Houston, Chloë. *The Renaissance Utopia: Dialogue, Travel and the Ideal Society*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2014. 198 pp.

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The title of Chloë Houston's recent monograph on Renaissance utopia does not only hint at some of the main trends within utopian studies in the past decades, but it might also remind the reader of a 1980s classic on 16th-17th-century English utopian writing. The link is further reinforced by an explicit reference to the same in the blurb on the back of the volume, where the book advertizes itself as "the first comprehensive attempt since J. C. Davis' *Utopia and the Ideal Society* to understand the societies projected by [early modern] utopian literature." Marginal as such a text is to the whole volume, this short note epitomizes how the volume constantly struggles to find its place within the two main poles of utopian studies: the study of "societies projected" and "utopian literature."

The book opens with a more theoretical introduction whose title ("The Utopian Mode in Dialogue") reverberates with some of the long-standing anxieties about the definition and categorization of utopias, anxieties to which the chapter refers, and which it tries to resolve by a method of reading to which "both literary forms and social forms are central" (3). Houston identifies three objectives in the introduction: to show how utopia changed from "philosophical satire to utopia as an imaginative means to achieve social reform" (10); to read utopias as dialogues and to indicate the influence of this form even when it is not directly applied; to argue that "the utopian literature of the Renaissance period merits reassessment" (7). She also argues that the 1640s can be regarded as a "uniquely active and idealistic" (7) utopian moment. Although the intention to avoid imposing a teleological order on the tradition is declared, one cannot help but feel the threat of an impending grand narrative when the author proposes to tell the story of utopia as the maturation from satire to an elevated idealistic reformist genre.

The starting point of the book is Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516), where the case for reading More's classic as a dialogue is established through a vast array of critical literature, including works focusing specifically on *Utopia*, as well as more comprehensive discussions of the dialogue form. The tendency of the form towards blurring the borders between truth and fiction, and its capacity to represent several independent perspectives is highlighted, and Houston seamlessly integrates the prefatory letters of the work into her argument. The instability of the text is mentioned, which is a feasible argument that could have been further strengthened by a reference to the different versions (with changing prefatory materials) of the book published in More's lifetime. The question of the ancient tradition of dialogues is addressed, and not only Plato, but the author of satiric dialogues, Lucian of Samosata, is also discussed briefly. In a work exploring the relationship between utopia and dialogue, it might have been fruitful to mention

some of Lucian's dialogues, above all, his meta-critical piece, *The Double Indictment*, which makes an insightful distinction between the Platonic and the Lucianic dialogue. By relying solely on *True History*, the author discusses Lucian's work from only one of her aspects, the genre of travel literature. The best part of this chapter is the section on the connection between *Utopia* and Augustine's works, where the latter's *De beata vita* is read as an important prefiguration of *Utopia*. In Houston's reading, More's classic emerges as a work that is critical of ideal-state writing, and where philosophical enquiry and satire are not complemented by a call for political reform and social amelioration.

The next chapter ("'Godly Conversation': The Reformation of Utopia") settles a long-standing debt of utopian studies by investigating two of the dialogic utopias published in the 1570s and 1580s. In connection with Thomas Nicholl's *Listra* and Thomas Lupton's *Siquila*, Houston shows that the works rely heavily on the model established by More's masterpiece. She highlights that both authors were connected to a group "whose literary output often promoted the Protestant politics of the Leicester faction" (53), and thereby reads both works as part of their respective authors' efforts at social advancement. Houston stresses the importance of Ralph Robinson's translation (1551) of *Utopia*, and she also calls attention to the difference between the original work and its first English version, the latter work putting significantly more emphasis on social reform. This is certainly true (one need only recall the preface of either the 1551 or the 1556 edition, where the reformist stance is unquestionable), but the shift in audience should also be noted, as it is in Terence Cave's study on Robinson's translation, where a less educated readership is suggested. The chapter briefly refers to the historiography of the dialogue form in English literature, and while most of its claims are well-founded, the important connection of this kind of the dialogue with the continental *Reformationsdialog* is not fully explored, and thus the chapter suggests that the route from *Utopia* to these dialogues is a straight one, which is not necessarily the case. The chapter concludes that the simplified mode of dialogue contains a monologue beneath itself, which "contributes to the utopia's crucial loss of irony in the later sixteenth century" (59).

Chapter 3 ("Education and the Decline of Dialogue in *Christianapolis* and *The City of Sun*") reveals a surprising change of scene. Houston argues that English utopias should be read in their European context, and her example is Joseph Hall's *Mundus alter idem* (1605). This is a very good example indeed, because not only does this book rely in places on Rabelais, as she explains, but it is a Latin work by an English author that was initially distributed in Germany and achieved significant contemporary success on the continent as well. It is quite puzzling that this work is not given detailed treatment, especially considering that one of the longest chapters of the book is devoted to a German and a Spanish representative of the tradition. The chapter stresses the importance of a useful education for Christian humanists, which is identified in both works discussed here. In *The City of the Sun*, the one-sided and didactic nature of dialogue is emphasized, and the practical aspects of the utopian (Solarian) educational system, which heavily rely on ancient models and sources, are explored. The use of the dialogue form is seen as yet another gesture towards classical culture, which is very important to the whole of Campanella's work. As for *Christianapolis*, the Second Reformation appears as the primary context for the work, and remnants of the dialogic form are identified in the

prefatory letter, which "[establishes] the way in which the reader is expected to approach the text" (76), a feature shared with *Utopia*. In Andreae's case, however, ambiguity and irony feature much less prominently, even if the text makes explicit references to other utopian works. Allusions are found not only to More's classic, but to Hall's mentioned work as well, which is another hint at the international currency of *Mundus alter et idem*—here at least a passing discussion of Hall's work is included (77-78). Leaving the dialogue form is seen as a conscious choice by the author with the aim of distinguishing his work from the satiric utopian tradition, but it is preserved within the travel narrative as a useful educational device. The chapter closes by stressing the spiritual aspect of the work, whereas a visit by Andreae to Geneva is highlighted as the possible source of the system of discipline witnessed in the text. Besides the stress on education, Houston regards the emphasis on the role of institutions as the most important contribution of these two works to the "development of the Renaissance utopia" (87).

Chapter 4 ("Natural Philosophy, Dialogue and the Ideal Society in *New Atlantis*") returns to the English scene and investigates the other cornerstone of the early modern English utopian tradition, Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*. Institutions, or at least one institution, Salomon's House, become central to this discussion as well, and Houston performs an engaging reading of the text. In her opinion, although dialogue form as such is not employed in the work, conversation plays a very important role in the text; in fact, it is the most important channel for the transmission of knowledge, which is clearly a central concern of the work. The reference in Bacon's work to *Utopia* is interpreted on the one hand as a sign of the emerging self-awareness of the genre, and on the other hand as a distancing effect which simultaneously asserts the text's reliability and falseness. A separate analysis is devoted to the speech by the Father of the Salomon's House where authority, and its manifestation through rhetoric, are found to be the most characteristic features. In line with the centrality of Salomon's House to this reading, conversation is also analyzed as a type of scientific activity. The last part of this section is devoted to the later sequel to *New Atlantis*, written by R. H., which draws an interesting contrast between the original and its continuation, namely that science is much more open to the public eye in the latter volume. In sum, Bacon's book is seen as a work where dialogue is still important, but where it is becoming increasingly clear that travel narrative is the genre of the future.

Chapters 5 ("Millennium and Reform in the 1640s) and 6 (The Proliferation and Rejection of Utopia") are in fact a single lengthy discussion of the previously proposed "utopian moment." These chapters not only offer an interesting interpretation of certain utopian works, like Gabriel Plattes' *Macaria* and Samuel Gott's *Nova Solyma*, but they also give a detailed overview of the historical-intellectual context, focusing on millenarianism and the conversion of the Jews. Although an interest in these subjects is a shared feature between the two works, they, as Houston claims, are in fact representative of the two different paths before utopian literature, which seem to split around this time. One of the traditions (*Macaria*) is that of blueprint-like utopian works, which, however, could later never take their own idealistic schemes as seriously as they did in the 1640s. The other (*Nova Solyma*) is the imaginative strain of utopia, where novel-like elements appear and fiction, far from being suspicious, is actually desirable. It must be noted, though, that even works of this second group are devoid of "the

ambiguous, ironic touch" (156). Nonetheless, it is this heritage that is regarded by the author as "the forerunner of the utopian novel" (141). Thus, with this last chapter, the narrative of *Renaissance Utopia* comes to an end, suggesting a development from a playful, satiric mode of utopian writing towards a kind of idealistic, but at the same time highly matter-of-fact kind of utopian writing.

Houston's book is an important contribution to utopian studies which will fascinate anyone with the slightest interest in (early modern) utopias. Significantly, it focuses on a relatively short time span, and is thus able to pay detailed attention to texts which have long been neglected in critical works. It is also welcome that the work tries to somehow relate the development of the tradition to its changing relationship with two other literary genres, dialogue and travel writing. At the same time, it provides ample space for the intellectual-historical context of the works. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that there are problems of proportion. Despite the title of the volume, the book is evidently more interested in the dialogic aspect of utopias, and the treatment of travel narrative is rare and casual. Some might also find the selection of the corpus, especially the focus on continental works in chapter 3, puzzling. In itself, the treatment of European works is of course desirable, but when it is done at the expense of an English author—Hall, whose book was published with those of Campanella and More in 1643!—the discussion of Continental works is questionable, especially if no information whatsoever is provided on their contemporary English reception. Silence about Hall is also problematic because it might appear as a biased decision; his work seems to question the linear progress drafted by Houston, as it manages to find a balance between the satiric tone of More and the moralistic-social purpose of the Elizabethan dialogues, not to mention the work's focus on institutions. The question arises whether the mentioned disappearance of the satiric aspect is merely the result of Houston's focus changing according to the framework of her own making. While in the beginning, the book concentrates more on "literary" forms, as it progresses more and more emphasis is placed on "social" forms. Eventually, the work seems to drift away from literary history to history with literary references. Such disproportions and imbalances can, however, be excused in light of the immense challenges one faces when trying to map the complicated world of early modern utopias. This is a story of early modern utopias where the history of the genre "come[s] full circle" (156)—one should only remember that other explorers' itineraries might be much more ragged.