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Houston, Chloë. The Renaissance Utopia: Dialogue, Travel and the Ideal Society

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Houston, Chloë.

The Renaissance Utopia: Dialogue, Travel and the Ideal Society.

Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014. Pp. 198. ISBN 978-1-4724-2503-4 (hardcover) £60.

What is it about Utopia that we can't explain? Is it its ambiguity? Is it its literary form or its lack of political ambition?

In this masterfully researched book, Chloë Houston argues for the uniqueness of the utopian genre/form/mode of discourse and analyzes its early development, from Thomas More's *Utopia* to the seventeenth century. In the introduction she alerts the reader to "something uniquely complicated and compelling about the transformation of Utopia during the Renaissance." She then argues that a "detailed study of this transformation provides insight into how people thought about both the prospect of the ideal society and their own role in bringing it about" (3).

True to her word, the author explores the uniqueness of classical utopia through the double lens of dialogue and travel. She focuses mostly on English classical utopia, trying to "examine the development of the Utopian from 1516 until the proliferation in the middle years of the seventeenth century" (3).

The two forms analyzed by Houston (dialogue and travel) constitute two important aspects of the utopian narrative. On the one hand, the connection between utopia and dialogue is undeniable. Although J. H. Hexter in his seminal *More's Utopia: The Biography of an Idea* (1952) had named the description of the island of Utopia, that is, book 2 of *Utopia*, a "monologue," the *aureus libellus* was obviously conceived as a dialogue, modelled both on Plato and on Lucian. Moreover, as Houston points out, both dialogue and utopia "play with the boundaries of fact and fiction" and are characteristically "difficult to define" (9).

A second aspect that is crucial to the utopian narrative is travel, which has historically been a useful trope to symbolize the passage from the *mundus idem* of everyday life to the *mundus alter*. It was often through a journey that the traveller "discovered" the utopian world. Moreover, according to Houston, both travel and utopia have "an unstable relation with the truth" (8). It is known that travel stories were full of tall tales, and one only needs to remember the etymologies of *Utopia's* topography to realize how much More tried to blur the boundaries between truth and fiction in his work.

In the first chapter of *The Renaissance Utopia* the author analyzes utopia as dialogue, in light of classical and Christian models such as Lucian, Plato, and Augustine. In the second chapter, she challenges the notion of “a gap in English Utopian fiction between *Utopia* and the upsurge of utopian writing in the early seventeenth century” (11). She proves her point with an analysis of two less famous utopias: Thomas Nicholls’s *A pleasant Dialogue* and Thomas Lupton’s *Sivqila*, both written around 1580. Houston shows how these two works mark a shift from utopia as satire and irony to utopia as an instrument to improve society: “the utopian mode of discourse becomes concerned with social and moral improvement rather than irony, satire and philosophical enquiry” (59).

Chapter 3 discusses changes in the dialogue form in Campanella’s *City of the Sun* and Andreae’s *Christianopolis*. Here dialogue is used didactically, which shows a decline of its importance in the European utopian production of the early seventeenth century.

In the fourth chapter, Houston’s analysis of Bacon’s *New Atlantis* signals a clear evolution from More’s *Utopia*. Bacon was more interested in the conditions to “support natural philosophy” (116) than in “opening discussion as to the nature of the ideal society” (117). Moreover, in this particular work, the dialogue form, even though it is still used to convey meaning, appears as less fluid and more fractured (117).

The utopias analyzed in chapter 5 still look at dialogue, although dialogue in these utopias is even less relevant. However, Houston argues that dialogue goes from intra-utopian to inter-utopian. As the author explains in the introduction, “utopian texts were in immediate dialogue with each other to promote and achieve the ideal society” (12). This is the culminant phase of the period analyzed—around the 1640s there is general consensus among utopian writers about the possibility to ameliorate the lives of people through good institutions (130). Some reformers, such as Hartlib, began using utopia as a blueprint for social reform (138). In this context, although utopian ideas proliferated, the two main forms of utopian discourse—travel and dialogue—became less relevant.

In the final chapter, Houston argues that as the utopian narrative becomes more accepted as a possible blueprint for social reform, “writers of utopian literature [...] conceived of a public audience for their texts which was itself comprised of writers of utopian literature and like-minded reformers” (161).

As the audience changed, so did forms and modes of discourse. In the end, the author remarks that the 1640s was a time in history when it was “both possible and to their [the authors’] mind, desirable, to make a difference to society though the writing and dissemination of utopian literature” (162).

Houston leaves the reader with the impression that the love story between utopia and social reform rose to its zenith a little more than a century after the publication of More’s *Utopia*. This is the most significant message of this meticulously researched and beautifully argued book—that there was a time when utopias were considered relevant for the improvement of society; when they were taken seriously and not considered naive flights of fancy. And who is to say that such a time might not come back?

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Kahn, Victoria.

The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014. Pp. xiii, 246. ISBN 978-0-226-08387-2 (hardcover) US\$45.

Victoria Kahn’s *The Future of Illusion: Political Theology and Early Modern Texts* examines modern readings of works from the early modern period, showing that the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries’ turn away from essentialist validations for authority, transcendental justifications of the state, in favour of poiesis (“making”) as a new form of knowledge, served as a point of contention for twentieth-century intellectuals. Faced with the failure of liberal secularism to offer a defense of its values when challenged by totalitarianism, authors such as Carl Schmitt, Ernst Kantorowicz, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, and Sigmund Freud all critically engaged with the point in history they understood as a decisive break from older forms of political legitimation. Certain figures, such as Schmitt, viewed this secular demarcation as catastrophic; others, such as Kantorowicz and Freud, saw this break as a productive moment in the relationship between human creativity and political activity. Every author examined by Kahn uses early-modern poiesis to construct an argument about modernity.