

***Sir Thomas More: A Tragedy***  
by JAMES HURDIS

**O**NE of the forty-one plays composed in English listed in Friedrich-K. Unterweg's excellent survey of five centuries of Thomas More dramas and the only known play written about More during the eighteenth century in England is James Hurdis' *Sir Thomas More: A Tragedy* (1792); a dozen lines greet its bicentennial in *Moreana*, 111-112/31. A brief overview of Hurdis' life and a more detailed look at the history of the work's composition will supply the background necessary for an analysis of this drama and its place within that group.

Born at Bishopstone in Sussex in 1763, Hurdis was the third of seven children and the only son of James Hurdis. In 1780, he was entered a commoner of St. Mary Hall, Oxford; and, at the election in 1782, he was chosen a demy of St. Mary Magdalen College. After he obtained the bachelor of arts in May 1785, he held various clerical posts for the rest of his life. His earliest work was a tragedy of five acts entitled *Panthea*, and based upon a story found in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia*. He first appeared before the public in 1788 with *The Village Curate*, a poem in the manner of Thomas Gray, Oliver Goldsmith, William Cowper, and other writers of sensibility, those authors literary historians sometimes label as pre-Romantics. Its reception far exceeded Hurdis' expectations, and the *Curate*, his most popular piece, went through four editions, the last of which he considerably improved, during his lifetime. His second production, a poem named *Adriano, or The First of June*, was followed, in short time, by three other poems: a revision of *Panthea*, *Elmer and Ophelia*, and *The Orphan Twins*. In 1791, he wrote his closet drama on More. His other works include biblical studies, such as *Select Critical Remarks upon the English Version of the first Ten Chapters of Genesis* (1791) and *Twelve Dissertations on the Nature and Occasion of Psalm and Prophecy* (1800), and literary scholarship, such as *Cursory Remarks*

upon the Arrangement of the Plays of Shakespeare, occasioned by reading Mr. Malone's Essay on the Chronological Order of those celebrated Pieces (1792). His final literary creation was *The Favourite Village*, which he printed from his own press in 1800. He died suddenly on December 23, 1801, leaving a widow, two sons, and a daughter born posthumously (Baker 1: 382-83; Whitaker 8-13).

Hurdis acknowledged the influence of William Cowper upon his work, and their correspondence reveals not only general information about their literary friendship, but also specific details about Hurdis' drama on More, which can be used to date its composition and trace its development. The subject of More as the focus of a play is first mentioned in the postscript of a letter dated March 6, 1791, in which Cowper says,

I wish to know what you mean to do with *Sir Thomas*. For though I expressed doubts about his theatrical possibilities, I think him a very respectable person, and with some improvement well worthy of being introduced to the public. (Wright 37-38)

During the eleven months that passed before Cowper refers to the play again in a letter dated February 21, 1792 (Wright 156-57), Hurdis probably revised a draft Cowper surely had seen. Cowper declares some wonder about not receiving another manuscript of *Sir Thomas*, so Hurdis most likely sent one soon. In fact, Cowper's next letter of March 2, 1792, notes Hurdis' "obliging offer to inscribe *Sir Thomas More*" (Wright 157-58) to him, a courtesy that might have been stated on a manuscript or in a letter accompanying it. (The first edition in 1792 was dedicated to "William Cowper, Esq....as a Token of Respect for his Virtues and his Abilities, and as a Compliment Due to the Liberality, Candour and Humanity of his Criticism...."). Cowper's most extensive comment on the play occurs in his letter of March 23, 1792, in which he writes:

I have read your play carefully, and with great pleasure; it seems now to be a performance that cannot fail to do you much credit. Yet, unless my memory deceives me, the scene between Cecilia and Heron in the garden has lost something that pleased me much when I saw it first; and I am not sure that you have likewise obliterated an account of Sir Thomas's execution, that I found very pathetic. (Wright 172)

Not only do Cowper's observations voice his disapproval of some of Hurdis' revisions, they also anticipate some of what little criticism the

finished piece has received by commenting on its omission of a scene depicting More's execution (Whitaker 53).

After recommending that Hurdis reconsider adding the omitted passages, Cowper continues by remarking:

If the play were designed for representation, I should be apt to think Cecilia's first speech rather too long, and should prefer to have it broken into dialogue, by an interposition now and then from one of her sisters. But since it is designed, as I understand, for the closet only, that objection seems of no importance; at no rate, however, would I expunge it; because it is both prettily imagined, and elegantly written. (Wright 173)

Ironically, Whitaker, one of the play's most scathing critics, fails to note the play is a closet drama and claims that "as a play it would hardly succeed on the stage, chiefly because it lacks a satisfactory close" (53). In spite of this lack of insight, Whitaker expands upon Cowper's final point in his letter about the similarity between "the character of Cecilia" and Hurdis' sister Sally (Wright 173); he finds the play's female characters "more convincing than the male characters" (53) because they are drawn from Hurdis' sisters.

Cowper's final comments on the play are in his letter of March 25, 1792, to Lady Hesketh, in which he says:

To Mr. Hurdis I return *Sir Thomas More* tomorrow; having revised it a second time. He is now a very respectable figure, and will do my friend [Joseph Johnson, a publisher], who gives him to the public this spring, considerable credit. (Wright 175)

Although these remarks cause speculation about the extent of Cowper's hand in the play, they present some facts about the work's publication history. First printed by Cowper's "friend" in 1792, *Sir Thomas More* was reprinted from that edition in 1793 with some changes in punctuation and phrasing and some new misprints. A third edition appeared in 1810.

Unterweg places Hurdis' work in his second group of plays, which characterize More as "the great Christian statesman" (16), and he argues that the plots of such dramas "begin with More's entry into the king's service" (19). Because about twenty years separate the events of their stories, these plays, Unterweg maintains, generally feature episodic structures (19). Although Hurdis' *More* limits the time represented to ten years and covers major events before 1525 through narration, the play fits

loosely into that category; it also fits Unterweg's third group (24), because it portrays More as a model Christian and loving father. Indeed, Hurdis' focus on More's relationship with his daughters, with his father, and with Lady More unifies many of the play's episodes.

Largely based upon Roper's *Lyfe*, the play includes these characters: "Henry VIII, Sir John More, Tunstall, the Duke of Norfolk, Bonvise [Antonio Bonvisi], Sir Thomas More, Roper, Dancy [Daunce], Heron, Lady More, Margaret, Eliza., Cecilia, Anne Bullen." The *Biographia Dramatica* summarizes it as "a pleasing performance" that "can scarcely be called a tragedy" because it consists "merely of a series of scenes, describing the dramatic conduct of Sir Thomas and his family" (Baker 3: 279). The entry also states that

Contrary to the testimony of all our historians, the author has drawn Anna Bullen as a sanguinary Herodias, thirsting for blood, and eager to ruin and destroy the Chancellor, whose character is exhibited in the most amiable point of view. (Baker 3: 279-80)

Written in blank verse, the five-act drama opens with a conversation between Bonvise and Heron in which Bonvise characterizes More and other members of the household before readers actually see them in subsequent scenes. Through this narrative, Hurdis raises expectations about what kinds of characters readers will meet and conveys a good deal of information about More prior to his and Tunstall's return from negotiating the Peace of Cambrai in 1529, the time at which the play begins. Although Heron is mainly interested in discussing Cecilia, Bonvise concentrates upon More, the "ornament and honour of his country" (7 – The 1792 edition does not number lines; thus, the parenthetical references are to pages.), an ardent scholar and writer, "a wise and just, / Ready and eloquent" (8) lawyer, a sterling member of Parliament, a man who is naturally good in all he does because of his "noble disposition" (9). Bonvise also describes More as the ideal family man who would rather be home than anywhere else – one of the ways Hurdis draws readers' attention to one of the play's main points – More's life with his family at Chelsea.

Set in More's library, the second scene pictures Margaret reading, Eliza painting, and Cecilia (drawn as a chatterbox throughout) talking. Lady More briefly interrupts their conversation, reminding them they should help her prepare for their father's return. Before they leave to obey their stepmother, Margaret and Eliza discuss Dancy's worthiness

as a husband and whether More will approve of his proposal; the play thus introduces another of its major points, marriage.

The next scene, a visit with her grandfather, shows Cecilia holding a bird she uses to exemplify her love of nature's beauty. Almost ninety, Sir John turns her discussion to a consideration of how beauty and youth are fleeting and how goodness and virtue will outlast them. Cecilia and Sir John exit to join other family members and friends in the last two scenes of act 1 in which they joyously welcome their father home. Act 1 ends with More and Bonvise discussing More's approval of Heron as Cecilia's husband; More asks Bonvise to keep his consent "secret" (30), because Heron has not yet approached More to ask for his daughter's hand. The king's great matter will soon break the unity of this happy household: More's approval of his daughters' marriages will unite the More family; his disapproval of Henry and Anne's marriage will separate them.

Act 2 opens with the lovesick Cecilia walking early in the morning, waiting for Heron to meet her, wondering how much he loves her. It then shifts to More and Bonvise. Bonvise answers More's questions about the status of the king's divorce, and their conversation prompts More to view Catherine of Aragon as the virtuous wife wronged by Anne Boleyn. The scene returns to Cecilia, who has met Heron. Instead of declaring his love for her directly, Heron praises the qualities of a nameless maid much like Cecilia. Next he asks her to "Requite [his] tale ... And tell [him] the perfections of that youth, / Who sits upon the throne of [her] regard" (38).

The lovers leave, and Lady More enters with her husband. She is uneasy about the relationship between Dancy and Eliza, and she discusses Dancy's worth. As is often the case, Lady More is More's foil. She disapproves of Dancy mainly because he lacks money and possessions; More, however, values him for his promise and virtues. They exit; Cecilia and Heron enter, both declaring their love for each other. Afraid her father will see him, Heron leaves as More returns, and Cecilia talks with her father. When Cecilia tells More that Heron has proposed to her, More asks her what she would do if her father withheld his consent. Although she admits his refusal would be difficult to accept, she would obey him. More happily consents to their marriage. As Cecilia leaves, Dancy enters; he and More overhear Eliza playing and singing. When Eliza enters, More joins their hands; he has already given the curate "notice" (52) to perform a double wedding. Although Hurdis jumbles the times to unify his play's action, both daughters did marry on the same



JAMES HURDIS, 1792, age 29

Photograph of a miniature in possession of Mr. E.C. Bowden-Smith, drawn by Teed and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1792: the picture was a present from Hurdis to his sister Elizabeth. From *James Hurdis: His Life and Writings* by A.P. Whitaker, Moore and Tillyer, Ltd.

day, September 29, 1525.

As act 2 ends with a breakfast (Lady More has been impatiently waiting to serve it) that unites all the family, act 3 begins with "all his Family at Dinner" (54) after the marriages. More, who must go meet the king, comments that time may change the happiness the family now feels, a remark foreshadowing the alterations soon to take place. No sooner is this said than the king pays a surprise visit to the household and cuts short More and Cecilia's banter about the qualities of good and bad women, a topic of much bearing upon the play. After Henry listens to Eliza and Cecilia sing, "all retire, leaving the KING, and SIR THOMAS together" (59) to confer. More explains he was about to leave, "obedient to [his] majesty's command" (60), to meet him at his "court at Greenwich" (60). That the king comes to Chelsea not only projects a view of their friendship, but it also underlines the king's urgent desire to bring More's "integrity and learning" (60) to bear upon the divorce. Portrayed as the patriotic sovereign who wants to divorce and remarry only to beget a male heir to ensure the succession, Henry elicits readers' sympathies as he urges More to weigh the case, decide upon it, and meet him at Hampton Court. After Henry departs, More delivers a soliloquy in which he laments the fate he sees for Catherine unless he can convince Henry how Anne has "bewitch'd" (63) him.

The next scene features Anne and Henry discussing the king's visit with More, and Henry again stresses the importance of More's approval, for

His countenance,  
Fam'd as he is for learning, wit and worth,  
Will warp the multitude to deem  
Our [Henry and Catherine's] marriage  
Judicious and expedient. Should he yield,  
None can dispute our justice. (63-64)

Norfolk interrupts, announcing that More awaits the king, and Anne exits as More enters. A preamble comparing the advice he gave his daughters about marriage to what he will say to the king paves the way for More to tell the king he disapproves of the divorce, largely because of its effects upon the virtuous Catherine. Seemingly convinced, Henry leaves, pondering what More said; "and if [his] mind / Finds nothing to disturb it" (67), he bids More to "come again / And [he] will act as [More] advise[s] [him]" (67). In soliloquy, More wonders if he has "quench'd / The furious flame" (67); if not, he hopes "Vigorous reason may again subdue it" (67).

Norfolk enters with a frantic Lady More who tells her husband "A sudden fire / Has burnt down all [his] barns, and half [his] house" (69). This misfortune, another signal of More's soon-to-change fate, affords Hurdis the opportunity to develop More's charity toward his "neighbor's servant" whose "negligence" (70) caused the fire. Such a reaction again incites the practical Lady More to become his foil as she reminds him to "Remember Charity first feeds her own" (71). With Lady More's exit, More's soliloquy proclaims how he accepts "the will of Heav'n" (72) in what has happened and will happen.

The scene moves to the gardens and catches Anne wondering what More has advised Henry in the encounter she has watched. Henry enters, proclaiming that what More advises troubles him, and now he asks Anne what course he should pursue. At this point, Hurdis carefully delineates Anne as a scheming villain who plants the ideas of executing More and seizing his estates in the king's mind (74). Henry continues to hold the readers' sympathies when he declares Anne counsels ill. Clever Anne, however, moves the king to consider another strategy: Have the Lords and Commons pass a bill that will trap More, and thereby escape the blame for destroying More, whose "name / [is] In ev'ry corner of the globe, at home / Lov'd for his virtues, and esteem'd abroad / For his great learning, judgment and politeness" (74-75). When Henry rejects this proposal, Anne suggests he bribe More with the chancellorship. Reciting Wolsey's faults persuades Henry to "strip him of his honours" (79). Anne proceeds to argue "the great seal... / May purchase More" (80). Henry will act as Anne directs; thus, Hurdis absolves Henry of some of the guilt for dealing with More as he does.

The next scene in More's library finds him and his wife reviewing the expense of the fire damages that, as Lady More says, exceed "All [they] can raise" (81-82). More counters her complaint about his assistance to the neighbor whose servant caused the fire with further discussion of the value of charity. Norfolk interrupts them to announce that Henry has made More chancellor. When Norfolk leaves, More reacts to his message with disbelief, humility, and fear as he muses about Wolsey's fall. After Henry and Anne briefly recount what the king has done to Wolsey and More, the final scene of act 3 focuses upon a meeting between Henry and More in which the King becomes angry as he presses More to consent to the divorce. More delays, arguing that such a complex issue requires much time to be considered carefully. After Henry departs, Norfolk enters to deliver the bad news of Sir John's death.

With the funeral of More's father that begins act 4, the play's

mood darkens. Prior to this scene, Hurdis mainly develops More's relationship with Cecilia and Eliza; henceforth, he will concentrate on More and Margaret. Although More talks to Margaret about her grandfather's death, he is also preparing himself and Margaret for his own death. Sensing he is quite upset, Margaret asks her sad father to reveal the "grief that preys upon [his] heart" (93), but her selfless father will not share it, because it would make her "wretch'd tho' it eases [him]" (93). Later, when he suspects Margaret knows some of what disturbs him, he relents and tells what he believes will result from defying the king. Since More "cannot with integrity support / [His] ruin'd fortunes" (93), and since he will not be bribed, he foresees his fall and realizes that "the blow that ruins [him] will ruin" (94) his family, his "innocent house" (94). Margaret's willingness to share More's fate consoles him as the scene ends.

In the next scene, More meets Tunstall, and the encounter enables Hurdis to draw More's refusal to accept Tunstall's reward of "four thousand pounds" (98) for his controversial writings. Although More needs the money because of his altered circumstances, of which Tunstall and the other clergy are aware, and although Tunstall repeatedly encourages More to take his offer, More refuses, proclaiming that to have served the church is his reward (97-100). Norfolk enters to close this depiction of More's piety and to announce the king's command that More "this afternoon" (101) explain his "cause / Before the lower house" (101). More confides to Norfolk his intent to resign the chancellorship. In soliloquy, Norfolk punctuates the scene's close as he comments wryly, "Well, honesty becomes us, but I fear / 'Twill make Sir Thomas shorter by the head" (102).

The scene changes to More's library and reminds readers of the scene in the same room in act 1 in which the sisters talked of being reunited with their father. Now they talk of separation — from home, each other, and their father — separation which they will accept cheerfully because they know their father would want them to do so. As Eliza and Cecilia sing, More enters to disperse his household. He bids his servants farewell, then Eliza and Cecilia; Lady More is not present, because "she will not commend / The deed which makes a beggar of her husband" (107). Norfolk's arrival to announce the king's command for More to "repair with speed / To Lambeth palace ... to take the oaths / Requir'd by the late statute" (107) breaks off the farewell speeches of More and Margaret. When Norfolk goes, More tells Margaret, "Herodias has prevail'd, Herod is pleased / And I must be the martyr" (108). In order to get away from Margaret who clings to him and begs to let her attend

him, More locks her in the library. Roper opens the door, and he and she relate their plan to follow More to Lady More, who ends the act with a soliloquy lamenting the twists of fortune.

Roper and Margaret do not find More at Lambeth Palace as act 5 opens, for he has been taken to the Tower for refusing to swear the oath and for keeping silent about his reasons for so doing. Roper comforts the faint Margaret; and, with her "strength ... all return'd" (113), she "will travel ere [she] eat[s] or drink[s] / To see [her] father" (113). In a long soliloquy that opens the next scene, More, confined in the Tower, reflects upon the world as a prison, upon man's cruelty to man, and upon others who lost their lives in the Tower, especially Richard III's supposed victims, the little princes. As he thinks of his family, Margaret enters and asks him to obtain his freedom by taking the oath. Comparing her and women generally to Eve who tempted Adam to eat the "fatal fruit" (117), he asks Margaret to "urge [his submission] no more" (117). Nevertheless, Margaret continues to urge it, arguing he might consider his position egotistical and wrong-headed; after all, she claims, "Is not some def'rance to those great men due / Who scruple not? and ought we not to think / Our judgments may be faulty?" (118). (Ironically, some of this scene invites comparison to Anne's session with Henry in which she wins direction of the king's course.) More will maintain his position, and his parting speech to Margaret closes the scene.

Another scene depicts Bonvise praising Margaret as the ideal daughter in a soliloquy broken by Roper who reports More's indictment for treason and the forthcoming trial. Bonvise leaves to attend the trial as Margaret enters to relate her visit with her father in the Tower. Roper tells her what he told Bonvise, and they rush to join him at More's trial. Having been walking for a long time before the next scene opens, the exhausted Roper and Margaret meet Bonvise as he returns from the trial. He says More is condemned and on his way back to the Tower to await execution. Stage directions describe the final meeting between More and Margaret:

Enter SIR THOMAS guarded, and with a composed countenance. As soon as he sees his daughter, he pauses and looks compassionately upon her. She bursts into tears, makes her way through the crowd, and, throw[s] her arms about his neck. (127)

The play ends in Bonvise's house where he reads to Roper a letter from More. More writes he must die "at nine" (129); Roper and Bonvise therefore "Listen and count the clock – six – sev'n – eight – nine"

(129). More also instructs Bonvise to "Love [his] children" (130). Dancy and Heron enter with news of Eliza and Cecilia. Bonvise invites the men to bring their wives to his house, for he is happy to be a surrogate father to the children of his friend.

Caught up in the literary currents of his day, Hurdis' *Sir Thomas More* contains the marks of the literature of sensibility – the stock familial characters, situations, and beliefs in the appealing quality of virtue displayed against potent distress. Because this distress causes undeserved suffering in characters who are relatively defenseless against the king's might, the play demands readers' emotional responses and arouses pathos (Todd 3). As the forces of the king and Anne destroy More and his family, Hurdis' emphasis falls not upon the subtleties of particular characters or emotional states but upon communicating common feelings of suffering with which readers can sympathize (Todd 4).

Another factor about the literature of sensibility, which Frank H. Ellis examines, is its "spectrum of attitudes reaching from pity for a non-existent object at one extreme and pity for all humanity at the other" (4-5). Naturally, Hurdis' play does not cover all that range, but it does excite pity for most items Ellis lists – for the human condition in general, More, his family, his friends, Catherine, Wolsey, Henry, his neighbor and his servant, his own servants, the poor, and even animals (the butterflies Cecilia collects but does not kill, for instance). In addition, Ellis provides a list of subjects the eighteenth century often treated with the attitude of sensibility – the universe, men, women, parents, children; the so-called lower orders, such as servants, peasants, foreigners, the poor; animals, vegetables, minerals; the emotions; evil, crime, and death; money; and the past, the elsewhere (10-11). It hardly stretches the fabric of Hurdis' play to assert that it incorporates almost all these subjects; indeed, he frequently chooses to develop those that excite the most pity in more detail than those less capable of so doing (for example, the choice of emphasizing More's relationship with Margaret in the last two acts). Ellis finally notes this "attitude toward women, parents, children, the lower orders (as they were called in the eighteenth century), and animals imputes to them a higher position in the scale of being than that traditionally or empirically assigned to them" (10-11). Hurdis' work reflects some of this attitude, particularly in Cecilia's comments about birds, butterflies, and other beauties of nature.

Hurdis often utilizes contrast to arouse and deepen feelings of pity in readers, and he pits characters, situations, and rhetorical devices against each other throughout. Examples of the most important contrasts of

characters and situations include, to mention a few, the chaste, virtuous daughters of More and the flirtatious, scheming, evil temptress Anne; Catherine and Anne, the marriages of More's daughters and that of the king, Wolsey's fall and More's rise, More's lack of money and his refusal of Tunstall's reward, his loss of property (because of the fire) and his gain of the chancellorship. Rhetorical devices – such as similes and metaphors about nature and its reflection of moral order, and purple passages praising virtue and condemning its absence – also convey contrasts between characters and situations, and make readers feel more intense pity for those who suffer.

This study of James Hurdis' *Sir Thomas More: A Tragedy* certainly does not close the book on what might be said about the only More drama in eighteenth-century England; it does, however, open yet another chapter in a much larger and more important volume about the question of how More fascinated and continues to fascinate playwrights and countless others.

Department of English  
Fort Hays State University  
Hays, KS 67601-4099



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