

Hanan Yoran. *Between Utopia and Dystopia: Erasmus, Thomas More, and the Humanist Republic of Letters*.

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In *Between Utopia and Dystopia*, Hanan Yoran provides a challenging reappraisal of Erasmian humanism and the genesis of the modern universal intellectual. This bold and stimulating book argues that, ultimately, Erasmian humanism failed because of its internal and largely unidentified contradictions. At the heart of Yoran's study is the argument that while humanism was devoted to the production of knowledge for useful purposes, thus embedding humanism within society, Erasmian humanism sought a universal space that was independent from power structures and established order. According to Yoran, it was therefore Erasmus and Thomas More who became the first modern universal intellectuals. They failed, however, because humanist discourse could not easily function in an abstract independent space outside of particular historical contexts. As Yoran's last sentence concludes: "Ultimately, the identity of the universal intellectual threatened to lock the Erasmian humanist in a disembodied intellectual sphere, a literally utopian location, which could not be legitimized in humanist terms" (189). Yoran thus maintains that More and Erasmus deliberately created an independent place, a utopia, for the modern intellectual, but that this no-place became a dystopia when structured by humanist discourse.

Underlying Yoran's argument is a secular definition of Renaissance humanism based on ontological and epistemological presuppositions rather than on any particular humanist content. "Humanism," Yoran writes, "rejected the metaphysical assumptions . . . that behind the diversity of phenomenal appearances stood intelligible and unchangeable substance. Humanist discourse consequently denied that the meaning of human reality — human history, social institutions, political events — was contingent upon its subordination to a transcendent realm. Instead the humanists presupposed that the human world was a world made by men" (3–4). How this definition, which seemingly echoes late-medieval nominalist thought, fits with Neoplatonic influences within humanist and Erasmian texts, remains unexplored. This particular definition, however, is the critical starting point for the rest of Yoran's argument. Once Yoran has tied humanism to time and place as contingently historical, the problematic nature of the independent and universal Republic of Letters becomes discernable.

Since, according to Yoran, humanist knowledge was socially and culturally constructed, there could be no fully autonomous universal intellectual. Yet that is precisely what Erasmus and More sought to create in the humanist Republic of Letters. Yoran argues that Erasmian humanism, which brought both of these concepts together, contained an irresolvable internal contradiction. This study, therefore, does not seek to understand Erasmus's and More's texts as they understood them, but rather seeks to identify the underlying and hidden discursive contradictions that caused a theoretical and practical breakdown of Erasmian humanism. Erasmus and

More certainly never recognized the internal contradiction created by their epistemology and espoused membership in the Republic of Letters. Yoran acknowledges that nowhere do they discuss this problem and then suggests that they therefore “disguised or, better still, repressed” this fundamental humanist problem (9). Referring to the humanist texts of Erasmus and More, Yoran writes that “the text should be read against its explicit assertions and argumentation in order to expose the problems it hides and the contradictions it tries to resolve” (9).

The second half of the book focuses on a critical reading of Erasmus’s colloquy *Convivium Religiosum* and Thomas More’s *Richard III* and *Utopia*. These three texts, Yoran argues, follow the rules of humanist discourse, but simultaneously subvert and undermine them. In *Utopia*, in particular, the perfect Erasmian state even becomes antihumanist and anti-Erasmian (184). Thus, since the Erasmian Republic of Letters was constructed as humanist utopia, “More and Erasmus ultimately failed to provide a coherent humanist account of political reality, to elaborate a coherent humanist political theory or to visualize a coherent humanist utopia” (14). Again, this all would have been news to Erasmus and More, but that is, in part, precisely Yoran’s point. More broadly, Yoran seems to be suggesting that the ambiguity and problematic nature of the modern intellectual today is rooted in the contradictions inherent within the thought of the first two modern intellectuals, Erasmus and More (187). While readers may question both the theoretical approach of the book and some of its conclusions, this study should prompt readers to think carefully about the early sixteenth-century humanist movement from a fresh perspective.

GREGORY D. DODDS  
Walla Walla University