

Thomas More on Politics as a Profession ★

AFTER G.R. Elton's remarkable article 'Thomas More, Councillor', historians of More have been inclined to understand his entry into the Council of Henry VIII in 1517¹ as an aspect of a normal career. J.A. Guy and Richard Marius are good examples of this approach.² The achievements of these three historians have demolished the legend put forward by Erasmus and Roper that More became Henry's councillor with great reluctance and under immense pressure. Nevertheless, it does not seem to me to have been so simple a matter for an experienced humanist-lawyer who not only sought the ideal, but was well versed in kingship and the corrupting tendency of unlimited power.³ Did he simply change his moral conviction, if it changed, as J.H. Hexter has it? This would be the best answer if we could not find any other clues. Brendan Bradshaw concludes that More entered royal service willingly, though not with enthusiasm. Germain Marc'hadour draws a similar conclusion by placing the phrase 'dragged into court' in the perspective of Erasmian humanism.⁴ I agree with them on the point that they understand More entered into royal service because he thought he should. However, for this conclusion further arguments are required.

In my view one clue to the problem lies in More's favourable image of the non-hereditary statesman, the best example being John Morton, while another is found in his two letters addressed to Erasmus on 17 February 1516 and 25 October 1517. The present article is therefore an attempt to reexamine the reasons why More entered into the Council of Henry VIII in 1517.

It is in the dialogue between 'More', Peter Giles and Raphael Hythloday (the only fictional figure) in book I of *Utopia* that the author discusses what attitude a man of wisdom with a deep knowledge of human society and prudence, a man like Hythloday, should take toward actual politics.⁵

Hythloday's position is a negative one. While agreeing with Hythloday that his rational counsels are of no use to the decision-making of kings, 'More' criticises his position, and advocates 'another philosophy'

which 'knows its stage, adapts itself to the play in hand, and performs its role neatly and appropriately'⁶. This position requires a man of wisdom to make every possible effort to improve the present state of affairs, at least to make matters as little bad as possible (and, if necessary, to use flattery).

But Hythloday rebuts this 'indirect approach' :

At court there is no room for dissembling, nor may one shut one's eyes to things. One must openly approve the worst counsels and subscribe to the most ruinous decrees. He would be counted a spy and almost a traitor, who gives only faint praise to evil counsels.

Moreover, there is no chance for you to do any good because you are brought among colleagues who would easily corrupt even the best of men before being reformed themselves. By their evil companionship, either you will be seduced yourself or, keeping your own integrity and innocence, you will be made a screen for the wickedness and folly of others.

(*CW4*, p. 103).

Neither 'More' nor 'Giles' says anything further. Thus the dialogue on the king's service remains open-ended, the disputants agreeing with each other on the importance of seeking the ideal. However, the image of John Morton, the lord chancellor of Henry VII, depicted by More in *The History of King Richard III* and *Utopia* seems to me to give some indications of More's real view of this question.⁷

More depicts Morton as a man of prudence and virtue, who not only had excellent memory and speech, a full knowledge of law, and the ability to see and choose those fit for public office ; but possessed penetrating powers of observation in actual politics. This image of Morton as a statesman, which exaggerates the reality, is similar to that of the humanist More as portrayed by Erasmus, an image also somewhat overstated.

What then had suited Morton for being a statesman ? He needed to possess excellent natural qualities, and they had to be improved by learning and practice : long and various experience in the affairs of the commonwealth trained him to be a great statesman. He had a strict sense of responsibility for society, and an empirical view that the enforcement of policy requires careful measures, including experiment.

Hythloday in 1497 was able to observe of Morton that 'the king placed the greatest confidence in his advice, and the commonwealth seemed much to depend upon him when I was there' (*CW4*, pp. 59-61). Morton, in other words, managed to influence Henry VII, who was not neces-

sarily inclined to philosophy.⁸ This is a good example of a king being swayed by the advice of a man of wisdom, even though we should not take Hythloday's estimation of Morton at its face value. The example shows that it was possible for a man of wisdom to enter the king's service, but with at least two conditions : he must stand on the level of John Morton and his king must be like Henry VII.

More, however, required further qualities in his potential statesmen.⁹ They, for example, should not be those who are evil (*CW4*, p. 105 ; *CW3*, pt. II, p. 107) nor those who are ambitious to obtain any office (*CW4*, pp. 105, 193) ; but should be distinguished for virtue and learning, which should have an encyclopaedic nature.

In brief, More's ideal statesman is a sort of philosopher-statesman who is not only superior in intellect and virtue, but well versed in all branches of learning. He also has a deep understanding of human society, especially of politics, through his own experience and the ability to solve or ameliorate its problems for the public interest. And finally, he enters into public service at the invitation of those who are entitled to nominate.

This image of the statesman seems to me to accord closely with Thomas More himself.¹⁰ The then king of England even seemed to show that interest in learning which Hythloday viewed as a necessary condition for a king to take the counsel of philosophers. Henry VIII gave an impression of being a lover of learning ; by way of evidence, not a few scholars like Thomas Ruthall and Cuthbert Tunstal, both of whom were learned as well as virtuous and whom More respected, were working for Henry VIII.¹¹ Only one condition remained. That was for Henry to appoint More. Naturally, Henry and his chief minister Wolsey had reason to obtain More : his command of Latin and oratory and law, as well as his fame in London and Europe made him a suitable councillor.¹²

However, More himself wrote to Erasmus in February 1516 that he had refused the king's annuity after returning from Flanders, and that he expected to continue his refusal.¹³ If his words were true, had he come to want higher status, more wealth and power ? Or, was he hiding his real desire, held for quite some time, to become a worthwhile councillor of Henry VIII, as Marius asserts¹⁴ ? It is surely not reasonable to put such constructions on his change of mind, if we consider his personality and powers of observation in palace politics. If More had had merely secular goals, he would have entered royal service before anything else, after having been assured of the conditions of his service. There must have been some reason for such a change of position.

There were two major problems More was bound to consider in contemplating Henry VIII's invitation after his return from Flanders : (i) how to reconcile his duties to London with his allegiance to England, and (ii) his doubts of Henry's generosity. He had experienced physical, economic and mental difficulty during his 1515 embassy. Then came Henry's request for him to go to Calais in August 1517. This drove More into a final decision on the choice between the City and the Kingdom, a choice over which he had been pondering for a long time. In his letter to Erasmus of 17 February 1516, he enumerates three reasons why he did not want to serve the king as his envoy : his dislike of the embassy ; the layman's unsuitability for it on mental and economic grounds ; and thirdly, if he accepted a king's stipend, the citizens of London would harbour suspicions about his loyalty to them when any dispute over their privileges arose between them and the king. More would therefore have to resign his post as undersheriff of the City, which not without reasons he considered as proper to the 'patriotic' attitude of a Londoner in guarding the privileges of the City.¹⁵

Apparently, the economic considerations seemed to be most crucial to More. He had a tangible reason to doubt Henry's generosity : he was neither sufficiently paid for his embassy to Flanders,¹⁶ nor reimbursed for his expenses during his embassy to Calais for a long time, though Wolsey had promised to do so.¹⁷ In weighing this problem, it seems to me that two of More's letters to Erasmus have more implications than has been so far thought. The letter of 25 October 1517 reads :

...as for the litigation, at home I have a natural distaste for it even when it brings in something, and imagine how tedious it must be here when accompanied by loss. But my lord makes generous promises that the king will make it all up to me. When I get it, I will let you know.¹⁸

Does not the last sentence imply that More will let Erasmus know when he becomes 'a full-fledged councillor'¹⁹ ? Otherwise did he have to say so expressly ? In a previous letter, of 17 February 1516, More had written :

...Lastly, priests can be very easily rewarded by monarchs for their labour and expense with ecclesiastical preferment, without any expenditure on their own part ; but we cannot be dealt with so generously or so easily ; although on my return the king did award me an annuity, and one that was very much not to be despised, whether one considers the honour or the profit of it. Hitherto...I have refused it, and it looks to me as though I should maintain my refusal.²⁰

The latter part of the first sentence is suggestive. More thought royal service honourable ; he seems to imply that if he, a layman, was dealt with generously by the king -- at least at the same level as his current income, not one hundred pounds a year, which was councillor's usual salary -- he would accept an annuity. If so, the implication of the last sentence is that he intends to refuse the king's offer so long as Henry will not treat him generously. In any case, More makes it clear that he is not indifferent to money.²¹ In his seeming change of mind, there lay a matter of economy or livelihood. When he wrote to Erasmus on 17 February 1516, he may already have been prepared to serve the king if guaranteed the necessary income.

Accordingly, when Erasmus, probably on the heels of that letter of More's, heard from Ammonio that More 'haunts those smoky palace fires in my company. None bids my lord of York good morrow earlier than he',²² he must have understood More's true intention.²³

It is also worth-while to note More's phrase in the same letter : 'I had lost one-half of myself in Pace, and the other in you'.²⁴ This hints that More had two sides as a humanist : royal servant, like Richard Pace, and unbound scholar, like Erasmus or Hythloday.

Seen in this light, it is not unnatural that he prompted Henry to grant him a councillor's fee in July 1518.²⁵ In addition, is More's involvement in several jobs for the Government from 1509 (probably initiated at his father's introduction) to be regarded as evidence that he 'had steadily worked towards the goal of royal service'²⁶ ? It seems to me that he rather did what he was able to do for the Kingdom, just as he had been devoted to the City, even though his father wished his further promotion. On this point More resembles 'the saner' part of the voluntary servants in Utopia, who are 'fond of hard labor' but regard 'matrimony as preferable' (*CW4*, pp. 225-227).

To enable me to conclude the present argument, another question needs consideration. Why did More continue to be Henry VIII's councillor and eventually become his lord chancellor in 1529 ? More was probably discovered by Wolsey and worked under him until then as an able but not influential royal servant.²⁷ It was the failure to obtain a divorce for Henry that ruined Wolsey. As long as More remained in opposition to Henry's divorce, he might incur the same fate as Wolsey, if he continued to hold a councillorship ; his plight would be even worse if he accepted the chancellorship, in which, above all, he had to support his king's policies. When More was offered the great seal, he hesitated, at first he perhaps even refused it, but, after having been pressed angrily

by his king he eventually accepted,²⁸ though he was much less influential in the Government and much more conscientious than Morton and Wolsey.

Marius gives two reasons for More's acceptance of the chancellorship : first, his personal ambition and secondly, that he saw it as an advantageous position for protecting the church from its enemies.²⁹ The latter is surely right, but the former is doubtful. If More had entered into royal service through ambition, why did he need to hesitate in accepting the chancellorship, which would have been his final target ? Or, was he completely satisfied with being chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the income of which office was at best only marginally increased by promotion to a higher one in spite of its onerous and time-consuming nature³⁰ ? As his massive controversial works in defence of the church and his practical adherence to the vision they express clearly show, Chancellor More struggled for the unity of the church. For this aspiration of his the chancellorship was more advantageous than other offices : a sufficient motive for his accepting the office.

Between More's letter to Erasmus of 17 February 1516 and his embassy to Calais there happened a serious political affair which rocked the stability of London -- the Evil May-Day riots of 1517.³¹ The king intervened in the City, and London was put under his military rule. The rioters were charged with treason under his jurisdiction, and those who were convicted in drumhead courts-martial were swiftly executed. After a series of humiliations by Henry and Wolsey, London was eventually given pardon for the other rioters. This affair must have had some influence on More's decision. It illustrated the limits of London's jurisdiction and the power of the Crown. In addition, Wolsey's peace policy may have strengthened More's expectations.

In actuality, after having been granted a stipend as a councillor on 21 June 1518, backdated to Michaelmas 1517, More resigned as under-sheriff of London on 23 July.

Thus More neither entered into Henry VIII's service unwillingly nor willingly in order to make a career, but did so to try to bring his special talents to the creation of the ideal statesman urged by his sense of duty. In other words, More became a royal councillor after satisfying himself that he fulfilled the conditions necessary to be a statesman and was solicited by the king with the guarantee of a reasonable stipend, hoping that he could do something good for the commonwealth, at least

by making matters as little bad as possible. More's deeds were embodiments of his ideas : it was a question of duty not of desire.

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NOTES

★ I am grateful to Professor Sir Geoffrey Elton for his kind and helpful criticism of earlier drafts of this essay. I am re-using the title given by the editor to my essay in *Moreana* no. 93, which dealt with why More became a statesman.

1. For a short bibliography of this study, see my 'Thomas More's View of Politics as a Profession', *Moreana* XXIV, 93 (1987), pp. 29, 38-39.

2. On Marius' interpretation, see R. Marius, *Thomas More* (London, 1985), pp. 190-91.

3. See for example *Epigrams*, no. 19 'On the Coronation Day of Henry VIII', in *Latin Poems*, ed. C.H. Miller, L. Bradner, C.H. Lynch and R.P. Oliver (*CW3*, pt. II, 1984), p. 105.

4. G. Marc'hadour, 'Fuitne Thomas Morus in aulam pertractus?', in *Acta Conventus Neo-Latini Sanctandreami*, ed. I.D. McFarlane (Binghamton, 1986), pp. 441-48.

5. For an extended discussion of this, see my 'More's View', pp. 32-33.

6. *Utopia*, ed. E. Surtz and J.H. Hexter (*CW4*, 1965), p. 99. Further references to most of the Yale volumes will be given in the text.

7. I discuss this more fully in 'More's View', pp. 30-31, 34.

8. See for example More's assault on Henry VII in his Ode 'On the Coronation Day of Henry VIII', *CW3*, pt. II, pp. 101-7.

9. For a more extended discussion of this, see 'More's View', pp. 31-32.

10. For an extended discussion of this, see 'More's View', pp. 35-37.

11. For More's estimation of Ruthall, see More's dedicatory letter to Ruthall, in *Translations of Lucian*, ed. C.R. Thompson (*CW3*, pt. I, 1974), pp. 6-9.

12. See Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 192-93.
13. For an extended discussion of More's departure from the City, see 'More's View', pp. 36-38.
14. Marius, *Thomas More*, p. 190. 15. See for example Marius, *Thomas More*, p. 193. 16. *Ibid.*, pp. 190-91. 17. *Ibid.*, p. 198.
18. *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, tr. R.A.B. Mynor and D.F.S. Thomson (*Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 5, Toronto and Buffalo, 1979), no. 688, p. 158.
19. Marius, *Thomas More*, p. 198.
20. *Correspondence of Erasmus (CWE)*, vol. 3, 1976), no. 388, p. 234.
21. G.R. Elton, 'Thomas More, Councillor', in *St. Thomas More : Action and Contemplation*, ed. R.S. Sylvester (New Haven, 1972), p. 98.
22. Andrea Ammonio's letter to Erasmus of 18 February 1516, in *Correspondence of Erasmus (CWE)*, vol. 3), no. 389, p. 239.
23. J.A. Guy, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (Brighton, 1980), p. 8.
24. *Correspondence of Erasmus*, no. 388, p. 230.
25. Cf. Elton, 'More, Councillor', pp. 90-91 ; Guy, *Public Career*, p.8.
26. Guy, *Public Career*, p. 7. 27. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 32. 29. Marius, *Thomas More*, p. 364. 30. See Guy, *Public Career of More*, pp. 26-27.
31. On this affair, see Marius, *Thomas More*, pp. 193-98.

Editor's post-script.

At the author's request, I am listing here the errata and omissions in his earlier essays in *Moreana*.

(A) No. 67-68 (1980)

1. P. 32, lines 34-36 should read : e.g., the lunar calendar, religious institutions, and even contrary to the Decalogue, euthanasia, etc.
2. P. 34, note 9, line 4 : power (pp. 96-97, 164-165), fourthly, the use and social guarantee of the means for survival and living (pp. 96-97, 136-137, 148-149), and fifthly,

(B) No. 93 (1987)

1. P. 31, l. 31 should read : The Requisites of the Statesman.
2. P. 32, l. 3 : those who are evil
3. P. 33, l. 35 : second best ¹⁷.
4. P. 36, l. 16 : who were both
5. P. 37, ll. 21, 28, 35 : economic