

*EDITING THOMAS MORE : THE PAST AND THE FUTURE* ★

★ A Paper for Discussion by the Renaissance English Text Society,  
Modern Language Association Meeting, Chicago, December, 1977

If a retiring president may hazard an opinion, then I should like to say that the decision made by the Renaissance English Text Society<sup>1</sup> three years ago to devote our annual MLA meetings to discussions of editorial problems in Renaissance texts has proven to be most profitable. Our first such session (San Francisco, 1975) dealt with Richard Hooker (W. Speed Hill providing the position paper), and our second (New York, 1976) with William Tyndale (paper by Donald Millus). The Hooker meeting evoked a detailed discussion of particular textual problems that had emerged as the project matured (1967-75), and it is a pleasure to see that the first two volumes of the edition have now been published (Harvard University Press, 1977). With Tyndale we were concerned not with a project that was just moving into high gear but rather with the problems surrounding the planning, almost from scratch, of a new edition -- questions of format and financing, of old spelling vs. new, of the appointment of editors and advisors, etc. In 1977, at Chicago, we turn to still another phase of the lengthy process involved in the preparation and publication of scholarly texts. And it is particularly fitting that we talk of Thomas More and his works in this year, the five-hundredth anniversary of his birth.

The Thomas More Project at Yale University was officially approved and constituted in 1958. Since that date, we have published eight volumes of the Complete Works, with two more volumes now in press and scheduled to appear in 1978 and 1979. In addition our Selected Works series (modern spelling and paperback) has issued four volumes, with another volume (the *Tower Works*) now in press. Various ancillary volumes have also appeared. We thus have five volumes remaining to be published ; if our progress is not interrupted, we hope to see the edition completed by 1985. In my more optimistic moments I like to think that we are not, like the Tyndale edition, at the beginning, nor, like the Hooker, at the end of the beginning. Our goal is indeed in sight, the beginning, one trusts, of the end.

I have treated the early and (if one will) middle history of our project in some detail elsewhere<sup>2</sup> and thus will not take up time here with going over that ground again. What I propose to do in this paper is to review

some of the problems with which we have had to deal and then attempt a glance into the future, making some suggestions about the uses to which large editions like ours can be put.

Of all the problems that beset continuing projects, the purely human ones are the most difficult to cope with. Editors, like all men, are mortal, and the grim fact of death has confronted us on several occasions. New scholars must then be assigned to unfinished volumes, with the inevitable delays that such adjustments entail. We have had, *Deo gratias*, almost none of the cantankerous bickering that has upset the progress of some editions. But almost all our editors hold teaching positions, and the amount of time they can devote to their task has often been limited by other demands made upon them. And then there are what might be called « the self-generated distractions » -- the opportunities to lecture on More, the conferences on sixteenth-century literature or history, etc. -- all noble enough activities (even, one might argue, duties), but each detracting in some way from the hard task of maintaining the pace on basic editorial work. Never was this truer than now, in 1977-78, when so much of our energy must perforce go into the many celebrations of a five-hundredth birthday party. We are all guilty, however gladly and happily we rush to offer Thomas More another demi-millennium of fame and good fortune.

Some practical difficulties we have escaped. We have been well financed to date, both with funds for the operation of our central office and with strong backing, to cover publication costs, from the Yale Press. One trusts these patterns can be maintained in the future.

We have managed to establish a basic pattern for the general editing of each of our volumes. Exceptions have occasionally been made, but most of our series goes through the following sequence : 1. Editor (or editors) submits MS. for a particular volume. 2. Editorial committee reviews MS., making suggestions or changes, etc. 3. After revisions, copy editing in central office takes place. This is not so much a matter of styling (set fairly well now after eighteen years) as of reference checking and verifying of quotations. 4. Submission of MS. to press. 5. Galleys, page proofs, etc., according to printer's schedule, with each set of proofs being read at least three times, twice in the office and once by the editor of the volume. The entire process, from first submission of MS. to publication of bound volume takes, on the average, about two years.

Since the inception of our project we have often had to change our plans because of the discovery of new materials. The most striking example of this is our volume 14, the *De Tristitia Christi*, the holograph

manuscript of which came to light in 1963. In many cases we have found better texts of individual works than were hitherto known, particularly so in the case of More's correspondence.<sup>3</sup> Our final volume (15) will contain at least thirty new letters to More, and it would be presumptuous to think that no more new material will turn up in the future. We have been able, thanks to the Yale Press's policy of keeping all our volumes in print, both to correct mistakes (and we have made some) in the text itself and to append an « Addenda and Corrigenda to Previously Published Volumes » section to new volumes as they appear. This kind of self-correcting mechanism is one strong feature that can be built into all long-term editions. Perfection may never be absolutely achieved, but we can come close<sup>4</sup>

As far as editorial work itself is concerned, I should say that our greatest difficulties have arisen as we have tried to prepare an adequate commentary to More's text. In some cases it has been all too easy to extend an explicatory note into a miniature essay and we have had to be ruthless in cutting back on such wanderings by the way. At times some of this material has been accommodated in the Introduction or in a special appendix. For my own part, however, where the matter is in doubt, I prefer the fuller note wherever it can be justified. It is the reader, ultimately, who must be served and one can never gauge exactly just how much knowledge he will, a generation hence, bring to the text. Better, I feel, that he have more than he needs rather than less.

Much more troublesome is the situation which arises (very frequently with More) when one encounters a phrase like « As St. Augustine sayeth, » with no book or chapter reference provided either by More himself or by the glossator in the 1557 *English Works*. Sometimes one never finds the passage alluded to,<sup>5</sup> even after days and weeks of the most careful searching. Generally, patience and perseverance are rewarded, with much being owed to our Advisory Committee and other « outside » experts for putting us on the right trails. One learns early on that certain scholars have a nose for tracking down unruly sources and our appeals to them have been frequent and abundantly rewarding. With biblical quotations and allusions we have been immensely helped of recent years by Germain Marc'hadour's *Thomas More et la Bible* (Paris, 1969) and his accompanying *The Bible in the Works of St. Thomas More*, 5 vols. (Nieuwkoop, 1969-72), which offers an almost complete index of scriptural references in More's works.

We have hopes ourselves of producing a general index volume to

the edition after all the texts have appeared in print. Along the way to that goal we try to make the index to each volume as full as possible. It may well be that the computer will play its part in the development of the general index. The technology is certainly available for such a laborsaving task and it would be foolish not to employ it. As one looks to the future, the use of the computer in preparing a concordance to both the English and Latin works seems more and more desirable<sup>6</sup>. More produced a body of English prose that is larger than that of any other Englishman writing in the first half of the sixteenth-century;<sup>7</sup> a concordance to his works, based on an exact text, would have obvious implications for sixteenth-century philological studies.<sup>8</sup> Even the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for which More was read very thoroughly, has been occasionally caught out by citing an erroneous text in the 1557 edition.<sup>9</sup>

More's Latin style, to proceed with our glimpse of the future, opens many possibilities for new studies. Some strong beginnings have been made by R. Monsuez, Elizabeth McCutcheon, and, most importantly, Clarence Miller,<sup>10</sup> but much remains to be done in this area. More's Latin is idiosyncratic and difficult; to Erasmus, he was « a poet even in his prose, »<sup>11</sup> and he was not one to avoid poetic license where it might help him to achieve his ends. The Latin Poems themselves, scheduled to appear as volume 3, part 2, in the Yale edition, have not been studied in anything like the detail that they deserve.

In the immediate future we can expect the publication of various volumes of collected essays on More which will update and supplement earlier gatherings like *Essential Articles* and *St. Thomas More: Action and Contemplation*, ed. R.S. Sylvester (New Haven, 1972). The first of these, the proceedings of the February 1977 Fordham Conference on More, have appeared in a special issue of *Thought* (LII, 206, Sept. 1977). Some of the papers delivered at « Thomas More 500 », held in Angers in April 1977, are being published in *Moreana*, which continues, as it has since 1963, to provide a running bibliography of and commentary on More studies. Two new biographies of More, by Judith Jones and R.C. Marius, are announced for 1978-79, and John A. Guy is preparing a book on More as king's councillor. The whole matter of More's work in government has been sadly neglected in the past,<sup>12</sup> but the study of Public Record Office documents should remedy this lack and lead to a better understanding of More's career as a professional lawyer and judge.

*Utopia* continues, as it has for hundreds of years, to generate its own genre of studies. This great seminal book engages the attention of scholars of political and social science, philosophers, and historians of

thought, as well as maintaining its place in sixteenth-century literary studies. I shan't attempt a survey of the vast Utopian bibliography<sup>13</sup> here, but it may be remarked that, as our edition draws toward completion, further examinations of the way in which More's masterpiece (so often studied only for its own sake) fits into both his public and his literary careers will be undertaken.

Our editorial work on More has also suggested a number of new topics that deserve investigation. We have become much more aware of his sources and can now propose that studies of the influence of the classics, of the church fathers and of Jean Gerson upon him would be richly rewarding. There is not even as yet any « standard » treatment of the relationship (both personal and literary) between More and Erasmus, a subject on which scholars have disagreed strongly in the past.<sup>14</sup> The new developments in Erasmus studies (especially the complete editions being produced at Amsterdam and Toronto) dovetail nicely with our own progress and should open the way to revised perspectives.

When one comes to the question of More's own influence on other writers, the field, except of course for *Utopia*, is almost completely barren. It is only recently that scholars have begun to discover the large body of English Recusant prose that has come down to us and it is in this area that we can expect to see More as a model writer for his spiritual descendants. We also need further studies of More's influence on Tudor prose -- on writers like Thomas Elyot, Roger Ascham and Thomas Lupset, not to mention a re-examination of the « school » of More biographers (Roper, Harpsfield, Stapleton, and Cresacre More) so ably introduced by R. W. Chambers forty years ago.<sup>15</sup> The last general attempt to treat More's influence on the development of English drama in the sixteenth-century remains A. W. Reed's *Early Tudor Drama* (1926). New studies here will no doubt be related to further analyses of the interludes produced by the More circle, particularly those of John Rastell and John Heywood.

Much of this new work will be aided and abetted, it is our hope, by the materials provided in our edition. A stable, reliable text is the first requisite for the scholarly study of any author, that necessary basis with which interpretative criticism must be supported. And there are plenty of opportunities opening up now for new interpretations of More's works. Thematic studies are particularly needed, with much to be done on such topics as « Thomas More Polemicist, »<sup>16</sup> « More's Epistolary Technique, » « More's Use of Dialogue, » « Anecdote and Fable in More's Works, » etc. If I may judge from conversations with students

and colleagues, then I would say that the question of « Role Playing and Fictionalizing in More's Writings » is exciting the greatest amount of interest at the present time.

The future, it is clear, is full of new opportunities -- new thresholds, new anatomies. Our primary task, which every scholarly edition tries to achieve, is the preservation of the past. But that occupation, however laboriously dull it may seem at times, is not an end in itself. We edit in order that the past may live again in the present and be constantly available to readers who may wish to discover more about their cultural heritage. This is why, in any attempt at a final evaluation of our work, I would put such a strong emphasis on the pedagogical role which we play. It is now possible to teach, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, solid courses on Thomas More and his circle. Twenty years ago one rarely met More in the classroom -- except of course for *Utopia*. Student interest in More, in both his life and his works, now runs high. To have had a hand in the fostering of this interest is, to me, our greatest accomplishment. The future lies with our students, not with us; and it must be left for them to appreciate to the full G. K. Chesterton's prophecy of 1929:

Thomas More is more important at his moment than at any moment since his death, even perhaps the great moment of his dying; but he is not quite so important as he will be in about a hundred years time. He may come to be counted the greatest Englishman, or at least the greatest historical character in English history.<sup>17</sup>

Richard S. Sylvester

#### NOTES

1. It should be noted here that this decision was prompted by the Vice-President (and President-Elect) of the Society, Professor David Bevington. We owe the new format of our annual meetings to his initiative.

2. See « Editing Thomas More, » *The British Studies Monitor*, 3 (1973), 4-17 and an updated report in *Moreana* 51 (1976), 26-37.

3. Some of the new letters have been published in *Sir Thomas More: Neue Briefe*, ed. Hubertus Schulte-Hertrüggen (Münster 1966).

4. One minor problem may be mentioned here concerning the matter of reprints. General editors should make sure that necessary corrections, revisions, etc. are incorporated when a volume is reprinted. With one of our paperback's, a mistake in the first printing reappeared in the fourth -- even though it had been eradicated in the second and third!

5. In volume 8 of our edition (*The Conjugation of Tynedale's Answer*), where More's text runs to 1034 printed pages, there are five such places that have symmied our editors.

6. Possibilities also exist here for specialized indices, e.g., an index of More's classical allusions or of the many proverbs which he employs.

7. The only competitor who comes readily to mind is Thomas Elyot, and then only if his dictionary is included. A scholarly edition of Elyot's works is much to be desired.

8. Previous work on More's vocabulary, grammar and syntax has been based on the text in the 1557 *English Works*, which, for most works, is decidedly inferior to that of the early editions published during More's lifetime. See Joseph Delcourt, *Essai sur la langue de Sir Thomas More* (Paris, 1914) and F. T. Visser, *A Syntax of the English Language of Sir Thomas More A. The Verb* (Louvain, 3 vols., 1946-56).

9. For an example, see Davis P. Harding, « *Instruct*: Lexicographers' Illusion, » *Moreana* 25 (1970), 54-55.

10. See R. Monsuez, « Le Latin de Thomas More dans 'Utopia' », *Annales publiées par la Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines de Toulouse*, Nouvelle Série, Tome II, Fasc. 1 (Janvier 1966), *Caliban* 3, 35-78; Elizabeth McCutcheon, « Denying the Contrary: More's Use of Liotes in the *Utopia*, » *Moreana* 31-32 (1971), 107-21 (reprinted in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. R. S. Sylvester and G. Marc'hadour [Hamden, Conn., 1977], pp. 263-74); Clarence Miller, Commentary to the *De Tristitia Christi*, in vol. 14 of the Yale edition (New Haven, 1976), 789-999.

11. *Ciceronianus*, tr. Izora Scott, in *Controversies Over the Imitation of Cicero* (New York, 1910), p. 104.

12. The work of Margaret Hastings provides an honorable exception: see her « Sir Thomas More: Maker of English Law? » in *Essential Articles*, pp. 104-18, a study which deals with the cases that came before More as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (1525-29). More's legal background and environment have been presented by R. J. Schoeck in various articles; see particularly his « Thomas More, *Humanist and Lawyer*, » in *Essential Articles*, pp. 569-79.

13. For a listing of many of the principal studies, see the Bibliography in *Essential Articles*, pp. xvii-xiii.

14. E. E. Reynolds' *Thomas More and Erasmus* (London, 1965) predates the enormous literature born of the Erasmus Quincentennial, as well as the author's own continued research in the period.

15. For a fresh survey of this subject, see Michael A. Anderegg, « The Tradition of Early More Biography, » in *Essential Articles*, pp. 3-25.

16. Two-thirds of More's prose can be classified as polemical but the only extended study of it to date is Rainer Pineas' *Thomas More and Tudor Polemics* (Bloomington and London, 1968).

17. *Essential Articles*, p. 501.

#### A TRUE STORY *From San Francisco*

In a letter from a new amica, Norine Jane Smith, to her friend Dame Bede :

The other day I went to the chemist to buy a tooth-brush and as I had only 37c in my wallet, I asked if I might write a cheque. The clerk asked for identification and when I showed her my driver's license which has my birthdate in bold face print (one renews one's license on one's birthday, you see), the clerk exclaimed, « Rather close to your birthday isn't it ? », and feeling rather exuberant I answered « Yes, also it is the birthday of Thomas More... in fact this year is the 500th anniversary of his birth and 500th anniversary of the first book printed in England ». « Oh yes, says she, St Thomas More, I know him well, in fact my nephew is named Thomas More Fitzgerald. How lucky you are to be born on *his* birthday ! ». By this time a small crowd had gathered around the cash register, one of whom said : « I, too, know Thomas More, I'm in his parish ! » What a merry scene. I'll bet you that that day marked the first that More was the subject of a gathering in that particular chemist !

