

Young Thomas More *and* *the Arts of Liberty*



Gerard B. Wegemer

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Young Thomase
Arts of Liberty

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University of Dallas



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Abbreviations

<i>Corr.</i>	<i>Correspondence of Sir Thomas More</i>
<i>CSPS</i>	<i>Calendar of State Papers, Spanish</i>
<i>CUP Utopia</i>	Cambridge University Press edition of <i>Utopia</i>
<i>CW</i>	<i>The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More</i>
<i>CWE</i>	<i>The Collected Works of Erasmus</i>
<i>EE</i>	<i>Erasmi Epistolae</i>
<i>OLD</i>	<i>Oxford Latin Dictionary</i>
<i>SL</i>	<i>St. Thomas More: Selected Letters</i>
<i>TMSB</i>	<i>A Thomas More Source Book</i>

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Young Thomas More

Why Do Peace and Prosperity Require Arts of Humanitas?

[Wisdom is] the skilled artisan of life . . . , her voice is for peace, and she summons all mankind to concord.

Seneca, *Epistulae* 90.26–27

[Liberal] arts were devised for the purpose of fashioning [*fingerentur*]¹ the minds of the young according to *humanitas* and virtue.²

Cicero, *De Oratore* 3.58

Humanitas, or the idea of man, [is that] according to which man is fashioned [*effingitur*] . . . as Plato says.³

Seneca, *Epistulae* 65.7

“Work out your own ideas and sift your thoughts so as to see what conception and idea of a good person they contain”; otherwise you can end up as a “Caesar [who] overturned all the laws, human and divine, to achieve for himself a *principate* fashioned [*finxerat*] according to his own erroneous opinion.”⁴

Cicero, *De Officiis* 3.81, 1.26

¹ See www.thomasmorestudies.org/IndicesofLatinTerms for the uses of this verb in More’s *Epigrams*, *Richard III*, and *Utopia*. This verb also appears in the one passage that can be read in the near life-size *Sir Thomas More and His Family* (see Illustration 7 in Chapter 10). *Fingere* is a term commonly used in sculpture, meaning “to make a likeness of or to represent (from clay, wax, molten metal, etc.)” (*OLD*). For examples where Cicero associates this term with Plato or Socrates or in the senses of Platonic representation, see *Tusculanae Disputationes* 2.27, 3.31; *De Oratore* 1.224; *De Officiis* 3.69, 1.26; *Pro Sexto Roscio Amerino* 47.

² “Artibus quae repertae sunt ut puerorum mentes ad humanitatem fingerentur atque virtutem. . . .”

³ “Ipsa autem humanitas, ad quam homo effingitur, permanet, et hominibus laborantibus illa nihil patitur . . . ut Plato dicit. . . .”

⁴ Cicero, *De Officiis* 3.81: “Explica atque excute intelligentiam tuam, ut videas, quae sit in ea [species] forma et notio viri boni”; 1.26: “Caesaris . . . omnia iura divina et humana pervertit propter eum, quem sibi ipse opinionis errore finxerat, principatum.”

In 1515, as part of their plan for international peace, Thomas More and Erasmus both called for a renaissance – a “rebirth” – of the “so-called liberal studies.”⁵ That “so-called” referred to Seneca’s famous statement: “Hence you see why ‘liberal studies’ are *so called*: because they are studies worthy of the free. But there is only one really liberal study, that which gives a person his liberty. It is the study of wisdom, and that is lofty, brave, and great-souled.”⁶ In calling for this renaissance, they were agreeing with their classical predecessors that education in the “liberal arts,”⁷ or what Cicero often called the *studia humanitatis*, is the best path “to lead the state in peace,”⁸ because “the fostering of a virtuous and educated citizenry provides the key” to peace and liberty.⁹ But what did they mean, and were they and their fellow humanists not woefully misguided as critics such as Machiavelli would later claim?¹⁰

In 1515 More wrote book 2 of *Utopia* with its provocative promises of liberty, peace, and *humanitas*;¹¹ in the same year, Erasmus “dreamt of an age truly golden,” only to discover “the severity of that worse than iron age we live in.”¹² The iron age of war rather than the golden age of peace was also portrayed in *The History of King Richard III*, which More had been writing since 1513 but never published in his lifetime.

⁵ CW 15, 18/13 (volume, page/line): “bonas renasci litteras”; EE 337/328: “renascantur bonae litterae.” References are regularly to the Latin text because translations are often adjusted. When quoting sixteenth-century English, spelling and punctuation are modernized.

⁶ *Epistulae* 88.1–2 (emphasis added). This collection of Seneca’s letters was of such importance to More that it is one of only three books definitely identified in the portrait *Sir Thomas More and His Family*.

⁷ Like Cicero, More uses several expressions for liberal education. See Cicero’s *De Inventione* 1.35 (“artium liberalium”), *De Oratore* 3.127 (“has artes quibus liberales doctrinae atque ingenuae contineantur”), *Tusculanae Disputationes* 2.27 (“a Graecia . . . eruditionem liberalem et doctrinam putamus”), and *Pro Archia* 3 (“studia humanitatis”). See More’s uses of “humanis literis” (*Corr.* 255/37, 42–43; 121/14ff.; CW 3.2, Epigram 143/103, 107–8; CW 15, 138/7, 11), “lyberall artes” (CW 6, 132/8), “liberales artes” (CW 15, 134/12, 138/24, 220/13), “liberalibus disciplinis” (*Corr.* 255/37–38), “ingenuis artibus” (CW 3.2, Epigram 19/117), and “bonis artibus” (CW 3.2, Epigrams 143/176–77, 264/43; CW 4, 158/8; CW 15, 26/10; *Corr.* 122/74). For Erasmus’s summary of More’s views on the value of liberal studies, see EE 1233 or TMSB 221–26.

⁸ Mitchell 1984 38, but see his fuller argument with references beginning on p. 35.

⁹ Skinner x.

¹⁰ In their introduction to *The Prince*, Quentin Skinner and Russell Price point out striking instances in which Machiavelli directly counters Cicero’s and Seneca’s views on effective rule and good government (xvi–xxii esp.).

¹¹ See Chapter 9 for an assessment of the provocative uses of these terms.

¹² CWE 3, Letter 333 (15 May 1515), lines 9, 51.

Did the shattering of this golden dream prove to More and Erasmus that the fashionings of *humanitas* lacked the power they hoped?

In 1515 the playful “Triumph of Humanitas” (Illustration 1) decorated Erasmus’s newly published edition of Seneca’s collected works, the edition that Erasmus had worked on during his stay in England from 1509 through 1514, using manuscripts from English libraries. The figure Humanitas in the top of the frame is pushed by the Latin authors Cicero (Tully) and Virgil and pulled by the Greek authors Demosthenes and Homer – all four of whom wrote on war in ways that deeply affected their cultures. Lady Humanitas is peacefully reading, even while riding in her triumphal chariot pushed and pulled by these laurel-crowned poets and bareheaded statesmen, all under a triumphal canopy held by plump, happy cherubs. On the left side of the engraving is the figure of a child, and lest there be any doubt after one sees the sickle in his hand or the wings at his feet, a sign in Greek identifies this figure as “Time.” On the right, another label in Greek identifies “Nemesis,” who is holding her traditional measure and spool of fate. Erasmus, in his *Adages* (II.vi.38), describes Nemesis as “a goddess, the scourge of insolence and arrogance, whose province is to forbid excessive hopes and punish them,” possessing “a general power of supervising the fates, surveying above all human affairs as queen and arbiter of all things.”¹³ In this frontispiece, however, the triumphal march that takes place above Time and Nemesis seems to present Humanitas as the greater queen and arbiter. This reading is confirmed by the comparative-genitive constructions, which lead us to read the text in this frame as “Humanitas greater than Time, greater than Nemesis.”¹⁴

But how could *humanitas* ever have such power? Cicero was murdered, and Seneca’s death was ordered by the Roman *princeps* he loyally served.¹⁵ Cicero’s head and hands were nailed to the rostra in the Roman forum where he had served as lawyer, senator, and consul of the Roman Republic.¹⁶ He lived to see the Roman Republic become an empire, ruled by one despotically powerful *princeps* instead of many *principes*

¹³ CWE 33, 310–11.

¹⁴ My gratitude goes to Joseph Koterski and Jeffrey Lehman for this revealing grammatical point.

¹⁵ In the portrait *Sir Thomas More and His Family*, one of the three books identified is *The Consolation of Philosophy* by Boethius, another philosopher-statesman unjustly imprisoned and executed by his prince. See Illustration 7.

¹⁶ Rawson 296; Plutarch 2.441.



ILLUSTRATION 1. "Triumph of Humanitas." Title page of Seneca's collected works of 1515, the collection Erasmus edited from English manuscripts while staying with Thomas More in London.

civitatis.¹⁷ As we will see in the following chapters, these *principes* – that is, these leading or “first” citizens – were an integral part of the *humanitas* Cicero sought to advance, exemplified by Cicero’s rendition of Rome’s greatest *principes* as educated in *studia humanitatis* and trained in the arts of governing.

After the fall of the republic, Seneca continued the appeal to the leading citizens’ *humanitas* but not to the laws and *libertas* of self-governing Romans. Instead, Seneca had to appeal to the *clementia* of a despotically powerful emperor.¹⁸ As Chaim Wirszubski has shown, *libertas* requires rule by law;¹⁹ as we will see, Thomas More agreed.

The importance of Seneca during the medieval and early modern periods is witnessed by the title page of the 1515 edition of his collected works (Illustration 1), where Erasmus introduces him as “most holy” and “philosophical.” In the prefatory letter²⁰ to this large volume,²¹ Erasmus reports that “Seneca was so highly valued by St. Jerome that alone among Gentiles [Seneca] was recorded in the *Catalogue of Illustrious Authors*”;²² Jerome “thought him the one writer who, while not a Christian, deserved to be read by Christians” and “by all who aspire to a virtuous life.”²³ Years later, however, Erasmus would give even greater praise to Cicero: “Never have I more wholly approved of Quintilian’s remark that a man may know he has made progress when he begins to take great pleasure in Cicero.”²⁴ When I was a boy Cicero attracted me less than Seneca.” Erasmus then goes on to urge “the young to spend many long hours in reading him and even in learning him by heart.”²⁵

¹⁷ For the changing use of this term from the late Republic to Augustan’s conception of *princeps*, see Ogilvie 392.

¹⁸ See Seneca’s masterful appeal to Emperor Nero for *humanitas* in *De Clementia*, and especially Seneca’s praise of Augustus Caesar as “*mitis princeps*” (9.1), echoing Cicero’s similar praise of Julius Caesar at *Epistulae ad Familiares* 6.6.5.

¹⁹ For the central importance of *leges-libertas*, see Wirszubski 1954 and 1968.

²⁰ “To Thomas Ruthall,” CWE 3, Letter 325, 7 March 1515. In this letter, Erasmus expresses his gratitude for use of the manuscripts of Seneca provided by King’s College at Cambridge and by Archbishop Warham of Canterbury.

²¹ This volume is 665 large folio pages and contains Seneca’s twelve moral essays, 124 moral letters, ten books of natural questions, ten books of declamations, six books of *suasoriae* and *controversiae*, St. Jerome’s praise of Seneca, and the pseudocorrespondence between Seneca and St. Paul. It concludes with a seven-page listing of “*Senecae Proverbia*,” a twenty-one-page “*Index Locorum*,” and another snake-and-dove device (more elaborate and elegant than the one on the frontispiece) with the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin quotations that appear in the *Utopia* version of this device.

²² See St. Jerome, *On Illustrious Men* 26–27.

²³ CWE 3, Letter 325/81–83, 109–10.

²⁴ Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 10.1.112.

²⁵ CWE 10, Letter 100.

Thomas More agreed that Cicero and Seneca should be included among the greatest of classical thinkers. In defending the study of Greek at Oxford University, More wrote: "For in philosophy, apart from the works left by Cicero and Seneca, the schools of the Latins have nothing to offer that is not either Greek or translated from Greek."²⁶ What specific contributions did Cicero and Seneca make to philosophy that were distinct from the Greek?

Cicero's view of *humanitas*, that is, his philosophy of human nature and society, formed the basis for his conceptions of civic and international law and of the philosopher-rhetorician's duty as "first citizen" to be equipped with those arts needed to promote and protect justice, liberty, and peace.²⁷ This duty was based on the view that there is "no difference in kind between man and man" and that the "whole universe [is] one commonwealth"²⁸ because all human beings have reason – the view eventually written into Justinian's *Digests*²⁹ and into subsequent codes of law that Thomas More knew and defended.

Although Seneca could not appeal to such a universal code of civil law, he did consistently appeal to the principles of human nature and to the natural consequences of just and unjust behavior – most dramatically in his powerful tragedies.³⁰ Seneca affirmed, however, Cicero's arguments for *ius gentium*, the law of all peoples,³¹ and an ideal society based on friendship, justice, liberty, and peace.

For Seneca, *humanitas* is "the idea of man" (*Epistulae* 65.7) and therefore "the first thing which philosophy undertakes to give" to society (5.4). *Humanitas* forbids arrogance and greed and teaches kindness to all (88.30, 33, 35); it toils against the madness of war, crime, and cruelty (95.31–32), teaching that "man [is] an object of reverence in the eyes of man" (95.33), whether slave or master (*Epistulae* 47.10; *De Vita Beata* 24.3); it leads those in society to view themselves as "the parts of one

²⁶ CW 15, 143.

²⁷ *Ius gentium* is a fundamental theme in *De Oratore*, *De Re Publica*, and *De Legibus* and throughout his speeches. As an introduction to the complexity of Cicero's thought, see Nicgorski 1993 and Frank.

²⁸ *De Legibus* 1.30, 23.

²⁹ See especially 1.1 on "Justice and Law," 1.5 on "Human Status," and the treatment of *ius gentium* throughout.

³⁰ Seneca's *Oedipus* appears in the portrait *Sir Thomas More and His Family*, and selections from the important choral ode of the fourth act can be read in this near life-size painting. See also the quotations from Seneca's tragedies in the sixteenth-century play *Sir Thomas More* as noted in TMSB 134ff.

³¹ For example, *De Otio* 6.4 and its reference to "leges . . . toti humano generi."

great body” bound by love (*amore*) and “prone to friendship” (*Epistulae* 95.52). This view of *humanitas* Seneca saw expressed in the following lines that he wished to be in the heart and on the lips of all (9.53): “I am a man; and nothing in man’s lot / Do I deem foreign to me.” These are the famous lines of Terence that Cicero quoted and that More knew by heart, quoting them from memory while in prison.³²

Seneca repeats this praise of *humanitas* in *De Ira*, insisting upon it as a “duty” and ending with a call to “cherish *humanitas*” (2.28.2, 3.43.5). There he again develops the analogy of the body politic but extends it to the “greater city,” the *maior urbs*, of the world:

To injure one’s country is a crime; consequently, also, to injure a fellow-citizen – for he is a part of the country, and if we reverence the whole, the parts are sacred – consequently to injure any man is a crime, for he is your fellow-citizen in the greater commonwealth. (2.31.7)

As he develops this analogy, he points out again that the parts of the human community need to be united by bonds of love:

What if the hands should desire to harm the feet, or the eyes the hands? As all the members of the body are in harmony one with another because it is to the advantage of the whole that the individual members be unharmed, so mankind should spare the individual man, because all are born for a life of fellowship, and society can be kept unharmed only by the mutual protection and love [*amore*] of its parts. (2.31.7–8)

Although Seneca is the first to say explicitly that the body politic should be bound by love, he is simply advancing the concepts already developed by Aristotle and Cicero.³³

One of Seneca’s longest explanations of *humanitas* occurs in *Epistulae* 88, “On Liberal Studies”:³⁴

Humanitas forbids you to be over-bearing towards your associates, and it forbids you to be grasping. In words and in deeds and in feelings it shows itself gentle and courteous to all. It counts no evil as solely another’s. And the reason why it loves its own good is chiefly because it will some day be the good of another. (88.30)

³² Terence, *Heautontimoroumenos* 77. See Cicero’s use of this quotation in *De Officiis* 1.30 and in *De Legibus* 1.33. For More’s knowing this quotation by heart, see CW 14, 349/2–3 with its commentary.

³³ See Chapter 3.

³⁴ In Erasmus’s edition of these 124 letters, only this letter has its own entry in the table of contents, and it is a letter that More echoes in his own educational writings.

Seneca insists in this letter that liberal arts can only “*prepare* the soul for virtue.”³⁵ Because virtue is the “art to become good” (90.44), it “does not enter a soul unless that soul has been trained and taught, and by unremitting practice brought to perfection” (90.46) through free choice.³⁶ Seneca insists that our “primary art is virtue itself” (92.10) and that virtue is “nothing else than a soul in a certain condition” (113.2). What condition? The “perfected condition” of wisdom, which is “the greatest of all the arts” (104.19). In the last letter, Seneca explains that the highest human good is the free use of one’s godlike power of reason to forge “a pure and corrected soul” (124.23).³⁷ Such a soul, as we will see, is most capable of leading the “sound deliberation” that prudent first citizens foster to achieve peace, prosperity, and liberty.

Thomas More will paraphrase this same Senecan language in his own letters on education. For example, in his 1518 Letter to Oxford, More argues that liberal education “prepares the soul for virtue” and helps in acquiring “prudence in human affairs,” which “can nowhere be drawn so abundantly as from the poets, orators, and historians.”³⁸ This view of education accords with Cicero’s that the liberal “arts were devised for the purpose of fashioning [*fingerentur*] the minds of the young according to *humanitas* and virtue.”³⁹ Thomas More consistently affirmed a view of freely acquired virtue and well-trained reason based on “the inner knowledge of what is right” or “right conscience” (*recti conscientia*) that gives rise to “solid joy”⁴⁰ – a view that would bring More in radical conflict with Luther.

But why would poets, orators, and historians be superior sources of “prudence in human affairs”? Eleven years later, More would repeat and

³⁵ Seneca, *Epistulae* 88.20 (“quia animum ad accipiendam virtutem praeparant”); emphasis added. St. Basil the Great makes a similar argument, drawing upon Plato, in section 2 of his *How to Profit from Pagan Literature* (385), where he gives special place to oratory, poetry, and history – as More will do – in this preparatory process of free and deliberate choice.

³⁶ See Chapter 2 for the treatment of this essential element of human flourishing.

³⁷ Seneca’s *Epistulae* is another of the three books specifically identified in the portrait *Sir Thomas More and His Family*.

³⁸ CW 15, 139; note especially line 11: “animam ad virtutem praeparat” and compare with Seneca’s *Epis.* 88.20. More makes an extended argument about wisdom in his Letter to Gonell, TMSB 197–200 or SL 103–7 and Corr. 120–23. As seen in note 35, St. Basil the Great gives the same list of three.

³⁹ See the quotations opening this chapter. Although Crassus articulates this view in *De Oratore* 3.81, Cicero in his prefaces to these dialogues affirms the view of education that Crassus defends.

⁴⁰ TMSB 198, 199.

expand this statement by adding “laws” to these superior sources and also by indicating the special contributions of these four areas of study:

[R]eason is by study, labour, and exercise of logic, philosophy, and other liberal arts corroborate [strengthened] and quickened, and the judgement both in them and also in *orators, laws, and [hi]stories*⁴¹ much rip[en]ed. And albeit *poets* [have] been with many men taken but for painted words, yet do they *much help the judgement* and make a man among other things *well furnished of one special thing without which all learning is half lame . . . a good mother wit*.⁴²

Proper study of oratory, law, history, and poetry, More explains, will “much ripen” and “help the judgment” by making one “among other things well furnished of one special thing without which all learning is half lame.” Lucian, as Chapter 4 will indicate, is a master at revealing in most entertaining and effective ways what that “one special thing” is: prudence, clear-sighted practical wisdom; or, put in Chaucerian language, “a good mother wit.”

Why these particular arts or areas of study? Oratory is an art that requires a thorough knowledge of human nature and a thorough, detailed knowledge of a people and its culture. The same is true of law, poetry, and history. All require an expertise in *humanitas* if they are to move and affect their audience.⁴³

This expertise in *humanitas* gave rise to Seneca’s and Cicero’s view that all should be treated equal before the law and be subject, before that law, to equal rights.⁴⁴ Cicero forcefully argued that human flourishing required “liberty in law,” and he used his rhetorical powers to attempt to persuade his fellow citizens that “we are servants of the law that we might be free.”⁴⁵ Seneca, however, given the imperial despotism and ambitions for world domination of his time, had to use persuasion of another kind, but he artfully and powerfully reminded all of their common humanity and of the importance of peace.⁴⁶ Seneca’s most famous essays – “On

⁴¹ See the editor’s note at CW 6, 132/10–22.

⁴² CW 6, 131–32, emphasis added.

⁴³ Cicero develops this point throughout *De Oratore*.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Cicero, *De Officiis* 2.42 and *De Legibus* 3.44.

⁴⁵ *De Lege Agraria* 2.102; *Pro Cluentio* 146.

⁴⁶ That peace in the state is analogous to health in the body is a commonplace for Christian authors. See Augustine’s *City of God* 19.12–13, 17, 24 or Aquinas’s commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics* 1112b14 where Aquinas expands Aristotle’s remark about the end of the statesman as “enact[ing] good laws and enforc[ing] them.” Aquinas adds that “a statesman or a ruler of the state does not deliberate whether he ought to achieve peace which is compared to the state of health to the human body (health consists in the harmony of wills)” (no. 474).