The Intersection of Poetry and Politics in More’s *Epigrammata*

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Though the obvious understanding of Thomas More’s *Epigrammata*, initially published with the 1518 edition of *Utopia*, is that of the poetic portfolio of a rising statesman, the intensity of the proceeding dispute with the French poet Brixius indicates a significance beyond the poems at hand. As his letter in response to Brixius explains, More writes with a particular concern for the plight of poetry and the character of the poet. Though he criticizes Brixius for cheap imitation of the ancients, he adapts and composes lines capable of containing both the mockery and the moralizing of his Latin and Greek predecessors. While it is undoubtedly More’s wit that commends his collection to his contemporaries, it is his commitment to truth that proves transformative in the development of the Renaissance epigram. These often-neglected poems and their commitment to laughter and learning may inform our understanding of the author and his ever-celebrated works.

Keywords: epigram, adaptation, Greek Anthology, Martial, fides

Si les *Epigrammata* de Thomas More, publiées en même temps que l’édition de 1518 de l’Utopie, ont surtout été comprises comme le portfolio poétique d’un homme d’état en vue, l’intensité de la querelle qui l’opposait au poète français Brixius confère à l’œuvre une importance plus grande que celle qu’on lui attribue généralement. En témoigne sa lettre en réponse à Brixius, où More exprime un souci particulier envers la situation de la poésie et le personnage du poète. Bien qu’il critique Brixius pour son imitation facile des anciens, lui-même adapte et compose des vers qui rivalisent de moquerie et de moralisme avec ses prédécesseurs latins et grecs. Sans aucun doute est-ce la verve de More que ses contemporains apprécient dans ce recueil, cependant c’est son engagement à dire la vérité qui renouvelle le genre de l’épigramme de la Renaissance. Ces poèmes trop souvent négligés et leur dessein d’amuser en instruisant pourraient bien parfaire notre compréhension de l’auteur et de son œuvre.

*Mots-clés : épigramme, adaptation, anthologie grecque, Martial, fides*
Si bien es cierto que podemos leer los Epigrammata de Thomas More (aparecidos inicialmente junto a la edición de 1518 de Utopia), como la agenda poética de un hombre de estado, la intensidad de la subsiguiente disputa con el poeta francés Brixius parece indicar un significado en esta obra que va más allá de los poemas. Como explica en su réplica a Brixius, More había escrito su obra con un interés muy particular en el estado de la poesía y en la identidad de los poetas. Aunque se critica a Brixius por su burda imitación de los clásicos, el autor adapta y compone unos versos que contienen tanto la burla como el tono moralizante de sus predecesores latinos y griegos. No cabe duda de que es el ingenio Moreano lo que sus contemporáneos admiraron en la obra; pero es su compromiso con la verdad lo que resultó ser detonante en el desarrollo del epigrama renacentista. Estos poemas (tan frecuentemente olvidados), comprometidos con la risa y el conocimiento, bien pueden guiarnos en la comprensión de sus trabajos más memorables.

Palabras clave: epigrama, adaptación, Antología griega, Marcial, fides

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When the offended Germain de Brie, known among his contemporaries as Brixius, prophesied in his livid, 580-line Antimorus that “Neither this age nor the coming age will read” Thomas More’s Latin epigrams, he was certainly at least half wrong. On the contrary, after its initial printing at the end of the 1518 edition of Utopia, More’s Epigrammata found its way into anthologies and jestbooks for the next two hundred years, making odd cameo appearances in anything from sermons to histories to pastorals. Indeed, the very intensity of the Brixian diatribe would seem laughably disproportionate to the nine sardonic epigrams had they cut into nothing deeper than the pride of a young poet. In fact, since Brixius largely ignores the epigrams addressed to him and centers his attack instead on More’s technical errors, his appropriation of the ancients, his address to Henry VIII, and his general English incompetence, we may conclude either that their dispute extends into the very nature of poetry and its relation to the political sphere or that the Frenchman is a poor rhetorician (or both, potentially). If we assume the former case, then these 271 published epigrams, though generally neglected by modern scholarship, may inform our understanding of his ever-celebrated works.

If some initial definition of the epigram as a genre seems necessary, it may be an indication of its ambiguity in the sixteenth century rather than the insufficiency of subsequent scholarship. Samuel Johnson’s later definition of “a short poem terminating in a point” was hardly settled among his literary predecessors whose epigrams often lacked both brevity and witty closure, and Martial’s prominence as the archetypal epigrammatist was by no means as established as it is today. Furthermore, the epigram often failed to merit even inclusion among lists of poetic genres, and when it did its position on such lists was far from fixed. It can be dismissed as “the fag end of Poetry” by Edward Phillips because it “consists rather of conceit and acumen of Wit then [sic] of Poetical invention,” a century after it is praised by Tommaso Correa for its “great art, wit, sharpness of talent, becoming brevity, and a certain dexterity and

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discernment." Julius Caesar Scaliger, who holds up Martial as the model, places the epigram at the bottom of his five-part poetic hierarchy with hymns at the top, but in his case even the epic is relegated to number three, while for Francesco Robortello, who holds up the Greek Anthology as the model, the epigram is not a genre of its own but rather a small part of tragedy or comedy which are in turn a small part of epic, so by that token an epic can be said to be a web of epigrams. Thus when the young Thomas More made his poetic debut, it was in a genre whose constraints were as various as its authors.

Of course, with proper Renaissance decorum, More claimed that his book "was snatched away and published while he was still thinking about it," and indeed the collection has more the air of a sketchbook than an opus. More translates, adapts, and composes, and his sources range from antiquity to contemporary England. In his roughly 110 adaptations from the Greek anthology, there are many examples of multiple attempts at the same epigram as the poet changes the meter and tweaks the sense. As a translator, More's skills were immediately recognized, earning the praise of Richard Pace (1517) who proclaimed:

no one ever existed who did not compose the meanings of sentences out of words, excepting only our Thomas More. For on the contrary, he gathers the meanings of words out of sentences, especially in his studies and translations of Greek. This is not alien to grammar, but it is somewhat more than grammar, and an instinct of genius."

No doubt, this reaction was exactly the intention of Erasmus and his associates who took thorough care in the publication of his friend's epigrams: the use of his own esteemed printer Froben in Basel, the inclusion with Utopia, the prefatory letter from Rhenanus exhorting the reader to "take this book in hand, read it, and admire More," the three publications in two years, the immediate inclusion of the epigrams in anthologies and pedagogical resources. The collection comes across as the poetic portfolio of a rising statesman, demonstrating the strength and dexterity of More's wit and the breadth of his faculties. As such it seems to have been a success, meriting inclusion among scores of Latin and vernacular collections across Europe for the next two hundred years including the Adagia and Soter's Epigrammata Graecia, and serving as a model for future epigrammatists to emulate as they similarly polished the craft.

But, returning to the issue of Brixius' scathing invective against More's Epigrammata, while the diatribe is possibly understandable after a young man's pride has been injured by the
dismissive nonchalance of a mere “jesting epigram”\textsuperscript{12} (or nine) in a prominent statesman's collection. More's dignified but firm rebuttal treats the quarrel as more significant than the poems at hand. There is a particular concern in the \textit{Antimorōs} and in More's reply for the nature of poetry and the character of the poet, and indeed with nearly 50 of his epigrams relating to the arts and another 20 to beauty (real and feigned), it becomes apparent that as a poet More is zealous for the plight of poetry. Especially in his epigrams against Brixius (who is the only subject of mockery addressed by name in the collection), the epigrammatist who polished his craft by careful adaptation of antiquity is concerned about cheap imitation of the classics. He mocks Brixius for the way “you have culled here and there like fistfuls of buds and blossoms”\textsuperscript{13} the lines of the ancient poets, which in the end “reveal their origin and gleam amid your poem more brightly than the stars shine in the night”\textsuperscript{14}. Brixius answers this charge in the opening lines of the \textit{Antimorōs}—“You say that I smell too much of ancient poets. Certainly no one would be able to say this of you”\textsuperscript{15}—though as evidence of this charge he mostly points to technical errors of syllable lengths, and it becomes clear that he has misunderstood the accusation against him. It is not, More makes clear in his letter of rebuttal, that Brixius' lines “smell too much of antiquity”\textsuperscript{16}, but rather that the young, sophomoric Frenchman “would imitate everything in the worst way”\textsuperscript{17}. To make the accusation epigrammatic, Brixius' method of imitation is not “wrestling Hercules' club away”\textsuperscript{18} as a hubristic humanist may try to do, but is instead “secretly stealing it when it is laid down”\textsuperscript{19}. More is critical of “meticulous dullness”\textsuperscript{20} that comes from using lines of the ancients as embellishments of poorly conceived and poorly executed poetry.

Yet Brixius' primary sin runs deeper than a cheap form of imitation that makes for bad humanism, and even deeper than the dishonor he does the poets by using his cheap imitation as ornaments for French anti-English propaganda. More spends significant space both in the epigrams and the letter deriding him for shameful dishonesty, because

\begin{quote}
you would not envelop truths with falsehoods, but you would fabricate almost the whole matter from complete lies and craft new facts out of your own whim.
\end{quote}

The issue at stake is the credibility of poets whom Plato had banished from his republic centuries earlier on the very basis Brixius uses to defend his poem: “Fictions belong to the poets; if you take them away, there will be no poetry”\textsuperscript{22}. It is a dangerous form of “heedless”\textsuperscript{23} negligence that has a destructive effect on the art of poetry as a whole. As Brixius destroys the credibility of poets with his lust for reputation, he does not write as “one craftsman envying another”\textsuperscript{24}, but rather as “one envying the glory of art itself”\textsuperscript{25}. Who

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{12} \textit{epigramma iocosum} (\textit{CW} 3, 606).
\textsuperscript{13} \textit{hinc et inde flosculos et gemmulas / Manu capaci legeris} (\textit{CW} 3, 224, no. 193).
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Suos parentes indicant, / Magisque resplendent tua inter carmina, / Quam nocte lucent sydera} (\textit{CW} 3, 224, no. 193).
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Me nimium veteres dicit redolere poetas, / Nimimum hoc de te dicere nemo potest} (\textit{CW} 3, 488/102-103).
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{nimis redoleant antiquitatem} (\textit{CW} 3, 610).
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{quae omnia pessime sis imitator} (\textit{CW} 3, 610).
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Herculi clauam ut eripere} (\textit{CW} 3, 612).
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{repositam furlo subripere} (\textit{CW} 3, 612).
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{accuratissime stolidis} (\textit{CW} 3, 604).
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{non ut vera falsis involueres / sed ut rem ferme totam meris mendacis fingeres / atque ex arbitrio tuo concinnares nouam} (\textit{CW} 3, 600).
\textsuperscript{22} \textit{sua sunt figurata poetæ, / Quae si sestuleris, nulla poesis erit} (\textit{CW} 3, 490/138-9).
\textsuperscript{23} \textit{imprudens} (\textit{CW} 3, 614).
\textsuperscript{24} \textit{saber fabro inuidens} (\textit{CW} 3, 614).
\end{footnotesize}
will commission any elegies to be written at all, More asks, if elegists are permitted to make up any lies to please their patrons? Bad poetry destroys all poetry; if poets lose their credibility, no one will waste time reading them.

If Brixius’ poetry is most shameful because it is dishonest, it may be assumed that More aspired to write epigrams that were “true,” in some sense of the term, epigrams that would maintain the credibility and respectability of the poet, the fides, to use the Latin. Brixius understands their battle as aesthetic, one in which he might disagree with ancients like Martial whose Muse does not “swell with tragedy’s raving robe” along with Erasmus who criticizes verbose decorations in favor of “verse that is not far removed from prose, albeit the best prose.” More, on the other hand, seems to be contributing to a related-but-different conversation in which he would agree with the severity of Plato’s charge against the mendacious poet by seeking to raise him above it. Thus More criticizes Brixius’ absurdities and Brixius scorns More’s trivialities; More indicts Brixius as a treacherous liar and Brixius lambastes More as lazy versifier. In both cases, the fate of poetry hangs in the balance: whether it will fall into ridiculous buffoonery that robs the poets of any rational glory on the one side, or whether it will be sloppily managed by trifling versifiers who write “barbarous figures and tropes and taunts which sound nothing of Greek or of Latin” on the other. By taking so much effort to present More as a bad poet, Brixius in effect acknowledges that More is an important poet, even a dangerous poet.

Whether or not More’s verse is dangerous for showy poets like Brixius, his inventions in the yet-undefined genre are certainly dangerous for himself. More’s preference for the gnomic Greek epigram combined with his ready acceptance of the satiric Latin epigram converts Martial’s “trifles” into direct dictums and gives him a notably bold familiarity in his Coronation Ode to Henry VIII and the four epigrams that follow. While Martial likewise addresses Caesar in his epigrams, More’s stance is decidedly more daring and would welcome the moralizing Cato whom Martial banned from his books. From the beginning, Martial “who hurries that he may please you, Caesar” takes a much more contrived posture, one that would have appealed to the flattering Brixius, in contrast to More who spends his dedication to Henry VIII excusing his nine-year-delay in publication because of his illuminator’s bout of gout. Even More’s flattery is precarious, and his enemy does not let the implications about the king’s dead father go unnoticed when More evokes Isaiah in the prophesy that the new king “will wipe the tears from all eyes, and give joy in place of long groaning.” Furthermore, beyond a

25 arti prorsus ipsi suam insidens gloriam (CW 3, 614).
26 More himself notoriously writes an epigram mocking a patron who demanded an elegy written in rhyme, declaring that “sub undem protinus obdi / Atque ijsdem dignus uersibus ipse legi (He should be shut up immediately in the same tomb and distinguished by the same epitaph).” (CW 3, 203, no. 161, l. 10-11).
27 nec insano syrmate nostra tumet (IV. xlix. 7-8).
29 tropos, et schemata barbara, quaeque / Scommata nil Graium, nil Latiae sonant (CW 3, 488/122-3).
31 festinat, Caesar, qui placuisse tibi (LIBER DE SPECTACVLIS, XXXI)
32 cunctis lachrymas detergat oculis, / Gaudia pro longo substituat gemitu (CW3, 100, no. 19, l. 18-19).
presentation copy of these boldly familiar epigrams to the new king, their publication nearly a decade into his reign as More's career at court was well underway was a risky undertaking that could have proved disastrous had Henry taken the Brixian invective seriously. But at least in the direct addresses to his king, More's epigrams follow their classical model closely enough to remain commendatory; he carefully praises Henry with words that, lavish and exaggerated though they may be, could be true if Henry were to live up to them.

Even more daring than these direct verses to his king, More's aphoristic epigrams about kingship and tyranny later in the volume are downright critical. More does not admire the strength, ferocity, and cunning in the beasts Martial likens to Caesar; instead, he depicts a shrewd circus spectator who “would dare to endure the tongue of the lion, but not when the teeth are so close”34. Even in a direct epigram to Henry VIII he points out the “spinas” on his multicolored rosebush,35 and later he says that a bad king is not a guardian of the flock but is rather the wolf himself.36 Nevertheless, even the most terrifying tyrant is every bit as mortal as he is awful, and a rustic in one of More's own compositions confuses the king for “a man in a painted dress.”37 Indeed, one of his most repeated themes from the Anthology is mortality and its close cousin sleep,38 both of which flatten kings to the level of the most destitute slave, and in one of his few cracks into scatological humor he compares “breaking wind”39 to the power of “dreaded kings”40. In this way he has made a break from his classical and Renaissance predecessors, for while Martial creates “vignettes”41 of vice for the purpose of amused ridicule, More's more moralizing treatment of the same subjects turns the mocker into a teacher. In fact, if Ann Baynes Coiro is right to name “starkly critical political epigrams” as his “original contribution to the genre”42, then when the next generation of Italian intellectuals such as Correa define the utility of the epigram as consisting of laus and vituperatio, we may infer it to be the effect of More's legacy.43

Nevertheless, it still remains that this Catholic martyr's primary reputation among his contemporaries and his immediate successors alike was for his wit, and the bulk of the Epigrammata's appearances in More's native tongue was in popular jestbooks. Those who have read the Elizabethan drama that bears his name may remember that the central act depicts the statesman joining a troupe of actors staging a play titled The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom, and More is notorious for approaching the scaffold with jests on his tongue. Rather than assuming that his contemporaries were mistaken in their comical presentation of his poems, we may remember that Erasmus himself told his friend in the dedication of his Praise of Folly, 39

33 David R. Carlson elaborates in English Humanist Books: Writers and Patrons, Manuscript and Print, 1475-1525 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993).  
34 audebo linguam legeis leonis / Sed tam uincinis demibus haud faciam (CW 3, 214, no. 181, 1. 6-7).  
36 CW 3, 165, no. 115.  
37 pieta uesle homo (CW 3, 232, no. 201, 1. 15).  
38 E.g. Ferme dimidium uilae, dormilur: in illo / Aequeles spacio diues, inopsque tacent / Ergo Croese lihi regum dilissime, uilae / Ferme dimidio par erat Iris egens. (Nearly half of life is slept away, and through sleep itself the rich and the poor lie the same. Therefore, Croesus, wealthiest of kings, for almost half of life was not needy Iris equal to you?) CW 3, 160, no. 107.  
39 efflatum venris (CW 3, 123).  
40 Terrificis regibus (CW 3, 123).  
41 Coiro, p. 51.  
42 Ibid., p. 75.  
43 Gerard Kilroy points to More as a model for Harington's treatment of politics; Mary Thomas Crane suggests him as a model of “the old way and true” for Jonson's moralizing epigrams after generations of English jokesters.
I suspected that our witty game would meet your approval in particular, seeing that you are accustomed to jokes of this kind, that is, those that are not unlearned (if I am not mistaken), nor always dry.44

Perhaps this is what Rhenanus was getting at when he insisted that More "jests, but in every case without bite; he ridicules, but without abuse,"45. Rather than departing from the epigram's reputation as a trifle, the Epigrammata embraces foolery with the understanding that, as Erasmus says,

literary trifles may lead to serious matters and fooleries may be handled such that a reader who is not completely dull-witted may gain more of a return from them than from the sharp and showy arguments of some that we know.46

In this way, More introduces the epigram to Renaissance England as a genre capable of combining the mockery of Martial, the moralizing of the Anthology, and the laughter of the English jestbook.

It is precisely this combination of laughter and learning, poetry and politics, that has kept scholars arguing about interpretations of Utopia for centuries. It seems appropriate then to end this discussion with an epigram titled "What is the best form of government"47, which happens to be his longest epigram about kingship and an essentially original composition. The bulk of the epigram consists of weighing arguments for and against the rule of a senate rather than a monarch, a conversation in which More evokes the rationales of Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, and Isocrates. This poem does not read like an epigram at all, but rather like an oration in which the speaker presents his topic, states his case, provides strong argument, and systematically addresses the opposing view. With the exception of the partitio, all the parts of the classical oration are in place, and the author of Utopia seems to be daringly arguing against monarchy.

However, mid-sentence in the refutatio, we remember that we are reading an epigram, not an oration, and the speaker interrupts the discussion and transforms himself, his listener, and even the reader into the brunt of his own joke:

...but say, whence does this inquiry come to you anyway? Is there anywhere a people for whom you can appoint either a king or a senate by your own ruling?48

The answer to this question, interestingly, is Yes, in Utopia, "no place". If there is a buffoon in this epigram, it is the listener for introducing the question, who could be understood to be Thomas More himself. It is a clever twist, too jarring to be explained simply as a republican sympathizer watching his back in a monarchical government. In a mere 30 lines, More presents a humanistic argument in a classical form and mocks himself for doing so, merging the epigrammatist into teacher, mocker, and mocked all in the same instant. If the ability to create a government to your liking does lie within your power, the epigram concludes, you are already a king, and your argument for a senate becomes moot. Perhaps the final

44 suspicabar hunc ingenii nostri hasum tibi praecipue probatum iri, propeterea quod soleas huius generis incis, hoc est, nec induetis, ni fallor, nec vsquequaque insultis (Miller, p. 67).
45 locatur enim sed ubique citra dentem: ridet, sed citra contumeliam (CW 3, 74/50-51).
47 QVIS OPTIMVS REIPVB. STATVS (CW 3, 228, No 198).
48 Quaestio sed tamen haec nascitur unde tibi? / Est ne usquam populus, cui regem siue Senatum / Praeclare arbitrio tu poies ipse tuo? (CW 3, 230, no. 198, l. 27-29).
warning may be applied to the larger work with which this epigram was originally published:

Stop deliberating over to whom you would delegate power. The first question is whether it would even do any good. 49

Nearly half a millennium after the publication of Utopia, the jury is still out on that one.

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L'Eloge de la Folie – Imprimerie Paillart, Abbeville, 1933
vignette de Hans Holbein (1523)
« Il se livrera pendant quelque temps à la joie »

49 nee iam cui, eonsuerat tradas / Imperium: prior est quaestio, an expediat (CW 3, 239, no. 198, l. 30-31).

Works Cited


