The Prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

Maarten Vermeir
University College London

Abstract

Thomas More wrote the basic lines of the first book and the main parts of the second book of *Utopia* with the description of Utopian society, during his embassy in the Low Countries and staged the conversation on the state of Utopia between a Raphael Hythlodaeus as the narrator of the Utopian story, a Pieter Gillis and a Thomas Morus in the city of Antwerp, the main port and economic heart of the Low Countries and of Europe at that time. However, a comparison between aspects of Utopia and aspects of political, cultural, religious, and socioeconomic life in the Burgundian Low Countries at the beginning of the sixteenth century was missing from the scholarship. In this paper I will present such a comprehensive study of *Utopia*, unlocking the crucial meanings and purposes of the most enigmatic book in the Northern Renaissance, and by doing so making way for a renewed and more prosperous study of civic humanism, now in context of the political cultures in the Low Countries and of the Christian humanism of Thomas More and Erasmus. This paper offers the extensively elaborated written text of my research presentation at the RSA conference in New York, March 2014, where I met professor Lisa Jardine to whom I dedicate this publication, as well as to my beloved parents and grandparents.

Keywords

*Utopia*, Low Countries, Christian humanism, political thought, Low Countries humanism

Maarten Vermeir holds a Master of Latin Literature and Linguistics from the Free University of Brussels (2011), an Advanced Master in Medieval and Renaissance Studies from the Catholic University of Leuven (2014), an International Master in European Studies from the Italian-Belgian Chamber of Commerce in collaboration with the Université Catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve (2015), a Bachelor of Laws from the Catholic University of Brussels (2004) with additional Master credits for *i.a.* European Law, International Law, Constitutional Law and Civil Law and the certificate - uniquely accepted in all EU member states - of ‘European Mediator in the Practice of Justice’ from the Association for International Arbitration, supported by the EU (2014). In February 2015, he was unconditionally accepted for a Graduate Research Study/PhD at University College London, with professor Lisa Jardine as supervisor. After her passing in October 2015 and the Brexit vote in June 2016, he is now looking for a possible relocation and start of this Graduate Research at a fit university in one of the remaining EU member states and in combination with his present days’ engagements: currently he is professionally active as advocate in European affairs (EU compliance, advocacy, project drafting, funding and management), matters of International Trade and Cultural Diplomacy, advocating Erasmian ideals and actualized Christian humanist principles as common moral ground, as binding/enthusing story, as heart and soul for the European Dream and Project.

* This dissertation is based on the research presented at the conference of the Renaissance Society of America in New York, 28th March 2014, as part of one of the Moreana panels on More’s *Utopia*. Until the first publication of this paper in December 2016, the complete video and audio recording and PowerPoint of this RSA conference presentation could be consulted on the website of Moreana.
O príncipe de Utopia, a Utopia de Thomas More e os Países Baixos

Maarten Vermeir
University College London

Resumo

Thomas More escreveu as principais linhas do primeiro livro e as principais partes do segundo livro da Utopia com a descrição da sociedade utopiana durante sua missão diplomática nos Países Baixos e compôs a conversa sobre o estado de Utopia com um Raphael Hythlodaeus narrador da história utopiana, um Pieter Gillis e um Thomas More, na cidade de Antuérpia, principal porto e coração da economia dos Países Baixos e da Europa naquele momento. Faltava, porém, na bibliografia especializada, uma comparação entre aspectos da Utopia e aspectos da vida política, cultural, religiosa e socioeconômica nos Países Baixos burgúndios no início do século XVI. Neste artigo apresentarei um estudo panorâmico da Utopia, desvendando os significados e propósitos cruciais do mais enigmático livro do Renascimento do norte e abrindo caminho para um renovado estudo do humanismo cívico, agora no contexto das políticas culturais nos Países Baixos e do humanismo cristão de Thomas More e Erasmo. Este artigo é uma versão mais elaborada das pesquisas que resultaram no texto apresentado no congresso da Renaissance Society of America, em Nova York, em março de 2014, durante o qual encontrei a professora Lisa Jardine, a quem dedico esta publicação, assim como a meus amados pais e avós.

Palavras-chave

Utopia, Países Baixos, humanism cristão e humanism cívico, pensamento político, humanismo dos Países Baixos


Enclosed Garden in the city of Antwerp, behind a mansion of ‘Hertoginstraat’/Duchess Street, Summer 2015.
Pieter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The feast of Acheloüs*, ca. 1615
Metropolitan Museum of Art - New York
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Low Countries

A detailed comparison between the society of *Utopia* and the society of the Low Countries at the beginning of the sixteenth century is justified when we overlook the numerous elements connecting Thomas More’s *Utopia* to the Low Countries. First of all we have the well-known fact that the so-called ‘Utopian embassy’ of More, during which he conceived and started writing *Utopia*, was an embassy to the Burgundian Low Countries. As part of an English diplomatic mission in name of king Henry VIII, More journeyed in May 1515 to Bruges where negotiations for a new trade treaty with a delegation of representatives of prince Charles, ruler of the Burgundian Low Countries, were initiated.¹

When the Netherlandish negotiators felt the need to ‘seek’ the instructions of the government in Brussels, negotiations were suspended on 21st July ² and their continuation was depending of the remarkably slow-coming green light from the political ‘counselors’ directing the policy of the young prince Charles at the court of Brussels.³ More used this ‘interval of serendipity’ to travel further to the Northern Renaissance court of Jerome Busleyden in Mechelen, the splendid ‘hof van Busleyden’,⁴ and at the end of July or beginning of August to Antwerp. In this main port of the Low Countries and Brabant and the economic heart of Europe at the time of More’s visit, Thomas More stayed in the house of the first clerk of the city of Antwerp:  

1 Other members of the English delegation were Richard Sampson, Sir Thomas Spinelly, John Clifford
2 Without attested relation, July 21st is the National Celebration Day of Belgium since the Joyous Entry and oath on the Belgian constitution, instituting constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy (even then in 1831 a very ‘liberal’ constitution in European context), was made and pledged by King Leopold I as first king of the Belgians on July 21st 1831.
3 I believe this interruption was intentionally arranged by political leaders of the Burgundian Low Countries like chancellor Jean le Sauvage to provide the opportunity for More to travel further and stay with Gillis in Antwerp, probably also with Erasmus as co-director of these plans. On May 7th 1515 Erasmus writes from London to Gillis that chancellor Jean le Sauvage had held him, on his way to London, busy for three days in Ghent. In this context, following statement of Desmarez in his preface for *Utopia*, becomes also clearer and more understandable: ‘The one and only Maecenas or patron of every noble pursuit, Jean le Sauvage, Chancellor of Burgundy, summons us.’ Thomas More, CW 4, p. 26-27; In any case there was at once a nice and long period of leisure for More, foreseen and anticipated by Erasmus who would arrange More’s stay with Gillis even before More’s departure from England. As Hexter stated: ‘there is no indication of a resumption of negotiations in Bruges between July 21 and October 22, 1515 in *LP* (Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, of the Reign of Henry VIII, ed. J.S. Brewer, James Gairdner, and R.H. Brodie, London, 1862-1932), 1515-16, Nos. 732-1057’. Thomas More, CW 4, p. xxxiii
the jurist and Christian humanist Pieter Gillis who was informed about More by Erasmus. Even before More’s departure from England to the Low Countries in mid-May 1515, Erasmus had already asked Gillis to ‘keep his service very correctly available’ to his English friend ‘if by chance an opportunity arises’: a fact of preparation that allows us to doubt seriously the accidental character of More’s travel to the city of Antwerp and his stay there with Pieter Gillis, made possible by an ‘accidental’ interruption of the negotiations in Bruges. Also J. H. Hexter has ‘no doubt’ that ‘Erasmus spoke of Gillis to More both in England and when he went through Bruges in June on his way to Basel.’ It is a fact that Erasmus on his way through the Low Countries to Basel successively saw More in Bruges and Gillis in Antwerp, within a few days.

This legendary stay of Thomas More in Antwerp with Gillis, the second main reason for the comparison in this paper, is immortalized only with light reversions in the beautiful first pages of *Utopia*, staging the Utopian conversation in the city of Antwerp itself: the third reason of this comparison. The base of *Utopia*’s ‘first book’ (*Morus* stay in Antwerp, his encounter with a Gillis and Hythlodaeus, the latter’s characteristics and his role as narrator of Utopian society) is necessary for several references in the main parts of the second book, according to Hexter written in the Low Countries, and should therefore also be conceived during More’s stay in the Low Countries.

---

8 In *Utopia*, More is not staying in the house of Gillis but has found lodging at another place where he receives amongst his visitors also Pieter Gillis (thus *Morus* is not staying with Gillis in *Utopia*), of all the most welcome. Also the time of their meeting is placed by More ‘four months’ after his separation from house and family, thus around mid-September 1515: Hexter and I don’t believe that More and Gillis’ first meeting took place in September. Hexter points to the possibility that More visited Gillis firstly around the end of July, left again and came back to Gillis around September; but I believe that More’s stay with Gillis in Antwerp was long and not interrupted (not for nothing this stay was carefully arranged by Erasmus). I believe that these unhistorical descriptions of the place and time of their meeting in Antwerp were an intentionally arranged safeguard for Gillis, softening his personal involvement in the creative context out of which *Utopia* came as a result. Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 48-49 and p. 573-576 (J.H. Hexter on ‘More’s visit to Antwerp in 1515’); Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. xxxiii
9 J.H. Hexter in Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. xvii-xviii: ‘(…) Scattered through Book II of *Utopia* there are bits of autobiography, recognizable fragments of a narrator, and (that) it is highly probable that the narrator to whom the fragments belonged had been earlier provided with an identity. In Book II the narrator offers the following information concerning himself: 1. He lived for five years in Amaurotum, the capital of the Utopian federation (116/28). 2. He personally prefers Greek authors to Latin and suspects that, except for the Roman poets and historians, the Utopians would find little in Latin literature to interest them (180). 3. The venture he was on when he encountered the Utopians was connected with the ‘fourth voyage’ – whose voyage is not specified (180/26). 4. When he was in Utopia, there were only four men in his party although before there had been six (218/10-11).’
According to Hexter, the long elaboration of the first book and the small extensions of the second book were completed by More after he returned to London towards the end of October 1515 when he was recalled by his prince.\(^{10}\) We know also that Erasmus stayed with Thomas More in England during the first half of August 1516, without testimonials of their conversations regrettably.\(^{11}\) At the beginning of September 1516, More’s writing work for the first edition of *Utopia* was done and sent to Erasmus, then in Antwerp. The first book is completely staged in the city of Antwerp and contains explicate reference to Antwerp - after mentions of Bruges and Brussels - and the ‘church of St. Mary’ now the cathedral of Our Lady, and thus also the entire explanation of Utopian society by Raphael Hythlodeus in what is now known as the ‘second book’ is staged in Antwerp. With good reasons, J.H. Hexter suggested that only the ‘peroration and conclusion’ of the second book (\(CW\) 4, p. 236-246) and the ‘dialogue of counsel including the exordium’ (\(CW\) 4, p. 58-108) of the first book were written back in London.\(^{12}\) The parts written in London provide also a not unnecessary buffer for safeguarding More as writer of such a revolutionary work: in these parts More creates a philosophical gap between *Morus* and Hythlodeus. Thus the second book of *Utopia* was principally written in the Low Countries and maybe not by Thomas More alone: this can be a possible explanation for the difference in style between the first and second book, mentioned and somehow excused by Erasmus pointing to a difference in More’s free time reserved for writing.\(^{13}\) More would have had more ‘free time’ to write the second book with the description of Utopia, but in this ‘free time’ More wrote also his longest letter ever, 2/3 the length of *Utopia*, in defense of Christian-humanistic learning and of Erasmus after a public attack by Martin Dorp.\(^{14}\) Most likely coauthors who could have helped More directly or with previously prepared parts, are Erasmus and Pieter Gillis in whose house More was staying during the crucial time of conception. At the site of Gillis’ house ‘De Biencorf’ or ‘The Hive’, then at the ‘Oude Veemarkt’ or Old Cattle Market and now near the ‘Eiermarkt’ or Egg Market, you can find one of

\(^{10}\) More’s letter and answer to Martin Dorp who had attacked Erasmus for his *Laus Stultitiae*, is dated October 21\(^*\) and at the end of this letter More is writing that ‘letters had arrived from his prince recalling him’. Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 573-574; Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. xxxii

\(^{11}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. xvi; Desiderius Erasmus, *Ep.*, 2, letter 451, p. 317


\(^{13}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *Ep.*, 4, letter 999, p. 21

\(^{14}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, xxxiii
Antwerp’s architectural benchmarks called the ‘Boerentoren’ or Peasants Tower: the first skyscraper on the European continent.\textsuperscript{15}

Pieter Gillis was not only active as the first clerk of Antwerp: one of the four capitals and only cities of Brabant represented next to Clergy and Nobility in the representative assembly of this rich Duchy, the ‘Estates of Brabant’. In a true humanistic spirit, Gillis was still active as an editor maintaining a very warm contact with Dirk Martens in whose printing house the young Gillis had found a shelter and intellectual challenges after a premature end of his Law studies in Orléans. In the first months of 1504, Gillis would meet in the printing shop of Dirk Martens still in Antwerp, his friend for life Desiderius Erasmus who was supervising there the first printing of his \textit{Panegyricus}: an oration for Duke Philip the Fair (the father of prince Charles), however not very well received by a certain circle of Brabantine and Netherlandish politicians at the court of Brussels. After their meeting in this context of Brabantine criticism on Erasmus’ first political work, Erasmus encouraged his bright young friend to finish his Law studies. And indeed, Gillis enrolled in June 1504 probably again for law studies at the university of Leuven where Dirk Martens would establish his printing house in 1512. Pieter Gillis combined his legal studies in Leuven still with his corrector’s work and in 1509 he started also working as clerk of the city of Antwerp. In 1510 Gillis was assigned as first clerk of the city, \textit{id est} the ‘high position’ More referred to when Thomas Morus describes Gillis in \textit{Utopia}. From April 11\textsuperscript{th} 1512, Pieter Gillis could strengthen his professional reputation with his degree as \textit{licentiatius utriusque juris} from the university of Orléans.\textsuperscript{16}

Unsurprisingly after having regarded this entangled history, Erasmus and Gillis arranged the first printing of \textit{Utopia} in the Leuven printing house of their old friend, Dirk Martens. At the beginning of September 1516, More would send to Erasmus his manuscript of \textit{Nusquama or Utopia} as probably Erasmus chose the final title, and his prefatory letter (directed to Gillis); in accompanying letter of September 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 1516, Thomas More writes following compliment and subtle request concerning arrangements for the first publication of his \textit{Magnus Opus}: ‘I know from experience that I do not have

\textsuperscript{15} G. Degueldre, 1988, p.1-22
to tell you to give proper attention to everything else.'\(^{17}\) And indeed with Erasmus’ proper attention, the first edition of *Utopia* was printed by Dirk Martens in Leuven, December 1516, helped by his trusted friends Pieter Gillis\(^{18}\) and Jean Desmarez as assistant editors and by Gerard Geldenhouver as capable corrector:\(^{19}\) all three writers of prefatory pieces for their *Utopia*. The latter was also briefing Erasmus carefully, respecting him as first editor, on the proceedings of the printing work\(^ {20}\); these facts concerning the first publication of *Utopia* constitute the fourth main reason for the following comparison.

The fifth reason for this comparison is constituted by the fact that most of the prefatory letters for *Utopia* are written by political humanists from the Low Countries. This may not strike as much as a surprise when we consider that More requested Erasmus in a letter of September 20\(^{th}\), 1516, to ‘furnish’ *Utopia* well ‘with glowing testimonials not only from several literary men but also from people well-known for the part they have taken in public affairs’.\(^ {21}\) And he did: all prefatory letters for the 1516 edition of *Utopia* are written by men from the Low Countries (except for Thomas More’s first and most important prefatory letter to Pieter Gillis), devoted to Erasmian humanism and indeed active at the political *centra* of the Burgundian Low Countries. Erasmus found the requested writers amongst humanists and politicians who stood the closest to his heart and mind at a time he was present regularly in the political heart of


\(^ {18}\) In More’s first prefatory letter for *Utopia* to Gillis, Thomas More writes that he has sent the manuscript of *Utopia* to Gillis and explains the delay. Did he really send this manuscript to Gillis? Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 38-39

\(^ {19}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 487, p. 124-127

\(^ {20}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 487, p. 124-127; ‘My friend Martens has undertaken the task of printing the *Utopia* with the greatest pleasure. The plan of the island itself has been drawn out by a capital artist, and Paludanus will show it you; if you would like any alterations, either let me know, or note them on the draft. I will keep the copies of your Epistolae most carefully until you get here; if you want them sent to you, they shall be sent without delay. I will take great care to see that *Utopia* makes its public appearance in style, so that readers may get the benefit of it, and not be put off.’

\(^ {21}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 467, p. 79; ‘I sent you some time ago my Nowhere, which I long to see published soon, and well-furnished too with glowing testimonials, if possible not only from several literary men but also from people well-known for the part they have taken in public affairs - for the benefit especially of one man (you will know whom I mean even if I do not mention his name), who for some reason, which you must guess for yourself, regrets that it should be published before nine years have passed. You will take this in hand as you may consider best for me.’ In the letter of October 2nd, 1516, written in Antwerp, we can find the answer of Erasmus to More: ‘Jerome will be here in a couple of days, with a great bundle of letters to me. When I get them, I will inform you, should there be anything that you ought to know. As for your Island, and all the other things, they shall be taken care of.’ Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 474, p. 90-93; And also in a letter to Pieter Gillis on October 17th, 1516, Erasmus writes that he is ‘furnishing’ (*adornare*) or ‘getting ready’ the ‘Nusquam(a)’ and he asked also Gillis to write a prefatory letter for *Utopia* and to address this letter not to him but to Busleyden. Desiderius Erasmus, *Ep.*, 2, letter 477, p. 359, r. 5-7; Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 477, p. 98-100
the Low Countries. The fact that More sent this request to Erasmus at the moment Erasmus was present and maintaining political contacts in the Low Countries, allows us to assume that More was keen to let his *Utopia* be furnished with testimonials from men familiar with the public affairs of the Low Countries: in the Burgundian Netherlands we find the political actors Erasmus and More were theoretically and practically the closest with, in the entire of Europe, or as they liked to call it, the entire *Respublica Christiana*.

The 1516 edition of More’s *Utopia* shows firstly a ‘map of the island of Utopia’, contributed by Gerard Geldenhouwer as he confirms in a letter to Erasmus although we don’t know the name of the artist, and then the amazing Utopian alphabet with a ‘quatrain in the Utopian vernacular’ and six lines on the island of *Utopia* written by the so-called Anemolius, described as ‘poet laureate and nephew of Hythlodaeus by his sister’, and often attributed to Pieter Gillis. These six lines are followed by a letter from Pieter Gillis ‘to the most illustrious Jerome Busleyden, provost of Aire and councilor to the catholic king Charles’. Jerome Busleyden or Hieronymus Buslidius was a doctor of law and became a member of the highest court in the Low Countries, the Grand council of Mechelen. He participated actively in several important diplomatic missions for the central government of the Burgundian Low Countries (in name of this government he complimented in 1505-1506 pope Julius II, in 1509 king Henry VIII and in 1515 king Francis I with their accessions to the throne and as a mediator he helped arranging the appointment of Philip of Burgundy as prince-bishop of Utrecht by the representative assembly of Utrecht) and in June 1517 he became an official member of Charles’ council accompanying the prince to the Spanish kingdoms for the latter’s enthronement there; Busleyden died already at Bordeaux in August 1517, before reaching Spain, and his effectuated testament provided then the needed financial means for the foundation of the *Collegium Trilingue* in Leuven by Desiderius Erasmus and his companions. Erasmus asked Pieter Gillis explicitly to

---

22 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 19  
24 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 18-19; In his prefatory letter to Busleyden, Gillis writes that ‘there is nothing I can add to what he (More) has written; there was only a poem of four lines in the Utopian vernacular which, after More’s departure, Hythlodaeus happened to show me; this verse, preceded by the Utopian alphabet, I have caused to be added to the book; I have appended also some brief annotations in the margins.’ Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 22-23  
25 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 20-21  
26 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 20-25  
27 For activities of counsel and assistance to the government, Busleyden receives compliments from Pieter Gillis in the latter’s prefatory letter for *Utopia*, directed to the former. Thomas More, *CW* 4, 24-25  
direct his prefatory letter not to him, but rather to Jerome Busleyden.  

A prefatory letter from Ioannes Paludanus or Jean Desmarez to Pieter Gillis follows in which Jean le Sauvage, chancellor of Burgundy with political responsibility for all the Burgundian Low Countries, is celebrated as the ‘one and only Maecenas or patron of every noble pursuit (who) summons us’ and then a poem from the ‘same author’ Ioannes Paludanus on the ‘New Island of Utopia’. Jean Desmarez was the public orator or professor of eloquence and poetry at the law faculty of Leuven University and in name of his acquaintance Nicolas De Ruistre he handed over to Erasmus the invitation to compose his Panegyricus on occasion of a feast offered by the Estates of Brabant, celebrating the return of Philip the Fair from Spain. Then follows a prefatory poem by Gerardus Noviomagus or Gerard Geldenhouwer of Nijmegen, and a poem from Cornelius Grapheus or Cornelis de Schrijver. From 1514 Geldenhouwer was attached as secretary to Philip of Burgundy: the commander of the Burgundian fleet or ‘Admiral of the Netherlands’ and from 1517 the prince-bishop of Utrecht. Between 1514 and 1516 Gerard Geldenhouwer was also active as corrector in the printing house of Dirk Martens in Leuven. The first attested contact between Geldenhouwer and Erasmus originated from 1516 when Geldenhouwer was helping at this place with the first printing of Utopia: the first preserved letter between them, deals on this subject. As a city secretary of Antwerp from 1520, Cornelius Grapheus was a colleague of Pieter Gillis who would help him with the design of the triumphal arches for the joyous entry of prince Charles in Antwerp, 1520. The imperial character of these inscriptions is difficult to combine with the political culture of Brabant, but as city clerks they were professionally obliged to deliver the pieces demanded by the around that time radically changed central government. We can suppose however that Grapheus’ true position, like that of Pieter Gillis, was much closer to the political culture of Brabant as subscribed by Erasmus in his Institutio principis christiani to which work - next to Erasmus’ Enchiridion militis christiani - Gillis and Grapheus paid tribute with their co-authored work: Enchiridion principis et magistratus christiani, edited posthumously in

---

29 Desiderius Erasmus, Ep., 2, letter 477, p. 359, l. 5-7
30 Thomas More, CW 4, 26-29
31 Thomas More, CW 4, 28-29
33 Thomas More, CW 4, 30-31
34 Thomas More, CW 4, 30-31
35 P.G. Bietenholz, 1985-1987, vol. 2, p. 82-84
Cologne, 1541, but not in a single copy preserved as far as we know. Thomas More’s famous prefatory letter and dedication to Pieter Gillis closes this beautiful series of prefaces, introducing the first edition of *Utopia*, printed by Dirk Martens in Leuven. The exhaustive study of Erasmus’ and Thomas More’s interaction with political actors in and from the Burgundian Low Countries and with other international key political actors and other, for these matters crucial Christian humanists, on both theoretical and practical level, together with the study of the complete involvement of Erasmus, More and their collaborating Netherlandish political actors and their international political and humanist companions, in Netherlandish and in European political affairs and the further nachleben of their combined political actions and theories, are subject of my doctoral research. In the appendix of this paper, you can find the text of my accepted doctoral research plan.

All the prefatory letters written by these political humanists are also directed to one of these authors, only Jerome Busleyden directed his letter to More who directed his prefatory letters to Gillis. The prefatory letter from Erasmus to Froben, the one from Guillaume Budé to Thomas Lupset and one from Beatus Rhenanus to Willibald Pirckheimer (councilor to the emperor Maximilian and member of the Nuremberg senate), complete the list of prefatory letters and poems for one of the editions of More’s *Utopia*. Like the author ‘Anemolius’, most writers of these prefaces are celebrating systematically the state of *Utopia* and its laws and institutions as the best institution in present practice, surpassing the institutions of ancient Rome and Classical Greece and even the philosophical constitution of Plato’s republic. In Ioannes Paludanus’ poem, a unique combination of virtues is attributed to the state of Utopia,

38 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 32-37
39 The changing order of the *Parerga* in the first editions of More’s *Utopia* can be correctly found in Elizabeth McCutcheon’s overview. E. McCutcheon, ‘More’s *Utopia* and Its Parerga (1516-1518)’, *Moreana*, Vol. 52, 201-202, p. 138
41 This Graduate research proposal was unconditionally accepted by the history department of University College London in February 2015, with Lisa Jardine as supervisor.
43 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 2-3
44 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 4-15
45 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 252-253
sharing respective virtues respectively with France, Germany, England and the Classical states. One region at the crossroads of these countries remain significantly unmentioned: the Low Countries are missing in this list, maybe because they combined - just like the state of Utopia - all the best characteristics of these respective states and countries, also present in the Netherlandish political culture and in the institutional system of Brabant; maybe because the Low Countries are in this perspective the hidden *inspirator* of Utopia, a place not well and not widely known in this perspective: in these perspectives a No-Place or ‘ou-topia’, a Nowhere or ‘Nusquama’. At two other places in *Utopia* the Low Countries are mentioned explicitly: in the description of More’s mission at the first page of the first book, *Flandria* or ‘Flanders’ is mentioned, a *pars pro toto* also used for the Low Countries as a whole i.e. the country which England was having trade negotiations with during Thomas More’s utopian embassy.\(^{46}\) And in the list of peoples and countries the king of France desires feverishly to conquer according to Hythlodaeus, we find *Flandros* and *Brabantos* or the Flemish and the Brabantines followed by *totam Burgundiam* or the whole of Burgundy.\(^{47}\) All together more than enough reasons to take seriously and investigate further the bonds between the Utopian state and the Burgundian Low Countries in the following comparison.

\(^{46}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 46-47
\(^{47}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 86-87
Depiction of the island of Utopia, from *Utopia’s editio princeps* of 1516, by unknown artist.
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Low Countries

Depiction of the port and city of Antwerp by Jan de Gheet, a woodcut from *Unio pro conservatione rei publicae*, 1515. The similarities in style between this picture and the depiction of Utopia in *Utopia*’s first edition of 1516, are very remarkable.


Comparison between Utopia and the Low Countries at the beginning of the 16th century

The political life of Utopia and the Low Countries

The state of Utopia is organized as a parliamentary democracy with a prince for the entire Utopian state, assigned by a representative assembly representing the entire people of Utopia. This side of the Utopian society is already quickly treated in the second book of Utopia, after the first geographical and basic ethnographical notes on the Utopian state and people, necessary for a good understanding of the political institution.

‘Every thirty families choose annually an official whom in their ancient language they call a syphogrant but in their newer a phylarch. Over ten syphogrants with their families is set a person once called a tranibor but now a protophylarch. The whole body of syphogrants, in number two hundred, having sworn to choose the man whom they judge most useful, by secret balloting appoint a governor, specifically one of the four candidates named to them by the people, for one is selected out of each of the four quarters of the city to be commended to the senate. The governor holds office for life, unless ousted on suspicion of aiming at a tyranny. The tranibors are elected annually but are not changed without good reason. The other officials all hold their posts for one year. The tranibors enter into consultation with the governor every other day and sometimes, if need arises, oftener. They take counsel about the commonwealth. If there are any disputes between private persons – there are very few – they settle them without loss of time. They always admit to the senate chamber two syphogrants, and different ones every day. It is provided that nothing concerning the commonwealth be ratified if it has not been discussed in the senate three days before the passing of the decree.

To take counsel on matters of common interest outside the senate or the popular assembly is considered a capital offense. The object of these measures, they say, is to prevent it from being easy, by a conspiracy between the governor and the tranibors and by tyrannous oppression of the people, to change the order of the commonwealth. Therefore whatever is considered important is laid before the assembly of the syphogrants who, after informing their groups of families, take counsel together and
report their decision to the senate. Sometimes the matter is laid before the council of the whole island.\textsuperscript{48}

Precise reading learns that a body of 200 syphogrants is elected by the people, one syphogrant per 30 families, inside each of the 54 Utopian cities. In every city a princeps (prince, governor or mayor) is elected by the representative body of 200 syphogrants inside each city. That makes in total then 54 representative bodies and 54 principes for the administrative level of the cities. But there is also a council or representative body for the entire island with three representatives from every Utopian city (thus with 162 representatives), gathering as a senatus in the capital Amaurotum.\textsuperscript{49}

Based on the clear fact that more institutional details are not explicitly stated, André Prévost, Richard Marius and George M. Logan concluded that there is not a particular princeps or prince for the entire island, assigned by the general council representing the complete people of Utopia.\textsuperscript{50} However, with completely the same factual clearness, Thomas More did not write explicitly that there is no general prince for the entire state of Utopia. For such interpretative cases, European jurisprudence knew ever since Roman law the figure of juridical analogy, used in cases of silence or absence of a clearly stated juridical regulation. This figure allows us to assume that in analogy with the 54 Utopian city councils of 200 syphogrants each, electing each a princeps in all of these 54 cities, also the general council or representative body of the entire state of Utopia is entitled to assign a prince, helping through a coordinative role the general council with handling the general affaires d’ état as the councils at city level are helped by a city princeps in a coordinative role at city level, handling the city affairs.

\textsuperscript{48} Thomas More, CW 4, p. 122-125
\textsuperscript{49} Thomas More, CW 4, p. 146-147
This juridical interpretation based on the interpretative figure of juridical analogy and clarifying the political and institutional finesses of the Utopian state, is further affirmed by Thomas More himself, describing in the letter of 4th December 1516 to Erasmus a dream in which More saw himself as the prince of the entire state of Utopia assigned by his Utopians, holding the Utopian princely scepter, a bundle of corn, mentioned also in the book of Utopia, and receiving foreign rulers and ambassadorial delegations, an occasion for which in the book of Utopia the general council of Utopia is assembled.\(^5\) These last details of More’s letter on his Utopian dream have a corresponding mentioning in the book of Utopia, a corresponding presence in Utopian society: these elements strengthen thus the assumption of the existence of a general prince, as seen in the dream of More, correspondingly for the entire Utopian state. It is in this context also relevant, remarkable and significant that in the fragments of the second book of Utopia, providing more information related to a princeps of Utopia (for example the present statements about the princeps giving the required travel permission\(^5\) and the princeps holding a handful of grain as scepter\(^5\)), More writes princeps always in the singular form instead of writing principes, referring to all 54 principes present and active at city level in the Utopian state. And although More describes seeing himself as the prince of all Utopians in a dream, this fantastic vision is equally valid as a description of Utopian society because the land and society of Utopia as described in the book of Utopia can be considered a complex but complete dream all together.

In More’s Epigrams, a crucial companion piece to the final edition of Utopia in 1518 and thus intertextually closely connected to Utopia, the word princeps stands clearly for king or prince of an entire state.\(^5\) Also in this context I would like to place as argument the letter of 31st October 1516 in which More states that Jerome Busleyden, Jean le Sauvage and Cuthbert Tunstall would have been 'principes' if they had lived in the Utopian state:\(^5\) Jean le Sauvage was an official with political responsibility for the entire Burgundian Low Countries. Erasmus would also dedicate his final first

\(^5\) Desiderius Erasmus, CWE, vol. 4, letter 499, p. 162-164; Thomas More, CW 4, p. 152-153 (on the reception of ambassadors in Utopia); Thomas More, CW 4, p. 194-195 (on the princely scepter); A bundle of corn as scepter of the Utopian Prince makes him or her also a true Christian Prince or Princeps Christianus, referring to the title of Erasmus’ main political work, because with the grains from bundles of corn bread can be made: the symbol of the body of Christ.

\(^5\) Thomas More, CW 4, p. 146-147

\(^5\) Thomas More, CW 4, p. 194-195


\(^5\) Desiderius Erasmus, CWE, vol. 4, letter 481, p. 447
dedicatory letter for *Institutio Principis Christiani*, ever since its fourth edition in July 1518, to chancellor Jean le Sauvage, who is celebrated in Desmarez’ prefatory letter for *Utopia* as the ‘one and only Maecenas or patron of every noble pursuit (who) summons us’.

In another letter Erasmus states concerning chancellor Jean le Sauvage that ‘it is pleasant to know how the prince feels towards me, or rather the chancellor, who in practice is the prince.’ For all these reasons together, it is correct to state that Utopia knows a prince or princeps for the entire state, assigned by the general council or senatus with representatives of all Utopian cities. Also a rather casual reading of the text on the political institution of Utopia, evokes amongst many readers in almost a natural way an interpretation in this direction. For sure the silence on this point in *Utopia*’s text forms another security measure for the author of the book, in the same way as the mediating figure of Hythlodaeus as spokesperson and herald of the Utopian society and the distancing end comments of Morus. We can thus conclude that in quite an ironic way, probably the most important element of the Utopian society and of the intended philosophical message through the book of *Utopia*, is not explicitly mentioned.

In the years 1515-1516 we can find in the Burgundian Low Countries, more exactly in the Duchy of Brabant, a constitution I propose to consider the *Conception Act* of parliamentary democracy. The only written and for all parties positively legally binding constitution in the Low Countries was the ‘Joyous Entry’ of Brabant, written from 1356 at the start of every new reign of a duke or duchess of Brabant and undersigned or sealed by the Estates of Brabant and by the new duke or duchess who also swore a solemn oath to respect this constitution of Brabant. This constitution gave the right to a representative assembly, the Estates of Brabant, to assign and if needed to depose the duke or duchess of Brabant on the juridical basis of an explicit article. The Estates of Brabant assembled representatives of three estates: the Clergy, the Nobility and the four capitals of the Duchy of Brabant: Leuven, Brussels, ‘s-Hertogenbosch and Antwerp: the city of which Pieter Gillis was the first clerk at the time of More’s visit. In these Estates the capitals played an unavoidable role.

Next to the patricians only guild masters were directly involved in the daily political life of the city and through the representation of these four capitals in the

---

56 Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 6, letter 853, p. 54-56
57 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 26-29
58 Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 475, p. 94
Estates of the Duchy of Brabant, with a veto right on all subjects also for this Third Estate. But the craft guilds knew also a specifically strong internal organization and all the members of these craft guilds could feel the effects of certain political decisions, made in the city hall, certainly very well. The entire craft guilds of the Brabantine capitals were so powerful that policies of these cities in the Estates of Brabant, with unanimity amongst the three Estates required for all decisions, were determined by the political choices of craft guilds in the capitals, as Hugo Soly clarifies.

‘During the early modern period, the importance of the craft guilds in the capitals extended considerably beyond the local context, as they effectively decided whether a request from the ruler for a new aide (which generally meant new or higher taxes) in the states of Brabant would be approved: unanimous approval was required, and the yea or nay of the Third Estate depended on what the guilds had decided in the capitals. Since they commanded the vote in the second most densely populated and most affluent province in the Habsburg Netherlands, the craft guilds in the Brabant capitals influenced ‘national’ politics until the end of the ancien régime.’

Strong means of pressure inside the guilds granted the apprentices all necessary tools to steer, if needed, the political choices of their guild masters at the level of the city and further at the level of the Duchy through the city representations in the Estates. Of course women, peasants and large groups of poor in the cities were excluded from guild circles, from political participation: the reason to not equalize the present mature forms of representative democracies in the West with the political institutions of the Medieval Duchy of Brabant. But on the other hand we have to admit that the ‘democracies’ in England from the end of the seventeenth century and in wider Europe from the end of the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century were very plutocratic, maybe even more than a system with indirect participation of guild apprentices. And women got the right to vote in Belgium not earlier than 1948. Do we have to raze then also the great acts like the Act of Abjuration, the Bill of Rights and the Declaration of Independence from our historiography on the development of representative democracy? I propose to incorporate the Joyous Entry of Brabant in this historiography as the Conception Act of

The political system of Utopia is described in *Utopia* as one of the first, actual and thus key elements in the description of the Utopian society. But next to this elaborated description of a political system resembling the institution of Brabant, we can find two other fragments in the first book of *Utopia* referring to aspects of a political culture not unfamiliar after studying the specifics of Brabantine institution, while three of the four capitals of the Duchy of Brabant play an important role in *Utopia*’s genesis (Brussels, Antwerp and Leuven) and two capitals an explicit role in its storyline (Antwerp and Brussels: the capital with the court to which the Netherlandish delegation is told to be heading ‘after one or two meetings’, to ‘seek an official pronouncement from the Prince’).

‘Suppose I should show that they choose a king for their own sake and not for his – to be plain, that by his labor and effort they may live well and safe from injustice and wrong. For this very reason, it belongs to the king to take more care for the welfare

---

62 J. Keane, 2009, p. 242-244
63 H., de la Fontaine Verwey, 1975, p. 113-132
64 L. Jardine, 2008
65 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 122-125
66 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 46-47
of his people than for his own, just as it is the duty of a shepherd, insofar as he is a shepherd, to feed his sheep rather than himself.”

“What if then I were to put before them the law of the Macarians, a people not very far distant from Utopia? Their king, on the day he first enters into office, is bound by an oath at solemn sacrifices that he will never have at one time in his coffer more than a thousand pounds of gold or its equivalent in silver. They report that this law was instituted by a very good king, who cared more for his country’s interest than his own wealth.”

The two levels of government in the Utopian state with cities and a general council, 54 cities in Utopia and around the same number of cities in the Duchy of Brabant, the omnipresence of key politicians of the Burgundian Low Countries and the Duchy of Brabant in the book of Utopia (chancellor Jean le Sauvage, Jerome Busleyden - both affirmed by Thomas More as Utopian Princes - and Pieter Gillis, holding an important office in Antwerp: one of the four Brabantine capitals represented in the Estates of Brabant), strengthen simultaneously further the connections between More’s Utopia and the politics of Brabant and the Burgundian Low Countries. There are indeed two layers of representative assemblies respectively at the local or regional levels of the state and at the level of the entire state present in both Utopia with the representative assemblies of the 54 Utopian cities (also the Duchy of Brabant had around 54 legally recognized cities) sending 3 representatives each to the General Council for the entire Utopian state, and in the Low Countries with Estates in the Duchy of Brabant, the County of Flanders, Holland, Zeeland and the other countries of the Low Countries and in the General-Estates of the Burgundian Low Countries in which these countries were represented to discuss with the duke of Burgundy political matters concerning affaires d’état of the Burgundian Low Countries all together.

Chancellor Jean le Sauvage, showing a strong political commitment to the Joyous Entries of Brabant and also celebrated as ‘Maecenas of every noble pursuit’ in the Parerga of Utopia, can even be recognized in the figure of dux Utopus who made Utopia from a non-island into an island according to the lines of Utopia’s introduction

---

67 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 94-95  
68 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 96-97  
69 Desiderius Erasmus, CWE, vol. 4, letter 481, p. 447  
70 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 26-27
poem in the Utopian vernacular and alphabet,\textsuperscript{71} considering his role in the genesis of \textit{Utopia}.

Also in the economic system of the Utopian state we can read a strong metaphor for a political system based on consensus, with equal property of political power. This system was firstly instituted in Utopia by \textit{dux Utopus}, with ‘dux’ close to the etymological origin of the title ‘duke’. Two fragments in \textit{Utopia}’s prefatory poems suggest that the Utopian state is not build by abstract philosophy, but by real laws, men and resources. ‘Anemolius’ writes that

‘Utopia is a rival of Plato’s republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he delineated in words Utopia alone has exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence.’\textsuperscript{72}

And in the quatrain in the Utopian vernacular, we can read that

‘Utopus, my ruler, converted me, formerly not an island, into an island. Alone of all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy, I have represented for mortals the philosophical city.’\textsuperscript{73}

And internationally, the peace system carefully build by chancellor Jean le Sauvage through the innovative treaty of Cambrai in March 1517 - formulating a then for Europe revolutionary system of collective military defense amongst subscribing, supposedly peacefully coexisting countries, in resemblance with the internal-mutual and external positioning of the respective Low Countries as the composing parts of the Burgundian Low Countries - and other previous treaties with neighboring European countries, resembled the international-political orientation of the Utopian state, although Utopia is not negotiating treaties with its neighboring states. Utopia upholds and defends nevertheless the same international values by waging war only to counter an invasion, to support a befriended state under a similar threat or to free a neighboring state and people from tyranny - and thus protecting or facilitating an institutional, constitutional organization of its neighboring states, similar to the institution and constitution of the Utopian state itself.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 18-19
\textsuperscript{72} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 20-21
\textsuperscript{73} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 18-19
\textsuperscript{74} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 196-203; In the lines on the respect for treaties in contemporary Europe, there is clearly a perfume of irony and satire present. Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 196-197
The political system of Brabant was unique at that time, in both the inner context of the Low Countries and in a wider European context. In accordance to Herman de la Fontaine Verweij, Robert Stein states correctly that the other countries of the Low Countries didn’t have a constitutional tradition like Brabant had.\(^{75}\) Also the different attitude of Charles V towards the different privileges is illustrative: with his ‘joyous entry’ in Ghent he changed unilaterally some formulations of the granted privilege (and two protesters were executed); his oath on the Brabantine constitution however was impossible to change alone and in 1530 Charles V asked (and received) dispensation from this holy oath by the pope.\(^{76}\) With the Joyous Entry of his son Philip II as duke of Brabant, Charles V wanted to raze from the constitutional text the ‘article of resistance’ or the constitutional basis to depose a duke, without success however.\(^{77}\) With good reason, the *reconquista* of ‘s-Hertogenbosch by stadholder Frederik Hendrik and the Dutch army in 1629, had great political and symbolic meaning for the young Dutch Republic and the Stadholder: the control over one of the former capitals of the by revolt and war torn Duchy of Brabant could elaborate their political identity and legitimization in a priceless way. Although John Keane had not the most specialized information on the Joyous Entry of Brabant or on the Great Privilege of 1477 at his disposal, I also find the earliest appearance of ‘representative democracy’ in the same country where Keane found it: in the Low Countries. It is just the logic result when we repeat correctly the same exercise of comparative study and logic elimination, also undertaken by Wim Blockmans in a ‘history of power in Europe: peoples, markets, states’ edited with support of the European Commission on occasion of the 40\(^{th}\) anniversary of the EEC treaty of Rome, 1957. Blockmans describes firstly the gathering of the royal *curia* of Castile in 1187 with also governors of fifty cities, to determine the right of succession for Berenguela and her contract of marriage.\(^{78}\) John Keane discerns the first representative assembly in the Spanish kingdom of Leon:

> ‘So from within this princely triangle formed by the nobles, bishops and urban citizens, the modern practice of parliamentary representation was born. It was in the walled, former Roman town of Leon, in March 1188 - a full generation before king John’s *Magna Carta* of 1215 - that Alfonso IX convened the first

---

\(^{75}\) R. Stein, 2014, p. 84  
\(^{76}\) J.J. Woltjer, 2011, p. 59  
\(^{78}\) W. Blockmans, 1997, p. 256
ever cortes, as contemporaries soon christened it, using the local term for both a
city council and the city where a king resides.⁷⁹

Strengthening the ties (in a risky and costly context of the Reconquista) with this
gathering of high prelates, high nobility and elected citizens from the cities, this king
Alfonso IX of Leon swore in 1188 also an oath at the accession ceremony, to respect the
rights of the subject, followed by an oath of these subjects and their representative
bodies to obey the prince. Based on the reciprocal character of feudal rights and duties,
subjects all over Europe interpreted often out of these oaths the right to stop serving the
prince when he would neglect his princely duty to safeguard the rights of his subjects,
represented in an assembly or not. But in France no institution of such kind existed and
only one time barons had to choose between two rival candidates: they chose then
Philip of Valois over Edward III, king of England. In England the Magna Carta of 1215
offered the right to only 23 barons to overrule the prince in a meeting and distrain
(violently if necessary) the prince’s properties when this prince would neglect these
baron’s rights: it can be read as a propaganda piece and legitimization for the rebellion
the barons had raised against king John but is most significant because it placed the king
of England under the rule of law, and this for the first time in a written document.
According to the provisions of Oxford, 1258, the chief ministers had to be chosen by
and were accountable to the Council of Fifteen, chosen by 24 nominees of which 12
were chosen by the king and 12 by the barons-reformers: these provisions of Oxford
gave neither the constitutional right to a representative assembly to assign or depose the
prince.⁸⁰ The institutions of the Italian city states during the early started Italian
Renaissance resembled still strongly the Classical institutions. The Republic of Venice
had the ambition of becoming a new Athens, placing the stolen Piraeus Lion statue at
the gate of Arsenale and showing strong resemblance to Athens in its single-capital-
concentrated, naval empire and political system of direct democracy by the adult men of
the original 12th century Venetian Merchant families, complexly interwoven with lottery
selections for filling the major councils and electing the Doge. Also in Republican
Florence of the famous ‘Communes’, lottery selections and direct democracy, but then

⁷⁹ J. Keane, 2009, p. 173
⁸⁰ For these reasons the website of the British parliament itself places texts about the Magna Carta and
the provisions of Oxford under the title and subtitle ‘Origins of parliament: birth of the English parliament’ and not under the title ‘the development of parliamentary authority’.
http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/evolutionofparliament/
by the circles of the craft guilds, constituted the political system. And in most Italian city states, except of the Venetian Republic, the historical transformation from Roman Republic into Roman Empire would indeed be closely followed. Classical institutions will be compared with the political system of Brabant at the end of this chapter. And in the Holy Roman Empire, the election of the emperor was a highly political game between the most powerful families and between the principalities governed by an Elector.81 James D. Tracy describes correctly the political system of the Burgundian Netherlands as a unique monarchy, confined in the institutional framework of consent, when he is saying about Erasmus and the political institution of the Burgundian Low Countries that
‘If his writings were to be searched for some conception of an ideal state, the answer must be not that he dreamed of some leaderless federation of city republics, but that he accepted the thoroughly commonplace notion of mixed government: the best state was one which combined elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy’ (…) ‘cosmopolitan though Erasmus may have been, his thinking on monarchy was nonetheless conditioned by the traditions of his native country: the notion that consensus was the true foundation of royal government had a definite institutional context in the Netherlands, where the Estates stood for a still vigorous tradition of limited monarchy (…). As a Netherlander, Erasmus was disposed to look not for the overthrow of monarchy, but for its confinement within a framework of consent.’82

He follows the same line of thought when he is saying that
‘The ‘Great Privilege’ which Mary of Burgundy was compelled to grant her recalcitrant Estates in 1477, effectively dismantling the work of two generations of princely centralization, has no parallel in the contemporary history of England, France or Spain.’83

At the start of Duke Philip the Fair’s reign around 1495, this Great Privilege of 1477 was already revoked on the ground of vitiated consent: imminent invasion of French troops in 1477 had ‘forced’ Mary of Burgundy to grant this privilege, making it thus legally invalid. This privilege generalized the constitutional right of the representative assembly of Brabant to assign and depose the prince, to all Burgundian

81 W. Blockmans, 1997, p. 256
82 J. Tracy, 1978, p. 35
83 J. Tracy, 1978, p. 74
Low Countries. A similar political system was for the first time proposed explicitly around 1127 in the county of Flanders where a ‘court’ with members of three estates would have to judge about the further continuation of the reign of a count of Flanders, feudally installed by the king of France and violating the rights he had sworn to protect.\textsuperscript{84} A good example to illustrate that such political ideas were brewing in the Low Countries already for quite some time. This principal was not executed in Flanders when this count died already shortly after, and we don’t need a law degree to understand that the always still contestable imagination of a political system does not already imply the existence of a constitutional order based on a legal document, written on parchment or paper and signed or sealed by all involved parties including the prince himself: a great deal of difference in the verbal and fetish world of the Laws. Such written and signed constitution did in fact exist in the Duchy of Brabant and from 1356 ‘the article of resistance’ provided the written right - the written character of the \textit{Magna Carta} and the principle that also the king was subjected to the law, was also its greatest juridical significance in British constitutional history - of the Estates of Brabant to stop their obedience to the duke or to his descendants as long as the time of his violation of other constitutional rights (and the determination of this violation and its term were in the hands of these Estates). Of course the ducal title, rights and duties could be entrusted for this ‘period of time’ to another person: one wrongdoing duke was not allowed to block the system with inside its fabric also an important monarchical element enshrined. This was just the essence of the political system of Brabant, brought even already into practice around 1420.\textsuperscript{85}

In ‘History of power in Europe: peoples, markets, states’, Blockmans stops his comparison with the case of the Flemish ‘court’, just before discussing the Joyous Entry in this context. However, a large picture of a splendid tapestry depicting the Joyous Entry of Philip the Fair as duke of Brabant is adorning the page with the title for this large comparative-political piece: ‘the voice of the people’.\textsuperscript{86} In his contribution to Peter Blickle’s ‘Resistance, Representation and Community’, Wim Blockmans does mention the Joyous Entry of Brabant in an equally broad perspective by stating that

\begin{quote}
‘At that moment, their legitimation (of the Low Countries dismissing as a whole the king of Spain in 1581) was largely based on the institutional traditions of the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{84} W. Blockmans, 1997, p. 256

\textsuperscript{85} M. Vermeir, ‘‘Brabantia, decoding the main characters of Utopia’, \textit{Moreana}, Vol. 49, 187-188, p. 160-161

\textsuperscript{86} W. Blockmans, 1997, p. 251 and p. 256
various principalities, especially Brabant, where it was elaborated in written
dependencies granted on the occasion of each accession, called Blijde Inkomst
(Joyous Entry). From the 1580s onwards, the sovereignty of the representative
structures in the Dutch Republic became a solid exception to the monarchic
model prevailing in Europe.87

In his further explanation of the Low Countries, also John Keane gives special
attention to the Joyous Entry and the Great Privilege. But without access to the most
detailed information (mostly in Dutch), it is understandable that he did not come to a
similar conclusion.88

The political system of Brabant shows a higher synthesis of the typically
Medieval institutions and the institutions from Antiquity. With Medieval political
systems Brabant has the elements of the monarch and the representative assemblies in
common: a single leading figure with no exactly determined durance of his reign, and
the presence of a political gathering representing different groups of society. From
Roman antiquity Brabant has received the element of a senatus and from Greek
antiquity the element of people’s sovereignty, although we may not forget that also in
Ancient Greek, Hellenistic and Roman history the figure of king, monarch, princeps or
emperor played more than often a capital role. At the same time the Brabantine political
system divers also from all these political models. In Brabant the representative
assembly plays not only an advising role, it has the power to assign or depose the prince
and to hold the sovereignty itself in name of the ‘people’ it represents. In contrast to
Athenian democracy, not all represented citizens have thus to gather personally to form
together the entity with legislative power like Athens’ εκκλησία. In contrast to the
institutions of the Roman republic, Estates of Brabant represented broader social groups
than the oligarchic roman senate and the Estates could assign one prince instead of two
consuls appointed by the comitia centuriata where the senatorial class had still the
upper hand, and if Brabant’s prince was acting correctly he or she could hold office for
a lifetime instead of one or more terms of a half a year. In the end, the political system
of Brabant did maybe resemble the most of all the political organization (of course then
on a much smaller scale) of a Celtic tribe where not one but two kings, a young and an

87 W. Blockmans, ‘The impact of cities on state formation: three contrasting territories in the Low
Countries, 1300-1500’ in P. Blickle, 1997, p. 256-257
88 J. Keane, 2009, p. 256-257
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Low Countries

older, were appointed by a representative gathering. Culturally the ties are very strong with the political system invented according to the Jewish Book of Kings, by King David laying in his bed at the end of his life and carefully nursed by the beautiful Shunamite girl, to legitimize his son Solomon as the next kings of the Jews. In the first book of Kings, chapter 1, we can read how Solomon was according to David’s plan anointed by the priest, just outside the city walls of Jeruzalem, and acclaimed there by the people as their king; how he entered the city, sitting on the back of King David’s mule and how he was cheered by the people that followed him in a joyful procession. Solomon’s rule as king of the Jews was so legitimised in the way King David intended and Solomon’s rival for David’s throne was sent home with a capital warning to respect Solomon’s ascension. J.R.R. Tolkien wrote the entry of Aragorn as king of Gondor into the city of Minas Tirith according to the same scheme. Also the entry of Jesus Christ into the city of Jeruzalem on Palm Sunday, giving Him the aura of a true and the legitimate King of the Jews, finds its ceremonial origin in the opening chapter of the Books of Kings prescribing the procedure for the designation of the legitimate Jewish King, together with Judaic institution of Judges before the first Jewish Kings crucial to the exploration of the cultural background of the Joyous Entries of Brabant, with always a ceremonial procession of the new duke of duchess of Brabant into the capitals where he or she would swear the oath and attach his or her ducal seal to the Joyous Entry or the constitutional document of Brabant. Of course, the Joyous Entries in Brabant had also a more explicit constitutional meaning next to the political-ceremonial content as a procession in the style of king Solomon’s entry. Also in Flanders princes made ‘joyous entries’ at the beginning of their reign, but then only in a ceremonial sense and not with a constitutional and bilaterally signed document as the Joyous Entry of Brabant also

---

89 Another clear illustration of the strong influence of Judaism on Netherlandish culture, I found in the depiction of the figure Judith in Northern and especially Netherlandish Renaissance visual art. In contrast to the depiction of this figure in Italian Renaissance art (with clothes up to the neck), she is very often depicted by Netherlandish Renaissance painters with a naked upper body: I believe this significant difference is due to a stronger Jewish cultural and content influence on Netherlandish culture because in the Torah text on Judith it is much clearer for the understanding reader that Judith presented herself sexually to Holophernes, before cutting off his head after he felt asleep, than it is clear for the reader of on this point ‘cleaned’ version of the Judith story in the Christian Old Testament. And without neglecting the atrocities committed by the actors of the first crusade, we have to consider in this perspective also the strong, remaining imaginary force coming from the historical figures of two leaders of this crusade: Godfried of Bouillon, who was elected amongst his peers to become the first ‘Christian’ king of conquered Jeruzalem, but who refused to wear the crown of a king in the city where Jesus had worn a crown of thorns, who accepted the title of ‘Advocatus Sancti Sepulchri’ and became the first ruler of the realm of Jeruzalem, and his brother Boudewijn of Boulogne who did accept the crown and became the first ‘Christian’ king of Jeruzalem as king Boudewijn I of Jeruzalem: their family held feudal powers in domains that can be considered precursors of the Duchy of Brabant and its capitals (‘markgraafschap’ of Antwerp, County of Leuven and the Duchy of Neder-Lotharingen).
was. The enriching ability of taking the best aspects of all cultures they once came in contact with, is attributed by Raphael Hythlodaeus to the people of Utopia, and maybe this characteristic can also be attributed to the people of Brabant and the Low Countries with the border between the Germanic and Romanic sphere just in the core of the southern and at that time culturally most elaborated countries of the Netherlands.\textsuperscript{90} When we study one of Simon Schama’s maps on Jewish history, we also learn that these Netherlands were one of the rare regions in Medieval Christendom where the Jews were never expelled from or murdered in.\textsuperscript{91} Infamous are the persecutions of Jews in the Spanish kingdoms and later also in Portugal around the start of the sixteenth century, driving the Sephardic Jews to seek shelter in the Low Countries, or in Venice although the Venetian Republic ordered on 29\textsuperscript{th} March 1516 the grown Jewish population to live at night in Ghetto, a part of Venice giving its name to all future ghetto’s, behind closed gates and guarded by Christian soldiers: other European countries and principalities were even less tolerant to receive them.

Also in several prefatory letters of More’s \textit{Utopia} returns the theme that the state of Utopia and its institutions offer an unique combination of best characteristics, taken over from the cultures ‘Utopians’ once interacted with, and have no equal in the European sphere at any point of time till the day of \textit{Utopia}’s writing. Fragments from these prefatory letters on this point are presented on the following page.

\textsuperscript{90} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 106/30-109/20; The same cultural openness attributed to Utopia in the ‘Qatrain in the Utopian vernacular’ (‘Undemurringly do I adopt whatever is better from others.’ Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 18-19) and in the ‘poem on the new island of Utopia’ by Jean Desmarez (‘Examples of the different virtues are sought in different peoples, and what is lacking in one abounds in another. The total sum of all virtue once for all is the gift of the island of Utopia to earth-born men.’ Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 28-29)

\textsuperscript{91} S. Schama, 2013, p. 427
‘Utopus, my ruler, converted me, formerly not an island, into an island. Alone of all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy, I have represented for mortals the philosophical city. Ungrudgingly do I share my benefits with others; undemurringly do I adopt whatever is better from others.’

‘Brave men were the gift of Rome, eloquent men the gift of lauded Greece, frugal men the gift of famous Sparta, uncorrupted men the gift of Marseilles, hardy men of Germany. Courteous and witty men were the gift of the land of Attica. Pious men were once the gift of renowned France, wary men of Africa. Munificent men were once the gift of the land of Britain. Examples of the different virtues are sought in different peoples, and what is lacking in one abounds in another. The total sum of all virtue once for all is the gift of the island of Utopia to earth-born men.’

‘In your happy description of that most excellent system we cannot miss anything either of consummate learning or of complete knowledge of the world in which we live.’

‘It far surpasses and leaves a long way behind the many celebrated and much lauded commonwealths of the Spartans, Athenians, and Romans.’

‘Since this commonwealth of yours, which you praise so highly, is obviously an excellent blend of these virtues, it is no wonder if on this account it comes to be not only formidable to many nations but also revered by all of them, and likewise worthy to be celebrated through all the centuries.’

The feudal mutual relationship of protection and support, the canonists’ corporation theories, the writings and thought of William of Ockham, Marsilius of Padua and especially these of the Brabantine mysticus Jan van Ruusbroec will have enhanced the development, emergence and endurance of the Brabantine political culture as a practical higher synthesis of the ‘great’ political cultures, lingering and emerging in the collective cultural memory, in daily legal practices and in the libraries of the

92 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 18-19 (Quatrain in the Utopian vernacular)
93 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 28-29 (Poem on the New Island of Utopia by Jean Desmarez)
94 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 32-33 (Busleyden to More)
95 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 34-35 (Busleyden to More)
96 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 34-35 (Busleyden to More)
Netherlandish monasteries. Nevertheless was this political culture in its specificities original and unseen and did it inspire the leaders of the conciliar movement, Pierre d’Ailly and Jean Gerson, who learned both this Brabantine and Netherlandish political culture from first hand while residing and working in Brabant and/or in the Low Countries before the start of their historic councils.

The socioeconomic life of Utopia and the Low Countries

Utopian society is characteristically known for its economic system with common property of all goods. The Burgundian Low Countries at the time of Utopia’s writing, didn’t know a similar ‘communist’ system as model for its economic life in general. Equally for earlier or later times, the same can be said. Even the opposite is true: a very strong evolution towards a ‘capitalist’ system, for many scholars even the first existence of this system, can be located in the Low Countries where the city of Antwerp played the role of beating heart for the entire European economy and the starting transatlantic trade, flourishing with recent discoveries and exploitations of the America’s at the time of More’s visit to Antwerp.

The for Catholic religious orders prescribed common property, was again practically restored in the community of Ruusbroec in Groenendaal and amongst the Brethren and Sisters of the common life. A system of common property is also characteristic for Plato’s Republic, a work of major importance for political philosophy: Utopia is acclaimed as its ‘rival’, ‘perhaps even a victor over it’ in the prefatory poem of Anemolius. Also Gillis describes Utopia in his preface as ‘being superior to Plato’s republic’. With this economic similarity, a thread between Utopia and the Republic of Plato is woven, a paradoxical but undeniable line between the victor and victus. And if Utopia and Plato’s Republic are similar in this economic perspective, the difference between victor and victus and the reason of this victory, has to be found in another field: maybe in their diverging political organization? The Utopian state shows a new political system with equal shares of political power through representation for all its citizens in contrast with Plato’s Republic, and thus the economic system of Utopia can also be read as a large metaphor for this political organization of the Utopian state itself. The state-

---

97 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 136-139 e.a.
98 K. Van Cauteren and F. Huts, 2016
99 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 20-21
100 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 20-21
organized social care for the elder, sick and disabled and life security for all physically able citizens through education and work opportunity, the abolished aristocracy and a clergy assigned by the Utopian people on the basis of merit form practical elaborations of a similarly metaphorical ‘common property of all goods’. These constituting aspects of Utopian social life were for Erasmus, Thomas More and Juan Luis Vives also high on their agenda for their Respublica Christiana. At the time of Utopia’s writing, all social care was still organized by the church, mostly at the level of the parishes. But surely remarkable in this perspective is the fact that the first completely practically elaborated treatise on state-organized social care, more in particular on the subject of poor relief organized by local worldly authorities, was conceived and written by Juan Luis Vives while residing at least partially in the Burgundian Low Countries. Juan Luis Vives was a close friend of Erasmus and fellow Christian humanist residing for a considerable time in Bruges. With his De subventione pauperum of 1526, he formulated the still guiding principles of the active welfare state and important concepts of the Rhineland Model. This pioneering plead for state-organized poor relief, with a determining investigation of the life conditions of the poor in question, would be inspiring for emperor Charles V, also still the ruler of the Burgundian Low Countries. With the edict of 1531 he instituted poor relief at the level of the cities with the obligatory foundation in each city of a ‘gemene beurs’ or ‘common bourse’ for the relief of the truly needy poor, for the first time in Europe without any interference of the Church.

The religious and spiritual life of Utopia and the Low Countries

In no abundance of words, the organization of the Utopian church is explained with a short reference to the political organization of Utopia: ‘They (the priests) are elected by the people, just as all the other officials are.’ Knowing well how Utopia is politically organized, we can only conclude that the Utopian church is organized according to the principles of the conciliar movement of Pierre d’Ailly and Jean Gerson and their followers in contemporary and later centuries: also after the movement’s tragic defeat in 1439 the dream of a church in which all faithful are represented by an ecclesiastical assembly with the power to assign or depose the pope, stayed alive. In the context of this paper’s investigation, we have also to consider the fact that in the crucial years before his engagement as leading figure of the council of Costanz in the years

101 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 226-227
1414-1417 (where a church system with these specificities would be propagated for the first time), Pierre d’Ailly had been bishop of Cambrai with great responsibilities and involvements (not only ecclesiastical but surely also worldly) as the highest directly engaged prelate also in the Duchy of Brabant and at the ducal court of Brussels where the Joyous Entry as constitutional and institutional standard since the year 1356 could hardly be overlooked. The relations of influence between Pierre d’Ailly, Jean Gerson and the interwoven political and religious cultures of Brabant and the wider Low Countries will be a subject of my later research.

The most important prelates in the Low Countries were indeed the bishops of Cambrai who had also ecclesiastical authority in the Duchy of Brabant. These key bishops were chosen by the Rulers of the Burgundian Low Countries, and after payment to Rome their candidates were appointed by the pope who was not assigned according to the conciliar principles. So principally, the church of Utopia and the church in the Low Countries are not alike. In this perspective of conciliar assignment, there is one exception in the Low Countries, although not in line with Utopia’s separation of Church and State. The bishop of Utrecht was also the prince-bishop of Utrecht and had next to his ecclesiastical powers also a major worldly responsibility and authority. For our investigation, special attention has to go to Philip of Burgundy-Blaton, until 1517 the admiral of the Burgundian fleet with a Northern Renaissance court in Souburg on the isle of Walcheren, key isle of Zeeland\textsuperscript{102} and logic station of the Burgundian fleet: a geographical and military shield protecting the estuary of the Scheldt, the watery way to Antwerp and the Duchy of Brabant and thus to the heart of the Burgundian Low Countries itself. Philip of Burgundy was the last (known) bastard child of the famous duke of Burgundy, Philip the Good, and in 1517 he was asked by prince Charles (the great-grandchild of Philip’s half-brother) and his entourage to take up the role of prince-bishop of Utrecht. This important function however, could not be granted alone by the ruler of the Burgundian Low Countries who dictated (and paid) the appointment of the bishop of Cambrai. Also the decisive consent of Utrecht’s representative assembly was required and it took the diplomatic skills and efforts of Jerome Busleyden to achieve the representatives’ consent. Only then, a ‘joyous entry’ was granted to Philip of Burgundy into the city of Utrecht as the new prince-bishop. Philip’s entry and all related ceremonies were masterly reported by Gerard Geldenhouwer - since 1514 the secretary of Philip and also one of the correctors for Utopia’s first printing in December 1516 – in

\textsuperscript{102} Walcheren was at that time an island, now it is a peninsula.
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

a historiographical account directed to Jean Desmarez: *De Triumphali Ingressu Philippi de Burgundia in ditionem suam*, celebrated in a preface by Erasmus for Geldenhouwer’s historical faithfulness and edited by Dirk Martens in 1517.\(^{103}\) This child of Philip the Good - this ducal lineage gives also an extra political dimension to the event and to Geldenhouwer’s text because Duke Philip the Good had also been the duke of Brabant and was at his time also bound by his solemnly sworn and sealed ‘Joyous Entry’ - cherished strongest sympathies for the Christian humanists and their program and he maintained also warm contacts with Erasmus who would dedicate his *Querela Pacis* to Philip of Burgundy. Philip of Burgundy’s own secretary and closest assistant was also an important member of Erasmus’ circle.\(^{104}\) Can there have been a relation of inspiration between the island of Walcheren where Philip of Burgundy resided in 1515-1516 as admiral with a rich Northern Renaissance court, and Utopia, imagined not far from Walcheren in the famous port of the Duchy of Brabant, reachable when following the Scheldt upstream? For sure the isle of Walcheren was the geographical and military shield guarding the entry of the Scheldt, the watery way to the heart of Antwerp. Marisa Bass states that

‘Fundamental to Philip and Geldenhouwer’s shared interest in the antiquity of the province was the recent discovery that Roman writers such as Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder and Tacitus had long ago described the Netherlands as a body of land surrounded on all sides by water. The so-called ‘island of Batavia’, which was generally understood to be located between the branches of the Rhine and to border the ocean on its western front, had already captured the contemporary imagination by the time Gossaert created his monumental painting of 1516 (*Neptune and Amphitrite*). Venus herself was evoked explicitly as the mother of the Batavian isle, while another writer envisioned Mercury and Apollo looking down from the clouds on its shores, prophesying that the land would one day abound in fruit, gold and milk and would teem with the most industrious citizens. The very notion of a waterbound nation as an ideal locus of culture and virtue was explored that same year in Thomas More’s immensely popular *Utopia*, a work which he composed while traveling through the Netherlands.

---

\(^{103}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 3, letter 393, p. 248-250; I published the first translation of this history work by Gerard Geldenhouwer: *De Triumphali Ingressu Philippi de Burgundia in ditionem suam*. You can find this translation in the following article: M. Vermeir, ‘Erasmus and the Joyous Entry’, *Erasmus Studies*, 34, 2014, p. 144-153

Geldenhouwer himself even helped see the volume’s woodcut of the Utopian isle to press.¹⁰⁵

The crucial concept of religious tolerance in Utopia is based on the arrangement that Utopia knows only a few religious principles and thus an extended liberty for personal religiosity.\textsuperscript{106} Quite equally in the Low Countries, the guiding religious culture of Brabantine mysticism developed and taught by Jan van Ruusbroec from the years 1340 and the wide movement of the Modern Devotion with also the ‘Brethren and Sisters of the common life’ founded by Geert Grote in 1373 and 1384 with inspiration from Jan van Ruusbroec, are characterized by a strikingly similar and inside the Catholic Church at that time unique appetite for less strict religious rules and less strict religious structures.\textsuperscript{107} The religious freedom in Utopia is not an unlimited freedom however, some principles must be respected by all the faithful who want to keep the fullness of their political and religious rights. The Brabantine mysticism of Jan van Ruusbroec can neither be described as a complete celebration of spiritual freedom. One of its main objectives was even to counter the growing success of the movement of the ‘Free Spirit’ celebrating an unlimited spiritual freedom with many physical excesses and a tremendous form of laziness: Ruusbroec informed the Brabantine and Netherlandish people through his teachings and highly successful writings in the Brabantine Middle Dutch vernacular about the characteristics and different stages of a personal relationship with God, combining personal freedom with responsibilities and duties. Not only in the fragment on religious tolerance but in many fragments of Utopia we can recognize consistent aspects of a coherent morality about work, pleasure, physical and psychological integrity, defying equally the principles of the movement of the ‘Free Spirit’. A similar kind of religious tolerance was instituted in the state of Utopia by the mythical dux Utopus, and also with an explicit political motivation.\textsuperscript{108} In Brabant, Duke Jan III who would negotiate at the end of his life the drafting of the first ‘Joyous Entry’ ever in Brabant (with the Estates representing the different social groups that came to seek advice since 1343 and thus also around the crucial 1356 in Jan van Ruusbroec’s Groenendaal, close to the city of Brussels), would also be the duke of Brabant who literally provided the foundation for Jan van Ruusbroec’s religious

\textsuperscript{106} Thomas More, CW 4, p. 218/30-223/15
\textsuperscript{107} This research is further explained in my paper ‘Utopia and the Devotio Moderna’ for the ‘Sixteenth Century Society Conference’ in Bruges, August 2016. The recording of this paper can presently be consulted on the website of Moreana, the written text of this paper on my Academia page. This paper will be published soon.
\textsuperscript{108} ‘Utopus had heard that before his arrival the inhabitants had been continually quarreling among themselves about religion. He had observed that the universal dissensions between the individual sects who were fighting for their country had given him the opportunity of overcoming them all. From the very beginning, therefore, after he had gained the victory, he especially ordained that it should be lawful for every man to follow the religion of his choice.’ Thomas More, CW 4, p. 218/30-220/3
community. Jan III provided the community of Ruusbroec with their settlement grounds in Groenendaal, attached woods and fishing pools for life’s needs and even with his ‘good cook’ who could prepare ideal meals for the small community that would only grow and shape the spiritual and religious landscape of Brabant and the Low Countries, nicely compatible and interwoven with their political culture. This religious community would take the form of an Augustinian canon’s monastery in 1349 to counter criticism and avoid further suspicion.

Geert Grote founded the first houses of the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life in 1374 and 1383 with a less strict religious rule, echoed in More’s *Utopia* in one of the two different religious orders, and to counter coming criticism on the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life Geert Grote requested on his deathbed - and his successor Florence Radewyns would execute this - the foundation of the monastery of Windesheim with some Brethren taking the form of an Augustinian order, heading later the congregation of Windesheim. By doing so, they followed the example and living principles of the community of Groenendaal. The reputation of Groenendaal and of Ruusbroec’s teachings, through his oral explanations and beautiful writings in Medieval Brabantine Dutch, with great enthusiasm copied and translated even in Latin, reached far inside the Low Countries and further in Europe. In 1378-1379 Geert Grote came to visit the *doctor admirabilis* Jan van Ruusbroec in Groenendaal, as many did, and in 1413, the Windesheim congregation even absorbed the monastery of Groenendaal, turning it into a priory.

---

109 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 226-227
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

Miniature from the reproduction of a 14th century manuscript depicting Jan van Ruusbroec writing under a tree of Groenendaal.
Engraving depicting the Priory of Groenendaal, made by Lucas Vorsterman Junior between 1657-1666.

This specific tradition with less stringent structures and more space for personal spirituality, would become defining - through the spreading force of its focus on education, its great success in the Low Countries and beyond and its uniqueness inside the Catholic Church at that time - for the Brabantine and Netherlandish mystical tradition and its pioneering role in Late Medieval Europe. More’s *Utopia* offers the first philosophical presentation on a European scale, of the religious freedom and tolerance attached to the Brabantine mysticism of Ruusbroec and the religious cultures of Brabant and the Low Countries. All together the similarities between Utopia and the Low Countries are also in religious affairs unmistakably remarkable. In his first prefatory letter for *Utopia*, More writes about a devout theologian who is keen to go to the state of Utopia, where our religion ‘so felicitously begun’.\(^{110}\)

The designing and building of the tower and enlargement of the city hall of Brussels around 1449, to give place to the representatives of the craft guilds incorporated in the city council of Brussels after their decisive intervention around

\(^{110}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 42-43
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

1421, was entrusted to an architect with a familiar name, to a ‘Jan van Ruisbroeck’: master builder of Duke Philip the Good. The tower of the city hall is since then dividing the facade of the building in two parts, a broader and a less wide side, of which the mutual proportion is ruled by the golden section: the proportion universally recognized as beautiful. The architecture of the tower represents an ascension from earth towards heaven or a connection between the earthly world and the heavenly world with the lowest section having the ground plan of a square resembling the imperfect world, a middle section with the ground plan of an octagon going gradually over into the circular ground plan of the always smaller highest section with on top a golden stature of Saint Michael, patron and angel-protector of the city of Brussels, raising his sword victoriously into the sky while standing on the corpse of a black and slain devil. Geographically, this statue is standing even higher than the top of the Brussels Saint Gudula Cathedral to which the young Jan van Ruusbroec was ecclesiastically attached before leaving the city of Brussels and founding in the green tranquility of Groenendaal his first community. In the light of our story, this statue can equally stand for archangel Raphael.
Water of Inspiration – the fishing lake at the original site of the Priory of Groenendaal. The Priory was destroyed by the Austrians under emperor Joseph II at the end of the 18th century: a clear manifestation of the policies of emperor Joseph II in religious matters provoking the Brabantine Revolt and the first independence of the 'United Belgian States'.

The tower of the City Hall of Brussels with on top the victorious Saint Michael, patron and the angel protector of Brussels, in honor of the here presented reading of More’s *Utopia* also standing for
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

Archangel Raphael. The facade and tower of the City Hall survived the cruel bombardment of the center of Brussels by the French Louis XIV on 13th, 14th and 15th August 1695, next to the facade of the Maison du Roi, while all other buildings at the Great Market of Brussels and the interiors of the City Hall and Maison du Roi were completely destroyed by fire bombs. The Brussels population of that time believed the facade and tower of the City Hall were saved by Archangel Michael standing on top of the tower. (The sickening devastation is in more details explained on the Wikipedia page of ‘Bombardment of Brussels’.)

*The cultural life of Utopia and the Low Countries*

The culture of Utopia is determined by the ability of the Utopians to adapt the best aspects of all the cultures they ever came in contact with. As we have seen in the chapter on the political life, this determining ability is attributed to the Utopian people in several prefatory letters and poems. Also in the first book of *Utopia*, we find a key fragment describing this competence of cultural adaptation, apparently strange in the
rest of the *Respublica Christiana* and explaining the superior uniqueness of the Utopian institutional system: the way in which their ‘republic is more wisely governed’.

‘Accordingly to their chronicles, up to the time of our landing they had never heard anything about our activities (they call us the Ultra-equinoctials) except that twelve hundred years ago a ship driven by a tempest was wrecked on the island of Utopia. Some Romans and Egyptians were cast on shore and remained on the island without ever leaving it. Now mark what good advantage their industry took of this one opportunity. The Roman empire possessed no art capable of any use which they did not either learn from the shipwrecked strangers or discover for themselves after receiving the hints for investigation – so great a gain was it to them that on a single occasion some persons were carried to their shores from ours. But if any like fortune has ever driven anyone from their shores to ours, the event is as completely forgotten as future generations will perhaps forget that I had once been there. And, just as they immediately at one meeting appropriated to themselves every good discovery of ours, so I suppose it will be long before we adopt anything that is better arranged with them than with us. This trait, I judge, is the chief reason why, though we are inferior to them, neither in brains nor in resources, their commonwealth is more wisely governed and more happily flourishing than ours’.  

111

Throughout the history of Belgium the ability and almost necessity to adopt (the best elements of) different influences appear very familiar, especially when studying the cultural, political and constitutional history of the Burgundian Low Countries where the highlights of Medieval society (impossible to ignore when you walk through the beautiful cities of Bruges or Ghent) were blended into a new, original synthesis with treasures of Classical origin, preserved in the numerous Medieval monasteries or imported again from the ‘reborn’ Italy by Netherlandish, Iberian and Italian merchants and travelers or via the households of Italian merchants residing with almost full Italian Renaissance splendor in the port cities of Bruges and Antwerp. The best, combinable elements of these cultures were integrated into a cultural synthesis known as the Netherlandish and wider Northern Renaissance: in and around the Low Countries this new Renaissance washed ashore and was culturally clothed. For this reason, the resemblances on cultural level between Utopia and the Low Countries with a practical

---

and rather spontaneous implementation of the interculturalism and selective eclecticism combining the best elements of different cultures into a higher synthesis as intended or envisioned by Pico della Mirandola in his ‘900 Theses’, can be considered remarkably strong. The admiration of both More and Erasmus for Pico della Mirandola was legendary strong and in an intercultural perspective the Low Countries could be considered a spontaneous and practical-pragmatic version of della Mirandola’s dream world.

But there is more. The spokesmen of both societies at the stage of Renaissance culture in the sixteenth century, show also remarkable similarities. The Utopian society is richly described, defended and promoted by a ‘Raphael Hythlodaeus’, immortalized by Thomas More in his monument of Renaissance culture. In the following words, Hythlodaeus is explained by More as spokesperson of Utopian society:

‘I do not wonder,’ he [Raphael] rejoined, ‘that it looks this way to you, being a person who has no picture at all, or else a false one, of the situation I mean. But you should have been with me in Utopia and personally seen their manners and customs as I did, for I lived there more than five years and would never have wished to leave except to make known that new world. In that case you unabashedly would admit that you had never seen a well-ordered people anywhere but there.’  

In the literary style of Hythlodaeus’ speech and in the eclecticism of his ideas, Giulia Sissa suggested to see an eclectic combination of Plato’s and Epicurus’ style and ideas, resembling a supposed integration of these philosophers in the style and ideas of Erasmus.  

In the way Raphael Hythlodaeus discourses on the request of Gillis and More about the best political system he had encountered on all his travels, I recognized a close narrative of the way in which Erasmus handed over his acquaintance with the political system and culture of Brabant and the Low Countries through the acquaintance also of representatives of this culture and system, to his international friend. In his seminal work on Erasmus, James D. Tracy had gone already an important step further, titling this work illustratively ‘Erasmus of the Low Countries’,
respecting the many indications that Erasmus found for internationally defended Christian humanist ideas on several key aspects of society, main inspiration in these Low Countries. In this perspective we have to consider Desiderius Erasmus the most important and internationally renowned and respected spokesman of the Low Countries at the cultural stage of Renaissance Europe, like Raphael Hythlodaeus is portrayed by More for Utopia. Erasmus stayed intriguingly also around five years in the southern parts of the Low Countries: the same period of time Hythlodaeus would have stayed in Utopia. Erasmus toured around Europe to promote his cultural program and Hythlodaeus would ‘never have wished to leave except to make known that new world’.

Next to the great Medieval kingdoms or states of Classical splendor, these Low Countries appeared maybe somehow as a cultural ‘Nowhere’ or ‘Nusquama’, a ‘No-Place’ or ‘ou-topia’, but this position in the shadow was maybe just the secret precondition to harbor and cultivate so many foreign influences into a new particular and practically working culture of their own. Jean Desmarez explains in his prefatory poem for Utopia the components of the cultural synthesis inside the Utopian state and amongst the list of European peoples mentioned in this prefatory poem remain remarkably unmentioned: the peoples of Spain, of the Scandinavian countries and the people of the Low Countries.

‘Brave men were the gift of Rome, eloquent men the gift of lauded Greece, frugal men the gift of famous Sparta, uncorrupted men the gift of Marseilles, hardy men of Germany. Courteous and witty men were the gift of the land of Attica. Pious men were once the gift of renowned France, wary men of Africa. Munificent men were once the gift of the land of Britain. Examples of the different virtues are sought in different peoples, and what is lacking in one abounds in another. The total sum of all virtue once for all is the gift of the island of Utopia to earth-born men’

Also in the prefatory ‘quatrain in the Utopian vernacular’, we find a similar statement on the Utopian state, describing itself in the first person: ‘Ungrudgingly do I share my benefits with others; undemurringly do I adopt whatever is better from others.’

116 J. Tracy, 1997
117 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 28-29
118 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 18-19
Humanistic reading and interpretation of *Utopia*

The positions of More and Erasmus towards the respective aspects of Utopian society

To understand what Thomas More and Desiderius Erasmus had in mind with the composition and edition of *Utopia* and thus how we should interpret correctly one of the most enigmatic Renaissance works in a truly ‘humanistic’ way, it seems a very useful endeavor to study the respective positions of More and Erasmus towards the respective aspects of Utopian society.

Through the latest researches, the political ideas of Erasmus and More are shown very similar. In the June issue of *Moreana* 2012, I concluded that Desiderius Erasmus was in favor of the political system of representative government or parliamentary democracy present in the Utopian political system, and that he spread through More’s *Utopia* the political system embodied in the Brabantine Joyous Entries as a political-legal theory applicable to all states of the *Respublica Christiana.*

James D. Tracy is equally convinced of a connection between Erasmus and this political system of the Low Countries, as firstly suggested in the following and above already quoted statement from ‘The Politics of Erasmus’.

‘If his writings were to be searched for some conception of an ideal state, the answer must be not that he dreamed of some leaderless federation of city republics, but that he accepted the thoroughly commonplace notion of mixed government: the best state was one which combined elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy’ (…) ‘cosmopolitan though Erasmus may have been, his thinking on monarchy was nonetheless conditioned by the traditions of his native country: the notion that consensus was the true foundation of royal government had a definite institutional context in the Netherlands, where the Estates stood for a still vigorous tradition of limited monarchy (…). As a Netherlander, Erasmus was disposed to look not for the overthrow of monarchy, but for its confinement within a framework of consent.’

---

120 J. Tracy, 1978, p. 35
In the corresponding footnote for this quotation, James D. Tracy refers to the clear allusion in Erasmus’ *Panegyricus*, earlier in the full text of ‘The Politics of Erasmus’ mentioned (You do not think it *lèse-majesté* if someone questions you in word. Rather, you rejoice to be reminded of your obligation and of the oath by which you bound yourself in accepting your principate (i.e. as duke of Brabant)),\(^{121}\) and to a supposed allusion in his *Institutio Principis Christiani* (*Hac lege populus in tua iurauit verba*),\(^{122}\) both to the Brabantine ‘Joyeuse Entrée’ or Joyous Entry explained in the first chapter of Tracy’s book as ‘Brabant’s strong tradition of limited government guarded by the provincial Estates’.\(^{123}\) In this footnote he states that ‘one might, for example, find’ in the quoted line of the *Institutio* ‘an allusion to the Brabançon *joyeuse entrée*.’\(^{124}\) The findings of the *Brabantia* article in *Moreana* strengthen further this political-philosophical positioning of Erasmus, and three more arguments for this thesis I found after the publication of this article: the prefatory letter of Erasmus for Gerard Geldenhouwer’s *De Triumphali Ingressu* on the joyous entry of Philip of Burgundy (natural son of Duke Philip the Good) in which Erasmus finds, as stated in his preface, historical veracity (*historica fide*);\(^{125}\) Erasmus’ mentioning in the first dedicatory letter to prince Charles for the first three editions of *Institutio Principis Christiani*, of the biblical and beautiful Shunamite girl, above described, whom Erasmus literally transformed in this dedication into a personification of justice and wisdom (this addition of Erasmus is not present in 1 Kings, 1 and can be read as a clear estimation of the system King David conceived in the caring arms of the Shunamite to arrange and legitimize the enthronement of his son Solomon, as just and wise);\(^{126}\) and a third new argument we find in Erasmus’ final first dedication of his *Institutio Principis Christiani*, since the *Institutio*’s fourth edition in July 1518 no longer dedicated to prince Charles but to chancellor Jean le Sauvage, who was a supporter of the political culture and constitution of Brabant on which his actual political power since 1515 was also


\(^{122}\) J. Tracy, 1978, p. 151, note 116; Desiderius Erasmus, *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, IV-3, O. Herding and F. Schalk (eds.), North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1974, p. 146, l. 317-318 (these contain the quoted line from the *Institutio*); Also in several words of the *Panegyricus*’ extended title: *de triumphali profectione and festivissimo reditu*, we can read allusions to the Joyous Entries of Brabant.

\(^{123}\) J. Tracy, 1978, p. 19

\(^{124}\) J. Tracy, 1978, p. 151, note 116

\(^{125}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 5, letter 645, p. 94-95

\(^{126}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 3, letter 393, p. 248-250
institutionally based. His coat of arms shows three silver unicorn heads on a field of azure, and while Jean le Sauvage is explicitly mentioned and hailed as Maecenas of every noble pursuit in the Parerga of *Utopia* and celebrated by More in a letter to Erasmus on 31st October 1516, as a Prince of Utopia if he would live in the Utopian state, the ‘U’ in *Utopia* can also stand for *Unicornius* as one of the three unicorns shown in Sauvage’s coat of arms and also present in the top tapestries of both the Cloisters Museum and the Musée de Cluny, originating all from the Low Countries around the beginning of the sixteenth century. Tracy stated that Jean le Sauvage was ‘prominent among’ the Netherlandish counselors accompanying prince Charles to Castile and Aragon, who helped provoke the Revolt of the Comuneros; I have added the idea that Jean le Sauvage has done so willingly. It was Sauvage who had invited Erasmus to write his *Institutio Principis Christiani*, in which he expresses the wish that ‘princes would eschew such dynastic unions and marry within their borders,’ It was the very same Sauvage who had made great efforts to obtain a stable peace in Europe by an ingenious web of treaties – an arrangement that surely would be put under great pressure and at risk through prince Charles’ accumulation of crowns on the European

---

127 During the tutelage of Prince Charles after the death of his father Philip the Fair in 1506, Philip’s sister Margaret of Austria governed the Burgundian Low Countries. She opposed the series of splendid offices collected by Jean le Sauvage. When Guillaume de Croÿ and Jean le Sauvage, who became Chancellor of Burgundy in the same year, contrived the emancipation of Prince Charles as ruler of the Burgundian Low Countries in 1515 at the age of only 15, Margaret of Austria was effectivly excluded from the governorship of the Burgundian Netherlands. To realize this earlier accession, the two lords arranged a payment by the Estates of Brabant to Emperor Maximilian I. After Prince Charles’ accession to the throne, Sauvage and de Croÿ were in fact pulling the strings of power, using Charles as a necessary but still very young puppet and thus freeing themselves from Margaret of Austria’s entitled involvement in the politics of the Burgundian Netherlands. With this payment, the Estates of Brabant expressed unmistakably clearly their approval of Jean le Sauvage and Guillaume de Croÿ as real ‘Governors’ behind the 15-year-old Prince Charles. This proves a real relation of trust between the Estates of Brabant and Jean le Sauvage and his respect for the political culture and constitution of Brabant. I believe his strong respect and support for the Brabantine constitution and political culture also to be the reason for the *condemnatio memoriae* of Jean le Sauvage by the Spanish-Habsburg rulers at the end of the politically related Eighty-Years War, next to his wish and campaign for keeping the Burgundian Low Countries and the Spanish kingdoms dynastically apart: a wish that was partially broken at the end of this Dutch Revolt. I believe also that he was poisoned in Spain, 1518, or by Spanish opponents who didn’t know his true intentions with Spain, or by Netherlandish opponents forming a rival faction at the court of Brussels with opposite political ideals and plans, aware of Jean le Sauvage’s true actions and dreaming of a new world monarchy and of the Low Countries and the Spanish kingdoms as the core of a new Roman Empire. This faction would gain the upper hand at court in the years 1518-1521, after which Erasmus decided to leave the Burgundian Low Countries, never to return. When Jean le Sauvage was celebrated in the text of his burial monument in Brussels Cathedral as *eques auratus*, I believe that this title refers to an honorary title given by the Holy Roman Emperor and not to an official position in the Order of the Golden Fleece. M. Vermeir, ‘Chancellor Jean le Sauvage/Joannes Sylvagius: Erasmus' Princeps Christianus and a Prince of Utopia for Thomas More’, *Moreana*, Vol. 53, 203-204, p. 276

128 Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 481, p. 447


130 James Tracy, 1978, p. 58
chessboard (a fear history would prove to be correct). It was also Jean le Sauvage who had been called the one and only Maecenas of every noble pursuit in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, a text presenting for the first time, under the guise of fiction, the political system inspired by the original institution of Brabant and claimed by the Comuneros, as a general, widely applicable political theory.

‘The Unicorn is attacked’, one of the Unicorn Tapestries from the Low Countries around 1500 (1495-1505)
The Cloisters Museum - New York
‘La Vue’, the fifth tapestry of the series ‘La Dame à la Licorne’, probably from the Low Countries around 1500 (1484-1515)
Musée national du Moyen Âge (former Musée de Cluny) - Paris
By my knowledge, these two miniatures are the only remaining depictions of chancellor Jean le Sauvage and his wife, Jacqueline de Boulogne, in their Book of Hours (French Flanders, 1503 - Miniature by Jean Markant).

Then the question rises if the conception, publication and spread of the book of *Utopia* was supported by Sauvage, already with this planned political provocation in mind. In 1515, the approaching death of King Ferdinand of Aragon could somehow be foreseen and anticipated. And although Thomas More’s Utopian Embassy to the Low Countries started in May 1515 and King Ferdinand died in January 1516, setting the imminent succession by his grandson prince Charles as the following in the line of succession for the thrones of Castile and Aragon, into motion, it is very remarkable that the first book of *Utopia*, printed in December 1516, opens with a sentence mentioning prince Charles in his capacity of King of Castile, describing the context of a recent and severe problem with Henry VIII, King of England, and explaining why Thomas More was coming to the Low Countries as part of a diplomatic mission. During the entire Utopian embassy of the real Thomas More, however, King Ferdinand was still alive and prince Charles was certainly not yet King of Castile! The description of Charles as King of Castile was clearly added between January and December 1516, and the technical-literary combination of this royal capacity and a great problem between Charles in this capacity and King Henry VIII, seems to support only further the supposed and
suggested plans of Jean le Sauvage for the international relations between the Spanish kingdoms and the Low Countries. We can say that Sauvage’s plans with the Spanish kingdoms are in line with the program of promoting and spreading the political culture and system of Brabant through *Utopia* in the entire Republica Christiana, and thus also in the two Spanish kingdoms where sabotaging the dynastic and political aggregation of Castile and Aragon and the Burgundian Netherlands would support the political wish expressed by Erasmus in his *Institutio Principis Christiani*, written at the invitation of Jean le Sauvage, to not combine European states into threatening empires through royal dynastic aggregations. In the course of 1515, the coming death of King Ferdinand, and the connected matter of a succession by prince Charles, could already vaguely be foreseen by Jean le Sauvage and his circle. In the course of 1516 after Ferdinand’s death in January, this matter became only increasingly urgent. The support for the Christian humanist ideal of the peaceful European states not emerging into a new Roman Empire, and thus also not the aggregation of Castile and Aragon with their American colonies, and the Burgundian Low Countries into the core of such a new empire, was certainly an intended and important purpose of *Utopia*. Another part of the already initially intended practical-political purposes for the book of *Utopia*, was the support of the negotiations for the peace treaty of Cambrai in March 1517, setting up a revolutionary system of collective defense. I can only conclude that the group around Sauvage, More and Erasmus intended willingly to support their plans and hopes for Europe with the publication of *Utopia*, also their practical-political plan to prevent the ascension of the ruler of the Burgundian Netherlands as King of Castile and Aragon and to keep the Low Countries and the Spanish kingdoms apart: the book of *Utopia* also supported and strengthened Sauvage’s provocation of the Revolt of the Comuneros, together with the influence of the political culture and system of Brabant and the Burgundian Netherlands on the Spanish kingdoms over centuries through a wide range of cultural, economic, commercial and political contacts. In January/February 1517 the Cortes sent a letter to the Brussels court with an ultimatum stating that prince Charles had to present himself as successor to the Cortes before Autumn 1517, otherwise the Cortes would ‘assemble and deliberate again’ about his succession. The influence of *Utopia* on the further political events in the Spanish peninsula and on the political thought of the Revolt of the Comuneros worked coherently together with the already long but slow influence of the Brabantine political culture and system, defended and consistently put into practice by the greatest advocates of this institution involved in the Spanish-Netherlandish dynastic-
political affairs, like Jean le Sauvage, active on the political scene of the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon; and together with the strengthening influence of other political works of the Christian humanists like Erasmus’ *Institutio Principis Christiani*, supporting the same political ideals.

In the same article of June 2012, I proposed the following on More’s political thought: ‘the readiness of More to live up to the political-literary expectations of these political men and especially of Erasmus, is giving us a most enriching insight in the political thought of More himself, and clarifies his position towards tyranny in a subtle but convincing way.’\(^\text{131}\) This suggestion appeared to be in line with papers presented at the conference ‘Thomas More, Renaissance and Tyranny’ in Paris, July 2012, and with *Moreana* articles in which the conference papers resulted. Gerard Wegemer refers with exemplary precision to Thomas More’s Epigram 198, ‘What is the Best Form of Respublica?’, in which ‘the imperious narrator calls the hereditary monarch ‘blind chance’ as compared to the ‘sound deliberation’ of an elected senate - a senate headed, Epigram 198 suggests twice, by a consul.’\(^\text{132}\) More had towards the tragic end of his life not only a fundamental problem with the Acts of Henry VIII because these violated the separation of Church and State and conciliar principles, but also because these Acts were approved by a parliament filled with Henry VIII’s satellites, violating also the parliamentary system of England at that time. Also Joanne Paul clarifies the place of Thomas More in the history of political thought by exposing the concern with the destruction of what men hold in common in the body of the Church and State, as central theme running through the entire oeuvre of More and also present in the book of *Utopia*\(^\text{133}\). Internationally Erasmus and Thomas More were both very supportive for the peace efforts and policies of Jean le Sauvage, working through a web of treaties between the Burgundian Low Countries and its European neighbor states and climaxing in the multilateral peace treaty of Cambrai in 1517 to which More refers in my view in the text written as his epitaph: this text is still readable in a wall stone inside the Church of Chelsea where More and his family attended Mass in the last years of his life and where he prayed before going to the Tower of London, stating that he had helped arranging the treaty of Cambrai. Also Erasmus did actively support the creation of this

---


\(^{132}\) G. Wegemer, ‘Thomas More on Tyranny: what is distinctive in his early thematic and literary treatment?’, *Moreana*, Vol. 49, 189-190, p. 154; Articles based on papers of this conference can be found in the December issue of 2012 and in the June and December issues of 2013.

\(^{133}\) Joanne Paul, 2016
great treaty of Cambrai, with his well-informed and truly facilitating literary efforts backing the treaty arrangements through the first edition of his *Querela Pacis* in 1517 at the invitation of Jean le Sauvage, the distribution of *Utopia’s* first edition in the first months of 1517 and the second edition of *Utopia* in Paris intended for and finally accomplished in the same year; Erasmus arranged even a third edition of his *Institutio*, the first one in France, in the same month of March 1517 when the peace talks and following treaty conclusion were planned in Cambrai. Also in his *Consultatio de bello Turcis inferendo* he would urge all the European states to take up jointly the collective defense of their shared *Respublica Christiana*, similar to the collective defense provisions of the Cambrai treaty. As a model for the peaceful internal and international organization Erasmus and More had in mind for their *Respublica Christiana*, they even could have found inspiration in the dual governmental organization of the Burgundian Low Countries as an internally peaceful composite state with still continuing political identities and titles of the respective countries inside the Low Countries and an institutional and political readiness for common defense in case of any military threat to the Burgundian Low Countries.

Although Erasmus had great admiration for Plato and for the earliest Christians who equally upheld common property as their economic organization like the Brethren and Sisters of the Common Life intended to restore, we cannot state with any historical credibility that Erasmus dreamed to see the economic institutions of the West overthrown and to see installed instead an economic system like the one of Utopia. Erasmus stated that ‘if it were only possible for mortals to be persuaded of this (common ownership of all things), in that very instant war, envy, and fraud would depart from our midst’, a statement that we have to place in the context of Erasmus’ cautiousness while continuously mediating and campaigning for getting the gradual ecclesiastical-legal/canonical permissions of a subsequent line of popes to dispose lawfully of his personal belongings, like he enjoyed and used to do during his humanist life (while being for the Church still officially an Augustinian canon with common property inside his order) but then also legally with an eye on his will towards the end of his life: this eventual successful campaign embodies one of the strongest arguments on Erasmus’ true and real economic orientation. He opens also his *Adagia* with the

---

134 Desiderius Erasmus, *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami*, II-1, p. 61, l. 299-300
135 Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 11, letter 1588, p. 201-203
adagium that ‘amongst friends everything should be equal’,\textsuperscript{136} thus amongst friends and not amongst all citizens. Also his successful cleverness as business man shows an accepting familiarity with the economic ground rules of his time and world, as clearly confirmed in his \textit{Institutio Principis Christiani}; at the same time Desiderius Erasmus never wavered his strong concerns for the social welfare of all people, this is also stated in the \textit{Institutio}.\textsuperscript{137} And if true friends like More and Erasmus should everything have in common, their ideas on the best political institution with its juridical specificities, international politics with the system of collective defense, the relation between Church and State, morality, an emancipated role for women and the matrimonial policies, religion, personal spirituality, the institution of the church, religious freedom and tolerance, culture, education, social affairs and also economics were indeed in common: Thomas More was an enthusiastic member of the London guild of merchants, also the context in which he grew up, and he was one of the most wanted and successful lawyers defending the London merchants.\textsuperscript{138} It was a diplomatic mission to negotiate a trade treaty between England and the Low Countries that brought More to the Low Countries. However, it remains very ironical that a story about a fictitious society with common property of goods was conceived and staged precisely in the trade city taking the lead in the fast evolution towards a capitalist economy. Both Erasmus and More saw the immense social risks and consequences of this economic evolution and were determined to defend adequate social care and promote the development inside the public state - in line with their Christian ethics and defense of a separation of Church and State - all the needed countermeasures to compensate the great losses or heavy disturbances of social care caused by the first developments of a ‘capitalist’ economy, without abolishing the Western monetary system or confiscating private properties. If Juan Luis Vives’ treatise on social care embodies a further elaboration of the social ideas of Erasmus, Thomas More and their circle of Christian humanists, if Vives’ work was instigated by their social program and further encouragements, we have another reason to acknowledge that Erasmus and More did not wish to establish the Utopian common property of all

\textsuperscript{136} Desiderius Erasmus, \textit{CWE}, vol. 31, p. 29-30
\textsuperscript{137} Desiderius Erasmus, \textit{Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami}, VI-1, p. 190 (l. 771-773), p. 198 (l. 955-957), p. 199 (l. 1001-1007): In these lines he propose taxations on luxury goods (often goods from ‘Barbarian’ countries) rather than on provisions like bread and beverages. However, he does not intend to take away properties in order to arrange a complete social redistribution of means. W. Blockmans, ‘Erasmus’ politieke theorie en de praxis van zijn tijd’ in G. Jensma (et al.), \textit{Erasmus: de actualiteit van zijn denken}, Walburg, Zutphen, 1996, p. 67
\textsuperscript{138} F. Carpinelli, ‘Merchant neighbors of the More family on Milk Street’, \textit{Moreana}, Vol. 50, 193-194, p. 229-266
goods as economic institution for Europe. In the treatise of Vives, the healthy poor, able to work, are not granted social support; only sick, elder and truly struggling poor are provided with the necessary means of life.

Common property in Utopia has to be interpreted metaphorically. Through the book of *Utopia* More and Erasmus intended to defend what is held in common in the body of the State and Church, as Joanne Paul identified this theme in her brilliant ‘Thomas More’ biography, as a central idea running through the oeuvre of More. I discern in Utopia’s common property also clear specificities on both Erasmus’ and More’s ideas for the State and the Church: in the political system of parliamentary democracy for the State and in the conciliar system for the Church, all the citizens and all believers have an equal share of political or ecclesiastical power. Common property inside Utopian society places *Utopia* in a line of succession with Plato’s great political work, *The Republic*, presenting the same economic institution. Thomas More and Erasmus refer also with Utopia’s economic organization to the economy of the first Christians who shared initially all property, a system echoed in the later religious orders, and in whose footsteps the Christian humanists wanted to promote a society steadily based on the strong pillars of Christian morality. Utopia’s special institution of slavery refers also to the same communities of the first Christians in which slavery was not yet abolished but certainly humanized as also slaves were treated as Christian brothers and sisters. In also a metaphorical way, the common property in Utopian society underlines also the strong social care, organized by the state, for the sick, elder and truly needy; in a metaphorical way the common property emphasizes the strong social connections among Utopian citizens crystalized in their political, religious and social organization and supported by a strongly common culture and education, dismissing all forms of egoism, pride and arrogance as deranged forms of hyperindividualism.

The ideas of Erasmus and More on the organizational structure of the church, again congruent with the interdepending political ideas, are equally similar to the organization of the church of Utopia. In 2013, the anonymously edited *Julius Exclusus e coelis* was attributed officially to Erasmus by the *Conseil International pour l’ édition des oeuvres complètes d’ Erasme*, based on the very strong research of Silvana Seidel Menchi who discovered through her research investigations that Erasmus had deliberately formulated his own organizational plans for the Church as the program planned by the council of

---

139 Joanne Paul, 2016
Milan-Pisa, very well known by Erasmus but nevertheless intentionally changed into his own conciliar ideas, in the text of the *Julius Exclusus e Coelis*.

We would like to propose in this context the reading of *Julius Exclusus* as a refused joyous entry into Heaven, the City of God. So together with the authorship of the *Julius Exclusus*, the commitment of Erasmus to the conciliar movement has been proved for once and for all. In the debate between Richard Marius and John Headley I am convinced that Marius has the strongest arguments, allowing us to associate Thomas More with the principles of conciliarism. I consider *Utopia* even one of the last, authoritative and crucially serious pleads for conciliarism inside the Catholic Church before this aspired organizational form was declared finally dead for the Catholic Church with the Fifth Lateran Council in 1517: Erasmus and More knew probably very well the debates that were going on in the previous years and took as clear and powerful as possible their stand in support and in defense of conciliarism. Dramatically but not without relation, the Reformation of Luther would take off in the same year. Religious deregulation opens the practical way to the legendary but always pro-Christian and pro-Catholic Erasmian tolerance. *Dux Utopus’* policy to reduce the number of essential religious rules can be associated completely with Erasmus’ desire for a Christian and Catholic spiritual life enriched by a bright mosaic of personal and therefore individually and differently colored ways of spirituality, only made possible by only a few nonnegotiable religious rules. More’s position towards the religious tolerance of *Utopia* is often challenged for his role in the burning of a number of English protestants. In this perspective it is brave and correct of Sanford Kessler to remind us that the religious tolerance of *Utopia* should be interpreted as the tolerance there described: the number of truly strict religious rules is low but these rules are and remain strict. As Erasmus and More were in favor of a religious institution organized according to principles of conciliarism, they also expected that the few unbreakable rules were respected by the entire religious community and surely not publicly challenged: civic unrest or violent insubordination were not allowed by both of them. Only Thomas More exercised a highly responsible public function and Erasmus did not. Also in *Utopia*, the men who did not believe in the few unbreakable religious rules and points of belief (like the free will of men, denied by Luther, and according to Utopian religion rewarded or punished

---

after this life) were refused access to public functions and were forbidden to preach their thoughts publicly. They could only discuss these ideas privately with officials. If they did not respect these rules, they were brought into slavery and if they did not respect the terms of their slave status they could also be killed. So the gap between the institution of Utopian tolerance and later political actions of Thomas More, is therefore less deep and less broad as often depicted. Even Erasmus explicitly stated in a reaction and answer to Gerard Geldenhouwer that he did not wish to exclude the death penalty as final sanction for protestants continuing their protest and opposition against limited non-negotiable points of belief inside the Christian community and threatening further the public order and coherence of the entire Respublica Christiana.

One of the most important parts of Erasmus’ religious-philosophical discussion with Martin Luther, De Libero Arbitrio, was officially public but the nature of this work limited its reach to a rather small circle of humanistic and religiously specialized readers: the closed circle in which Erasmus wished to keep his heavy discussions with Luther on divisive religious matters privately, completely in line with the arrangements for such discussions in the state of Utopia. One of the three books anyone should read according to Thomas More, was ‘The imitation of Christ’ by Thomas a Kempis, a prominent representative of the Modern Devotion. Also Jean-Claude Margolin found striking similarities between Thomas a Kempis’ ‘The imitation of Christ’ and Erasmus’ Enchiridion Militis Christiani, stating at the same time that a major cause of these similarities could be the shared background and shared context of the Modern Devotion, in which also Erasmus was raised and educated as a child and as a youngster – in my view decisively for his later religious and spiritual views and writings. Although he had indeed also bad experiences with figures formally connected to the Modern Devotion, this movement started by Geert Grote was really significant and inspiring for Erasmus too.

A Latin translation of Ruusbroec’s main work ‘de geestelijke bruiloft’/ ‘the spiritual wedding’ about the different phases and risks of the evolving process of a human seeking unity with the Divine throughout his life, was printed for the first time in

---

144 Thomas More, CW 8, p. 37-39
145 J.-C. Margolin, 2007, p. 39-41
1512 by Jacques Lefèvre d’Etaples. Most intriguingly, Erasmus visited this friend in 1511 and had with him ‘a number of intimate conversations’. At the end of the 15th century already, Erasmus had visited the priory of Groenendaal, learned from the living example of Groenendaal’s institutions and organization and spent days there studying in its library: with his zeal he surprised even the monks, taking books with him at night to his dormitory. So it is certainly possible that around 1515, both Erasmus and Thomas More knew the works of Ruusbroec very well from first hand, not only through works of Devotio Moderna’s protagonists like Thomas a Kempis, inspired by Geert Grote and Ruusbroec himself.

Thomas More translated ‘The Life of Pico della Mirandola’ and was undoubtedly aware of della Mirandola’s philosophical program: in his famous 900 theses Pico della Mirandola intended to combine into higher synthesis the best elements of Classical traditions, especially from the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, with aspects of the Jewish-Christian traditions, especially mystical elements like he found in the Jewish Kabbala. His great endeavor was to formulate a consistent marriage between Jewish-Christian mysticism and the rich humanistic learning by which he was surrounded in Renaissance Florence. His early death prevented him regretfully from executing his great master plan. But the Christian Humanists around Erasmus and More would become Pico’s true inheritors and take Pico della Mirandola’s scheme as a blueprint for their complete literary oeuvre and philosophical program. One of Utopia’s layers of meaning is certainly a broad defense of the Christian humanistic ideals: these serious parts of Utopia can be read as an honorary tribute to Pico della Mirandola’s audacious plans, as a literary realization of Pico’s inspiring dreams.

It is clear that major aspects of Utopian society could be subscribed by Erasmus and More and some could not. Thomas More’s and Erasmus’ positions towards different aspects of Utopian society – except their approval for the Utopian state-organized social care for the needy poor, the Utopian socially equal society and separation of Church and State - show intriguing parallels with the comparison between the Utopian society and the society of the Low Countries at the beginning of the sixteenth century. These parallels are due to the great significance of the Netherlandish society to the formation of Low Countries Humanism, strongly present in and disseminated through the book of Utopia. As I explained in my Brabantia article the
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Low Countries

figure of Raphael Hythlodaeus as a literary depiction of Erasmus ‘in disguise’, indeed disguised with some nonessential elements and specificities, I would like to propose here the reading and interpretation of Utopia as a literary depiction of the Low Countries also ‘in disguise’: also disguised with diverging, not seriously defended elements and specificities like the economic institution of Utopia, which refers together with other ironical aspects to the life conditions of the young Erasmus in Holland. The elements of Utopian society defended by the Christian humanists but not present in Netherlandish society, can be read as further recommendations for the Low Countries. One of these recommendations was followed when the first form of state-organized social care at city level for the truly needy was organized less than twenty years after the first publication of *Utopia*, again firstly in the Low Countries, revolutionarily in and exemplarily for the rest of Europe. And for the effective impact of the craft apprentices on the decision making of their masters in social affairs and through these masters’ role in the government of the Brabantine capitals on the policies of the entire Duchy, I did not yet find an equal example of social and political emancipation reaching at that time equally far, outside the Duchy of Brabant and the Low Countries.

So we may say that for Thomas More and Erasmus not all elements of Utopian society were truly aspired or seriously meant: the economic system, the travel restrictions and the clothing uniformity are such elements. Other elements like the political system and juridical specificities (with deregulation, a few understandable laws that could be invoked in their case or defense by all citizens themselves, and alternative, more humane work sentences within the institution of slavery to punish crimes, next to the still existing death penalty for the heaviest, society threatening crimes) the related international politics with a collective defense system, an equally instituted ecclesiology, the separation of Church and State, the ideologically and politically connected religious tolerance and freedom, personal spirituality and morality with emancipated role for women and matrimonial policies, education, culture and interculturalism and the state-organized social care for sick, elder and truly needy, were truly aspired. Such mixture of aspired ideas with absurdities provided a most useful and needed excuse in the face of possibly threatening accusations or persecutions at a time in which Renaissance princes were centralizing their power: Thomas More and his circle could argue that the description of this fictive island was only filled with absurdities and should only be read as one long satire, spoken out mostly by an equally absurd and foolish sailor, as almost in the same way only lady Stultitia is orating all the
crazy, and under this cover, sharply critical statements in the *Praise of Folly* and thus only she can be blamed for this. And indeed Utopian society shows absurdities in the view of the Christian humanist. Therefore, we should stop describing Utopia as the ideal state of Thomas More, for the simple but conclusive reason that it is not. Denying this honest view is denying their righteous place inside the Christian tradition to both Thomas More and Erasmus, is denying their essential affiliation to Christianity itself, seeing and seeking Paradise in a place beyond our mortal lives and capabilities, beyond our mortal world. The most promising British Thomas More scholar Joanne Paul defends also spontaneously the view that not all aspects of Utopian society were truly aspired by More: she highlights Thomas More’s concern with the destruction of what is held ‘in common’ in the State and body of the Church, as the central theme running through More’s oeuvre and also through his *Utopia*.¹⁴⁸

Next to the economic system of Utopia, we cannot believe that More and Erasmus could have found peace with the restrictions to be dressed in a completely equal, very humble way and to travel only with the approval of the prince. At the same time these rules remind us strongly to the life conditions of the young Erasmus as Augustinian canon of the Monastery Emmaüs in Steyn, near Gouda in Holland: living rules he tried successfully to escape during his later life with obtaining even eventually the official papal dispensation allowing him to move freely and to dress freely from 9th April 1517 (so after the first publication of *Utopia*) and later to dispose legally of his personal belongings. Thus in a soft satirical way, we can also attach these aspects of Utopian society, truly different from the plans of the Christian humanists for the entire *Respublica Christiana*, to the figure of Erasmus and other aspects of his bonds with one of the Burgundian Low Countries. Thomas More flirted with a monastic life ruled by these very same principles, but in the end he did not choose for such a life. More, Erasmus and other Christian humanists were not dressed in an identical way, they enjoyed greatly the liberty to visit each other, and they didn’t pool their financial means and material belongings, although they showed a great hospitality towards each other as friends ‘amongst whom everything should be in common’.

Utopia as the *Praise of Wisdom and a little Folly*

¹⁴⁸ Joanne Paul, 2016
We can consider the book of *Utopia* the return gift from Thomas More to Erasmus, thanking his friend for the *Praise of Folly* which Erasmus had dedicated in 1511 to More explicitly in the preface and literarily in the title with *Moriae* in the Ancient Greek version of the title of the *Praise of Folly* or *Laus Stultitiae, Moriae Encomium*, referring to the name of Morus. Erasmus and Pieter Gillis thanked More probably also for their beautiful literary depiction in *Utopia* with the Diptych by Quentin Metsys, sent to More in 1517: the first year of *Utopia*’s distribution. A visualization of the participation of Erasmus in the genesis of *Utopia*, can be found in this diptych: in the portrait of Erasmus, the humanist is writing in an open book and in the portrait of Gillis, the city clerk of Antwerp points with a finger to a closed book on which papers’ side is clearly written ‘IS ERAS. R.’: ‘this (is) Erasmus Roterodamus’ or ‘this (is) from Erasmus Roterodamus’, ‘this (is) for Erasmus Roterodamus’ or ‘this (is) by Erasmus Roterodamus’.

Erasmus wrote his *Praise of Folly* in the house of More around the ascension of the young Henry VIII (for which Erasmus had specially come from Italy to England) and Thomas More wrote the basic parts of his book of *Utopia* in the year of the ascension of the young prince Charles and behind his throne of chancellor Jean le Sauvage as man in power, in the Antwerp house of Pieter Gillis: truly a primary residence of Erasmus in the Low Countries, showed and opened to More by arrangements of Erasmus. The Greek name of the narrator of the *Praise of Folly*, Lady Stultitia or Moria, is ironically but linguistically directly linked to the name of Thomas More/Morus and the narrator of More’s *Utopia*, Hythlodaeus can be linked reciprocally to Erasmus through the figure of Saint Erasmus, as I discovered recently, the patron of all sailors. The widest of the islands in the Venetian Lagoon, as *Utopia* not far from the mainland, was the only island in the Lagoon already inhabited by Romans (before the ‘barbarian invasions’) who used it as a pleasure ground, and is dedicated by name - today and also in the time of More and Erasmus who stayed the most of the year 1508 or a large part of Erasmus’ Italian journey in 1506-1509 (after which Erasmus would conceive on the return journey and write in the house of More his *Moriae Encomium*) with Aldus Manutius in Venice, strong scholar and master of the famous

---


150 Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, p. 84; In the commentary on this page the house of Gillis is confirmed as the repeated forwarding address of Erasmus in the Low Countries.

151 Desiderius Erasmus, *Ép.*, 2, letter 332, p. 68, l. 15-19
Aldine Press who had been a friend of Pico della Mirandola, who was greatly interested in Ancient Greek culture and would print the greatest works of the Ancient Greek authors, who had an anchor and a dolphin as his emblem (also Dirk Martens who had learned the printing trade in Venice showed a sea anchor as his printing emblem) and who died on 6th February 1515 (three months before More’s Utopian Embassy, so a major emotional impact on Erasmus concerning the figure of Manutius precedes both the creation of *Moriae Encomium* and *Utopia*) - to the saint of sailors: Sant’Erasmo. As Erasmus dedicated his *Laus Stultitiae* explicitly to More,¹⁵² the book of *Utopia* is in an understandable way dedicated by More to ‘a devout man and a theologian by profession’ - mentioned in More’s first prefatory letter for *Utopia* - planning, ready and keen to journey to the Utopian state,¹⁵³ to a close friend who was literally disguised into a sailor, but actually more a sailor of the mind like a Plato,¹⁵⁴ into the storyteller and herald of the Utopian society. These are very strong elements allowing us to suppose a strong literary relationship between *Laus Stultitiae* and *Utopia*. However, these key elements don’t dictate the exact nature of the relationship between these two major works and literary pillars of Christian humanism.

As *Moriae Encomium* shows mainly absurd statements with sharp critiques under the surface, this work of Erasmus presents at the same time a small part of a truly defended and aspired folly: the Christian mystical folly. But in Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, we can read mostly the negative dismissing assessments, shared by both Erasmus and Thomas More (and discussed and built over the years through their letter writing and probably even more in their uncontrollable oral conversations) of many aspects of their contemporary society. As a proper return gift, Thomas More offered in my view with the book of *Utopia* mainly a broad overview of the positive ideas and ideals

¹⁵³ Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 42-43 (More to Gillis); It is possible that Erasmus asked More to not direct his first prefatory letter for *Utopia* and to not dedicate in this way *Utopia* explicitly to Erasmus but rather to direct this letter to Pieter Gillis. I believe that according to More’s first choice, the work would have been dedicated to Erasmus: probably Erasmus changed this idea as he urged in the same way (and with written testimonial) Pieter Gillis to direct his prefatory letter for *Utopia* not to him but rather to Jerome Busleyden. Desiderius Erasmus, *Ep.*, 2, letter 477, p. 359, l. 5-7; The fact that Jean le Sauvage tried to arrange for Erasmus the title of bishop of the Sicilians, also an island people ‘who were clever Greeks once and still are witty and gay’, at the beginning of October 1516 or the time of editing and preparing the first edition of *Utopia*, can also be seen as a strong tribute to Erasmus in these crucial days for the first publication of *Utopia*. Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 476, p. 95-96; In this context we may not forget that it was in Sicily, in Syracuse, that Plato had tried to implement his political theories unsuccessfully.
¹⁵⁴ Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 48-49
seriously defended and truly aspired by both Erasmus and Thomas More for their society (and equally discussed and built through their correspondence and oral conversations), in combination with a small part of nonsensical ideas according to More and Erasmus, equally present in the book of *Utopia*. For very good reasons, Marie-Claire Phélippeau concludes the chapter on *Utopia* in her captivating Thomas More biography, with the affirmation of *Utopia* by André Prévost as a manifesto of Christian humanism. As stated above, the economic institution, the travel restrictions and the sartorial uniformity and simplicity are the most obvious ideas in *Utopia* not seriously defended by the Christian humanists. Most intriguing is the finding that this smaller part of nonsensical elements in *Utopia* describe exactly main life conditions of the young Erasmus at the place, the monastery of Steyn, where Erasmus came firstly and really profoundly into contact with the small part of folly mentioned in *Moriae Encomium* and truly aspired by the Christian humanists: the Christian mystical folly. In this perspective, I would like to complete further the alternative title given by Edward Surtz to the book of *Utopia*: the *Praise of Wisdom*. As title I suggest alternatively the *Praise of Wisdom and a little Folly*, as I read equally Erasmus’ *Moriae Encomium* as the *Praise of Folly and a little Wisdom*. More’s *Utopia* and Erasmus’ *Moriae Encomium* form indeed a complementary unity: we can consider both works in this way as an interconnected Yin and Yang of serious and nonsensical ideas in the collegial view of the Christian humanist circle around Erasmus and Thomas More. As the true Christian humanist ideals are silently evoked through *Moriae Encomium* in contraposition to all the dismissed follies of European society, also these very same follies are silently evoked - and some of these follies even explicitly mentioned in the first book of *Utopia* - in contraposition to all the true ideals for European society, present in the second book

155 M.-C. Phélippeau, 2016, p. 72; A. Prévost, 1969, p. 105  
156 E.L. Surtz, 1957; Also Frank E. Manuel and Fritzie P. Manuel stated that ‘More’s *Utopia* should be read in conjunction with Erasmus’ *Moriae encomium*’ and Andrew D. Weiner wrote that ‘Utopia might well be read as a companion to Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly* in which More is ‘praising’ wisdom as Erasmus has ‘praised’ folly’. F.E. Manuel and F.P. Manuel, 1979, p. 134; A.D. Weiner, ‘Taking More seriously: Humanism, Cultural Criticism, and the Possibility of a Past’ in T. Hoenselaars and A.F. Kinney (eds.), 2005, p. 60; In the Dutch speaking academic world, an interesting and entertaining confrontation of ideas occurred in the commemoration time of Autumn 2016. Professor emeritus Hans Achterhuis defends in his book ‘Koning van Utopia’ the reading of More’s *Utopia* almost as a second *Praise of Folly*: he writes that hardly one element of Utopian society can be considered a truly Morean ideal, except for a few smaller ‘mini-utopia’s’ inside More’s work. However, More’s *Utopia* contains more than a few seriously intended concepts in the mind of Thomas More. But in the end this is a welcome and probably even necessary sound to confront the starting principle of Erik De Bom’s and Toon van Houdt’s book ‘Andersland’, describing Utopia as ‘Thomas More’s highly personal dream world’. This reading of *Utopia* will disappear steadily in the course of the 21st century. H. Achterhuis, 2016; E. De Bom and T. van Houdt (eds.), 2016
of *Utopia*. At the same time the small part of explicit and serious Christian humanist wisdom in the *Praise of Folly* and the small part of clear folly through the eyes of the Christian humanists in the book of *Utopia*, connect both works and describe the life of the young Erasmus embarking on his journey to discover the rich culture of the Low Countries and to spread this Netherlandish culture practically and philosophically in the wider world.

For the *Moreana* issue of June 2012, I had invited Giulia Sissa to publish her research on similarities between Raphael Hythlodaeus and Erasmus in style and in ideas with aspects of the philosophies of both Plato and Epicurus, in the same issue where I was planning and going to publish my Master’s thesis, to support further my own findings on the relationship between Erasmus and Raphael Hythlodaeus.157

However, our scholarly roads have clearly separated. She completed her first findings into the mistaken Sissa thesis, seeing Raphael Hythlodaeus as a complete parody of Erasmus and the Utopian society as an entire parody of Erasmus’ ideas, all this brought by Thomas More who would have subscribed in Sissa’s view practically no aspect of life in Utopia.158 I believe that these conclusions turn Sissa into a parody of a historian defending a parody of historiography from which I wish to distance my presented work explicitly. In my view there existed a strong consensus of ideas in the close and rather small circle of Christian humanists around Erasmus and Thomas More, both about the seriously defended ideas in the book of *Utopia* and about the nonsensical part of *Utopia*. Not for nothing did Christian humanists consider Desiderius Erasmus their true Prince of Humanists as they saw themselves as members of a Republic of Letters based on clear principles. The statement of Sissa that the economy of Utopia can be linked to serious wishes and ideas of Erasmus for the economic institution of the *Respublica Christiana* are conflicting completely with my own findings and conclusions on this point and have nothing to do with historical reality. In the *Brabantia* article, I already stated that there were also ‘unessential’ elements present in Thomas More’s characterization of Hythlodaeus, logically needed to hide Erasmus behind the mask of Hythlodaeus: under his cloak and behind a sailor’s beard. Also the nonsensical parts of Utopian society in the view of Erasmus and More, equally enthusiastically

---

defended by Raphael Hythlodaeus as he defends serious ideas, are such nonessential disguising elements, logically and necessarily different from the person who is supposed to be disguised.\textsuperscript{159} Also More’s literary depiction of himself in the book of \textit{Utopia}, known as the character Morus, shows truly diverging differences in comparison with the true Thomas More. Nevertheless we recognize also without problem Morus as the literary depiction of More by More in \textit{Utopia}: Raphael Hythlodaeus depicts in a similar literary way the character of Erasmus inside the book of \textit{Utopia}.

There are many reasons present in or related to the book of \textit{Utopia} underlining the ambiguous content of More’s \textit{Utopia} with both serious and nonsensical ideas through the eyes of More and Erasmus. The letter ‘\textit{u}’ in the word ‘utopia’ is generally explained as a reference to the Ancient Greek word ‘eu’ meaning ‘good’ and at the same time to the Ancient Greek word ‘ou’ meaning ‘not’. The letter ‘\textit{u}’ on itself does not stand as an independent meaningful word in Ancient Greek, neither in Latin. Nevertheless, in combination with ‘topia’, referring to the Ancient Greek word ‘topos’ or ‘place’, ‘utopia’ can mean a ‘good place’ or ‘eu-topia’ also in accordance with the literal description of the Utopian state in the six lines by Anemolius as an ‘Eutopia’ or ‘Happy Land’,\textsuperscript{160} and at the same time a ‘not-place’ or ‘ou-topia’: a place that is not good, does not exist or should not exist. This duality of meanings strengthens further the interpretation of \textit{Utopia} as a complex book demonstrating at the same time good, seriously inspiring ideas and ideas that should not be followed. Based on the findings above, I believe that the name of \textit{Utopia} should mainly be read as an ‘eu-topia’ or ‘good place’, however without razing the possible reading of ‘utopia’ as an ‘ou-topia’ or a society with also aspects that should not be imitated according to the plans of More and Erasmus for the Respublica Christiana.

Then there is the strong etymological confusion about the meaning of ‘Hythlodaeus’, with the Ancient Greek etymological understanding of ‘hythlos’ as ‘nonsense’ or ‘idle talk’, ‘hodaios’ as ‘merchant’ or ‘peddler’ but at the same time with ‘daios’ as ‘hostile’ or ‘destructive’.\textsuperscript{161} In the \textit{Brabantia} article, I pointed to a thematically political line as \textit{Utopia}’s ‘fundamental layer of meaning’ and a ‘crucial

\textsuperscript{159} M. Vermeir, Brabantia, decoding the main characters of Utopia’, \textit{Moreana}, Vol. 49, 187-188, p. 181
\textsuperscript{160} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 20-21
purpose”\(^{162}\) and to Hythlodaeus also as the notorious ‘Merchant of Nonsense’ in a literary relation with lady Stultitia, but mainly as a ‘Destroyer of Nonsense’,\(^{163}\) like archangel Raphael is revered as a vanquisher and jailer of devils and (also by doing so) as a ‘healer of God’ protecting travelers, matchmakers, happy meetings and sailors.\(^{164}\)

His stated description as travel companion of Amerigo Vespucci, mixing in his personal travel accounts reality with untrue fantasy, confirms Hythlodaeus’ nonsensical side which I certainly do not want to neglect. But in the light of the findings of this paper, I believe that we can indeed read and understand Hythlodaeus mainly as an efficient destroyer of nonsense and, with a political institution as presented in and spread through the book of *Utopia*, as vanquisher and jailer of tyrants or devils in human form.

Another clear hint for our reading we can find in the title and subtitle of the book of *Utopia*: ‘on the best form of the state and on the new island of Utopia: a truly golden handbook, no less beneficial than entertaining’, ‘*de optimo reipublicae statu deque nova insula Utopia; libellus uere aureus, nec minus salutaris quam festius.*’

This new island of Utopia is in the title thus not equalized with the best form of the state: the two descriptions are separated by a meaningful ‘que’ or ‘and’. The book is in the subtitle also described as both beneficial and entertaining, actually ‘no less beneficial than entertaining’, to be completely correct. With this formulation of the subtitle, More can also mean ‘more beneficial than entertaining’, endorsing almost literally the proposed reading of *Utopia* as ‘Praise of Wisdom and a little Folly’. This formulation is repeated and further elaborated in the following prefatory poem by Gerard Geldenhouver ‘of Nijmegen’, ‘on Utopia’.

‘Reader, do you like what is pleasant? In this book is everything that is pleasant. Do you hunt what is profitable? You can read nothing more profitable. If you wish both the pleasant and the profitable, this island abounds in both. By them


\(^{164}\) ‘Due to his actions in the Book of Tobit and the Gospel of John, St. Raphael is accounted patron of travellers, the blind, happy meetings, nurses, physicians, medical workers, matchmakers, Christian marriage, and Catholic studies. As a particular enemy of the devil, he was revered in Catholic Europe as a special protector of Catholic sailors: on a corner of Venice's famous Doge's Palace, there is a relief depicting Raphael holding a scroll on which is written: "Efficacia fretum quietum" (Keep the Gulf quiet).’

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raphael_(archangel)#Patronage

The flagship of the Portuguese armada of four ships by which Vasco Da Gama sailed from Lisbon to India in the last 3 years of the 15th century was named *São Gabriel* while its main sister ship, built with the same size and the same purpose at the same time by the same builder, was named *São Rafael*.

you may polish your expression and improve your mind. In this book the very 
sources of right and wrong are revealed by the eloquent More, the chief glory of 
his native London.”

Clarence H. Miller explains in the introduction of his Utopia translation that ‘More’s Utopia does not fit the ordinary meaning of the word as it came down in modern languages, where it signifies an unrestrainedly ‘good place’” and that ‘More’s Utopia should not be read (as it often has been and sometimes still is read) as presenting More’s notion of a purely positive and desirable society’.

This point of view is also increasingly strongly defended by the group of international Thomas More experts organized around Moreana and in the society of Amici Thomae Mori while I continue my comprehensive scholarly campaign to fortify and foster the growing consensus on this matter. More’s and Erasmus’ affiliation to Christianity, seeing the ideal world beyond our mortal lives and our capabilities of understanding and articulation; the strong research of Elizabeth McCutcheon on paradoxes in the book of Utopia; the refusal of More to translate and publish the book of Utopia in a vernacular language and to make Utopia thus accessible to a wider public, also to people without schooling in Classical satirical literature; the first literary project of More and Erasmus together, id est a translation and commentary competition with an Ancient Greek text of famously satirical writer Lucianus as basic material, and the stated love of the Utopian people for writings of Lucianus whom they admire for his ‘wit and pleasantry’, give us only more additional reasons to consider Utopia no longer the ideal state or society according to More and/or Erasmus and to recognize a dual essence of serious and absurd parts in the book of Utopia.

Very illustrative are also the three following, conflicting statements, the first two by the figure Thomas Morus at the end of the second book of Utopia and the third quote

---

165 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 30-31
167 A beautiful overview and situation of her work can be found in the Moreana Liber Amicorum for Elizabeth McCutcheon: this is the main Moreana issue (of December 2015) celebrating the 500th anniversary of More’s Utopia. E. McCutcheon, ‘Liber Amicorum: A Collection of Essays by Elizabeth McCutcheon’, Moreana, Vol. 52, 201-202
168 Thomas More, CW 8, p. 179, lines 10-16 (fragment from the Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer)
169 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 182-183; All Utopians enjoyed a literary schooling and filled their long leisure time next to the six hours of work a day, also with reading. At an older age as a people, the Utopians started to learn Ancient Greek, as also Erasmus had done at an older age, reading works of Greek authors provided to them by Raphael Hythlodaeus who is described in the opening parts of the second book as an expert in Ancient Greek, even a greater expert in Greek than in Latin.
from the second accompanying letter of Thomas More to Gillis, in the Yale edition placed after the two books of *Utopia*.

‘When Raphael had finished his story, many things came to my mind which seemed very absurdly established in the customs and laws of the people described – not only in their method of waging war, their ceremonies and religion, as well as their other institutions, but most of all in that feature which is the principal foundation of their whole structure. I mean their common life and subsistence – without any exchange of money.’

‘Meanwhile, though in other respects he is a man of the most undoubted learning as well as of the greatest knowledge of human affairs, I cannot agree with all that he said. But I readily admit that there are very many features in the Utopian commonwealth which it is easier for me to wish for in our countries than to have any hope of seeing realized.’

‘I was extremely delighted, my dearest Peter, with a criticism already known to you, made by an unusually sharp person who put this dilemma about our Utopia: if the facts are reported as true, I see some rather absurd elements in them, but if as fictitious, then I find More’s finished judgment wanting in some matters. Whoever this fellow was, I am very much obliged to him, my dear Peter. I suspect him to be learned, and I see him to be friendly. By this very frank criticism of his, he has gratified me more than anyone else since the publication of my little volume.’

In my view, the first fragment does not reflect truly the point of view of the real Thomas More - apart of his view on the Utopian economic system which he rejects in the fragment explicitly the most fiercely - but functions as a literary mechanism of security for More as the author of *Utopia* in the face of conflicting political, international and religious tendencies amongst the increasingly powerful Renaissance princes evolving and acting in a completely opposite direction, away from the political, international and religious landmarks of Utopian society. In the same way the figure of

---

170 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 244-245
171 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 244-247
172 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 248-249
Hythlodaeus as spokesperson of the Utopian society with a possible characterization as Merchant of Nonsense, provides such a mechanism of security, as well as the mixture of serious and nonsensical concepts in *Utopia*: any accusation could be parried with the explanation that not just a smaller part of Utopia was nonsensical but the entire state was. In the second fragment we can clearly read a serious affirmation of *Utopia* as a Praise of Wisdom and a little Folly and of the tension More felt between the political reality of his time and the political dreams of the Christian humanists for their and our society on the long term. In the third fragment we can find some clear allusions by Thomas More himself adding credibility to my proposed estimation of the first fragment.

I read in *Utopia* the key elements of the Christian humanistic program, seriously meant for a wider dissemination and actual realization in the states of the *Respublica Christiana*, next to a lesser number of nonsensical elements configuring in *Utopia* a significant part of satire and humor: essential aspect of the Christian humanistic writings and *modus vivendi* next to many other essential aspects of their humanism. In the same way constitutes the *Praise of Folly* an essential but not exclusively determining part of Erasmus’ oeuvre, containing also many other important writings of different nature. Also Erasmus’ *Institutio Principis Christiani* contains next to clear messages and mainly serious political ideas, an unmistakable part of irony and humor, obvious when reading the opening of the first chapter where Erasmus states that the education of the (son of the) prince is less important in countries where the ruler is assigned (and can be deposed) by election instead of only being dictated by hereditary succession, \(^{173}\) with the knowledge that Charles to whom Erasmus directed and dedicated firstly this manual, was also the ruler of the Duchy of Brabant with a political institution providing the possibility to appoint and depose legally the prince as duke of Brabant bound by his Joyous Entry. As in *Utopia*, also a limited but certain dose of irony and humor goes together here with concerns for safety and a justified carefulness in a politically volatile environment.

Quentin Metsys, *Portrait of Desiderius Erasmus*, 1517
Galleria Nazionale d’ Arte Antica - Rome

Quentin Metsys, *Portrait of Town Clerk Pieter Gillis*, 1517
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten – Antwerpen
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

Quentin Metsys, *Portrait of Town Clerk Pieter Gillis*, 1517
Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten - Antwerpen
Utopia as a political work

At the heart of the seriously meant parts of *Utopia*, we find the political system of the Utopian state, by which also the organization of the Utopian church is defined with also a politically motivated tolerance, in which the cultural eclecticism of Utopia is reflected the clearest and by which the Utopian people - all holding an equal share of political power - are emancipated and socially equalized with further social policies as the governmental consequences of this particular system. Even international-political relations of the Utopian state, in the defense of neighboring peoples against tyranny from inside or outside their state, is determined by the proper political system of Utopia itself. Amongst the seriously meant key elements, only the political system of Utopia, a state-organized social care supporting the sick, elder and truly needy and Utopia’s religious tolerance and collective defense were truly innovative in general philosophical view, and also therefore amongst the most crucial elements of *Utopia*. Other seriously defended elements in the book of *Utopia* like conciliarism in Church, separation of the Church and the State, interculturalism and personal spirituality, were defended already philosophically and widely in earlier Christian humanistic works like Erasmus’ *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* (personal spirituality) or in earlier works by other earlier philosophers and writers like Pierre d’Ailly and Jean Gerson (conciliarism), William of Ockham and Marsilius of Padua (separation of the Church and the State), Pico della Mirandola (interculturalism), the Brabantine *doctor admirabilis and mysticus* Jan van Ruusbroec and Thomas a Kempis (personal spirituality).

This and other reasons allow us to construct and formulate the theory that the crucial purpose of *Utopia* existed in the first but resolute politico-philosophical elevation and support of the political system firstly conceived and constituted through the Brabantine Joyous Entries with the interwoven spiritual-religious culture of Jan van Ruusbroec’s Brabantine mysticism, and broadly anchored by a socially far reaching political culture in Brabant, as the best institution applicable and recommended to all states in the *Respublica Christiana* (that should defend collectively this institution in and the integrity of these respective states), by all the Christian humanists of Erasmus’ and Thomas More’s circle, by their political friends and companions and their Maecenas and protector, chancellor Jean le Sauvage.

174 In my future research, I will investigate further the influence of the older Brabantine political culture on the conciliar thought of Pierre d’Ailly and Jean Gerson, very familiar with the Low Countries, and the conceptual bonds between the Brabantine mysticism of Jan van Ruusbroec and Brabant’s political culture of Joyous Entries.
The first part of the title of *Utopia* is one of these other reasons: ‘*De optimo reipublicae statu*’ can be translated the most correctly as ‘on the best form of the state’. These words are also repeated in the title of the first book and the title of the second book,\(^{175}\) without the other parts of the main title and subtitle for the entire book of *Utopia*. Utopia’s political system is the first main aspect of Utopian society described after the general introduction on the people and geography of Utopia, needed to understand Utopia’s political institution. The general end title for the two books of *Utopia* describes the text as the ‘discourse of Raphael Hythlodaeus on the laws and institutions of the island of Utopia, hitherto known but to few’, *de legibus et institutis utopiensis insulae paucis adhuc cognitae*.\(^{176}\)

The political character of *Utopia* is further strengthened by in *Utopia* explicitly stated political capacities and legal backgrounds of Thomas More (undersheriff of London and diplomatic envoy of Henry VIII) and Pieter Gillis (clerk of the city of Antwerp), at the time of Utopia’s conception and first publication. A closer look learns that all the writers of *Utopia*’s prefatory letters were very familiar with political affairs: Pieter Gillis, Thomas More, Jerome Busleyden (counselor and diplomatic envoy of the Burgundian court in Brussels), Gerard Geldenhouwer (secretary of Philip of Burgundy, commander of the Burgundian fleet till 1517 and from 1517 the Prince-Bishop of Utrecht), Jean Desmarez (former courtier at the court of Brussels) and Cornelius Grapheus (head designer of the triumphal arches for prince Charles’ Joyous Entry in Antwerp and also a city clerk of Antwerp). Even Erasmus as appointed counselor of prince Charles and Guillaume Budé as counselor of the French king François Ier can be considered as such. The appearance of these actors, all with political links or backgrounds, as writers of the prefaces in *Utopia* comes not at all as a surprise when we read the letter in which More requested Erasmus around 20\(^{th}\) September 1516 to ‘furnish’ *Utopia* with ‘testimonials not only from several literary men but also from people well-known for the part they have taken in public affairs’.\(^{177}\) A study of More’s contacts in the Low Countries shows prominent political and/or legal background and activities for most of these contacts.\(^{178}\)

\(^{175}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 46-47 and p. 110-111
\(^{176}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 246-247
\(^{177}\) Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 467, p. 79
And the silent figure of chancellor Jean le Sauvage, guarding the entire book of *Utopia* while being praised as the ‘one and only Maecenas or patron of every noble pursuit (who) summons us’ already in the *Parerga of Utopia*, in the preface by Jean Desmarez, only contributes to the political character of More’s golden book.\(^{179}\) In his letter of 31\(^{st}\) October 1516, More asks Erasmus even how the book of *Utopia* is received by chancellor Jean le Sauvage, and by two other political heavyweights: Jerome Busleyden and Cuthbert Tunstall (leader of the English delegation for the Bruges trade negotiations with representatives of prince Charles, and Henry VIII’s ambassador in Brussels), who would have been princes according to More if they had lived in the state of Utopia.\(^{180}\)

The *Morus* and Pieter Gillis characters in *Utopia* invite Hythlodaeus most eagerly to tell them firstly about what interested them the most: where did he encounter on his long travels good and wise institutions and political systems, and which system could serve as a good example for all the states of *Respublica Christiana*?\(^{181}\)

‘What he said he saw in each place would be a long tale to unfold and is not the purpose of this work. Perhaps on another occasion we shall tell his story, particularly whatever facts would be useful to readers, above all, those wise and prudent provisions which he noticed anywhere among nations living together in a civilized way. For on these subjects we eagerly inquired of him, and he no less readily discoursed; but about stale travelers’ wonders we were not curious. Scyllas and greedy Celaenos and folk-devouring Laestrygones and similar frightful monsters are common enough, but well and wisely trained citizens (in latin: *sane ac sapienter institutos ciues*, could also be translated as: citizens organized in a sane and wise form of state) are not everywhere to be found. To be sure, just as he called attention to many ill-advised customs among these new nations, so he rehearsed not a few points from which our own cities, nations, races, and kingdoms may take example for the correction of their errors.’\(^{182}\)

George M. Logan demonstrated that Thomas More placed him – and in accordance with our research also Erasmus - through many literary and political-

---

\(^{179}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 26-27  
\(^{181}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 52-55  
\(^{182}\) Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 52-55
philosophical references in *Utopia* like Utopia’s economic system, in the extent of the great political-philosophical tradition of Plato, Aristoteles and the great Classical political thinkers, dialoguing almost personally with these philosophers throughout their entire *Magnum Opus*. And John Guy clarified that John Rastell, Thomas More’s brother-in-law, published already in 1514 a short manifesto with also an Utopian vision for society, not characterized by common property however but governed and reformed by law.

As first joint literary project Erasmus and More made both a translation of and wrote both a commentary on Lucianus’ *The Tyrannicide*, build around the question how to end and prevent a tyrannical regime. According to the explanations in *Utopia*, the Utopian people cherish also this book as they love reading all works of Lucianus after having learnt Ancient Greek, as also Erasmus had done at older age. More and Erasmus leave a great deal of responsibility to the readers of *Utopia* for a correct understanding and interpretation, as also a crucial responsibility for the benefit of the state is given to all citizens in a political system of representative government or parliamentary democracy as described in *Utopia*. One line of More’s enigmatic Renaissance work describes surely the institutions of the Utopian state as ‘very far from stultitia’, showing in its formulation the same word used for the Latin translation of the word *Moria* in the title of Erasmus’ *Moriae Encomium*. Also intertextual connections between *Utopia* and the *Epigrams* of Thomas More and between their respective political content as profoundly investigated by Concepción Cabrillana, emphasize the serious political meaning of *Utopia*.

The striking simultaneity of Erasmus’ appointment in 1515 as counselor of prince Charles who was instituted as ruler of the Burgundian Netherlands in that year, or rather, of Jean le Sauvage who is considered by Erasmus ‘in practice the prince’ as Erasmus states concerning chancellor Jean le Sauvage that ‘it is pleasant to know how the prince feels towards me, or rather the chancellor, who in practice is the prince’, and of the genesis of Erasmus’ main political work *Institutio Principis Christiani*.

183 G.M. Logan, 1983
184 J. Guy, 2008, p. 104-105
185 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 182-183
186 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 158-159
188 Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 4, letter 475, p. 94
through 1515 and the first months of 1516 - conceived at the invitation of Jean le Sauvage - and its first publication in May 1516 in Basel, with the genesis of More’s *Utopia* through 1515 - in my view politically facilitated and protected by chancellor Jean le Sauvage - and its first publication in December 1516 in the city of Leuven under his political auspices, strengthens strongly the political character and significance of the book of *Utopia*, especially when we consider the fact that Jean le Sauvage is known as the instigator of Erasmus’ *Institutio* and *Querela Pacis* and explicitly celebrated as Maecenas of ‘every nobly pursuit’ in the *Parerga* of *Utopia*. And as in *Utopia* there is also in the *Institutio* a small but considerable and existential part of irony: *Institutio* is dedicated to prince Charles in his new capacity of ruler of the Burgundian Netherlands and of the Duchy of Brabant with its explained constitutional system, while Erasmus highlights at the beginning of his work on princely education the importance of a solid education of the prince, especially in countries where this prince cannot be legally chosen and deposed. Many elements of the prescribed education are at the same time very hard to imagine in practice for the education of a young heir to the throne, living at court surrounded by courtiers seeing him or her all as the future prince. Erasmus opened his first preface for the *Institutio* directed to prince Charles, with the beautiful statement that ‘Wisdom in itself is a wonderful thing, Charles greatest of princes, and no kind of wisdom is rated more excellent by Aristotle than that which teaches how to be a beneficent prince.’

This wise sentence is completely in line with our reading of *Utopia* as a Praise of Wisdom and a little Folly, with its political wisdom amongst the most crucial elements of Wisdom in *Utopia*. Through his entire *Institutio Principis Christiani* and its prefaces, Erasmus states repeatedly that people can live in this world in almost heavenly happiness when they are ruled by a good prince: a more than decisive reason to secure the rule by such a good prince, as institutionally more explicitly explained in the book of *Utopia*.

In ‘Brabantia, decoding the main characters of *Utopia*’ and in the Belgian contribution to the first contemporary manual of Latin for all the European students edited in October 2015 by *Euroclassica*, ‘Panegyric for a Prince: Erasmus’ Joyous Entry into Political Culture’, I placed Erasmus’ *Panegyricus*, his *Institutio Principis Christiani*.  

---


The prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

Christiani and Thomas More’s *Utopia* in one creative and thematic-political line, showing a consistent, increasingly explicit plead for representative government as the best political system, first in the Duchy of Brabant, then for the Burgundian Low Countries and finally for all states in the *Respublica Christiana*. In the *Brabantia* article, I pointed to this thematically political line as ‘a fundamental layer of meaning’ and as ‘a crucial purpose’ of *Utopia* and I pointed to Hythlodaeus also as a ‘Merchant of Nonsense’ in a literary relation with lady Stultitia, but mainly as a ‘Destroyer of Nonsense’, like archangel Raphael is revered as a vanquisher and jailer of devils and (also by doing so) a chief ‘healer of God’ protecting travelers, matchmakers, happy meetings and sailors. This meaning of the name of Raphael adds only strength to the already strong political meaning of *Utopia*.

Also Juan Luis Vives is recommending in the following fragment both the *Institutio Principis Christiani* and *Utopia* as works about living well like the works of Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch and of Plato, ‘especially those that take into account the government of a republic’.

*Auctores in quibus versabitur, ii erunt qui pariter et linguam et mores excolant, atque instituant; quique non modo bene scire doceant, sed bene vivere; hujusmodi sunt Cicero, Seneca, Plutarchi opera [...] aliquid Platonis opera, praesertim qui ad rempublicam gubernandam spectant, Hyeronimi epistolae, et quaedam Ambrosii et Augustini opera, Erasmi institutio principis, [...] Thomas Mori Utopia.*

‘Authors that should be studied are those who honor and cultivate both language and moral values and who do not only teach how to know well, but also how to live well; these include the works by Cicero, Seneca, Plutarch [...] some works by Plato, especially those that take into account the government of a republic, Jerome’s letters and some works by Ambrose and some by Augustine, *The Education of a Christian prince* by Erasmus [...] Thomas More’s *Utopia*.\(^{194}\)

---


\(^{194}\) Juan Luis Vives, *Opera Omnia*, vol. 1., Officina Benedicti Monfort, Valencia, 1782
Utopia is placed in line with the main political work of Plato, The Republic, in the book of Utopia itself, not only by presenting common property as Utopia’s economic system identical to that of Plato’s Republic, but even by celebrating the state of Utopia explicitly twice in the Parerga as the superior victor over the Republic of Plato.

‘The ancients called me Utopia or Nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato’s republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia or Happy Land.’

‘It is known as yet to few mortals, but it is eminently worthy of everyone’s knowledge as being superior to Plato’s republic.’

These two consistent statements become only more interesting when we realize that the state of Utopia and the Republic of Plato share the same economic organization based on common property, but show a significantly different political institution. So the key reason for Utopia’s victory should not be searched in the economic sphere but can be found in the political. These two fragments from prefatory pieces, the first from Anemolius’ six lines and the second from the preface of Pieter Gillis to Jerome Busleyden, are complemented further in the prefatory letter for Utopia by Jerome Busleyden to More, invited to write this letter by Erasmus (who would also help Jerome Busleyden with editing the final version of his prefatory letter) and stating and praising the superiority of Utopia’s political institution over the constitutions of the Classical Greek and Roman states.

‘In no other way could you have better or more rightly secured this object than by holding up before reasonable mortals themselves that ideal of a commonwealth, that pattern and perfect model of morality, whose equal has never been seen anywhere in the world for the soundness of its constitution, for its perfection, and for its desirability. It far surpasses and leaves a long way behind the many celebrated and much lauded commonwealths of the Spartans,

195 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 20-21
196 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 20-21
197 Erasmus invited Busleyden to write his prefatory letter for the first edition of Utopia and Busleyden asked for Erasmus’ assistance with writing this letter. Desiderius Erasmus, Ep., 2, letter 484, p. 375, l. 1-15
Athenians, and Romans. If these latter had been founded under the same auspices and regulated by the same institutions, laws, decrees, and customs as this state of yours, assuredly they would not yet lie ruined and leveled to the ground – and now, alas, annihilated beyond any hope of restoration. They would, rather, still be intact, prosperous, happy, and most fortunate – all the while mistresses of the world, sharing their wide dominion by land and sea."  

In the catalogue of the splendid Leuven exhibition ‘In search of Utopia’, Jan Papy formulates his endorsement of ‘a main purpose’ of More’s *Utopia* with the following eloquent statement.

‘For if More’s *Utopia* was often interpreted as the tantalizing revelation and successful literary portrayal of an ideal society, a moneyless state with few laws and with property held in common, his real concern lies elsewhere. The question that exercises More is what process should be followed in order to put such a society into practice.’

Through his entire *Institutio Principis Christiani* and its prefaces, Erasmus states that people can live in this world in almost heavenly happiness when they are ruled by a good prince:  

more than enough reason to secure the rule by such a prince, as more explicitly explained in *Utopia*. Coherently with these views, Papy describes *Utopia* also explicitly in the catalogue as a ‘political study’. Also his following beautiful statement on *Utopia* can be read there.

‘Yet it is chiefly Erasmus’s own *Panegyricus* for Philip the Fair (1504), his *Moriae Encomium* (Praise of Folly, 1511) – dedicated to More as if to

---

198 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 32-35
demonstrate their complete congeniality – and his *Institutio Principis Christiani*, written in 1515 and dedicated to Prince Charles in May 1516, that have left the most traces in More’s ideal state. If the *Institutio* was Erasmus’s positive political program for a healthy and wisely governed state, the antique sources of the *Institutio* and *Utopia* are also largely parallel. Both works are variations on the same theme: the ideal state as a tight family bond founded on the pillars of morality in which the citizens participate in the power. Compared to Erasmus’s *Moriae Encomium*, More’s *Utopia* as a ‘Praise of Wisdom’ is the literary-satirical and politico-philosophical complement to the *Praise of Folly* dedicated to him five years earlier. Both contrast, as in a mirror, the ideal with the shortcomings of their own world. Both offer a satirical stepping stone to an earnest contemplation of truth.

Referring to parts of André Prévost’s analysis of *Utopia* and to his wordings, Papy situates in the same catalogue Utopia ‘between the human cities and Augustine’s Divine City’, and describes Utopia as a ‘building under construction in which a utopian catharsis releases a Christian-humanist Erasmus-inspired society’: an approval and assent I here very gladly subscribe.

In the year the book of *Utopia* actually started to circulate from January 1517, Erasmus started organizing the foundation of the *Collegium Trilingue* in the same city that had seen the first publication of *Utopia*: the city of Leuven. The three languages (‘trilingue’) that would be taught in this renowned institute were Ancient Greek, Latin and Hebrew. There was an increasingly large and culturally participative Jewish community in the Low Countries, with diaspora streams of refugees fleeing from Spain.

202 J. Papy, ‘*Utopia* and European Humanism’, in J. Van der Stock (ed.), 2016, p. 129; In almost a surrealist way Papy intends to combine the reading of *Utopia* as More’s ideal state with the reading of *Utopia* as a significantly satirical work: this contradiction he tries to solve officially in the writings mentioned in the footnote 197, by situating this considerable part of satire in book one of *Utopia*. However, I have good reasons to believe that his real reading of *Utopia* is closer to the reading of *Utopia* I am presenting throughout this paper. I see and propose to recognize a minority but existential part of true satire and irony not only in the first book of *Utopia* (in the city of Antwerp and Duchy of Brabant as setting of the story, in disguising Erasmus as the sailor and key narrator Raphael Hythlodaeus and in his first defense of the economic system of Utopia), but also and even more strongly in the second book of *Utopia*: inside the description of Utopian society itself.

and Portugal, shooed by terrible persecutions. The Christian humanists had always a
deep interest in Jewish culture: the father of their cultural program was Pico della
Mirandola, planning for a comprehensive cultural synthesis of Classical Greek-Roman
and Jewish-Christian culture with also a keen interest in Jewish Kabbala. His 900 theses
formed a first stepping stone towards such synthesis.

It was probably Erasmus who proposed ‘Utopia’ as title of More’s book, instead
of More’s first proposal for the title of his golden book: ‘Nusquama’ or ‘Nowhere’, a
first title More is still using in his correspondence of September 1516. Since 1516-1517
Erasmus became very good friends with Juan Luis Vives, a Spanish-Jewish humanist
residing in Bruges. As a true inheritor of Pico della Mirandola’s syncretic program,
Erasmus refers in his preface for the first edition of his Institutio Principis Christiani to
the Torah figure of the Shunamite, and describes her even as the personification of
Justice: a personal addition not stated in the Book of Kings. All these elements brought
me to look for the meaning of the letter ‘u’ in the Hebrew alphabet as also Hebrew was
taught in the Collegium Trilingue Lovaniense, founded by Erasmus in the year 1517
when Utopia started to circulate, in the same city of Utopia’s first publication. In
Hebrew every letter of the alphabet not only stands for a particular word but embodies a
complete concept. The Hebrew letter that corresponds to our letter ‘u’, is the Hebrew
letter ‘vav’. The Hebrew ‘u’ or ‘vav’ is the sixth letter of the ‘Aleph-Bet’ and has
therefore the numeric value of six, symbol for ‘Man’ created on the sixth day and
working after his Fall six days a week. ‘Vav’ means hook, and more particularly the
hook used to assemble the ‘mishkan’ or tabernacle. The curtain of the tabernacle was
attached to its post with silver hooks, with ‘vav’ standing for such a silver hook. As the
tabernacle was considered to be the habitation of God while the Israelites were
wandering through the wilderness, the Torah is still revered as the habitation of the
Word of God. In respect of this parallel between the tabernacle and the Torah, and thus
between the tabernacle curtain and the Torah’s parchment sheets (around 50 per scroll)
the name of this curtain, ‘yeriah’, was given to a parchment sheet of the Torah like the
name of the post of the tabernacle’s curtain, ‘amud’, was given to every column of text
in the Torah. And because the tabernacle curtain was attached to its post always by a
silver hook or ‘vav’, the scribes started every column of text with a ‘vav’, hooking in
this way the text to the parchment.

204 http://www.hebrew4christians.com/Grammar/Unit_One/Aleph-Bet/Vav/vav.html
Leviticus 11:42 contains the middle of the entire Torah, marked by an oversized ‘vav’, as part of the word ‘gachon’ meaning ‘belly’. Although broken letters are prohibited by Torah writing laws or ‘Soferut’, there is only one exception: Numbers 25:12 shows the word ‘shalom’ or ‘peace’ with a broken ‘vav’, referring to a Broken Man or Messiah bringing peace to the world, in the sentence ‘Behold, I am giving to him my convenant of peace’. In Torah the word ‘toldod’ stands for the ‘generations’ or the created order of the world before the sin and fall of Adam and Eve, written in Genesis 2:4 with a ‘vav’ the one time this word appears before their sin and fall is described. When the same word is used after the fall of Adam and Eve, the word ‘toldod’ is missing its ‘vav’. Only in the context of the family or ‘generations’ of Perez constituting the later line of King David, the ‘vav’ in the word ‘toldod’ is restored again (Ruth 4:18), referring to the restoration of the creation through the line of good kings and the arrival of the Messiah Yesuah.

There is also a strong connection between this interpretation of the letter ‘u’ in Utopia as the Hebrew letter ‘vav’ and the interpretation of the letter ‘u’ in Utopia as ‘u’ referring to the Unicornius, symbolizing Christ and standing in the coat of arms of Jean le Sauvage: the real prince for Erasmus in the context of politics and political culture in the Duchy of Brabant and in the Low Countries, an image of the good Christian prince for both Erasmus and More. While Christ descended from the family line of king David and while the political culture of the Joyous Entries (also respected and defended by chancellor Jean le Sauvage whose personal political power was also directly supported by the practice and game rules of the political system instituted through the Joyous Entries of Brabant) showed strong symbolic similarities with the legitimation of Solomon as successor of king David, invented by the same king David while receiving good cares of the Shunamite girl, Erasmus referred to this Shunamite in his initial dedication of Institutio to prince Charles as a personification of Justice: Solomon was accepted as king of the Jews through a Joyous Entry into the city of Jeruzalem, followed and imitated by Jesus Christ on Palm Sunday and echoed in the political culture of Joyous Entries by every new duke or duchess of Brabant. The reading of references to a line of/for good kings or princes in the title Utopia, is next to the Hebrew letter ‘vav’ and the phenomenom of the unicorn supported by the in Utopia stated explanation of the name of the Utopian state as a derivation of the name of dux Utopus, the good leader and first Utopian prince - or should we say duke? - who laid the political and religious foundations of the state of Utopia, named since then after him. The duke of Brabant, Jan
III, was very prominent in both the political and religious foundation of the Duchy with the tolerated negotiation and drafting of the first Joyous Entry at the end of his life and with providing the living grounds for the community of Jan van Ruusbroec in Groenendaal. But also a strong reference to chancellor Jean le Sauvage, showing a strong political commitment to the Joyous Entries of Brabant and celebrated as ‘Maecenas of every noble pursuit’ in the Parerga of Utopia,\textsuperscript{205} can be recognized in the figure of dux Utopus who made Utopia from a non-island into an island according to the famous lines of Utopia’s introduction poem in the Utopian vernacular and alphabet,\textsuperscript{206} considering his role in the genesis of Utopia.

As true Christians, More and Erasmus knew well enough that Paradise or Heaven is not findable or realizable in our world. Rather to see the complete book of Utopia as their vision on the ideal society or Earthly Paradise, we should hold their enigmatic work as a silver hook attaching to its post the curtain of the sacred tabernacle. As the reinstitution of the letter ‘vav’, lost with the fall of mankind, but restored through the line of good and rightful kings, bringing the world and mankind again closer to its initial stage of creation. As a fishing instrument or attaching hook making a facilitating connection between our fallible world and the world of perfection.

Many fragments from the prefatory letters or the Parerga of Utopia focus in particular on Utopia’s constitution. The illuminating significance of such prefaces for the interpretation of Renaissance works, and thus also of the prefaces with the following fragments for interpreting Utopia, is and should be well respected.\textsuperscript{207}

‘The reason is that our age and succeeding ages will hold his account as a nursery of correct and useful institutions from which every man may introduce and adapt transplanted customs to his own city.’\textsuperscript{208}

‘From every point of view, however, I considered it unfitting to suppress the work for long and most fitting to place it in men’s hands, especially since it is recommended to the world by your patronage. This latter is true not only because you are unusually well acquainted with More’s talents but because no man is better qualified than you to assist with good counsels the government of

\textsuperscript{205} Thomas More, CW 4, p. 26-27
\textsuperscript{206} Thomas More, CW 4, p. 18-19
\textsuperscript{208} Thomas More, CW 4, p. 14-15 (Budé to Lupset)
the commonwealth in which you have labored for many years, winning the highest praise for wisdom and integrity.\textsuperscript{209}

‘Whatever pertains to the good constitution of a commonwealth may be seen in it as in a mirror. Would that, just as the Utopians have begun to receive our religion, so we might borrow from them their system of public administration! This perhaps might happen easily if a number of distinguished and invincible theologians would betake themselves to the island. They would promote the faith of Christ already sprouting there and at the same time bring home to us the customs and laws of the Utopian people.’\textsuperscript{210}

‘\textbf{Though you have always aimed at this goal on other occasions}, yet you have recently secured your object with wonderful success by putting down in writing that afternoon conversation by which you have given to the world a description of the good and just constitution, which all must desire, in the commonwealth of Utopia. In your happy description of that most excellent system we cannot miss anything either of consummate learning or of complete knowledge of the world in which we live.’\textsuperscript{211}

‘In no other way could you have better or more rightly secured this object than by holding up before reasonable mortals themselves that ideal of a commonwealth, that pattern and perfect model of morality, whose equal has never been seen anywhere in the world for the soundness of its constitution, for its perfection, and for its desirability. It far surpasses and leaves a long way behind the many celebrated and much lauded commonwealths of the Spartans, Athenians, and Romans. If these latter had been founded under the same auspices and regulated by the same institutions, laws, decrees, and customs as this state of yours, assuredly they would not yet lie ruined and leveled to the ground – and now, alas, annihilated beyond any hope of restoration. They would, rather, still be intact, prosperous, happy, and most fortunate – all the while mistresses of the world, sharing their wide dominion by land and sea.’\textsuperscript{212}

\textsuperscript{209} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 24-25 (Gillis to Busleyden)
\textsuperscript{210} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 26-29 (Desmarez to Gillis)
\textsuperscript{211} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 32-33 (Busleyden to Thomas More)
\textsuperscript{212} Thomas More, \textit{CW} 4, p. 32-35 (Busleyden to More)
‘The ancients called me Utopia or Nowhere because of my isolation. At present, however, I am a rival of Plato’s republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he has delineated in words I alone have exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence. Deservedly ought I to be called by the name of Eutopia or Happy Land.’

‘Utopus, my ruler, converted me, formerly not an island, into an island. Alone of all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy, I have represented for mortals the philosophical city. Ungrudingly do I share my benefits with others; undemurringly do I adopt whatever is better from others.’

‘It is known as yet to few mortals, but it is eminently worthy of everyone’s knowledge as being superior to Plato’s republic.’

So we get to the point where the study of civic humanism, after the dead end for Hans Baron’s assumptions on civic humanism in the Italian Renaissance, can be reopened and brought to new and more prosperous horizons through the wonderful world of Northern Renaissance around the Low Countries and lead by the Christian humanism of Erasmus and More. Inspired by a real political and constitutional system of ‘men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence’, More and Erasmus let rise an Island (in Utopia, Utopia was literally changed into an island by Utopus and this isle is at the end of Utopia still supposed to exist) in literary contrast to the ruin of the island of Atlantis, according to Plato’s Kritias ruled by a hereditary monarchy and at the end defeated by the Athenians before the final destruction. In the created island of Utopia, the institutions of Atlantis’ and even Plato’s (philosophers-kings selected through a process of always intensified education) non-representative monarchy and Classical Athens’ direct democracy are reconciled into a higher synthesis: based on a system of real men and resources and laws, More and Erasmus let the new system of parliamentary democracy and representative government sail to the brightly shining world of philosophical and universally applicable ideas, pushed by a wind of fiction.

213 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 20-21 (Six lines on the Island of Utopia by Anemolius)
214 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 18-19 (Quatrain in the Utopian vernacular)
215 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 20-21 (Gillis to Busleyden)
216 J. Hankins (ed.), 2000
Internationally they are the first writers, thinkers or philosophers to do so, of course we may not forget that for Brabantine and Netherlandish practitioners the political system of their country had already a philosophical and universal aura from the beginning. The position of the tower in the façade of the city hall of Brussels, one of the four capitals of Brabant with representatives of their city councils in the Estates of Brabant, suggests strongly a connection between the political system of which the city of Brussels formed a significant part, and universal/timeless beauty. Some Brabantine humanists from the sixteenth century even believed that Adam and Eve spoke in Paradise the Antwerp version of Brabantine Dutch; the Brabantine origin of the first ‘Christian’ ruler and king of Jeruzalem, respectively Godfried of Bouillon and his brother Boudewijn of Boulogne, facilitated also such self-esteem. Another beautiful example we find in the work ‘Dat kaetspel ghemoralizeert’ written in Dutch (and thus locally restricted) by the jurist Jan van den Berghe in 1431 and quite popular in the Low Countries till the mid of the sixteenth century. In this work a nobleman decrees eleven strict laws, hard for the people to obey. When they insist to raze these harsh laws, the nobleman invents a cunny plan: he declares that these laws come from Apollo and that he would go to Delphi to ask the oracle if these laws can be cancelled. As long as he is on his journey, the people have to obey the laws and - by doing so - to show their faithfulness to the God. The nobleman never returns, he even arranges that after his death his body would be dropped in sea, and the eleven laws of which one institutes a remarkable parliamentary democracy, remain into effect. Also other similarities between the Utopian society and the eleven laws are striking: it is not allowed to praise gold or silver; war and trade are preserved to wise men who decree only through representation in the parliamentary democracy; cloth restrictions have to avoid jealousy, like their negative attitude towards gold and silver; and the elder have to be respected for their wisdom. These measures consist also a sober life associated with the early Christian communities and Christian religious orders.217

The first five Latin editions of Utopia appear no later than 1519: around this time the political tendency in the central government of the Burgundian Low Countries changes dramatically and turns away from the Christian humanistic ideals. In 1548 the second Latin edition of Utopia in the Low Countries was printed in Leuven by Servaas van Sassen (a son-in-law of Dirk Martens) for Birckmann: a Cologne publisher with a branch in Antwerp. And around the crucial years 1565-1566 another Latin edition of

217 H. Pleij, 2003, p. 328
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries

*Utopia* was published in Leuven. By 1553 the first Dutch translation of *Utopia* was edited in Antwerp by Hans de Laet and in 1562 the second edition of this translation followed.218 The political and religious tensions were building up in these decades, erupting finally in 1568 with the start of the Dutch Revolt and the Eighty-Years War. After the decisive fall of Antwerp in 1585, More’s *Utopia* would not be reprinted any time soon in the Southern Netherlands, remaining under black renaissance of Spanish dominion.219

In this perspective it is helpful to understand that *Utopia* embodied a political-philosophical and highly reputed intellectual confirmation of the Brabantine political system and culture - by definition outstandingly well known and constitutionally present in the region from where this political system originated - and thus a meaningful endorsement, strong ideological support and further political instigation for the unprecedented legitimization of the Dutch Revolt, legally based on the Brabantine constitution. Other political works of the Christian humanists like Erasmus’ *Panegyricus* and *Institutio* went in the same direction and had a similar effect and influence. The effect and impact of *Utopia* in the Low Countries has to be understood and studied in this way: in combination with the further effect and impact of the inspiring political and constitutional context that also continued to exist after the publication of More’s *Utopia*. Studies of the real influence of More’s *Utopia* on the Dutch Revolt; on the 1520-1521 Revolt of the Comuneros provoked by Jean le Sauvage and other Netherlandish counselors;220 on Elizabethan England together with influences from and strong ties to the Dutch Revolt;221 on the Glorious Revolution together with the Dutch Republic and the Elizabethan heritage;222 and together with inspiring political principles from the Dutch Revolt, Glorious Revolution, the Dutch province of New Netherland and the settlement of New Amsterdam as its capital in the southern part of Manhattan island on the Northern-American colonies emerging finally as the independent United States of America,223 should be and also will be studied through my

218 This Dutch translation has an interesting addition in the title, describing the book as ‘very useful and entertaining to read, especially (for) those who have a town or borough to govern, for which it (the book) is mostly used.’ M. De Schepper, ‘Editions and translations of *Utopia* 1516-1750’, in J. Van der Stock (ed.), 2016, p. 114-116
221 The ties between the Joyous Entries and the political culture of Brabant, and the English realm and court of Elizabeth I, are subjected to my research and presented in a coming article.
222 L. Jardine, 2008
223 R. Shorto, 2004
further research in the consistent combination with the further influence of the Netherlandish and Brabantine political culture and institution, with the influence of other political works from Christian humanists like Erasmus’ *Institutio*, and with later, inspired political-philosophical and literary works defending the same political system and fortified through a congruent organization of the Republic of Letters. In all these contexts have the Netherlandish political culture and the book of *Utopia*, presenting through a fiction for the first time this political culture in a general, widely applicable and philosophical way merged into one symbiotic, highly powerful and influential impulse driving the further spread and realization of this political culture in the entire *Respublica Christiana* and beyond.

Therefore, it must have been also very amusing for Netherlandish readers to learn more about the political system of a fictitious, exotic and ‘newly discovered’ state defined by surrounding watery boundaries and too similar to the political culture and institution of their own country, to be coincidental, certainly in the well-known cultural context of Low Countries humanism disseminated by Erasmus and his circle.

At the same time they would have understood the reasons of disguising the wide promotion and philosophical spread of such revolutionary political system in the context of the European contemporary politics. In a grim world with Renaissance princes centralizing their power, a completely serious recommendation in white and black of the Brabantine political culture and system for the entire *Respublica Christiana*, would have been a truly exotic, unimagined, out-of-the-world and for the writers life threatening political-literary manifestation at that time.
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Low Countries
The façade of the Royal Library of Belgium is carefully build over and around the last remaining part of the Renaissance Palace of William the Silent in Brussels. Emperor Charles V had brought the young William of Orange to the court and city of Brussels to secure a Catholic education for the young nobleman destined to become a powerful political actor as heir of important German territories and as prince of Orange. In Brussels William did not only receive a Catholic education but was also surrounded by the at that time unpredictably important (for the later reasons and legitimation of the Dutch Revolt) instructive context of the political culture and Erasmian tolerance in the Duchy of Brabant and the Burgundian Low Countries. This only remaining part of William of Orange’s Palace was the chapel of his household in Brussels, before fleeing to Germany and to the Northern parts of the Burgundian Netherlands at the beginning of the Eighty Years War, where he is celebrated and rightfully respected as the founding father or Pater Patriae of the Netherlands, the present country north of Belgium. The Renaissance Palace of William the Silent on this site, later owned by also William III of Orange, King of England after the Glorious Revolution, was destroyed by the Austrians to build there a Classicist Palace for governor Charles of Lorraine around 1750, on his culturally barbaric and catastrophic demand.
Detailed picture of the largest decoration in the wall of the chapel of William of Orange’s Palace, depicting Saint George slaying a dragon. Inspiring for William the Silent and significantly illustrative for his political choices and leading role in the Dutch Revolt? The chapel of his palace was renovated and decorated in Renaissance style already in the 1520’s.
Statue of ‘Guillaume le Taciturne’, Willem De Zwijger or William the Silent, in the splendid Neorenaissance park of Petit Sablon, Brussels.
I believe also that Renaissance painters were reluctant to bring Hythodaeus’ island into vision, exactly because of its great political significance and sensitivity. In any case it is strange that a popular book like *Utopia* with ideal material for depictions, has almost no explicit presences in the pictorial art of the Northern Renaissance, except for two large illustrations for the book itself. Or should we search for *Utopia* in paintings like the ‘Feast of Acheloüs’, painted by Jan Brueghel the Elder and Pieter Paul Rubens *circa* 1615, hundred years after the conception of *Utopia* in 1515 and depicting a bearded river god in a vivid conversation with two beardless guests, Theseus and Peirithoüs? Acheloüs points to an island at the horizon in the right upper corner, with a recognizable U-shape and bay. According to the myth of Acheloüs, this island was once the nymph Perimèle, loved by Acheloüs and thrown from a rock by her father after Acheloüs had deflowered her. For the sake of Acheloüs’ love, Neptune transformed her into an island in Acheloüs’ river. In the painting, Acheloüs seems to inform his friends eagerly on the island he can embrace now forever in the arms of his flowing stream.\(^{224}\)

**Utopia as a literary depiction of the Low Countries**

Although *Utopia* is not widely depicted in pictorial Renaissance art, we can consider *Utopia* a work of art itself, a literary depiction of the Low Countries with the consistent presence of some disguising but nonessential elements while several aspects of the Netherlandish society inspired Low Countries humanism - not for nothing and rightfully bearing this name - and the closely related Christian humanism of Erasmus and More, mainly exhibited through the book of *Utopia*. The society of the Low Countries and by Early Modern Netherlandish life inspired Low Countries humanism provided more than one pioneering and trendsetting contribution to Western civilization, for the first time promoted on a widely applicable, truly European and general-philosophical scale by Christian humanists as defenders of Low Countries humanism: the parliamentary or representative democracy or government, constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary sovereignty, religious freedom and tolerance inside a broad Christian-Catholic framework with a limited number of religious rules, a state-organized social care for the truly needy poor, sick and elder, interculturalism in

\(^{224}\) With a surprising serendipity, I came across this painting in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, shortly after I had presented the research on which this article is based at the conference of the Renaissance Society of America in New York, March 2014, as part of one of the *Moreana* panels on More’s *Utopia*. Until the publication of this paper in December 2016, the complete recording of this RSA conference presentation could be consulted on the website of *Moreana*. 

practice with higher synthesis of best elements from different cultures as envisioned by Pico della Mirandola, international-political system of collective military defense guaranteeing real peace. Many artists of Northern Renaissance worked together with Christian humanists in this perspective: rooted in the same geographical and cultural region, they learned and ate, drank and breathed the specific elements of this Netherlandish society and uplifted for the first time the related ideas and culture of a shared background to a new, unseen European and widely recommended level, instigated by an almost identical circle of crucial political promotors and protectors. The first and the richest literary successes of the Christian humanists were produced by Erasmus and Thomas More around the same years the first key artists of Northern Renaissance produced respectively their first and their richest artistic pearls. As both More and Erasmus enjoyed and celebrated literarily the paintings, engravings, medallions by Quentin Metsys, Hans Holbein the Younger or Albrecht Dürer, these artists and others could be encouraged and instigated by this support and inspired by the literary works of Erasmus and More in general but as many of these artists shared with the Christian and Netherlandish humanists a same background of renewing Netherlandish culture and political supporters and protectors, they will mostly have been inspired by the ways in which the Christian humanists over the years aspired and practically assumed the leading cultural role or position in Europe, proudly and self-consciously defending an unseen form of Renaissance, connected to the inspiring practical culture of the Low Countries and mainly defended in the book of Utopia also to the benefit of the entire Respublica Christiana, and instigated by a small circle of literarily and broadly artistically supportive political figures, trying to advance a widely European, political and cultural acceptance of their international political goals and program, connected to the political culture of Brabant and the Low Countries.

This different kind of Renaissance art is normally described as Northern Renaissance art, and can in the case of the painter Jan Gossart better be labeled Netherlandish Renaissance art, as Marisa Bass explains. In her brilliant book ‘Jan Gossart and the invention of Netherlandish Antiquity’ she shows specific manifestations of this special form of Renaissance art, correctly seen and understood as truly innovative. Astonishingly interesting in the framework of the here presented research is her statement that the group around Gerard Geldenhouver, actively involved in the publication of the first edition of Utopia, was excited about the discovery that ‘Roman

225 M.A. Bass, 2016, p. 4-5
writers such as Julius Caesar, Pliny the Elder, and Tacitus had long ago described the Netherlands as a body of land surrounded on all sides by water.\footnote{M.A. Bass, 2016, p. 70 and p. 167, footnote 92 (‘The most important ancient sources were Caesar, De bello gallico, 4.10, Pliny the Elder, Historia naturalis, 4.101, and Tacitus, Germania 29. For discussion of these sources, see H. Teitler, ‘Romeinen en Bataven: de literaire bronnen’ in De Bataven: verhalen van een verdwenen volk, De Bataafsche Leeuw, Amsterdam, 2004, p. 20-36’) Another link between the Low Countries and islands, can be found in the history of the Azores. In the first half of the fifteenth century the Portuguese added these unpopulated islands in the Atlantic Ocean to their realm and build first settlements. Prince Henry the Navigator allowed and assisted large groups of destitute from Flanders to settle on the Azores after the request of his sister Isabel of Portugal who was married with Duke Philip the Good of Burgundy, facing social unrest with the poor in Flanders: therefore the Azores gained the name of ‘Flemish Islands’ or ‘Isles of Flanders’. These poor were given transport to the islands and the means and materials to build their settlements. When Philip II of Spain made himself in 1580 by force also king of Portugal, the Azores stood up against his rule and as in the Southern Low Countries, also there the Revolt was cruelly crushed by the Spanish armies.}

This discovered Classical imagination of the Low Countries as a body of land, surrounded on all sides by water, is in line with the discovery of the Netherlands as the practical place of origin of the political and religious system and the religious freedom and tolerance, defended in More’s \textit{Utopia} that can be read as a panegyric of this political and religious system, culture, of these political and religious freedoms. Also the ‘interculturalism’ of Pico della Mirandola and the intranational and congruent international organization presented in Utopian society, found a first pragmatic-practical and spontaneous development and original realization in the Burgundian Netherlands.

In Jean Desmarez’ prefatory poem for \textit{Utopia}, different gifts and talents of different European countries are attributed to the state of Utopia: next to the Scandinavian and Spanish countries, the Low Countries are clearly missing in this overview while exactly the Low Countries show an aggregation and combination into a higher synthesis of different cultural characteristics of the mentioned surrounding countries and the great historical cultures.\footnote{Thomas More, CW 4, p. 28-29} For Pico della Mirandola’s philosophical program, the Low Countries constituted a true practical dreamland: a cultural laboratory that Erasmus and Thomas More could explore directly. I believe that this intercultural richness of the Low Countries and of Brabant in particular, was one major reason, next to the political protection by Chancellor Jean le Sauvage, for Jerome Busleyden and for Erasmus to found the Collegium Trilingue in Leuven as one of the four capitals of Brabant, outside the university of Leuven with several representatives, theologians hostile to the person and endeavours of Erasmus and stupidly blind to Erasmus’ genius: their small-minded positioning towards the greatest scholar of their age did not prevent Erasmus’ Collegium to become one the most famous and innovative centers of
humanism in Europe, influencing slowly but steadily scientifically even Leuven’s university from the outside, more effectively than it could have done as it would have been founded as full part of the university at Erasmus’ time. The same idea is expressed in the opening poem of *Utopia* itself, first in the Utopian vernacular and alphabet, then in Latin: ‘Ungrudgingly do I share my benefits with others; undemurringly do I adopt whatever is better from others.’

In the same opening poem, we read that Utopia, ‘alone of all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy’, has ‘represented for mortals the philosophical city’. In Anemolius’ lines we find the statement that ‘Utopia is a rival of Plato’s republic, perhaps even a victor over it. The reason is that what he delineated in words Utopia alone has exhibited in men and resources and laws of surpassing excellence.’ These two fragments affirm the state of Utopia twice as an actual real state with real men and resources, with real laws ‘of surpassing excellence’ (!).

According to the end title of *Utopia*, these laws and institutions were ‘hitherto known but to few’, as also the institution incorporated in the Joyous Entries of Brabant was unknown in a wider European context before the publication of More’s *Utopia*. Chancellor Jean le Sauvage or the ‘Maecenas of every noble pursuit’ in *Utopia* was also the chancellor of Burgundy with political responsibility for the entire Low Countries. With his political assistance or protection he helped indeed as a true *Utopus* converting Utopia or the Low Countries, ‘formerly not an island into an island’.

‘Utopus, my ruler, converted me, formerly not an island, into an island. Alone of all lands, without the aid of abstract philosophy, I have represented for mortals the philosophical city. Ungrudgingly do I share my benefits with others; undemurringly do I adopt whatever is better from others.’

Two more aspects can be directly linked to both the state of Utopia and to the political culture of Brabant and of the Low Countries. Both Utopia and the Burgundian Netherlands showed a state organization with two constitutional levels and I counted 54 cities with the legal status of a city in the Duchy of Brabant and its connected territories: the same number as the number of cities in Utopia. The book of *Utopia* can be considered a panegyric not of one city but of a political union of 54 cities, with an equal

---

228 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 18-19
229 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 18-19
230 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 20-21
231 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 246-247
232 Thomas More, *CW* 4, p. 18-19 (Quatrain in the Utopian vernacular)
status and one capital where representatives of all Utopian cities gathered on an equal basis in a general council for the entire state of Utopia. *Utopia* constitutes in this perspective a true panegyric in the spirit of Isocrates’ *Panegyricus*, to which Erasmus referred with the title for his first political work. In this first *Panegyricus*, Isocrates recommended the Classical Greek city states to unite against the threat of invasion by Philip, king of Macedonia, father of Alexander the Great. Remarkable and significant is the fact that Erasmus used this title for his first political work in which he defends openly the Brabantine Joyous Entry, jointly and equally supported and enjoyed by a quite unique union of four capitals in the Duchy of Brabant.

If the Classical Greek city states would have had the political system of Utopia, based on the institution of Brabant, the city states would have worked together politically as an union and would have been able probably to counter king Philip of Macedonia and, according to Jerome Busleyden in the following fragment, to survive the ages. In the combination of Isocrates’ text with these words of Busleyden and Erasmus’ special choice of title for his first political work, we find an unforeseeable prediction of later political events in which only a political union of countries and cities in the Burgundian Netherlands was able to rescue and safeguard in the end at least the Northern Netherlands from the cruel rule of king Philip II, truly a second Philip, after he was deposed as ruler by several Low Countries represented in the Estates-General invoking and cherishing the principles of the Joyous Entry, only positively legally valid in Brabant. In the following fragment from the prefatory letter of Jerome Busleyden to More, we can read clearly the supposed superiority of the Utopian state over the antique city states of Athens, Sparta and even Rome, all build around one single capital, while these Classical single city states had surely strong cultural influences, present and at the same time surpassed in the program of Pico della Mirandola, in the Utopian state and in the Duchy of Brabant institutionally supported by four capitals.

‘In no other way could you have better or more rightly secured this object than by holding up before reasonable mortals themselves that ideal of a commonwealth, that pattern and perfect model of morality, whose equal has never been seen anywhere in the world for the soundness of its constitution, for its perfection, and for its desirability. It far surpasses and leaves a long way behind the many celebrated and much lauded commonwealths of the Spartans, Athenians, and Romans. If these latter had been founded under the same auspices and regulated by the same institutions, laws, decrees, and customs as
this state of yours, assuredly they would not yet lie ruined and leveled to the ground – and now, alas, annihilated beyond any hope of restoration. They would, rather, still be intact, prosperous, happy, and most fortunate – all the while mistresses of the world, sharing their wide dominion by land and sea.233

The ‘Onze Lieve Vrouw ten Zavel’ Church, the splendid Brabantine Gothic church at Petit Sablon, seen from the Brussels park of Petit Sablon in the Spring of 2016.

The beautiful Brabantine Gothic Church of ‘Onze Lieve Vrouw ten Zavel’ was in the Middle Ages, and ever since, a place for adoration of a neglected statue of Mary, brought by a devout woman of Antwerp, Beatrijs Soetkens, in 1348 (not many years before the drafting of the first Joyous Entry of Brabant) from Antwerp, the city of Mother Mary, to the city of Brussels in a boat with hoisted sail, miraculously pushed forward according to legend without the force of wind. According to this legend, Jan III, duke of Brabant, was waiting for Beatrijs in Brussels and welcomed her there. Antwerp allowed then this statue to stay in Brussels as token of friendship between these two Brabantine cities, also two of the four capitals of the Duchy of Brabant. The guild of Brussels crossbowmen became the guard of this symbolic statue standing for the bond between these two cities of Brabant, and this military guild found, even up to now, in this Church at Petit Sablon their religious home and station.

233 Thomas More, CW 4, p. 32-35
If Utopia as presented in the second book depicts the Low Countries in a literary way and the first book refers to England, then the complete book of *Utopia* stands also for the bonds and contacts between England and the Low Countries at the time of Erasmus and More, and for the bond between Thomas More, in my view the greatest Renaissance cultural figurehead of England, and ‘Erasmus of the Low Countries’ (to quote the title of the standard biography by James D. Tracy) who stayed in the Low Countries around five years and became the greatest verbal herald of Netherlandish Renaissance culture, as Raphael Hythlodaeus stayed also five years in Utopia and acts through the entire book of *Utopia* as the greatest - and actually only - verbal herald of Utopian society. When Thomas More accepted *Utopia* as title for his work, he would surely have been aware of the many similarities between the Utopian society and the society of the Low Countries - alongside of a few obvious differences - at the beginning of the sixteenth century, as not only Desiderius Erasmus was ‘of the Low Countries’ but also the Low Countries were around these glorious years of 1515-1516 clearly of Erasmus, prince of humanists and of the entire Republic of Letters. ‘U’ in Dutch and Middle Dutch means ‘You’ or ‘Your’. Considering this etymology ‘u-topia’, can mean then ‘your place’ and constitute an honorary reference by More to the place of origin of his dear friend and to the place of origin of many renewing ideas in the book of *Utopia*.

*Utopia* as a monument for the bond and relationship between Thomas More and Erasmus

The small part of seriousness in Erasmus’ *Moriae Encomium* and the small part of absurdity in More’s *Utopia* refer equally to the life circumstances of the young Erasmus as a canon in the monastery of Steyn near the city of Gouda in Holland. In this capacity he was granted permission to travel with Henry of Bergen, Bishop of Cambrai, and work as secretary of the Bishop. Respectively in the capacity of Henry of Bergen’s secretary while still being bound officially and canonically by the monastery rules, Erasmus was introduced for the first time at the court of Brussels, while the Duchy of Brabant was part of the diocese of the Bishop of Cambrai. Also in this capacity, Erasmus could visit near Brussels the priory of Groenendaal for the first time. As Erasmus handed over to More his acquaintance with and knowledge of the particular political and religious-spiritual culture of Brabant and the Low Countries, also by handing over through arranged or facilitated meetings his direct contacts with certain
prominent figures most familiar with these cultures, More would turn clearly into words these Netherlandish concepts as ideals for the entire Respublica Christiana through the book of Utopia in a more explicit way than ever occurred in the works of Erasmus himself, who directed the plan to promote this by him originally designed Low Countries humanism to the benefit of all people in Europe, together with his circle of Netherlandish acquaintances and Christian humanists who found exemplary clearness in this Low Countries humanism.

As in the Low Countries the results of a practical and spontaneous interaction of Classical and Medieval traditions towards an higher and culturally original synthesis could be found, More could also find and see there a living example of a new combination of the ideas and cultures he knew very well through his splendid education and early career and with which his sharp and creative mind was almost continuously playing: an indeed lifelike example of which the illustrative and persuasive force cannot be underestimated.

The fact that important aspects of Netherlandish society, inspiring Low Countries humanism, were such strong and almost unconscious, spontaneous executions of Pico della Mirandola’s great scheme for the different and widely known traditions influencing Netherlandish culture, made them easy to accept and to defend by a broad public of intelligentsia, also to More who showed, as Joanne Paul clarified, a strong consistency between ideas in his earlier works and the key ideas seriously defended in the book of Utopia. I see Thomas More and Erasmus as two leading figures and friends who had intellectually ‘everything in common’. As Erasmus was placed by birth, education and early career close to a directly surrounding and inspiring new culture of which he understood the great potential - also with the encouragement of some crucial figures and political actors active in the center of Netherlandish power and influence - for all states and peoples in the Respublica Christiana, Thomas More received an excellent legal and rhetorical training and would become one of the most successful lawyers in London of his time (and he was elected around 2000 by English lawyers as the greatest English lawyer of the past millennium). There I see the complementing difference between the two soulmates who wanted to share everything as friends: Erasmus found in the Low Countries a new culture of which he understood the great importance to also the other states and peoples in Europe, and Thomas More, to whom Erasmus handed over these insights and his familiarity with this country and its culture also through well-arranged acquaintances, acted as the verbally more dauntless and
rhetorically most skilled advocate of this new Netherlandish culture and of the by this
culture inspired Low Countries humanism. He was by far the strongest advocate of
Erasmus and of the Christian humanism Erasmus offered with inspiration from
Netherlandish culture to all Europeans: to the Europeans of his days, these of later years
and ages and these of today. In this perspective it is very illustrative that Thomas More
produced during his Utopian embassy with his letter to Martin Dorp another of the
clearest defenses of Christian humanism and of Erasmus, facing shortsighted criticism
from theologians of the University of Leuven on his Praise of Folly and on related
ideas. This letter had 2/3 the length of Utopia itself.234

This role partition can also be read in the play between Morus and Hythlodaeus
in the book of Utopia - with Pieter Gillis as symbol for the figures informing first
Erasmus and then More about the specificities of the Netherlandish system and culture -
and even more clearly in the genesis, conceptualization and realization of the book of
Utopia itself. I would like to close this discourse with five small fragments: first one
from Thomas More’s epigrams, the second fragment from the letter of More to Erasmus
on 31st October 1516, and the third from a letter of Erasmus to Guillaume Budé on 16th
February 1521 with a statement on More, all together illustrating most clearly the bond
and intellectual relationship between More and Erasmus of which I consider the book of
Utopia a splendid and lasting monument, stronger than a statue of stone, able to survive
all perils of difficult times and dangerous ages.

234 In this perspective we can consider Utopia and More’s letter to Martin Dorp two strong emanations of
a broad rhetoric defense by Thomas More of Erasmus, his Praise of Folly and the Christian humanist
program, not only in the face of hostility from Leuven theologians but against hostile reactions from all
possible opponents across Europe.
On Two Beggars, One Lame, One Blind

There can be nothing more helpful than a loyal friend, who by his own efforts assuages your hurts.

Two beggars formed an alliance of firm friendship - a blind man and a lame one. The blind man said to the lame one, ‘You must ride upon my shoulders.’ The latter answered, ‘You, blind friend, must find your way by means of my eyes.’

The love which unites shuns the castles of proud kings and prevails in the humble hut.  

‘You are dearer to me than my eyes.’

‘For More’s letter, which I think you saw before More showed it to me at Calais when it was already printed, is such that in comparison with it myself, who am thought by some people to have rather sharp fangs, seem positively toothless.’

The fourth and fifth fragment illustrate their intellectual relationship, almost in an emotionally exaggerated way and directly in the context of the genesis of *Utopia*; the fourth fragment from the letter of More to Erasmus on 3rd September 1516, for this genesis highly significant, and the fifth fragment from an equally significant letter for *Utopia’s* genesis: the letter of More to Erasmus on 31st October 1516 in which More indicated the identities of his imagined Princes of Utopia, one of these men celebrated by Erasmus as his living image of a Christian Prince.

‘If besides them any are actually feeble, deal with them as you may think will be best for me. Quintilian said of Seneca that he was the sort of man one would wish to use his

---

235 Thomas More, *CW* 3, part II, p. 120-121 (Epigram 32)
236 Desiderius Erasmus, *Ep.*, 2, letter 481, p. 372, l. 80
237 Desiderius Erasmus, *CWE*, vol. 8, letter 1184, p. 154
own brains in writing, but be guided by someone else’s taste; and I am the sort of writer who ought to use not merely someone else’s taste but another man’s brains.238

‘Your vote will be more than enough for my judgment. We are ‘together, you and I, a crowd’; that is my feeling, and I think I could live happily with you in any wilderness.’239

Bibliography

H. Achterhuis, Koning van Utopia: nieuw licht op het utopisch denken, Lemniscaat, Rotterdam, 2016


238 Desiderius Erasmus, CWE, vol. 4, letter 461, p. 68
239 Desiderius Erasmus, CWE, vol. 4, letter 481, p. 117


H., de la Fontaine Verwey, Humanisten, *Dweepers en rebellen in de Zestiende Eeuw*, Nico Israel, Amsterdam, 1975, p. 113-132


J. Huizinga, Erasmus, Ad. Donker, Rotterdam, 2001


F.E. Manuel and F.P. Manuel, Utopian thought in the Western world, Belknap Press, Boston, 1979


F. Oakeley, ‘Headly, Marius and the matter of More’s ‘conciliarism’’, *Moreana*, Vol. 64, p. 82-88


R. Stein, *De hertog en zijn staten*, Verloren, Hilversum, 2014


J. Van der Stock, *In search of Utopia: art and science in the era of Thomas More*, Davidsfonds and Amsterdam University Press, Leuven and Amsterdam, 2016
H. van Ruler and G. Sissa (eds.), *Utopia 1516-2016: More’s eccentric essay and its activist aftermath*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2017


J.J. Woltjer, *Op weg naar tachtig jaar oorlog: het verhaal van de eeuw waarin ons land ontstond*, Uitgeverij Balans, Amsterdam, 2011
Quentin Metsys, Gold medal depicting Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1519

Bibliotheque Nationale, Cabinet des Medailles - Paris
The prince of Utopia, Thomas More's *Utopia* and the Low Countries

Hans Holbein the Younger, *Portrait of Erasmus of Rotterdam*, 1530-1531
David Owsley Museum of Art - Muncie, Indiana
Appendix

_Erasmus Politicus_. The conceptualization and manifestation of Erasmus' political thought: the development and impact of his political theory and activity in his contemporary humanistic and political milieu and their further European influence in the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

In the first decades of the 16th century, Erasmus became the leader of European humanism, blowing a new wind through the West and bringing an original synthesis of selected Medieval and Classical ideas to reform almost every aspect of society. At this critical juncture, the group of humanists respecting Erasmus as their leader also wanted to reshape the political world of contemporary Europe. I intend to undertake the comprehensive study of the political principles and goals of this circle, who organized themselves in a ‘republic of letters’, and of the political ideas and aspirations of the man entitled by these humanists as their ‘prince’. This research will provide the first broad study of the merits of the movement we can label as civic humanism of the Northern Renaissance. James Hankins showed that the acclamations of Hans Baron on civic humanism in the Italian Renaissance were unfounded, but Hankins left at the same time an interesting and still unexploited opening towards a study of civic humanism in the Northern Renaissance by stating in the introduction of his _Renaissance Civic Humanism_ that ‘Renaissance republicanism, at least in Italy’ was ‘transitional’ in relation to our Western Democracies.

Formulating conclusively a coherent view on the political views of Erasmus regarding the best government of the state and the best international constellation of such states, will be the first objective of my research. In _Panegyricus_ and _Institutio Principis Christiani_, edited by Lisa Jardine in the series of _Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought_, and in the _Querela Pacis_, the _Adagia_ and some important dedications, we can find scattered fragments revealing constituting aspects of Erasmus’ political thinking. So we can only detect the true significance of Erasmus as a political thinker and expose the impact of his political thought in contemporary time and later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, by placing his political works and phrases in the
same political context in which he wrote them and in which his contemporaries read them, interpreted them and passed them over to the following generations. I intend to find the true meaning and contemporary significance of Erasmus’ political works exactly by placing them in their context reflected in the letters to or from Erasmus’ less well known but truly determining political contacts through an interdisciplinary study, combining literary with historical analysis, enriched by trained insights in political and legal theory. Erasmus’ political and legal contacts in the Low Countries were all very familiar with the constitution and the political culture of the Duchy of Brabant, providing the first embryonic form of representative government in Europe. This political system, culture and these contacts inspired Erasmus and Thomas More to become the first political philosophers to promote the system of representative government or parliamentary democracy as the best political system for all European countries, which they did through the book of *Utopia* with a similar institution of the Utopian state, as I defended in my Masters’ thesis and in my first *Moreana* article ‘Brabantia, decoding the main characters of Utopia’.

James Tracy demonstrated clearly that the political context of Desiderius Erasmus was that of the Burgundian Low Countries, even labelling Erasmus as ‘Erasmus of the Low Countries’ in the title of his magisterial work. So in order to reveal the political theory and activity of Erasmus conclusively, I intend as my second objective to reconstruct the political context of Erasmus in the Low Countries exhaustively, finding and studying all of his political acquaintances in the Low Countries and investigating the active and theoretical interaction of Erasmus with these figures. James Tracy has already demonstrated in *The Politics of Erasmus* the influence of a political entourage in the Low Countries on the development and articulation of Erasmus’ ideas about pacifism, and in my first *Moreana* article on the political ideas of Erasmus about the best government of the state, I argued the influence of a similar entourage on the conceptualization of parliamentary democracy as an Erasmian ideal, most explicitly spread through the truly Erasmian book of *Utopia*. Amongst the political contacts of Erasmus in the Low Countries, there was clearly a group of men keen to bring Erasmus to the articulation of certain aspects of their factional political culture as ‘Erasmian’ ideals and through the vigour of his literary and philosophical talent and authority as (more) widely respected and applicable ideals for the benefit of the Low Countries and Europe. This political faction I would propose to name ‘Erasmian’ has never been envisioned and investigated properly.
I will show the revealing political context of Erasmus in the Low Countries through the study of all acquaintances of Erasmus - maximizing the still limited scope of Tracy’s study in *The Politics of Erasmus* - who were active in the political *centra* of the Burgundian Low Countries firstly by gathering in the three volumes of the *Contemporaries of Erasmus* edited by Peter Bietenholz all these contacts: a group of around hundred politicians and legal actors. Every single contemporary of Erasmus mentioned at least once in the extended collection of his works and correspondence, is provided in this register with a biographical sketch and further references to appearances of the respective figure in the vast oeuvre of Erasmus: in this way, it becomes feasible for me to create an exhaustive overview of all political acquaintances of Erasmus in the Low Countries. I will collect as primary sources for my research all the passages from works or letters of Erasmus in which his political acquaintances are mentioned: passages edited in the original texts in ‘Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi’ and in Allen’s ‘Opus Epistolarum Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami’, with English translations edited in the ‘Collected works of Erasmus’. Every appearance of acquaintances will be traced in the indices of these editions, integrating every citation missing in the biographical texts of Bietenholz’s volumes. I will base my study on the contextualized study of this extensive body of collected fragments like Johan Huizinga wrote his classical *Erasmus* from the reading and evaluating of large parts of Erasmus’ correspondence. But also enriched with all relevant archival documents and acquaintances’ writings preserved outside the *oeuvre* or correspondence of Erasmus as additional primary sources and with applicable contextual works as specialized secondary sources, I will build my study further through the educational, professional-political and socioeconomic backgrounds, personal choices, plans, activities and fates of these political acquaintances, therefore forming stone by stone a bright mosaic as a wider picture. I will critically combine all of the found data in an integrated analysis, reaching the **first and second objective**: revealing the complete political thought of Erasmus through the study of the interaction with his revealing and determining context: his political and legal contacts in the Low Countries.

With the first and second objective I will open the way for the **third objective** of my research: the reception history of Erasmus as political thinker and actor. With the clearest view possible on Erasmus’ political thought, it becomes feasible to detect the contemporary impact and further influence of his political ideas and connected activities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as a whole. This political influence will be
studied not only in the Low Countries: due to the present lack of clarity, Erasmus is mentioned in Martin van Gelderen’s *The political thought of the Dutch Revolt* for his important religious ideas, while the Revolt’s intellectual elite and head figures like William of Orange shared almost the same explainable context in which Erasmus encoded his political messages and ideas. This will also be studied across Europe: the influence of Erasmus’ political thought on the conception of Thomas More’s *Utopia*, on the internal organisation of the Republic of Letters, on the works of Shakespeare and the political culture under Elizabeth I - both trained in Christian humanism, lead together with their receptions, the contributions of Netherlandish immigrants and the continuing inspiration from the Northern Netherlands, even to the Glorious Revolution with the assignment of a William of Orange as king of England. In this respect my research will deepen and widen the political element of Lisa Jardine’s *Going Dutch* research. In the new introduction of her last 2015 edition of *Erasmus, man of letters: the construction of charisma in print*, she states that, although Erasmus loved England deeply and although Erasmus was (and is) deeply loved in England, his thought was formed in and by the Low Countries. And although the circles of Netherlandish humanists have been generally studied by Henry De Vocht and Jozef Ijsewijn, the study of the meaning of Netherlandish humanism to the wider European intellectual history still has to be undertaken. With the research presented in the paper ‘The Prince of Utopia, Thomas More’s *Utopia* and the Low Countries’ and with my further research, I am undertaking this missed work, providing at the same time the first broad and serious study of Civic Humanism in the Northern Renaissance, with better prospects for the outcome and scholarly results than these of Baron’s study of Civic Humanism in the Italian Renaissance, correctly subverted by James Hankins.

The exhaustive study of the interactions of Erasmus and Thomas More as the best and closest advocate of Erasmus, with political actors in and from the Burgundian Low Countries and with other international key political actors and other for these matters crucial Christian humanists, on both theoretical and practical level, together with the study of the complete involvement of Erasmus, More and their collaborating Netherlandish political actors and their international political and humanist companions, in Netherlandish and in European political affairs and the further nachleben of their combined political actions and theories, are subject of this doctoral research.
Enchanting harp concert in the Renaissance room, part of the celebrations in the Erasmus House of Anderlecht, Brussels, at the occasion of the jubilee year 2016.

Illuminted letter U, by Nancy Culan