

**THE PLAY OF SIR THOMAS MORE :
THE PROBLEM OF THE PRIMARY SOURCE.**

In an article in *Moreana* (XIV, June 1977, No. 53, pp. 57-62) entitled « The Book of *Sir Thomas More* and its Sources » Michael A. Anderegg suggests a sequence of events by which the play came into being. In essence he holds that Anthony Munday, perhaps in the course of his duties as pursuivant, came upon one of the lives of More circulating surreptitiously in manuscript during the last two decades of the sixteenth century and recognized it as suitable material for a chronicle play. Although Stapleton's *Vita Thomae Mori*, published as part of *Tres Thomae* in 1588, was available in print at any of the dates of composition conjectured for *Sir Thomas More*, Roper's and Harpsfield's lives of More existed only in manuscript. Anderegg thinks one of them -- probably Roper's -- was the principal source of the play. Citing the note in the Emmanuel College manuscript copy of Harpsfield's *Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore*, establishing the fact that such manuscripts were circulating in 1582,¹ he presents an array of evidence in support of his proposition and argues persuasively for its validity. His impression that Munday originated the idea of a play on More as a result of having come upon one of the lives may be correct, but I propose to describe another explanation which is more in accord with some bits of evidence not taken into account in his essay and which recognizes the realities of theatrical conditions of the 1580's and 90's.

Anderegg's hypothesis rests on the prevalent but by no means unanimously accepted assumption that, since the original manuscript of *The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore* is written in Munday's hand, he was therefore the author of the original version of the play, that is before it was emended and the additions were written. As a corollary he also believes, and it is also widely accepted, that the four playwrights of the additions -- now established with varying degrees of certainty as Chettle, Dekker, Heywood and Shakespeare² -- did not participate in the composition of the original. Some students of the play, however, and among them some of the most acute, do not agree with the general scholarly opinion on these points and they cite evidence that points in another

direction. There are two items of such evidence. The first is the presence in the manuscript of duplicate endings to the play, the dialog of the second somewhat more extensive than the first. In his edition of *Sir Thomas More*,³ Sir Walter Greg says indeterminately that this shows « that the draft was either written by the author himself or under his immediate supervision, but the latter is perhaps as likely as the former. »⁴ This falls short of being a satisfactory explanation for the duplication but no other has been offered. We may account for the anomaly by assuming that the original author wrote two endings but did not clearly indicate, or possibly had not determined, which he preferred. In the absence of a decision by the original playwright, it appears that the scribe charged with preparing a fair copy transcribed both. If so, then the scribe -- Munday -- is most unlikely to have been the original author. Greg's second item of evidence is

the queer word 'fashis' (l. 1847) ... It should be 'fashion', and there seems no reasonable doubt that the writer has misread an 'δ' as a final 's'. This is quite an easy mistake, for the two resemble one another closely in some hands, but it is a mistake of which it is almost impossible to suppose that an author would be guilty in copying his own work. I shall therefore assume, what has indeed I think been the general view, that the original text of the play is not autograph.⁴

Most critics who, since Greg, have addressed themselves to this question have accepted his determination. The one or two who demur have not made a successful case in refutation.⁵

At least two explanations of the puzzling state of the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* that take Greg's evidence fully into account appear possible. One would hold that Munday was merely engaged to prepare a fair copy from the author's foul papers. If so, while there is no objective evidence as to the identity of the original poet if he was not Munday, it seems probable that Greg is right when he concludes that « there is nothing to prevent one of the additional hands from being that of the original author, » that is Chettle, Dekker, Heywood or Shakespeare. The other explanation is that the original was the result of a collaboration in which Munday may or may not have been one of the participants, and upon its completion he prepared a fair copy.

For the sake of further discussion let it be assumed that Munday was, in this instance, merely the playhouse copyist and that Shakespeare (working from one or more of the biographies of More then in circulation in manuscript, or from Hall's *Chronicle*) was the sole author of

Sir Thomas More.⁶ In that event, Andereg's reliance on Shapiro's speculation, unsupported by any presentation of evidence, that « the original draft of *Sir Thomas More* was conceived, as well as written wholly by Anthony Mundy », is misplaced.⁷ Nor is it likely that, if Munday had been the prime mover in the composition of *Sir Thomas More*, he could have transcended his bias as, in Shapiro's words, « a convinced anti-Catholic agent, »⁸ so as to treat the dramatized life of More in the sympathetic way the play does. On the presumption that Munday was the author, Shapiro celebrates Munday's achievement in exhibiting « the same kind of insight and the same skill in handling source-material as we admire in Shakespeare. »⁸ If *Sir Thomas More* does in fact exhibit such Shakespearean qualities, then that is more properly interpreted as evidence for Shakespeare's authorship than Munday's. The conclusion to be drawn, according to this thesis, is that Munday's role in the composition of the play could only have been minor and perhaps merely ministerial.

If we alternatively assume that he functioned in a collaboration of poets as one of two or more playwrights, which is perhaps more reasonable, then we are almost bound to conclude that he found it either necessary or politic to suppress or at least subordinate his anti-Catholic sentiments to the exigencies of the moment. He was, after all, a professional playwright. In any event, accepting either explanation, it appears that the fruit of the efforts of any one or a combination of the possible dramatists -- the play itself -- was probably not the result of the unfettered choice and exercise of Munday's talents as a playwright. There is, in other words, no evidence either external or internal that Munday selected the life of More as the subject of the play, whether or not we favor the inference that he took part in writing it.

How then can we account for the fact that *Sir Thomas More* came to be written? In this connection it is worthy of note that, despite being on different sides of the religious issue, More and the citizens of London enjoyed a healthy mutual respect for each other. For the Mores this was a family tradition. Sir John More, Thomas's father also was esteemed by Londoners. Sir Thomas, upon his marriage to Jane Colt in 1504 or 1505, set up his household in Bucklersbury « in the very middle of London, »⁹ and lived there for almost two decades. When the time came that more space was needed he removed his family only as far as Chelsea. A Londoner by birth, More in spirit never left the city. Even after resigning his position as Under-Sheriff (1518), he acted from time to time as advocate for the affairs of London. In 1521 he was remembe-

red as « a special lover and friend in the businesses and causes of this city. »¹⁰ More's earliest employment upon being appointed to the king's Council was as judge of the Court of Poor Men's Causes. The even-handed justice which this Court dispensed was much appreciated by the average citizen of London, and More gained a reputation as a friend of the poor.¹¹ In short, even to the Protestant London of c. 1590, More was, and remained, a London hero.

There seems then to be little doubt that the idea of a play on the life of More grew out of his popularity alike with the great body of the citizens of London and with the merchants and magnates of the metropolis who as a group constituted the greater part of the players' audience. However there is no evidence of who decided to write such a play, of how the decision was taken nor even of precisely when it happened. Scholars since 1930 tend to separate into early-daters and late-daters depending on which aspect of such evidence as we have is emphasized. Respected critics are to be found in both camps. The late-daters stress affinities *Sir Thomas More* shares with Shakespeare's middle plays, notably *Henry V* and *Troilus and Cressida*. Those favoring an early date are so persuaded by the fact that the play is, first of all, a collaboration, and then one in which Shakespeare may have taken a relatively subsidiary part. It appears probable that he would only have accepted these conditions, and would only have collaborated with Henslowe's playwrights during the time of adverse economic pressures that brought about the amalgamation of Lord Strange's Men (later the Lord Chamberlain's Men) with the Lord Admiral's Men early in the 1590's, a very difficult time for the players.¹² If so then the idea of writing a play about More may have come from Henslowe, from the Admiral's Men, from Strange's, or from one or more of the five playwrights. If the suggestion came from one of the collaborators it is reasonable to suppose that it was one of the two established dramatists, Munday or Shakespeare, rather than Chettle, Dekker or Heywood who were at that time little more than novices, although all of them as well as Henslowe and the members of the two troupes of players were Londoners, either born or adoptive, and were presumably familiar with, or at least cognizant of, More's popularity in the capital. In any event a decision to write the play need not have been taken as a consequence of some such fortuitous event as the chance acquisition of a manuscript biography of More, especially since there existed, and had for decades, a London oral tradition about his career. In the opinion of R.W. Chambers, while much of the biographical content of *Sir Thomas More* can be traced to Hall's

Chronicle, there is at least one incident which the play handles differently than the *Chronicle*, and in such a manner as to correct Hall's anti-More animus.¹³ That is the incident concerning the poor woman whose legal papers were in More's possession when he was arrested. She asked for their return as he was on his way to the Tower, a request to which he responded by saying that the King had taken the matter into his own hand. Hall says More ministered a mock to the petitioner, but the play has him apologize to her, to which she responds :

Ah gentle hart, my soule for thee is sad,
farewell the best freend that the poore e'er had.¹⁴

Chambers views the play's departure from Hall as reflecting current London opinion of More.¹⁵

Anderegg recognizes More's reputation in London but holds that the reasons why the play came to be written remain a puzzle. The most likely solution is that the play came into being because the players anticipated that it would be popular with London audiences. There is ample evidence, sketched above, that the hero of *Sir Thomas More* was held in high regard by the great variety of Londoners. For motivation we need seek no further than the players' desire to please them and thus retain their patronage. Once having decided to write such a biographical chronicle, obtaining source material whether it was Hall or Roper, Stapleton, Harpsfield or Ro.Ba. would have been a relatively simple matter.

The present state of studies of the sources of *Sir Thomas More* continues, somewhat surprisingly, in disarray. In his first printed edition of the play (1844) Dyce, when he came to sources, emphasized Hall's *Chronicle*. After Richard Simpson's essay in *Notes and Queries* for July 1, 1871 announcing that he had detected Shakespeare's hand in *Sir Thomas More*, scholarly attention concentrated on the question of authorship, the identification of the various hands and, to a lesser extent, on the date of composition. This focus of interest was reinforced successively by Greg's edition of 1911 and the Pollard symposium of 1923, *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*. For nearly a century after Dyce's edition the few sporadic comments made on the play's origins tended merely to endorse this finding of Hall as the primary source. Marie Schütt published in 1933 the only substantial scholarly discussion of the sources that we have. She examines each scene of the play individually and identifies the sources of almost all. « Zusammenfassend kann man sagen, dass Halls *Chronik* und Ro. Ba.s *Biographie* als Hauptquellen anzunehmen sind, dass aber die Verfasser ein-

zelne Züge auch aus anderweitiger Tradition schöpften. »¹⁶ Most subsequent commentators continued to think of Hall as the chief source. R.W. Chambers, one of the contributors to the 1923 symposium, tells us : « The playwrights take Hall's *Chronicle* as their source, ... Hall's *Chronicle* provided the most important source of fact. »¹⁷ Harold Jenkins says that « Hall's *Chronicle* was a main source. » Some aspects of the play are derived from « the lively tradition of anecdote... but any direct relation between the biographies and the play is most unlikely. » He also cites Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*.¹⁸ These are fairly representative of scholarly opinion as expressed during the last half century, although there have been dissenting voices. Ribner's is one : « The authors seem to have gone mainly to Roper's life of More, although some use must also have been made of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*. »¹⁹ Judith Doolin Spikes tells us : « Many, perhaps most, of the virtues of the play are those of its principal source, William Roper's *Life of Sir Thomas More*. » She acknowledges that other possible sources, including Hall and Foxe, were consulted.²⁰ Anderegg (p. 57) cites Spikes and agrees with her conclusion. Such contending views make it clear that Shakespearean scholarship is in need of a definitive study of the various possible sources of *Sir Thomas More* and their interrelationships aimed at settling the disputed question as to which is the principal source of the play and which sources contribute merely subsidiary elements.

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NOTES

1. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock and R.W. Chambers, eds. *The Life and Death of Sr Thomas Moore, knight, sometyms Lord high Chancellor of England, written...by Nicholas Harpsfield, L.D.* EETS 186. London : Oxford University Press, 1932. Rpt. 1963. Pp. xiii and 294-6. The note reads : « This booke was founde by Rich : Topclyff in Mr Thomas Moares Studdye emongs other bookes at Greenstreet Mr Wayfarers howse when Mr Moaré was apprehended the xijth of Aprill 1582. »

2. A.W. Pollard, ed. *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*. Cambridge : At the University Press, 1923. Rpt. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press Library Edition, 1967. W.W. Greg. « Shakespeare's Hand Once More. » *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 November 1927, p. 871 and 1 December 1927, p. 908. Harold

Jenkins. « A Supplement to Sir Walter Greg's Edition of *Sir Thomas More*. » *Malone Society Collections*, 6 (1961) : 177-192. Rpt. in 1961 issue of Greg's 1911 edition. Anthony G. Petti. *English Literary Hands from Chaucer to Dryden*. Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1977. Pp. 87, 91, 95 and 111. Many other scholars have expressed opinions concerning the identity of the writers in the ms. See G. Harold Metz. *Four Plays Ascribed to Shakespeare : An Annotated Bibliography*. New York and London : Garland, 1982, Section III, *Sir Thomas More*, pp. 67-117.

3. W.W. Greg, ed. *The Book of Sir Thomas More*. Oxford : Oxford University Press for the Malone Society, 1911. Rpt. 1961 with a Supplement by Harold Jenkins. References are to this edition.

4. *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

5. Paul Deutschberger. « Shakespeare and *Sir Thomas Moore* », *Shakespeare Association Bulletin*, 18 (1943) : 75-91, 99-108, 156-67. MacDonald P. Jackson. « Anthony Mundy and *Sir Thomas More*, » *Notes and Queries*, 208 (1963) : 96. Richard Beebe. « 'Fashis' in *The Booke of Sir Thomas More*, » *Notes and Queries*, 216 (1971) : 452-3. For other dissenting opinions see Metz, *Four Plays*, Section III, pp. 67-117.

6. *The Shakespeare Newsletter*, 30:4 (Sept., 1980) ; 29-30 ; 31:1 (Feb., 1981) : 2 and 6.

7. I. A. Shapiro, « Shakespeare and Mundy, » *Shakespeare Survey* 14 (1961) : 25-33. The passage quoted is on p. 32.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

9. R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More*. London : Cape, 1935, p. 178. Rpt. Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1958. The succeeding discussion of More's relations with the city of London and its people rests on Chambers' biography, 1958 issue.

10. Harpsfield, *Life*, ed. cit., p. 314.

11. Chambers, *Thomas More*, pp. 174, 246.

12. Metz, *Four Plays*, p. xxii, and Section III, pp. 67-117.

13. Chambers, *Thomas More*, pp. 46-7.

14. Hall's *Chronicle*, ed. Whibley, II : 265. Greg, ed. *Sir Thomas More*, 11. 1647-8. Quoted in Chambers, *Thomas More*, p. 47.

15. Chambers, *Thomas More*, p. 47.

16. Marie Schütt, « Die Quellen des 'Book of Sir Thomas More,' » *Englische Studien* 68 (1933) : 209-26.

17. Chambers, *Thomas More*, pp. 46-7.

18. Harold Jenkins, ed. *Sir Thomas More. Complete Works*, edited by C.J. Sisson. London : Odhams, 1954, p. 1235.

19. Irving Ribner, *The English History Play in the age of Shakespeare*. Princeton University Press, 1957, pp. 212-13.

20. Judith Doolin Spikes, « *The Book of Sir Thomas More : Structure and Meaning* », *Moreana*, No. 43-44 (1974), 25-39 ; in n. 19, she says : « The authorities agree that Roper's *Life* is the principal source of the play, » but she does not list her authorities.

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In *Catholic Herald*, Patrick O'Donovan uses his « *Charterhouse Chronicle* » to present two contrasting views of More. 1) The man of God, whose « splendid prose » (in his last prayer) he quotes from extensively. 2) The persecutor, so tendentiously sketched in *History Today* that Donovan reckons Guy to be a New England Protestant « dedicated to the pleasure, in this case, of pulling down the most revered figure in English history. »

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In *Recusant History*, vol. 15, no. 2, Rod M. Fisher studies « Privy Council and Religious Conformity at the Inns of Court » (pp. 305-321). During the period he examines (1569-84), the « Roper connexion », fairly large at Lincoln's Inn, was exposed for non-conformity to a scale of penalties : fines, loss of job, expulsion from the Society. More's son-in-law William Roper, a Bencher of the Inn, was removed from the commission of the peace ; Roper's son and partner Thomas lost his office as prothonotary ; other victims of the persecution were his grandsons Philip Basset and William Dawtry and his former servant Anthony Wright, attorney of the Queen's Bench.

Dennis Flynn, in « *Sir Thomas Heywood the Parson and Donne's Catholic Background* », lays to rest the story that the priest Thomas Heywood, Donne's grand-uncle and a monk who had conformed at the Dissolution, was « executed » for his faith in 1574. The first footnote gives an impressive list of Donne's Catholic connexions : to Sir Thomas, brother of his grandfather John, add the poet's younger brother Henry, who died in prison (1593) for harbouring a priest ; also William Rastell, More's editor, and the two Jesuits Ellis and Jasper Heywood.