The Western Literary Canon in Context
Parts I–III

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John M. Bowers is a Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he has served as chairman of the Department of English. In 1971 he received his B.A. from Duke University, and he went on to earn an M.A. in 1973 and a Ph.D. in 1978 from the University of Virginia. In 1975 he was awarded a Master of Philosophy degree from The University of Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar with a specialty in medieval English literature.

Professor Bowers has published four books: *The Crisis of Will in "Piers Plowman"*; *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteenth-Century Continuations and Additions*; *The Politics of "Pearl": Court Poetry in the Age of Richard II*; and *Chaucer and Langland: The Antagonistic Tradition*. He is the author of more than 30 articles and essays on authors, including Saint Augustine, Marie de France, and William Shakespeare, as well as seven entries in the 2006 edition of *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* on writers such as William Caxton and works such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. He has championed scholarship on Chaucer's contemporaries Thomas Usk and Sir John Clanvowe as well as the 15th-century Chaucerian poets Thomas Hoccleve and John Lydgate. His current book projects concern Chaucer, William Langland, and the *Gawain* Poet.

He has been a visiting research fellow at Merton College, University of Oxford, and a resident scholar at the Rockefeller Foundation's Study Center in Bellagio, Italy. He has lectured widely, with presentations in New York, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin. He has taught at the University of Virginia, Hamilton College (now Kaplan University), California Institute of Technology, and Princeton University. His regular teaching assignments include Chaucer, Shakespeare, literary theory, and world literature.

Professor Bowers has received numerous awards for his scholarship and teaching, including fellowships from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. Among his many teaching recognitions, he is the recipient of the Nevada Regents' Teaching Award.

Lecture Eighteen
"Man for All Seasons"—More and His *Utopia*

Scope: A good courtier improvises whatever role is needed, and Henry VIII's most brilliant courtier was Sir Thomas More: lawyer, scholar, chancellor of England, and Catholic martyr. His project of self-invention carried over to literature, and More used the new technology of the printing press to make himself an internationally famous author. While European navigators like Amerigo Vespucci were mapping the New World, European scholars were rediscovering Greek classics like Plato's *Republic*. In friendly competition with his friend Erasmus, More wrote his *Utopia* as a blueprint for future political experiments and also as an example of the "intellectual goofiness" that characterizes much educated writing.

Outline

I. Sir Thomas More's *Utopia* needs to be set in the context of the early European exploration of America.
  A. It is a work very much about the discovery of a new civilization on the other side of the world.
  B. It anticipates England's own rise as a seafaring global power and also looks forward to the eventual export of European books to these new worlds.

II. Five years after Chaucer's death, the Mongol warlord Tamberlane died, ending the long period of Mongol imperial domination of the East.
  A. As the Persians, the Turks, and the Chinese began to wrangle for power, they hardly noticed the little kingdoms in Europe.
  B. When Sir Thomas More was born, European countries were still very small, economically feeble, in some ways culturally deprived, and hopelessly divided.
  C. Although nobody in Damascus or Beijing felt threatened by Europe at this time, this would soon change.

III. The rise of European sea power continued a long tradition in the West, one that can be traced back to the earliest Mediterranean civilizations.
  A. The Minoans and the Phoenicians were both important, ancient seafaring populations.
  B. From the *Odyssey* to *Beowulf*, tales of seafaring loom large in the Western literary tradition.

IV. By the time Sir Thomas More was writing and publishing *Utopia*, the Spanish and the Portuguese had fleets going as far as the Indies and the Americas.
  A. More had been reading the accounts of Amerigo Vespucci, whose letters gave us the phrase "New World" and whose first name gave mapmakers the term "America."
  B. There is a direct link between More and Vespucci: The narrator of *Utopia*, Hythloday, claims to have traveled with Vespucci on his last three voyages.

V. We're going to talk a little bit more about Sir Thomas More, who was called by his friend Erasmus "a man for all seasons."
  A. This epithet points to More's versatility, especially his ability to straddle tragedy and comedy.
  B. More's biography, written by his son-in-law William Roper, tells the story of More's ability as a child to improvise roles in Christmas plays, which prompted Cardinal Morton to send him to Oxford to prepare for a career in law.
    1. Many of our great writers, going back to Ovid, weren't really trained in literature but rather in the law, where they learned rhetoric, or persuasive speech.
    2. Part of this training was the "legal fiction," where a situation is imagined for the sake of argument. We will see More using this method in *Utopia*.
  C. More was able to apply the rhetorical skills gained at Oxford to whatever propaganda purposes were requested by the king.
    1. In *The History of Richard III*, More used his lawyer-like skills to do a hatchet job on the earlier monarch to legitimize the Tudor claim of Henry VIII.
    2. It was More's monstrous vision of Richard III that Shakespeare used when writing his play.
  D. There is also in this play of the imagination a true sort of gamefulness that seems to have been a part of More's personality.
    1. Humor and playfulness were at this point becoming part of the English character.
    2. More also found ancient philosophy, especially Plato, congenial to this sense of playfulness.

VI. In *Utopia* itself, we find this sense of serious fun, or what I like to call "intellectual goofiness."

    A. The text was written in Latin so that it could have a European readership. More was writing in the finest style of Latin prose, Ciceronian Latin, yet he plays with it.

    B. This intellectual humor can be seen in the Utopian citizenry: They use gold to chain their slaves, they examine prospective spouses naked before marrying, and they execute those who are caught twice for adultery.

    C. The narrator's name, Hythloday, can be interpreted in Greek as "nonsense peddler," and indeed we get nothing but nonsense from him.

    D. The word *utopia* itself is a kind of schoolboy punning. It is based upon two Greek words: *eutopia*, meaning "a good place," and *outopia*, meaning "no place at all." So Utopia is a very good place, except that it doesn't exist.

VII. There is also built into *Utopia* a kind of friendly rivalry.

    A. More was, in a sense, challenged to rise to the occasion by his friend Erasmus, who was staying with More while writing his great *Praise of Folly*.

    B. C. S. Lewis was able to recognize this aspect in *Utopia*, largely because he and J. R. R. Tolkien were engaged in a similar rivalry.

VIII. Sir Thomas More was living at the dawn of a progressive, Western, modern world in which there was competition of every kind: economic competition, competition in exploration, and competition in technology, as epitomized by the printing press.

    A. More was able to learn Greek and Latin at Oxford because the printing press had made these texts available.

    B. In writing *Utopia* in Latin, he was assuring himself a transcontinental readership, as well as assimilating many of the classics that he had read.

    C. The people of Utopia do not value most of the imports being brought from Europe. However, they do value paper and the classical volumes being offered to them, especially the Aldine editions of the Greek writers.

        1. This is indicative of an extraordinary moment in the Renaissance: The Greek classics were available again in the original language for the first time in 1,000 years.

        2. The literary canon was beginning to materialize, featuring authors like Thucydides and Herodotus.

        3. This was thanks to a humanist in Italy named Aldus Manutius, whose printing press created manageable editions of Greek classics (known as the Aldine editions). We are also indebted to him for italic type.

IX. It is sometimes said that the ideal society that More describes in *Utopia* actually resembles a medieval monastery. More himself is reported to have lived in a monastery. The famous Renaissance humanist remained at core a medieval Catholic.

    A. Throughout his life at court, More wore a hair shirt under his fine silks and would practice self-flagellation with a knotted whip.

    B. His Catholic identity led to his fall from political power, and he became the persecuted philosopher suffering imprisonment. During his incarceration, he wrote *The Dialogue of Comfort*—very clearly modeled on Boethius's *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

    C. Toward the end, More's life became another recognizable genre: the saint's life. He faced his execution as a Christian martyr standing against the king, though Henry VIII knew better than to let him speak on the scaffold.

X. The way that More rendered his life from beginning to end shows the immense theatricality of his mindset, and it makes his life story tailor-made for dramatization.

    A. This can be seen in Robert Bolt's 20th-century play *A Man for All Seasons* and even earlier in *Sir Thomas More*, a Renaissance play, the manuscript of which contains one scene in Shakespeare's handwriting.

    B. More's life lends itself to dramatization because he had a sense of courtroom drama, which we trace all the way back to the Greek tradition.

XI. Sir Thomas More became Saint Thomas More 400 years after his death. It is an interesting case of a canonic writer also being canonized as a saint.

    A. We've seen this before: Augustine and Boethius were both canonized as saints, and Boccaccio's *The Life of Dante* reads like a saint's life. It's no wonder that there is an interesting interplay between the literary canonization of an author and his elevation to the ranks of sainthood.

    B. Tolstoy achieved spiritual status as well. His ideas of nonviolence and universal human rights influenced such figures as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

XII. Another interesting point: In Roper's biography of More, *Utopia* is never mentioned. Again we see, as we did with Petrarch's sonnets, a work whose arrival in the canon comes from nowhere, completely unexpected.

Suggested Readings:

More, *Utopia*.

Roper, *Life of Sir Thomas More*.

Wegemer and Smith, eds., *A Thomas More Source Book.*

Questions to Consider:

1. We wrongly equate canonic authors with high seriousness. Just as Chaucer brought comedy into English literature, the rediscovery of Plato encouraged Sir Thomas More to experiment with "serious play" and philosophical silliness. Why not compare the intellectual playfulness of *Utopia* with the clownish performance in the *Apology of Socrates*?

2. The most outrageous fictions in Western literature are grounded in historical fact. Where does More cross the line in *Utopia*? Or does he crisscross back and forth, just as he alternates between absurd speculations and serious suggestions for social reforms?