

JOHN OWEN ON THOMAS MORE

The Neo-Latin epigrammatist, John Owen (1564-1627), included three poems about Thomas More in his ten books of epigrams.¹ Owen, or *Ioannes Audoenus*, was born in Caernarvonshire in 1564, and was proud of his Welsh lineage, terming himself *Cambro-Britannus*. Educated at Winchester College under Bilson, and at New College, Oxford, he graduated as Bachelor of Civil Law in 1590. An impoverished younger brother, he turned to teaching, becoming head of the King's New School of Warwick. By 1600 he was writing epigrams in London, probably invited there by an influential Welsh (school or college) friend. In 1606 Simon Waterson published his first triad, dedicated to one of his many aristocratic patrons, Lady Mary Neville. By 1612 he had published ten books, containing about 1,500 epigrams, only equalled in quantity by Martial. In quality and subject-matter they are similar, although Owen has a Welsh predilection for word-play, and a high proportion of religious, patriotic and moralizing topics, reflecting his love of Protestantism and the new Union, and hostility to the Roman Catholic Church.

The first poem on More, II.152, refers to the hair saga associated with More's execution. Some courtier (or possibly Cromwell) made a final effort to extract a recantation from More, and hurried to the king with the news that More had 'changed his mind'. Further inquiry led to More's macabre joke that, having changed his mind about his hair or beard, he now wanted it to take part with his head at the execution.² If true, this report would have added to the savage 'indignatio principis'. Rather, it is one of many apocryphal anecdotes that give the lighter side of More's last days. The neat Latin couplet is as follows :

Morus moriens.

Abscindi passus caput est a corpore Morus ;
Abscindi crines³ noluit a capite.

More dying.

More let his head be cut off his body ;
He would not let his hair be cut off his head.

The hexameter portrays More's resignation and co-operative behaviour on the block, and possibly his own 'passion' (*passus*). By contrast, the pentameter gives the incongruous hair-growing conceit. The repetition of the heavy, cacophonous *abscindi* serves to accentuate the triviality of the word that follows, *crines*, emphasizing the irony of More's paradoxical decision.

Another such anecdote provides Owen with material for V. 109 :

Thomas Morus.

Quid de se fieret, meditans in carcere Morus,
Inspicit urinam ; nil ibi triste videt.
Urinam Regis potius lustrasset ; in illa
Vidisset mortis turbida signa suae.

Thomas More.

More, wondering in prison what fate was in store for him,
Inspected his urine. He saw nothing sinister there.
He should rather have examined the King's urine ;
In it he would have seen turbid signs of his own death.

The sinister, sibilant augury of the second couplet is in contrast to the matter-of-fact, medical examination (perhaps referring to More's bladder pains in prison) and unsuspecting peace of mind of the first. Owen's wit appears also in the oxymoron of the crude *urinam* and epic *lustrasset* (with its purificatory connotations), and in the *double entendre* of *turbida* ('medically turbid', or 'violent'). The poem is typical of Owen's lively imagination and sharp eye for irony and incongruities both in the world around him, and in history.

Henry VIII only appears in one other epigram, VI.72, and mainly for the sake of a pun⁴ on Pope Leo X :

Ad. Henr. VIII. Fid. Defensor.

Hunc titulum Regi florum Regique leonum
Florentinus homo dat tibi Papa Leo.

To Henry VIII, Defender of the Faith.

This title was given to you, King of Flowers and Lions,
By a Florentine man, Pope Leo.

Despite Owen's own strong Protestantism⁵, despite his pride in Elizabeth and in the new Union, the only appearances of Henry VIII are as the Pope's one-time Defender of the Faith, and as More's murderer. The combination serves to damn the king.

Finally V.54 – one of Owen's longer poems – is quite unlike II.152 and V. 109, and almost all of his epigrams, in its genuine sensibility and emotion :

De Tho. Moro, Angliae olim Cancellario, ad
Thomam Baronem de Ellesmer, Angliae Cancellarium.

Integritas morum Morum commendat, et ardor
Ingenii, et docto dulcis in ore decor.
Te quoque cor sapiens, gravitas et gratia vultus
Eximit e populo, conspicuumque facit.
Totius integritas vitae sine labe peractae
Te Moro aequalem moribus esse probat.
Excipias Mori casus, et flebile fatum,
Et causam mortis ; cetera Morus eris.

*On Thomas More, once Chancellor of England, to
Thomas Baron Ellesmere, Chancellor of England.*

Moral integrity commends More, as does his bright
Intelligence, his learning, grace and charm.
A wise heart, dignity and graceful looks make you, too,
Stand out from the people, make you conspicuous.
The integrity of your whole life passed without stain
Proves you to be More's equal in morality.
Barring More's misfortunes, and lamentable fate,
And the reason for his death, in all else you will be a More.

Owen eulogistically compares Thomas More, once Lord Chancellor of England, with Thomas Egerton, Baron Ellesmere, James I's Lord Chancellor, and one of Owen's patrons.⁶ The word-play

on *morum* in lines 1 & 6 (reminiscent of More's own poem⁷), the alliteration of *docto dulcis... decor, gravitas... gratia, flebile fatum*, the c's and m's in lines 7-8, the rhymes of *ardor/decor, vitae/peractae* and *mortis/eris*, are normal components of Owen's artistry ; but not the pathos. Whereas Owen saw the martyrdom of More as an unnecessary tragedy, to be avoided by Egerton (presumably *causam mortis* refers to More's obstinate defiance of the king, and defence of papal authority), he presented the morality of More as the highest of ideals, and yet fully achieved by Thomas Egerton. The flattery must have delighted his patron.

Clearly three short poems cannot tell us much about Owen's attitude towards Thomas More. But even allowing for the special nature of Epigrams, and for Owen's special delight in word-play and conceits, some salient features emerge. More is eulogized for his noble character, lively intelligence, great learning and good looks, and his death is seen as a tragedy, another 'passion'. But the troubles that led up to it, and the obstinacy that ensured it, are not seen as models for Egerton the statesman to follow. William Cecil had shown how to survive the Tower, and how to serve a difficult Queen. Elizabeth's final Lord Keeper, Egerton, rewarded his royal patrons' confidence in him, without any altercations, and in actively encouraging intellectuals like Francis Bacon, Whitgift, John Donne, Ben Jonson, Samuel Daniel and John Owen.⁸

Owen also shows the morbid fascination that people have for anecdotes connected with a great man's death. The triviality of the hair, or beard joke (and others like it), and the crudity of the urinary prophecies, hardly detract from the dignity of a death which More himself took with jesting. Anecdotes of this sort were quite acceptable adjuncts to the Elizabethan idealization of the brave, and often flippant, English gentleman, dispensing humour and good advice to the very last, the modern 'Anglais avec son sang-froid habituel'. Even today historians seem to be reluctant to cut away these apocryphal accretions.⁹

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1. The dates are as deduced by J.H. Jones, in 'John Owen, Cambro-Brittannus', *Trans. Hon. Soc. of Cymmrodorion* (1940), 130-143. For proof of the spurious nature of book XI (*Monosticha quaedam ethica et politica veterum sapientum*), see J.J. Enck, 'John Owen's Epigrammata', *Harvard Library Bulletin III* (1949), 431-4. To avoid confusion over the 3 triads, references are to Books I-X (as in Renouard's 1794 edition).

2. See A. Cecil, *A Portrait of Thomas More* (London, 1937), 416-7. More's lengthy beard at his execution needed explaining.

3. *Crines* suggests 'hair' rather than 'beard', but both could be implied. See Charles C. Doyle, "Moreana of the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century" in *Moreana* 45 (1975), p. 57, and G. Marc'hadour, *ibid.* p.4 and p. 83.

4. The Lion and Fleur-de-lis in England's Royal Coat-of-Arms, and Pope Leo (Lion) from Florence (Flora, 'flower') ; also, as Donatello's *Marzocco* shows, Florence's protector was a seated lion holding a shield emblazoned with a single fleur-de-lis ; and the fleur-de-lis and *lions couchants* appeared on Medici crests. Henry VIII himself appears as a *Leo* in IV.8, where he alone does not flee before the *Galli cantum* ('cock-crow', or 'French threats').

5. Reinforced by the life-long activities of his uncle Hugh, who was implicated in the Ridolfi Plot, and later in the Gunpowder Plot, and from 1587 was an uncompromising champion of the Jesuit and Hispanophile wing of the Roman Catholics, even giving advice as to the best place for the Spanish Armada to land.

6. In his later years Owen probably lived primarily on patronage ; four other poems are addressed to Egerton (II. 19, IV.133, X.12, 97), and most of the aristocracy of his day, especially royalty, are honoured with one or more epigrams.

7. The poem was first printed by Fowler (Louvain, 1568), who said More composed it "triennio antequam mortem oppeteret". It is reproduced by Elsie Hitchcock in her EETS edition of Harpsfield's *Life of More* (1932), p. 181 ; quoted and analysed in *Moreana* No. 2 (Feb. 1964) pp. 69-70. For Owen's succinct word-play on Erasmus' name, see my article *Erasmi Nomen Tertio in Erasmus in English*, 7 (1974), p. 7. The puns are on *eras* ("thou wert"), *mus* ("a mouse") and *Desiderium desiderat orbis*.

8. See A.L. Rowse, *The England of Elizabeth* (London, 1950), 409-412. James' support protected Egerton against the great lawyer of his day, Edward Coke.

9. As in the biographies of More by A. Cecil (*op. cit.*) and E.E. Reynolds (London, 1953, p. 358, and 1968, pp. 377-9) ; R.W. Chambers (London, 1935) is rightly sceptical about the beard anecdotes (pp. 343-4). The eight lines to Egerton were quoted in a 1971 letter from Howard Baker, *Moreana* No. 30 (May 1971) p. 38. See also Frank Sullivan's "John Owen on Thomas More" in *Moreana* No. 7 (Sept. 1965), 104-5, and Frank and Majie P. Sullivan, *Moreana Material*, 3 (Los Angeles, 1966), 56-57. They quote a fourth poem mentioning More (IV. 248), addressed to *Mercurius Britannicus* (Joseph Hall) :

Optima describit Morus, tu pessima mundi ;
Tu nobis narras vera, sed ille bona.

More described the best things of the world, you the worst ;
You tell us the truth, but he tells us what is good.

Brill's are at present publishing my edition of Owen's *Epigrams* (Vol. I, Books 1-3, to begin with) : this should clear up the confusion (and mistakes) evident in most earlier articles.