

**«A RUFUL LAMENTACION» OF ELIZABETH :  
THOMAS MORE'S TRANSFORMATION OF DIDACTIC LAMENT**

Thomas More's "Ruful Lamentacion" on the death of Elizabeth of York, queen consort to Henry VII, has itself suffered a rather rueful fate. Though such authorities as A. W. Reed, A. F. Pollard, and C.S. Lewis have characterized it, respectively, as "not without a note of inspiration," "really the best of the poems of Sir Thomas More," and "of real value," More's fine poem has remained on the periphery of critical attention.<sup>1</sup> E.K. Chambers' enshrinement of only the first half of the "Ruful Lamentacion" in his *Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse* (1932) suggests the ambivalent attitude of respectful disregard in which the poem has been held.

Traditionally, and understandably, More's few English poems have been overshadowed by the riches of his prose work. But even the admirers of the "Ruful Lamentacion" seem reluctant to discuss it in any detail. One may speculate that this reticence stems from an uneasiness with it as elegy. Spoken as it is by the dead woman herself, More's poem simply does not conform to modern assumptions of what an elegy should be. It is perhaps significant that the fullest anthology of English elegies omits the "Ruful Lamentacion" without comment and that Sister Willow's recent study of the poem avoids the question of genre entirely.<sup>2</sup> The "Ruful Lamentacion" was written near the end of the medieval tradition of didactic lament, and an appreciation of the poem's delicacy of tone and meaning is dependent on an acquaintance with this tradition. Sister Willow's mistaken assertion that More's elegy is "patterned after Italian models" suggests that this English tradition is not well enough known.<sup>3</sup>

Though it has a kinship with a large and varied body of didactic verse, the "Ruful Lamentacion" bears closest resemblance to a group of seven laments which spans almost a century. With the exception of More's poem on Elizabeth (who died in 1503), none of the poems can be securely assigned to an author. These elegies are, in chronological order, laments spoken by :

Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester (d. 1441) ; Edward IV (d. 1483) ; James IV of Scotland (d. 1513) ; Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham (d. 1521) in Harley MS. 2252 ; a second by Buckingham in Rawlinson MS. C. 813 ; Sir Gryffyth ap Rys (d. 1525) ; and Anne Boleyn (d. 1536).<sup>4</sup> The seven laments derive their conventions from two related medieval traditions : warnings from the dead and Fall of Princes literature.<sup>5</sup> Through these adapted conventions, they seize upon the death of a high-born person as an occasion for warning the living about the last things. The poems might be called "confessional elegies," as the dead person recites his sins, bids farewell to the world, and invokes the prayers of friends and the mercy of Christ. Formally, the poems are written in the plain style, laced with commonplaces on the transience of life, and punctuated by a minatory refrain line. Their intention is avowedly didactic, and they serve the function of a speaking death's head. They teach a lesson that all men know, but none knows well enough : to abjure the enticing vanity of the world and seek the eternal good.

These didactic elegies share a reluctance to admit, much less celebrate, the individuality of the dead ; their reference to biographical detail is thus extremely restricted. If the dead person is to serve as a mirror in which the living may see themselves, then too much detail might distort the reflection. The fallen princes of the poems see themselves, and exhort us to see them, not as individuals but as cautionary examples. The didactic strategy is apparent in John Lydgate's wish that even hardened sinners "Bi good example may come to repentaunce."<sup>6</sup> Obedient to the imperatives of convention, the subjects of the confessional elegies dutifully repeat the formula : thus, the Duchess of Gloucester hopes that "by me [all women] may ensample take" (10) ; James IV wishes "my Successors may be ware / and exsampyll take by my wrechyd ruyn" (81-82) ; and Sir Gryffyth ap Rys reminds the reader to "remembre how soden thys lyffe doeth slyed, / ye may all take ensample be me" (57-58).

At the beginning of More's "Ruful Lamentacion" Elizabeth strikes this same generalized admonitory note :

O ye that put your trust and confidence,  
In worldly ioy and frayle prosperite,  
That so live here as ye should never hence,  
Remember death and loke here uppon me.  
Ensaumple I thynke there may no better be. (1-7)<sup>7</sup>

Elizabeth's phrasing here is utterly conventional, as a similar exhortation from Alexander Barclay's nearly contemporary *Shyp of Folyes* illustrates :

O man that hast thy trust and confydence  
Fyxed on these frayle fantasyes mundayne ...<sup>8</sup>

As More's poem begins, we seem on the verge of hearing yet another colorless homily on earthly transience ; the only hint that Elizabeth may be more than an abstracted "ensaumple" is her parenthetical "I thynke" in line five.

But in stanza two Elizabeth's tone shifts from exhortation to meditation. More seems intent on capturing the play of her mind as she moves from her initial generalized statement to a more personal reflection on its meaning for her. Her conventional exhortation is immediately qualified by a series of questions, as if in the first stanza she said what she felt she *ought* to say :

Was I not borne of olde worthy linage ?  
Was not my mother queene my father kyng ?  
Was I not a kinges fere in marriage ?  
Had I not plenty of every pleasaunt thyng ?  
Mercifull god this is a straunge rekenyng ... (8-12)

Though these questions could be read as rhetorical questions which answer themselves, they carry a note of genuine bewonderment at her fall and perhaps a touch of self-pity as well. Unlike the other fallen princes, who understand and even take a certain pleasure in the justice of their demise, here Elizabeth sees her death as unaccountable and unacceptable, "a straunge rekenyng".

Elizabeth continues in the third stanza the uncertainty which she has shown in the second :

If worship myght have kept me, I had not gone.  
If wyt myght have me saved, I neded not fere.

If money myght have holpe, I lacked none.  
 But O good God what vayleth all this gere.  
 When deth is come thy mighty messangere,  
 Obey we must there is no remedy,  
 Me hath he sommoned, and lo now here I ly. (15-21)

Behind these lines lies Everyman's lesson, the commonplace that nothing worldly avails against death's summons. But Elizabeth's repeated use of subjunctive "if" clauses also suggests her reluctance to leave the world. Her rather nostalgic indulgence in what might have been is abruptly shattered by the force of "But O good God what vayleth all this gere." What in similar elegies was a wooden reminder of the inevitability of death has come to Elizabeth (and perhaps to the reader as well) with a shock of recognition. The laconic and punning refrain of "lo now here I ly" concludes the stanza on a powerful note of finality.

Even after her realization that "Obey we must there is no remedy," Elizabeth's mind returns to the promise of the life she has left. She recalls the recent "blandishyng promise" of long life given her by a court astrologer.<sup>9</sup>

Yet was I late promised otherwyse,  
 This yere to live in welth and delice. (22-23)

The bitterness of her sarcasm ("How true is for this yere thy prophesy") again suggests a disappointment perhaps not wholly consonant with renunciation of the world. It is not until the fifth stanza of the poem that Elizabeth will express a stern realization and acceptance of the essential sorrowfulness of life:

Account my sorow first and my distresse,  
 In sondry wyse, and reckon there agayne,  
 The joy that I have had, and I dare sayne,  
 For all my honour, endured yet have I,  
 More wo then welth, and lo now here I ly. (31-35)

Elizabeth's unwillingness to face the worst in the previous stanzas invests with pathos the commonplace she expresses here and makes it her own.

From the stylized exhortation of the opening stanza the

poem has moved toward what might be called soliloquy. More's engaging depiction of Elizabeth's mind has led readers to see the poem as a deathbed dramatic monologue rather like Browning's "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church." Thus, Louis R. Zocca speaks of "the farewell of the dying lady to her children" and Sister Willow pictures "the dying Queen ... addressing the group surrounding her bedside" and justifies supposed inconsistencies in the poem as "mental meanderings" which are plausible in the face of imminent death.<sup>10</sup>

There is, however, reason to think that More depicts Elizabeth as speaking from her grave. Though allowing the dead to speak may seem an elementary violation of verisimilitude, it was a common convention of medieval cautionary verse. The speaker is clearly dead, for instance, in the elegy closest to More's, the lament of Edward IV. Elizabeth's refrain of "lo now here I ly" suggests that she too is dead; her words are a shortened form of Job 7:21 (*Et ecce nunc in pulvere dormio*) which serves as the refrain of the elegy on Edward IV and also appears in the Office of the Dead. A further suggestion that we should not picture Elizabeth on her deathbed comes at the end of stanza six. After mentioning the royal edifices at Richmond and Westminster, the Queen concludes: "My palyce bylded is, and lo now here I ly." The pungency of the line stems from our realization that Elizabeth's present palace is in fact her tomb. This irony of the turf being one's final tower, of one's nose touching the roof-beam, is common in medieval verse on death.<sup>11</sup>

Despite these suggestions that she is dead, More's dramatic presentation of Elizabeth creates the illusion of life. It is precisely through More's impressive gift for dramatization that the poem transforms its conventional materials.<sup>12</sup> With reference to the lament of Edward IV, Douglas Gray has noted the poet's difficulty in adapting the "devices and ideas of the essentially anonymous and general 'dead man's lament' or warning to a particular historical individual ..."<sup>13</sup> More has managed this synthesis brilliantly. His dramatic rendering of Elizabeth's lament qualifies its traditional *topoi* as it absorbs them into the emotional logic of the poem. Instead of blunting the poem's didactic force,

however, More's dramatization of Elizabeth imparts an emotional resonance to the commonplaces. The poem becomes more effective than the baldly didactic laments spoken by Elizabeth's fellow princes. More's strategy in the poem adumbrates the desire of Renaissance poets to teach through significant percept rather than disembodied precept. In Sir Philip Sidney's eloquent statement of the idea, the poet "coupleth the general notion with the particular example" and thus

yields to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description, which doth neither strike, pierce, nor possess the sight of the soul so much as that other doth.<sup>14</sup>

A good example of the way in which the dramatic mode of the poem transforms its conventional materials occurs in stanza seven, where Elizabeth laments :

Where are our Castels, now where are our Towers ?  
Goodly Rychmonde sone art thou gone from me,  
At westminster that costly worke of yours,  
Myne owne dere lorde now shall I never see.  
Almighty god vouchesafe to graunt that ye,  
For you and your children well may edefy.  
My palyce bylded is, and lo now here I ly. (36-42)

*Ubi sunt* passages such as this, which invoke buildings rather than people, are common in didactic literature. In the elegy on Edward IV, for instance, the dead King asks : "Where ar now my castelys & byldingis ryall?" (69) and realizes that only his tomb remains. Both passages express the ironic incongruity between the relative permanence of buildings and the transience of their builders. As always, Barclay's *Shyp of Folyes* provides the relevant, heavy-handed moralization :

Ye folys blyndyd with curyosyte  
Whiche on great byldynges set so sore your mynde  
Remember ye nat that doutles ye shall dye  
And your gay byldynges and howses leue behynde ...<sup>15</sup>

But More's handling of the convention avoids Barclay's shrill

moral. Due to the poem's dramatic mode, we actually hear the Queen's genuine disappointment at never seeing Henry's new Chapel at Westminster, "that costly worke." The implicit contrast between the living hopes of the Queen and her final "lo now here I ly" is far more eloquent than Barclay's formula. Also, Elizabeth's lines effect a subtle change in the substance of the convention's meaning. Even though she knows that the tomb is man's final "palyce," Elizabeth nevertheless prays that Henry "well may edefy" for himself and their children. Her tender solicitude for her family both softens and deepens the force of the lesson about worldliness.

This same combination of pathos and didacticism dominates stanza eight, in which Elizabeth recalls her earlier sorrow at the imminent departure of her daughter Margaret (to be married to the ill-fated James IV of Scotland) :

Farewell my daughter lady Margaret.  
God wotte full oft it greved hath my mynde,  
That ye should go where we should seldome mete.  
Now am I gone, and have left you behynde,  
O mortall folke that we be very blinde,  
That we least feare, full oft it is most nye,  
From you depart I fyrst, and lo now here I lye. (50-56)

The mother's natural concern at the departure of a beloved daughter is finely rendered and gives point to her generalized observation on the blindness of "mortall folke." Because it is fully absorbed into a dramatic context, her apostrophe has a richer meaning here than it would in a moral treatise.

More's poem seems simpler than it is because its development is unobtrusive. The shape of the "Ruful Lamentacion" is implicit in the shifting perspectives from which Elizabeth speaks ; the self-proclaimed cautionary example in stanza one becomes wife, mother, and sister in the concluding six stanzas. The poem moves from Elizabeth's concern with the significance of her own suffering and death to her specific commitments in the world : her husband who will now have to play the part of mother, her children whom she will never see again. It would

seem that Elizabeth can express her selfless love for those left behind only after she has purged herself of self-pity and questioning in the opening stanzas.

The final six stanzas are cast in the form of a moving series of farewells to the various members of her family. Again, More's device is on the surface conventional. Prolonged farewells which employ the figure of anaphora (a cluster of lines beginning with the same word) usually conclude medieval confessional elegies. Unlike the other elegists, More does not allow the repeated farewells to become merely perfunctory and mechanical. In their euphony and sustained cadence, Elizabeth's farewells create a tone of plangent sorrowfulness. Also, while most of the speakers of confessional elegies address their farewells to the various pleasures which emblemize their worldliness, Elizabeth's farewells and adieux are directed to her loved ones. Thus, Eleanor Cobham, Duchess of Gloucester, bids farewell in her lament to "damaske and clothys of gold," "velwette and clothys in grayne," "my clothys so manyfold," "all mynstraly and song," and "all worldly daliance" (113-15, 121-22). Though she briefly mentions the Duke, she seems to grieve far more for the loss of her wardrobe than for him. In place of the Duchess' (rather unwilling) renunciation of her earthly folly, Elizabeth's last words implicitly affirm the possibility of love and meaningfulness in the world of the living. In her melancholy farewells there is a delicate balance between a sense of the innocent joy the world affords and the treachery which takes it all away.

Unlike those of her fellow victims, Elizabeth's lament is remarkable for its absence of self-accusation. Most of the subjects of confessional elegies hold themselves responsible for their falls and insist on their sinfulness. The Duchess of Gloucester, for instance, proclaims that "As Lucifer fell downe for pride, / So fell I from felice" (29-30) and declares an impressive list of sins ranging from "having purchast fast from yere to yere" (37) to having "dolt with sorcery" (94). James IV of Scotland passes judgment on himself with precision by noting that "Bothe lawe & nature dothe me accuse" (26) and that "I am damned by ryghtfull lustyce" (75). In the Harley manuscript the Duke of

Buckingham is similarly insistent: "for no dowte dethe haue I deseruyd" (37). And even Anne Boleyn, who prefers to blame her fall on fortune, allows that "for myne offence I am full woo" (77).

More's Elizabeth, however, seems remarkably free from feelings of guilt. Though she refers to herself as an "ensample" in the opening stanza, later she sees herself less as a warning against viciousness than as one who has placed too much trust in worldly joy. Significantly, she does not attribute her death to the working of retributive justice, the dominant force in *Fall of Princes* literature. In the place of the often spectacular sins of her fallen peers, we sense in her merely humanity's inevitable frailty. She speaks as one chastened rather than bludgeoned by her fall. More's poem, in short, is the only confessional elegy which presents the fallen prince with unequivocal sympathy.<sup>16</sup>

As a result of More's sympathetic portrayal of Elizabeth, what might be called the philosophical orientation of his poem diverges decisively from that of the other confessional elegies. Like Lydgate's *Fall of Princes* which lies behind them, these confessional elegies partake of the *contemptus mundi* emphasis on the vanity of all earthly endeavor.<sup>17</sup> Buckingham in the Rawlinson manuscript sums up his lesson with "now I perceyve all is but vayn-glorye" (3), and James IV reaches the same conclusion: "Adewe thys world ys full of vanyte" (110). The most emphatic invocation of the *contemptus mundi* tradition comes in the penultimate stanza of Edward IV's lament, when he recalls the sombre words of a popular thirteenth-century diatribe against human presumption:<sup>18</sup>

Why shuld a man be provd or presume hy ?  
Seynt barnard dothe there of nobly trete,  
Seyng a man ys a sak of sterqueryte [dung]  
& schall torne to wormys meete. (73-76)

The pervasive dung and vermiculation of *contemptus mundi* literature are notably absent from Elizabeth's lament. And it is significant that she refrains from saying what comes most naturally to fallen princes: that all is vanity. Perhaps direct exhortation would be superfluous, as the eloquently understated

refrain of "lo now here I ly" constantly (and tactfully) reminds us of the last things. Elizabeth comes closest to the *contemptus mundi* vision in the penultimate stanza, where she bids farewell to her four sisters :

Lady Cicyly, Anne and Katheryne,  
Farewell my welbeloved sisters three,  
O lady Briget, the other sister myne,  
Lo here the ende of wordly vanitee.  
Now well are ye that earthly foly flee,  
And hevenly thynges love and magnify,  
Farewell and pray for me, for lo now here I ly. (77-83)

Elizabeth sees herself again as an example of "the end of worldly vanitee," and she praises her sister Bridget, a Dominican nun, for fleeing "earthly foly." Yet even here Elizabeth avoids the typical deprecatory tone of *contemptus mundi* moralization. Part of the mellowness of tone comes from the intimacy of one sister addressing another. Elizabeth's advice on fleeing the world seems here less the generalized imperative of the preacher than the perception, drawn from her own experience, of the world's treachery. She speaks here, as throughout the final stanzas, in a tone of reflection and melancholy. To borrow John Stuart Mill's distinction, Elizabeth's words seem overheard rather than heard, and thus they strike us as primarily an expression of feeling rather than instruction.<sup>19</sup> As opposed to the opening stanza, here Elizabeth seems not to have a conscious design on her audience of readers. And it is also significant that, unlike the jaundiced thrust of contempt-for-the-world literature, her final emphasis falls not on abjuring the world, but on the need to "love and magnify" what is heavenly.

In one sense this poem represents a historical dead end, as it seems to have cast no direct influence on the subsequent development of the English elegy. Yet, the "Ruful Lamentacion" does have considerable historical significance. Its transformation of *contemptus mundi* materials into an elegy which implicitly praises its subject marks an important point in the transition from medieval to Renaissance attitudes toward death and funeral poetry. The

juxtaposition of the old and new is equally apparent in Elizabeth's tomb : Pietro Torrigiano's bronze funeral effigy of Elizabeth, who is serenely idealized in High Renaissance fashion, rests in a chapel adorned with the last flowering of the Perpendicular Gothic style in England.

Despite its didactic conventions, the "Ruful Lamentacion" clearly points toward the Humanistic conception which More advanced thirteen years later in the *Utopia* : that remembrance of the dead person's "uprightness is not only a most efficacious means of stimulating the living to good deeds but also a most acceptable form of attention to the dead."<sup>20</sup> In his depiction of Elizabeth, the sinful "example" of medieval verse has begun its metamorphosis into the "pattern of virtue" figure which dominates the Renaissance elegy.<sup>21</sup>

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1. Reed, "Introduction," *The English Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. W. E. Campbell (London : Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1931), p. 16 ; Pollard, "The Lamentation of Queen Elizabeth," *TLS*, 7 July 1932, p. 499 ; Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 133.
2. J. C. Bailey, ed., *English Elegies* (London : John Lane, 1900) and Sister Mary Edith Willow, *An Analysis of the English Poems of St. Thomas More* (Nieuwkoop : B. De Graaf, 1974), pp. 139-73.
3. Willow, *English Poems*, p. 139.
4. For the text of the Duchess of Gloucester's lament, see Rossell Hope Robbins, ed., *Historical Poems of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (New York : Columbia Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 176-80 ; for Edward IV's lament (which is sometimes attributed to Skelton), see Robert S. Kinsman, "A Lamentable of Kyng Edward the III," *HLQ*, 29 (1966), 95-108 ; for James IV's lament, see British Museum MS. Harley 2252, ff. 43<sup>v</sup>-45 ; for Buckingham's lament in MS. Harley 2252, see *Ballads from Manuscripts*, ed. F. J. Furnivall and W. R. Morfill (Hertford : S. Austin, 1873), II, 62-65 ; for Buckingham's lament in Bodleian MS. Rawlinson C. 813, see Frederick Morgan Padelford, "The Songs in Manuscript Rawlinson C. 813," *Anglia*, 31 (1908), 364-65 ; for Gryffyth ap Rys' lament, see Padelford, "The Songs in Manuscript Rawlinson C. 813," pp. 347-49 ; and for Anne Boleyn's lament, see *Ballads from Manuscripts*, ed. Furnivall (London : Taylor and Co., 1868), I, 408-13. All quotations of the poems are from these editions.
5. For warnings from the dead, see Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 315-26 ; for the Fall of Princes tradition, see Willard Farnham, *The Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy* (Berkeley : Univ. of California Press, 1936), pp. 69-172.

6. Lydgate, *Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen. EETS, ES, 121 (London : Oxford Univ. Press, 1924), 1, 7.

7. *English Works of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Campbell, p. 335. Subsequent quotations of the poem are from this edition. The texts in Balliol MS. 354 (ff. 175-76) and British Museum MS. Sloane 1825 (ff. 88<sup>v</sup>-89<sup>v</sup>) are rife with scribal errors.

8. Barclay, *Ship of Fools* (1509), ed. T. H. Jamieson (Edinburgh : William Paterson, 1874), 1, 268.

9. Richard S. Sylvester has identified the astrologer as William Parron, who rashly predicted that the Queen would live to be eighty. *The Anchor Anthology of Sixteenth Century Verse* (New York : Anchor Books, 1974), p. 125.

10. Zocca, *Elizabethan Narrative Poetry* (New Brunswick, N.J. : Rutgers Univ. Press, 1951), p. 10 and Willow, *English Poems*, p. 143.

11. See Woolf, *English Religious Lyric*, pp. 82-84. In Barclay's words, "the laste hous gyuen to mankynde / Is the course grounde and walles of his graue" (*Ship of Fools*, I, 91).

12. For a suggestive exploration of More's "penchant for role-playing," see Richard S. Sylvester, "A Part of His Own : Thomas More's Literary Personality in His Early Works," *Moreana*, 15 (1967), 29-42.

13. Gray, *Themes and Images in the Medieval English Religious Lyric* (London : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 205.

14. Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (London : Nelson, 1965), p. 107.

15. *Ship of Fools*, I, 91.

16. More's sympathy is consonant with the high esteem in which Elizabeth's subjects held her. See S. B. Chrimes, *Henry VII* (Berkeley : Univ. of California Press, 1972), p. 302 and Nancy Lenz Harvey, *Elizabeth of York* (New York : Macmillan, 1973), p. 195.

17. Farnham, *Medieval Heritage of Elizabethan Tragedy*, pp. 40-42.

18. For the text of the poem Edward quotes, which is traditionally attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux, see J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologia Latina*, 184 (1879), cols. 1313-16.

19. Mill, *Dissertations and Discussions : Political, Philosophical, and Historical* (London ; John W. Parker, 1859), I, 71.

20. *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz, S.J., and J. H. Hexter (New Haven : Yale Univ. Press, 1965), p. 225.

21. For patterns of virtue in the Renaissance elegy, see O.B. Hardison, Jr., *The Enduring Monument : A Study of the Idea of Praise in Renaissance Literary Theory and Practice* (Chapel Hill : Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1962), pp. 137-62. Sister Thea Bowman's M.A. thesis on "A Riful Lamentacion" (The Catholic University of America, January, 1969) came to my attention after this article had been completed. The research was supported by a grant from the Canada Council.