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The Utopia for All—with Exceptions:  
Gender Roles in Thomas More's *Utopia* and Early Modern England

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Male superiority is an undeniable trait of humanity: this is the implication of Thomas More's Utopian society. His work, however, did not condemn women as simply housewives either. Still, the fact that the first instance of the word "Utopia" in English—a word that today represents a fictional but perfect place—being used to describe this society in which women had greater faculty but were still subjects of the patriarchy seems to insist on their lesser nature. This ideology is especially problematic to have developed in this imagined society as it never interacted with the Mediterranean—with the exception of the supposed Roman and Egyptian shipwreck to the island—yet developed similar beliefs, implying that male chauvinism itself is a human condition bound to naturally develop within any human civilization without external pressure or influence. Of course, the idea of women as equal is anachronistic and inequality was standard, so it is more valuable to address how the women of Utopia compared to that of More's England in examining if he actually believed in progressive changes. The background of Thomas More as an admirer of the classics and a "passionately observant Christian" gave his work a unique outlook that combined the ideologies of ancient and contemporary in determining what

may be that ‘perfect’ society.<sup>1</sup> By examining this work specifically, one can investigate how More might have seen the ideal position of women in society through the Utopian example. Also, one can compare that Utopia to the England that More saw as well as the England that secondary research sees to reveal much about how More’s ideal society compares to the actual one.

The women of Utopia had an increased role within the society as a whole in comparison to early modern England, a status that More presented as quite beneficial. All women of that island being involved in work proved extremely beneficial to the society of the whole, in the eyes of Hythloday (the fictional explorer recounting the tale) and likely More. As Hythloday explained, all men and women would work in agriculture without exception, and women would learn a second trade in order to contribute further.<sup>2</sup> While women in the poorer communities of England did help contribute to keep themselves and their family fed, it would have been unheard of for *all* of the women to either work or know a trade, let alone both. Hythloday was quite impressed by this and did attribute the contributions of women to Utopia’s increased productivity, allowing them to work only six hours a day each, in contrast to other countries which he acknowledged do not use almost half of their citizens.<sup>3</sup> Both he and the author who wrote his story seemed quite sympathetic to women contributing economically, which likely revealed More felt more involvement by women could benefit the country as a whole. This does not seem to come from a place of sympathy toward the women themselves, but more an observation of practicality, as during this observation Hythloday asserted women “as a weaker

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene F. Rice and Anthony Grafton, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe, 1460-1559* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), 141.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas More and George M. Logan, *Utopia: A Revised Translation, Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2011), 44-45.

<sup>3</sup> More, *Utopia*, 46.

sex”: a language mirrored by the Anglican Church called the woman a “weake creature” in their Homilee later that century.<sup>4</sup> More recalled to the overall attitude that does not make this a hugely progressive idea but a good alternative in the scope of current attitudes. This demonstrated that the Utopian society shared the same basic view of women as England, but allowed them to contribute out of practicality, which was shown in both the public and private spheres of society.

Women possessed great influence and power within the Utopian household, which was actually quite similar to that of the Tudor English household. When discussing the distribution of power in Utopian society, Hythloday explained that every household was headed by both a master and mistress together.<sup>5</sup> That mistress in the house functioned as a seemingly equivalent parent, possessing the capability to discipline the children-- a touch of power-- and sitting separately from men behind the other women of the family in church-- a touch of independence. The husband also had to have the wife’s consent to travel around the town. In comparison to More’s England, Martin Ingram described how writers of that time period stressed the importance of both the parties being present and involved within the household as well and expanded on how women could exercise control over the affairs of children and servants.<sup>6</sup> Both the imaginary and actual society saw the woman as invaluable to the house, although the reasoning was quite different. For Utopia, women’s involvement was necessary because they wished to have the most practical and productive society where all members contributed equivalently. The women were still a step under the husband, nonetheless, as Hythloday explicitly identified that husbands chastise their wives when in error.<sup>7</sup> This was More once again

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<sup>4</sup> More, *Utopia*, 45; Church of England, “Homilee on the State of Matrimonie,” Anglican Library-Homilies, Book 2, Homily 18 (1562).

<sup>5</sup> More, *Utopia*, 40.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Ingram, “Men and Women in Late Medieval and Early Modern Times,” *The English Historical Review* 120 (2005): 740.

<sup>7</sup> More, *Utopia*, 73.

relating the women's role to the contemporary expectations. For England, the wife seemed to acquire her influence simply from the lack of the husband's presence as men worked most of the day leaving the wife at home. It is also reasonable to deduce that many men of England saw household activities beneath them as Alberti's Giannozzo did.<sup>8</sup> Either way, English women were more likely to exercise authority in their household due to the vacuum of the man rather than the cooperation of Utopia.

The formation of the mistress and master relationship was perhaps one of the starkest contrasts that More made between the Utopians and the English. While the institute of marriage was important and serious to Catholic England in 1516, it had not nearly the rigid form and strict customs that the Utopian marriage held. Once the marriage was completed, the woman would join the household of the husband in Utopia, just as in the tradition of England; however, reaching that point was where the Utopian tradition differed drastically.<sup>9</sup> Just to begin, there were strict limits on the ages of both the man and woman: the man had to be at least twenty-two years of age and the woman had to be at least eighteen.<sup>10</sup> While aspiring men did tend to marry a little later in life during this period, there was nothing like a set age in England. People younger than that were married often. That was far from the drastic change however. The most astounding custom was the premarital right the suitor had in seeing his possible bride fully naked (within the presence of a matron) before he decided if he wished to marry her. Hythloday stated that this was defended by the Utopians with a comparison to inspecting colts before they were chosen and implied that the physical appearance of the wife was most important as all men look for physical beauty.<sup>11</sup> This appeared to be one of the "parodies" of which Rice and Grafton

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<sup>8</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *The Family in Renaissance Florence* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1994), 78.

<sup>9</sup> More, *Utopia*, 49.

<sup>10</sup> More, *Utopia*, 71.

<sup>11</sup> More, *Utopia*, 72.

spoke: a custom so absurd that this way could not possibly be an improvement on the English way of life but was of a people who knew not the decency and example that Virgin Mary set for women.<sup>12</sup> Just as Hythloday himself stated, they were astounded by this seemingly barbaric custom from this otherwise sophisticated society; however, they would find more surprise when learning of the relative ease in which those marriages could end.

More utilized some of his greatest embedded satire in this work with the discussion of the divorces between the Utopian men and women. Hythloday presented the allowed divorces as if they were only allowed in the strictest of cases: man and woman could seek divorces for adultery, “intolerably offensive behavior,” or even if both parties found someone else they would prefer without fornicating yet. All that was needed in the last was senate approval.<sup>13</sup> In actuality though, these allowed divorces were much more liberal than the equivalent mechanisms in Europe, as the current king (Henry VIII) would find out soon enough. There was also little to no room for women to pursue divorce outside of adultery in Tudor England. Edward Surtz explained that it is “necessary to bear to mind the firm stand of the Western Church on the indissolubility” of the ratified and consummated marriages between two baptized persons and the strictness for those outside of those conditions. Surtz would go further to say that the Utopians were stressing too much on the personal good rather than common good by allowing the dissolving of marriages under these conditions.<sup>14</sup> The classic Christian view likely saw these ended marriages as jeopardizing the integrity of the community. This made this an ingenious manipulation by More for his practicing Catholic audience who would have been familiar with the traditions of which Surtz explained. Without blatantly stating it, More expressed the

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<sup>12</sup> Rice and Grafton, *Foundations*, 143.

<sup>13</sup> More, *Utopia*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Edward Surtz, *The Praise of Wisdom; a Commentary on the Religious and Moral Problems and Backgrounds of St. Thomas More's Utopia* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1957), 246-248.

superiority of the Catholic stance on divorce as it maintained a better community continuity than this Utopian society that based its entire society on establishing the most optimal community. This was another chance to assert the European superiority over other models; at the same time though, it discounted a style which gave women more say in the prospects of divorce as in England they were limited to “informal separations” when they felt mistreated, some of which are described by S.D. Amussen.<sup>15</sup> While this was not the most blatant statement by More in his novel, it carried immense weight in reminding his audience that alternatives to their own system were not necessarily better, and that especially included those that may have given more ability to women.

The most surprising and, seemingly, most celebrated customary difference between the Utopian and English women was their participation in battle alongside the men. Hythloday reported that the women that wished to enter battle were both “encouraged and praised for doing so” and would fight fiercely by the side of their husbands.<sup>16</sup> The surprise of the storyteller stayed quite true to the form of a sixteenth-century European man being told of women participating directly in battle in this distant land. As Ingram described, violence and physical force were connected to masculinity in Tudor England; and yet, here was a practice of women participating in battle almost as if they were a living (and admittedly toned down) representation of the classical Amazoness within them.<sup>17</sup> This would be why it was so surprising and praised for such to occur then. It can only be speculated, but it is likely that Hythloday and the Utopian’s praise of such women came from their surprising channeling of ‘manliness’ rather than a personal courage or determination. This would be accurate of the time that featured an exceptional woman like

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<sup>15</sup> S.D. Amussen, “Gender, Family and the Social Order, 1560–1725,” in *Order and Disorder in Early Modern England*, edited by A. Fletcher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 208.

<sup>16</sup> More, *Utopia*, 81.

<sup>17</sup> Ingram, “Men and Women,” 742-746.

Isotta Nogarola being told to tone down her ‘femininity’ and instead focus on acting more like a man. This was likely the message that More was sending to the male population-- who made up most of the literate-- to praise in women the traits they see in themselves. Such was surely the attitude of the patriarchal society then, and such could even be argued to be the attitude of the society today. While Utopian women did receive both praise and opportunity through their serving in military ventures, this was not quite Utopian women overcoming the limitations of the patriarchy, but rather embracing parts of it in the eyes of the men.

Determining which traits of Utopia he mocks and which he praises is the most difficult aspect in analyzing Thomas More’s *Utopia*, and the discussions on women in the book are no different. Rice and Grafton stand by the assertion that the book was intended to bring to life the “extraordinary variety of possible institutions and beliefs” that could exist in the New World but ultimately demonstrated that the European society was still quite superior.<sup>18</sup> More certainly did this but did not stray too far in matters he seemed to see as better alternatives. As for women, he truly seemed to believe in the economic benefits of women being given more faculty to work both in and out of the house, but it appears to be no secret that he did not wish to see the institutions of marriage and divorce that the Utopians used and was certainly not challenging the social rank of women. It is difficult to reconcile a whole denunciation of Utopian practices role as Book I included a scorching critique of the English labor and Church, and Hythloday starkly defended the Utopian institutions focused on communal gain together. This was followed immediately by More, as himself to himself, speaking of his many refutations he wanted to add; yet, as the author of the book, if he had wanted to include these he could have, but instead he simply says he hopes to see a few of the aspects enter into European society. It appears that this

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<sup>18</sup> Rice and Grafton, *Foundations*, 86-87.



ending simply could have served as his absolution from guilt-- as was allowing another fictional man to recount the entirety of the story-- as he was still a believing and devout Catholic who likely did not wish to upset the Church. Thomas More did not appear to call for a total upturning of the patriarchy, but he still saw a societal benefit of allowing women more ability in the society, which he expressed in certain customs of the Utopians.

### **About the author**

Ryan Miller is an undergraduate student at the University of Georgia, pursuing an A.B. in History, a B.S. in Chemistry, and a minor in Transnational European Studies. He completed the UGA at Oxford Junemester program in Oxford, England in the summer of 2019. Ryan is also completing the Double Dawgs program through the University of Georgia with an intended Master's in Public Administration. He writes fiction works in his free time and has self-published a few of these on Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing: *The Man They Call Zoran*, *Kaios*, and *Erabios*.

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