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MORE'S *RICHARD III* :
A "SATIRICAL DRAMA"? *

In her recent *Richard III and His Early Historians*,¹ Alison Hanham seeks "to re-evaluate the historical evidence about Richard's deeds and intentions", and to discover through chronicles and histories written between 1483 and 1535 "how the literary Richard came into being" (p.1). Of special interest to students of More is her discussion of his *History of King Richard III*,² which enjoys an uneasy prominence in the scheme of her book. Hanham discusses most of her texts against her own reconstruction of the rise and fall of Richard. As historical works they are judged on their reliability as evidence. But More's *History* is treated differently. Hanham argues that it should not be read as a source of information about Richard, but rather as a "literary" work under the rubric of "satirical drama". This account allows a number of perceived historical deficiencies -- such as uncorroborated, exaggerated and palpably factitious reports -- to be explained in terms of More's "literary purpose" (p.166). But is this an appropriate reading of the work?

Dramatic interpretation of the *History* is not new. Hanham joins what has become a minor tradition.³ A.F. Pollard was its primogenitor, although others had noticed the dramatic qualities of the *History* long before he wrote. Pollard, however, developed the dramatic aspect into an explanatory device to cover the factual deficiencies of the work. To quote him, "if More's *Richard III* is primarily dramatic, the question of fidelity to historical fact hardly arises".⁴ Yet, despite its suggestiveness, Pollard's device has little explanatory power. In effect it distracts attention from the problems of treating the work as a history by emphasizing its literary qualities. It appears plausible because its metaphorical nature is understated and it passes as a genuine alternative category to history.

Hanham is confronted with similar problems about the

historicity of the *History*, but she is less cautious than Pollard in proposing her solution. She goes beyond metaphor to present an act and scene analysis of the text. This is her undoing, for it destroys the illusion of a genuine alternative category yet gives no critical purchase on the work in return. On Hanham's reading the *History* must literally become a drama. Yet simply to relate its details under the divisions of act and scene cannot make it so. Nor will reference, in the vein of Pollard, to More's sustained interest in drama make the term less of a misnomer. Indeed, given his interest and evident ability, it is clear that if More had wanted to write a drama instead of a history he could have done so. To insist that he accomplished this under the elastic label of "history" is merely to exploit the equivocations of the term, not to demonstrate the case.

Dr. Hanham's interpretation becomes even less plausible when she characterizes More's "drama" as a "comedy" in which "the leading players all make fools of themselves. Richard and Buckingham are sheer figures of farce" (p. 182). Her later clarification of "comedy" is hardly a qualification: the *History* "is, by the medieval definition of the word, a comedy because it ends happily for the central figure" (p. 188). That Richard and Buckingham are figures of farce is difficult enough to entertain, but the claim that Richard comes to a happy end defies explanation. His fall is graphically, albeit briefly, anticipated even though it is not reached chronologically and related in detail.⁵ Moreover, to impose this classification on the text in virtue of its unfinished state is simply perverse. For the historiographer the decoy of drama becomes more dangerous under the guise of comedy.

It seems that Dr. Hanham's two strands of enquiry have become conflated. In her determination to establish the facts of Richard's reign she applies the standards of evidence proper to her craft; but in interpreting her texts she expects to find the same standards at work. It is one thing, however, to assess the reliability of a text and its usefulness to the modern historian, and quite another to evaluate it on its own terms. Yet all of Hanham's chosen works are interpreted according to modern historical

conventions, that is, how fully, objectively and fairly each presents its information. Such conventions are presumed to guarantee authentic historical texts, and even writers like Polydore Vergil who do not quite satisfy them may be commended for trying (p. 125-9). More, of course, diverges from Hanham's standards and must be read not as an historian but as a literary artist. Hence Roger Ascham is called "unrealistic" for holding "More up as a model for historians" (p. 189). But if Ascham is to be so judged it cannot be because he failed to apply nineteenth and twentieth century criteria. Indeed, Hanham can only chasten Ascham in ignorance or defiance of Tudor principles of history writing: he at least was in possession of the appropriate conventions for evaluating a contemporary work.

Hanham's application of her own scholarly standards of approval is particularly regrettable in the case of More. She is clearly aware of the need for other criteria when she discusses the *History* in terms of "poetic truth" (p. 160) and "fictitious Truth" (p. 170). Yet she is unable to untangle her two strands of enquiry sufficiently to look upon the work as a document to be understood in the context of its time rather than in that of a debate which came later. For all her appreciation of the literary and rhetorical qualities of More's work, Hanham does not explore the Tudor notion of history sufficiently to realize that such qualities were implied in it. The authenticity of More's Tudor history is vouchsafed by the very features which may make it "the least authentic" (p. 189) to a modern historian. There is, then, no need to resort to drama. Rather than the invocation of this misleading category, one might have expected some exploration of the connexions between history and rhetoric in the early Tudor period, in the vein, perhaps, of Nancy Struever's *Language of History in the Renaissance*. But this would be only one way of affirming More's role as an historian. The real objection here is to his displacement at the prompting of anachronistic demands.

Hanham's discussion of the "central problem (of) More's intentions" is equally unsatisfactory (p. 155-161). The *History*, she claims, "forms a Lucianic and so irreverent comment on the

whole craft of history" (p.155). At other places she suggests that it specifically parodies Tudor propaganda (p.157, 159, 160). Hence, Polydore Vergil's "new historical methods were at once the inspiration and the butt of More's *History*" (p.146). But why would More wish to parody his contemporaries in this way; is he to be credited with an historiographical prescience which enabled him to regard them as worthy objects of satire? If so, why did he invite his audience to overlook his parody by choosing a subject and style designed to excite serious political interest more than amusement? In short, if More was sending up the historians of his time he was too subtle: nobody until Dr. Hanham got the joke.

Illustration takes the place of evidence to support the parody thesis. Hanham takes More's catalogue of Richard's crimes⁶ based on what "wise men" "ween" and "deem" and argues that it is a "parody of the kind of argument put forward by contemporary 'Richard experts'... frequently cited by Vergil..." (p.157). Hence the irony of the statement which follows the list: "But of al this pointe, is there no certaintie, & whoso diuineth vppon coniectures, maye as wel shote to farre as to short."⁷ But this irony cuts another way, as the larger context reveals. For More continues, "How beit this haue I by credible informacion learned...", and he rehearses the Pottyer incident. As a whole, then, the irony of the passage reinforces the credibility of the Pottyer report. For if the previous information, showing Richard even during King Edward's reign "forethought to be king", was uncertain, the better testimony of the Pottyer informant substantiates the point. Whether Richard really did aim at the throne long before Edward's death is immaterial. More's immediate concern is the exposition of Richard's malevolent desires and evil character, and these are represented according to proper rhetorical canons, as consultation of Erasmus or Thomas Wilson will show⁸.

Why should Hanham have interpreted this passage as parody? Again the answer lies in her use of inappropriate criteria: she looks for logical rather than rhetorical proofs (p.157). And

assumes that More's reasoning should follow her own:

If Richard had, "as they deem", been aiming at the throne even before the death of Clarence, he was remarkably optimistic and unbelievably foresighted... More has the effrontery to espouse the ... improbable and unprovable ... idea that Richard had aimed at the throne for over five years when four people had a better claim. In proof of this he offers one of the "conjectures" whose validity he has just denied, a casual prophecy by one of Gloucester's men ... (p.158).

The Mystlebrook-Pottyer episode is then quoted. Pottyer's exclamation on hearing of the death of Edward IV -- "then wyll my mayster the Duke of Gloucester bec kyng"⁹ -- provokes strange reasoning from Dr. Hanham: "The point at issue... is not in fact the veracity of the story, but what possible relevance it can have -- how a member of Richard's household could have 'any inkling' of his secret intentions" (p.158). One might reverse this line and ask, who better than a member of Richard's household to be privy to his ambitions. Nor is his exclamation a "casual prophecy", but the justifiable exclamation of one "toward" Richard. And Pottyer's remark is not presented as "evidence" -- in Hanham's sense -- but as the culmination of a series of rhetorical proofs of the Duke's "ambicion". Its relevance is not in doubt. What Hanham sees as "remarkably optimistic and unbelievably foresighted" in Richard's aim, given that "four people had a better claim", is a demonstration of how strong and diabolical that ambition was.

Hanham's account of More's intentions is unconvincing then, because her standards of judgment are irrelevant. Despite references to the rhetoric of humanist history writing (p.144) and the "literary" qualities of the *History* (e.g. p.166, 170, 188-90), she does not bring an appreciation of rhetoric to her reading. Similarly, other aspects of authorial intention are raised but not pursued. Hence, she notes that More "was ... well aware of the political uses of history" (p.159), but stops short of suggesting that the *History*, like the works it supposedly parodies, is political

too. She characterizes the work as a "life of the tyrant on the lines perhaps of Tacitus or Suetonius" (p.160), but only at the very end of her book does she allow that More

saw King Richard as a personification of that tyranny which he loathed with an intensely personal hatred. In his creative purpose, Richard becomes the symbolic figure in a moral story (p.195).

Hanham does not, however, elucidate this moral story or explore its political implications. Yet by her own suggestion, this aspect of More's intentions merits closer inspection than she accords it.

If, as Hanham claims, More's achievement in the *History of King Richard III* has been misunderstood and undervalued (p.153-155), her own interpretation does little to redress matters. It is punctuated with inconsistencies and equivocations¹⁰: More is not to be used as a source (p.155-6), but is used by her as one (p.3, 8, 13). A suggestive metaphor leads her to an analysis of the work which emphasises only style as important and neglects a thorough investigation of More's intentions. Anachronism flaws her arguments as they develop: she is unable to free herself of her own canons of scholarly approval to evaluate her authors on their own terms. In short, if the *History* is to be properly understood, it requires a more penetrating and historically informed elucidation than Hanham provides under the pseudo-classification of satirical drama.

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1 Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1975. All page numbers in the text refer to this work.

2 *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 2, ed. R.S. Sylvester, New Haven, 1963.

3 See A.F. Pollard, "The Making of Sir Thomas More's *Richard III*" in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait*, ed. J.G. Edwards et al., Manchester, 1933, p. 223-238; T.G. Heath, "Another Look at Thomas More's *Richard III*", *Moreana*, 19-20, 1968, p. 11-19; A.N. Kincaid, "The Dramatic Structure of Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*", *Studies in English Literature*, 12, 1972, p. 223-242. The volume of *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Germain Marc'hadour, Hamden, 1977, reprints the essays of Pollard (p. 421f.) and Kincaid (p. 375f.).

4 "The Making of ... *Richard III*", p. 231.

5 *CW* 2, 87/4-21.

6. See *ibid.* 8/13-9/5.

7. *Ibid.* 9/5-7.

8. See Erasmus' *On copia of Words and Ideas*, ed. and transl. D.B. King and H.D. Rix, Milwaukee, 1963, p.45, on the characterization of "a monster"; and Thomas Wilson, *The Arte of Rhetorique*, Gainesville, Fla., 1962, whose example of "Description of person", Richard III, could have been taken straight from More, p.202.

9. *CW* 2, 9/12-13.

10. A more thorough discussion of Hanham's equivocations is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to state here that Hanham's failure to distinguish clearly her two sets of critical criteria leads to a muddled conception not only of More's work but of that of other authors. For example, she castigates Polydore Vergil for inaccuracy and the introduction of fiction into his narrative (p.130), while acknowledging that he "was not writing 'scientific history'" (p.132-3). Later she talks of his history as "an enquiry" (p.155). Having drawn attention to the "fictional", "poetic", "imaginative" and "feigned" character of More's *History*, she discusses its possible sources in terms of a scholarly pursuit of materials (p.161-166): "if More systematically canvassed surviving witnesses there is much they failed to reveal" (p.163).

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

For More, no less than for Shakespeare, the drama of real life is performed on a stage – "upon scaffolds" as it says in *The History of Richard III* (*CW* 2, p. 81/7). In "Lancelot Andrewes: Renaissance Preacher" Trevor Owen, *Selected Papers from the West Virginia Shakespeare and Renaissance Association* (Spring 1976), shows (pp. 56-57) the Anglican bishop (d. 1626) appropriating the simile, "probably from Petronius":

Andrewes declares that, "The heathen man long since observed, that *Mundus scena*, that in his conceit 'the world for all the world was like a stage or theatre,' scarce a true face in it, all in a manner personate" (I. 406).

Andrewes frequently uses the metaphor of the theater. In one of his Nativity sermons, for example, when he discusses the glory of the Word becoming flesh, he compares the life of Jesus to a theatrical spectacle. In commenting on the events of the life of Jesus, Andrewes says, "All which they saw, as being in the theatre all the while from the epitasis to the very catastrophe" (I. 95).

And it is surprising for the modern reader to find, embedded in one of Andrewes's sermons on the Passion, a brief quotation from a Latin comedy. Here Andrewes, in describing the shame of the scourging of Jesus, quotes a brief line of dialogue from Terence: "Loris? Liber Sum" (II. 172). ("The Whip? I am free.")

MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS,

by a Scots amica

Books of non-Morean content written by friends of Thomas More are grouped in a special section of our Moreanum library. There you will find E.E.R.'s works on Bossuet, Wordsworth or heraldics, N. Barker's life of Stanley Morison, Daniel Sargent's *Four Independents*, etc. The latest accretion to this "friends' corner" is a historical novel of generous bulk (426 pages) which I discovered on the shelves of Dalton Haughey, and secured – with some difficulty, because it is out of print – from the author, Margot Robert Adamson. The title, *A ROPE OF SAND* (London, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1965), comes from an old ballad quoted on p. 152 and p. 265 :

They could not bind nor burn him

Till they made a rope of sand.

Mary Stuart, suppressed by Henry VIII's daughter, is not far in time or space from More's world. Her chief interlocutor in Chapter I, Abbot Quintin Kennedy, has been featured, as character and as author, in *Moreana* (nos. 5, 6, 7). The shadow of the murdered Cardinal Beaton, a poor man's Wolsey, repeatedly crosses the stage. A sprinkling of Scotch idiom flavors the whole banquet, but the queen, if not her kingdom, still clings to unbroken Christendom ; so, in addition to a few quaint Tudorisms, you encounter Paris and Petrarch, an occasional French phrase or "pope-latin refrain", especially that moving colophon of the *Te Deum* : "In te, Domine, speravi, non confundar in aeternum" (Ps. 30:2 and 70:1), Elizabeth I (on p. 379) ponders the motto she learned from Ascham : "*Aut fer, aut feri. Ne feriaris, feri* : Either suffer or strike. Not to be struck, strike." Antipodic to this stance and spirit is the mood of Elizabeth's victim in the final scene when, after the death-sentence has been passed, Jane Kennedy, opening at random the book of the lives of the saints, hits upon the legend of "Desmas the Penitent Thief". More's Messenger in the 1529 *Dialogue* had caricatured Dismas as the saint thieves call upon "to speed them well in their robbery" (Book I, Ch. 10). But, as the fully forgiven sinner, the *latro poenitens* was the patron of every christian in need of pardon, which meant everyman ; he figures prominently and re-assuringly in both the *Dies Irae* and the *Adorate* ; he appears time and again in More's work (see my *Bible Repertory* under Luke 23 : 40). The Queen of Scots belongs to the same tradition :

"Could there be a better patron?" Mary Stuart had laughed. "He came errant and late, much more so I." (p. 412).

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