Moreana, nos. 19-20 (Nov. 1968): 11-19

ANOTHER LOOK AT THOMAS MORE'S *RICHARD*

The figure of King Richard III hovers like a medieval incubus over English history, – an evil spirit that has absorbed not only the imputations by his contemporaries of dissemblance, treachery, and murder, but also each succeeding generation's fear of royal tyranny and wilful, irresponsible ambition. His deformed body, his bloody mind, his troubled soul have become a stock symbol of evil ; that long list of royal and noble personages whom he is reputed to have killed to gain the throne, – Prince Edward, King Henry VI, his own brother, the Duke of Clarence, the lords Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, and Hastings, his wife Anne, and the famous Princes in the Tower – has become the stock narrative of the total depravation of an ambitious man.

Since the early seventeenth century, many scholars and some novelists have attempted to dispell the evil reputation of Richard. They have pointed out the shaky evidence that implicates him in the death of Prince Edward, Clarence, and his wife. They have dismissed the politic deaths of the lords Rivers, Grey, Vaughan, and Hastings as regrettable incidents of a violent age. And they have argued that his murder of the princes was in all likelihood subsequent Lancastrian propaganda. And specialists, if they balk at the completely purified Richard, nevertheless accept much of the furbished portrait. But to no avail ! The evil Richard rises over all their efforts ; he lives on, gnawing his lips, his hand never leaving the dagger by his side, a national bogeyman.

We might go even further and say that Richard lives on because he is a Shakespearean figure. The malignant plotter of *Henry VI, Part III,* who determined to 'set the murtherous Machiavel to school' (Act III, sc. ii) becomes the heartless tyrant of *Richard the Third.* But the two portraits of Richard are one stereotype of evil. The very rigidity of Shakespeare's Richard has occasioned much speculation. Unlike other heroes, Richard neither develops during the play nor exhibits any tragic flaw. His destruction by Henry Tudor is as impersonal and inevitable as the fate which tumbled the heroes of Grecian tragedy. Was Shakespeare, then, imitating the Greeks ? Or again, Richard is painted so black and Henry Tudor so white, it has been suggested that Shakespeare must have been writing in the medieval genre of the morality plays. Was Shakespeare continuing the traditions of the Middle Ages ? More recently, a third possibility, which does not exclude either of the two mentioned, has been proffered. Shakespeare found the portrait of Richard in all its detail and some of its dramatic presentation in the major chronicles of the second half of the

sixteenth century ; he rendered his sources in dramatic form. What is not always recognized is that the literary portrait of Richard in these chronicles was the creation of Thomas More some fifty years earlier.[1]

Thomas More wrote his *History of Richard III* between 1514 and 1518, that is, during those few years when Christian humanism seemed about to triumph in the courts of Europe and when Erasmus and More could speak so confidently of the golden age which was about to be introduced. These are the years before More entered into the arduous service of the king, when he rose rapidly through the writing and publication of his *Utopia* to the first ranks of the European humanists. And More, although already holding the office of Under-sheriff to the City of London, took his budding literary career seriously. Erasmus describes to Hutten in 1519 how More worked earlier to increase his facility with verse and later to polish his prose style.[2] It seems likely that we have in *The History of Richard III* his attempt to master the historical genre.

The events which More sets out to recount happened barely thirty years before his writing. In those intervening years the legend of Richard III had grown to the extent that the original reports of his crimes had entered into the stream of Lancastrian propaganda and the general encomium of the successful Tudor dynasty. Many scholars have fitted, almost without question, More's depiction of Richard into this political framework. To call More's history Lancastrian is to leave unexplained his unequivocal praise for Richard's Yorkist predecessor, King Edward IV. More's work cannot be so easily dismissed. Other historians have pointed to the unfinished state of the history, the omission of many dates, and the confusion of some names as evidence that More had no interest in history *per se* and have hinted that it was probably a piece of literary writing meant to curry favour with Cardinal Morton, who comes out rather well in the narrative. This approach overlooks the general accuracy of detail as far as it can be tested against other sources and the often brilliant attempts to analyse the historical motivations and probable sequence of events.[3]

More's history does not, however, fit any more easily into literary history. Although it contains some splendid dialogue and dramatic moments, they remain ensconced in the prose narrative. His work has been appreciated in bits and pieces and not in its total conception. The literary structure of the narrative is considered clumsy, with digressions which break the flow of events. That the history is apparently unfinished and and was never published by More seems to corroborate the judgment that it is an only partially realized literary work.

This ambiguity of genre and piecemeal treatment of the text have done much to relegate More's history to the role of a work of secondary importance. I should like to reconsider his history and show how its literary structure, far from obscuring, reveals More's historical acuity and, thereby, a dimension and an awareness that are completely absent in

Shakespeare's work.[4]

In More's history as in Shakespeare's, the villainous personality of Richard initiates and unifies the action. Richard, the dissembler, the murderer, the very incarnation of evil, is as absolute and immutable a personality in the earlier history as in the later drama. The dramatic unfolding of the story in the two authors is, however, very different. In Shakespeare, the plot gains in suspense through the multiplication and increase of horror until the final dénouement through the intervention of an external instrument, Henry Tudor. Within the action of the play there is no adequate counterweight to Richard. His enemies, although many, are ineffectual ; the eventual desertion of the Duke of Buckingham, who is less wicked only in opportunity, alone presages and contributes to Richard's fall. More, in contrast, gives Richard an opponent powerful enough to threaten him with failure and to make his success in the great issue of kingship a hollow victory. He creates thereby an internal dramatic situation, which contrasts with the purely external conflict presented by Shakespeare.[5]

More's *History of King Richard III* has come down to us in both Latin and Fnglish versions.[6] Although many form critics have attempted to prove that one or the other is a translation, it seems likely that More composed the versions for different audiences.[7] Part of the difficulty in establishing a definitive text is the lack of any autograph copies ; part, the unfinished nature of both versions.[8] The Latin history ends immediately after Richard's coronation ; the English text carries the story on to include the murder of the princes in the Tower and the genesis of Buckingham's conspiracy.

There is good evidence both in the extant copies of the *History* and in other works, such as the *Utopia*, that More worked piecemeal at his compositions ; he wrote sections, rearranged them, changed the sequence, and, often, left parts unfinished.[9] Without the original drafts it is impossible to determine the specific development of the various copies which have survived, but by blocking out the history as a literary work the relationship between the Latin and English versions can be suggested and, what is to the purpose of this essay, the dramatic emphasis of More can be seen to reveal his very considerable insights as an historian.

If the additional material of the English version is left to one side for the moment, More's history can be divided into four distinct sections. The first section provides the reader with background material for the ensuing action :[10] a description of Edward IV and the last years of his reign, which amounts to an idealized picture of the perfect monarchy, a description of Richard, his malice and evil ambition, and finally an account of the death of Edward IV and his highly dramatic plea for peace amongst his relatives, one of whom is Richard, and the greatest lords of the land, some of whom become Richard's victims. The second section

begins immediately with Richard's machinations and ends with his first triumph.[11] He persuades the Queen mother to call her son Edward, the new king who is still a minor, to London. Richard waylays the party on the road, imprisons the young king's protectors, and replaces them with his own men on the pretence that he has learned of a plot against the boy's life. Thereupon, Richard becomes the boy's protector. On receiving news of this action, the Queen mother in London takes her other son into sanctuary at Westminster Abbey. This decision brings on the first crisis in the dramatic action. Richard must have both boys whether he wishes to control or to seize the throne. The peak of the crisis is a powerful dialogue between the Queen mother and the Archbishop of Canterbury, who has been sent to fetch the boy she has with her. In this section, Richard plays a role behind the scenes and the action is carried to its most intense excitement by other characters. Having got both boys in his control, Richard, in the third section, openly seizes control of the royal government.[12] His chief victim is the naive Lord Hastings.

These three sections absorb slightly more than half the total length of the history. The fourth section and nearly half the work is taken up with Richard's complex subterfuges to have himself proclaimed king.[13] The length alone suggests the importance that More gave to this part of Richard's career, and it is in this section that Richard's antagonist emerges. His ponderous but decisive enemy is the English people, represented by the hard core of sceptical, perhaps wise men of the City of London. With a touch of irony, More makes Richard himself state the problem : 'They will not suffer in any wise king Edwardes line to governe them, whome no manne earthly can governe again their willes.'[14]

Richard's chief concern is to win the approval of the City. First, he must explain Hastings' execution. He sends for 'many substauncial men out of the city' and appears with the Duke of Buckingham, dressed in old, outmoded armour, 'such as no man shold wene that thei wold vouchsafe to haue put vpon their backes, except that some sodaine necessitie had constrained them.'[15] His performance is not convincing, but 'eueri man answered him fair, as though no man mistrusted the mater which of trouth no man beleued.'[16] Next Richard orders a previously drawn up proclamation, alleging that Hastings plotted the death of Richard and the Duke of Buckingham, to be read throughout the city. The proclamation is met with jests and rude remarks. Who would believe that such a piece could have been composed so quickly ? Someone in the crowd, a schoolmaster of S. Paul's, wittily remarks, 'Here is a gay goodly cast, foule cast awai for hast.'[17] Finally, Richard determines to make an example of Hastings' (and previously Edward IV's) mistress, Jane Shore. As she was the wife of a substantial Londoner before her entrance into court life, it would seem a clever move. She is paraded half-naked through the City :

> yet went she so fair and louely, namelye while the wondering of the people caste a comly rud in her chekes (of whiche she before had most misse) that her great shame wan her much praise, among those that were more amorous of her body then curious of her soule. And many good folke also that hated her liuing, & glad wer to se sin corrected : yet pitied thei more her penance, then reioyced therin, when thei considred that the protector procured it, more of corrupt intent than ani vertuous affeccion.[18]

Thus, Richard, while unopposed, must proceed unsupported by the very people whom he wishes to win over later in the great matter of the kingship. More has skilfully used these preliminary failures to prepare for Richard's farcical crowning, a victory empty of the popular acclaim he most desired. The two attempts to have himself proclaimed king by popular acclamation bring the story to its dramatic peak. The first attempt is at S. Paul's Cross. This time the plans are carefully laid. Several prominent Londoners, including the mayor, are induced to join into Richard's schemes. They select two highly respected clerics, Dr. Shaa, a brother of the mayor, and an Austin friar, Thomas Penker, to preach to the people at S. Paul's Cross. Shaa is given the main task, which is to convince the people that Edward and his descendants were illegitimate and then to emphasize how the very similarity of countenance proclaims to all the world that Richard is the true heir to the Yorkist line.

> Nowe was it before deuised, that in the speaking of these wordes, the protector should haue comen in among the people to the sermonwarde, to thend that those words meting with his presence, might haue been taken among the hearers, as thoughe the holye ghost had put them in the preachers mouth, & should haue moued the people euen there, to crie king Richard king Richard, that it might haue bene after said, that he was specially chosen by god & in maner by miracle.[19]

But Dr. Shaa becomes nervous and hurries to reach the point, passes it, and then must repeat the words when Richard finally does make his appearance: 'the people wer so farr from crying king Richard, that thei stode as thei had bene turned into stones, for wonder of this shamefull sermon.'[20]

The second attempt, which aims at winning over the dignitaries of London rather than the populace, is staged at the Guildhall, the great house of government for the City of London. This time the oration, which is to stir the assembly to declare Richard king, is given by the Duke of Buckingham, and More makes it a masterful and eloquent address. The duke appeals to the citizens' material interests, their security, their future, their moral rectitude, their special place in the kingdom, and the consequent love which a grateful king would undoubtedly show to them. The speech fills six pages of the eighty-two of the book. The length and literary brilliance, – it is the most striking passage in the history – leave no doubt that More considered this attempt by Richard to bring the City with him as the most vital issue of his history. The duke brings the oration to a

thundering conclusion, in which he warns the people of the disastrous consequences of putting a boy (that is, the young prince) on the throne, and awaits a tumultuous affirmation of Richard :

> When the duke had saied, and looked that the people whome he hoped that the Mayer had framed before, should after this proposicion made, haue cried king Richarde, king Richard : all was husht and mute, and not one word aunswered therunto.[21]

The duke turns to the mayor, who suggests that they may not have heard him too well. The duke repeats the performance in other words. More does not record this speech but describes the crowd's reaction :

> But were it for wonder or feare, or that eche looke that other shoulde speake fyrste : not one woorde was there aunswered of all the people that stode before, but al was as styl as the midnight, not so much as rowning among them, by whych they myght seme to comen what was best to doe.[22]

The mayor suggests that the people are used to hearing such matters presented by their own recorder, perhaps if he were... The recorder then rehearses the entire matter once more to the silent audience. The duke in exasperation puts the matter to them bluntly : 'we woulde not gladly doe withoute you' but 'we require you giue vs aunswer one or other, whither you be mynded as all the nobles of the realm be, to haue this noble prynce now protectour to be your kyng or not.'[23] A whispering in the crowd, broken finally by the shouts of men that the duke and the mayor have sent to the back of the audience, who alone shout : 'King Richard, King Richard! '. The duke and mayor express their joy at the shout, promise the crowd that they will make their desire to have him king known to Richard.

> And therewith the lordes came downe, and the company dissolued and departed, the more part al sad, som with glad semblaunce that wer not very mery, and some of those that came thyther with the duke, not able to dissemble theyr sorow, were faine at his backe to turne their face to the wall, while the doloure of their heart braste oute at theyr eyen.[24]

After this scene at the Guildhall, the actual petition to Richard that he take the crown is an empty and anti-climatic gesture, which the people accept with a well-matured scepticism :

> And so they said that these matters bee Kynges games, as it were stage playes, and for the more part plaied vpon scafoldes. In which pore men be but the lokers on. And thei that wise be, wil medle no farther.[25]

And Richard ? More leaves him currying the favour of 'the nobles the marchantes, the artificers, and in conclusion al kinde of men. But specially the lawyers of this realme.' And 'in his returne homewarde, whom so euer he met he saluted. For a minde that knoweth it self giltye, is in a maner deiected to a seruile flattery.'[26]

The dramatic action of More's history is, then, fundamentally different from Shakespeare's play. For Shakespeare, the conflict is centred in court politics and personalities. The City is a mere shadow in the background ; here a few citizens comment on the events, there the mayor appears briefly. The great Guildhall scene is merely reported. For Thomas More, the conflict is between the king and his subjects, and it is this dimension which adds to our understanding of More's England and More's attitude to kingship.

The City of London in the fifteenth century was a much more independent factor in English politics than it was under the Renaissance government of the Tudors. The chaos of the Wars of the Roses brought havoc and disrupted commerce, but forced the City to look to its own interests and to steer an independent course amongst the rising and falling dynasties. If some of its citizens could be bribed, the City as a whole nevertheless could keep a sceptical distance from the frenetic ambitions of its royal masters. And More's depiction makes the Londoners credible as a people that could not be governed against their wills. Thomas More, a Londoner by birth and by profession under-sheriff to the City of London with his court situated in the Guildhall itself, was well placed to interpret the role that London played in national affairs and to assess the qualities of every class of that great city's society. One of the most important contributions which his history makes is this picture of London as the cumbersome, often silent, but decisive and final arbiter of royal policies.

Put there is more than representation of the City in More's account. There is an underlying theory of the nature of government. For More, the problems of dynastic right and courtly politics are of secondary importance in the governance of a country. Indeed, the personal morality of a king's life is not a factor in considering his reign. The important factor is his relationship to the people whom he governs. The king must be loved by his subjects ; without this favour he will fail. It is this belief that determines the structure of More's history.

The opening section, for example, which juxtaposes Edward and Richard is more than introductory. Edward's progress is strikingly similar to Richard's. Edward too deposed a king and went to the Guildhall to be acclaimed his successor. Richard seems to have consciously followed this precedent even to staying at the same palace during the days of the appeal to the people and the crowning. And, as More points out, both Edward and Richard were brave and able military men. Edward certainly did not hesitate to involve himself in court intrigues and the ruthless quest for power. In his personal life and morality, he was not to be compared with the chaste Richard ; Edward's court was notorious for its courtesan ornaments.

But the differences between the two kings are striking and, for More, decisive in explaining the success of Edward and the failure of Richard. Edward solicited and received the support and love of his subjects. And he did this not in the first instance by great benefits, but by small courtesies

and consideration for the people's immediate well-being. To illustrate this aspect of Edward's government, More relates the occasion when Edward was hunting at Windsor and sent for the Mayor and aldermen of London :

> for none other eraunde, but too haue them hunte and bee mery with hym, where hee made them not so statelye, but so frendely and so familier chere, and sente Venson from thence so frelye into the Citye that no one thing in manye dayes before, gate hym eyther moe heartes or more heartie favoure amonge the common people, which oftentymes more esteme and take for greatter kindenesse, a lyttle courtesye, then a greate benefyte.[27]

This openness and friendliness contrast strikingly with Richard's summons to the mayor and leading citizens to watch his poor performance in the Tower after the execution of Hastings, or his heavy-handed involvement of the mayor in preparation for the 'popular acclamation' at S. Paul's and the Guildhall, which failed so shamefully. On the other side, the moral rectitude of Richard could have no such appeal. As More wisely remarks in commenting of Edward's '*fleshlye wantonnesse*' : 'Thys faute not greatlye gryeued the people : for neyther could any one mans pleasure, stretch and extende to the dyspleasure of verye manye, and was wythoute violence.'[28]

In spite of the indications that More did not finish his book, there seems to be some grounds for arguing that at least on one level, the history, especially in the Latin version, is a complete composition. For More, Richard's downfall occurs, not with his death at the hand of Henry Tudor in 1485, as Shakespeare would have it, but at his coronation in 1483. The four sections of the history, which the Latin version comprises, have a finished and satisfactory form. Excessive concern of scholars with Richard's personality and, especially, with the question of his involvement in the murder of the princes has obscured the central interest of Thomas More, the drama of king and subjects. This focus restored, More's elaborate 'digressions', such as the duke's speech at the Guildhall, become integral parts of the drama.

If we now turn to the remaining English section, which fills eleven pages of the Yale edition, the 'unfinished state' of More's *Richard* can be more clearly seen.[29] This fifth section contains pieces of writings with which More planned to continue the history. Here there is no structure to the chronicling of events or to their manner of treatment. The murder of the princes, Richard's death, and a description of Richard's guilt-ridden personality form one group ; the conspiracy of the Duke of Buckingham and Cardinal Morton form another. Some of this material does in fact appear in the main part of several versions of the history : the discussion of Buckingham's motives[30] is found in the Latin version of 1565, as is a description of Richard's state of mind after the murder of the princes.[31] These variants merely underline More's habit of piecemeal composition

and frequent rearrangement of episodes.[32] In this perspective the material now found in the last section of the English version may be looked upon as a collection of episodes which did not find a place in the finished Latin version. Rastell appreciated this in giving the English text an equivalent structure by translating passages from the Latin even at the risk of duplicating some of the material found in the section at the end of the English version.

The material in this last section which was not used in the Latin was probably written with the intention of continuing the history. Indeed, More makes his intention explicit : '... yf we hereafter happen to write the time of the late noble prince of famous memory king Henry the seventh, or parcase that history of Perkin in any compendious processe by it selfe.'[33]

The fascination which the evil personality of Richard III has exerted on the minds and imaginations of scholars, novelists, and dramatists from the sixteenth century to the present day has done much to obscure the true stature of More's history. More's position in the City and his literary training, his breadth of vision and political acuity enabled him to analyse the failure of Richard with more cogency and profundity than has so far been allowed him by subsequent commentators. The schoolmaster's jest at the proclamation can be turned to more commendatory purpose, if we say of More's *History of Richard III* : 'Here is a gay goodly cast, foule cast awai for hast.'

St. Thomas More College, Saskatoon T.G. Heath.

NOTES

1) For example, the recent editor, G.B. Harrison, of Richard the Third in the Penguin Shakespeare, quotes Hall's chronicle, but does not mention More, Hall simply included a version of More's History of Richard the Third in his chronicle.

2) Erasmi Epistolae, ed. by P.S. Allen, H.M. Allen, et al. (Oxford, 1908-58), IV, p. 21.

3) See The History of King Richard III, ed. by R.S.Sylvester, The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, (New Haven, 1963), vol. II, Intro., pp. lxxx-civ and passim.

4) The failure of a historian such as A.F. Pollard to appreciate More's historical abilities is ample indication of the need for a reappraisal ; see his article, 'The Making of Sir Thomas More's Richard III, Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait ; (Manchester, 1933), pp. 223-38.

5) Exclusive interest in the personality of More's Richard has obscured the dramatic counterweight ; see ibid., pp. 230-31.

6) Complete Works of St. Thomas More, II, pp. xvii-liv.
All subsequent references are to this edition.

7) pp. l-liv. 8) p. xx. 9) p. xxviii. 10) p. 3-14. 11) p. 14-42.
12) p. 42-52. 13) p. 52-82. 14) p. 79. 15) p. 52. 16) p. 53.
17) p. 54. 18) p. 55. 19) p. 68 20) p. 68 21) p. 75.
22) p. 75. 23) p. 76. 24) p. 77. 25) p. 81. 26) p. 81-82.
27) p. 5. 28) p. 4. 29) Intro, p. xxvii. 30) p. 87-8, 42-4, & p. li.
31) p. 87 and p. 82. 32) p. lv-lvi. 33) p. 82-83.