

THOMAS MORE'S *RICHARD III*

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Although most readers feel the literary power of More's *History of King Richard III* or admit its historical relevance, the work as a whole is vaguely puzzling. To most literary readers it has an interest only because it is the source, via the chronicles of Halle and Holinshed, for Shakespeare's villainous Richard III. The literary man acknowledges that More's unfinished book has some powerfully dramatic scenes, but in general feels that it is too "historical" for serious literary study. To most historians, on the other hand, More's *Richard III* is not very reliable as history. Beginning even before Horace Walpole's *Historic Doubts* (1768) and continuing down to Paul Murray Kendall's *Richard the Third* (1956), many historians have found that their research has led them to envisage an historical King Richard quite different from More's and Shakespeare's. Although the historian also acknowledges the dramatic powers of the work, he usually finds it too contrived, too slanted, too "literary". Thus More's *Richard III* has become an anomalous work, neither "literary" enough for the literary critic to ignore its historical side (as he does in the Shakespearean historical plays, for example) nor "historical" enough for the historian not to be bothered by its literary power (as, for example, the serious respect that Clarendon's *History of the Rebellion* still commands despite its powerfully eloquent style that so obviously manipulates the reader's responses). Hence neither the literary critic nor the historian knows quite what to make of the work, largely because it does not fit into any of their accustomed categories.

The question therefore becomes one of genre. What kind of work is More's *Richard III*? If we could determine, within the limits imposed by cultural and temporal distance, the kind of work that More wrote, we might avoid the kind of misleading expectations of what the work will do and be that have thus far confused our understanding of it. Or, if we can-

not make an absolute determination of genre, we can certainly offer the suggestion that reading the work in the light of knowledge about a certain genre will lead to a better understanding of it. In what follows I offer the suggestion that the work is best considered as a biography and that the most significant biographic passages in it are examples of a seldom-used kind of panegyric, the inverted panegyric – a work whose function is not to praise but to blame, not to commend but to condemn. Since it does this to an historical person, it is inextricably involved in history, but since it is also a verbal artifact ordered toward a certain end (hence a kind of rhetoric), it will use the literary resources (notably style and structure) available for persuasion to that end – in this case, the dispraising of King Richard III.

To call *The History of King Richard III* a “history” does not tell us its genre, or at least it cannot to a modern historian or literary critic. There are at least two reasons why this is so. First, in the twentieth century, “history” has too many meanings to too many people for it to be satisfactory as a generic label. Not only do differing philosophies of history tend to confuse the term, but also historical writing can assume a number of different literary forms. Second, in the sixteenth century, the word “history” was used quite loosely. Legendary chronicles, polemical treatises, even tragic dramas were called, on their title pages, “history”. Nevertheless, More – or his editor, and there is a strong presumption that Rastell printed from More’s fair copy – called his work a “history”.¹ If we can determine generally what history meant to a man of More’s education and interests, we would be in a better position to see what kind of work it was that he wrote. And even if this investigation does not yield “history” in any acceptable modern sense, it could perhaps point us in the right direction for understanding the work now.

The whole area of Renaissance historiography, though still controverted by the scholars in details, is now reasonably clear in the large outlines of the commonplaces of Renaissance historical thinking and writing. One of these commonplaces, Herschel Baker explains in *The Race of Time*, is that the truths of history writing are “exemplary: they are paradigms of moral and political behavior, which, authenticated by famous men’s experience, provide patterns that can shape our own response to perennially recurring situations. Thus history, unlike more imaginative kinds of literature, was thought to be both true and useful”.² If this was true for the reader of history, it was also true for the writer of history. The historian wrote to provide “paradigms of moral and political behavior”. His materials and indeed his very subject matter could be chosen precisely for the moral or political lessons he wished to teach or illustrate. “Writing – and reading – about the past was justifiable only because men learned

from it”.³ We can thus safely assume as a working hypothesis that More wrote because some useful lesson could be learned from the life and reign of King Richard III.

Precisely what lesson, moral or political, *The History of King Richard III* was designed to inculcate is difficult if not impossible to determine, because we are dealing with an obviously incomplete work. It would seem inevitable that it should have ended with Bosworth Field. The explanation that More would have given of the conduct and behavior of the King, Lord Stanley, the Duke of Buckingham, and Henry Tudor before the battle would undoubtedly have clarified the lesson. Perhaps More was trying to show the evil effects of tyranny in the state, but broke off when he realized the contemporary implications of a Duke of Buckingham plotting against the monarch (Sylvester, pp. lxix ; xcix-civ).⁴ But it is not necessary to be specific about the lesson. Perhaps the lesson would be moral and personal: this is what a really evil man is like. Perhaps the lesson would be political and general: this is what the rule of a bad man is like, or this is what happens when the principle of legitimacy or primogeniture is overridden. Perhaps the lesson would be dynastic: this is how and why the Yorkist line failed and the Tudors came to save England. Any one, or any combination, of these is possible. The fact remains that some such lesson was intended and would be expected by More’s putative readers. This much we can definitely affirm on the basis of the commonplaces of Renaissance historiography. After all, more than a century later Sir Henry Wotton still believed that certain English rulers, among them Richard III, “had been expressly sent by God to emphasize, by way of contrast, ‘the Wisdom, Goodness, Prudence and Lenity of their Predecessors’.”⁵ It would seem that Thomas More believed so too.

At this point we must face the possibility that *The History of King Richard III* is more a biography than a history. Biography is, after all, one species of historical writing and has, in the Renaissance view, similar didactic purposes. According to Plutarch, biography differs from history in that the former emphasizes the nature of a particular man and considers actions as an index to his character.⁶ A biography of a great or important man would therefore look upon what he did for the light that these actions might throw upon the character and personality of the man himself. Understanding the man, not narrating his deeds, is the determining distinctive aim. But biography still has the larger aim of teaching, and the biography of an important political figure should teach something about political and moral behavior in public life. Now More’s *Richard III* seems to fit into this pattern quite well. It concentrates on one man and shows his actions as proceeding from the kind of man he was, according to the description given by the author. If More had called the work a *Life*, most readers

would quickly agree that it would best be considered as a biography. Thinking of the work as a biography and reading it as such leads us to consider certain passages – those setting forth More's general view of Richard's character – as the most significant in the book. Although it is those sections that give it its power, they are the very ones that most need a framework in which to understand them because they seem to be obviously legendary or flagrantly psychologizing.

Anyone reading the *Richard III* will come away with the impression that in More's eyes Richard was an evil man. Most biographical works concentrating on the career and actions of a single person as much as the *Richard III* does are usually devoted to a good man. It is somewhat unusual to devote so much good writing to so bad a man. Since King Richard is by no means admirable, the author's recounting of his life or the reader's contemplating it do not directly induce to virtue, save by inversion. It is possible, therefore, that the *History* could teach goodness by showing its opposite in action.

If evil is the perversion of good, then perversion is the key to Richard's character as More sees it – perversion of the man's natural roles as son, brother, uncle, and king. If, furthermore, perversion is the moral key to Richard III, then the key to the literary expression of this perversion is inversion – inversion of the usual purpose of a literary form. Theme and form thus reinforce each other, for More uses, I suggest, a literary form that is, roughly speaking, biographical, but instead of portraying a good man whom readers could imitate, he offers instead the portrait of a thoroughly evil man whose life and actions ultimately bring about his ruination.

Given that Richard was a bad man and that some lesson was to be drawn from a book about him, the literary question of how to handle such a theme and such a subject matter arises. Is there, in the relatively wide range of literary forms, any form, any informing principle, that could give shape to the theme and subject matter? At this point we should be cautious not to confine our ideas of literary form too much. That is, not to confine ourselves to the obvious genres, epic, tragedy, and the like. We already know that the work is a "history" in some sense, and a biography in a stricter sense, and we further know that this determination does not help much in uncovering the sources of its power. I propose instead to turn to the traditional forms of classical rhetoric for assistance.

One of the species of rhetoric in Aristotle is the panegyric, also known as epideictic oratory, or, in the Oxford translation, as "the ceremonial oratory of display".⁷ Although usually the panegyric praises someone, this kind of rhetoric can also be used to attack, dispraise, or blame someone. Aristotle allows the two possibilities in his statement of the purposes of

panegyric: "Those who praise or attack a man aim at proving him worthy of honour or the reverse, and they too treat all other considerations with reference to this one" (1358^b). Since praise is "the expression in words of the eminence of a man's good qualities", what the panegyric does is to "display his actions as the product of such qualities" (1367^b). An inverted panegyric hence would be a work that expresses in words the eminence of a man's bad qualities and displays his actions as the result of such bad qualities. Although Aristotelian usage preserves "epideictic" as a neutral term, conveying neither praise nor blame and referring just to the mode of the rhetoric, the term "epideictic" is rarely used in English. Panegyric, on the other hand, carries a favorable connotation in English, and is the common term for epideictic oratory. Since I want a term that conveys both the kind of rhetoric and the fact that its usual aim is changed, I will use the phrase "inverted panegyric" in this essay to mean epideictic rhetoric aimed at blame rather than at praise, even though "inverted panegyric" is not, strictly speaking, an Aristotelian usage. Now this kind of rhetoric, inverted panegyric, is what it seems to me that More's *History of King Richard III* uses in its most powerful sections.

I am not arguing that More set out consciously to write an inverted panegyric – perhaps he did, but it cannot now be proved – nor that Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is a "source" of the *History*. My suggestion is simply that by reading the *History* as though it were an inverted panegyric we can understand certain passages better and appreciate why certain aspects of Richard's character are emphasized. Moreover, it is just those passages where the inverted panegyric seems most in evidence that have captured the imagination of More's readers and hence have contributed so much to the traditional picture of Richard Crookback, the most wicked of English kings.

Two of the most influential passages in the *Richard III* for establishing the traditional picture of the wicked Richard III are the general sketch of his character early in the work and the description of his almost monstrous birth. By analyzing the character sketch in the light of the rules for panegyric in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and by comparing the description of Richard's birth with a similar description in a very traditional late medieval panegyric art form (the saint's life), I hope to show that reading More's *History of King Richard III* as an inverted panegyric makes sense and focuses the critical reader's attention on the means that More used to heighten the evil of Richard III.

For example, take the very telling description of Richard's character early in the *History*:

None euill captaine was hee in the warre, as to whiche his disposition was more metely then for peace. Sundrye victories hadde hee, and

sommetime ouerthrowes, but neuer in defaulte as for his owne parson, either of hardinesse or polytike order. Free was hee called of dyspence, and sommewhat aboue, hys power liberall, with large giftes hee get him vnstedfaste frendshippe, for wiche hee was fain to pil and spoyle in other places, and get him stedfast hatred. Hee was close and secrete, a deepe dissimuler, lowlye of counteynaunce, arrogant of heart, outwardly coumpinable where he inwardely hated, not letting to kisse whome hee thoughte to kyll : dispitious and cruell, not for euill will alway, but ofter for ambicion, and either for the suretie or encrease of his estate. Frende and foo was mucche what indifferent, where his aduantage grew, he spared no mans deathe, whose life withstoode his purpose. (Sylvester, pp. 7/30-8/13).

In many respects these lines are the foundation of More's work, for here he states what kind of man he believes Richard to have been. In these sentences More almost always speaks in his own person as narrator and does not hedge his statements with his frequently used device of saying that he only reports what others have said. Richard's later actions are consistent with his character as More here portrays it. More focuses on three aspects of Richard : his wars and battles; his liberality in "dyspence"; and his hypocrisy and ambition. Here we get a personal, almost intimate, picture of Richard. More talks about Richard's public behavior ("outwardly coumpinable") which masks interior vice ("he inwardely hated"). Always More draws attention to the relationship between public behavior and the man's real character. Richard's actions, in short, are the products of the quality of his character. Such an attitude on the part of the author is the attitude of a biographer teaching.

To show what I mean by inverted panegyric, I will compare what Aristotle says can be praised in a good man with what More actually says about Richard. The objects of praise and blame, Aristotle points out, are "virtue and vice, the noble and the base" (1366^a). The noble, or "that which is desirable for its own sake and also worthy of praise", (1366^a) is closely akin to virtue, which is "a faculty of providing and preserving good things ; or a faculty of conferring many great benefits, and benefits of all kinds on all occasions" (1366^a). Generally speaking, the actions of Richard in the sketch of him quoted above are not desirable for their own sake and are not worthy of praise. The exception, which perhaps shows More trying to be fair and to tell the truth, is Richard's undoubted military prowess. Indeed, More always seems to cite just those aspects of Richard's character that in a good man would be, according to Aristotle, the objects of praise.

The virtues that Aristotle cites as praiseworthy are "justice, courage, temperance, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, prudence,

wisdom" (1366^b). Of these the most honored are justice and courage. More does not exactly call Richard courageous, nor does he accuse him of cowardice. He merely says that Richard was "none euill captaine... in the warre" and that he had "sundrye victories". The import of these sentences is not directly censorious, but the irony in "none euill captaine" certainly does not suggest praise of Richard for courage. Rather he is admitting the obvious (Richard was indeed truly successful in war) while trying to lessen the impact of Richard's military prowess.

Liberality, which "disposes us to spend money for others' good", magnanimity, which "disposes us to do good to others on a large scale", and magnificence, "a virtue productive of greatness in matters involving the spending of money", are three virtues that Richard conspicuously lacks in More's view. Not that Richard did not spend freely ; he did, but was "sommewhat aboue hys power liberall", which does not suggest that he was a prudent man. According to More's account, however, the important thing about Richard's spending was its purpose. In Aristotle's view of these virtues, likewise, the purpose of the spending is the determinant of virtue. Whereas the praiseworthy man shows his "greatness" in the way he spends, More's Richard spends to get himself friendships which turn out to be unsteadfast, friendships that lead him to turn to "pil and spoyle in other places", which then gets for Richard "stedfast hatred" in place of "vnstedfaste frendshippe".

Now it is certainly not necessary to know Aristotle's *Rhetoric* to understand that More is painting a most unfavorable picture of Duke Richard here. But if the reader knew that a praiseworthy man spent his money for the benefit of others, and then read More's explanations of Richard's purposes in spending, he would realize that the Richard of the *History* is not just an ordinary evil man, but a man whose evil is very great because his actions recounted in the narrative are selected so as to contradict directly the ideal great or praiseworthy man. In other words, the purposes for which Richard spends his money become more reprehensible when viewed against the traditional ideals of spending in a literary context. It is in this sense that I suggest that the *History* (or at least parts of it) is an inverted panegyric. More focuses his character sketch on precisely those points at which Aristotle had said that the good man shows himself to be virtuous and noble and makes Richard emerge instead as vicious and ignoble. Moreover, this characterization is all the more telling because the diametric opposition to the ideal that most readers would have been familiar with is placed early in the work so that the rest of the deeds of Richard are seen in its light.

Aristotle is quite insistent that the noble and virtuous man performs actions that are good for others and not just for himself. "Those actions

are noble for which the reward is simply honour, or honour more than money. So are those in which a man aims at something desirable for some one else's sake ; actions good absolutely, such as those a man does for his country without thinking of himself ; actions good in their own nature ; actions that are not good simply for the individual, since individual interest are selfish" (1366^b). Thomas More is just as insistent that Richard acted only and always for himself, "dispiteous and cruell, not for euill will alway, but ofter for ambicion, and either for the suretie or encrease of his estate". If one thinks of the *History* as an inverted panegyric, then the latter part of this passage is the more damning. A man dispiteous and cruel is the opposite of the temperate and gentle man who is praiseworthy by Aristotle's standards. Far worse, however, is the dispiteous and cruel man whose actions are not only vicious but ignoble as well. Such a man is Richard of Gloucester as More paints him, a man of vicious nature seeking to increase his wealth for ignoble ends.

Although it would be possible to extend this analysis of *Richard III* to other passages and sections to show that reading them as inverted panegyrics makes sense, so much of the overall impact of the work stems from the passage just analyzed that the further considerations are not necessary. Moreover, this famous description of the character of Richard really established the traditional picture of him via Shakespeare's play, which obviously takes its conception of the King from it.

One of the commonest forms of the panegyric in Thomas More's England was the saint's life, the object of which was to praise a saint and his special virtues so that readers would imitate his life. To show further how the inversion of panegyric in *The History of King Richard III* works, I will compare it not with an ancient treatise that few people knew but with a kind of writing that almost all literate people were familiar with. Comparison of a few passages from the *History* with analogous passages from a typical saint's life will show that More seems to stress precisely those points in Richard that in a saint would show his sanctity.

In a traditional late medieval saint's life, such as those Caxton published from Voragine's *Golden Legend* in 1483, certain qualities and certain situations recur, and the saint is a certain kind of man or acts in certain, almost predictable ways. And at these points More's Richard is most unsaintlike or does most unsaintly actions. More's *Richard III*, then, becomes an inverted saint's life. Since we have already looked at a passage in More analyzing character, I will examine here instead a situation in the *History* — the birth of Richard — and compare it with a similar situation in a saint's life.

In his classic work *The Legends of the Saints*, Hippolyte Delehaye explains that many saint's lives were written simply for edification and

not for "relating actual facts"⁸: a definition that fits, I think, some parts of More's *Richard III*. These obviously legendary parts occur at just those places where a hagiographer would have placed them. Delehaye suggests that a complete saint's life covers three areas: "Before birth: the saint's nationality and parentage, his future greatness miraculously foretold; his lifetime: childhood and youth, the most important things he did, his virtues and miracles; after death: his cultus and miracles".⁹ Since More breaks off his narrative well before Bosworth field, the last part of Delehaye's scheme is omitted, though perhaps the very existence of *The History of King Richard III* is testimony of the cultus, again, of course, by inversion.

One of the most famous passages in the *History* and one of the most influential for the subsequent reputation of King Richard is More's description of his birth:

He was malicious, wrathfull, enuious, and from afore his birth, euer frowarde. It is for trouth reported, that the Duches his mother had so muche a doe in her trauaile, that shee coulde not bee deliuered of hym vncutte: and that hee came into the worlde with the feete forwarde, as menne bee borne outwarde, and (as the fame runneth) also not vntoed, whither menne of hatred reporte aboute the trouthe, or elles that nature chaunged her course in hys beginninge, whiche in the course of his lyfe many thinges vnnaturallie committed. (Sylvespp. 7/22-30).

Compare this passage with one from a typical saint's life, wherein the future of the saint is foretold: "S. Rocke was born in Montpelier... of noble progeny". His noble parents, John and Libera, though pious, had no children. While praying to Mary "devoutly for to have a child". Libera heard an angel's voice promising a child:

And anon she went to her husband and told him as she had heard of the angel. And then they, hereof joyful, accomplished the act of matrimony, and she conceived, and at time was delivered of a son, which in his baptism was named Rochus or Rocke. And this Rocke had impressed in the shoulder on his left side a cross, which was a token that he should be acceptable and beloved of God, which thing when his father and mother saw they blessed God, and his mother herself nourished and gave suck to the child, and fed it and committed and did gladly the other business of a nurse. Which devout mother fasted twice in the week, and the blessed child Rocke abstained him twice also, when his mother fasted in the week, and would suck his mother but once that day, which was to all a great wonder, and that day he was gladder, merrier, and sweeter than the other. And after, when he came to five years of age, he disposed him to the works of penance, and was much obedient to father and mother. And in the twelfth

year of his age he fasted many and divers fastings for Christ's love. And the more his members grew, the more the cross, that tofore was spoken of, appeared larger and more apparent.¹⁰

Now medically it is not impossible for Richard of Gloucester to have been born in the way More describes, nor it is impossible for little Rocke to have a cross-shaped birthmark on his left shoulder. But the importance of these descriptions lies in the significance that readers will attach to them as signs of something beyond the ordinary course of nature.

Both More and the author of the *Life of St. Rocke* make sure that the reader draws the correct conclusion. The young Rocke, obviously destined for sainthood, displays his destiny by his appearance and by his eating habits until the ages (five and twelve) at which he can act of his own will and show true obedience and a more mature asceticism. More emphasizes the "unnaturalness" of Richard's birth with the phrase "whiche in the course of his lyfe many thinges vnnaturallye committed". I suggest that More's description of Richard's birth can be best understood if it is seen as a diabolical analogy to the description of St. Rocke's birth, and that of many other saints as well. The main object of the writers is to use the unusual circumstances of birth to foreshadow the future life and actions of a very special child. Neither Rocke's birth nor Richard's should be read by modern men as an exact clinical description. No man today could think of reading Rocke's birth that way. He would rather understand that the anonymous author intended, according to the conventions of the genre, to point to the deeper spiritual reality underlying the circumstances of the birth, which are likely to be legendary anyway. With somewhat more sophistication, Thomas More does the same thing. It is the meaning of the event rather than the event itself that is important. More introduces his narrative with the face-saving phrase, "it is for trouth reported". Often in the *History* More uses such a phrase to introduce certain hard-to-believe parts of the work, and it would seem that he does this to avoid responsibility for the veracity of the statement, or at least not openly to vouch for it. Nevertheless, the statements about Richard's birth do form part of the work and More explicitly cites them as foreshadowing Richard's later evil career. Thus the function of the accounts of birth in both the *Life of St. Rocke* and the *History* is ultimately the same, although the purpose of the one work is to praise, and of the other to blame.

My analysis of *The History of King Richard III* suggests that to a perceptive and aware reader its undoubted power could come from a rather sophisticated and ironic shock of recognition. When certain key passages are read as inverted panegyrics they make better sense in context because their literary mode becomes apparent. Hence the problem of historicity should there cease to bother the reader. Reading those parts of *Richard III* as in-

verted panegyrics does not, of course, deny historical accuracy to other parts of the work.

Most large-scale "historical" or "biographical" works of More's time were devoted to good men, and readers were accustomed to encountering traditional patterns of life and behavior in those works, patterns that in *Richard III* are inverted so that the life and behavior are evil. The descriptions of Richard's birth and of his general character, though not historical in any modern sense, were seized upon by Shakespeare as giving him the key to Richard's character, just as More intended they should. Because readers had been conditioned to expect good and found instead evil, the inversion of accepted life and behavior in set situations produced the legend of King Richard as evil incarnate. It is just this kind of reader reaction that More wanted, and it is all the more powerful for its dependence upon inversion. When *The History of King Richard III* is read as a biography of an evil man that proceeds by inverting the usual meaning and substance of the panegyric, the question of its historical accuracy vanishes because its function is not to provide historical or empirically verifiable data, but rather to convince More's readers that King Richard was a thoroughly evil man. For over four centuries there has been no doubt that Thomas More succeeded.¹¹

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NOTES

- 1) Richard S. Sylvester, ed. *The History of King Richard III*, by St. Thomas More, The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More, 2 (New Haven, 1963), p. xxix. Subsequent references to the *History* will be to this edition, cited as "Sylvester", and given in the text. Page numbers in small roman numerals refer to Sylvester's Introduction, those in arabic numerals to the text of the *History*.
- 2) Herschel Baker, *The Race of Time : Three Lectures on Renaissance Historiography* (Toronto, 1967), p. 16.
- 3) F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, Calif., 1967), p. 287.

- 4) See also A. F. Follard, "The Making of Sir Thomas More's *Richard III*", *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait* (Manchester, 1933), pp. 237-238 ; and Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, pp. 69-72.
- 5) Sir Henry Wotton, *The State of Christendom* (1657), p. 7, quoted by Baker, *The Race of Time*, p. 68.
- 6) Albert H. Buford, "History and Biography : The Renaissance Distinction", *A Tribute to George Coffin Taylor*, ed. Arnold Williams (Chapel Hill, N. C., 1952), p. 106. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought*, p. 68, asserts that More's *Richard III* is best considered as a biography.
- 7) Aristotle, *Rhetorica*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, *The Works of Aristotle Translated into English*, ed. W. D. Ross, XI (Oxford, repr. 1946), 1358^b. Subsequent references to the *Rhetoric* are to this translation and will be given in the text.
- 8) Hippolyte Delchaye, *The Legends of the Saints*, trans. Donald Attwater (New York, 1962), p. 50.
- 9) Delchaye, pp. 72-73.
- 10) William Caxton, *The Golden Legend*, ed. F. S. Ellis (London, 1900), V, 1-2.
- 11) The author wishes to thank his colleagues at Boston College, Profs. P. Albert Duhamel and John Sullivan, for their generous assistance to him in writing this essay.

