

**THOMAS MORE IN HOSTILE HANDS :
THE ENGLISH IMAGE OF MORE
IN PROTESTANT LITERATURE OF THE RENAISSANCE**

Today, even as we acclaim Thomas More the man for all seasons and celebrate his infinite complexity and varied achievement, there is yet much we have to learn about him. Such scholars as G.R. Elton and John Guy¹ are attempting a new assessment of More's role in the politics of the period and, with the publication of the polemical works in the Yale series, attention to his role in the theological disputes of the early 16th century is increasing. Much of the problem of coming to terms with More derives from his position at the center of the theological and political maelstrom of the English Reformation. The modern student who turns to More's own time for clues to his true character rapidly finds that the many contemporary views of More engendered by his powerful personality and tragic end are all partial, stressing one facet of his career or character to conform with the position held by the critics. For example, there are the highly partisan attacks on More launched by adversaries in theological debate, Tyndale, Frith, Barnes, and others. Rainer Pineas, in several fine studies of the controversial pamphlets, examines the use of *ad hominem* attacks on More and the resultant caricature of him as a servile papal lackey.² On the other side of the theological controversy, which tinted in one degree or another all the century's portraits of More, stands the tradition of More the martyr, the heroic Catholic man of conscience putting his God above his king. This recusant tradition studied by James McConica, Michael A. Anderegg, and others,³ emphasizes the later years of More's life, smoothing out or ignoring irregularities or inconvenient data from his earlier career. Few of the works in this tradition had much of an impact in Protestant England. The 16th century biographies by Roper, Harpsfield, and Ro. Ba. written in English lay in manuscript during the Renaissance while others, such as Stapleton's *Tres Thomae*, were published abroad in Latin. To be sure, the circle of English recusants who assiduously kept More's fame alive and his example bright knew and treasured these works, as the multiple manuscripts that have come down to us witness. But the ordinary 16th century Englishman's view of More is not likely to have been influenced by the productions of the Catholic hagiographers.

As the century wore on in England, the main lines of More's contemporary reputation were shaped less by these extreme portraits --

-- since most readers of the day lacked access to the writings in the recusant tradition and the passing of time dated the polemical works of the early Reformers with their vitriolic portrayal of More -- than by the accounts of 16th century historians. Before considering the « main-line » Protestant view of More promulgated by the chroniclers, I should notice two facets of More's reputation, each narrow and one-dimensional, which live on through Elizabethan thought and literature. One is the extension into his later career of the early Protestant controversialists' image of More as papal lackey where, once in power, he is seen as a ruthless persecutor. This extreme emphasis is plucked out of the more complex portraits found in Hall, Holinshed, and Foxe ; and, in such popular sermons of the period as Thomas Drant's (published 1570), More functions as a bogeyman, a symbol of Roman savagery in an English breast. Among right-wing Elizabethan Protestants, this jaundiced and distorted view of More may be followed to the end of the century in such polemical works as *The Theatre of Gods Judgment* (1597), whose authors, T. Beard and T. Taylor, describe More as both « a sworne enemy to the gospell, and a profest persecutor. »⁴

Another over-simplified view, existing largely outside the arenas of theological controversy or historical interpretation, sees More as wit, a jesting ironist and ornament of English letters. Among the wellsprings of this essentially popular tradition are the English translation of *Utopia* in 1551 by Raphe Robynson and the return to print of More's merry jest in Rastell's publication of the *English Works* in 1557. Again, however, the chroniclers had a large hand in emphasizing this facet of More's complex character. The heaping up of humorous anecdotes and examples of More's « mocks » in Edward Hall's *Chronicle* in the editions of 1548 and 1550, for example, is certainly part of a strategic effort to discredit More as a serious and substantial figure. At any rate, as with John Skelton, various merry tales and jests came to be associated with and attributed to More who, in some quarters, seemed to resemble a cardboard jestbook character. For example, in addition to Thomas Nashe's well-known praise of witty Sir Thomas More in the 1590's, Francis Bacon's *Apophthegms Old and New* (1624) feed this flippant reading of More's character through clusters of witty anecdotes about him.⁵ It is interesting to speculate whether this popular view of More as wit and ironist may have induced the large and more favorable reevaluation of his career and historical position portrayed in the fascinating Elizabethan play *Sir Thomas More*. Since revisions were unable to meet the

critic's objections, this play, however, appears never to have been performed or printed until modern times and so had no impact on the English perception of More. Numerous instances of the English view of More as jester have been catalogued by R.W. Gibson in his bibliography of early Moreana, the compilations of Frank and Majie P. Sullivan, and Anne Prescott's gleaning of Renaissance references to More in a recent number of *Moreana*.⁶

Interpretations which derive from limited facets of More's character and career are confined by their very emphasis to definable segments of the population. The vicious persecutor of Protestants is no more verisimilar than Hall's eternal jester, who « thought nothing to be well spoken except he had ministered some mocke in the communication. »⁷ Actually, most 16th century English estimates of More were based not on manuscript recusant materials, occasional pulpit slurs, unpublished plays, or even jestbook collections, but upon the narratives of More's career set forth in the chronicles of the day. These chronicles seem to have been widely read, reaching a peak of popularity in the final decades of the century, and their accounts of the Reformation in England contained the most extensive and coherent narratives of More's doings available outside recusant circles.

The early chroniclers say little about More. Thus, John Hardyng's brief survey of the reign of Henry VIII in his *Chronicle From the First Begynnyng of Englande* (1543) avoids mention of More ; the 1559 edition of Robert Fabyan's *New Chronicles of England and France* notes without comment the deaths of More and Fisher in 1535 « for denying ye kyng to bee supreme hede of ye Churche of Englande. »⁸ Much more interesting is the 1555 edition of Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*, an expanded edition covering the period to 1537. Polydore does not dwell on More, but there is no question where his sympathies lie. As Speaker of Parliament in 1523, More is first introduced as « a man of outstanding integrity. »⁹ At the climax of his story, Polydore commends « Sir Thomas More, so greatly distinguished in his writings and his virtuous life. Together they [More and Fisher] finally preferred to abandon their lives rather than their convictions, in the belief that they would all the sooner delight eternally in heaven ; and a few others chose to act likewise. »¹⁰ Such a portrait would seem a strong counterbalance to the negative commentary of Hall and Holinshed on More, except for the odd position of Polydore's history in the 16th century. Hall, Holinshed, and Foxe all knew the work, borrowed from it -- and disparaged it as the work of a prejudiced foreigner. Denys Hay, who has

studied this anomaly, attributes the English historians' ambivalent attitude to Polydore's rejection of the myths of Brutus and King Arthur. However the case may be, Polydore's history was published at Basle in Latin ; it seems to have had no impact on the mass of English readers during the 16th century.

The case of Edward Hall's great *Chronicle of England* is quite different. Hall told More's story, in notes interpreted and expanded by Richard Grafton for the editions of 1548 and 1550, in a fashion which directly influenced all Protestant historians of the English Renaissance. Interpreting his material to suit the demands of Protestant history, Hall plays down More's role as statesman and international figure, passing lightly over his « eloquent Oracion » (p. 764) as Speaker of Parliament while noting his invariable favoritism toward the clergy in all matters. Hall's most extensive assessment of More occurs in his account of the executions of 1535. The Carthusians are branded seditious traitors out of hand. John Fisher was « of very many menne lamented, » Hall notes, for his reputation for great learning and an exemplary life. Yet his learning and perspicacity must have been a sham, Hall observes, for how grievously was he deceived by the Holy Maid of Kent and, of course, « wonderful it is that a man beyng lerned should be so blind in the scriptures of God that proueth the supreme authoritie of princes so manyfestly. » (p. 817)

Against this background, Hall arraigns More, noting that he « was also coumpted learned. » Since the superficiality of Fisher's learning presumably also indicts More, the chronicler passes on to the unsupported assertion that he was « in that tyme a great persecutor of suche as detested the supremacy of the bishop of Rome. » (p. 817) There follows his famous judgment of More, repeated by Foxe and subsequent chroniclers : « I cannot tell whether I should call him a foolish wyseman, or a wyse foolishman, for vndoubtedly he beside his learnyng, had a great witte, but it was so mingled with tauntynge and mockyng, that it seemed to them that best knew him, that he thought nothing to be wel spoken except he had ministered some mocke in the communication. » (p. 817) Hall then strings together half a dozen illustrations of More's flippancy at his execution, concluding with More's admonition to the executioner about his beard. « Thus, » Hall records, « with a mocke he ended his life. » (p. 818) In his account of More, Hall plays down More's role as statesman, adds the unsupported charge of persecution, and suggests the limits of his learning and the shallowness of his wisdom through his comments on Fisher's execution. But the cen-

tral thrust of his attack is to portray More as an unredeemably frivolous man, whose heroic death might be discounted on the grounds that a character flaw rendered him fully capable of throwing away his life for a jest in a bad cause.

In the abbreviated notice of More in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, after describing More's execution for refusing the supremacy oath, Holinshed echoes Hall in his evaluation of More : « This man was both learned and wise, but giuen much to a certaine pleasure in merye tauntes and iesting in moste of his communication, which manner he forgatte not at the verye houre of hys death. »¹¹ Thus, the legend of More as grim jester, his wit overmatched by an addiction to mockery, stretches through the Protestant historians of the century.

For the fullest account of More's career and character, we must consider another kind of historian, John Foxe the martyrologist, whose polemical history of the Protestant Church and its heroes was rivalled in popularity only by the Bible itself. Interestingly, Foxe does not simply level a broadside attack on More in the manner of most Protestant polemicists ; instead, he is the most fully aware among Protestant historians of More's genius and significance, and paradoxically, his account includes both the most ample recognition of More's achievement and the most damaging charges against him to be found in Protestant literature of the period. This anomaly derives from Foxe's division of More's career into secular and sacred spheres. He repeatedly praises More as an author, thinker, and statesman, as « a man well learned in the tongues, and also in the common law ; whose wit was fine, and full of imaginations, » certainly worthy of the Chancellorship Henry VIII bestowed upon him.¹² More's « fine wit » is commended in various places in the *Book of Martyrs*, and Foxe regrets that he is constrained to write « against sir Thomas More, albeit in degree worshipful, in place superior, in wit and learning singular, if his judgment in Christ's matters had been correspondent to the same, being otherwise a man with many worthy ornaments beautified. » (IV, 199) Here is the rub ; rather than confining himself to his natural sphere of activity, an accomplished lawyer and layman supplanting a cleric as Lord Chancellor, More insisted on meddling with religion -- on the wrong side.

Foxe best expresses his dual attitude toward More in the midst of an extended discourse challenging point by point More's account of the martyr Thomas Bilney in the preface to the *Confutation of Tyndale*. Foxe explains that he undertakes a refutation because of the great reputation of his antagonist :

Sir Thomas More, sometime lord chancellor of England, and now a great archpillar of all our English papists ; a man otherwise of a pregnant wit, full of pleasant conceits ; also for his learning above the common sort of his estate : esteemed no less industrious in his studies, than well exercised in his pen ; who, if he had kept himself in his own shop, and applied to the faculty, being a layman, whereunto he was called, and had not overreached himself to prove masteries in such matters wherein he had little skill, less experience, and which pertained not to his profession, he had deserved not only much more commendation, but also longer life. (IV, 652)

But as the theological « archpillar » of English Catholics, More must be discredited for the good of the Protestant cause. Foxe's attack begins by supplementing Hall's account of More as a jester, reminding the reader repeatedly that More was ever « too much a mocker » and had made his literary reputation by writing feigned tales of Noplace. But Foxe is no mere echo of Hall ; in fact, their emphases are quite different. Where Hall had sought to bring More's intellect and serious intent into question, Foxe undertook to question his character. More, he argues, was so blind an adherent of Catholicism that he was prepared to set aside his personal standards to prevaricate and persecute when he thought it would uphold and advance the cause of his religion. Foxe attempts to prove this character perversity through his examination first of More's writings and then of his actions relating to the religious conflict.

Foxe challenges More's accounts of several of the martyrs, such as Bilney and Richard Hunne, repeating the charges that « he dallieth out the matter, trying to jest poor simple truth out of countenance. » (IV, 198) At best, Foxe charges, More has

a knack of Sinon's art, to interlard a tale of untruth with some parcel of truth now and then among it, that some things being found true, may win credit to the rest which are utterly false ... Ah Master More ! for all your powder of experience, do ye think to cast such a mist before men's eyes, that we cannot see how you juggle with truth, and take you tardy in your own narration ? unless peradventure you will excuse yourself, 'per licentiam poeticam' after the privilege of poets and painters. (IV, 644)

In raking over these old charges, Foxe does not, like Tyndale for instance, accuse More of venality, of writing against the Protestants for money. Instead, the accusation is even more damaging. For Foxe, More used his impressive learning, his rhetorical training and skills, wilfully to

represent the Catholic cause in the most favorable light, twisting and misinterpreting evidence to further his goal. This is why More rather than a clergyman or theologian was chosen to answer the Reformers' assaults. What was needed was not a writer in command of divinity and the body of controverted matter but a slick writer, a master of legalisms, one adept at verbal trickery and a veteran at manufacturing plausible tales. Thus, Foxe describes the Bishop of London's approach to More :

desiring him, that he would show his cunning, and play the pretty man, like a Demosthenes, in expugning the doctrine of these books and opinions : who, albeit he was no great divine, yet because he saw some towardness in him by his book of Utopia, and other fine poetry of his, therefore he thought him a meet man for their purpose, to withstand the proceedings of the gospel, either of making some appearance of reason against it, or at least to outface it, and dash it out of countenance. Wherein there lacked on his part neither good will nor labour to serve the bishop's turn, so far forth as all his rhetoric could reach, filling up with fineness of wit and scoffing terms, where true knowledge and judgment of Scripture did fail (IV, 679).

This salvo represents one-half of the assault on More's character : at the request of the clergy, he prostituted his talents and integrity by making the worse cause seem the best in order to fool innocent Christian readers. The other barrel of Foxe's blast is constituted by the accusation that More was a great persecutor. Hall had thrown out the charge in passing, and, of course, it had been made earlier by More's opponents in the pamphlet controversies. Foxe, however, attempts to document it, offering names, places, and even speeches decrying More as a « sore persecutor. » His accounts are sharply etched : John Tewkesbury, tied to a tree and whipped in More's garden at Chelsea, « and also twisted in his brows with small ropes, that the blood started out of his eyes ; and yet would accuse no man » (IV, 689). James Bainham, a fellow lawyer, was also taken to Chelsea where More « whipped him at the tree in his garden, called the tree of Truth, and after sent him to the Tower to be racked ; and so he was, sir Thomas More being present himself, till in a manner he had lamed him ... » (IV, 698). The emotional, visceral impact of such stories in Protestant England may be readily imagined ; where they might make large allowances for an otherwise distinguished fellow countryman honestly gone astray, the English had no stomach for persecutors, and Foxe's charges stained More's legend for centuries.

The truth of Foxe's various charges of persecution against More and the degree to which he himself believed them lie beyond the scope of this study. More defended himself against many of these charges in his

Apology, explaining how stories like the Tewkesbury one originated and grew through idle gossip, and R.W. Chambers devotes a chapter of his 1935 biography to an examination of the charges and a persuasive defence of More.¹³ The most recent study of the matter, the chapter on « More, Politics, and Heresy » in John A. Guy's *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (1980), rules out most of the flogging and torture charges on the same grounds as Chambers's, and Guy notes the lack of substantive evidence in most cases. His cautious conclusion is that « There can be no ultimate certainty either way. »¹⁴ How many of the persecution charges Foxe himself believed is impossible to determine. He certainly wished to blacken the reputation of England's foremost Catholic champion, and the persecution charge, if true, would be his ultimate weapon. Where he can be checked against independent records, however, Foxe receives good marks for accuracy from modern students of the Tudor period.¹⁵ Thus, it is not likely he invented these tales; rather, he may have accepted too readily hearsay of such obvious utility to his purpose. For example, Foxe records in the first, 1563 edition of the *Book of Martyrs* a pathetic speech at the stake by Thomas Bilney accusing More of being the author of all his troubles. The speech is deleted in the subsequent editions and revisions of the book. Foxe seldom left material out of his great book for reasons of economy. When he deleted a story, it was usually because evidence had come to his hand proving the story not true. The remainder of his account of More Foxe allowed to stand, as it has through the hundreds of editions and abridgments of the *Book of Martyrs* from his day to ours.

In summary, the multiple perspectives on More found in 16th century Protestant England were surprisingly varied. Nor is it simple to estimate their impact upon the ordinary reader. The recusant English authors writing on More in the vernacular did not bring their work to print and so seem to have had little impact outside of Roman Catholic circles. It is even more difficult to see how the fascinating manuscript play, *Sir Thomas More*, with its strong positive portrait of More the man and politician, could have made any impact upon Englishmen. Various reductive views of More flourish during the century, especially that of the persecutor and bogeyman found in Protestant pulpit oratory and polemic and the jestbook tradition of More the merry wit. While most English readers knew of More as the author of *Utopia*, their information about his life and the lens through which they estimated its significance came from the popular historians of the 16th century, in particular Hall, Holinshed, and Foxe. Their attack on More's reputation is

two-pronged: Hall slurs More's intelligence and suggests a basic character flaw, a fatal frivolity, which discounts his career in general and his tragic end in particular; Foxe supplements Hall's attack and alters its focus from More's mind to his character.

Nonetheless, Foxe betrays a much clearer conception both of the complexity of the real Thomas More and of the significance of his life and death. Foxe was under no illusions that More's self-sacrifice might be shrugged off as the act of a congenital jester, as Hall had suggested. More was a formidable man possessed of great qualities, and his death sealed his status as hero among Catholics; Foxe reckons that « within a hundred years, » More and Fisher were likely to be canonized by their church. (V, 100) To counter More's heroic reputation, Foxe grants his intellectual attainments but argues for his willful prostitution of them at the service of the clergy. In Foxe's portrait, the secular More is a learned man, an intellectual and an ornament of English letters, until he strays into the thicket of religious controversy, where his blind partisanship corrupts his learning and diverts his literary studies from their proper channels and ultimately leads him to debase his great office. Finally, then, Foxe makes of More an object lesson of a great man, neither trivial nor light, whose gifts and accomplishments were ultimately perverted and vitiated by blind adherence to a false religion. By supplementing Hall's instances of More's jocularly and recounting incidents to support his label of More as persecutor, Foxe fleshed out an inverted hagiography, made the more plausible by its recognition of More's intellectual endowments. It thus seems just to trace the anti-More tradition in England not to the first generation of Protestant polemicists nor even to the comparatively clumsy efforts of Hall and Holinshed to besmirch More's motives and actions, but to Foxe's skillful portrait of a gifted individual, corrupted and finally ruined by a faith placed not wisely but too well. The influence of Foxe's portrait of More -- not only on subsequent Protestant historians but on the avid readers in countless Protestant households who bought out edition after edition of the popular abridged versions of Foxe's harrowing and inspirational tales of the Reformation in England -- is incalculable. *

NOTES

1. See especially Elton's essays on « Thomas More, Councillor » and « Sir Thomas More and the Opposition to Henry VIII » in *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1974), pp. 129-172 ; and Guy's *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1980).
2. Pineas' most extensive treatment of the subject is his *Thomas More and Tudor Polemics* (Bloomington, Ind. : Indiana University Press, 1968) ; his most recent is his essay « Thomas More as an Anti-Catholic Weapon in Protestant Polemics, » *Moreana*, XVIII, no. 70 (June, 1981), pp. 45-48.
3. Both McConica's « The Recusant Reputation of Thomas More » and Anderegg's « The Tradition of Early More Biography » are included in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, eds. R.S. Sylvester and G.P. Marc'hadour (Hamden, Conn. : Archon Books, 1977), pp. 136-149 and 3-25, respectively.
4. Cited in R.W. Gibson, *St. Thomas More : A Preliminary Bibliography* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1961), pp. 175-176.
5. Bacon includes six anecdotes illustrating More's merry wit in his *Apophthegms*.
6. In her article on « Renaissance References to More, » in *Moreana*, XVIII, no. 70 (June, 1981), pp. 5-24, Prescott mentions similar gleanings by Charles Clay Doyle and Franklin Williams published in earlier issues of the journal.
7. *Hall's Chronicle ... Carefully Collated with the Editions of 1548 and 1550* (London : J. Johnson, *et al*, 1809), p. 817. All subsequent citations of Hall will be to this edition with page numbers included in the text.
8. *The New Chronicles of England and France* (London : F.C. and J. Rivington, 1811), p. 700.
9. *The Anglica Historia of Polydore Vergil, A.D. 1485-1537*. Ed. and trans. by Denys Hay (London : Royal Historical Society, 1950), p. 307.
10. *Ibid.* p. 335.
11. Raphael Holinshed, *The Laste Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande, with their descriptions* (London : George Bishop, 1577), p. 1564.
12. *The Acts and Monuments of John Foxe*, eds. S.R. Cattley and George Townsend, rev. ed. (1843-49 ; reprint ed., New York : AMS Press, 1965), IV, 610. Subsequent references for this work are cited in the text.

13. See *The Apologie of Syr Thomas More, Knyght*, ed. J.B. Trapp (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1979) and Chambers, *Thomas More* (London : Jonathan Cape, 1935), pp. 274-282. Foxe's charges are also collected and assessed in Frank and Majie P. Sullivan, *Moreana : Material for the Study of Saint Thomas More* (Los Angeles : Loyola University, 1964), I, 366-368.

14. Guy, p. 166.

15. See, for example, Charles C. Butterworth, « Erasmus and Bilney and Foxe, » *BNYPL*, 57 (1953), pp. 575-579 ; J.A.F. Thompson, « John Foxe and Some Sources for Lollard History : Notes for a Critical Appraisal, » in *Studies in Church History*, ed. G.J. Cuming (1965), vol. 2, pp. 251-257 ; and « A note on the reliability of Foxe » appended to John Fines, « Heresy Trials in the Diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, 1511-12, » *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 14 (1963), pp. 160-174.

★ This essay is a revised and expanded version of a paper read at the Seventeenth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Mich., May, 1982.

TIME TRIETH TRUTH

This Morean motto, running under More's portrait, serves as a title for the first collection of essays to which the officers of the Thomas More Society of America have treated the members – 120 pages, Washington, D.C., 1981. President Thomas Wall writes in his foreword :

The authors range from a bishop who spoke about More at a Red Mass, a Federal Judge, a Congressman, several learned professors, and finally, to two undergraduate students who made their term papers available to our Society.

The bishop is James Hicky with a homily of 5 Oct. 1980. More's profession is represented by Chief Judge Howard T. Markey, speaking on « A Man for This Season » and Associate Justice Donald W. Steinmetz with « Reflexions on More's Life ». James H. Hansen's « Conscience and the Crown » is an article reprinted from *Commentar*. Least directly Morean among the professors, who are « learned » by definition, Nancy Brown, lecturing to the Society on 21 March 1981, moves from *Utopia* to *A Dialogue of Comfort*, where More turns Thomas Audley's feeble apologue of « a lion, an ass, and a wolf » into a meaning-fraught fable of « The Fox, the Ass and the Wolf ». Nancy retells it in a charming paraphrase leading to More's « speedy moral : less harm in a scrupulous conscience than in one that can be stretched », and to a plea for *via media*. The other profs are Thomas Lawler and Germain Marc'hadour, yoked together here as they are in the critical edition of *A Dialogue concerning Heresies*. The students, who have done their homework remarkably well, are Joanne F. Wall and Charles S. LiMandri.