

## Erasmus on Thomas More

999. To Ulrich von Hutten

Antwerp, 23 July 1519

Erasmus of Rotterdam to the Honorable Ulrich von Hutten, Knight, greetings.

5 Most illustrious Hutten, your love, I had almost said your passion for the genius of  
Thomas More—kindled as it is by his writings, which, as you truly say, are as learned  
and witty as anything can possibly be—is, I assure you, shared by many others; and  
moreover the feeling in this case is mutual; since More is so delighted with what you  
10 have written, that I am myself almost jealous of you. It is an example of what Plato says  
of that sweetest wisdom, which excites much more ardent love among men than the most  
admirable beauty of form. It is not discerned by the eye of sense, but the mind has eyes of  
its own, so that even here the Greek saying holds true, that out of Looking grows Liking;  
and so it comes to pass that people are sometimes united in the warmest affection, who  
15 have never seen or spoken to each other. And, as it is a common experience, that for  
some unexplained reason different people are attracted by different kinds of beauty, so  
between one mind and another, there seems to be a sort of latent kindred, which causes us  
to be specially delighted with some minds, and not with others.

As to your asking me to paint you a full-length portrait of More, I only wish my  
power of satisfying your request were equal to your earnestness in pressing it. For to me  
20 too, it will be no unpleasant task to linger awhile in the contemplation of a friend, who is  
the most delightful character in the world. But, in the first place, it is not given to every  
man to be aware of all More's accomplishments; and in the next place, I know not  
whether he will himself like to have his portrait painted by any artist that chooses to do  
so. For indeed I do not think it more easy to make a likeness of More than of Alexander  
25 the Great, or of Achilles; neither were those heroes more worthy of immortality. The  
hand of an Apelles is required for such a subject, and I am afraid I am more like a Fulvius  
or a Rutuba than an Apelles. Nevertheless I will try to draw you a sketch, rather than a  
portrait, of the entire man, so far as daily and domestic intercourse has enabled me to  
observe his likeness and retain it in my memory. But if some diplomatic employment  
30 should ever bring you together, you will find out, how poor an artist you have chosen for  
this commission; and I am afraid you will think me guilty of envy or of willful blindness  
in taking note of so few out the many good points of his character.

To begin with that part of him which is least known to you—in shape and stature  
More is not a tall man, but not remarkably short, all his limbs being so symmetrical that  
35 no deficiency is observed in this respect. His complexion is fair, his face being rather  
blonde than pale, but with no approach to redness, except a very delicate flush, which  
lights up the whole. His hair is auburn inclining to black, or if you like it better, black  
inclining to auburn; his beard thin, his eyes a bluish grey with some sort of tinting upon  
them. This kind of eye is thought to be a sign of the happiest character, and is regarded  
40 with favor in England, whereas with us black eyes are rather preferred. It is said, that no  
kind of eye is so free from defects of sight. His countenance answers to his character,  
having an expression of kind and friendly cheerfulness with a little air of raillery. To  
speak candidly, it is a face more expressive of pleasantry than of gravity or dignity,  
though very far removed from folly or buffoonery. His right shoulder seems a little

45 higher than his left, especially when he is walking, a peculiarity that is not innate, but the  
 result of habit, like many tricks of the kind. In the rest of his body there is nothing  
 displeasing—only his hands are a little coarse, or appear so, as compared with the rest of  
 his figure. He has always from his boyhood been very negligent of his toilet, so as not to  
 50 give much attention even to the things, which according to Ovid are all that men need  
 care about. What a charm there was in his looks when young, may even now be inferred  
 from what remains; although I knew him myself when he was not more than three and  
 twenty years old; for he has not yet passed much beyond his fortieth year. His health is  
 sound rather than robust, but sufficient for any labors suitable to an honorable citizen;  
 and we may fairly hope, that his life may be long, as he has a father living of a great age,  
 55 but an age full of freshness and vigour.

I have never seen any person less fastidious in his choice of food. As a young man,  
 he was by preference a water-drinker, a practice he derived from his father. But, not to  
 give annoyance to others, he used at table to conceal this habit from his guests by  
 drinking, out of a pewter vessel, either small beer almost as weak as water, or plain water.  
 60 As to wine, it being the custom, where he was, for the company to invite each other to  
 drink in turn out of the same cup, he used sometimes to sip a little of it, to avoid  
 appearing to shrink from it altogether, and to habituate himself to the common practice.  
 For his eating he has been accustomed to prefer beef and salt meats, and household bread  
 thoroughly fermented, to those articles of diet which are commonly regarded as  
 65 delicacies. But he does not shrink from things that impart an innocent pleasure, even of a  
 bodily kind, and has always a good appetite for milk-puddings and for fruit, and eats a  
 dish of eggs with the greatest relish.

His voice is neither loud nor excessively low, but of a penetrating tone. It has  
 nothing in it melodious or soft, but is simply suitable for speech, as he does not seem to  
 70 have any natural talent for singing, though he takes pleasure in music of every kind. His  
 articulation is wonderfully distinct, being equally free from hurry and from hesitation.

He likes to be dressed simply, and does not wear silk, or purple, or gold chains,  
 except when it is not allowable to dispense with them. He cares marvelously little for  
 those formalities, which with ordinary people are the test of politeness; and as he does not  
 75 exact these ceremonies from others, so he is not scrupulous in observing them himself,  
 either on occasions of meeting or at entertainments, though he understands how to use  
 them, if he thinks proper to do so; but he holds it to be effeminate and unworthy of a man  
 to waste much of his time on such trifles.

He was formerly rather disinclined to Court life and to any intimacy with princes,  
 80 having always special hatred of tyranny and a great fancy for equality; whereas you will  
 scarcely find any Court so well-ordered, as not to have much bustle and ambition and  
 pretence and luxury, or to be free from tyranny in some form or other. He could not even  
 be tempted to Henry the Eighth's Court without great trouble, although nothing could be  
 desired more courteous or less exacting than this Prince. He is naturally fond of liberty  
 85 and leisure; but as he enjoys a holiday when he has it, so whenever business requires it,  
 no one is more vigilant or more patient.

He seems to be born and made for friendship, of which he is the sincerest and most  
 persistent devotee. Neither is he afraid of that multiplicity of friends, of which Hesiod  
 disapproves. Accessible to every tender of intimacy, he is by no means fastidious in  
 90 choosing his acquaintance, while he is most accommodating in keeping it on foot, and

constant in retaining it. If he has fallen in with anyone whose faults he cannot cure, he finds some opportunity of parting with him, untying the knot of intimacy without tearing it; but when he has found any sincere friends, whose characters are suited to his own, he is so delighted with their society and conversation, that he seems to find in these the chief  
 95 pleasure of life, having an absolute distaste for tennis and dice and cards, and the other games with which the mass of gentlemen beguile the tediousness of Time. It should be added that, while he is somewhat neglectful of his own interest, no one takes more pains in attending to the concerns of his friends. What more need I say? If anyone requires a perfect example of true friendship, it is in More that he will best find it.

100 In company his extraordinary kindness and sweetness of temper are such as to cheer the dullest spirit, and alleviate the annoyance of the most trying circumstances. From boyhood he was always so pleased with a joke, that it might seem that jesting was the main object of his life; but with all that, he did not go so far as buffoonery, nor had ever any inclination to bitterness. When quite a youth, he wrote farces and acted them. If  
 105 a thing was facetiously said, even though it was aimed at himself, he was charmed with it, so much did he enjoy any witticism that had a flavor of subtlety or genius. This led to his amusing himself as a young man with epigrams, and taking great delight in Lucian. Indeed, it was he that suggested my writing the *Moria*, or *Praise of Folly*, which was much the same thing as setting a camel to dance.

110 There is nothing that occurs in human life, from which he does not seek to extract some pleasure, although the matter may be serious in itself. If he has to do with the learned and intelligent, he is delighted with their cleverness, if with unlearned or stupid people, he finds amusement in their folly. He is not offended even by professed clowns, as he adapts himself with marvellous dexterity to the tastes of all; while with ladies  
 115 generally, and even with his wife, his conversation is made up of humor and playfulness. You would say it was a second Democritus, or rather that Pythagorean philosopher, who strolls in leisurely mood through the market-place, contemplating the turmoil of those who buy and sell. There is no one less guided by the opinion of the multitude, but on the other hand no one sticks more closely to common sense.

120 One of his amusements is in observing the forms, characters and instincts of different animals. Accordingly there is scarcely any kind of bird, that he does not keep about his residence, and the same of other animals not quite so common, as monkeys, foxes, ferrets, weasels and the like. Beside these, if he meets with any strange object, imported from abroad or otherwise remarkable, he is most eager to buy it, and has his  
 125 house so well supplied with these objects, that there is something in every room which catches your eye, as you enter it ; and his own pleasure is renewed every time that he sees others interested.

When of a sentimental age, he was not a stranger to the emotions of love, but without loss of character, having no inclination to press his advantage, and being more  
 130 attracted by a mutual liking than by any licentious object.

He had drunk deep of good letters from his earliest years; and when a young man, he applied himself to the study of Greek and of philosophy; but his father was so far from encouraging him in this pursuit, that he withdrew his allowance and almost disowned him, because he thought he was deserting his hereditary study, being himself an expert  
 135 professor of English law. For remote as that profession is from true learning, those who become masters of it have the highest rank and reputation among their countrymen; and it

is difficult to find any readier way to acquire fortune and honor. Indeed a considerable part of the nobility of that island has had its origin in this profession, in which it is said that no one can be perfect, unless he has toiled at it for many years. It was natural, that in his younger days our friend's genius, born for better things, should shrink from this study; nevertheless, after he had had a taste of the learning of the Schools, he became so conversant with it, that there was no one more eagerly consulted by suitors; and the income that he made by it was not surpassed by any of those who did nothing else; such was the power and quickness of his intellect.

He also expended considerable labor in perusing the volumes of the orthodox Fathers; and when scarcely more than a youth, he lectured publicly on the *De Civitate Dei* of Augustine before a numerous audience, old men and priests not being ashamed to take a lesson in divinity from a young layman, and not at all sorry to have done so. Meantime he applied his whole mind to religion, having some thought of taking orders, for which he prepared himself by watchings and fastings and prayers and such like exercises; wherein he showed much more wisdom than the generality of the people who rashly engage in so arduous a profession without testing themselves beforehand. And indeed there was no obstacle to his adopting this kind of life, except the fact that he could not shake off his wish to marry. Accordingly he resolved to be a chaste husband rather than a licentious priest.

When he married, he chose a very young girl, a lady by birth, with her character still unformed, having been always kept in the country with her parents and sisters—so that he was all the better able to fashion her according to his own habits. Under his direction she was instructed in learning and in every kind of music, and had almost completely become just such a person as would have been a delightful companion for his whole life, if an early death had not carried her away. She had however borne him several children, of whom three girls, Margaret, Alice, and Cecily, and one boy, John, are still living.

More did not however long remain single, but contrary to his friends' advice, a few months after his wife's death, he married a widow, more for the sake of the management of his household, than to please his own fancy, as she is no great beauty, nor yet young, *nec bella admodum nec puella*, as he sometimes laughingly says, but a sharp and watchful housewife; with whom nevertheless he lives, on as sweet and pleasant terms as if she were as young and lovely as any one could desire; and scarcely any husband obtains from his wife by masterfulness and severity as much compliance as he does by blandishments and jests. Indeed, what more compliance could he have, when he has induced a woman who is already elderly, who is not naturally of a yielding character, and whose mind is occupied with business, to learn to play on the harp, the viol, the spinet and the flute, and to give up every day a prescribed time to practice? With similar kindness he rules his whole household, in which there are no tragic incidents, and no quarrels. If anything of the kind should be likely, he either calms it down, or applies a remedy at once. And in parting with any member of his household he has never acted in a hostile spirit, or treated him as an enemy. Indeed his house seems to have a sort of fatal felicity, no one having lived in it without being advanced to higher fortune, no inmate having ever had a stain upon his character.

It would be difficult to find any one living on such terms with a mother as he does with his stepmother. For his father had brought in one stepmother after another; and he

has been as affectionate with each of them as with a mother. He has lately introduced a  
 185 third, and More swears that he never saw anything better. His affection for his parents,  
 children and sisters is such, that he neither wearies them with his love, nor ever fails in  
 any kindly attention.

His character is entirely free from any touch of avarice. He has set aside out of his  
 property what he thinks sufficient for his children, and spends the rest in a liberal fashion.  
 190 When he was still dependent on his profession, he gave every client true and friendly  
 counsel with an eye to their advantage rather than his own, generally advising them that  
 the cheapest thing they could do was to come to terms with their opponents. If he could  
 not persuade them to do this, he pointed out how they might go to law at least expense;  
 for there are some people whose character leads them to delight in litigation.

In the City of London, where he was born, he acted for some years as judge in civil  
 195 causes. This office, which is by no means burdensome—inasmuch as the Court sits only  
 on Thursdays before dinner—is considered highly honorable; and no judge ever disposed  
 of more suits, or conducted himself with more perfect integrity. In most cases he remitted  
 the fees which are due from the litigants, the practice being for the plaintiff to deposit  
 three groats before the hearing, and the defendant a like sum, and no more being allowed  
 200 to be exacted. By such conduct he made himself extremely popular in the City.

He had made up his mind to be contented with this position, which was sufficiently  
 dignified without being exposed to serious dangers. He has been thrust more than once  
 into an embassy, in the conduct of which he has shown great ability; and King Henry in  
 consequence would never rest until he dragged him into his Court. ‘Dragged him,’ I say,  
 205 and with reason; for no one was ever more ambitious of being admitted into a Court, than  
 he was anxious to escape it. But as this excellent monarch was resolved to pack his  
 household with learned, serious, intelligent, and honest men, he especially insisted upon  
 having More among them—with whom he is on such terms of intimacy that he cannot  
 bear to let him go. If serious affairs are in hand, no one gives wiser counsel; if it pleases  
 210 the King to relax his mind with agreeable conversation, no man is better company.  
 Difficult questions are often arising, which require a grave and prudent judge; and these  
 questions are resolved by More in such a way that both sides are satisfied. And yet no one  
 has ever induced him to accept a present. What a blessing it would be for the world, if  
 magistrates like More were everywhere put in office by sovereigns!

215 Meantime there is no assumption of superiority. In the midst of so great a pressure  
 of business he remembers his humble friends; and from time to time he returns to his  
 beloved studies. Whatever authority he derives from his rank, and whatever influence he  
 enjoys by the favor of a powerful sovereign, are employed in the service of the public, or  
 in that of his friends. It has always been part of his character to be most obliging to every  
 220 body, and marvelously ready with his sympathy; and this disposition is more conspicuous  
 than ever, now that his power of doing good is greater. Some he relieves with money,  
 some he protects by his authority, some he promotes by his recommendation, while those  
 whom he cannot otherwise assist are benefited by his advice. No one is sent away in  
 distress, and you might call him the general patron of all poor people. He counts it a great  
 225 gain to himself, if he has relieved some oppressed person, made the path clear for one  
 that was in difficulties, or brought back into favor one that was in disgrace. No man more  
 readily confers a benefit, no man expects less in return. And successful as he is in so  
 many ways—while success is generally accompanied by self-conceit—I have never seen

any mortal being more free from this failing.

230 I now propose to turn to the subject of those studies which have been the chief means of bringing More and me together. In his first youth his principal literary exercises were in verse. He afterwards wrestled for a long time to make his prose more smooth; practising his pen in every kind of writing in order to form that style, the character of which there is no occasion for me to recall, especially to you, who have his books always  
235 in your hands. He took the greatest pleasure in declamations, choosing some disputable subject, as involving a keener exercise of mind. Hence, while still a youth, he attempted a dialogue, in which he carried the defence of Plato's community even to the matter of wives! He wrote an answer to Lucian's *Tyrannicide*, in which argument it was his wish to have me for a rival, in order to test his own proficiency in this kind of writing.

240 He published his *Utopia* for the purpose of showing what are the things that occasion mischief in commonwealths, having the English constitution especially in view, which he so thoroughly knows and understands. He had written the second book at his leisure, and afterwards, when he found it was required, added the first off-hand. Hence there is some inequality in the style.

245 It would be difficult to find any one more successful in speaking *ex tempore*, the happiest thoughts being attended by the happiest language; while a mind that catches and anticipates all that passes, and a ready memory, having everything as it were in stock, promptly supply whatever the time, or the occasion, demands. In disputations nothing can be imagined more acute, so that the most eminent theologians often find their match,  
250 when he meets them on their own ground. Hence John Colet, a man of keen and exact judgment, is wont to say in familiar conversation, that England has only one genius, whereas that island abounds in distinguished intellects.

However averse he may be from all superstition, he is a steady adherent of true piety, having regular hours for his prayers, which are not uttered by rote, but from the  
255 heart. He talks with his friends about a future life in such a way as to make you feel that he believes what he says, and does not speak without the best hope. Such is More, even at Court; and there are still people who think that Christians are only to be found in monasteries! Such are the persons, whom a wise King admits into his household, and into his chamber, and not only admits, but invites, nay, compels them to come in. These he  
260 has by him as the constant witnesses and judges of his life—as his advisers and traveling companions. By these he rejoices to be accompanied, rather than by dissolute young men or by fops, or even by decorated grandees, or by crafty ministers, of whom one would lure him to silly amusements, another would incite him to tyranny, and a third would suggest some fresh schemes for plundering his people. If you had lived at this Court, you  
265 would, I am sure, give a new description of Court life, and cease to be Misaulos; though you too live with such a prince, that you cannot wish for a better, and have some companions like Stromer and Copp, whose sympathies are on the right side. But what is that small number compared with such a swarm of distinguished men as Mountjoy, Linacre, Pace, Colet, Stokesley, Latimer, More, Tunstall, Clerk, and others like them, any  
270 one of whose names signifies at once a world of virtues and accomplishments? However, I have no mean hope, that Albert, who is at this time the one ornament of our Germany, will attach to his household a multitude of persons like himself, and set a notable example to other princes, so that they may exert themselves in their own circles to do the like.

You have now before you an ill-drawn portrait, by a poor artist, of an excellent

275 original! You will be still less pleased with the portrait, if you come to have a closer  
acquaintance with More himself. But meantime I have made sure of this, that you will not  
be able to charge me with neglecting your command, nor continue to find fault with the  
shortness of my letters, though even this one has not seemed too long to me in writing it,  
and will not, I am confident, appear prolix to you, as you read it; our More's sweetness  
280 will secure that. However—not to leave unanswered your last letter, which I read in print  
before I saw it in writing—I have been informed of the kindness of the most illustrious  
Prince Albert by his own letter to me. But how, I should like to know, has it come to pass  
that that cup has reached every one by means of your letter before it has come to me?  
You certainly could not have sent it more safely by any one than by Richard Pace, the  
285 ambassador of the English king, whether I was in Brabant or in England.

You, I see, are doing vigorous battle both with the pen and with the sword—  
successfully too, as well as bravely! For I hear you are in great favor with the Cardinal of  
Gaëta. I am glad that we have good news of Capnio [John Reuclin]. If Literature allows  
the name of Franz von Sickingen to die, she may fairly be taxed with ingratitude.

290 For our own news, there will be another occasion. Only this at present; business is  
conducted at this Court by the meanest sycophancy—a trade to which I must confess  
myself unequal. If there is any one of your acquaintance who wants to learn it, I will  
point him out a wonderful master of this accomplishment—one, of whom you may say  
that he was evidently born for it. Cicero was not a more successful orator than he a  
295 sycophant; and he finds many docile pupils among us! The right time is not come, but  
before long I will introduce the man to you, so that he may obtain the glory which he well  
deserves, and of which he is sadly ambitious. He will then be celebrated in the letters of  
all the learned, as a portent rather than a man. Farewell.

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Longmans, Green and Co., 1918), pp. 387-401.