

A Thomas More Conference

CROSSROADS AND MORE

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Hungary is located at the crossroads of European history. It is also closely related to Thomas More: there he located his fictitious *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*.

Papers in French or English are invited on the following tentative list of the subjects:

Christian and non-Christian Cultures

Catholicism and Reformation

Spiritual and Temporal Issues

Public and Private Matters

Conviction and Compromise

Travels and Translations

Philology and Religion

Proposals for papers – titles and abstracts – should be sent to the conference director, Benedek Péter Tóta (tota.benedek@btk.ppke.hu) and to the secretariat of the *Amici Thomae Mori* (info@amici-thomae-mori.com) by the end of March 2008.

JOHN FOXE, POETS, AND
SIR THOMAS MORE

Erin E. Kelly
Department of English
Nazareth College
Rochester, NY 14618, USA
ekelly9@naz.edu

Sir Thomas More transforms material from Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* to offer through the character More a defense of poets, playwrights, and theatre. Foxe describes More as a poet, equating his writings with Catholicism and with lying. The authors of the play deviate from this source in presenting poets as tolerant and moral. Their More rejects the oppositional thinking that makes martyrdom possible and, therefore, is not a straightforward martyr figure as he goes to his death. Rather, he is a representative poet whose open-mindedness and empathy for all people serve as a defense of poetry and thus also of plays.

Key words: martyrology, Reformation, Counter-Reformation, drama, religious tolerance

La pièce Sir Thomas More emprunte des éléments à l'influent martyrologue protestant, John Foxe, afin de défendre, par le personnage de More, les poètes, les dramaturges, et le théâtre. En taxant More de "poète", Foxe insistait sur l'aspect fiction pour accuser More et son Église de mentir. Les auteurs de la pièce se démarquent de cette source en présentant les poètes comme des gens tolérants et moraux. Leur More rejette la posture de confrontation qui conduit au martyre; sa marche vers la mort n'est donc pas, d'emblée, celle d'un martyr. En revanche, le poète qu'il est, par son ouverture et son empathie pour tout le monde, sert à défendre la poésie, et du même coup les pièces de théâtre.

Mots-clés: martyrologie, Réforme, Contre-Réforme, drame, tolérance religieuse.

Sir Thomas More transformó materiales sacados del *Acts and Monuments* de Foxe para ofrecer a través del personaje de Moro una defensa de los poetas, autores dramáticos y del teatro. Foxe describe a Moro como un poeta, identificando sus escritos con el Catolicismo y la mentira. Los autores de la obra de teatro se alejan de su fuente al presentarnos a los poetas como tolerantes y morales. Este Moro rechaza el pensamiento enfrentado que posibilitaría el martirio. No es, por tanto, el prototipo de mártir camino de la muerte. Por contra, sí es un poeta emblemático cuya mentalidad abierta y empatía con todos sirven como defensa de la poesía y por ende de las obras de teatro.

Palabras clave: martirologio, Reforma, Contrarreforma, teatro, tolerancia religiosa

The question of the extent to which the authors of the play *Sir Thomas More* relied upon Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* as a source has some clear answers. The scene in which More imprisons a man until he crops his long, unruly hair almost certainly derives from Foxe's martyrology (although, in that text, the event is an episode from the life of Thomas Cromwell).¹ The many "mocks" More offers in the moments leading to his execution in the play are recorded in numerous sources and have been traced to Hall's *The union of the two noble and illustre families* (1548 and 1550). The accounts in both Holinshed's *Chronicles of England Ireland and Scotland* and in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* reference Hall, and Holinshed's version might even derive its material from Hall by way of Foxe.² Thus, if one sees Holinshed as the most likely source for the details of the hangman asking forgiveness and More jesting about his beard, as do Melchiori and Gabrieli ("Table" 200), one must also recognize that material from *Acts and*

Monuments could have contributed to the scene. Foxe might not have been the only source for the portrayal of More going to the scaffold, but it does seem probable that, as they referred to the long-haired ruffian material in *Acts and Monuments*, the play's authors also consulted the volume's life of More. Critical as well as laudatory biographical accounts of More served as sources, a fact that has been seen as evidence of the playwrights' efforts to create an evenhanded representation of their main character.³ This balanced approach might have led the authors to utilize details from an obviously hostile source like Foxe's martyrology that were certified as accurate by more moderate authors like Hall and Holinshed.

Yet, despite investigations of *Acts and Monuments* as a source, there has been little consideration of how Foxe's account might have shaped the play's more general structure and themes.⁴ The play presents More's life as a particularly London-focused instance of a *de casibus* story, emphasizing the fickleness of fortune through a depiction of

¹ For a brief account of arguments for Foxe as a source for this scene as well as a discussion of the implications of moving an incident from the life of Cromwell into the life of More, see Gabrieli and Melchiori's "Introduction," 6–7, 9. A.W. Pollard identified Foxe as the source for this anecdote in *Shakespeare's Hand* (2), and others follow his lead, including Melchiori and Gabrieli in "A table of sources and close analogues" (198–99). Metz speculates that perhaps the playwrights or even Foxe received this story as an orally transmitted urban legend about a good officer of the law. However, the use of the name "Morris" for Faulkner's master, a name which appears in the margin on the same page of the 1583 edition of Foxe's work as the long-haired ruffian anecdote, seems to me clear evidence that the playwrights looked at *Acts and Monuments*. Melchiori considers why Anthony Munday in particular might have transferred the episode from Cromwell's life into a story about More ("Dramatic Unity," 79–80).

² Foxe references Hall as his source for the description of More's path to the scaffold, starting this section by noting, "Edward Hall in his Chronicle writing of the death and manners of this Syr Thomas Moore seemeth to stande in doubt, whether to call hym a foolishe wise man, or a wise foolish man" (1563 ed., 1069). The account in the 1587 edition of Holinshed closely echoes this passage, starting with the phrase "I cannot tell (saith master Hall) whether I should call him a foolish wise man, or a wise foolish man" (938). The text concerning More's path to the scaffold differs mostly in punctuation and spelling among the three texts.

³ For a discussion of how the weaving together of elements from several Tudor interludes to produce the play's *Marriage of Wit and Wisdom* parallels the way playwrights drew from numerous historical and biographical accounts of More's life and death, see Gabrieli and Melchiori ("Introduction" 9–10). Since the play's principal author is usually recognized to be Anthony Munday, a writer who worked as a spy for the English government gathering information about both recusant Catholics and non-conformist Protestants, the "evenhandedness" of the portrayal of More is often commented upon in relation to Munday's biography. For varying speculation about underlying reasons for this aspect of the play, see Monta 160–61; Knapp 152–54; Gabrieli and Melchiori, "Introduction" 12–17; and Hamilton 120–24.

⁴ In his discussion of the history of source attribution for the play, Metz mentions that A.F. Hopkinson's edition of *Sir Thomas More* (privately printed in London, 1902) links the execution scene to Foxe's account (29–30); he notes, "Most commentators who discuss sources, *although not in any detail*, mention Hall, Foxe, the *Lives*, *Lusty Juventus*, and the oral tradition" (emphasis mine; 31). When attention is paid to Foxe as a source, the discussion focuses on the long-haired ruffian scene only. Monta considers Foxe's portrayal of the laughter of martyrs and discussion of More's "mocks" in relation to the play's representation of More's humor, but she does not deem Foxe a source for treatment of this subject matter in the play (158–64, esp. 164).

the rise and fall of a famous person.⁵ Foxe's references to the life of More follow this same pattern, beginning at nearly the same moment as does the play, with his appointment as Lord Chancellor, and ending with his beheading. Foxe's construction of this narrative makes More's execution seem justified while the play is more ambivalent. Particularly interesting, though, is that both Foxe and the play's authors create their divergent impressions by emphasizing the same aspect of More's character: his status as a poet. Foxe consistently mentions More's imaginative writings to demonstrate the ways in which his poetry made him unfit to be a true martyr. The playwrights seem to pick up on Foxe's repeated references to More as a poet, a characterization unique among the play's identified sources, and they also hint at an unbridgeable gap between poetry and martyrdom.⁶ However, unlike Foxe, they offer a positive evaluation of linguistic creativity, linking More's idea of poetry to an attitude of tolerance and open-mindedness that would make martyrdom impossible. In the process, they offer an implicit attack on the rhetoric of martyrdom that is not an apology for the historical Thomas More but rather a defense of poetry – and of plays.

Foxe's Life of More

It is not surprising that Foxe's presentation of More is unsympathetic. After all, he was writing about someone he thought "the Popes holynes hath hallowed & dignified . . . long since" as a martyr for the Catholic faith (1069).⁷ Simply to associate More with the Pope was

⁵ For a discussion of the play's adherence to this pattern, see Melchiori and Gabrieli, "Introduction" 3–6.

⁶ As I demonstrate below, both Foxe and his Protestant polemical sources made an issue of More's being a poet. The term does not appear in Hall or Holinshed's accounts. Harpsfield labels both *Utopia* and *Life of King Richard the Third* as books, not poetry (102–04), and refers to and offers a few examples of More's "verses" (136, 180–81), but neither he nor Roper identifies More as a poet.

⁷ All page numbers from Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* are taken from the 1583 edition. The extended sections on More are not present in the 1563 edition, but they

an argument for condemnation in the larger context of Foxe's anti-papal polemic. However, Foxe offers more than a simple statement that More cannot be considered a true martyr. His detailed account of More's final years creates a different impression than his more customary attacks on Catholics. Foxe seems to relish cataloguing the blood-thirsty statements Catholic authorities make while interrogating Protestant prisoners; he also seems to enjoy describing the grisly deaths of these men he considers cruel prosecutors. In comparison, his description of More's death is understated.⁸ Perhaps More's popular reputation as a well-respected statesman, writer, and wit made it difficult for Foxe to dismiss him entirely.⁹ Surely, it led him to offer a rare instance of praise for a Catholic, the acknowledgement that More was "a man wel learned in tongues and also in the comen lawe" (994).

Instead of offering a simple attack on More's religious allegiances, Foxe constructs his narrative of the Lord Chancellor's life and death in a way that excludes the possibility of considering him a martyr. More's

appear in the same order with only minor typographical differences in the 1570, 1576, and 1583 editions. (It is important to note the value of *Foxe's Book of Martyrs Variorum Edition Online* for making these textual comparisons.)

⁸ For example, the text and marginal commentary on one page of the martyrology describe Bishop of London Edmund Bonner personally whipping two young men; Foxe reports him gloating, "they call me bloody Boner. A vengeance on you all I would faine be rid of you, but you haue a delite in burnyng. But if I might haue my will, I would sowe your mouthes, and put you in sacks, and drowne you" (2044). Bishop Stephen Gardiner's participation in numerous interrogations is recorded with his sins, errors, and cruelties helpfully labeled in marginal notes. After this man's attempt to assassinate Elizabeth Tudor is described, Foxe offers a gruesome account of Gardiner's agonizing death in 1555 (1787–88). For a discussion of the importance of such providential deaths of Catholic officials within Foxe's overall project, see Freeman.

⁹ Although he was not officially canonized until 1935, More was considered someone who died for the faith by Catholics from the time of his death throughout the sixteenth century in no small part because of hagiographic texts produced by his family members. For a helpful discussion of how visual images and written accounts of More served as relics supporting "The Cult of Thomas More," see Hulse, especially 207–23.

name first appears in the context of a discussion of how Henry's cardinals attended more diligently to the interests of the Pope than to their own monarch, deluding the king about their half-hearted attempts to procure annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. The fall of Cardinal Wolsey is directly linked to the rise of More; Foxe explains that the king and council chose the new Lord Chancellor not simply because of his impressive intellectual abilities but particularly because he was "no man of the Spiritualitie" (994). With this beginning, More is established as a figure upon whom fortune has smiled. The account that follows demonstrates how More arrogantly misused his power until the moment when he fell from the height of royal favor. Thus, More's life is shown to be utterly different from that of Foxe's true martyrs. While Protestant martyrs merit praise for their ability to best Catholic clerics in doctrinal arguments, More's engagement in religious debates is characterized by Foxe as inappropriate. The way More is introduced makes him seem honor-bound to serve Henry's reasonable goal to appoint an official who serves the crown rather than the church. Subsequently, every mention of More's polemical arguments becomes an occasion for Foxe to remind his readers that More overreached his official role by authoring such texts.¹⁰

For example, since More wrote a refutation of John Frith's treatise against the Real Presence, Foxe embeds within his account of Frith a point-by-point attack on these arguments both as Papist doctrine and as a personal expression of such ideas by Thomas More (1034).¹¹ This vituperation culminates when More's writings are characterized as inherently flawed on the grounds that their author was a layman:

¹⁰ Foxe is either ignorant of or conveniently overlooks the fact that Henry counted on More to write on contemporary religious controversies, particularly to defend his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* against Luther's *Contra Henricum* with the *Responsio ad Lutherum*. See Marius 276–91, especially 280–81.

¹¹ For the argument to which Foxe seems to be responding, see More's "Letter against Frith" as well as Gordon's "A missing reference in the More-Frith controversy."

not contented with his own vocation, [More] hath with Oza reached out his unmeet hand to medle with Gods Arkematers, wherein he had little cunning and while he thynketh to helpe religion, destroyeth religion, and is an utter enemy to Christ and to his spiritual doctrine. (1011–12)

Uzzah (whose name Foxe, like the Vulgate, spells "Oza") was a man who, while transporting the Ark of the Covenant back to Jerusalem, touched the load to steady it; God struck him dead for putting his hand on this sacred thing (2 Samuel 6:1–7). Foxe's use of this reference is remarkable because Uzzah, one of David's army of "the chosen men of Israel," dies not for being a heretic but for meddling (albeit accidentally) with an object reserved to the priests. Based on his praise of Protestant martyrs, Foxe clearly does not wish to restrict laymen from considering doctrinal matters, but he presents More as a special case of an individual prohibited from engaging in religious debate by his official position in the king's government.

More is shown to have defied the wishes of the king in dealings with Simon Fish, author of the anticlerical tract "The Supplication of Beggars." According to Foxe, the king met with Fish and had an enjoyable conversation about how the abuses of the clergy and the decadence of the Roman church rendered honest Englishmen unable to feed their families. When Henry ended this encounter by telling Fish to go home to his wife, the man replied that "he durst not do so, for feare of Syr Thomas More then Chancellour" (1014). Henry responded by giving Fish his signet and telling him to take this sign to More, "charyng him not to be so hardy to worke him any harme" (1014). Foxe then describes how More took the signet as an indication that Fish must be released and left unpunished for his writings, yet he also willfully overlooked the King's intent: "levyng not his grudge towards [Fish's] wife, the next morning [More] sent his man for her to appear before him" (1014). In this account, More seems a persecutor of the poor and humble, a harasser of women, and, most importantly, a traitor to the king. This episode and others enable Foxe to conclude that this man "so wilfully stode in the Popes quarrell againste his owne

prince that he would not geve over tyll he had brought the Scaffold of the Tower hyll with axe and all upon his owne neck" (1069).¹²

In addition to making More seem a rebellious subject, Foxe repeatedly shows him to be an enemy to God's true martyrs. As he does for other church and state officials, Foxe describes instances in which More was involved in the trials and executions of the followers of Christ. His name appears in a list of "Persecutors" of Thomas Bilney between the names of two clergymen, so he seems to be among those who kept Bilney in custody "no longer than they could sende up to London for the writte to burn him" (1008). More is also described as "a deadly persecutor of John Fryth" (1032). By noting that More was responsible for the deaths of the truly faithful, Foxe characterizes him as someone whose beliefs and behaviors are the inverse of those associated with Christian martyrs.

But Foxe also singles out More as different from other Catholic persecutors because of his writings. In addition to being an official who helped to make martyrs, More, in Foxe's eyes, is an anti-martyrologist, a writer who presents false information about those who died for Christ in order to call the significance of their suffering into question. Since More wrote about a number of the Protestants Foxe considers martyrs, many of the martyrologist's treatments of these individuals include extended attacks on More. In both *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, More claims that Thomas Bilney went to the stake a true Catholic who repented his Protestant heresies. Foxe calls More's account a deliberate act of deception, commenting:

here now commeth in Syr Thomas More trumping in our way, with his paynted carde, & would needes take up this Tho. Bilney from us, and make him a convert after his sect. Thus these

¹² Here Foxe's characterization of More seems to prefigure the arguments of William Cecil in his *Execution of Justice in England* (1583) that the Catholic priests executed by Elizabeth's government were punished for being traitors, not for their religious beliefs, and thus ought not to be thought of as martyrs.

coated cardes, though they could not by playne scriptures convince him beyng aliyve, yet now after his death, by false play, they wil make him theirs whether he will or no. (1008)

Although More's arguments are described here as a cheap trick, Foxe takes these ideas seriously enough to engage them. His refutation of More's assertions about Bilney's supposed conversion (and his concomitant defense of Catholic doctrine) run for three densely packed, double-column folio pages (1008–11).¹³ Similarly, Foxe spends a number of paragraphs attacking More's treatise on "the poore sely soules pewlyng out of Purgatory" (1017) and several more refuting the claim that George Constantine colluded with Henrican officials to seize illegal Protestant books (1019).¹⁴ By showing that More's writings about Catholic beliefs and Protestant martyrs were packed with lies, Foxe establishes that More ought not to be considered a martyr.

Particularly relevant to the relationship between *Acts and Monuments* and the play *Sir Thomas More* is how Foxe characterizes More as a persecutor and wily anti-martyrologist by reminding readers that the Lord Chancellor was widely recognized as a writer of fictions. The parlance he uses to communicate this idea, in keeping with early modern

¹³ For More's account of Bilney's recantation, see More, *A Dialogue* (35–36, 255–57, 268–71, 277–80) and *The Confutation* (518). Foxe responds directly to the latter text, picking up More's phrase "tyll finally at hys death god of hys goodnesse opened hys eyes" for extended ridicule.

¹⁴ Since Constantine is among those Foxe claims as Protestant martyrs from the reign of Mary, it was important that More's slights against his character be addressed; the fact that Foxe does so within sections that discuss More's life rather than waiting until his later account of Constantine's martyrdom indicates that here he is particularly focused on discrediting More. Throughout this section of the text, he frequently engages with material from "The Preface to the Christian Reader" in More's *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, a text that mentions not only Constantine and Tilney but also some of Foxe's other martyrs including Robert Barnes, Richard Bayfield, and Thomas Hitton (13–29). For the section on Constantine that Foxe refutes, see 18–20.

flexibility in applying the term, involves calling More a poet, his writings poetry.¹⁵ More's claim that Bilney recanted is proved, according to Foxe, "By 3 or 4 mightie arguments as big as milpostes [mill-posts], set out of Utopia, from whence thou maist know reader, can come no fittons [fictions or lies], but all fine Poetrie" (1008). More's defense of the existence of Purgatory is similarly dismissed as fiction: "[W]here then stood M. More I marvell al this meane while, to see the devil laugh with his mouth so wyde, [that] the soules of Purgatory might see all hys teeth? Belyke this was in Utopia where M. Mores Purgatorye is founded" (1017). Repeatedly equating More's *Utopia* with his religious writings, Foxe indicates that all of More's texts are a type of poetry one can see as little more than lying.¹⁶

At one point, Foxe describes More in a passage that seems peculiar in light of his oft-repeated praise for Protestant martyrs who read and wrote about spiritual matters. He calls More

a man otherwise of pregnant witte, full of pleasaunt conceites, also for his learnyng above the common sort of his estate, esteemed industrious, no lesse in his studies, then well exercised in his penne. Who, if he had kept himself within hys owne shoppe and applied the faculty, being a lay man wher he was called, and had not over reached himselfe to prove mistries [mysteries] in such matters, wherein he had lesse skill, less experience, and which pertainct not to his profession, he had deserved not onely more commendation but also longer lyfe. (1011)

¹⁵ As is made clear by Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589; see 38–73) and Sidney's *Defence of Poesy* (1580, rpt. 1595; see 10–12), the term "poetry" was associated with verse but could be applied to almost any sort of imaginative writing, prose, or verse, including plays.

¹⁶ Interestingly, it is common for contemporary literary critics to emphasize the similarities between the dialogic structure and argumentation of *Utopia* and More's religious polemics, albeit for very different reasons than does Foxe; see Greenblatt 58–62, Ni Chuilleainain 388–90.

Here Foxe does not completely contradict his Protestant convictions that no one should be restricted from reading the Bible or from understanding church doctrine. Rather, he emphasizes that More's particular type of work with his pen made him unfit to deal with religious matters. As is evident from other sections of *Acts and Monuments*, Foxe did not condemn all poems; several editions include Latin verses among the prefatory materials.¹⁷ However, these texts differ from *Utopia* in being both explicitly polemical and dogmatically Protestant. Because some of what More wrote was "full of pleasant conceits," he is incompetent to comment on spiritual "mystries." As a poet, More is a liar who cannot be expected to offer sound religious doctrine, much less to die as a religious martyr.

Since Foxe's martyrology is as much a compilation of other writings as an original work, it is not surprising to find the roots of this attack on More in earlier Protestant texts. In his *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, William Tyndale repeatedly asserts that More's work as a poet has led him to make false arguments. After explaining how More critiques his translation of the Greek word *ecclesia* as "congregation" rather than "church," Tyndale laments "M. More hath so long used his figures of poetry, that (I suppose) when he erreth most, he now, by the reason of a long custom, believeth himself that he saith most true" (14). Tyndale knows that such a great humanist scholar could not accidentally misunderstand the definition of a simple Greek word; either More is madly ranting or craftily lying, two practices which Tyndale associates directly with the work of poets. In *The Souper of the Lord*, a text which Foxe attributes to Tyndale, poetry is more explicitly equated with lying as the author connects the "vnwryten vanities" of the Roman church (such as the veneration of saints, belief in transubstantiation, and arguments for purgatory) to stories made up out of thin air (More, *Answer* 312).¹⁸ Exasperated with the power

¹⁷ See specifically the 1570 edition, 20–21; 1576, 20–23; and 1583, 21–23

¹⁸ While nineteenth-century scholars generally agreed that *The Souper of the Lord* was authored by William Tyndale and Foxe attributes the text to him in his *Whole workes of W. Tyndall, Iohn Frith, and Doct. Barnes* (1573), the writer of this work has

of poets to create fictions that seem truthful, the author of *The Souper*, now thought to be George Joye, notes, "If ye will believe whatsoever More can feign without the scripture, then can this poet feign you another church than Christ's, and that ye must believe whatsoever it teacheth you" (312).¹⁹ For a number of Protestant reformers, a poet is always a liar, and Foxe picks up on this idea in his characterization of More.

By calling More a poet and considering even More's religious writings a type of poetry, Foxe establishes that the texts authored by this Catholic writer are completely different from his own martyrology. Throughout *Acts and Monuments*, Foxe repeatedly acknowledges the sources for his accounts in an attempt to demonstrate he only reports what is true and verifiable. For this reason, within the context of the larger martyrology it seems particularly damning when Foxe indicates that the only source for More's writings is imagination. At one point he posits,

M. More, for all your powder of experience, do ye thinke to cast such a mist before mens eyes, that we cannot see how you juggle with truth, and take you tardy in your own narration? unless peradventure you wil excuse your selfe, *per licentiam Poeticam*, after the priviledge of Poets and Paynters, for as you know the old liberty of these two. *Pictoris atque Poetis. Quae-libet audiendi semper fuit aequa potestas* (1009).²⁰

been disputed since it was first published. More's own response to this polemical work in his *The answer to the fyrst part of the poysoned booke* (1533) ponders whether the author was William Tyndale or George Joye. In an appendix to More's *Answer*, Michael Anderegg argues convincingly that Joye is the most likely candidate. See Appendix B to More's *Answer to a Poisoned Book*. Page numbers for *The Souper* reference the edition presented as Appendix A to More's *Answer*, 299–340.

¹⁹ See Ni Chuilleanain for detailed analysis of how ideas about reading, writing, literature, and textuality play out in More and Tyndale's exchange of polemical arguments and in Reformation discourse more generally.

²⁰ Corrected from Foxe's spelling, the epigram reads "*Pictoribus atque poetis Quidlibet audendi semper fuit aequa potestas*" ("Painters and poets have always enjoyed equal power to dare anything they like" or, more colloquially, "Both painters and

While a poet may write about whatever he can dream up, a martyrologist has a responsibility to report on what actually happened. Because More demonstrated he could create a fictional world in *Utopia*, Foxe deems him a poet incapable of writing an accurate account of either Christian doctrine or historical events. Foxe does see, however, some redeeming qualities in More's works. Good Christian readers, he concedes, might look at More's writings and "although they see the matter to be false, yet might commend the workmanship of the handler" (1009).

Sir Thomas More and the Work of Poets

It is this view of poets as immoral tricksters that the authors of *Sir Thomas More* refute in the play's many episodes of More discussing poetry and utilizing his poetic imagination.²¹ Whereas Foxe's quoted Latin epigram grants to poets complete (and dangerous) freedoms to ignore reality, More's evaluations of the art throughout the play are quite different. Instead of equating poetry with lying, the playwrights, through the voice and actions of their character More, present a definition that implies a more complex and positive relationship between the work of poets and reality. While poets have the ability to invent whatever they can create in their minds, the best poetry maintains a close relationship to reality in order to promote an ethical and inclusive vision of humankind. More performs as this type of poet throughout the play, and he comes to symbolize a power of poetry that is described in early modern defenses of poetry and associated with the work of playwrights.

poets have always been able to attempt anything") and is derived from Horace's *Ars Poetica* (9–10).

²¹ References to material taken from *Sir Thomas More* appear parenthetically, with the text taken from and the first reference showing act, scene, and line numbers in the Gabrieli/Melchiori edition. The second reference indicates line numbers in Greg's edition for the Malone society, which more closely reflects the play manuscript without modern editorial intervention.

In the middle of the play, Surrey rejects being labeled with “that word poet” both because it is linked to “much idleness” and because “Poets were ever thought unfit for state” (3.1.193, 195; A4:160, 162). More immediately corrects him, explaining “It is the sweetest heraldry of art / That sets a difference ’tween the tough sharp holly / And tender bay tree” (3.1.197–99; A4:165–67).²² In other words, it might be conventional to insist on a lack of relationship between the “tender bay” of poetry and the “tough sharp holly” of statecraft, or even to posit a hierarchy of politics over poetry, but this description is more a result of tradition and artifice (“art”) than accuracy. For More, poetry and the affairs of state are interrelated, the work of a poet being inspired by and constructed out of elements of reality. If poetry has, as Surrey laments, “become the very lag number / To all mechanic sciences” (3.1.201–202; A4:168–69), this lack of quality is not the fault of poets but of princes. More insists, “I’ll show the reason / This is no age for poets: they should sing / To the loud cannon *heroica facta* / *Qui faciunt reges heroica carmina laudant*; / And as great subjects of their pen decay / Even so unphisicked they do melt away” (3.1.202–207; A4:170–75). In this Latin epigram seemingly original to the play, poetry is described as a form bound up in the reality of its times, particularly to the character of state leaders: heroic poems (or epics) by their nature praise the heroic deeds of kings.²³ If poetry is diminished, it is because the age offers poets few honorable heroes to praise. This vision is directly opposed to Foxe’s association of poetry with *licentia*, a word that indicates not only freedom and liberty of the imagination but also immoral licentiousness.

²² Gabrieli and Melchiori’s note on these lines claims “the contrast between the poet and the statesman in More’s personality is the tragic flaw that accounts for his fall.” This seems to me an oversimplification of a play that directly links More’s poetic imagination to his success in the public realm, particularly to his judgments as sheriff and Lord Chancellor.

²³ Gabrieli and Melchiori’s notes for these lines translate the epigram “Epic poems praise what kings do.” They indicate the lack of an identifiable classical source for this statement.

As it is expressed most directly in the conversation between More and Surrey, this definition of the function of poetry might seem limited, restricting the work of the poet to attempts at mimesis. Yet More hints that a poet might have the responsibility not only to reflect the deeds of others but also to instigate moral actions. The vague referent for the word “they” in More’s phrase “Even so unphisicked they do melt away” implies equally that men decline from greatness when they lack the “phisick” of poetry as it does that poets decline when they lack “great subjects.” The relationship between a poet and reality, then, is symbiotic, and one responsibility of the poet is to use his language to affect positively the world around him. As he offers this statement about poetry, the character More seems in agreement with the assertion by Sidney that the poet’s ability to make “things either better than nature bringeth forth or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature” (8–9) is not to be used unthinkingly or amorally. Sidney writes,

[T]hat the poet hath that *idea* is manifest by delivering them forth in such excellency as he had imagined them; which delivering forth also is not wholly imaginative, as we are wont to say by them that build castles in the air, but so far substantially it worketh, not only to make a Cyrus, which had been but a particular excellency as nature might have done, but to bestow a Cyrus upon the world to make many Cyruses, if they will learn aright how and why that maker made him. (9)

According to Sidney (and other early modern commentators on poetry), to be a poet is to make something that is always entangled with reality, for the work of the best poets strives to improve humankind.

The ramifications of More acting as this kind of poet are made clear when he is in the Tower. The Lieutenant comments that, as Lord Chancellor, More must have become a rich man, able to amass “two thousand pound a year” (5.3.41; 1770), but the prisoner calls this assumption a mistake. Rather than enriching himself, More has “purchased as strange commodities / As ever you heard tell of in your life”

(5.3.50–51; 1780–81) with his earnings, primarily “Crutches . . . and bare cloakes / For halting soldiers, and poor needy scholars / Have had my gettings in the chancery” (5.3.54–56; 1784–85). He explains his scanty inventory of personal property to the officer, stating “That part of poet that was given me, / Made me a very unthrift. / For this is the disease that attends us all: / Poets were never thrifty, never shall” (5.3.61–64; 1790–93). More directly links the elements of his character that make him a poet to his impulse to offer charitable gifts to wounded soldiers and impoverished scholars in a statement about poetry that serves as corollary to his Latin epigram. If the heroic deeds of princes move poets to create epic verse, then the hardships of a country lead poets to aid the poor. In either circumstance, the poet reflects the reality of the world around him, but he does not stop with mere reproduction of what he perceives. Instead, he makes an imaginative leap, building upon his understanding of the condition of those around him to craft words and actions that offer beneficial “phisick” to others.

In numerous episodes throughout the play, the playwrights offer examples of More using his poetic force in this way. When More represents the realities around him in his moments of making poetry (whether in the form of eloquent verse speeches, play-acting, or both), he is shown to have a profound empathy for those whom he observes. This sense of identification with those he engages in language play not only leads More to individual acts of charity but also inspires his hearers to behave empathetically (even mercifully) towards those over whom they have power. Characters onstage are moved from disdain for troublesome individuals to identification with their situation through the force of More’s poetic imagination. Additionally, and more crucially, by presenting multiple scenes structured around the metamorphosis of opposition and conflict into sympathy and fellowship, the play meditates on the relationship between the work of playwrights and this type of poetic imagination.

More’s ability to move others to acts of charity is apparent in his first scene on stage. The play initially presents More in his role as

sheriff, involved in the trial of the notorious pick-pocket Lifter. The scene’s theatrical and meta-theatrical qualities are legion, starting with the revelation of the mayor, justices, and sheriff More with the drawing back of an arras (1.2.sd1; 104) and culminating with More adopting the role of “setter” to enable Lifter to steal Suresby’s purse (1.2.81; 187).²⁴ While More’s ability to play act is apparent in this scene, less obvious is the purpose he achieves with what he himself characterizes as nothing more than “a merry jest” (1.2.76; 184). Justice Suresby lacks pity for either the condemned man or the plaintiff. He grumbles that Lifter “Had he had right, he had been hanged ere this, / The only captain of the cutpurse crew” (1.2.7–8; 114–15), and then turns to chide Smart for increasing the numbers of “so many pilferers and felons” that plague London, saying he is one of the “foolish people” who “tempt the needy miserable wretch” by carrying large amounts of cash in their purses (1.2.32–34; 138–39). Even if these speeches did not reveal Suresby’s intolerance, his name would offer a clue to his character – he is so sure that his judgments are correct that he confidently finds all other men lacking. More’s “merry jest” does more than show that Suresby is a fool. Rather, it sets up a situation in which More can both reflect and play with Suresby’s language in order to inspire in the justice a sense of empathy for others. Paraphrasing Suresby’s earlier speech to Smart, Sheriff More mockingly berates the justice for having seven pounds in his missing purse, then extends the argument to its logical conclusion: “Should he be taken now that has your purse, / I’d stand to’t, you are guilty of his death” (1.2.181–82; 293–94). Whereas Suresby’s words were condemnations of both victim and criminal, More’s are an inverted reflection of his intentions, a speech that insists on the necessity of empathy for both Smart and Lifter. As More merrily concludes, “’Twere a good deed to fine ye as much more / To the relief of the poor prisoners, / To teach ye to lock your money up at home” (1.2.184–86; 296–97), the audience sees an example of

²⁴ For a discussion of the self-conscious theatricality of More’s actions in this scene, see Knapp 155–56.

More's work as a poet, using language to transform a description of reality into an act of charity. The strict requirements of justice are not acted out in this scene, for Lifter is pardoned by More although "the jury is all together" in finding him guilty (1.2.5; 111). Yet a happier resolution is achieved as Suresby is brought to empathize with the individuals whose cases he adjudicates. More achieves here a type of poetic justice by using creative language to transform the impulse to punish into an act of mercy.

A similar dynamic characterizes More's interactions with the Ill May Day rioters. As he tries to dissuade the crowd from burning the city, he creates an imaginative description of their situation that moves hearers from anger and rebellion to empathy and obedience. The rioters cry for "Peace, peace" (2.3.66; A2:183) so that they will be able to hear More speak. He immediately transforms this language into a comment, saying "Look what you do offend you cry upon, / That is the peace" (2.3.67-68; A2:184-85). Then he shifts to a call for self-examination, asking his audience to note that they have grown up in an environment of peace they would deny to others. George Betts insists that their actions will benefit the city by getting rid of troublesome foreigners, but More responds by urging the crowd to "Imagine that you see the wretched strangers, / Their babies at their backs, with their poor luggage / Plodding to th' ports and coasts for transportation" (2.3.80-83; A2:197-99). The vision is designed to arouse pity, and More builds upon this emotion by asking the rioters to envision themselves in the foreigners' position. Were the humble citizens of London subject to the force of rioters, he asserts, they would lose any chance at happy lives because in such a disorderly world, "ruffians, as their fancies wrought, / With selfsame hand, self reasons and self right / Would shark on you, and men like ravenous fishes / Would feed on one another" (2.3.90-93; A2:207-10). Englishmen being sent overseas as punishment would hope to find themselves welcomed as strangers, not set upon by violent mobs. More's evaluation, "This is the stranger's case, / And this your mountainish inhumanity" (2.3.150-51; A2:262-63) leads the crowd to

respond with a re-statement of the Golden Rule, "Faith, 'a says true; let's do as we may be done by" (2.3.152; A2:264).

With this quelling of the riots, More's persuasiveness clearly serves the interests of the king and commonwealth. Eloquent statements could even be seen as an example of poetry akin to lying since the description of the foreigners presented by More bears little similarity to what the play showed of them in its opening scenes. Francis DeBeard does not seem the type to creep along wretchedly with a baby at his back as he attempts to claim sexual ownership of the carpenter's wife and boasts that he could have the mayor of London's wife as a concubine. Caveler is more shark than sharked upon when he steals the pigeons Williamson has purchased, insisting that they are too fine a dish for a working man. The strangers are, in fact, a force that needs to be controlled. But More's transformation of the rioters from violent rebels into peaceful subjects does not privilege the interests of the English government, and the foreigners it wishes to protect, over those of London citizens.²⁵ Rather, his persuasive speeches protect the rioters from what would surely be the "dangerous blows" (2.3.43; A2:120) of troops sent to quiet them. More offers the crowd word pictures that both reflect and distort reality in order to achieve empathy and peace, and subsequently he employs the same rhetorical strategy to convince the king to pardon the arrested rebels. According to Surrey's report, More obtains clemency for the rioters by telling the king "on his word / They did so gently yield" (2.4.146-47; 1703-04), but the staged scene that presents members of the crowd fighting over whether they would

²⁵ Knapp argues that *Sir Thomas More* offers a defense of legal and religious conformity by linking it to theatricality, insisting upon a gap between outward performances of obedience and inward thoughts (149-52); Hamilton concurs that the play ultimately argues in favor of obedience to the government's demands but also shows that it does so while staging highly controversial subject matter, perhaps as a way of lamenting past and present religious persecution (120-24). Yet these and other critics do not consider the ways in which More's support of conformity to law in this scene involves playing fast and loose with concepts of obedience in order to achieve both mercy for the foreigners and clemency for the rioters.

listen to Surrey or to More and then over whether they would listen quietly (2.3.29–65; A2:148–82) hints that More's description of them is a semi-fiction crafted to win pity. In a strict legal sense, justice is shortchanged when the citizens are convinced to overlook the wrongs done to them by foreigners and then, in turn, are pardoned for rioting. However, a broader vision of human experience is created and a peaceful outcome achieved. This happy ending is made possible through More's creation of what he considers to be poetry, a reflection of the world that shapes reality into language capable of effectively moving men to charitable actions.²⁶

While the troupe of players is quite different from the group of rioters, they derive a similar benefit from More's poetic imagination. The scene that presents More stepping into the play *Marriage of Wit and Wisdom* is probably based on Harpsfield's account of More as a boy performing in a Christmas play. However, the description of this performance in the biography stresses different character traits than does the similar moment in *Sir Thomas More*. Harpsfield indicates that More's ability to "Upon the soden step in among the Christmas players" was "among many other tokens of his quicke and pregnant witte" and led the audience, the players, and the Cardinal whom he served to admire him (11). While this incident shows the young More gaining (and perhaps seeking) the approval of spectators, the older More in the dramatic text steps into a play for altruistic reasons. Early in his discussion with one of the players, it is made clear that this troupe is ill-

²⁶ Of course, while all of the rioters are pardoned, not all of their lives are saved. The hanging of Lincoln, which takes place before Surrey arrives with the pardon, can be seen as a pre-figuring of More's execution. Most importantly, though, this scene offers the play's first indication that individuals who are too deferential to written documents might be prevented from offering the type of mercy and sympathy positively associated throughout the play with More's poetry. The Sheriff so efficiently carries out the execution of Lincoln because "The writ is come above two hours since" (2.4.29; 595), which leads him to believe "We may not dally time with great command" (2.4.34; 600). This idea of official documents as a dangerous restraint on the effects of the poetic imagination is further developed in the scenes concerning More's arrest and execution. See my discussion below.

equipped in several ways. They have only "four men and a boy" (3.2.72; 932) to present a play that includes three substantial female roles, leading More to comment, "And one boy to play them all? By'r Lady, he's loaden" (3.2.77; 937). They lack a beard for the player portraying Wit and have no one to send to fetch this costume piece but the man who is supposed to portray Good Counsel. As the drama makes apparent that this group of players is down and out, More's move into the role of Good Counsel becomes an act designed not only to please his important guests but also to spare from embarrassment actors who are doing a terrible job. The financial reward More sends is characterized as a charitable gift rather than a required payment when he chides his servingman for filching part of it: "Then what avails my bounty, when such servants / Deceive the poor of what the master gives" (3.2.339–40; A6:50–51). Just as More transforms the foreigners into impoverished refugees worthy of pity and the rioters into a peaceful crowd, he makes this group of players seem worthy of praise through his words and actions towards them.

More is linked to acting in this play by stepping into the interlude and by earning the admiring comment from Inclination, "Would not my lord make a rare player" (3.2.295–96; 1150). Some see this representation of More as a player as indicative of his ability to present an outward show that may or may not align with his inward thoughts and intentions; this notion of More as a skillful actor is then usually linked to a consideration of the play as an argument for outward religious conformity.²⁷ Such readings, however, overlook the consistent moral point of view associated with More's application of poetic language, whether in an interlude or in his official capacities. Rather than presenting More as a player, this episode exemplifies how his identification as a poet connects to the dynamics of the stage. When Inclination marvels, "Did ye mark how extemptrically he fell to the matter, and spake Luggins's part almost as it is in the very book set down?" (3.2.297–99; 1152–53), he praises More's linguistic abilities more than

²⁷ See especially Knapp, 149–52 and Hamilton 120–24.

his performing skills. The implied reason why More is able to “extemporally” speak lines like those in the script is that his poetic imagination aligns with that of playwrights.²⁸

Having already established that More associates poetry with (and uses it to persuade others to) acts of mercy and charity, the interlude scene offers audiences a metatheatrical comment on the nature of plays as a force for promoting tolerance and understanding among different groups of people. Such a notion of theatre is also evident in the moralistic defenses of poetry and playing produced by poets for the stage in early modern England. Like More in the play, Thomas Lodge in his *Reply to Gosson* (c. 1580) describes the work of poets as akin to the efforts of “good Phisitions” who develop medicines that will be both healthful and pleasant to their patients (5; A3^r). As Thomas Heywood’s *Apology for Actors* (1612) responds to accusations that the theatre is immoral, it systematically describes the beneficial lessons to be learned from different types of plays. For example, Heywood indicates moral interludes are designed “to perswade men to humanity and good life, to instruct them in civility and good manners” (F3^v), a goal that seems similar to what More attempts with his extemporaneous performance. Jeffrey Knapp cites these types of arguments to defend his contention in *Shakespeare’s Tribe* that the early modern English stage put greater emphasis on promoting an ecumenical spirit of Christian fellowship than on clarifying doctrinal divisions, much to the chagrin of the period’s more theologically precise religious writers. However, in his reading of *Sir Thomas More*, Knapp explores only the ways in which the title character is presented as a player and thus sees the play as an argument for conformity and obedience. While at moments the play does emphasize More’s performance skills, it is more consistent in its representation of him as a poet whose use of language arouses empathy and sympathy. As the play’s More acts as a poet, he also becomes a

²⁸ In his article on “The Role of Drama in More’s Literary Career,” Norland offers a number of instances in which More’s writings seem to have been influenced by drama and, at times, resemble plays. See also Norland’s chapter on More in *Drama in Early Tudor Britain*, 111–27.

symbol of the importance of poetry as a means of promoting the religious toleration Knapp associates with the writers for the stage.

More, Poets, and Martyrdom

If the first three acts clearly present More as a poet who has the power to generate empathy, the effects of poetry seem less straightforward as the play moves toward its (and More’s) tragic conclusion. Although More never ceases to act as a poet, he does fail to obtain the same pardon for himself that he garnered for Lifter, the citizen rioters, and the player troupe. The play’s final scenes repeatedly stage the cause of that failure – official, written documents. While More continues to generate sympathy among his listeners with his poetry, these individuals are unable to transform their emotions into merciful actions because they are constrained by written directives. This dominance of official documents over human interaction persists throughout a series of events that leads to More’s death. Rather than making him seem a wronged innocent, however, these scenes work to undercut the sense that, at the end of the play, More is a religious martyr. Like Foxe’s condemnation of poets as liars, the play’s definition of them as individuals who promote tolerance forecloses the possibility that a poet could fit neatly into the typical narrative of martyrdom. Yet the play’s idea of poetry also offers a profound critique of the martyr-persecutor dichotomy that underlies all martyrologies. Ultimately, the play uses its representation of More as a poet to privilege the work of poets over the writings of martyrologists and other religious polemicists.

Although some critics have argued that the play hints at religious reasons why the character More is arrested and executed, it is important to note how carefully the specific cause for which he dies is obscured. Most obviously, the contents of the “articles” to which More is ordered to subscribe are never revealed. His appeal to “conscience” as the ground for his refusal is so generic an example of religious language that it prohibits associating him with any particular Christian

doctrine (4.1.73–75; 1238–40).²⁹ The careful shaping of language to mystify the mechanism of More's downfall continues until and even after his death. Lady More's dream of being in a boat with her husband as it is sucked underwater by a whirlpool is a secular vision of a mysterious loss of social prestige rather than of punishment for political rebellion or execution for religious dissent. Indeed, as the dream indicates that it is neither the king nor More who separates the "little boat" from the royal entourage but "The violence of the stream" (4.2.18; 1300), Lady More's premonition hints at her husband's passivity during his journey towards death. This seems quite different from the ways in which many of Foxe's Protestant and later Catholic martyrs actively defended their beliefs once they were condemned. Roper's wife's dream has more explicit religious content as she describes a vision of More "Standing upon the rood loft, now defaced, / And whilst he kneeled and prayed before the image, / It fell with him into the upper choir, / Where my poor father lay all stained in blood" (4.2.38–41; 1322–25). Yet this scenario indicates only that the image and More fell simultaneously, leaving the doctrinal implications of the dream quite vague. Is one to see More here as a devout Catholic whose downfall is associated with damage to the true church or to see him as an idolater justly done in by Henrican reforms? Surrey's lines after More exits on his way to execution are similarly open to divergent interpretations. When he mourns More as "A very learned gentleman [who] / Seals error with his blood" (5.4.119–20; 1983–84), it is impossible to discern whose error is being discussed. Perhaps Surrey sees More as a pitiful example of an individual dying to defend his own errors, or perhaps he laments his friend as a victim of the king's errors. Like the references to conscience and the details of Lady Roper's dream, Surrey's requiem avoids depicting More as either a rebel or

²⁹ Honingman's argument connects the play's portrayal of More to the executions in the 1580s and 1590s of Catholic priests; Bevington (256) and Hamilton (119–20) assert that with its defense of individual conscience, the play would also be appealing to Protestant non-conformists. For a somewhat different explanation than mine of why the play might invoke the idea of conscience in order to make available a range of interpretations, see Monta 166–72.

a martyr. Repeatedly, the play goes out of its way to leave both readings open, in the process troubling both narratives.

If, as Augustine asserted, it is not the death but the cause that makes a martyr, leaving the cause of an individual's death unclear does not make for a martyrology. By its very nature, the discourse of Christian martyrdom supposes distinct differences between true faith and heresy even as it simultaneously establishes and solidifies those differences. The early church needed to distinguish between martyrs, such as the Christians who died at the hands of Roman authorities before Constantine's conversion, and heretics, who, like the Pelagians, Donatists, and Manicheans were punished by Christian officials for promoting false doctrine. Augustine first made his statement as part of this project of delimiting official Christian doctrine.³⁰ By the beginning of the sixteenth century, the arguments for why heretics ought to be burned or otherwise executed were well established. As Brad Gregory pithily states in his analysis of martyrdom in early modern Europe, Christians not only had a long history of "willingness to kill" to protect their faith but also saw it as necessary to do so in order to protect the church as an institution and to shield individual believers from the corrupting ideas of heretics.³¹

No wonder then that reformers whose doctrine was considered heretical by church and state representatives were sometimes burned. What is more remarkable is the efforts these officials made to allow known or suspected heretics to conform or recant.³² Those who did go to their deaths usually had resisted such opportunities, seeing capitulation as a path to damnation and believing even the most horrible

³⁰ The statement that it is not the pain (or the death, or the suffering) that makes a martyr but the cause for which he or she dies first appears in Augustine's "Contra Cresconium," a text written to refute Donatists' arguments. For evidence of the ubiquity of this statement in Reformation discourse about who should be considered a true Christian martyr, see Gregory.

³¹ For analysis of More's writings about heresy as forceful early modern arguments for the necessity of executing heretics, see Gregory 74–90.

³² Gregory describes how local circumstances and officials' own beliefs created regions or time periods in which heretics were not harshly punished (90–96).

earthly punishment would lead to a heavenly reward. As the individuals being executed for heresy insisted that they were devout Christians and that those trying them were cruel, misguided, or evil persecutors, those willing to die offered through the example of their suffering a compelling argument that theirs was the true faith.³³ Martyrologies replicate this oppositional rhetoric. For example, Foxe's accounts of Protestants going to their deaths tell the same story over and over, a tale of one of God's true saints being persecuted by cruel monsters in the form of papist heretics. To admit that the same individual might reasonably be seen as a heretic by some, a martyr by others, would undercut the absolute distinctions that are foundational to the discourse of martyrdom.³⁴

Even as *Sir Thomas More* avoids presenting its title character as either a saint or a rebel, it shows him using the power of his poetic imagination throughout the days leading up to his death in ways that make him most unlike a martyr.³⁵ Instead of condemning the officials he encounters as misguided heretics or as merciless persecutors,

³³ Gregory points out that just as martyrdom requires officials willing to kill those they label heretics, it also needs individuals willing to die for their faith. He discusses how the idea of martyrdom functions in late-medieval monastic and lay traditions to explain its availability to early modern Christian society; see 97–138. Numerous texts argue that the martyrs of a particular church demonstrate its doctrinal correctness while asserting that the heretics or criminals claimed by another church are not true martyrs. Among the most prominent are Cecil's *Execution of Justice in England* (along with William Allen's reply to it), Parsons's *A Treatise of Three Conversions of England*, and Donne's *Pseudo-Martyr*. Excellent studies of the effects and creation of such arguments are offered by Mueller (see esp. 174–79) and McCoog.

³⁴ For a discussion of how Foxe shaped his martyrology to eliminate doubt about which individuals should be considered Protestant martyrs (and, in the process, created a more codified and unified sense of Protestant doctrine), see Gregory 183–87. For examples of moments when both Catholic and Protestant martyrologists seemed to recognize the instability of their arguments, even while seeking to clarify and strengthen their claims about true martyrs, see Monta, esp. 35–49.

³⁵ Even a cursory reading of early modern martyrologies reveals the formulaic quality of the stories of martyrs' pious lives, interrogations by church or state officials, and behavior in the moments preceding death. Bartlett makes connections

he repeatedly interacts with them in a way that generates empathy for their plights and sympathy for his own. The officer who comes to the More household "Ready to arrest you of high treason" (4.4.131; 1557) for refusal to subscribe to the king's articles is recognized and greeted in a way designed to arouse emotion: "Ay, Downes, is't thou? I once did save thy life, / When else by cruel riotous assault / Thou hadst been torn in pieces. Thou art reserved / To be my summ'ner to yond spiritual court. / Give me thy hand, good fellow, smooth thy face" (4.4.133–37; 1560–64). While Downes does not reply with words, indirect clues such as the indication that his face needs to be smoothed and the comment from Shrewsbury that More ought to "Be brief" (4.4.141; 1568) hint that More's language has successfully moved his listener to a genuine sense of regret for arresting his former protector. Similarly, the lieutenant in the Tower, the sheriffs who lead him to the scaffold, and even the hangman express sympathy for More after exchanges with him, and their emotion makes them seem worthy of pity.³⁶

Nevertheless, although More's poetic imagination remains undiminished in its power to generate a spirit of fellowship and empathy, it has no impact on his ultimate fate. The implications of this affecting but ineffective language during the last two acts are made clear in one of More's most striking utterances. Approaching the Tower, More greets it eloquently: "Fair prison, welcome. Yet methinks, / For thy fair building 'tis too foul a name" (5.2.57–58). Such musings about the Tower's emotions with regards to being known as a prison might generate empathy for the structure, but cannot possibly evoke an act of sympathy from it. This exchange is typical of the way More's poetry is thwarted as the play moves towards its conclusion. Again and again,

between the common structural elements of Foxe's stories and the conventions of hagiographic narratives; see esp. 775–77.

³⁶ Certainly, it is conventional for martyrs to forgive their executioners before their deaths, echoing Christ's plea "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). The Jesuit priests executed as traitors regularly prayed for the queen in their final moments. Yet the play's treatment of More's expressions of sympathy for his captors greatly exceed the convention.

his poetic imagination is set in opposition to a series of unalterable judgments expressed in official written documents. As Sir Thomas Palmer carries a copy of the articles More is asked to sign (4.1.70–104), as Downes brings the order to take More to the Tower (4.4.157–58), and as the lieutenant arrives bearing an order for execution (5.3.1–4), the men who hold these documents are moved to pity, but the written texts cannot be. Because they cannot be swayed by More's poetic imagination, these documents make individual acts of charity impossible.

The results of placing too much faith in unyielding written orders is hinted at through one of the aspects of the Tower's experience considered by More: "Many a guilty soul, and many an innocent, / Have breathed their farewell to thy hollow roof" (5.2.60–61). Foxe would agree with More's remark that innocent men and women had gone to their deaths in the Tower since a number of his martyrs were among those who suffered and perished there. However, Foxe would insist, based on his documentary evidence and accounts from eyewitnesses, that he could tell the difference between guilty parties and true innocents.³⁷ The play, through the experiences of its title character, challenges the possibility of such certainty by showing how the clear statements of official documents, often dangerously, prohibit individual acts of mercy and charity. As he expresses empathy for all of the people he encounters and imagines their emotions without attempting to distinguish between the guilty and the innocent, More speaks more like a poet than a martyr – or a martyrologist.

At some points in his life, the historical More seemed to value poetry for some of the qualities associated with the character More's poetic language. In his *Utopia*, More famously created an imaginary

world which one speaker describes as a place where "it should be lawful for every man to follow the religion of his choice, that each might strive to bring the others over to his own, provided that he quietly and modestly supported his own by reasons nor . . . used any violence" (221). To envision a place where differing religious beliefs led only to persuasive speech and never to harsh words or violent actions was to place great faith in the power of language to accommodate difference and to shift points of view. Related to this view of poetry was More's sense that poetic imagination was compatible with right reason and religious faith. In a 1515 letter to Martin Dorp, More defends poetry as more able to express human and spiritual truth than the traditional academic discipline of formal logic.³⁸ A similar point appears in *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* as the speaker More critiques a Lutheran emphasis on *sola scriptura*:

[A]lbeit poetes ben with many men taken but for paynted wordes / yet do they moche helpe the iudgement / and make a man amonge other thynges well furnyshed of one specyall thyng / without whiche all lernynge is halfe lame . . . a good mother wyt. And therefore are in myne oppynyon these Lutheranyes in a madde mynde / that wolde now haue all lernynge saue scripture onely clene cast away / whiche thynges . . . be as me thynketh to be taken & had / & with reason brought as I sayd before in to the seruyce of dyuynyte (132/11–20).

Here More not only offers an argument for the value of poetry but also identifies it as a corrective force that could oppose what he saw as the closed-minded zealotry of the heretics of his time.

Yet there are also moments in his religious polemics when More condemns poets on the same grounds as do his opponents. In his *Apology*, when he notes that one of the ways Tyndale and Frith attack him

³⁷ Particularly notable are Foxe's discussions of those persecuted as Lollards. As is apparent from the cases of William Swinderby (464–75) and Walter Brute (475–502), Foxe uses the documents presented in court to prove these men heretics (as well as the records of the trials condemning them) as evidence to prove they were innocent martyrs.

³⁸ Quoted by Ni Chuilleain (391), who offers a thorough and systematic discussion of conflicting ideas about the nature of literature, writing, and reading in the More/Tyndale debates, arguing that poetry was often valued in this way by humanists interested in religious and educational reform.

is “in theyr wrytynge, [they] call me a poet,” More seems wittily modest as he claims, “yt is but of theyr owne courtesye, vnderued on my parte” (42). In the effort to retaliate against these religious and rhetorical enemies, however, More cannot resist adopting some of their positions. He offers his readers a story related by Plutarch about the Macedonians in which King Philip’s Macedonian army is joined by a group of men who formerly fought on the side of the enemy. Although these new recruits were now their allies, the Macedonians “in spyght would call them traytours” (42). The new subjects complain to the king, who asks them to be tolerant of such verbal attacks since one of the qualities he admires in his people is that “theyr nature is so playne, and theyr vtterance so rude, that they can not call an horse but an horse” (42). Like the Macedonians, More claims, he can only say what is true. Unlike the play’s More, who uses language to generate empathy and sympathy among men, the polemicist More explains that he can only point out differences:

I can neyther so myche poetry nor so mych rethoryque neyther, as to fynde good names for euyl thynges / but eyn as the Macedonyes could not call a traytour but a traytoure, / so can I not cal a fole but a fole, nor an heretyque but an heretyque (42).

As More here implicitly defines poetry as a form of lying, his language contrasts with the poetry of the character More throughout the play. Critics and biographers regularly point out differences between the More who wrote the witty humanistic *Utopia* and the More who composed long, vicious polemical tracts.³⁹ If there is a profound shift in More’s writings at some point in his life, it seems most evident at this moment when he disavows the value of poetry in order to claim the power to call “an heretyque but an heretyque.”

The playwrights who were involved in the composition of *Sir Thomas More* could be accused of constructing the kind of pretty

lie that Protestant reformers and, at times, More himself associated with poets. By linking his goodness to a broadly conceived sense of Christian fellowship facilitated by poetic imagination and expressed through poetic language, the authors of the play separate More from the Catholic doctrine he died to defend. Foxe needed a clear sense of religious controversies and of the causes for which More lost his life, in order to label him a persecutor and a liar, just as Roper and Harpsfield needed the same certainty to see More as a hero and a martyr. By making their More a character who reconciles conflicts between opposing parties, the playwrights avoid presenting him as a martyr. Instead, they offer him as an example of the benefits of religious tolerance and the dangers of allowing rigidly unsympathetic documents to govern human actions. The moment when the play shifts from a comic to a tragic mode occurs just after More has refused to sign the king’s articles and relinquished his office as Lord Chancellor. Returning to his home, he seems to believe that he will be allowed to live the rest of his life quietly devoted to his family and to contemplation, having escaped the turmoil of court. He seems, according to one of his daughters, “joyful and merry” as he exclaims, “As seamen, having passed a troubled storm, / Dance on the pleasant shore, so I – O, I could speak / Now like a poet” (4.2.50–53). His poetry takes the form of reflecting and attempting to build a sense of good will out of his downfall, generating sympathy not only for his family but also for the king. That the official workings of government do not speak like poets but rather express themselves in unfeeling documents is implied to be the cause of More’s death. Linking religious tolerance, a broad sense of human empathy, and poetic imagination, the play *Sir Thomas More* ultimately defends poetry as something more than a language of lies – the poet, whether in the form of the play’s More or in that of a writer for the public stage, offers a rhetorical alternative to the bloody logic of martyrology.

³⁹ See especially Greenblatt 58–72 and Marius 386–406 but also Bagchi 272–75, Maus 79–80, and Ni Chuilleanain, esp. 382–83.

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