

UTOPIA

My meeting with Geraldine Hitherday was fortuitous; but what an important meeting it turned out to be.

We were both attending a Conference on Renaissance Political Philosophy. During a coffee break on the 2nd day, I found myself next to Geraldine and by way of making small-talk, I said to her “Yesterday, when we had to introduce ourselves, for a moment I thought you’d said your name was ‘Geraldine *Hythloday*’, till I realized my mistake.”

“Well, Hitherday is not a common surname, I guess,” she replied.

“No,” I said, “but rather more common than Hythloday, surely, as the latter was made up by Thomas More.”

“Ah yes,” she said, “Raphael Hythloday – the one who told More all about Utopia. But,” she added. “he really was Raphael Hitherday; It was More that changed it, you know. He just made a pun with Greek *hythlos* (idle talk, gossip).”

“What!” I exclaimed in astonishment. “Are you telling me that Raphael Hythloday was an historical character? That he was really Raphael Hitherday?”

“Yes,” she said in a very matter of fact way. “He’s one of my ancestors, so to speak. He never married or had any children of his own. I’m descended from his brother, Michael, who is my great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather. So I guess that’d make Raphael my great-great-great-.....”

“OK,” I said, interrupting her. “I get the picture. Next you’re be telling me that Utopia was a real island.”

“Well, yes, of course,” she said, “but ‘Utopia’ is not the real name. You’ll find it in my great-great-etc uncle’s papers. It was actually called ‘Ketllan’. More changed all the names, making them sort of mock Greek.”

“Like the River Anyder?” I queried.

“Exactly!” she said. “The River Waterless – how ridiculous! But More made lots of jokes like that in the book.”

“I wonder why he did that?” I mused.

“Well,” she said, “it seems from Raphael’s diaries that More was skeptical about the truth of Raphael’s tales. In Antwerp, More is likely to have met other travelers who told extravagant stories and some, certainly, were not true. But Raphael’s stories obviously attracted him; but rather than narrate the stories as a straight travelog, More, it seems, decided to present his book in the form of the ancient Greek genre of a discourse on the ideal commonwealth.”

“Yet,” I said, “it does not have the argumentative structure of Plato’s and Aristotle’s works on this subject. Indeed, it seems to me much more like the Ciceronian dialogs – long speeches punctuated by brief interruptions which, while they expound different positions, do not reach definitive conclusions.”

“Ah, you’ve noticed that,” she said. “And,” she added, “despite what Hythloday claims in the book, Utopian society is clearly *not* ideal in certain

respects.”

“True,” I agreed. “For one thing it depends on slaves to do the really dirty jobs.”

“And,” she added with feeling, “it’s sexist through and through. When they marry, women move into the *husband’s* household; wives act as *servants* to their husbands; husbands are expected to *chastise* their wives. And as for what happens at home before they go to Church on Finifestus day.....”

Geraldine paused, as anger was getting the better of her.

“They confess their sins to their husbands,” I said, completing her sentence.

“They have to *prostrate themselves at their husband’s feet* and then confess their sins. But do the husbands have to confess anything to the wives? No!”

“And they’re colonialists,” I said, hastily moving away from the sexist question. “If the population grows too large, the Utopians will go to war simply to obtain territory for colonization, arguing that it is a most just reason for war (*justissimam belli causam*) to drive out people who leave their land idle but don’t let other’s use it.”

“Yes,” she said with feeling, “the very same arguments Europeans used in colonizing the New World and removing native populations from their land.”

“And not,” I added, “so very different from the Nazis’ arguments for ‘Lebensraum’. There’s a good deal in their foreign policy which More himself would surely not have agreed with.”

“Yes, indeed,” she agreed. “And did not More have himself say towards the end of the book ‘*haud possum omnibus assentiri quae dicta sunt*’ – I cannot agree with everything that was said?”

“So why did he write it, I wonder,” I said.

“I guess,” she answered, “that he was fascinated with Raphael Hitherday’s stories of Ketllan, but didn’t know how true they were, so he put it into classical dialog form – Ciceronian, it is true, rather than Greek – as though on the ‘best commonwealth’ theme of Plato, Aristotle and others; and he spiced it with his own wit and his Greek puns. Even the title of the book is a pun.”

“What, Utopia?” I said, “Yes I know it’s Greek *ou* (not) and *topos* (place) so *utopía* (Not–place–land).

“Yes,” she said. “But surely if it *really* was a genuine discourse on the ideal commonwealth, wouldn’t he have spelt it EUTOPIA – *evtopía* (Good–place–land)? Instead he spells it *always* UTOPIA – *utopía* (Not–place–land).”

“I suppose so,” I agreed.

“And the capital city Amaurot (Phantom) with its River Anyder (Waterless) and the governor Ademus (One who has no people) and other similar names are surely mildly mocking Raphael’s traveler’s tales. But you know, I suppose,” she continued, “that five years before he wrote Utopia, More had given a series of lectures on St Augustine’s ‘City of God’?”

“No,” I replied, “I had not known that. I suppose, then,” I added, “that

Thomas More, like St Augustine, did not believe that any human society could be wholly attractive.”

“Precisely,” she replied.

“But,” I said, “you said earlier that Utopia was a real place called Ketllan. I don’t know of any Ketllan. What happen to it?”

“Well,” she said, “if you read Utopia carefully you can see how Utopian society, when Raphael Hitherday knew it, contained the seeds of its own destruction. It shows up even more in Raphael’s own diaries and notes, though he himself did not see it. He really did think it was an ideal society.”

“I didn’t know such diaries and papers existed,” I said with some surprise. “Where are they now, I should dearly like to see them.”

“They’ve been kept in the family,” she said. “We have them at home. You’re certainly welcome to come and visit and have a look at the papers.”

“Gosh, thanks,” I said. “I should very much like to do that. But what did you mean just now by saying Utopian society contained the seeds of its own destruction. I’m not sure I understand.”

“Just think,” she said, “of their severe lack of personal freedom.”

“How so?” I replied. “Surely I recall reading somewhere that no kind of pleasure is forbidden so long as no harm comes from it. That sounds pretty libertarian to me.”

“Ah yes,” she said, “that, according to Raphael Hitherday, is what they believed. But in practice their lives were so hedged around with so many activities either actually forbidden, or stigmatized or very strictly channeled. Even their leisure time is restricted to just a few approved activities. But”, she added, looking at her watch, “I think we’d better leave this for some other time, or we’re going to be late getting along to Professor Maurizio’s talk – and that looks like being the highlight of the day.”

“Gosh,” I said, “is that the time. Yes, I want to hear his talk. We’d better get along. Perhaps we can meet up later and you can tell me what did happen to Utopia or, Ketllan, as I suppose I should call it.”

“Yes,” she said, as we started off for the talk, “we’ll do that.”

And we did do that. In fact that was the beginning of many meetings about Thomas More, Utopia and great-great-etc uncle Raphael – and other things besides.

Geraldine and I celebrated our twentieth wedding anniversary this year; and Michael Hitherday now has another generation of descendants: two great-great-etc grandsons, Thomas and John; and a great-great-etc granddaughter, Margaret.

A year after that Conference on Renaissance Political Philosophy, we were married in Geraldine’s home town in the Church of Saints John Fisher and Thomas More. Maybe our first meeting was not fortuitous after all; maybe St Thomas had a hand in it all along.