

**Subjects or Citizens ?**  
***Populi and cives in More's Epigrammata.***

THE recent edition of Thomas More's *Latin Poems*<sup>1</sup> provides an occasion for comment on aspects of his political vocabulary. Elsewhere I have argued that More used epigrammatic verse as a political idiom,<sup>2</sup> but the *epigrammata* confirm in their language the difficulty of specifying the political status of a community which could neither be called subjects nor, in the republican sense, citizens.

If one leaves out the rival progymnasmata done with William Lyly, which traditionally precede the main collection, More's *Epigrammata* begins not with an epigram but an ode in praise of the accession of King Henry VIII. More compares the early advantages of the new reign with the rigours of Henry VII's. The theme of liberation and deliverance which suffuses the ode is typically expressed in these verses :

Ergo alios populi reges timuere, sed istum,  
 Per quem nunc nihil est quod timeatur, amant.

The Yale editors translate this « Hence it is that, while other kings have been feared by their subjects, this king is loved, since now through his action they have no cause for fear. »<sup>3</sup> The translation of *populi* as 'subjects' seems most inappropriate here. When More wishes to refer to « the people » in the classical sense as members of a political community he uses *populus*, as in *The History of King Richard III* or *Utopia*. *Populus* has a dimension of freedom and initiative denied to 'subject' : it is the people, not subjects, which passes judgement on the absurd drama of usurpation enacted before it in the *History*.

As with the ode, so too with the epigrams which follow it. *Bonum Principem Esse Patrem Non Dominum* (No. 111, p. 162) expresses a *speculum principis* commonplace in deceptively simple language :

Princeps pius nunquam carebit liberis  
 Totius est regni pater.  
 Princeps abundat ergo felicissimus,  
 Tot liberis, quot ciuibus.

In some contexts 'subjects' might be the appropriate rendering

of *ciuibus*, but here it conflicts with the associations of freedom implicit in *liberi*. It is also at variance with the translation of *cives* as 'citizens' in the next epigram *De Bono Rege Et Populo*.

The point here is not a quibble about a few items of translation, but that More's political language is not one of *subditus* or *subjectus*, but of *civis* and *populus*. These are the terms used in the *History*, *Utopia* and the *Epigrammata* to designate the political community and its relationship to government. Their ideological and rhetorical significance persisted through the Renaissance even into the eighteenth century.<sup>5</sup> « Je n'ai pas lu que le titre de *cives* ait jamais été donné au sujet d'aucun prince, » wrote Rousseau in a note to his *Contrat Social*.<sup>6</sup> In the *Discourses*, Machiavelli distinguishes between *soggetto* and *compagno*, a distinction taken over and modified for an English context by Stephen Gardiner in the 1530s.<sup>7</sup> Such distinctions are often fine and More makes the telling *bon mot* in *Utopia* that the difference between royal service -- *inservias* -- and slavery -- *servias* -- is merely a syllable.<sup>8</sup> Clearly More was sensitive to the political implications of language, but we do not have to rely on interpretations of his works for confirmation of this. In a 1516 letter to Erasmus he quite emphatically rejects the title of subjects as an appropriate designation of the political community :

Nam eo non credo moueri tales viros, quod ibi non essent multos habituri subditos ac subiectos, quomodo nunc reges populum vocant, hoc est plus quam seruos, quum tanto sit honorificentius imperare liberis...<sup>9</sup>

In the light of such clearly expressed sentiments the use of 'subjects' in translating an epigram titled *Populus Consentiens Regnum Dat Et Aufert* (121) appears out of place.

The question which now arises is the kind of conception of a political community held by More. Obviously he was not a republican but nor was he a champion of monarchy. Perhaps his political writing is best located in the development of an English civic consciousness or conception of the role of the citizen in a *vivere civile*.<sup>10</sup> Pocock argues that this development remained staunchly monarchical and did not become republican « in the acephalous sense ». Whether the community be called 'commonweal' or *res publica*, « it remains a *corpus* of which the prince is head, a hierarchy of degree in which counsel is given by every man sitting in his place ». <sup>11</sup> This seems to be precisely the situation reflected in More's epigrams and nowhere better than in *De Bono Rege Et Populo* (112) :

Totum est unus homo regnum, idque cohaeret amore.  
Rex caput est, populus caetera membra facit.  
Rex quot habet ciues (dolet ergo perdere quenquam)

Tot numerat parteis corporis ipse sui.  
Exponit populus sese pro rege putatque  
Quilibet hunc proprij corporis esse caput. (112)

Yet the development of civic consciousness in England was necessarily unsettling and not reducible to the offering of counsel from a fixed place in a hierarchy. The so-called Dialogue of Counsel in the First Book of *Utopia* is nothing if not a demonstration of the equivocal position of the counsellor at court. Republican sentiments, no matter how masked or qualified in a monarchical context, underlie a changing political consciousness in England. The trick was to hold the two in balance, as one of More's most perplexing epigrams shows. *Quis Optimus Reipub. Status* (198) asks whether a senate or a king is a better form of government. The argument of the poem is that a senate is better, but before a conclusion can be reached the enquiry is diverted to another destination. On paper a republic is more rational, but political reality offers no such choice and amelioration must be the option of a civically minded counsellor to a king.

Two points should be made then about *populus* and *cives* in More's epigrams. First, these terms imply a political community and not merely a multitude which gains its corporate being from monarchical rule. Second, the nascent civic consciousness of Tudor writers is not only to be found in discursive works like *Utopia*, but also in the vocabulary and usage even of so slight a poetic adventure as an epigram.

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1. *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 3, Part II, *Latin Poems*, eds. C.H. Miller, L. Bradner, C.A. Lynch and R.P. Oliver (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1984). Numbers of epigrams are cited in parentheses in the text.

2. « Thomas More's *Epigrammata* : political theory, in a poetic idiom », *Parergon*, New Series 3, 1985, p. 115-129.

3. *CW3/II*, pp. 106, lines 126-7, and p. 107.

4. 'Subject'/'*subditus* are not used in the *History/Historia* on my reading, and *subditus* does not occur at all in *A Concordance to the Utopia of St. Thomas More*, ed. L.J. Bolchazy et al. (Hildesheim and New York : Georg Olms, 1978).

5. For the seventeenth century especially see the forthcoming publication of Conal Condren's « Simplification of Political Vocabulary in the 17th Century », given to the seminar on British political thought, Folger Shakespeare Library, November, 1985.

6. *Du Contrat Social* (Paris : Garnier, 1962), p. 244.

7. Gardiner used the distinction from *Discourses*, III, 19 at 118 of his *Discourse on the Coming of the English and Normans to Britain*, published as *A Machiavellian Treatise*, ed. and trans. P.S. Donaldson (Cambridge, C.U.P., 1975) : see Donaldson's note, p. 164.

8. *CW6*, eds. E. Surtz and J.H. Hexter (New Haven and London : Yale University Press, 1965) p. 155.

9. *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. Allen *et al.* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1906-58) 2, ep. 481, lines 70-74.

10. See Donald Hanson, *From Kingdom to Commonwealth* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1970) and J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton and London : Princeton University Press, 1975).

11. *Op. cit.*, p. 339.

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#### Résumé français des pp. 133-136.

L'auteur conteste la traduction de *cives* et de *populi* par 'subjects' dans les poèmes de More sur le gouvernement. More lui-même, dans une lettre à Érasme, dénonce le terme de 'sujet', qui implique soumission et, en pratique, asservissement, alors que celui de 'citoyen' exprime une libre participation à la vie de la communauté. Ces précisions de vocabulaire sont importantes chez un auteur soucieux d'éveiller la conscience civique, compatible d'ailleurs avec le régime monarchique.

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