

## THOMAS MORE'S *UTOPIA* AND THE « TRAGEDY » OF POLONIUS.

In Book II of More's *Utopia*, Hythlodæus has the following to say about decision making in the Utopian senate :

It is provided that nothing concerning the commonwealth be ratified if it has not been discussed in the senate three days before the passing of the decree....

In addition, the senate has the custom of debating nothing on the same day on which it is first proposed but of putting it off till the next meeting. This is their rule lest anyone, after hastily blurring out the first thought that popped into his head, should afterwards give more thought to defending his opinion than to supporting what is good for the commonwealth, and should prefer to jeopardize the public welfare rather than to risk his reputation through a wrongheaded and misplaced shame, fearing he might be thought to have shown too little foresight at the first....<sup>1</sup>

While we do not know for certain that Shakespeare read the *Utopia*, it is unlikely that he would have been ignorant of one of the most important books of his period -- all the more so, since we do know that he concerned himself with the life and career of the author of that work in *Sir Thomas More*.<sup>2</sup> But whatever the truth of the matter may be, it seems as if the fortunes of Polonius in *Hamlet* are almost a dramatization of the error against which More warned in the passage from *Utopia* cited above. For within the greater tragedy of *Hamlet* lies the lesser tragedy of Polonius. Polonius is a professional wise man -- a highly respected counsellor, who has been held over from the previous reign by the most able character in the play, Claudius. Against Hamlet's assessment that Polonius is a fool, there stand the views of his father and his uncle. Not too many counsellors in any period can ask

Hath there been such a time...

That I have positively said « 'Tis so, »

When it proved otherwise ?

to receive the answer

Not that I know (II.ii.153-155).<sup>3</sup>

Since there is no mention in the play of Claudius having ever been exiled from court -- rather, all indications point to his having been very much present -- this typically cautious statement of the previous king's brother is certainly not a profession of ignorance but a flat endorsement.

Whether the above attitude can be dignified by the term *hubris* is debatable, but Polonius is tested precisely on that quality he considers

his greatest strength -- his wisdom, and he fails the test : the dramatically ironic

[Pointing to his head and shoulders]

Take this from this, if this be otherwise ; (II.ii.156)

is grimly played out ; he dies because of his folly.

Polonius has fallen into the fatal error More cautioned against : that of jumping to a conclusion -- that the cause of Hamlet's « madness » is Ophelia's rejection of his love<sup>4</sup> -- and then investing that rash opinion with his ego and refusing to give it up, until it leads him to search for confirmation to the Queen's bedchamber -- and his death. Not only does he no longer understand what others say to him, such as Gertrude's « More matter with less art » (II.ii.95), but he also no longer understands even what he himself says. For the ultimate irony of his advice to Laertes, « To thine own self be true » is not that as a general maxim it is shallow nonsense, but rather that for the speaker himself it was excellent advice. Had Polonius been true to himself, he would have continued to act with that wisdom which had earned him the respect of the two monarchs he had served. His « tragedy » is that in his folly he has failed to follow his own advice.

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1. Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J. and J.H. Hexter (*The Yale Edition of the Complete Works*. Vol. 4, New Haven and London, 1965), pp. 123-125.

2. See three notes in *Moreana*, XVIII, 71/72 (November 1981) : Thomas Merriam, « The Strange Case of *Sir Thomas More*. » 113-114 ; Clare M. Murphy, « Triptych on *Sir Thomas More* : A Review of Recent Scholarship, » 115-126 ; Marie-Claude Rousseau, « *Sir Thomas More* : Une énigme résolue ? » 155-164. See also George T. Wright, « Can *Sir Thomas More* be by Shakespeare ? » *Moreana*, XIX, 75/76 (December 1982), 89-90.

Shakespeare was, of course, also influenced by More's depiction of Richard III, which came down to him through Grafton, Halle, and Holinshed. For the most recent suggestion concerning the link between More and Shakespeare, see Thomas Merriam, « Did Shakespeare Model Camillo in *The Winter's Tale* on *Sir Thomas More* ? » *Moreana*, XIX, 75/76 (December 1982), 91-101.

3. See *Shakespeare -- The Complete Works*, ed. G.B. Harrison (New York, 1952). All subsequent references are to this edition.

4. Polonius did not originally hold this opinion. At first he thought that Hamlet was only trifling with Ophelia (I.iii.101-136), and for this reason ordered her to have no further meetings with the Prince. But after Ophelia describes Hamlet's bizarre reaction to this rejection, Polonius changes his mind and concludes that Hamlet really does love Ophelia and that the rejection has driven him mad (II.i.75-119). Not too surprisingly, Polonius is willing to admit error to his daughter, but not to Claudius and Gertrude.