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**A NOTE CONCERNING ELEMENTS OF TACITUS'
DEPICTION OF NERO IN THOMAS MORE'S
*HISTORIA RICHARDI REGIS ANGLIAE***

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Scholars have often made mention of Tacitus' influence upon Thomas More's *Historia Richardi Regis Angliae*. Richard Sylvester and Daniel Kinney have listed a number of verbal echoes in their editions of the text.¹ Scholars have also pointed to influences from the Republican historian Sallust who preceded Tacitus by some 90 years, whom More "must have had almost by heart" (CW2, lxxxvii).² Despite the echoes of Sallust, scholars have linked the evidence from Tacitus to evidence from Suetonius' work on the Roman emperors to conclude that, "for those who recognize the echo"

¹ The Complete Works of St. Thomas More (Yale UP, 1963-1997), vol. 2, *The History of King Richard III*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester, 1963, and vol. 15, *In Defense of Humanism*, ed. Daniel Kinney, 1986. Various examples provided are: xciv *Ann.* 4.60, *Ann.* 1.7; xcv *Ann.* 6.6, *Ann.* 3.36, 60, *Ann.* 4.14, *Ann.* 4.32; xcvi, *Ann.* 4.1, *Ann.* 2.23, *Ann.* 4.33, *Ann.* 12.32, *Ann.* 12.43, 64, *Ann.* 14.12, *Ann.* 15.47; xcvi *Hist.* 4.48, *Ann.* 3.26-8, 4.4; 159 *Ann.* 3.24, 4.44, 14.65; 160 *Germ.* 30; 161 *Ann.* 13.12, *Ann.* 13.14; 183 *Germ.*, 5.2 *Ann.* 4.28; 187 *Hist.* 2.88; 197 *Ann.* 11.13; 200 *Hist.* 3.74; 207 *Ann.* 2.45; 215 *Hist.* 1.29; 218 *Ann.* 12.20; 226 *Ann.* 14.40; 232 *Ann.* 4.32; 247 *Ann.* 12.14. More's text here cited comes from CW15. The Latin text of Tacitus used here is drawn from that established by C.D. Fisher, *Cornelii Taciti Annalium ab excessu Divi Augusti Libri* (Oxford UP, 1973). All translations from Latin are my own. I am grateful to Brian McCarty of Centerline, Michigan, for stimulating my interest in this point.

² Also see Alison Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians 1483-1535* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) 194.

[of Tacitus and Suetonius], "the narrative of the *Richard*" is set "firmly against the background of Tiberian Rome" (CW2, xci-xcii).

There is evidence, nevertheless, to suggest that More was influenced not only by Tacitus' account of Tiberius in his *Annales*, but also by his account of Nero. Such a thing would not be surprising as More was an inveterate foe of tyrants, and Nero was certainly that (CW2, xcix).

Sylvester has located two echoes of Tacitus' chapter on Nero in More's *Historia*. The first is a general reference to "Tacitus' speculations on astrology and fate," for which Sylvester has supplied three other references (12.43, 64; 14.12; 15.47) which concern the gods' punishment of Sejanus (CW2, xcvi). The second at 14.40 is a clear adaptation of Tacitus' words by More to fit into his prose. Tacitus wrote of the ex-praetor Domitius Balbus: *erat...longa senecta...orbitate et pecunia insidiis obnoxius*, "because of his old age, his childlessness and his money was exposed to treachery." Perhaps More adapted this text when he described Lord Hastings, who was *insidiantibus facile obnoxius, utpote ob innatam animo audaciam*, "easily exposed to treachery due to the innate daring of his spirit" (CW15, 420). Evidence of More's familiarity with Tacitus is suggested by the conjunction of the adjective *obnoxius, a, um* and the noun *insidiae, insidiarum* or participial forms of the first conjugation verb *insidior*. The quotation from Tacitus provides us the only attested example of this pair of words in classical Latin. Although the combination of these two is hardly surprising, it is interesting to note that, for whatever reason, it is found in More.

Kinney (CW15, 610) mentions Tacitus' *Annales* 14.56 in his commentary on these lines by noting: "These words may contain an allusion to Judas' betrayal of Christ with a kiss. Cf. *CW 14*, 407, and Tacitus, *Annales* 14.56 (on the same sort of behavior in Nero)." Kinney's reference is to a line in More's *De Tristitia Christi: Iuda osculo filium hominis tradis*, "Judas do you betray the son of man with a kiss?" (CW14, 407/1-2). But Kinney's comments go no further.

I here suggest that the Tacitean passage 14.56 provides us with an additional connection between Tacitus' Nero and More's *Historia*. Early in the *Historia*, More depicts Richard as *verbis adblandiens his*,

quos intus impense oderat: nec eorum abstinens complexibus quos destinabat occidere, "charming those whom he hated deep within with his words, and not abstaining from the embrace of those whom he was planning to kill" (CW15, 324). Tacitus at *Annales* 14.56 describes Nero's behavior after he refuses to let his former teacher and confidant, Seneca, return his lavish gifts and retire from the imperial court. The exchange comes to an end, at which point Nero *his adicit complexum et oscula, factus natura et consuetudine exercitus velare odium fallacibus blanditiis*, "added to his words an embrace and kisses, [for] he was made by nature and trained by habit to veil his hatred with treacherous caresses."

The verbal parallels between the two Latin texts are several:

1. Where Tacitus employs the plural of the demonstrative *his*, "to these things or words," More makes a fuller phrase by adding the noun for "word" in Latin to read *verbis...his*, "with these words."
2. The word *complexum*, "an embrace," in the text of Tacitus is changed into the plural *complexibus*, "with embraces."
3. Where Tacitus uses the noun *odium*, "hatred," More has employed its equivalent as a verb, *oderat*, "he hated."
4. The plural form of the noun *blanditiis*, "with caresses," in Tacitus is replaced by More with the present active participle of a compound form of the verb *blandio* or *blandior*, to make *adblandiens*, "charming."

There is in addition a bilingual connection between the version of the *Historia* More wrote in English and the Latin text here cited. For More employs the word "kisses," which is the English equivalent of the Latin noun *oscula* found in Tacitus. Thus More infuses his portrait of Richard III with details taken not only from the life and times of Tiberius, the second Julio-Claudian emperor, but also from the fifth and last emperor of that imperial line, Nero. This connection suggests that More, while writing the *Historia*, may well have been thinking about ruling families in general and their furious and violent struggles for dynastic hegemony. In the process, More's recollection of vivid passages from Tacitus may have bumbled up in his memory.

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