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ARTICLE

The *Utopia* within *Utopia* (1516)

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Abstract

The debate between Hythlodaeus and an English lawyer before Cardinal Morton in Book One of *Utopia* (1516) contains many proposals for socio-economic reforms. These have typically been interpreted as innovative proposals to counteract the corruption of Christendom which surrounds them. However, when placed into their legislative context, it is apparent not only that these reforms echo closely many socio-economic reforms passed in England in the decades preceding *Utopia*, but that corollaries for almost all of them were passed when Morton, in whose presence the debate took place, was lord chancellor. Recognizing this forces a reassessment of this debate, showing Hythlodaeus's flaws, and reframing the contribution of the English lawyer. This very reassessment, however, realigns the entire dialogue before Cardinal Morton, which it is possible to identify as a mirror to the wider text. It is a *Utopia* within *Utopia*, or, a *mise en abyme*. By closing examining the reflection, it appears that this provides a structural indication of how *Utopia* should be read.

Utopia (1516), written by the English lawyer and humanist Thomas More (1478–1535) is most famous for its second book which describes the eponymous island where all property is held in common and so virtue and good governance flourish. *Utopia* was swiftly and broadly published and translated, and by the end of the century works of political thought and satire and even parliamentary debate referenced it.[1] This influence was so enduring that all subsequent fictional idealized political societies are called utopias after this book, and even the Soviet Union styled itself as More's direct descendant.[2] More himself became chancellor of England, before being executed for resisting Henry VIII's religious reforms.

The description of Utopia is located within a dialogue between Raphael Hythlodaeus, a traveller, and Morus, More's fictional persona. What begins as a debate concerning whether and how to counsel princes comes to encompass a division between whether gradual, ameliorative reform can be effective, or whether it

[1]John Case, *Sphaera civitatis* (Oxford, 1588), p. 582; Thomas Nash, *Quaternio* (London, 1633), p. 278, Simonds D'Ewes, *The journals of all the parliaments during the reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London, 1682), p. 674; T. Cave, ed., *Thomas More's Utopia in early modern Europe: paratext and contexts* (Manchester, 2008); C. Shrank and P. Withington, eds., *The Oxford handbook of Thomas More's Utopia* (Oxford, 2024), part two.

[2]A. Gushurst-Moore, 'A man for all eras: recent books on Thomas More', *Political Science Reviewer*, 33 (2004), pp. 90–143, at pp. 91–2.

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is necessary to imitate the transformation seen in Utopia. To support his scepticism of counsel and ameliorative policy, Hythlodaeus delivers a stinging description of contemporary Christendom, and recounts a debate he had in England eighteen years prior before Cardinal John Morton (d. 1500) concerning capital punishment. His evocative imagery depicting England's utter corruption by the wealthy, whose greed drives the indigent to theft, is powerful, epitomized in his description of England's anthropophagic sheep. However, the power of his rhetoric has obscured the complexity of this dialogue within a dialogue. While Hythlodaeus proposes various ameliorative socio-economic policies, his opponent, a long-winded and callous lawyer, attempts to undermine his analysis, but is silenced by Morton. Morton ignores Hythlodaeus's policy proposals and asks for an alternative punishment for theft, which Hythlodaeus provides by describing the system of punitive labour practised by the fictional Polylerites. As a result, the lawyer has been read as a buffoon, Hythlodaeus as incisive, and Morton as a wise man.

Contextualizing this debate within legislation passed during Morton's own chancellorship challenges this analysis. Remarkably, almost all the policies that Hythlodaeus proposes to prevent poverty had already been enacted during Morton's chancellorship, in legislation concerning retaining, enclosure and engrossing, the wool trade, and more. In fact, most of the analytical steps in *Utopia*'s condemnation of contemporary England were prefigured in this legislation. Consequently, it is not just England's corruption which is emphasized, but also the existing methods designed to restrain it, methods further promulgated in the years immediately preceding *Utopia*'s composition.

Such contextualization reframes the scene, with significant implications. The lawyer's criticisms seem more justified, suggesting his role in the work is more significant than previously recognized. Indeed, the same criticisms of Hythlodaeus are levied later in the text by Morus, who also accuses Hythlodaeus of blindness to context. Further, by raising reforms which had already been attempted, the later rejection of such reforms by Hythlodaeus proves a deliberate rejection of actual contemporary reforms.

Whether *Utopia* as a text prefers gradual reform or social transformation has been the subject of continuous debate even within the ancillary materials of its initial Latin editions. This especially stems from its ambiguous ending where Morus dismisses Utopian customs, then muses that there are many aspects he would wish, but not expect, to see. The interpretation of the debate before Morton proffered here recommends a way of relating the episode to *Utopia* as a whole which provides a structural answer to this question. The episode before Morton is a *mise en abyme*: an image of *Utopia* within *Utopia* itself. That is, Hythlodaeus's account of Morton's table reflects both the structure and contents of the broader work, while extending the image to provide a model for readers showing how to respond. This was not considered by its earliest readers, who tended to emphasize either Book One or Book Two in isolation. But it integrates later scholarly interpretations which combined the books to suggest that the episode before Morton 'mirrors in microcosm' the larger work and that *Utopia* uses the episode to establish a methodology for interpreting itself.[3]

[3]D. M. Bevington, 'The dialogue in "Utopia": two sides to the question', *Studies in Philology*, 58 (1961), pp. 496–509, at pp. 502–7; G. M. Logan, *The meaning of More's Utopia* (Princeton, NJ, 1983), pp. 53–74.

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Utopia's legislative context thus provides a structural answer to the vexed question of how *Utopia* wants readers to respond.

I

The dialogue at Morton's table is one of *Utopia*'s first lengthy pieces of analysis. It follows the scene-setting: Antwerp, 1515; and the introduction of the characters: Morus, Pieter Gillis, More's fictionalized Flemish friend, and Hythlodaeus, a fictional Portuguese companion of Amerigo Vespucci. *Utopia*'s dialogue only begins when Gillis responds to Hythlodaeus's description of the customs of the places he had visited in his travels to suggest that Hythlodaeus should enter the service of 'some king', whom he would be suited to 'instruct by examples and aid by advice'.[4] Once Gillis's facile justifications of self- and familial advantage are disposed of, Morus argues that Hythlodaeus should act as a royal counsellor for the public good, as 'a people's welfare or misery flows in a stream from their prince'. Hythlodaeus disagrees, arguing his counsel would bring no benefit, for no one would listen.[5] It is to demonstrate this point that he recounts the dialogue which occurred in the entourage of Cardinal Morton eighteen years prior.

This episode, occupying much of Book One, begins with Hythlodaeus's debate with a certain layman 'learned in the laws' of England. Locating it before Morton is significant, for, before his death in 1500, Morton was Henry VII's (r. 1485–1509) most influential statesman, simultaneously chancellor and archbishop of Canterbury. As Hythlodaeus himself effusively suggests, both king and commonwealth depended on his counsels.[6] The lawyer in Morton's company provokes Hythlodaeus by praising England's mass execution of thieves, expressing amazement that theft continues to plague the land regardless. Hythlodaeus retorts that traditional responses to theft practised in England and beyond consist of harsh and ineffective punishment, when it would be better to eliminate the need for theft by enabling 'every man to earn his own living'.[7] He attacks the immoralities of England especially: idle lords racking rents and retaining idle men who, when they are inevitably released, lack the training for another profession; the intertwined issues of enclosing open fields, engrossing multiple farms, and converting arable land to pasture; the hoarding of raw wool to increase prices; and the proliferation of luxurious dress, alehouses, and gambling. Hythlodaeus argues that these all force many into 'idleness', indicating unemployment, and into poverty, consequentially driving them to thievery. These 'blights', he thunders, must be banished, and he recommends various policies to do so. England should 'enact laws' that those who have ruined farmhouses and villages must 'restore' them or else hand them to someone who will. Restrictions should be placed on the ability of the rich to establish 'a kind of monopoly'. Fewer people should be 'nourished in idleness'. Agriculture and wool-manufacture should be

[4]Translations are my adaptations from Thomas More, *Utopia: Latin text and English translation*, ed. G. M. Logan, R. M. Adams, and C. H. Miller (Cambridge, 1995), here pp. 50–1.

[5]Ibid., pp. 52–3.

[6]Ibid., pp. 54–5, 80–1; C. Bigham, *The chief ministers of England* (London, 1923), pp. 197–207; S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (London, 1977), pp. 105–7; S. Bradley, *John Morton: adversary of Richard III, power behind the Tudors* (Stroud, 2019), pp. 62–9.

[7]More, *Utopia*, pp. 54–7.

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rejuvenated, creating 'honest work in which the idle throng might usefully occupy themselves' rather than resorting to crime. Lacking such policies, punishing theft can be nothing but an illusion of justice.[8]

Only a fragment of the lawyer's response is recorded, prefaced by Hythlodaeus's editorial derision, but it promises to be exhausting. He compliments Hythlodaeus, who spoke 'very well for a stranger', but he has not 'understood correctly' the state of affairs. Before Morton's interruption, he plans his response: summing up Hythlodaeus's speech, then showing 'in which matters ignorance of our affairs impeded you', before refuting and demolishing his argument.[9]

This debate has broadly been interpreted as a demonstration of the utter corruption of Christendom, what Brendan Bradshaw termed its 'world of jungle politics', inserted to invite direct comparison with the exemplary models of the fictional peoples which Hythlodaeus describes later in the work: the Polylerites, Achorians, Macarians, and Utopians. As such, Hythlodaeus is presented as unequivocally correct, and the lawyer characterized as a callous buffoon.[10] The reforms Hythlodaeus recommends, meanwhile, have been interpreted as More's own potential solutions. J. H. Hexter suggests they represent More's minimum 'remedy' to the 'evil' circumstances of oppression he perceived in Europe; George Logan sees them as 'partial, stopgap measures' which More wanted enacted; while Alistair Fox describes them as More's own 'imaginative remedies' to 'the causes of contemporary social ills'.[11] Gerard Wegemer, in a flawed attempt to undermine Hythlodaeus's credibility, dissents, describing the solutions as 'utterly simplistic and mostly unhelpful'.[12] No one denies Hexter's framing of the English lawyer as 'a tedious and nasty dolt'.[13]

Alternative interpretations have been proposed. Some suggest this description of England serves to demonstrate a new critical analytical approach to causes of social problems.[14] Dominic Baker-Smith argues that the description of enclosure in particular was derived from Plato's denunciation of oligarchy in *Republic*, inserted primarily to contrast with the good customs of Utopia.[15] Eric Nelson, meanwhile,

[8]Ibid., pp. 56–67.

[9]Ibid., pp. 66–7.

[10]B. Bradshaw, 'More on Utopia', *Historical Journal*, 24 (1981), pp. 1–27, at pp. 20–1; R. S. Sylvester, '"Si Hythlodaeo credimus": vision and revision in Thomas More's *Utopia*', in R. S. Sylvester and G. Marc'hadour, eds., *Essential articles for the study of Thomas More* (Hamden, CT, 1977), pp. 290–301, at pp. 297–8; J. C. Davis, *Utopia and the ideal society: a study of English utopian writing, 1516–1700* (Cambridge, 1981), pp. 46–8; Logan, *More's Utopia*, pp. 48–9; Q. Skinner, 'Thomas More's *Utopia* and the virtue of true nobility', in idem, *Visions of politics*, II: *Renaissance virtues* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 213–44, at pp. 233–4; G. Wegemer, *Thomas More and the arts of liberty* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 139–40.

[11]J. H. Hexter, *More's Utopia: the biography of an idea* (Princeton, NJ, 1952), pp. 144–6; Logan, *More's Utopia*, pp. 125, 253; A. Fox, *Utopia: an elusive vision* (New York, NY, 1993), pp. 84–5.

[12]Wegemer, *More and the arts of liberty*, p. 156. For a short exposition of Wegemer's tendency to abuse his sources, see R. Dealy, *Before Utopia: the making of Thomas More's mind* (Toronto, 2020), pp. 27–8.

[13]See J. H. Hexter's introduction in Thomas More, *Utopia* (New Haven, CT, 1965), p. xxxviii.

[14]Q. Skinner, *The foundations of modern political thought* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1978), I, pp. 223–4; B. Bradshaw, 'Review: the Tudor commonwealth: reform and revision', *Historical Journal*, 22 (1979), pp. 455–76, at pp. 464–5; Logan, *More's Utopia*, pp. 48–56; D. Baker-Smith, *More's 'Utopia'* (London, 1991), pp. 104–13; Fox, *Utopia*, pp. 84–5; N. Wood, *Foundations of political economy* (Berkeley, CA, 1994), pp. 96–7; D. Wootton, ed., *Utopia: with Erasmus's 'The Sileni of Alcibiades'* (Indianapolis, IN, 1999), pp. 18–23.

[15]Baker-Smith, *More's 'Utopia'*, pp. 106–9. See also Logan, *More's Utopia*, pp. 97–8.

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proposes that More used Hythlodaeus's proposals to advocate a Greek idea of justice in an 'attack' on a Roman conception of justice.[16]

None of these understandings are satisfactory. This in part stems from their almost exclusive focus on *Utopia*'s humanist context, while few consider the simultaneous context of legislative social reform in England. *Utopia* was, of course, a humanist text and these interpretations have incisively demonstrated its complexities as such, but *Utopia* participates in a multiplicity of contexts. The scarcity of legislative contextualization of *Utopia* is curious, given that the modern critical editions frequently reference the existing legislation on these matters passed under Henry VII and Henry VIII.[17] But even analyses which do provide this context only consider the years immediately surrounding *Utopia*'s composition. Hexter argues that on More's return from Flanders he saw the lord chancellor, Cardinal Wolsey, enacting almost all the ameliorative, minimum policies More himself had proposed through Hythlodaeus, thus undermining Hythlodaeus's arguments against becoming a counsellor and convincing More to join the reformist cause.[18] David M. Bevington subsequently demonstrates that such policies became law in 1514, contradicting Hexter's chronology, and so suggests More displaced the debate to Henry VII's reign where Hythlodaeus's complaints, not having been legislatively addressed, 'would have been relevant'.[19] However, the legislation passed during Morton's chancellorship undermines these interpretations, and consequently demands a new understanding of the debate between Hythlodaeus and the English lawyer.

II

From 1487 to 1500, the span of Morton's tenure as lord chancellor, nigh every social policy which Hythlodaeus recommended to the English lawyer was enacted. Hythlodaeus's first proposal, to 'banish' luxury and extravagance in dress, eradicate alehouses and similar establishments, and forbid gambling, as these all 'lead their devotees straight to robbery', echoes the provisions attacking gambling in the 1495 statute against vagabonds, which ordered justices of the peace to close distasteful establishments wherever 'convenyent', and to take surety from those permitted to continue.[20] Although no legislation on apparel passed during Morton's term, two such statutes were enacted under Edward IV, reviving earlier legislation.[21] Henry VIII's first parliament also included a statute, subsequently updated in 1514 and 1515, targeting costly clothing as the cause of 'grete impoverishing of divers of the Kings Subjects' which in turn provokes many 'to robbe…doo extorcion and other unlawfull Dedes'.[22]

[16]E. Nelson, *The Greek tradition in republican thought* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 24–5, 40–2.

[17]More, *Utopia* (1965), pp. 325, 337–40; More, *Utopia*, p. 67n32.

[18]Hexter, *More's Utopia*, pp. 146–55.

[19]Bevington, 'The dialogue in "Utopia"', pp. 502–7.

[20]More, *Utopia*, pp. 64–5; 11 Henry VII c. 2, *The statutes of the realm* (*SR*) (11 vols., London, 1810–28), II, p. 569.

[21]3 Edward IV c. 5, *SR*, II, p. 399; 22 Edward IV c. 1, *SR*, II, pp. 468–70; 37 Edward III cc. 1–19, *SR*, I, pp. 378–83.

[22]1 Henry VIII c. 14, *SR*, III, pp. 8–9; 6 Henry VIII c. 1, *SR*, III, pp. 121–3; 7 Henry VIII c. 6, *SR*, III, pp. 179–82.

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The condemnation of nobles retaining 'a great train of idle servants' and the prescription to ensure fewer people are 'nourished in idleness' echoes Henry VII's well-established assault on retaining.[23] The practice of retaining was restricted in 1487 through requiring a royal licence to retain any officers of the realm or tenants holding crown land.[24] In the 1504 parliament, after Morton's death, this statute was extended to prevent the retaining of anyone who was not a genuine waged household servant, manual worker, or legal consultant, with the exception of those whom the king licensed to be ready for military service.[25] Given his disposal of the lawyer's argument that retainers were good soldiers, Hythlodaeus doubtless would consider this legislation flawed. However, it aligned with his overarching goal: restricting idle retainers.

The legislation concerning the wool trade which preceded *Utopia* also aligns closely with Hythlodaeus's policies. Hythlodaeus urged the revival of the wool trade so that it might be an 'honest trade' in which those without work could 'usefully occupy themselves', whose poverty otherwise would force them to theft. He particularly singled out the concentration of the raw wool into the hands of a few rich men, forming an 'oligopoly', as price gouging, meaning 'poor people' who 'used to make cloth' could not afford it and were forced 'from work to idleness'.[26] Acts in 1487 and 1497, repeated in 1510, aimed to protect the wool trade by preventing exports of wool and lifting restrictions on it in order to rectify issues which had caused clothmakers 'to falle into greate poverte and idelnes'.[27] More significantly, the *Acte for the mayntenaunce of drapery and making of cloth*, passed by the 1489–90 parliament, prohibited selling raw wool to anyone who would not work it themselves to make 'Yarne or Cloth within this realme'.[28] Thus, measures to revive the wool trade and outlaw monopolies had already been passed.

Hythlodaeus's analysis is so close to extant legislation on enclosure, engrossing, and converting tillage to pasture that it could be a direct derivation. Hythlodaeus declares that these agrarian abuses 'destroy houses and abolish towns', while churches are kept only as barns, and the poor tenants are evicted. These individuals, unable to find work in agricultural labour since 'one herdsman or shepherd' with their flock uses as much land as previously occupied 'many hands', have no choice 'but to steal, and so be hanged...or to wander and beg'. Meanwhile, he claims agrarian abuses cause rising prices for food, wool, and livestock. His solution is to demand laws to 'make those who have ruined farmhouses and villages restore them' or else make them pass the lands to one who will.[29] This aligns with the 1489–90 *Acte against pullyng doun of tounes* which aimed to combat directly the 'desolacion and pullyng downe and wyfull wast of houses and townes' caused by enclosure, engrossing, and converting arable land to pasture. These practices, it declared, were destroying churches, weakening the realm, and driving people through lack of tenancies to

[23]More, *Utopia*, pp. 58–63, 66–7.

[24]3 Henry VII c. 15, *SR*, II, pp. 522–3.

[25]19 Henry VII c. 14, *SR*, II, pp. 658–60. See Chrimes, *Henry VII*, pp. 187–92; C. Carpenter, *The Wars of the Roses: politics and the constitution in England, c. 1437–1509* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 227–8.

[26]More, *Utopia*, pp. 64–7.

[27]3 Henry VII c. 12, *SR*, II, p. 520; 12 Henry VII c. 4, *SR*, II, p. 637; 1 Henry VIII c. 2, *SR*, III, p. 1.

[28]4 Henry VII c. 11, *SR*, II, p. 535.

[29]More, *Utopia*, pp. 62–7.

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'ydleness', the 'grounde and begynnyng of all myschefes'. Those who were driven out of their lands could not find work as agricultural labourers, because the conversion to pasture required three shepherds where 200 farmers would be. The statute accordingly ordained that any house which in the past three years had stood with twenty acres of arable land should be maintained or restored, on pain of half the annual profits being surrendered to the lord of the fee.[30] Further statutes followed in 1514 and 1515.[31]

Utopia's analysis comes closest to a royal proclamation dated at latest to 2 May 1515, the same month More departed for Flanders. It denounced the practices of 'converting arable ground unto pasture' and 'engrossing' by 'covetous' individuals, holding them up as 'enemies of the commonwealth'. In addition to causing a long-running scarcity of grain, poultry, and other food, these practices drive many into 'idleness' as a result of 'lack of occupation', and 'consequently unto thefts and robberies', leading the 'rigor of the laws of this realm' to punish them with 'execution'. To combat this, all land which was in tillage since the beginning of Henry VII's reign should be restored to it, and the accompanying houses of husbandry should all be repopulated.[32] The social analysis and solution are almost identical to Hythlodaeus's.

It is apparent that not only did almost every policy Hythlodaeus recommended have a legislative corollary enacted during Morton's chancellorship, but also the analytical process concerning idleness and the necessity 'to enable every man to earn his own living' was foundational to those laws. There can be no doubt that More, himself a lawyer and parliamentarian, and in his youth a member of Morton's household, would have been aware of this legislative context. Consequently, Hythlodaeus's social analysis clearly is not the novel approach many have described, but was derived from pre-existing statutes and proclamations.[33] Indeed, it is a testament to the number of social reforms passed during Morton's chancellorship that More could have added more to Hythlodaeus's list: the expansion of courts of equity; the establishment of bringing legal suits *in forma pauperis*; and legislation aimed at dealing with 'vagabonds' 'by softer meanes' than in previous acts.[34]

Meanwhile, Wegemer's counterargument that these were suggestions designed to be recognized as useless ignores that these reforms had been repeatedly attempted and accepted as useful.[35] Further arguments that this passage rests on a 'Greek' approach to justice or that Hythlodaeus's description drew primarily on Plato's *Republic* must account for the derivative nature of Hythlodaeus's analysis and consider whether ancient authors were co-opted to justify existing approaches.[36] The core point, however, is that the proposals Hythlodaeus described can in fact all be traced to Morton's chancellorship – the very man before whom he spoke.

[30]4 Henry VII c. 19, *SR*, II, p. 542. See also P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin, eds., *Tudor royal proclamations* (3 vols., New Haven, CT, 1964–9), I, pp. 32–4.

[31]6 Henry VIII c. 5, *SR*, III, p. 127; 7 Henry VIII c. 1, *SR*, II, pp. 176–7.

[32]Hughes and Larkin, eds., *Tudor royal proclamations*, I, pp. 122–3.

[33]See n. 14.

[34]S. J. Gunn, *Early Tudor government, 1485–1558* (Basingstoke, 1995), pp. 78–80; 11 Henry VII c. 2, *SR*, II, p. 569; 11 Henry VII c. 12, *SR*, II, p. 578.

[35]Wegemer, *More and the arts of liberty*, pp. 156–7.

[36]Logan, *More's Utopia*, p. 98; Baker-Smith, *More's 'Utopia'*, pp. 106–9; Nelson, *Greek tradition*, pp. 24–5, 40–2.

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The lawyer's responses to Hythlodaeus now gain new complexity. His counterarguments are that satisfactory opportunities in England for work in both industry and agriculture 'has been provided for', so that no one would need to turn to crime; that retainers proved good soldiers; and finally that Hythlodaeus's account was marred by his ignorance of English affairs.[37] His first argument, given the legislative context, now seems predicated on the existence of laws aimed to provide work for people. It 'has been provided for'; action has already been taken. Although Hythlodaeus counters him easily with examples of injured soldiers and unskilled idle retainers, for whom the availability of work is not an aid, when he continues to the subject of enclosure and the wool trade a shadow of the lawyer's point lingers – solutions for these issues had already been enacted. Thus, when the lawyer finally retorts that Hythlodaeus's account was impeded by 'ignorance' of English affairs, his criticism not only seems justified, but identifies the central weakness of Hythlodaeus's account. The reforms he proposed *had* all been attempted already. Ironically, almost all of them had been promulgated under the political supremacy of Morton himself.

To substantiate this interpretation, a precise date of the dialogue before Morton would be necessary. *Utopia* carefully provides one: it followed the 'revolt of the westcountrymen' which ended in slaughter, referencing the Cornish rebellion of 1497.[38] Embarrassingly, in line with Hythlodaeus's own description of Morton as a leading figure in the kingdom's affairs, he parrots Morton's own policies back to him. As such, after the traveller's long denunciation of English practice, Morton barely engages with Hythlodaeus's policies at all, instead asking very specifically about the only novel proposal Hythlodaeus made: the rejection of the death penalty.[39]

This does not deny the cutting strength of Hythlodaeus's condemnation of England, nor the power of his social analysis. Hythlodaeus's analysis is presented as incisive and clearly intrigues Morton, possibly since it aligned perfectly with his own thoughts, while Morus affirms that he is 'fully persuaded' Hythlodaeus would prove a counsellor advantageous to the public good.[40] The principles, analysis, and policy proposals all emerge as sound, even laudable. However, someone aware of their context would have recognized Hythlodaeus's proposals had been attempted before, and addressed why they had failed. Clearly, Hythlodaeus's engagement with his context is lacking. This has significant implications for interpreting *Utopia* as a whole.

III

The first and most obvious consequence of this representation of Hythlodaeus as aiming at the right target, but missing the context, is a reframing of Hythlodaeus's role within the narrative of *Utopia*. Hythlodaeus's unreliability has been previously argued, especially since he claims no one would listen to his counsel only to then

[37]More, *Utopia*, pp. 54–7, 66–7.

[38]Ibid., pp. 54–5; A. Fletcher and D. MacCulloch, *Tudor rebellions* (5th edn, Harlow, 2008), pp. 21–3. For another example of *Utopia*'s careful attention to chronology, see R. J. Schoeck, 'More, Plutarch, and King Agis: Spartan history and the meaning of "Utopia"', *Philological Quarterly*, 35 (1956), pp. 366–75.

[39]More, *Utopia*, pp. 66–9.

[40]Ibid., pp. 74–83.

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describe Morton paying careful attention to it.[41] The ignorance layered into his zealous condemnation of England confirms and extends this point in a crucial way, especially since Hythlodaeus's disregard of context is explicitly challenged a second time in *Utopia*, by Morus himself in their debate over counsel. After Hythlodaeus recounts his visit to Morton's table, he produces two more examples to demonstrate how his advice would never be accepted by European rulers: a war council of the French king, and an unidentified council concerning domestic policy. Hythlodaeus says that his anti-expansionist and anti-oppressive advice would have no place in these councils, rhetorically demanding whether, in raising models of better practice such as the fictional societies of Achoria and Macaria, these kings and their sycophantic counsellors would not 'turn deaf ears to me'?[42]

Morus does not pull any punches: they would, no doubt and no wonder! One should not 'offer advice that you know for certain will not be listened to'. There is no place at court for this academic philosophy which 'supposes every topic suitable to every occasion' and introducing it is like invading a comedic play to deliver a speech from a tragedy: you pervert the whole play, even if the tragedy is incomparably better. A more civil philosophy and an 'indirect approach' which 'adapts itself to the drama in hand' is better-suited, thus making things, if not good, 'as little bad as possible'.[43] Morus thus invokes the same criticism as the lawyer: Hythlodaeus speaks with a blindness to context. Readers who knew England's legislative context would have been prepared for this, since in his own account of an occasion when he had offered political counsel Hythlodaeus was so unaware of his context that he repeated someone's own policies back at them. While Morton curtailed the lawyer's criticism of this flaw, Morus precisely exposes it.

This adds a certain strength to Morus's position that one should enter princely counsel in order to make affairs as little bad as possible.[44] Hythlodaeus, in his zealous desire to condemn what he sees as wrong and propose a better model, does not think about its applicability, endangering the possibility of improving the situation at all. He is clearly a flawed character, meriting critique. However, it does not win the debate for Morus, only adding complexity, and paving the way towards *Utopia*'s central theme: the viability of ameliorative reform as opposed to total transformation. The debate on counsel between Morus and Hythlodaeus begins with the question of entering royal service, before swiftly arriving at a more troubling issue of whether gradual reform is possible at all. Morton's dialogue cements this as the central topic, as Hythlodaeus thus raises both Morton's reforms – reforms that had been actually attempted – as well as the fictional model of the Polylerites as possible routes to reform. But ultimately, the discussion was derailed by Morton's companions.[45] Hythlodaeus then raises the fictional examples of the Achorians and Macarians to show that attempts at ameliorative reform would stand no chance in European

[41]Sylvester, "'Si Hythlodaeo credimus'", p. 298; Logan, *More's Utopia*, pp. 45–6; Fox, *Utopia*, pp. 87–8; Dealy, *Before Utopia*, pp. 327–89.

[42]More, *Utopia*, pp. 83–95.

[43]Ibid., pp. 94–7.

[44]For more on the importance of counsel to the text, including in relation to More's life, see Hexter, *More's Utopia*, pp. 100–16.

[45]Ibid., pp. 76–81.

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states. It is here that Morus claims that Hythlodaeus's blindness to context means that of course his recommendations will not be accepted, because he does not care to ensure that what he is saying is either suited to the situation or framed with the propriety necessary to be convincing. Morus and Hythlodaeus here are not disagreeing about the corruption of Europe, but about how to approach it. It is at this point that Hythlodaeus reveals his current beliefs: 'wherever you have private property, and money is the measure of all things' it is 'hardly ever possible for a commonwealth to be just or prosperous'. In so doing, he raises his solution to the debate: the ideal commonwealth of Utopia, the only place where 'virtue has its reward' and a place where, by implication, this debate on counsel becomes obsolete.[46]

Having turned the conversation to Utopia, Hythlodaeus immediately rejects the ameliorative approach and proposals he raised moments before, both in relation to England and the fictional models he described. The people's oppression could be 'lightened to some extent', he says, by laws preventing one person from owning 'more than a certain amount of land' or earning above a 'certain income', or preventing a prince becoming too powerful, or the people too insolent, or even preventing the sale or exploitation of public office by rich men. These clearly refer back to and broaden his previous proposals of policies against agrarian abuses, as well as the limits on royal power of the Achorians and Macarians, adding potential proposals to reform the issue of corrupt councils. But these policies are like 'poultices continually applied to sick bodies that are past cure'. If private property endures, a society cannot return to 'good health'.[47] The justice which Hythlodaeus aimed at in his proposals before Morton, and which he hypothetically raised with the Achorian and Macarian examples, he thus declares false. The dialogue on counsel is refined precisely into a debate between ameliorative reform and social transformation as Hythlodaeus draws together the entirety of Book One, including the proposals he raised, and declares that the entire approach it represents is doomed.

This is not just a condemnation of corrupt European monarchies, it is a declaration that attempting to reform Europe through ameliorative reform and counsel is fruitless. The legislative context described above shows that this deliberately includes existing reformist legislation alongside the aspirational ameliorative reforms of the Polylerites, Achorians, and Macarians. It thus cements the debate over amelioration and transformation as central to *Utopia*.

Hythlodaeus can change his stance so radically and so quickly because the dialogue before Morton is very carefully temporally displaced and dated to demonstrate the development of Hythlodaeus's views. Despite it regularly being noted that Hythlodaeus's visit to England was in 1497, it has not typically been recognized that this indicates the presence of two *different* instantiations of Hythlodaeus: one from 1497 and one from 1515. These two dates are fundamental to Hythlodaeus's character, given the brief biography Gillis provides: Hythlodaeus reputedly sailed with Amerigo Vespucci on his voyages to the New World, voyages which occurred from 1499 to 1504. Consequently, in 1497 Hythlodaeus had not seen Utopia, while in 1515 he had (a distinction which also explains why the fictional Polylerites of Book One are located near Persia, not the New World).

[46]Ibid., pp. 100–1.
[47]Ibid., pp. 102–3.

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On returning from Utopia, Hythlodaeus has completely abandoned his previous hopes for effective ameliorative reform. His reformist propositions of 1497 he rejects outright in 1515. As such, Hythlodaeus maintains a critical distance from the models of the Achorians and Macarians when he raises them, introducing these proposals using a conditional clause: 'if I were to propose', 'if I were to show'.[48] He would not actually propose them himself at this stage; he is urging Morus to imagine the reaction if he did. Nelson's comparison of Hythlodaeus to the man returning to the cave from Plato's *Republic*, and the lexical similarities he uses to support this, thus nails the point of Hythlodaeus's character.[49] Hythlodaeus has gone and seen Utopia, and the ameliorative policies which he had previously proposed and Morton had legislated he now sees as useless half-measures: shadows. The legislative context thus clarifies Hythlodaeus's character, and in particular his flaws, as it emerges that both the English lawyer and Morus question his ignorance of context quite astutely. Consequently, it adds specificity to the broader question raised by Book One: should the readers accept Hythlodaeus's rejection of ameliorative reforms, including those being attempted by early modern governments, and instead seek total transformation? This question has vexed interpreters since *Utopia*'s initial publication, and has been debated to a standstill.

IV

Whether *Utopia* intends to provide the model of an ideal society to urge total transformation or to provide an inspirational model to encourage ameliorative reform has been endlessly debated. Even the various letters More and his fellow humanists provided for the early Latinate editions show divided interpretations. The prefatory letter from Guillaume Budé to Thomas Lupset, first included in the second edition, emphasizes the impossibility of Utopia, rechristening it 'Udepotiam' (Never Place), and implies that it would require divine intervention to establish such a society.[50] It is nevertheless a 'model of the happy life', a 'rule for living well', and finally a 'seedbed...of elegant and useful concepts' from which our age and future ages could borrow practices to be 'introduced...and adapted' to their own nations.[51] Jerome Busleyden's letter to More, which appeared in the first three Latin editions, shows more belief in the possibility of Utopia, urging that its good constitution 'should be desired by all' and wishing its perfection were imitated.[52]

This division was only further emphasized as *Utopia*'s earliest readers began prioritizing one book over the other. Indeed, these same letters which accompanied *Utopia*'s early editions prefigure this in the dearth of discussion of Book One in them. Such focus on Book Two, especially among continental humanists, perhaps reflects its detailed discussion of English affairs. Indeed, the first vernacular translation of *Utopia* (1524) by Basel humanist Claudius Cantiuncula completely excised Book One, Cantiuncula dismissing it as purely concerning English affairs and so of no use

[48]Ibid., pp. 84–7, 94–5.
[49]Nelson, *Greek tradition*, p. 21.
[50]More, *Utopia*, pp. 12–15.
[51]Ibid., pp. 16–19.
[52]Ibid., pp. 250–5.

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for understanding Utopia.[53] Meanwhile, later authors who crafted utopias typically imitated Book Two exclusively, framing perfect commonwealths while excising the debate and unreliability Book One provides.[54] Critics of *Utopia*, such as the English counsellor and diplomat Thomas Smith, similarly focused on Book Two; Smith's panning of the work as an example of 'feigned common wealths, such as never was no never shall be, [just] vaine imaginations' demonstrates well the eclipsing of Book One.[55] In contrast, others focused primarily on Book One, something very apparent among readers of the 1551 and 1556 English translations. As Matthew Ritger has shown, annotations on these editions dominate the first book: indeed one individual seems to have cut their copy into two, possibly to take Book One with them while happily leaving Book Two behind.[56]

This division itself reflects how More changed the text in the process of writing. At first, More composed the description of Utopia alone, and then later, on returning to England, opened a 'seam' and inserted the entire dialogue of Book One.[57] In doing so, as argued above, More added greater complexity and equivocality to the work and emphasized the importance of the debate on approaches to reform, both in terms of how a counsellor should approach reform, and whether reform should be ameliorative and transformative. Consequently, there is little engagement with the complexities of the English legal context amongst *Utopia*'s early audience: its European audience largely either did not know or did not care, while the tendency to focus on one book rather than both ensured even in England the full implications of its legal context were neutered.

Modern scholars of *Utopia* have drawn together the two books more closely, but are still divided over the question of whether, as Busleyden wrote, *Utopia* served as a model for social transformation or whether, with Budé, they think it challenged readers to use the model to seek gradual ameliorative reform.[58] The potential for both lines of argument is well indicated by how others have suggested *Utopia* either shows the very 'impossibility of politics', or else offers no definitive solution to the question.[59]

[53]Cave, ed., *Utopia in early modern Europe*, p. 159. See also G. Schmidt, 'From prototype to genre: translations and imitations of *Utopia* in early modern Germany (1524–1753)', in Shrank and Withington, eds., *Oxford handbook of Utopia*, pp. 195–214, at pp. 196–204.

[54]Those who did imitate its humour, did so more for satire than philosophical exploration. See Chloë Houston, *The Renaissance utopia: dialogue, travel and the ideal society* (Farnham, 2014), pp. 4–5; Schmidt, 'From prototype to genre', pp. 204–7.

[55]Thomas Smith, *De republica Anglorum*, ed. L. Alston (New York, NY, 1974), p. 142.

[56]M. Ritger, 'Reading Utopia in the reformation of punishment', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 72 (2019), pp. 1225–68, at pp. 1227n12, 1236–45, 1260–1.

[57]Hexter, *More's Utopia*, p. 21.

[58]For transformation, see Hexter's introduction in More, *Utopia* (1965), pp. c–cv; Skinner, *Foundations*, I, pp. 255–62; Nelson, *Greek tradition*, pp. 39–48. Note Skinner's refined position in Skinner, 'Thomas More's *Utopia*', pp. 236–44. For models for reform, see Edward Surtz's introduction in More, *Utopia* (1965), pp. cxxxiii–cxxxiv, cxli–cxlii; R. J. Schoeck, '"A nursery of correct and useful institutions": on reading More's *Utopia* as dialogue', in Sylvester and Marc'hadour, eds., *Essential articles*, pp. 281–9; Bradshaw, 'More on Utopia', pp. 26–7; Dealy, *Before Utopia*, pp. 311–36.

[59]D. Fenlon, 'England and Europe: Utopia and its aftermath', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 25 (1975), pp. 115–35, at pp. 125–6; J. C. Davis, 'More, Morton, and the politics of accommodation', *Journal of British Studies*, 9 (1970), pp. 27–49; Sylvester, '"Si Hythlodaeo credimus"', pp. 290–301; Logan, *More's Utopia*,

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These different interpretations primarily hinge on the conclusion to Book Two where, having heard Hythlodaeus's description of the isle of Utopia, Morus concludes that several of the Utopian laws and customs are 'absurd'. The chief absurdity, however, was the 'foundation' of the entire system, its communism and abolition of money, since this 'subverts all the nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty' which 'in the popular view' are the 'true ornaments and glory' of a commonwealth. However, Morus says nothing to Hythlodaeus, hoping to find 'some other time for thinking of these matters more deeply'. Nevertheless, in the concluding line of the work, he admits that there are in Utopia 'very many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see'.[60]

Hythlodaeus's powerful description of Utopia and condemnation of contemporary Europe is thus, at the final gasp, undercut by Morus's criticism – which is in turn undercut by Morus himself. Although some have read Morus's critiques as ironic, and thus not indicative of the overarching point, as Bradshaw argues this overlooks that Morus complains not that communism undermines nobility and its attendant qualities, but that this goes against the popular view.[61] Indeed, reading irony into Morus's critique is further undermined by Hythlodaeus's blindness to context, which makes clear that Hythlodaeus's claims should be seriously critiqued before being accepted. However, Morus does not deliver any knock-out blows in the debate with Hythlodaeus, so accepting Morus as the pre-eminent voice of *Utopia* also lacks firm textual affirmation.[62] As such, the initial interpretative divide between Budé and Busleyden remains: does *Utopia* urge transformation or provide a model for amelioration? This is clearly, despite many admirable attempts, a difficult impasse to overcome. It is my contention, however, that *Utopia* contains a precise guide indicating how to read it, shown by extending the above reinterpretation of the episode before Morton.

V

The new interpretation of the episode before Morton given above recommends a significant further reading: as a whole, the Morton dialogue represents a *Utopia* within *Utopia*, or a *mise en abyme.* A stylistic term originating in literary and art criticism, *mise en abyme*, in its most precise form, denotes a formal device where a particular element of a work is used to mirror the work as a whole, both in content and in theme.[63] Both structurally and thematically, the episode before Morton is a distinct mirror of the wider work, with some significant changes which provide

pp. 48–66, 246–53; Baker-Smith, *More's 'Utopia'*, pp. 207–26; Wootton, ed., *Utopia*, pp. 1–31; D. Baker-Smith, 'Reading Utopia', in G. Logan, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Thomas More* (Cambridge, 2011), pp. 141–67.

[60]More, *Utopia*, pp. 246–9.

[61]Hexter's introduction in More, *Utopia* (1965), pp. lii–liii; Skinner, *Foundations*, I, pp. 256–62; D. Wootton, 'Friendship portrayed: a new account of *Utopia*', *History Workshop Journal*, 45 (1998), pp. 28–47, at pp. 30–8; Bradshaw, 'More on Utopia', pp. 24–6.

[62]Bradshaw, 'More on Utopia', pp. 21–7; Dealy, *Before Utopia*, pp. 315–36.

[63]A. Gide, *The journals of André Gide, 1889–1949*, trans. J. O'Brien (2 vols., Evanston, IL, 1987), I, pp. 17–18; L. Dallenbach, *The mirror in the text*, trans. J. Whitely with E. Hughes (Chicago, IL, 1989), pp. 7–19.

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both examples and warnings about how to respond to *Utopia*. This reinterpretation, again, begins with Hythlodaeus's interlocutor among Morton's entourage: the English lawyer.

The lawyer in Morton's party in 1497 shares significant characteristics with another major figure related to *Utopia*. There was one particular man closely involved in *Utopia*'s production who had developed connections to Cardinal Morton in 1489 to 1492, studied English law at New Inn from c. 1494 to 1496 before being formally admitted to Lincoln's Inn in 1496, and whose personification in *Utopia* criticized Hythlodaeus for his blindness to context: More himself.[64] Such correlations could suggest the unnamed English lawyer represents a younger, more foolish Morus who was still a precocious nineteen-year-old with much to learn, providing a younger instantiation of Morus to match the pre-Utopia instantiation of Hythlodaeus. Given More's delight in ironic humour, the character seems to be a veiled self-deprecating joke.

Once the similarities between the lawyer and the character of Morus are recognized, even to the point where they could be conceived to be the same person, further structural similarities between the inserted dialogue before Morton and the wider dialogue of *Utopia* become apparent. The dialogue before Morton begins by setting the scene, then moves into a debate on a subject raised by the lawyer as a source of amazement to which Hythlodaeus takes exception: that there are so many thieves despite the number who were hanged as punishment. Hythlodaeus's objections are initially framed through a sharp condemnation of contemporary society and its corruption, with an especial emphasis placed on socio-economic injustice, and Hythlodaeus considers some ameliorative reforms to the issue at hand: specifically, reforms Morton had already attempted. The lawyer's initial counter-arguments, that work can be found and retainers make better soldiers, are easily disposed of, but his final argument that Hythlodaeus is not aware of the context he is addressing contains a salient point. Their discussion, however, is interrupted, and the debate over how to reform the current unjust system of capital punishment is redirected to consider the total transformation of the system. Hythlodaeus argues that the death penalty is both unjust (among other things it contravenes divine law) and impractical. Instead, he raises the Roman practice of lifetime penal servitude, before turning to his preferred model practised by the fictional Polylerites: the 'people of much nonsense', whose Persian locale and isolationist nature projects an aura of plausibility onto their (non-)existence. Hythlodaeus describes their punitive system, but also details the political, social, and economic mechanics which maintain it, while also directly raising their method of restitution as significantly better than those used in Europe. Hythlodaeus concludes by urging that their system could be 'adopted even in England'. The lawyer, however, denies it could be implemented 'without putting the commonwealth in serious peril', then falls silent.[65]

Up to this point, this small dialogue structurally echoes the wider work of *Utopia* precisely. *Utopia* also begins by setting the scene, then the dialogue itself starts when Gillis expresses his amazement that Hythlodaeus has not entered the service of a

[64]S. B. House, 'More, Sir Thomas [St Thomas More] (1478–1535), lord chancellor, humanist, and martyr', in *Oxford dictionary of national biography* (Oxford, 2004).

[65]More, *Utopia*, pp. 54–75.

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ruler. Gillis even uses the same verb which Hythlodaeus uses to introduce the English lawyer's musings on capital punishment: *miror*, 'I marvel', and *dicebat se mirari*, 'he said he marvelled', respectively.[66] Hythlodaeus takes exception, discarding the feeble objections of Gillis, before responding to Morus's argument which opens a more fruitful line of debate: whether advising a prince was an action worthy of a 'noble' and 'philosophical' nature. He then moves his objections towards a condemnation of corrupt contemporary society and the impossibility for a good counsellor to have their proposals for reforms listened to, especially through describing the actions of the sycophants in Morton's court, the French war council, and the financial council.[67] In doing so, he raises some potential methods of reform: Morton's reforms and the Polylerite, Achorian, and Macarian models. In response, another English lawyer, this time Morus, intercedes with the point that Hythlodaeus is being blind to his context: it 'is not the place for such things' and an indirect approach would be better.[68] Morus is thus directly recommending the reformist approach to not just the issue of counsel, but the entirety of European society.

Hythlodaeus, however, rejects the claim that this is possible. He initially gives similar objections as he had made to the death penalty: such an approach is both unjust, contravening Christ's own teachings, and impractical, as in the current system it is impossible to give any counsel but the very worst.[69] Instead, he reorients the debate to argue that the entire system needs to be transformed. He declares that a commonwealth can hardly be 'just or prosperous' where private property exists and money is society's ultimate value. In doing so, he rejects outright the possible reforms he raised earlier, reforms which could improve the symptoms but not purge the disease, while recommending the alternative model of Utopia, the 'no place', where 'virtue has its reward', 'everything is shared equally', and 'everyone lives in plenty'. He backs this up with Plato's support for the equality of goods, declaring that the only way to have both justice and happiness in human affairs lie in ensuring that 'private property is entirely abolished'.[70] To Morus's recitation of the conventional Aristotelian–Aquinian objections, Hythlodaeus urges that he holds these objections because he has 'no image, or only a false one, of such a commonwealth'. The Platonic model, like the Roman model in comparison to the Polylerites, is thus rejected in favour of a description of a new approach which is informed by but goes beyond the ancients' authority. With another facile objection from Gillis discarded, the dialogue concludes by setting the scene for the Book Two, the description of Utopia.[71]

The episode before Morton and *Utopia* as a whole are clear mirror images. The English lawyer fulfils the role of both Gillis and Morus, initially providing facile objections but then raising a challenge which cuts to the heart of the issue with what Hythlodaeus has said so far: he is ignoring context.[72] Hythlodaeus, meanwhile,

[66]Ibid., pp. 50–1, 55–6.
[67]Ibid., pp. 52–95.
[68]Ibid., pp. 94–7.
[69]Ibid., pp. 98–101.
[70]Ibid., pp. 100–3.
[71]Ibid., pp. 104–7.
[72]*Pace* Bevington's identification of the English lawyer with Gillis alone: Bevington, 'The dialogue in "Utopia"', p. 504.

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in his debates with the lawyer and with Morus, describes the abject corruption of contemporary Europe and raises some possible ameliorative reforms to restrain its worst impulses. However, these ameliorative reforms are not enough: in both cases, he still maintains that the system itself is what is corrupt and must be uprooted. To show how this can be done, he describes a fictional model from his experience of distant, unknown lands to give a fleshed-out analysis of a transformative solution to the issue at hand. The Polylerite model is thus a lesser mirror of the Utopian model of Book Two, while the debate which leads up to it is a mirror to the entirety of Book One.

Indeed, the Polylerite and Utopian models both draw similar reactions from their initial interlocutors. The English lawyer discards the Polylerite model as dangerous to introduce to the English commonwealth, then falls silent.[73] Morus is more diplomatic, falling silent immediately, but his unvoiced criticism expressed to the reader is that the foundation of the entire system, 'their communal living and their moneyless economy', alone 'subverts all the nobility, magnificence, splendour and majesty' which 'in the popular view' are the true honour and ornament of a commonwealth. Instead, Morus leaves the door open to further discussion, saying that they would find some other time 'for thinking of these matters more deeply'.[74] Once again, Morus and the lawyer agree, denying the effectiveness of transformational reform. As shown above, Morus's objection to communism is not ironic, but practical, and so his appeal to public opinion again deliberately echoes the lawyer: if communism so utterly subverts what is publicly valued, instituting it would be very dangerous. Both these English lawyers view Hythlodaeus's proposed systemic transformations as impracticable.

The mirroring of *Utopia* in the Morton dialogue, in structure, development, and argument, are apparent. Furthermore, they share the same theme: the viability of ameliorative reform compared to the need for total transformation. The dialogue before Morton is thus a *mise en abyme par excellence*, reflecting in miniature the contents and the themes of the entire work. What is more, one final mirror between this episode and *Utopia* demonstrates that this *mise en abyme* furthermore provides *Utopia*'s readers with a virtuous *exemplum* of how to respond.

VI

At the end of Book Two, Morus has two distinct reactions to Hythlodaeus's description of Utopia. His first reaction is to emphasize its absurd elements, but his second sets up the final line of the book: that 'in the Utopian commonwealth there are very many features that in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see'.[75] This concluding emphasis on the opportunities Utopia offers echoes not the lawyer, but Cardinal Morton. Immediately after the lawyer had condemned the Polylerite model as unfeasible, Morton provides a more measured response. 'It is not easy to guess whether this scheme would work well or not', he suggests, 'certainly when no trial has been made'. He then describes a way to test it within England: have the

[73]More, *Utopia*, pp. 74–5.
[74]Ibid., pp. 246–9.
[75]Ibid., pp. 248–9.

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king temporarily reprieve thieves sentenced to death, excluding the right of sanctuary, and thus discover if such a model works without 'risk' to the commonwealth. If it works, it could be made law; if not, then the thieves could still be executed. Indeed, Morton even proposes a way to extend the scheme in order to better manage 'vagabonds', since previous legislation targeting them (the latest iteration passed under his chancellorship) had not been effective.[76]

Another member of the party imitates Morton, suggesting that since Hythlodaeus's plan had found a method to take care of thieves, and Morton had solved the issue of vagrants, it remained to consider how to manage those whom 'sickness or age' had rendered unable to work, throwing them into poverty.[77] However, this discussion is cut off by the jesting of a fool who does provide a solution, but one that is neither seriously expressed nor workable. His recommendation that the 'impotent' poor could become 'lay brothers', knowing that lay brothers were devoted to doing manual work for members of religious orders, is clearly ridiculous: those who were too sick to work to support themselves would not be especially useful manual workers. The fool's jesting thus cannot, as some have suggested, represent a good way of developing from the Polylerite model.[78] Whether interpreted as a serious contribution framed through attempted comedy, or as a barb at religious orders framed as a contribution, it represents a foolish proposition. Furthermore, the fool's abrasive delivery provides the impetus to reduce the discussion to bickering, showing how easily discussions of good policy can be derailed.[79] This explains why the fool is introduced as a 'parasite' who liked 'to play the fool'. As Nelson astutely noticed, the word for fool (*morio, morionis*) is an unusual term deliberately chosen to pun on the Greek *morion*, meaning counsellor.[80] Thus, this man is introduced as one who liked *imitari morionem* 'to play the fool/counsellor'. What may seem like counsel is actually the opposite.

There are clearly significant echoes between Morton's response and Morus's concluding statement, but Morton develops his approach further. Morton considers how the Polylerite model could be tested in England without posing any danger to the English commonwealth, thinking about how it would interact with English law and thus recognizing that it would require some modification of the law of sanctuary. The man who raised the subject of the indigent who were unable to support themselves then provided yet another way of responding to such models: thinking about what they had not addressed successfully, and thus developing new directions to consider. This is also an approach which More himself seems to support in the letter he wrote to immediately follow the text of the 1517 edition, responding to a critic by asking if there was ever a description of a commonwealth, ruler, or even a private household where 'nothing ought to be changed'?[81] Utopia should be extended and improved on, as this unnamed man in Morton's household extended the discussion into a new area undeveloped by the Polylerite model. This, ultimately, explains

[76]Ibid., pp. 74–7.
[77]Ibid., pp. 76–7.
[78]Wootton, ed., *Utopia*, pp. 28–30; Nelson, *Greek tradition*, p. 40.
[79]More, *Utopia*, pp. 76–81.
[80]Nelson, *Greek tradition*, p. 40.
[81]More, *Utopia*, pp. 266–7.

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why *Utopia* ensures that the fool derails the dialogue in Morton's household before these aspects can be explored further. *Utopia* does not want the reader to take away straightforward solutions: it is offering a method.

Besides More's own ancillary letter, this interpretation fits with Budé's prefatory letter, and More's representation of Morton in his *History of King Richard III* (c. 1513–18), leading various scholars to argue that Morton sets an example for readers of *Utopia* to guide their response.[82] But the recognition of this dialogue as a *mise en abyme* provides significant internal evidence for this approach. The legislative contextualization is what allows for this recognition, but this furthermore explains why *Utopia*'s earliest readers did not pursue this line. As discussed in section IV, many did not know or care for the English context; while others prioritized Book One and its apparent recommended reforms while overlooking how Hythlodaeus specifically rejected them; and yet others, even when they knew the legislative context, simply engaged with Book Two. *Utopia*'s polyphonic ambiguity enabled each of these interpretations, and disproportionate focus on one book or the other limited the possibility to engage with the interpretation delivered here. So, ultimately, they would be unlikely to recognize overtly that when Morus muses that there are many institutions in Utopia which he would rather hope than expect to see, Morton had provided an example of how they could be seen: through listening to the fictional models, considering whether they should be tested, and, if tested, adapting them to European circumstances without danger. The mirror thus provides an extension not seen in the original, guiding the reader towards continuing the work in their own minds and practice, just as Morus hopes to continue the work in a future discussion with Hythlodaeus.

VII

Utopia's previously overlooked legislative context fundamentally affects how it should be understood. By considering the debate between Hythlodaeus and the English lawyer before Cardinal Morton in light of the social legislation Morton himself passed, it is clear that Hythlodaeus's policy proposals were almost all attempted by Morton as lord chancellor. In fact, the social analysis which Hythlodaeus provides is so similar to the justifications given within Morton's legislation, as well as other laws closer to *Utopia*'s production, that it seems almost derivative.

The dialogue between Hythlodaeus and the lawyer before Cardinal Morton, therefore, plays an even more significant role in *Utopia* than has previously been recognized. It invokes the moral corruption of contemporary society, but also describes previous attempts to reform it. Meanwhile, both the lawyer and Hythlodaeus gain another layer of complexity. The lawyer, for all his flaws, ultimately makes an astute criticism of Hythlodaeus, and it is a criticism which Morus will later make even more precisely. The similarities between these two could even suggest the lawyer is a self-deprecating depiction of a younger Morus. Meanwhile, Hythlodaeus, despite his rhetorical power and good intentions, is shown to be unaware of the context he is

[82]Ibid., pp. 54–5, 80–1, 104–5; Schoeck, '"Nursery of correct and useful institutions"', pp. 281–9; Logan, *More's Utopia*, pp. 60–6; Dealy, *Before Utopia*, pp. 327–9; J. Paul, *Thomas More* (Cambridge, 2017), pp. 57, 72–4, 77–8. See counterargument in Davis, 'More, Morton, and the politics of accommodation', pp. 40–9.

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intervening into. Developing these points shows how Hythlodaeus's views changed in response to seeing Utopia, but also indicates that his advice is chronically unsuited to European contexts.

At the end of *Utopia*, the question of reform versus transformation is left seemingly unresolved, allowing the reader to align themselves with either Morus or Hythlodaeus. This has bred countless complex interpretations of which of their two approaches *Utopia* indicates ought to be adopted. However, the legislative context allows for a reinterpretation of the dialogue before Morton, emphasizing contemporary methods for ameliorative reform for Hythlodaeus to subsequently reject. Furthermore, by revealing that the English lawyer indeed had valid criticisms of Hythlodaeus and the similarities between the lawyer's criticisms and those delivered by Morus, the legislative context points towards a structural way to interpret *Utopia*. For the parallels between the episode before Morton and the wider work of *Utopia* become so clear and so consistent that it appears to function as a *mise en abyme*: an image of *Utopia* within itself. However, the mirror extends further, giving virtuous *exempla* of how to respond through the figure of Morton, as well as the unnamed contributor who raises the issue of the indigent who cannot support themselves. Furthermore, it also contains a warning about damaging responses which are not thought through, are not properly discussed, and are delivered abrasively. *Utopia* thus recommends that a serious discussion should be had about its contents. It is not saying that Utopian institutions are the very best, nor even necessarily suited to Europe, but rather that Europe should learn from the Utopians and think about how to reform their society using the Utopian model, just as the Utopians learned from Europe, and Morton learned from the Polylerites. Like the device of *mise en abyme* itself suggests, this is not a one-off act, but an infinite recursion: a continuous method to reflect on improving society.[83] It is a discussion of this sort which Morus wistfully longs for when, in the penultimate sentence, he declares 'Would that this would happen some day.'[84] That More's immediate audience and subsequent imitators did not engage with it in this way, instead dividing the two books and so losing this point, meant for centuries this point was underemphasized. But through its English legislative context and reading both books together, the episode before Morton can be seen a model of *Utopia* within *Utopia* itself, demonstrating how this golden little book wants its readers to respond.

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[83]For a similar interpretation, see M. Knight, 'The game and play of Utopia', *Review of English Studies*, 76 (2025), pp. 15–27.

[84]More, *Utopia*, pp. 248–9.

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