

## STRUCTURAL PATTERNING IN WILLIAM ROPER'S *LIFE OF MORE*

Critics have long noted that William Roper's *Life of More* (written ca. 1553–57) rests upon the foundation of traditional hagiography, but the focus of critical commentary has always been upon the «Renaissance» elements discernible in the *Life*, especially the emphasis on character drawing in the presentation of More's individuality. This is the approach featured, for example, in such standard surveys as Donald A. Stauffer's *English Biography Before 1700* and Paul M. Kendall's *The Art of Biography*. While these critics are often quite perceptive in their analyses of particular features of Roper's *Life*, their very approach tends to obscure and minimize Roper's debt to medieval hagiography. Indeed, even Helen C. White, in *Tudor Books of Saints and Martyrs*, seems unsure how the *Life of More* is related to the hagiographic tradition which she explores so illuminatingly. Thus in the case of Roper's *Life of More*, one of «the first two genuine biographies written in England» according to Kendall,<sup>1</sup> we find the paradoxical situation of a work which, although widely assumed to have grown from a specific tradition and genre, has never been examined in detail from the perspective of that paradigm. This essay offers several preliminary observations on the design of Roper's *Life* and the relationship of this design to the hagiographic tradition as an aid to the larger re-assessment of the work which I think the evidence warrants. It is then conceived as a prolegomenon, focusing on the affinities between the structural patterning of Roper's *Life* and that found in the saints' lives tradition.

«The widespread myth that Roper had nothing more in mind than an informal account of somewhat random recollections of More,» or that his *Life* is only a collection of notes preliminary to Nicholas Harpsfield's full-scale biography, has been ably challenged and largely discredited by the studies of R.W. Chambers, R.S. Sylvester, and John Maguire.<sup>2</sup> While these critics argue for a consciously articulated design in the *Life*, they differ in their interpretations of both the design itself and its sources. For this reason, a brief review of the principal organizational models available to Roper should precede examination of the work itself.

The biographical design of the *Life* is curious. For example, the *Utopia* goes unnoticed altogether, and Roper appears oddly uninterested in the origins and mechanics of «the King's Great Matter»—the divorce issue which ultimately brought about More's martyrdom. As these and

similar factual omissions suggest, Roper's *Life* is not the record of fact we associate with modern biography. Indeed, the chronological progression of the narrative is a scaffolding employed only intermittently, an organizational principle suspended or discarded for pages on end when Roper chooses to discuss some aspect of his hero's character.

Regardless of whether he is tracing More's progress in Tudor politics or analyzing facets of his character, however, Roper writes an unapologetic encomium of his father-in-law, «a man of singular virtue and of a clear, unspotted conscience . . . worthy perpetual famous memory.»<sup>3</sup> To hold an audience through a panegyric is a difficult task, and for aid in organizing his praise of More, Roper might have turned to the classical method recommended anew in such popular manuals as Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetorique* (1553). In discussing epideictic strategies, Wilson recommends either the biographical method of formulary praise (using the familiar «places») or a discussion of the subject's virtues, in particular the cardinal virtues of Prudence (or Wisdom), Justice, Manhood (or Fortitude), and Temperance.<sup>4</sup> While the former scheme does not seem applicable, the latter seems to have had some influence on the shape of Roper's narrative. Thus, Roper touches on all four cardinal virtues and devotes especial attention to the greatest of the four, Prudence or Wisdom, which Wilson subdivides into Memory, Understanding, and Foresight, defined as «a gatheryng by coniectures, what shall happen, and an evident perceiuyng of thynges to come, before thei do come.»<sup>5</sup> More's prudence in the political sphere, his keen understanding of the realities of his position, regardless of outward appearances, and, of course, his prophetic powers are all frequent subjects in the *Life*. Yet Wilson's prescription does not seem to have contributed much to the final shape of the overall design, where moral, and specifically religious, virtues count for far more than the secular ones of the classical tradition.

Another possibility is the design suggested by R.S. Sylvester, who sees the *Life* organized about a central theme or virtue, More's fidelity to conscience.<sup>6</sup> As Chaucer, for example, frequently constructs the portraits of his pilgrims in the «General Prologue» to *The Canterbury Tales* about a key quality or radix trait, on a larger scale Roper has selected strength of conscience as the central emblem of More's life, and he has worked exempla and narrative climaxes about the theme. Sylvester's analysis is persuasive and valuable for its illustration of the key thematic importance of conscience as Roper saw More's life; but this design leaves out much of the *Life* which is not relevant to integrity of conscience.

If these analyses of Roper's design are not fully satisfactory, a reassessment of the hagiographic paradigm as the defining structural and

thematic determinate is in order. There is, of course, no question of Roper's familiarity with the hagiographic tradition. In his account of More's passion, when under sentence of death late in the *Life*, Roper even reconstructs two speeches in which More compares himself with the early martyrs. More forgives the Lords who pass sentence on him, recalling that:

Like as the blessed apostle Saint Paul, as we read in the Acts of the Apostles, was present and consented to the death of Saint Stephen, and kept their clothes that stoned him to death, and yet be they now both twain holy saints in heaven, and shall continue there friends forever, so I verily trust, and shall therefore right heartily pray, that though your lordships have now here in earth been judges to my condemnation, we may yet hereafter in heaven merrily all meet together, to our everlasting salvation (210).

Or again, More proposes to wear his finest apparel to his beheading; when his jailor objects that the executioner who will have his clothes is a rogue, he answers: «Nay, I assure you, were it cloth-of-gold, I would accompt it well bestowed on him, as Saint Cyprian did, who gave his executioner thirty pieces of gold» (253). In both instances, then, Roper reports More himself invoking the hagiographic model. Nor, finally, would it have seemed to Roper presumptuous or untoward to include his father-in-law in the ranks of the blessed, for, as he asserts early in the biography, «thus did it by his doings throughout the whole course of his life appear that all his travail and pains, without respect of earthly commodities either to himself or any of his, were only upon the service of God, the prince, and the realm, wholly bestowed and employed» (210). Neither More's fidelity nor his priorities were ever in doubt for Roper.

The hagiographic pattern, as found in such popular and influential collections as Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, translated into English and published in 1483 by William Caxton, or Pynson's English translation of the *Nova Legenda Angliae* in 1516, generally features an imbalanced chronological progression. If he were a martyr, the manner of the saint's death, the final proof that he died «for the faith», is the key event in the narrative and is examined in a detail which would be disproportionate in any other form of life-writing. Chronology itself is no more than a framing device, for the saint is distinguished by the possession of qualities whose essence is their spirituality rather than their mortality, their timelessness rather than their temporality. Thus chronological progression is frequently interrupted for a summary of the saint's virtues, often accompanied by particular illustrations. And, of course, the virtues

celebrated by hagiographers are not those shared with the pagans of antiquity, but the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity, which arm the martyr to accomplish his supreme sacrifice of love for Christ and the Church.

In all major respects the design of Roper's *Life* parallels that of medieval hagiography. It features the characteristic chronological focus, with approximately one-half the narrative devoted to the final months of More's life, as he moved down the path of martyrdom after his resignation of the Chancellorship. Within the first half of the biography, which moves through the resignation of the Chancellorship, four relatively distinct narrative segments are apparent. The opening segment traces More's rise to Speaker of Parliament and into the service of the king in a straight narrative accompanied by anecdotes and reconstructed speeches, but without real digressions. At this point, the chronological progression is abandoned for an illustrated catalog of More's virtues, focusing on his exemplary practice of the Christian virtues in his every day life and climaxing with his performance of what seems to Roper clearly a miracle, More's role in the recovery of his daughter from the sweating sickness. Following this, Roper returns to his chronological account, taking it up to the broaching of the king's great matter. Here, the forward movement of the narrative is again suspended for another recital, with appropriate illustrations, of More's Christian excellence, including plentiful examples of his honesty, his role as a dutiful and loving son, his various good works, complete with his polemical efforts in defence of the Church and his refusal of financial reward for them, his hair shirt, and his practice of self-flagellation. The *Life* then features a pattern of selected fact presented in a unified, chronological manner alternating with descriptive segments which present an edifying enumeration with exempla of More's heroic Christian virtues. In the second half, detailing More's path to martyrdom, the two strands of external action and internal, spiritual quality fuse to give supreme significance to his decision, which so puzzled and dismayed Dame Alice, to die for the faith.

In employing the hagiographic design in his *Life*, it seems likely that Roper had a specific purpose in mind. Although he took the oath of supremacy and did not go into exile with many of the other members of the More circle, in the *Life* Roper is ideologically consonant with the recusant tradition which stressed More's martyrdom rather than the Erasmian More of Robinson's preface to the English *Utopia* (1551).<sup>7</sup> While the death of Queen Mary precluded its publication, the *Life* was intended as one of those testimonies to More's eloquence, learning, and virtue, and in the words of Rastell's preface to his edition of More's

*English Works* (1557), his «trew doctrine of Christes catholyke fayth.»<sup>8</sup> The effort to re-assert More's orthodoxy and exemplary piety, of which Roper's *Life* was a crucial part, accompanied a push for the canonization of More, the proto-martyr of English lay recusancy, an eventuality widely anticipated by More's foes as well as his partisans.<sup>9</sup>

An early step in any canonization process is a survey of the life of the candidate.<sup>10</sup> Because of its distinctive construction, this biographical record was called *capitula generalia*. The life was usually divided into three to five periods; each period was further subdivided into a number of brief headings, each of which was officially styled a *capitulum*. These «general chapters» constituted an advocate's biography, drawn up by members of the petitioning party at the direction of a papal commission of inquiry. By the early sixteenth century, the account of the candidate's miracles, previously interwoven with the summary of his life and heroic virtues, had been detached and relegated to a separate document. The need existed, as Roper and the English recusants surely realized, to record, arrange and verify the materials necessary for the *capitula generalia* while the evidence was still current and witnesses still available.<sup>11</sup> It seems likely, then, that Roper's *Life* is a specimen of the official *capitula generalia*, intended as a spur to Rome to move forward in appointing a papal commission of inquiry, and an attempt, along with Rastell's edition of More's *English Works* and Harpsfield formal biography, to encourage More's *fama*, the evidence of his fame of sanctity and martyrdom among the English and a necessary preliminary to the appointment of the papal commission into More.

The theory that Roper's *Life* might be modeled upon the *capitula generalia* is attractive, if impossible to prove absolutely. It would explain the curious omissions, such as Roper's neglect not just of More's humanistic activities but of his writings and his miracles as well. In this latter regard, Roper, unlike More's other Renaissance biographers, Harpsfield, Stapleton, and «Ro: Ba:», cites but one miracle, More's prayer healing his moribund daughter. For all that is omitted in the *Life*, however, there is nothing left out which might be needed for the preparation of the *capitula generalia*. As noted earlier, More's life is divided into three clearly defined segments and the crucial one is the account of his martyrdom. Interspersed between the first two segments occur blazons of More's virtues, carefully delineated in discrete subdivisions; these lack only the headings which almost any reader can readily supply. In the first of these catalogs, Roper devotes a paragraph to More's meekness, with appropriate illustrations of his friendly disputation with university men. Next comes a paragraph on his wisdom and learning, followed by several anecdotes

illustrating his humility and forgiveness. There follows a paragraph on More's personal piety and another on his Christian instructions to his household. And so the exemplary sanctity of More is illustrated through individual catalogs of virtues which lack only headings or tags to announce them. Finally, if Roper's *Life* belongs to the genre of the *capitula generalia*, the function of the extreme partisanship and devotional mode is clear, as is Roper's heavy stress on his personal witness to his father-in-law's deeds and his accurate knowledge of More's character. Indeed, Roper introduces his biography almost as though he is giving a deposition:

I, William Roper, though most unworthy, his son-in-law by marriage to his eldest daughter, knowing—at this day—no one man living that of him and of his doings understood so much as myself, for that I was continually resident in his house by the space of sixteen years and more, thought it therefore my part to set forth such matters touching his life as I could at this present call to remembrance (147). [In conclusion, I re-assert the circumscribed nature of this investigation.]

Much of Roper's genius lies in his ear for dialogue and the sure dramatic sense which he displays in the anecdotes, two features that lie largely outside the scope of this study. Still less have I intended to wedge Roper's *Life* into a Procrustean frame narrowly labeled medieval hagiography. Rather I have attempted to show how strong are the roots that run beneath the apparently fresh and original surface of the *Life* back into the structural paradigm of the traditional saint's life. Nor have I attempted to assess or evaluate the relationship between the many constituents other than structural design and the tradition of medieval hagiography. This would be a useful exercise and would, I think, show that many of the supposedly idiosyncratic traits Roper ascribes to More are in fact paralleled in the *Golden Legend* and similar compilations.

In its peculiar chronological balance and its alternating the narration of events with catalogs of virtues, Roper's *Life* clearly reveals its indebtedness to the hagiographic tradition. Further, it seems to serve the function of that canonical genre, the *capitula generalia*. If this theory, which receives support from the circumstances of the biography's composition, can be accepted, it affords both an organizing principle and a criterion for the inclusion of material that explains many of the unusual features of *The Life of More* which have puzzled critics.

## NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was delivered at the Mid-Atlantic States Conference on Patristic, Mediaeval, and Renaissance Studies at Villanova University, Sept. 30–Oct. 1, 1977.

1. *The Art of Biography* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), p. 77.
2. See Chambers' *Thomas More* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), pp. 24–31, Sylvester's «Roper's *Life of More*», *Moreana*, 36 (1972), pp. 47–59, and Maguire's «William Roper's *Life of More: The Working Methods of a Tudor Biographer*», *Moreana*, 23 (1969), pp. 59–65. The quotation comes from Maguire, p. 59.
3. *Two Early Tudor Lives: The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey and The Life of Sir Thomas More*, edited by R.S. Sylvester and Davis P. Harding (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), p. 197. All citations from the *Life of More* are taken from this modernized text and page numbers of subsequent citations are incorporated into the body of the paper.
4. See *The Arte of Rhetorique* (1553), R.H. Bowers, ed. (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars, Facsimiles & Reprints, 1962), pp. 46–50.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 46.
6. This theory is developed in Sylvester's «Introduction» to his edition of *Two Early Tudor Lives*.
7. On the attitude of the English recusant exiles toward More, see H.R. Trevor-Roper's «Sir Thomas More and the English Lay Recusants» in *Historical Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), pp. 91–97 and James K. McConica's *English Humanists and Reformation Politics Under Henry VIII and Edward VI* (Oxford University Press, 1965).
8. *The Works of Sir Thomas More, wrytten in the English tonge* (London, 1557), Sig. Cii.
9. See, for example, the final section of Harpsfield's *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More* entitled «The Faith in England» and «A Happy Martyr.» Trevor-Roper writes that, after More's death in 1535, «when England had become Protestant, the recusant laity acknowledged in More their prototype and protomartyr; at every crisis in their fortunes, his works were rehandled, his biography (or hagiography) rewritten; and they confidently assumed, as even Protestants also assumed, that he would soon, 'after a hundred years expired,' be canonized.» (*art. cit.*, p. 91).
10. Information on the process of canonization in general and *capitula generalia* in particular is drawn from *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol 3 (1967) and Margaret R. Toynbee, *S. Louis of Toulouse and the Process of Canonization in the 14th Century* (Manchester University Press, 1929). See also Hippolyte Delehaye, *The Legend of the Saints, An Introduction to Hagiography*, trans. by V.M. Crawford (London, 1907).
11. This urgency in compiling relevant data as rapidly as possible is altogether understandable. To neglect this task could set back the investigation of a papal commission by years and create obstacles of various kinds. In the case of Thomas Aquinas, for example, when the papal commission began its investigation only forty-five years after his death (1319), it was impossible for any *capitula* to be drawn up.