

The MOREAN Counsellor in Shakespeare's Last Plays *

The conjunction of these two names, Thomas More and William Shakespeare, can hardly be called a commonplace in either Morean or Shakespearian scholarship. True, in the past fifty years or so the hand of Shakespeare has been detected in the writing of certain scenes of the manuscript play of *Sir Thomas More*, and this view has long since been confirmed from a literary point of view by R.W. Chambers. More recently, in the pages of *Moreana* and elsewhere, Tom Merriam, on the basis of close computer analysis, has ascribed the whole play to Shakespeare. But if we confine ourselves to the generally accepted canon of Shakespeare's plays, based on the First Folio of 1623, plus *Pericles* (which was first recognized in the Third Folio of 1664), where, we may ask, is there any shadow or sign of Morean influence ?

To begin with, there is the one explicit reference to More in the last of Shakespeare's history plays, *Henry VIII*. Here, in answer to Cromwell's curt announcement, "Sir Thomas More is chosen / Lord Chancellor in your place," Wolsey makes the gracious reply :

That's somewhat sudden;
 But he's a learned man. May he continue
 Long in his highness' favour, and do justice
 For truth's sake and his conscience ; that his bones,
 When he has run his course and sleeps in blessings,
 May have a tomb of orphans' tears wept on 'em. (iii.2)

The tone of this reply is certainly laudatory; but that is all. No further mention of More is made in the play; and this one mention contributes nothing to the development of either plot or characterization. If the words were quietly omitted from the play, they would leave no special gap. In any case, when we study the words more attentively, we

★ Presented to "A Scholar for all Seasons: a Renaissance Colloquium honoring Abbé Germain Marc'hadour," organized by Charles Daniel and Clare M. Murphy at the University of Rhode Island, on November 19, 1988.

notice a certain prosaic quality about them, apart from the metaphorical "tomb of orphans' tears", which is unparalleled by anything else in Shakespeare. Then, too, the verse endings are, with the one exception of "bones", monotonously feminine, in keeping with much of the verse in this play. It is, in fact, this remarkable predominance of feminine endings in *Henry VIII* that has led Shakespearian scholars from the time of James Spedding in the Victorian age to divide the authorship of this play between Shakespeare and a younger dramatist such as John Fletcher (who particularly indulged in such endings). When this division is made in detail, the scene in which mention is made of More is generally ascribed to the younger dramatist.

Now, after ruling out these two obvious connections between More and Shakespeare, I prefer to dwell on less obvious but more revealing connections, while taking for my point of departure the same play of *Henry VIII*, in so far as it is recognizably Shakespearian. Here the central character is not so much the king, who remains a strange, shadowy figure in the background, but the queen, Katharine of Aragon, on whose role Dr. Johnson acutely observed: "The genius of Shakespeare comes in and goes out with Katharine."

(In parenthesis, it is worthy of note that until he came to the composition of this play, Shakespeare had never touched on Tudor England in his drama. In his history plays he looks back to the mediaeval period of English history, culminating in the battle of Bosworth, when Richard III was overthrown by Henry Tudor. In his other plays, whether comedies or tragedies, he seems to avoid the matter of England — except in the comedy of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, as a sequel to the two Parts of *Henry IV*, by way of showing (according to the tradition of the queen's request) "Falstaff in love". As for the tragedies of *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*, they have their setting not in England, which only appeared in the fifth century A.D., but in ancient Britain. Thus it is only at the end of his dramatic career, under a different dynasty on the English throne, that Shakespeare ventured to deal with a more contemporary subject, and one so delicate as the reign of Henry VIII. Then, at the very threshold of his play, he announces this subject in the ominous words of the Prologue:

I come no more to make you laugh: things now
That bear a weighty and a serious brow,
Sad, high and working, full of state and woe,
Such noble scenes as draw the eye to flow,
We now present.)

What, we may ask, are these "things" the dramatist "now" goes on to present? Viewed as a whole, the play may be said to consist of a series of tragic downfalls: first, of the noble Duke of Buckingham, and then of the nobler Queen Katharine, both of whom appear as innocent, and finally of Cardinal Wolsey, who has largely engineered the preceding downfalls. From then onwards, however, the movement is no longer downwards to tragedy, but upwards to a happy ending in which the eye is no longer drawn to flow. What is perhaps most noteworthy in the play, for all its opening profession of sadness, is the absence of any reference to the religious changes that attended "the king's great matter" and to the subsequent ruin of so many monasteries, mentioned in *Sonnet* lxxiii as "bare ruin'd choirs where late the sweet birds sang". But in the final scene Cranmer comes out with his glowing prophecy of the glorious reign of Elizabeth, when, he says, "God shall be truly known" — with obvious approval of her religious policy. Still, this is a scene which, it may be added, definitely falls on the non-Shakespearian side of the above-mentioned division.

For my present purpose, I wish to concentrate, not on the pathetic closing scene of Katharine, in which she is granted a heavenly vision of angels (a scene which, incidentally, is often ascribed to the young collaborator), but on the more central trial scene in which "the king's great matter" comes to a head. There the queen enters and pleads her cause with dignity. She is, she confesses, "a most poor woman, and a stranger, / Born out of your dominions"; but she insists she has ever been to the king "a true and humble wife", while proudly claiming to be "a queen... the daughter of a king". Finally, before the assembled court, she makes her formal "appeal unto the pope" (ii.4).

These words of Katharine are significant not only in themselves, whether in relation to the play as a whole or to its historical setting, but also in relation to the previous play of *The Winter's Tale*. For here we are introduced to another sad queen, Hermione, brought to trial on an unjust charge of adultery by her jealous husband, Leontes, king of Sicilia.

(Here, again in parenthesis, I may note that Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* is based on Robert Greene's pastoral romance *Pandosto*, where the main events take place in Bohemia, with a pastoral interlude in Sicilia. In his play Shakespeare has strangely inverted the order of these two countries, with the main events leading up to Hermione's trial in Sicilia, followed by an interlude in Bohemia; and it is because of this inversion that he falls into the celebrated anomaly of providing Bohemia with a sea-coast (which it never had in history). As for the reason of this strange

inversion, I would point to the geographical similarity between Sicilia (the Greek Trinacria) and the three-cornered isle of England, thus implying a contemporary reference of the play, which is what I wish to demonstrate.)

Anyhow, to return to the trial of Hermione, she too, like Katharine, defends herself before the court with impressive dignity, maintaining that her "past life / Hath been as continent, as chaste, as true, / As I am now unhappy". She, too, boasts of being "a great king's daughter"; and she finally makes her appeal "to the oracle" of Apollo (iii.1). On the other hand, in contrast to this similarity between the two queens, there is an evident difference between the two kings and the causes of trial. Katharine is summoned to her trial, not because Henry has anything against her personal conduct, but because (as Suffolk pointedly remarks) "his conscience has crept too near another lady" (ii.2). Leontes, however, has conceived jealousy against his wife for no good reason, save as an outbreak of his psychological illness. So his fault is clearly shown up by the oracle; whereas the fault of Henry remains in obscurity to the end of the play. One conjectures that the dramatist felt freer to express his private feelings about Henry under the indirect guise of Leontes, whose name is reminiscent of More's famous description of Henry as the "lion" who might well prove dangerous to the kingdom once he came to realize the full extent of his strength.

Now let me turn to another character of *The Winter's Tale*, the wise counsellor Camillo. In him the jealous Leontes states his complete trust in a notable prelude :

I have trusted thee, Camillo,
With all the nearest things to my heart, as well
My chamber-councils, wherein, priest-like, thou
Hast cleans'd my bosom : I from thee departed
Thy penitent reform'd (i.2)

Then, however, Leontes seeks to persuade Camillo both to consent to his evil suspicion against Hermione and to be his accomplice in revenge against his imagined rival, Polixenes, king of Bohemia. Camillo, for his part, while trying to dissuade his royal master against such a suspicion, is too diplomatic to oppose him openly and gives a seeming consent. Then he goes on to warn Polixenes of his imminent danger and together they flee the realm for the safer land of Bohemia, while poor Hermione is left to face her fate.

Considering this parallel between *The Winter's Tale* and *Henry*

VIII, who, one may well ask, is the historical counterpart of Camillo in Henry's England but Sir Thomas More? He was for many years Henry's most trusted counsellor, in whose company the king delighted, even to the extent of visiting More at his home in Chelsea. In More one may even see something "priest-like", in his early thoughts of the priesthood and the religious life, in his continued custom of wearing a hair-shirt and in his delight in serving at the altar of his parish church in Chelsea. Subsequently, he fell from the king's favour in connection with his support of Katharine and his unwillingness to recognize Anne Boleyn as the true wife of Henry.

There, leaving the character of Camillo and the play of *The Winter's Tale*, let me turn to the character of another faithful counsellor, Gonzalo, who appears in Shakespeare's next tragi-comedy or romance, *The Tempest*. He, too, is addressed by Prospero, former Duke of Milan, in words that are strangely reminiscent of those in which Leontes expressed his trust in Camillo :

Holy Gonzalo, honourable man...
Let me embrace thine age, whose honour cannot
Be measur'd or confin'd. (v.1)

This holiness of Gonzalo is subsequently illustrated in the same scene by the prayer he pronounces over Ferdinand and Miranda, in whose union their happy fathers – Alonso king of Naples and Prospero – formerly enemies, are finally reconciled :

Look down, you gods,
And on this couple drop a blessed crown;
For it is you that have chalk'd forth the way
Which brought us hither. (v.1)

This holiness of Gonzalo, however, only appears in him at the end of the play. What stands out at the beginning is rather his whimsical humour, even in the extreme danger of shipwreck amid the tempest from which the play takes its name. Then in the teeth of the foul-mouthed boatswain, who shouts, "What care these roarers for the name of king?", Gonzalo wryly comments :

I have great comfort from this fellow : methinks he hath
no drowning mark upon him : his complexion is perfect gallows.
Stand fast, good Fate, to his hanging! Make the rope of his destiny
our cable, for our own doth little advantage! If he be not
born to be hanged, our case is miserable. (i.1)

At the end of this brief scene, when the ship is already splitting on the rocks, he concludes with the prayer: "The wills above be done! But I would fain die a dry death" – as it were echoing the similarly wry humour of Sir Thomas More on the very scaffold of his execution.

The parallel with More particularly appears when the royal party, who have come on this voyage, find themselves all (except prince Ferdinand) safely on the shore of the magic island. As for the location of the island, it is (within the terms of the play) somewhere between Tunis and Naples; but (in terms of Shakespeare's source) it recalls the "still-vex'd Bermoothes" mentioned by Ariel (i.2), on which the English fleet sailing to Virginia was wrecked in 1609. Thus it seems to point back to the imaginary location of More's Utopia. Then it is that Gonzalo, in a wise attempt to keep up the dejected spirits of his party, proposes his ideal of a commonwealth in which he "would by contraries execute all things", ruling his "innocent people" in a state of nature, without "riches, poverty... contracts, succession, / Bourn, bound of land" (ii.1). This is almost as More imagined Utopia, save that his description is derived, almost word for word, not from *Utopia* but from Montaigne's later "Essay on Cannibals", in what Shakespeare scholars regard as the most obvious example of the dramatist's indebtedness to Montaigne. Yet, whereas both More and Montaigne have an apparent satirical intention, Gonzalo seems to be aiming at nothing more than the entertainment of his party. He even goes on to admit that it was but a "kind of merry fooling" on his part – an admission that comes closer to the spirit of More than of Montaigne, where his use of the epithet "merry" recalls More's fondness for a "merry tale".

Finally, it may be asked, what is the conclusion to be drawn from this strange similarity between these two counsellors in the last two tragicomedies of Shakespeare preceding his composition (or his part in the composition) of *Henry VIII*? It may be that towards the end of his dramatic career Shakespeare felt himself increasingly close to More's position and increasingly free to express this closeness, if still in a somewhat indirect manner. It would thus seem that what he admired in More was his fidelity, amounting to something akin to holiness, as well as his merry humour.

It may be added that in the two other tragicomedies of this final period, *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*, Shakespeare again recurs to the figure of a faithful counsellor, though less impressively Morean than Camillo or Gonzalo. In *Pericles* there is Helicanus, who is addressed as "reverend sir" and is described as "a grave and noble counsellor, most wise

in general" (v.1); and he may be seen as presiding over the happy reunion between the aging hero and his long-lost daughter Marina, as well as his longer-lost wife Thaisa. Then in *Cymbeline* there is Belarius, who for all his fidelity has been banished from the court by the British king for being "confederate with the Romans" (iii.3).

In general, all four plays, including as they do such a Morean counsellor, point back in this and other respects (including the happy reunion of an old, sorrowing father with his kind daughter) to *King Lear*. Here one meets not only with examples of fidelity in *Kent* and *the Fool*, who may be seen as divided images of one exemplar, but also with the words of Gloucester as he asks for guidance up the cliff of Dover (for intended suicide), adding, "From that place / I shall no leading need" (iv.1) – in an apparent echo of More's last words to the lieutenant of the Tower, asking for help up the steps to the scaffold and adding, "For my coming down let me shift for myself."

In these plays, moreover, the dramatist may be seen as turning from a tragic vision, inspired by the recent tragic events in English history, to a visionary ideal, in which he is following, if from afar, the guidance of *Utopia*; even as More in his book was looking from the harsh social conditions of England in his time to an ideal island where all is ruled by reason. In the end, therefore, one may imagine Shakespeare recalling the words which he put into the mouth of Hortensio, speaking to Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* (iv.5) – the very words which More had uttered to William Roper while rowing to Lambeth for a crucial interview with the King's Council – "The field is won."

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Précis

It is not usually realized how close is the connection between More and Shakespeare, as the attention of scholars is mostly directed to the text of the plays. But between the lines of the text, one may find remarkable analogies between More and certain characters in the later plays, converging on the figure of a wise and holy counsellor.

Résumé

D'habitude on ne se rend pas compte combien est proche le lien entre More et Shakespeare, l'attention des savants se portant le plus souvent sur le texte des pièces. Mais entre les lignes du texte, on peut trouver, entre More et certains personnages des pièces tardives, de remarquables analogies qui convergent dans un profil de conseiller sage et saint.

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Dans *Memorie Domenicane* n° 18 (1987), deux grands experts nous apportent des précisions sur l'ambiance culturelle et spirituelle de Florence durant les années où un John Colet et autres "studenti d'Otralpe" y venaient entendre Ficcin, Politien et les deux Pic de la Mirandole, alors que l'esprit du prophète Savonarole continuait à braver celui de Laurent le Magnifique.

1) Salvatore I. Camporeale (répondant aux ouvrages d'Armando Verde) : "Lo Studio Fiorentino e la vita universitaria : 1473-1503" (pp. 347-67).

2) Verde lui-même, "Questioni Savonaroliane" (pp. 368-99), réagissant aux *Giornate* de Lorenzo Violi, "secrétaire" de Savonarole. Les sermons du prieur de San Marco, les 29 et 30 mars 1495, avaient pour thème le "Dieu dont nul ne peut refréner la colère" (Job 9,13).

L'un des comptes rendus examine un gros dossier constitué par trois Ursulines modernes sur leur fondatrice, Sainte Angèle Merici. Celle-ci résolut le dilemme cloître/mariage en proposant le don nuptial de soi à Dieu dans le siècle. La résistance qu'elle rencontra explique en partie qu'elle n'ait été canonisée que 267 ans après sa mort, en 1801.

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Javier Herrero, "More and Vives: Christian Radical Thought in the Renaissance", dans *Spain: Church State Relations*, ed. Lawrence Biondi, SJ, and Mercedes M. Robles, Loyola U (Chicago, 1983), 17-36. Un traité, *Forma subventionis pauperum*, dérivé de Vivès, et traduit en anglais par William Marshall, fut dédié à la reine Anne Boleyn. L'*Utopie*, inspiratrice de Vivès, occupe ici les pp. 24-28 (Exemplaire reçu de Michael Grace, SJ).