Pieter Gillis Lecture 2016

*Utopia*, a Republic of Letters

Hythloday tells the character of More that to approach the island of Utopia is to risk death; only someone who already knows its secrets can reach its hallowed shores. We might say the same for the book itself; for almost 500 years scholars have puzzled over this text, trying to work out its secrets. At the same time, we have every reason to believe that the audience for which More intended his text, the humanist scholars of sixteenth-century Europe, understood its meaning far more clearly than we do.

By understanding *Utopia* as a continuation of the themes central to the collective work of Erasmus and More, this talk not only explores *Utopia* in the context of the humanist Republic of Letters, but demonstrates it to be a literal ‘Republic *of Letters*’ to be shared amongst its members. In *Utopia*, More presents a central humanist theme, that of prizing what can be held in common over what is one’s own, leading to reflections on friendship, politics and mortality. In the end, to approach *Utopia* is indeed to face death, acknowledging our common fate, and our essential equality.