

# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Founded by EDWARD C. HEGELE

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VOL. XXXI (No. 9)

SEPTEMBER, 1917

NO. 736

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SIR THOMAS MORE.

From an engraving by S. Freeman after the picture by Holbein.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## SIR THOMAS MORE.<sup>1</sup>

BY C. H. WILLIAMS.

SIR Thomas More's *Utopia* may be read and superficially enjoyed for its literary qualities. But it will not have been understood if it is dismissed as nothing more than a piece of fine imaginative writing. Its true significance can only be appreciated when the conditions to which it owed its inspiration are fully known. Any real study of the work therefore must begin with a survey of the man who wrote it and the age in which he lived.

More lived at a time when a new age was beginning (1478-1535). Medieval conditions were breaking down and new institutions, modes of life and ideas were springing up to take their place. Any one who looks somewhat closely at the foundations of English society just when the fifteenth century was yielding place to the sixteenth may detect signs of decay everywhere, even in the fundamental institutions of the medieval commonwealth. Feudalism and all that it meant to the medieval world was losing its significance. The wars of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries had depleted the ranks of the nobles, the military inventions of the period combined with the growing power of the middle classes to overthrow the importance of the military caste which had dominated English life in the earlier centuries. The lord of the district gradually shed many of his pugnacious habits through loss of military strength and was forced to dispense with a number of the retainers who had helped to win his battles and make his name a terror in the locality. These men, soldiers of fortune as they were, skilled in no trade or craft, had been cast aside by their impoverished lords: they were

<sup>1</sup> This study of More's life and period will perhaps be read with greater interest when it is remembered that last December was the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the *Utopia*.—Ed.

acceptable to no employer of labor: there lay before them no means of obtaining a livelihood by their own energies: there was nothing save a life of vagabondage in which the quickest witted and the most unscrupulous alone survived. The retainer became a vagabond and all which that term implied, a thief, a rogue, a card sharper, a cut-throat. Here was a promising nucleus around which the growing crowd of vagrants might accumulate.

Owing to their depleted resources the nobility were transformed from chivalrous knights and feudal lords into shrewd close-fisted landed gentry whose sole object was the replenishing of the family coffers and the increase of their manorial estates. The growing independence and scarcity of labor suggested neglect of arable land and the popularization of sheep farms. Success in the new enterprise was an incentive to sheep rearing on a larger scale and as this needed increased land an enclosure movement was soon in progress which snatched large tracts of the common lands of England from the people and claimed them as private property.

The enclosure movement meant the break-up of medieval rural economy. The old state of affairs when every one had his place in the manorial machine and found a means of employment no longer held good. The lower strata of rural society which had been able to eke out a fairly comfortable living by performing menial duties for the lord and enjoying the benefits of common pasturage and woodland found themselves without a hope. Their labor was no longer acceptable in the fields of their lord, there was no more common land in the district. They were ejected from their tenements to make room for a sheep run and they found themselves confronted by starvation. The situation is ably reviewed by More:

“Therefore, that one covetous and unsatiabie cormoraunte and verye plage of his natyve contrey may compasse abowte and inclose many thousand acres of grounde to gether within one pale or hedge, the husbandmen be thrust owte of their owne: orels other by coueyne or fraude, or by vyolent oppression, they be put besydes it, or by wronges and iniuries they be so weried that they be compelled to sell all. By one meanes therefore or by other, other by howke or crooke, they must nedes departe awaye, pore, sylie, wretched soules: men, women, husbandes, wyues, fatherless chyl-dren, widdowes, wofull mothers with their yonge babes, and their hole housholde smal in substaunce and in much nombre, as husbandrie requireth many handes. Away they trudge, I say, out of their knowen and accustomed howses, fynding no places to rest in. All their housholde stuffe, whiche is verye lytle worth, though it



myght well abyde the sale, yet beyng sodeynelye thrust out, they be constrayned to sell it for a thyng of nought. And when they haue, wanderynge about, sone spent that, what can they els do but steale, and then iustelye God wote, be hanged, or els go about a begging?"

To those who were unaffected by ejections and dearth of agricultural employment, to the weavers and small craftsmen of the town and countryside disaster came in the form of higher prices consequent on the small amount of land in cultivation and in scarcity of employment. When they found themselves threatened by unemployment and poverty they, like the agricultural laborers, yielded to the fascination of the large towns of whose prosperity wonderful tales were told, and sold all to come to them only to find on their arrival that conditions were as bad there as in their original homes. That was the disillusionment awaiting hundreds of respectable craftsmen on their arrival in London and the larger towns. There was nothing before them but a life of vagabondage and begging.

It was from the ranks of all these unfortunates that the pestilential army of vagabonds and sturdy beggars which was so serious a menace to Tudor society, was recruited. Nor can it be wondered at if these social outcasts, left stranded by the fluctuations of commercial development, regarded the prosperous classes as enemies whom they could justifiably rob and attack. Necessity developed to the full predatory instincts which needed little encouragement, and the state was forced to deal with the very serious menace of the vagabond problem. The legislation of the reign of Henry VIII is in itself sufficient evidence of the gravity of the problem and the violent measures adopted to meet it. The thieves, tramps, card-sharpers, tavern haunters and tricksters who were the ordinary travelers along country roads were a serious menace to the moral and physical health of the decent members of society and needed sharp and severe treatment.

The church was not of much assistance in dealing with the question. The extraordinary number of friars who swarmed the country simply increased the number of beggars and imposed on the simple villagers to a more shameful extent than the lazy wasters because they were in a position to emphasize their maledictions with scriptural tags and ecclesiastical jargon which neither they nor their frightened victims understood but which served their purpose and extorted money. It is true that the monasteries attempted to deal with the matter, but their policy of indiscriminate

charity simply aggravated the evil and justified men going on tramp by supplying them with food.

But while we criticise the church for her policy let us temper our condemnation by the reflection that the spirit was genuine even though the methods through which it worked were often foolish to the point of madness. The church did attempt to deal with a serious social problem in an age when sociology and charity organization were unknown. It was a rough age when few men had the time and less the inclination to bother with social problems. It was a time when every man had to look out for himself and the weak went to the wall. Success in life belonged to the strong body and subtle mind which could take advantage of its neighbor's infirmity. There was little sympathy for suffering, no appreciation of the causes at work behind social conditions, producing the evils which troubled the body politic. Poverty and vagabondage were not understood. A man who sank into poverty was a fool or a rogue. In either case the remedy was straightforward—whipping and body branding. Few as yet realized that poverty has its roots deep in the social conditions of the age: that the pauper is the result of heredity, environment and training rather than the author of his own unhappy lot. The legislators of the time worked upon the assumption that men became beggars by choice and upon that assumption they built up a series of penal statutes which attempted to whip poverty out of England.

It was a policy in keeping with the spirit of the age, a harsh policy which took things as they were, and tried to solve problems in a rough and ready fashion. There was no sympathy wasted in sixteenth-century police organization. Crime was crime however misdemeanors might vary, and punishment took the drastic forms of hanging, branding or burning. There was no examination of details and extenuating circumstances, no carefully regulated code of punishments. Life was rude and so was justice. Men had not yet adopted the enlightened habits of later days. The same rough spirit ran through all the life of the age. There was little attention paid to the sick. Medical study was a luxury rather than a science, hospitals were rare extravagances. Men were too busy in worldly affairs, in business and war to pay much attention to refined manners and the more sympathetic graces which ease the strain of modern life.

The time was not yet come when life was regulated by hygienic principles. Towns were small and badly planned, streets were narrow and filthy, drainage systems were only just beginning to be

recognized as essentials of civic life, houses were small and crowded together in unhealthy spots. Plague and disease were epidemical for there was little or no municipal superintendence of sanitary arrangements and hardly any inclination on the part of individuals to transform their dwellings into ideal homes or their districts into garden cities. Men lived a rough life in uncouth surroundings because they knew of nothing better and because as yet their resources did not enable them to devote time or attention to personal comforts until they had repaired a little of the damage which their fortunes had undergone in the destructive wars of earlier years. The typical man of the age was a trader keen on making his fortune and his activity gave him small time for the amelioration of social conditions.

This sixteenth-century activity quickly made itself felt. The country became prosperous. Side by side with great poverty and social distress existed growing wealth and prosperity. The few grew wealthy while the many starved. Trade increased, especially trade with the continent, and England became a rich, important and consolidated nation. The trading classes played an increasing part in the national activity and Englishmen stepped daily more and more to the front among the speculators and traders of western Europe.

Contact with the continent made Englishmen realize the supreme significance of their insular position. Europe at this time was alive with scheming diplomatists, representatives of the fully awakened entities of the Renaissance era. The Papacy, no longer a divine institution commanding the obedience of Christendom, was now a temporal principality whose representative devoted all his energies to the consolidation of a papal state. France and Spain intrigued and fought to win possessions in Italy and entered upon a long and fierce rivalry which was to be the overshadowing event of sixteenth-century history. England's position made her a neutral whose support would profoundly modify the position of either of the powers. Under Henry VIII the island kingdom definitely embarked upon a continental policy and became mixed up in all the sordid intrigues and spiteful quarrels which divided Europe for so many years.

But not all the influences consequent upon the connection with the continent were bad for England. It was through close intercourse with Europe that Englishmen were brought into touch with the remarkable revival of learning which at this period characterized the western world. The Renaissance had its home in Italy. It

was from Rome with all its radiant memories of pagan culture that western Europe heard the message of the new learning. To Rome and Italy the scholars of the continent flocked and they revelled in the glorious sunshine of intellectual enthusiasm which had burst upon the world. Under the influence of the new learning men took a new interest in knowledge. The scholar looked out upon life with the freshness of childhood and the enthusiasm of youth. He sought inspiration in the literature of the ancients and was seized by a desire for knowledge. The world of the intellect lay before him to be examined and explained. His buoyant imagination broke the chains of medieval scholasticism and soared into realms of literature and art which the monkish scholar of an earlier age had never thought of even in his wildest moments of religious frenzy. The spirit penetrated into all departments of life. Men possessed with the enthusiasm set out to explore the physical universe and discovered new lands with their strange inhabitants. They were ever on the watch for novelty, were these Renaissance men, no matter where or how it was to be found, and their lives they gladly spent in searching after truth.

England was not untouched by the new spirit. Even as early as 1491 Grocyn had returned to Oxford from Italy infected with humanism. Here he was joined by Linacre and between them they began to instil into their Oxford pupils a love of Greek literature and a desire to visit Italy, the home of the new learning. In a few years there grew up at Oxford a school of men whose lives were devoted to the new spirit and who commenced to refashion the English universities and inspire them with an enthusiasm for knowledge and culture. In 1496 Colet startled English scholars by his humanist lectures on St. Paul's Epistles and in company with Grocyn, Linacre, and Latimer formed a bold and enthusiastic band of close friends whose lives were dedicated to humanism.

\* \* \*

Among the band of colleagues whose labors were stimulated by encouraging letters when apart and by cheerful conversations then they came together was a young lawyer, Thomas More. Born in 1478 the son of Sir John More, a puisne judge of King's Bench, Thomas More's early days had been spent in the household of Cardinal Morton, Archbishop of Canterbury and Chancellor of England. In 1492 he went to Oxford where he met Colet and came under the influence of Grocyn and Latimer to whom he probably owes his enthusiasm for Greek literature. But this enthusiasm had



to be concealed from a stern unimaginative father who had destined the young man for the bar, to which profession, he contended, Greek literature was no qualification. In 1496 Thomas More was admitted a student at Lincoln's Inn where he read assiduously for a few years.

Two years later the English humanists were overjoyed to have with them in that country the great cosmopolitan man of letters, Erasmus. He was brought to England by his former pupil Lord Mountjoy, the accomplished courtier and patron of letters. Mountjoy and More were friends, and it is probable that when at London on their way to Oxford the Earl introduced his friend to the great Erasmus. A far less acute judge of character than Erasmus could not have failed to recognize the charming personality of young More, and an intimate friendship sprang up between the English lawyer and the scholar of European repute. What Erasmus thought of More is seen in a letter written about 1498-9 to a friend in which he says, "Whenever did nature mould a character more gentle, endearing and happy than Thomas More?" The influence of this friendship on the life of More will be realized at more than one point in his later career.

About the year 1500 More was called to the bar and the days of his legal studies were over. Being free to employ his time as he pleased he again took up his beloved literary studies. In 1501 he is found delivering a course of lectures on St. Augustine's *De civitate Dei* at St. Lawrence's Church, Old Jewry, where Grocyn was rector. The subject is a sufficient indication of the direction of his studies.

At the age of twenty-five (1503-4) the young lawyer was elected a Member of Parliament at a time when the country was being ruthlessly fleeced by an avaricious king. Young as he was, More spoke his mind and successfully opposed the king, reducing the grant which the latter received from the £110,000 asked to £30,000. Little wonder that the lawyer was in disgrace and passed out of English parliamentary life for the next few years. The period of his disgrace was spent by More near Charterhouse where he thought of throwing up his legal work and becoming a monk. By this time the circle of college friends was gradually drawing together again. Lilly lived with More near Charterhouse. Grocyn was rector of a London church. Linacre had become a doctor and attended the Court. Finally in 1505 Colet left his Oxford lecture-room to become dean of St. Paul's. The reunion of so many old friends all keenly interested in the same things must have had a



great deal to do with the decision that More came to of rejecting all thoughts of a monastic life. The pleasant evening chats and close intimacy with those among whom a happy college life had been spent fired his soul afresh with an enthusiasm for letters and he became once again the student.

It was about this time that More came into touch with the writings of Pico della Mirandola. That these works influenced him profoundly is clear from the fact that he translated many of them, chiefly those parts which explained Pico's religious position and advocated the contemplative life. Mention will be made at a later point of the impression the Italian made on More's life and thoughts.

On April 23, 1509, Henry VIII became king and the hopes of the English humanists rose high. Henry was a Renaissance sovereign. He numbered among his friends all the scholars of the younger generation; he was known to be responsive to the call of learning and was looked up to as a successful patron of the fine arts. English scholarship anticipated a prosperous future under a king who could appreciate the new learning.

It was with a sense of relief that More heard of the death of the old king. He could come from his seclusion and take a part again in the life of his times. He was a personal friend of Henry who, forgetful of the defiance displayed by More to the old king, hailed his approach with delight and thought of him as a valuable asset to the government. Almost immediately More was chosen Undersheriff of London, an appointment which caused great satisfaction to the Londoners who trusted More for his bold stand in 1504.

Reference has been made already on more than one occasion to the close intimacy of the little band of English scholars. This period in the life of More is an opportune occasion to illustrate the significance of the fellowship and its influence on the life and thoughts of the young man.

The year 1510 was a happy one for More. He was popular in the city where he performed his judicial duties and where he had made a comfortable home with the wife he had married in 1505. His happiness was complete when a message from Erasmus told that the wandering scholar had at last yielded to the solicitations of his English friends and was on his way from Italy to spend some time with More in England. The great man arrived and passed the first days in comparative quiet and rest after the fatigues of his journey. When health and good spirits had been recovered he

entered with great zest into the little gatherings of kindred spirits who were accustomed to come together in each other's rooms.

We may picture the company gathered at Thomas More's to meet Erasmus. The conversation probably wanders for a time on the sights the traveler has seen in Italy and the news he has of foreign affairs. Suddenly Erasmus darts out to return in a few minutes with a small manuscript. It is not hard to see the twinkle in his eyes as he prays the indulgence of the company while he gives them some of the impressions his late travels have made on his mind. He looks quizzically at his host as he explains that he has taken the liberty to call his work the *Encomium Moriae*—a delicate play on the name of his friend which wins the applause of the party and the good-tempered smile of his victim who nods indulgently and settles down for an evening's entertainment. Erasmus continues his explanations. He has painted a picture of Folly bedecked with cap and bells and making a speech to her particular friends on the world and its affairs. The reader proceeds to make good-humored attacks on all prevailing institutions. Those who watch him closely will see him raise his merry eyes from his manuscript and smile at More as he gives sly hits at lawyers, schoolmen, monks, friars, theologians. Sometimes he joins in the hearty laugh of his hearers and fails to proceed with his reading as when he speaks his mind upon the papacy, and the Roman institutions which he has been examining at close quarters during his Italian travels. In short his contribution to the evening's entertainment was a delightful satire on the age, which pleased his hearers and made them insist on its completion and publication. Such were the merry gatherings of the enlightened scholars who had clung to More since his Oxford days.

The visit of Erasmus came to an end, and with his departure More became so immersed in business that he had little time to devote to literature. His private practice increased considerably and was worth £4,000 a year. His duties as undersheriff were heavy and he was winning a solid reputation among the citizens of London. In 1515 a tribute was paid to his ability as a man of business. He was appointed a Commissioner of Sewerage, an appointment which brought him into touch with the evils of his day, the insanitary conditions of London streets and the squalid misery of the districts around his city home. The sights he saw and the knowledge he gleaned while he carried out his duties on this commission made him realize some of the great evils crying for reform and gave him material to work upon when he came to discuss the

conditions of his town and country in the work we shall later examine in detail.

It is at this period that More came forward as a leading man in English politics and business affairs. England was being drawn into many disputes with continental states, very largely through the activity of her traders and the jealousy of Flemish merchants. Consequently it was necessary in 1515 to ease the friction by a conference between English and Flemish merchants to come to some agreement about trade difficulties. Nothing would please the London merchants save the appointment of their own favorite, Thomas More as their representative at this conference and accordingly the king yielded to their wishes and appointed him along with Archdeacon Tunstal, Richard Sampson, Sir Thomas Spynelly and others to meet the Flemish ambassadors.

The party left London May 18, 1515, for Bruges. During the four months spent at this city More could not help comparing all that he saw on the continent with the sights he had been accustomed to see in London. He contrasted the streets and districts of Bruges with the mean and crowded alleys of London (to the disadvantage of the latter); he watched the growing interest in social problems and contrasted it with the apathy of Englishmen. He came to the conclusion that bad as many things were on the continent, they were not as bad as the evils existing in London, and his mind set to work. The thoughts which had been suggested to him by Erasmus crowded into his brain and he realized the great work which needed immediate attention, the work of calling Englishmen to the study of the problems of their age. Slowly, almost unconsciously, ideas took shape and there was evolved during his four months stay at Bruges, a September spent at Brussels and an October given up to the pleasant company of Peter Giles at Antwerp, a series of thoughts on the question which he committed to writing in the form of Book II of his *Utopia*.

At the end of 1515 he returned to England intending to finish his work and having promised to send a printed copy to Peter early in the new year. But his arrival in England drove all thoughts of leisure from his head. He had performed his work as a diplomatist satisfactorily. The skill he had shown in the conduct of affairs quickened the king's anxiety to win him over to himself and his government. Henry, like all the Tudors, knew a useful man when he saw one, and spared no pains to attract such a person to his Court. He urged Wolsey to win More, and the Cardinal proceeded to show how little he understood the temperament of the man with

whom he was dealing by offering More a pension as though financial considerations would have altered for a moment the attitude taken by the lawyer. Needless to say, More rejected the bribe, but he knew that slowly he was being drawn into the whirlpool of court life and official responsibility. As Erasmus said in a letter: "The king really dragged him to his court. No one ever strove more eagerly to gain admission there than More did to avoid it."

There was one thing which he wished to do before he renounced his freedom finally and gave his time and strength to the strenuous labors of royal office. It was to leave his friends an explanation of his attitude and in some ways an apology for it. This had to be done carefully and More could think of no better way of doing it than continuing the fantastic work he had written on the continent and putting his opinions on royal office in the mouth of a fictitious character. He adopted this idea and the first book of the *Utopia* was the result. In October 1516 he sent the manuscript to Erasmus who with the help of Peter Giles put it into the hands of Thierry Martin by whom the work was published in December of the same year.

It has been necessary to follow rather closely the life of More up to the publication of the *Utopia*, for that work cannot be understood or appreciated without a knowledge of the events which led to its publication. It is the irrelevancy of the later years of More's life to the subject under examination rather than lack of interest which prevents an account of the man Thomas More until his death in 1535. It would be a pleasant task to watch the quick promotion of the undersheriff of London when finally he gave his decision to enter the royal service: 1523, Speaker of the House of Commons; 1525, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; 1529, Lord Chancellor of England. Nothing would be more pleasing than to watch him perform his judicial duties to the delight of the crowd of suitors whom he put at ease within his court. Nor is it difficult to understand the satisfaction he gave when one remembers the maxim which guided him in his judicial duties: "If the parties will at my hands call for justice, then were it my father stood on one side and the devil on the other the devil should have his right if his cause were good." (Roper, *Life of More*, p. 12.)

But such scrupulous justice was not always the surest road to Henry VIII's favor. He preferred a royal partisan to an unbiassed and incorruptible judge. It was plain to More that he had not satisfied the hopes Henry cherished about him. He was not sufficiently pliable to the royal will, so in 1532 he resigned the Chan-



cellorship. Another interesting problem would be the intolerance which marked More's public life, his persecution of religious heresy and his bigoted Catholicism; but as it does not bear directly on our subject it must be ignored.

It is not pleasant to watch the clouds of ruin and adversity overcast the twilight hours of a well-spent life; least of all is it bearable in the case of a man of such outstanding virtues and delightful temperament as Sir Thomas More. Already suspect because of his views on the divorce question, the year 1534 found him in disfavor because of a trumped-up charge of implication in the case of a religious fanatic—the Holy Maid of Kent. True, More's name was grudgingly removed from the bill of attainder but the mud stuck and he never regained royal favor. His failure to support the bill for the limitation of succession finally ruined him. On July 1, 1535, he was brought to trial after fifteen months of imprisonment, and on the 6th he paid the penalty of his convictions with death.

One of the saddest sights in English history is that picture of the old man torn against his will from the studies he had loved, and now after a life of service cast out by an ungrateful king. One could linger long and lovingly over the last few scenes of the life. The heart goes out in sympathy to his favorite daughter as she bids her father farewell and receives his gentle comfort: "Patience, Meg, and grieve not, for God hath willed it thus." One marvels at the fortitude of the old man a few days later as he climbs the scaffold and even then cannot refrain from a joke. "Friend, see me safe up, I prithee, and for my coming down let me fend for myself." Or again as he raised his head on the block and smilingly explained his desire to remove his beard from out of the way of the axe for "that at least is innocent of treason."

More died as he had lived, a happy English gentleman resolutely determined to face life with its difficulties or death with its mysteries and to be surprised at nothing which came his way. A glance at his portrait reveals the man. The strong features explain his success in life. Here is one with views of his own and a dignity which impressed all who came in touch with him. More could be strong and stern when the occasion demanded it. He could be fired by a holy indignation and be angry for a righteous cause, but he could not let the sun go down upon his wrath. Even as he thundered out his stern commands those kindly eyes of his twinkled reassuringly to tell the victim that his wrath was not so awful as it might at first appear to be. The stern set face was brightened



suddenly by the smile which all the while had hovered round his lips and the angry mood was gone, dismissed by a kindly word; a little jest and all was sunshine once again. For More could not be dour and gloomy. He always saw the comic element in life. He loved a joke. He was always teasing his friends, playing with them mischievously and acting for all the world as though he were a schoolboy once again. That is the secret of his wonderful family life and the affection which his children bore him. It is the secret, too, of most of his writings, particularly the *Utopia*. No one can hope to understand that work who does not remember that More never could be serious or stern for long. He was always jesting and if a great deal of what he wrote in the *Utopia* reveals the man's indignation at things as they were it is important to bear in mind that much was purely mischievous fun deliberately written for the enjoyment of his colleagues, fun which More did not mean to be taken seriously and which his friends who most enjoyed the work did not attempt to construe according to the letter. Behind the idea they saw the man with his quizzical smile, and they forgave much for they remembered that Thomas More would always have his little joke.

He was typical of the Renaissance thinkers, witty, courteous, versatile, above all lovable. In him met the man of the world and the student, the politician and the philosopher, the social reformer and the lawyer. His time **was** spent in dealing with hard facts of life and knotty legal questions in an English law-court. The remarkable thing is that he did not become as abstract and serious as the facts which which he dealt. He still retained his early enthusiasms and youthful ideals. He was a visionary who never lost himself in the fairy lands to which his fancy led him. He always returned from his imaginative wanderings to a world of cold hard facts and tried to adapt the visions he had seen and the dreams he had dreamed to the realities of life around him. He was a shrewd observer of life in the concrete and that happiest of all combinations, a visionary who is also a man of the world.