

MORE'S EPIGRAMS ON DEATH

For over four centuries Thomas More has had a great reputation as a wit, largely based, I think, on the anecdotes so delightfully handed down to us in the biographies of Roper and Harpsfield. But long before their appearance Beatus Rhenanus, in his dedicatory epistle to Pirckheimer prefixed to More's *Epigrammata*, concluded his praise of the comic felicity of these poems by saying about More *nil nisi iocus set*. This harping on his comic vein did not please More, and he deleted it from the revised edition of 1520. One has only to remember the epigrams on good and bad kings and the epigrams on death to realize that there is a very serious side to much of the material in this book. It is about the latter group of poems, those on death, that I would like to make a few comments.

Since it is impossible to date most of More's epigrams we cannot say whether the poems on death which he translated from the Greek Anthology were written before his original ones on that subject or not. Nevertheless I think it will be useful to discuss the translations first. Most of them are on the theme that death liberates men from slavery, from poverty, from diseases or from fear of the future. Master and slave, kings and subjects are equal in death ; there is no difference between the rich man and the pauper when they lie in the grave. These are neat pieces of moralizing, but they lack the power and profundity of More's original thoughts on death. But it is worth remembering that the theme of death as the liberator inspired several of his best efforts.

In Epigram 57 (Bradner & Lynch edition) More plays some variations on the commonplace theme that life necessarily leads to death. Death, he says, lies hidden right in our bodies, and it is foolish to think that it is far away. Even now, while we talk, we are dying. This, though a good epigram, is less original than no. 243 in which he reminds himself that it was foolish to be glad that he had escaped death from drowning in a storm at sea. What a short painless death that would have been ! It would have saved

you from a future death by wounds or by long drawn-out disease. Here we see the theme of death – in this case a particular death – as the liberator. A much more powerful and comprehensive treatment of liberation is found in no. 101. In this poem, as if More were thinking of Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*, written in his own house, the attack is on the vanity of this life.

*Damnati ac morituri in terrae claudimur omnes
Carcere. In hoc mortem carcere nemo fugit.*

In this opening couplet the idea that life is really a prison comes with crashing climactic effect in the last word of the sentence. He goes on to say that men act out their little parts quite oblivious of the fact that they are really not in a kingdom but in a prison. We love this prison, he moralizes, as no prison should be loved, but we are liberated from it only by death. No more striking exposition of the idea that we are strangers and pilgrims on earth and our true citizenship is in heaven has ever been written.

In the poems we have been discussing More is concerned with his and our own deaths, but in one epigram (no. 62) he praises death as the avenger of the oppressed. Take hope, he says, to those who are suffering under tyrants. Death will snatch away your enemy even while he rages and will lay him at your feet. He will be abandoned, helpless and penniless. What gift has life ever given you to compare with this gift from death? Death here is not only the liberator but also the gift-giver. The ferocity of attack is unusual in More's poems, but it should not surprise those who remember that in a dozen other epigrams he had compared good and bad kings and attacked tyrants. It is a theme that runs all through the book. With this epigram one should compare no. 211 on kings and queens who served human flesh on their tables. Such delicacies as these, he concludes, grace royal tables; it is not fare for the poor.

Contrary to the practice of most Renaissance epigrammatists More wrote only two epitaphs. One, on Henry Abingdon, was an early effort which need not concern us, but the epitaph he wrote long before his death for the tomb of his first wife Jane, with whom he hoped to be buried, is a lovely and original poem. The Latin deserves to be quoted in full.

*Chara Thomae iacet hic Iohanna uxorcula Mori
Qui tumulum Aliciae hunc destino, quique mihi.
Una mihi dedit hoc coniuncta virentibus annis,
Me vocet ut puer et trina puella patrem.
Altera privignis (quae gloria rara novercae est)
Tam pia quam gnatis vix fuit ulla suis.
Altera sic mecum vixit, sic altera vivit,
Charior incertum est, haec sit an haec fuerit.
O simul O iuncti poteramus vivere nos tres
Quam bene, si fatum religioque sinant.
At societ tumulus, societ nos obsecro coelum.
Sic mors, non potuit quod dare vita, dabit.*

The affectionate diminutive *uxorcula* reveals in one word More's love for his young first wife, and the lines devoted to Alice do a good deal to redeem her memory from the rather unpleasant picture of her given by the early biographers. We must remember that this tribute was written in the early days of his second marriage before Alice, the incredibly good stepmother, had been worn down by the cares of a large household and the difficulties of attempting to understand an often unpredictable husband. But in the context of this article the main interest lies in the picture of death as the gift-giver, as the giver indeed of a gift which life could not give. One wonders what Jane More, the little *uxorcula*, would have thought of this most unusual prayer. Whatever we may think of this proposed heavenly *ménage à trois*, this epigram is the only one in More's book which does not use death for rather grim satire.

This epitaph was engraved on a stone slab on Jane's tomb in the Chelsea parish church and can still be seen there in the restored building, which had been almost entirely destroyed by bombing in World War II. More's intention of being interred with her was frustrated by his execution for high treason. After the beheading his body was buried in the chapel of St. Peter ad Vincula in the Tower and his head in the Roper vault in St. Dunstan's, Canterbury.

ON WITH JANE COLT. (Editor's note)

In memory of Leicester Bradner's own uxorcula, who shared with Mrs C.A. Lynch the dedication of their husbands' joint labor on More's Latin poems, (and whom I personally recall as a most gracious hostess when I visited Brown University in 1969, two years before her death), I wish to linger a while with the familiar epitaph printed overleaf. No need to repeat the prose rendering published in the 1953 bilingual edition. At my request, Joseph R. Berrigan, of the University of Georgia, has tried his hand at a semi-poetic translation, which is here reproduced. The high rate of interest whereby More's 12 Latin lines yield 16 in English is a tribute to an "interesting" author. Ann Berrigan, the uxorcula by whom *puella et quaternus puer* call Joe *pater*, "has made a couple of suggestions", he writes, "so that this is as much hers as mine. It would be nice, all the same, to have it dedicated to her under the smiling indulgence of St Thomas More".

Dear Jane, the little wife of Thomas More,
Lies here. I dedicate this tomb to her,
To Alice, and to myself. The first, the bride
Of my green years, gave me this gift : a boy
And three girls call me their father. The second
Is as devoted to these stepchildren as few
Mothers ever were devoted to their own –
A rare and glorious tribute to her love.
Jane lived with me and Alice lives with me
In such a way that I cannot be sure
Which one of them was or is more dear to me.
O we could have lived together, the three of us,
So well, if fate and our religion had
Allowed us. But now I pray that we be joined
Here in this tomb and there in heaven. So
Will death bestow on us what life could not.