**Poetics in the Paratextual Poems of Thomas More’s *Utopia*[[1]](#footnote-2)**

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**Abstract:** Readers of Thomas More’s *Utopia* tend to forget that the book is not simply the description of “the best state of a commonwealth,” but it is embedded into a dialogue among three characters, two of which have a real-world counterpart. Even more problematic is the neglect of the rich collection of paratextual material (letters, poems, map, Utopian alphabet) that surrounds the text itself. Based on recent positive changes in these areas of secondary literature, the present paper offers an analysis of More’s renowned work with a focus on two features of it: the use of the dialogue form in the work, and the significance of the ancillary material. Both aspects will be investigated with the promise of tracing a previously disregarded literary-theoretical strain in the work.

**Keywords**: paratext, authorial control, utopia

Since Genette’s ground-breaking survey of what he chose to call *paratext*, the study of the “accompanying productions” surrounding literary texts has been increasingly popular in vastly differing branches of literary studies (Genette 1). In early modern literature, probably the most illustrious undertaking was the complete mapping of the paratextual configuration of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*, which was completed by the research group behind the *Dislocations: Practices of Cultural Transfer in the Early Modern Period* project.[[3]](#footnote-4) The strenuous efforts of this team resulted in a book that is probably unparalleled in the study of paratexts: the volume *Thomas More's* Utopia *in Early Modern Europe: Paratexts and Contexts* provides an overview not only of the paratexts of the Latin editions of More's work from its birth, 1516 until 1650, but also reviews the numerous vernacular versions from this perspective. Relying on the study of about fifty different editions, one important observation is that while the Latin editions tend to preserve the many original paratextual elements, the translations almost always radically change them (Cave 6). This reinforces Genette’s claim that the paratext is a textual space serving the authors’ (and his “allies’”) desire to control the readers’ reception of any given text (Genette 2).

More recent studies tend to question the possibility of such one-sided authorial control, suggesting that early modern paratexts are even more complex than Genette’s initial analysis allows, and that they in effect “structur[e] the reader’s approach not only to the text in question but to the experience of reading, and of interpreting the world beyond the book (Smith-Wilson 6-7).” More’s text seems to support these opinions: the work, equipped with a plethora of paratexts has been triggering harshly contradictory opinions from the moment of its birth, and it is obvious that the paratexts have a decisive role in this. How important these were is represented by their exceptionally high number, and by the subtle re-adjustments in the subsequent editions. For quick reference, the following table offers an overview of the paratexts in the order they appear in the March 1518 edition (considered by many as the most authoritative among the five editions published in More’s time):

*1. Table* Paratexts in the March 1518 Basel edition of *Utopia*

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| **Position** | **Item** |
| **1.** | **Letter**, Erasmus to Froben |
| **2.** | **Letter**, Budé to Lupset |
| **3.** | **Poem**, Anemolius’ hexastichon |
| **4.** | **Illustration,** Map (1518 map) |
| **5.** | **Illustration**, Utopian alphabet |
| **6.** | **Poem**, Utopian poem   * in Utopian * in transcription * in Latin translation |
| **7.** | **Letter**, Giles to Busleyden |
| **8.** | **Letter**, More to Giles I. |
| **Book I and II** | |
| **9.** | **Marginal notes** |
| **10.** | **Letter**, Busleyden to More |
| **11.** | **Poem**, Noviomagus’ poem |
| **12.** | **Poem**, Grapheus’ poem |
| **13.** | **Colophon** |
| **14.** | **Printer’s device** |
| **15.** | **Letter**, Rhenanus to Pirckheimer, introducing the epigrams |

As seen, the edition contains 15 paratextual elements (plus the title page), and features a variety of items ranging from conventional typographical objects to poems, letters, and detailed illustrations. Some of these have been extensively studied, and became almost stand-alone texts usually, read with the desire of discovering the key to the secrets of *Utopia*. More’s letter to Giles (nr. 8 in the table) bears a special role, as it directly precedes the main text, and it’s emphasised already in the original edition: its running title includes the word “Praefatio.” McCutcheon (9) argues that this small letter contains More’s “own poetics and hermeneutics,” and she offers a book-length study of this single letter. In a similar vein, Ghita (126) attributes a central role to the letter in that it is “assigning to his readers the crucial task of negotiating fictional and authorial credibility.” The two critics who studied the parerga comprehensively, Allen (101) and Wooden (153-4) both claim that the balancing between fiction and non-fiction is as important in the paratexts as it is within the main text, so their creators are text-book examples for the “readers” in Pintér’s definition: “utopias (…) are first and foremost intellectual and literary games, created by the author who invites readers to join in, to play with him/her and enjoy themselves (42).” As these opinions clearly show, the paratextual elements of *Utopia* are closely interconnected with literary-theoretical considerations. Here I would like to interrogate parts of the prefatory material which are less discussed by critics. My special focus is the poems surrounding the text, but some of the letters and illustrations will also be drawn in.

The basis for my investigation is the mentioned March 1518 Basel edition of *Utopia*, where paratext nr. 2 is a letter by the French scholar Guillaume Budé.[[4]](#footnote-5) Already at its outset, Budé calls *Utopia* a “very pleasant” and “profitable” reading, reiterating the Horatian literary commonplace to be employed later by More himself in the mentioned letter to Giles. Then he admits that he had been mostly impressed by the customs of the Utopians, and for some time, pursues the “politicising” kind of reading. However, interwoven phrases of delicate scepticism carefully counterbalance this strain:

Now, the island of Utopia, which I hear is called also Udepotia, is said, by a singularly wonderful stroke of fortune *(if we are to believe the story)*, to have adopted the customs and the true wisdom of Christianity for public and private life and to have kept this wisdom uncorrupted even to this day. (CW 11, my italics)

Budé partakes in the so Utopian play with words, and hints at another reading of the island’s name (*Udepotia* – Neverland), which displaces the island not only geographically but temporally as well. Then, in a somewhat ironic tone, he is wondering whether it is possible at all to talk about an uncorrupted Christian way of life anywhere. Probably that would be just enough to get a sense of his scepticism, but Budé does not want anyone to miss the point: in the highlighted aside, he explicitly questions the authenticity of the story. The true significance of this remark lies, however, not in that it is an obvious warning for the reader. More importantly, Budé, who finds the customs of the Utopians wonderful, and discusses the values of true Christianity in his prefatory letter, demonstrates an ideal reading of the work, one that engages in its discussion of the most serious real-world matters, seeing no tension between these and the work’s basically imaginary nature. Maybe the story is not true. Nonetheless, neither is it important, as – besides numerous sceptic phrases – his conclusion suggests: “I (…) have made investigation and discerned for certain that Utopia lies outside the limits of the known world (CW 13).” Budé’s letter is a good example showing how some of the prefatory materials take part in the discussion of the work itself, while at the same time, instead of trying to disguise it, they straightforwardly call attention to its fictitious nature.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Paratext no. 3, Anemolius’ six-line poem is the first among the poetic kind of paratextual materials, and it contributes to the discussion about the work with important literary and theoretical insights. Its typography suggests a unique place within the structure of the complimentary material: the long title and the six lines are placed in the middle of a recto page, and they are surrounded by vast empty spaces, like the island they represent. Unimportant as it seems, it must be noted that this is something that the reader sees nowhere else in the publication, for example, paratext nr. 11 and 12, which are two poems, follow a letter with only a line between the text of the letter and the poems. Already this peculiar typography seems to suggest that the poem plays a central role in the work, an impression that is only strengthened by the actual content of the poem:

‘No-Place’ was once my name, I lay so far;

But now with Plato’s state I can compare,

Perhaps outdo her (for what he only drew

In empty words I have made live anew

In men and wealth, as well as splendid laws):

‘The Good Place’ they should call me, with good cause. (More 1995, 19)

Like Budé’s letter, the short poem also plays with the word ‘utopia’, and it is here that a third rendering of it occurs: *eu-topia*, that is, good-place. By the third paratext, besides Budé’s explicit questioning of Utopia’s existence, the successive alterations of the geographical name and their scarcely hidden meanings themselves call into doubt both the spatial and the temporal existence of the island more implicitly, on the level of words, carrying on More’s initial pun: Goodplace (Eutopia) is Nowhere (Utopia) and never (Udepotia). More importantly, the short poem claims that *Utopia* surpasses Plato’s *Republic* because it shows good polity not only on the level of words, but it also “exhibits” it. The poem reinforces the ambiguous nature of the work: while it purports to be written by the inevitably fictitious “nephew of Hythlodaeus” indicated as its author whose name translates as “boastful,” it compares *Utopia* to Plato’s *Republic*, establishing a direct link with the most important classical literary precedent of the work, thereby stepping out of its own fictitious role. Some of the very terms used in the poem obviously refer to the act of imitation: *Utopia* is a rival [aemulo] of Plato. From this act of emulation or contest, *Utopia* emerges as the winner: whereas the ancient text merely *delineates* [deliniavit] the ideal state, More’s version also *exhibits* [praestiti] it, thereby surpassing its pattern. This passage is obviously associated, besides ancient and Renaissance theories of imitation, with concurrent ideas about the relationship between philosophy and literature as well. A peculiar near-contemporary parallel comes from Sir Philip Sidney’s *Defense of Poesie*, where precisely *Utopia* is the supporting example for the claim that poetry surpasses philosophy, and the argument is strikingly similar to that of the hexastichon:

But even in the most excellent determination of goodness, what philosopher’s counsel can so readily direct (…) a whole commonwealth as the way of Sir Thomas More’s *Utopia*? (…) For the question is, whether the feigned image of poetry or the regular instruction of philosophy hath the more force in teaching. (Alexander 2004, 21)

In its extremely concise form, the short prefatory poem effectively summarises and thereby foreshadows one of the central points of Sidney’s more extensive tract. The similarity can also be observed in the use of words:

Poesy, therefore, is an art of imitation, for so Aristotle termeth it in his word *mimēsis*, that is to say, a representing, counterfeiting, or figuring forth – to speak metaphorically, a speaking picture – with this end: to teach and delight. (Alexander 2004, 10)

Even though Sidney makes specific reference to More’s *Utopia*, by highlighting this similarity, I no way intend to suggest a borrowing by Sidney. Of course, this is shared terminology, originating from Aristotle, Horace, and other ancient and Renaissance sources.[[6]](#footnote-7) What is important, though, is that such a close terminological and conceptual overlap can be registered between the first “proper” utopia and the first “proper” English apology of literature. Unfortunately, like in Plato’s *Republic*, there is not much to learn about poets or literature in *Utopia*. However, a close reading of the short poem reveals an important literary agenda in operation in the underlying structure of the work, one that is the harbinger of Sidney’s later theoretical reflections. This relationship has a wider implication extending to the whole genre of early modern utopias, and at least partly explains their popularity: early modern utopias, by their very nature, were at the intersection of key questions of contemporary poetics. And, as this poem proves, they were often completely aware of this peculiar position.

Although different in nature, paratexts no. 4 through 6 are inextricably linked with the previous poem. The map, the utopian alphabet, and the different versions of the Utopian poem form a coherent group where the previously declared theoretical desideratum of “praestiti/exhibit” is put into practice. In accordance with the program announced in the opening and typographically accentuated poem, mere philosophical (verbal) speculation about the ideal commonwealth is supplanted here with actual (visual) representation. The island itself is displayed through a woodcut, whereas its language is not simply described or *delineated* (as it is later in the main text) but actually *represented* via spectacular samples: besides a table of the Utopian alphabet consisting of geometrically shaped letters (nr. 5.), its practical application in a poem (no. 6.) is also exhibited. The content of the poem itself is quite close to the first poem, its central idea summed up in its middle part: “I alone of all nations, without philosophy, have portrayed [expressi] for mortals the philosophical city.” (More 1995, 23)[[7]](#footnote-8)

This poem again draws a contrast between Plato’s *Republic* and *Utopia*, and the advantage over the predecessor is once more the very act of representation. In their combined effect, the map, the alphabet and the poem invite the reader to a certain way of reading and thinking, and the text constantly appeals to the *imagination*. Nonetheless, these elements are also subject to the self-negation that is omnipresent in the work, and that was already seen in Budé’s letter. Especially the updated version of the map, which was made by Holbein and appeared from the third edition, is, in Wooden’s (157) wording, “manifestly and neatly incorrect”.

The significance of the two closing poems (paratext no. 11 and 12) lies partly in that they are both explicitly addressing the reader, as opposed to the previous exchange of letters which occurred within an apparently closed circle of elite humanists. Geldenhauer recommends the book because it is (of course) both profitable and delightful, but it is interesting where he locates the actual profit of the book: “To sharpen at once both your thoughts and your speech” (More 1995, 257). Tiny and well-hidden as this remark is, it fully supports the supposition that *Utopia* is – among many other things – about the proper way of reading and using language. Elsewhere I argue that the work, and especially its first book, contains a not too obvious thread which addresses the proper, decorous use of the dialogue form.[[8]](#footnote-9) This poem reinforces the sense that the work is not only about the best commonwealth, but also about the best literature –from the perspective of the writer and the reader alike. It also shows that the self-reflexive literary thread is preserved until the very ending of the book, as the main advantage is not that the reader can imitate the wonderful virtues of the Utopians (that is, he learns not only from the content of the book) but that he can improve in “thought and speech,” so in fact that he becomes a better reader and writer. De Schrijver’s poem, on the other hand, offers no such self-reflexivity at first sight, and sounds like an advertisement for the book, briefly cataloguing its contents: “new monsters from the new-found world,” “new ways of life”, “the source of human virtue,” and “the void beneath all things” are the most compelling properties of *Utopia* in the poem’s reading (More 1995, 257). Of course, coupled with the other poem, this shift of focus is somewhat embarrassing. Especially if we remember the first book, where More recalls how they asked Raphael about his travels, and adds the following remark:

We asked him many eager questions about such things, and he answered us willingly enough. We made no inquiries, however, about monsters, for nothing is less new or strange than they are. There is no place where you will not find Scyllas, ravenous Calenos, man-eating Laestrygonians and that sort of monstrosity, but well and wisely trained citizens you will hardly find anywhere. (More 1995, 49)

By emphasising the presence of what is decidedly absent from the work, De Schrijver misleads the reader, as most of his questions relate to matters that are not addressed in the book. The two poems obviously form a pair, and the use of the Latin phrase “monstrorum” (CW 52) in the text and “monstra” (CW 30) in the poem establishes a subtle link between the text and its paratext.

Conclusively, it is clear that the paratextual materials contain important theoretical-poetical insights, and the verse paratexts are as important from this respect as the more frequently quoted prefatory letters. Whether these texts indeed reflect a striving for authorial control over the text is another question. The ambiguity of the work is extended onto the paratexts, and the last prefatory poem in fact undoes the previous one. Therefore, if there is an authorial purpose reflected in the paratexts, then it is nothing else but to leave the text as open for the reader as possible. After all, there might be no real conflict between Genette’s concept of authorial control, and Smith and Wilson’s claim about the paratext’s power to influence the reader’s universal “experience of reading.” For one, More and his allies were certainly aware of this potential and made the best use of it.

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3. A detailed project description is available at <http://www.ub.uio.no/fag/sprak-litteratur/romansk/prosjekter/dislocations/tekster/prosjek.pdf> (date of access: 27 Jan 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Allen and Wooden both find this letter crucial in their respective readings of the parerga. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. In Allen’s reading, the main point of Budé’s letter is that it calls attention to the fact that the work shows Christian principles to European readers. Although he registers that “the appended material shares in the deliberate ambiguity of *Utopia*”, here, and elsewhere too he overemphasises the serious (as opposed to the comic) element. Cf. (Allen 1963, 101, on Budé's letter: 104-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. The following names are connected to the quoted passage in the edition of *The Defence of Poesy* by Gavin Alexander: Scaliger, Trissino, Castelvetro, Mazzoni, Tasso, among the ancients: Plutarch (who attributes the concept of “poetry as a speaking picture” to Simonides) and of course, Aristotle, and Horace. See (Alexander 2004, 325, n35) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Here I quote the 1995 Cambridge translation of the text, because the Yale-version seems to be a bit far-fetched in this place: instead of “philosophy,” writes “abstract philosophy” (CW, 19), although the Latin original contains no word that could be/should be rendered as “abstract”. Neither does the word appear in Robinson’s rhymed translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Cf. my paper *Colloquium, sermo, decorum: the dialogic roots of More’s* Utopia. Forthcoming. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)