



Over the span of about twenty years (1500-1520) Thomas More composed a series of Latin poems published as his Epigrams. Renaissance handbooks define the epigram as “a brief and pointed poem on a single subject.”¹ Although a number of the poems are More’s original compositions, most are either translations or are inspired by images from classical sources such as the Planudean Anthology, the Aesopic tradition, and the philosophic themes of Plutarch, Seneca, Cicero, Diogenes Laertius, and Aristotle.² As with his translations of Lucian, however, More sometimes alters the images and takes liberties in translation to emphasize his own concerns.

At the urging of Erasmus, More’s Epigrams were first published with the 1518 edition of *Utopia*. There are considerable thematic connections between the texts. Although the proverb-like poems treat a wide range of conventional subjects (friendship, fortune, death, marriage, art, physicians, lawyers, astrologers, and others), More’s use of the epigram form for commentary on such political topics as kingship, tyranny, and the best form of government was unprecedented.³ More’s language reflects the political heritage of ancient Rome and employs such terms as *cives* (citizens) and *populi* (people) rather than Henry VIII’s preferred *subjectus* (subject).⁴

Questions on the Relationship between *Utopia* and the Political Epigrams⁵

1. What treatment of tyranny (and measures to prevent it) do we find in *Utopia* and the *Epigrams*?
2. What does each text put forth as the best form of government, and what kind of leaders are required to sustain each? What kind of citizens are required to sustain each?
3. What role does friendship play in the various political communities presented in each text?
4. What vision of equality do we find in *Utopia* and the *Epigrams*? Are they similar or different?
5. What treatment of philosophers do we find in *Utopia* and the *Epigrams*?⁶

Questions on the *Epigrams* as a Whole

1. What common themes emerge from this apparently disparate collection of poems? Does the order of the poems appear random or deliberate?
2. Is there a moral purpose to More’s satirical poems, or are the comical poems mere plays of wit? What kinds of characters does More wish to praise or blame?
3. Is More’s vision of the cosmos in the *Epigrams* ultimately pessimistic or hopeful?
4. How is the collection representative of More’s humanism?

Questions on Particular Epigrams and Themes

1. What does More wish to communicate to Henry VIII in the coronation poems? What serious lessons or political counsel do you discern in More’s celebration of Henry’s accession?
2. What conclusions on life result from the different meditations on death in the collection? What are the possible outcomes of More’s *memento mori* poems?
3. What is More’s treatment of marriage in the epigrams? Is it inconsistent or can we find a coherent view?
4. What is the nature of More’s quarrel with Brixius? How does More envision the function of poetry?
5. What is the role of rhetoric and self-presentation in the *Epigrams*? How does More the poet compare to the figure of More in *Utopia*, or the narrator in *Richard the Third*?

¹ James Doelman, “Epigrams and Political Satire in Early Stuart England,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (March 2006), 32.

² *CW* 3.2, 12.

³ *CW* 3.2, 62. Anne Baynes Coiro notes that “More initiates a function of the English epigrammatist as educator of princes that will remain central” (67). Anne Baynes Coiro, *Robert Herrick’s Hesperides and the Epigram Book Tradition* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 60-77.

⁴ Damian Grace, “Subjects or Citizens? *Populi* and *cives* in More’s *Epigrammata*,” *Moreana* 25, no. 67 (March 1988): 133-36. T.F. Mayer, “Tournai and Tyranny: Imperial Kingship and Critical Humanism,” *The Historical Journal* 34, no. 2 (June 1991), 267.

⁵ See the study guide to “*Utopia* and the Epigrams.”

⁶ For discussions of philosophy in the epigrams, see 119 (*EWTM* 225/128), 43 (229), 77-78 (233), 157 (243), and 261 (257).