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MORE'S EPIGRAMS  
ON HENRY ABYNGDON <sup>1</sup>

More's Latin poetry reveals his constant concern as a poet with the nature and results of art, a concern which draws together groups of poems about subjects as diverse as cosmetics and astrology, playing and governing, and poetry itself. In the brief sequence on Henry Abyngdon, <sup>2</sup> three short poems treat several artistic problems: the portrayal of the effects of one art by means of another, the choice and management of artistic form and substance, relations with patrons of art, and the appropriate response to criticism. The contrasts between the two epitaphs for Abyngdon and the ironic structure and language of the satirical epigram on Janus, Abyngdon's "heir," can tell us much about More's sense of history and his far-reaching view of artistic experience.

If the three poems seem at first to offer a sequence of statement, affirmation, and reversal, a careful reading re-shapes this pattern. The sequence finally depends on the poet's perspective on both Abyngdon and his successor, revealing in 141 the true image of Abyngdon's art as sanctioned by earthly and heavenly authority, in 142 the false image of Abyngdon's art as distorted by his heir's incomprehension, and in 143 the true artist's version of the false artist. When More reaches his conclusion, the arena in which the struggle between true and false art takes place has become almost exclusively literary. Poetry has absorbed the concerns of music and found its own metaphors for hypocrisy, arrogance, and stupidity.

EPITAPHIVM ABYNGDONII CANTORIS (141) displays from the beginning a classical form and a classical use of language. The balance of its lines and couplets is employed to create varying, dynamic rhythms and to contribute to the dramatic progress of its ideas. A strong verb (*Attrahat*) initiates the action of the poem, strengthened again by its repetition in the past (*attraxerat*), proof of the drawing-power of the great singer, past and present: "*Attrahat huc oculos, aures attraxerat olim / Nobilis Henricus cantor Abyngdonius.*" Although entombed physically, the musician still influences his audience. The poet's contribution of verses which will attract the reader as Abyngdon's music attracted hearers unites the two artists in their efforts and their successes. "*Vnus erat,*" at the beginning of the

third line and the end of the fourth, provides a more precise statement about Abyngdon than does the summary of either artist's skill ; he was unique : "*Vnus erat nuper mira qui uoce sonaret. / Organa qui scite tangeret unus erat.*" By virtue of this uniqueness, or artistic integrity (one-ness), not only was Abyngdon the glory of a temple, but soon the king wanted him (to create fame) and God seized him (to add glory) :

*Vellensis primo templi decus, inde sacellum  
Rex illo uoluit nobilitare suum.  
Nunc illum regi rapuit deus, intulit astris. . .*

Abyngdon moves upward temporally and spiritually from the cathedral at Wells through the Royal Chapel to the heavenly choir. In this progress verbs again indicate the quality of the action. "*Rex. . . uoluit. . . rapuit deus, intulit astris.*" Acclaim which affirms the artist's worth comes from outside, unsolicited, its vitality asserted by "*uoluit*" and "*rapuit.*" An artist of Abyngdon's stature, according to the poet, receives his reward in the favor of the king, the grace of God, and the celebration of the poet. The various balances and contrasts of "*Attrahat. . . attraxerat,*" "*Vnus erat. . . unus erat,*" etc., are completed by the final accolade : "*Ipsis ut noua sit gloria caelitis.*" Forming the line and surrounding the rest of the poem are "the very inhabitants of heaven"; inside their compass is the "new glory" they will gain ; at the center stands the power of the singer. If the poet succeeds in his evocation of a past art (that of the singer as well as that of classical Latin poetry), in his creation of a present art (that of the singer's memory and his own poetry), and in his prediction of a future art (that of the singer in heaven), he succeeds also in affirming his own art, a matter of joining the past of his models to the present of his task to create the future of a new artistic and historical vision.

Even the inevitable title of epigram 142, "ALTERUM DE EODEM," can suggest the mechanical, formal hollowness of the second epitaph for Abyngdon. Where lines in the first epitaph formed integral units or were part of larger movements, flat and ironic rhymes split the lines of this poem in half :

*Hic iacet Henricus, semper pietatis amicus.  
Nomen Abyngdon erat, si quis sua nomina quaerat.  
Vuellis hic ecclesia fuerat succentor in alma,  
Regis et in bella cantor fuit ipse capella.  
Millibus in mille cantor fuit optimus ille.  
Praeter et haec ista, fuit optimus orgaquenista.*

"*Henricus / amicus,*" no longer an artist of power, becomes a mere friend of piety like any law-abiding citizen. The rhyme "*erat / quaerat*" establishes the pattern for the remainder of the poem ; if anyone asks, he was : a singer in church and chapel, a singer in a thousand (but "*mille / ille*"

hints that there were a thousand like him), an organ-player. In place of the verbs (in the first poem) suggesting strong action by others, the second epitaph depends almost entirely on the simple equivalence of "*fuit.*" On this weak support hang repetitive phrases signalling the formal repetition of duties without either artistic or spiritual inspiration : "*cantor fuit,*" "*cantor fuit optimus,*" "*fuit optimus.*" The poet, too, fulfills his obligations to the scheme of the verse without infusing the statements with any vitality. "*Here lies Henry,*" entombed in the verses, deprived of all attractions. Echoing the conclusion to the first epitaph with its "*Nunc illum regi rapuit deus,*" the end of the second epitaph presents a *quid pro quo* : "*Nunc igitur, Christe, quoniam tibi seruiit iste / Semper in orbe soli, da sibi regna poli.*" Since the individual (not even identified here) has served Christ on earth, Christ *must* admit him to heaven. The rhyme "*Christe / iste*" on the vocative, and the imperative "*da,*" contribute to the offensive tone, the picture of a speaker deaf to propriety, respect, and art. A medieval verse-form carefully abused seems to offer an arena for the derogation of two artists, both the mourner and the mourned. The false music of the verse, its shoddy equations and sloppy fillers, perfectly suits the implied false music of its subject and reveals the false art of its creator. The reader of these poems may find no immediate explanation for the decay in the second of the art created and celebrated in the first. He awaits – and receives – elucidation in the concluding poem of the sequence.

Janus, the heir of Abyngdon (IN IANVM HAEREDEM ABYNGDONII, 143), inherits immediately a relationship to the poet who has concerned himself with the dead singer. Whether Janus legitimately inherits Abyngdon's music and its accompanying triumphs the poet will let the reader decide. Janus has ordered a poem, even if his town talents do not deserve one. In this third response to his commission he receives more than he had expected, with both statement and structure condemning his lack of vision and understanding. A split in the first line carries over the pattern of poem 142 ironically, revealing the separation between poet and patron :

*Scripti elegum carmen, Iano me haerede rogante,  
Quod tumulum Henrici signet Abyngdonii.  
Displicet, et doctis bene displicisset, at illi  
Displicet hoc tantum, si quid inest melius.*

Beginning with "*Scripti elegum carmen,*" the poet returns the reader to the "*elegum carmen*" and its virtues, recalling the success of that artistic endeavor in contrast with the ensuing artistic catastrophe. The third poem echoes the first, in placing identification in the second line,<sup>3</sup> and in the repeated word in the third and fourth lines.<sup>4</sup> Against the poet's word, "*carmen,*" for his original yet classical achievement, a designation which again joined his artistic aspirations to Abyngdon's, Janus places "*uersus,*" a term suggesting fragments hastily compiled rather than an entity thoroughly composed.

*Non resonant isti uersus, ait, illico sensi.  
 Qualeis lactucas talia labra petant.  
 Ridendos ergo ridens effutio uersus.  
 Hos uorat applaudens Ianus utraque manu.  
 Hos tumulo inscalpsit, sub eundem protinus obdi  
 Atque iisdem dignus uersibus ipse legi.*

The new image following Janus' artistic pronouncement descends to the level of his artistic perceptions: "*Qualeis lactucas talia labra petant.*" This heir and patron of artists suffers impairment in more than one sense; the poet's comment on his artistic judgment makes literal the metaphor of taste. Janus, in appreciative response to the satisfaction of his demands, will "devour" the new effusion, called "*Ridendos. . . uersus*" by the poet who disowns them. Using Janus' tasteless word, "*uersus*," and patterning the description after the last line of the first epitaph, the poet conceals himself, chuckling, inside this artistic insult: inside the mask of "*Ridendos. . . uersus*" he appears "*ergo ridens effutio.*" These Janus devours, applauding, *these* he inscribes on the tomb (the repetition "*Hos. . . Hos*" echoes "*Displicet. . . Displicet*"); he deserves to be known and "read" (*legi*) forever by them. "*Iisdem dignus uersibus*," by its order, links the man's worthiness more closely to the poem's unique suitability. The poet demonstrates, in form as well as content, his utter rejection of his patron's criticism.

The final couplet plays on the name of the tasteless patron to seal his identification as a sightless pretender, without any claim to his inheritance: "*Ante retroque bifrons Ianus deus omnia uidit. / Talpa effrons uidet hic Ianus utinque nihil.*" The man who should be "*bifrons Ianus*" has revealed himself as "*effrons. . . Ianus*," blind as a mole to the responsibilities and the possibilities of his position. "*Ante retroque*," before and behind, the god who lent the man his name should see. The concluding "*nihil*" balances "*Ante retroque*": in place of everything, nothing. This Janus inherits vision from neither his namesake nor his predecessor. Janus, the two-faced god, offers an image with multiple resonances for the poem, the short sequence of poems, and More's poetic concerns in general.<sup>5</sup> The classical god here represents a breadth of perspective which the man who bears his name cannot attain, as well as the duplicity with which the modern Janus tries to manipulate the world around him. Double vision applies, first, to the form of the poem, with the double application of many words, the before-and-behind circulation of meaning in the poetic style of classical Latin. The modern Janus, who rejected this kind of poetry, received in return a poem without any movement before and behind. Double vision applies also to the historical reference of the sequence of poems. A true Janus, using his special powers properly, should see in many directions at once for the benefit of those he governs; as ruler or artist he

should be able to appreciate the lessons of the past and apply them to the problems of the future. The poem that suits "*effrons. . . Ianus*," however, fixes itself firmly in a closed medieval style, looking neither before nor behind itself. Around it the two poems in classical style look behind for the fundamentals of their form and style and before for the results and implications of their efforts. The attempt to make new an old form exemplifies the double historical perspective of the true Janus, decidedly a Renaissance figure. A pseudo-deity, two-faced, but paradoxically blind on both sides, provides a symbol for some of More's central concerns in his art. If two-facedness can represent either broad vision or hypocrisy, then Janus can signify either the prophet or the astrologer, the artist or the tyrant, the satirist or the object of satire. Characteristically, then, More creates a symbol which permits as part of its meaning the notion that prophet and astrologer, artist and tyrant, satirist and satirized may be indistinguishable.

The three poems, though they appear to present a sequence of statement, affirmation, and reversal, actually represent a statement, a reversal, and a double-reversal. Janus in the third poem embodies an image for the second: looking in two directions, it sees in neither direction. In returning to his chosen form and repudiating philistinism, the poet allies himself with Abyngdon, alive after his death by the power of his art and acclaimed for the integrity of his life and art. The relationship among these epigrams, more clearly delineated than that among most series in More's book, can serve as a model for others. The poet extends his artistic consciousness and enhances the reader's awareness of possible perspectives on art and life by exploring, in parallel or in conflict, various ideas and modes suggested by a single experience or perception.

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#### NOTES

- 1) All quotations come from *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. Bradner & Lynch (Chicago, 1953), in which the poems on Abyngdon are numbered 141, 142, and 143. I am grateful to Professor Richard Sylvester for suggestions about revisions in this essay.
- 2) Abyngdon (c. 1418-c. 1497), a singer, organist, composer, was first master of the children of the Chapel Royal and first recipient of the B. Mus. at Cambridge (1463). He became succentor (deputy to the precentor) at Wells 24 November 1447 (*Grove's Dictionary of Music & Musicians*, 5th ed., Eric Blom [London, 1954]).  
 W.H. Grattan Flood, in "Henry Abyngdon, Mus. Bac., Choirmaster of

the King's Chapel, in 1455," *Musical Times*, June 1, 1911, pp. 377-78, offers a full review of all available information on Abyngdon's career. In the *Musical Times* of July 1, 1911, p. 478, Dr. Flood asks whether the "Master Henry Abyngdon" appointed Canon of Wells on October 1, 1431 might be the same man. I think probably not : there seems to have been another man of the same name who held various posts at and for Wells, from at least 1417 to his death in 1438 (cf. *Calendar of the MSS of the Dean and Chapter of Wells*, I : ed. W.H.R. Bird, London, 1907 ; II : ed. W.P. Baildon, London, 1914).

3) "Quod tumulum Henrici signet Abyngdonii" echoes "Nobilis Henricus cantor Abyndonius," lending the identification of "Nobilis. . . cantor" to the new marked tomb.

4) "Displicet. . . Displicet" echoes "Vnus erat. . . unus erat," though the different placement reflects the change in attitude : instead of the uniqueness and integrity of Abyngdon, the reader confronts the negative outlook of his heir.

5) Erasmus mentions Janus at least twice in the ADAGIA : "Antiquitas Ianum bifrontem fingens, regum prudentiam indicabat, quorum est & praeterita meminisse perpendereque, & futura prospicere. . ." (Chil. III, Cent. I, LIII : A fronte atque a tergo), and "Quadrabit uel in prouidum ac circumspectum, uel in ancipitem & perfidum. Persius : O Iane, a tergo cui nulla ciconia pinsit. Sumptum a Iano bifronte, cuius notior est fabula, quam ut sit hoc loco percensenda" (Chil. IV, Cent. II, XCIII : Ianus alter) -- Erasmus, *Adagiorum Chiliades*. . ., Basle, 1551, pp. 647 and 894.

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