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The History of King Richard III. St. Thomas More.

The Complete Works of St. Thomas More, Vol. 2
Edited by Richard S. Sylvester. Yale University Press,
1963. Pp. (cvi) + 312.

- A review by Professor W. Gordon Zeeveld -

The publication of the present volume, volume 2 (but the first to be published) in the Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More, is an event of major importance in the history of More scholarship. As harbinger of things to come, it is no mere swallow; presently, the climate continuing favorable, the entire canon of More's work will be collected for the first time, edited by a board representing a cross section of the most notable contemporary More scholarship. On its completion it will provide an unprecedented means of measuring the stature and versatility of the greatest English writer then alive. A quarter century ago, an edition of the English works was undertaken, but the effort proved abortive. Now, with the present project well under way, we have good hope that all of More's writings will at last be brought together under the most favorable of auspices.

There are, in fact, good reasons why such a project could not previously be carried through. The divisive effect of the Reformation with its train of religious prejudice has produced a prodigious

literary *Moreana*, scholarly and otherwise, much of it highly partisan, very little not suspect. The atmosphere was simply too unfavorable for calm, judicious scholarship. Not until R.W. Chambers' great Life on the four-hundredth anniversary of More's death could the air be said to have sufficiently cleared. It is literally true that the present edition would have been impossible earlier. Indeed, in retrospect, we can contemplate somewhat ruefully the literary energy More himself exhausted in religious polemics. In a very real sense, More suffered literary as well as religious martyrdom. His controversial writings are important in assessing the man, but we may have leave to regret that he did not live in a more Augustan age.

The History of Richard III, though free of such debellation, presents problems of its own, to many of which no solutions are possible, but on all of which Sylvester's seasoned experience as an editor sheds fresh light. His painstaking pursuit of the complicated textual history of the English and Latin texts and their relation to each other is a model of editorial reconstruction. Excepting Doyle-Davidson's essay in the 1931 edition of the English Works, Sylvester here charted his own path and erected his own hypothesis. I do not think it will be seriously broken down. There is no question, however, that in the establishment of the English text, more needs to be done with the printing practice of Richard Grafton, who printed all four editions of the history - Hardyng, 1543 (2) and Hall, 1548, 1550 - before Rastell set it up from More's autograph. Rastell's complaint on the title page of his 1557 edition that these earlier editions were "very much corrupte in many places ... and altered in wordes and whole sentences" is borne out by Grafton's practice in editing Hall's history in spite of his professions to the contrary. Hall, who had been writing the history in Grafton's

printing office at his death in 1547, willed the uncompleted manuscript to Grafton to print. It was therefore at a dying man's request that he professed in the preface of the printed work "that I haue as nere as in me lay, nether altered nor added any thyng of my selfe in the whole woorke, otherwise then the auctor writ the same," and that the incompleated portion after 1532 - a convenient date at which a man of discretion might stop - had been compiled and published "vtterly without any addiction of myne." Two years later, in publishing the second edition, he again carefully disclaimed responsibility, though much "myght right wel haue been ... augmented or amended. Yet for asmuche as a dead man is the auctor thereof, I thought yt my duety to suffer hys worke to be hys awne, and therefore haue altered nothyng therein." Such professions spring as much from prudence as piety. Further, they are not true. Sylvester has noted (pp. 273-274) the flattering references to the Howard family which Grafton inserted in his edition of Hardyng's chronicle which he dedicated to Thomas Howard, second Duke of Norfolk. But it is also to be noted that twenty years after publishing Hall, Grafton had to protect himself from charges by his meticulous rival, John Stow, of similar manipulations of Hall's history. In assessing the accuracy of transmission of the English version of More's Richard III, we cannot be too credulous of Grafton's professions of editorial integrity.

For convenience, - though I feel sure, not the editor's - the two major texts are opposed to each other in each opening, Rastell's 1557 English edition on the left, the 1565 Louvain Latin edition on the right, with textual variants from the associated texts, antecedent and derivative, at the bottom of the page. Next in importance and immediately following, is MS Arundel 43 at the College of Arms, here for the first time in print. Sylvester shows

that it is earlier than either the 1557 or the 1565 editions. Further, it contains a number of passages, several of some length not contained in either, and a large number of variant readings. Sylvester believes that these phenomena inter alia suggest its identification as a scribe's copy of More's autograph. As for the two major texts, he traces a complex relationship deriving from a manuscript resembling the English version.

In this matter, as in others, Sylvester weighs the evidence, avoids a dogmatic view. But he does not hesitate on occasion to take a stand. On the most controversial issue of all, he is sound in accepting the authorship of More, not Morton. What Archbishop Morton or others transmitted to him orally is probably forever hidden away behind that façade of "this haue I by credible informacion learned" which More the lawyer and More the burgess in parliament had thus early learned how to use, well aware that the events he described were the history of yesterday which a touch of the fire tonges could set into flame again. In the reign of a Tudor, there was only one way to write about Richard III, and More would have had no need to explore the work of contemporary historians for that. Nor could we expect that More could have gained from a royal historiographer like André or a city chronicler like Fabian much more than the bare scaffolding upon which he built the character of Richard or the events in which he moved. Sylvester's careful labors show that detail after detail of that remarkable portrait is historically grounded, but More's use of them reveals the same magistral domination of his materials that Shakespeare was later to make of More's account. Much more fruitful for More's purposes were the classic historians, and here Sylvester's investigations, particularly into the Tiberius of Tacitus' Annals (pp. xcii - xcvi) are both relevant and revealing.

As to the didactic purposes which Sylvester finds in Richard III I must reserve a degree of scepticism. It is useless to argue from More's close analysis of his own place in contemporary politics as described in Book I of Utopia to some sort of similar assessment of Machiavellian politics in Richard III. Book I of Utopia was a handbook to practical politics, or more exactly, an argument for the futility of it ; but Richard III most certainly is not. That circumspection which was so essential and yet at times so seemingly inconsistent an aspect of More's way of thought would have saved him from the naiveté of supposing Richard III a potential handbook. The folly of such an approach is precisely what he had argued in the refusal of Hythlodaye to take public office, the refusal he himself would presently foolishly refuse to make. Nor is it possible to conjecture that such a handbook would remain unfinished and unpublished because, as Sylvester suggests, "More could not or would not take the risk" of providing Henry with "too convincing illustrations of what he was able to do," in other words, of encouraging the potential tyrant in him. Reading Richard III once again in this new edition, one is impressed as much by its importance as an innovation in English historiography, as by More's obvious relish in the writing of it ; but there is no evidence that he was writing a political morality. The nature of its impact when eventually it did get into print was as much dramatic as historic, - so much so, that no historian of the entire Tudor period attempted any other approach. For the rest of the century, More's Richard had typed the historic Richard as a villain, and the first attempts at his defense were written in the spirit of paradox. Shakespeare's Richard was More's Richard with dramatic dimensions, his villainousness ultimately springing, as I suspect it did in More's mind, from his opposition to the

first Tudor.

Which is not to think any the less of the scholarly accomplishment so apparent everywhere in this initial volume of a series that will open up for the first time the whole literary output of a many-faceted mind, and we can hope, in due course, a renaissance of More's scholarship.