

# Humanist More<sup>1</sup>

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### I. Introduction

More became a lawyer largely because his father, John More, did his best to *steer* him that way. He sent Thomas to one of the best grammar schools in London; and then, when More was about twelve—in 1490—he managed to place him for two years as a page in the household of John Morton, who was not only archbishop of Canterbury but Henry VII’s lord chancellor (and soon to be a cardinal as well). Seemingly through Morton’s agency, More matriculated at Oxford at about fourteen (which was not an uncommonly early age at the time); after a couple of years there, he was brought back to London about 1494, and enrolled at New Inn to begin his legal education.

But of course there are lots of parents who want their children to become lawyers whose children *don’t* become lawyers—and probably right here in this room there are a few parents who have either had this fate or are *fated* to have this fate at some time in the future. And John More came pretty close to having his wish not realized, because in the years when Thomas was studying law, he was evidently tantalized by another kind of career. About twenty years after this period, More’s friend the great Dutch scholar Erasmus wrote, in a biographical account of More, that for a time “he applied his whole mind to the pursuit of piety, with vigils and fasts and similar

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Logan is the principal editor of the Cambridge *Utopia*, co-editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (5th-8th editions), and editor of the recently published *History of King Richard III* by Thomas More. He is the author of *The Meaning of More’s “Utopia”* (Princeton UP) and the Cappon Professor of English, Queen’s University, Canada.

exercises preparing himself for the priesthood.”<sup>3</sup> The young man was also extremely interested in literature, especially as conceived by the humanists of the period. In the Renaissance, it’s important to understand, “humanist” was not the opposite of “religious”—didn’t have the fixed epithet “godless.” Renaissance humanism was, in fact, intrinsically neutral with respect to religion. A humanist was someone who cultivated the academic disciplines that were the core of what became known as “the humanities”: the study of classical Latin and Greek language, rhetoric, poetry, history, and moral philosophy. More clearly had a lot of spare mental capacity, because while studying law he also continued the studies of Latin composition he had begun in school, and began studying Greek with William Grocyn, who was the first person to teach it in England.

So More was evidently contemplating, in his early adult years, a career as a priest—which would have fitted nicely with his humanistic studies. Grocyn was a cleric; and another of More’s mentors was John Colet, a priest and scholar who became dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral and, in 1509, refounded the grammar school attached to the cathedral, as the first of the English humanist grammar schools: a century later, long after it had become an Anglican cathedral and an Anglican school, John Milton attended it.

Erasmus famously claimed that it was sex that convinced More that he wasn’t cut out to be a priest: “he chose to be a god-fearing husband rather than an immoral priest.” (As if that were the *only* choice.) Be that as it may, by early 1505, when More got married, he had clearly decided to stay in the world. And so his humanistic studies would be only avocational, would be a spare-time activity of a man who, in his career in law and, increasingly, politics, unfortunately wouldn’t *have* much spare time.

In the first two decades of the new century, though, he did find time to do a fair amount of writing, and what we wrote was mostly the kinds of things that humanists wrote: numerous Latin verse epigrams; translations, from Greek into Latin, of several short prose works of the second-century A.D. ironist Lucian (who was very much a kindred spirit for both More and Erasmus); and so on. And, far above all else, in the years from about 1513 to 1518, he wrote two *great* humanist works that are also two of the best—most remarkable, most interesting, most influential—books in the British literary tradition; and it’s to these two masterpieces—*this* is what I’ve come to Dallas for—*Utopia* and the unfinished *History of King Richard the Third*—that I want to devote the rest of my time this evening. What I’ll try to show about them is not just that they *are* humanist works—that’s a slam dunk—but that the humanistic patterning they employ is fundamental to their *success*.

### II. Utopia

First *Utopia*: Writing about the fifteenth-century Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni and his imitation of a classical Greek speech (Aristides’ oration in praise of Athens) in his own *Praise of Florence*, the great historian of Italian humanism Hans Baron characterized not only the importance of Aristides to Bruni but an important aspect of humanist imitation of the classics in general: In Aristides’ panegyric, Bruni

<sup>3</sup> *Collected Works of Erasmus* 7.21.

“found...conceptual patterns which he could use to impose a rational order upon his observations of the world in which he lived...the Greek model served to introduce patterns of thought that accelerated, or even made possible, the intellectual mastery of the humanist’s own world.”<sup>4</sup>

A particularly clear example of the same process is provided by the famous passage on English society in Book 1 of *Utopia*. Looking “to impose a rational order upon his observations of the world in which he lived”—a world marked, for one thing, by gross inequalities in the distribution of wealth—, More found what he needed in Plato’s account of oligarchy in Book VIII of the *Republic*. For Plato, oligarchy means plutocracy. An oligarchy is “a society where it is wealth that counts...and in which political power is in the hands of the rich and the poor have no share in it.” More’s primary narrator Hythloday, and no doubt More himself, saw not only England but all of Europe as a series of plutocracies—as More has Hythloday say in that famous sentence almost at the end of *Utopia*, “when I consider...the various commonwealths flourishing today, so help me God, I can see in them nothing but a conspiracy of the rich, who are advancing their own interests under the name and title of the commonwealth.”<sup>5</sup>

For Plato, the “worst defect,” as he says, of oligarchy is that it generates *functionless* people. These are the idle rich, and those *formerly* of the idle rich who have managed to lose their money. Rich or formerly rich, a member of this group doesn’t “perform any...useful social function”—businessman, craftsman, soldier are the functions he’s previously enumerated—“simply by spending his money....Though he...[may appear] to belong to the ruling class, surely in fact he...[is] neither ruling, nor serving society in any other way; he...[is] merely a consumer of goods.” Nowadays it would be argued that just by consuming goods he serves society, because it generates employment. But Plato either didn’t think of that argument, or he didn’t buy it. “Don’t you think,” he says of this mere consumer, “we can fairly call him a drone? He grows up in his own home to be a plague to the community, just as a drone grows in its cell to be a plague to the hive.”

In More’s society the idle rich generally *stay* rich; and it is *this* class—the landed nobility of England—to whom he has Hythloday apply the metaphor of the drone (in this way clearly signaling the debt of his passage to Plato’s): “There are a great many noblemen who live idly like drones off the labour of others, their tenants whom they bleed white by constantly raising their rents.”<sup>6</sup> (*That* formulation doesn’t seem to leave much room for the claim that their consumption *itself* makes them of net benefit to society.) What’s more, Hythloday adds, these idle consumers are the cause of the existence of two *other* groups of functionless people: first, “they drag around with them a great train of idle servants”—servants, that is, whose benefit to their masters is only in the status afforded by their very super-abundance. When these people, “who have never learned any trade by which they could make a living,” are no longer sufficiently ornamental—because of sickness or advancing age—, or when their master dies, they are cast off. Second, the idle rich turn agricultural tenants into functionless beggars when they evict them to convert formerly

cultivated land into sheep pastures, in the process creating mass pauperization and the obliteration of many farmsteads and villages.

Hythloday’s analysis began as a critique of English criminal justice, a response to a fatuous and self-important lawyer at Cardinal Morton’s table—where More, as a page, had *waited* on table—a lawyer who is bemused by the fact that, though so many people are hanged for theft, the number of thieves does not appear to diminish. How did Hythloday get from *that* topic to the idle rich and their cast-off retainers and evicted tenants? He got there because More had imbibed the *fundamental* premise of Greek political philosophy, that society is a web, a system of interlocking, reciprocally affecting parts. What is wrong with English criminal justice is that it attacks the symptom, not the cause. The principal cause of theft is found in poverty, in the creation of functionless people at the low end of the social scale: the unemployed and often homeless who, in the absence of a social “safety net,” have no choice but to beg or to steal. (Plato had said the same.) Accordingly, the solution to the problem of theft is not to hang still more thieves, but to reduce poverty and unemployment by making systemic changes in the social structure: remedies can’t be directed just against the vagabonds and criminals; some of them have to be directed against the *conditions* that lead the criminals to commit the crimes: “Banish these blights,” Hythloday says, “make those who have ruined farmhouses and villages restore them or hand them over to someone who *will* restore and rebuild. Restrict the right of the rich to buy up anything and everything, and then to exercise a kind of monopoly”; and so on.

This episode of *Utopia* has been celebrated not only for its impassioned humanity but for the sophistication of its social analysis, which sets it apart from almost all the other social commentary of More’s time. More’s treatment of social problems is characterized, as the late J.H. Hexter wrote, “by his capacity to see past the symptoms to the sources of trouble.”<sup>7</sup> He sees “in depth, in perspective, and in mutual relation problems which his contemporaries saw in the flat and as a disjointed series.”<sup>8</sup> His analysis embodies the awareness that “in politics, general principles usually operate through specific institutional structures, when they operate at all,” and his recommendations for reform normally take the form of suggestions for institutional changes.<sup>9</sup>

What we have in *Utopia*, in fact, is (among other things) one of the great landmarks in the development of modern social theory. As another scholar, R.P. Adams, put it, in these speeches of Hythloday at Cardinal Morton’s table, “a historic cape of the mind was turned, one which divides the medieval from the modern world.”<sup>10</sup>

I want to make two points about this fact.

The first, made ruefully in passing, is that in my lifetime many people have reversed course and sailed back *around* that cape of the mind, in the opposite direction. When I began teaching *Utopia* I could count on more or less all of my students, and, in general, more or less all educated people, *agreeing* with Hythloday’s—More’s—analysis (and in this part of *Utopia*, I don’t think there’s any

<sup>4</sup> Hans Baron, *From Petrarch to Leonardo Bruni* (University of Chicago Press, 1968), 158-59.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia*, ed. George M. Logan and Robert M. Adams (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 105.

<sup>6</sup> *Utopia*, 16.

<sup>7</sup> J. H. Hexter, *More’s “Utopia”: The Biography of an Idea* (Princeton University Press, 1952), 64.

<sup>8</sup> *Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, 4:ci.

<sup>9</sup> J. H. Hexter, *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> Robert P. Adams, *The Better Part of Valor* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1962), 125.

question that Hythloday is speaking for More—very *different* question for Book 2), and enjoying the recognition of *Utopia* as a precursor of modern social thought. Now I can still count on my students, but many other Canadians and Americans, including many of those in political power, and their “base,” embrace a position not like Hythloday’s but like that of the fatuous lawyer he is arguing with. They seem to think, like More’s lawyer, that the cause of theft is simply thieves; so the solution to theft is hanging more thieves—or, in the modern kinder, gentler version, jailing more of them, for longer periods. But I gather that’s not working too well, any more than it did in More’s time. There’s something odd here, really: Thomas More was not *Michael* Moore, not some “frothing, atheistic leftist.” He believed just as much in Original Sin as modern Christian conservatives do: but somehow the saint came to far different conclusions from many of them about society and how to ameliorate its problems. I’m not being smart-alecky: I think that it is an interesting thing to reflect on.

Second, though—my main point—, More’s triumph in this passage stems not just from his own deep intelligence and his experience in law and politics—not that these things weren’t required—but comes in large part from his classical humanism—in particular, from his having assimilated the lessons of Greek political theory.

The same, of course, is true of his account of the island republic of Utopia, which depends *fundamentally* on Greek political theory. In Book 2 of *Utopia*, More, like Plato in the *Republic* and the *Laws*, and like Aristotle in Books VII and VIII of the *Politics*, gives us a full-scale example of one of the applications of the systemic approach to social analysis: an account of a completely reordered society, built—with enormous debts to his Greek predecessors—by applying rational analysis to the design of a self-sufficient society—with no functionless parts, no layabouts. In this case, though, More’s greatest triumphs become apparent when we consider the *differences* between his work and its classical precedents.

More’s account of an alternative society differs from its classical models in two fundamental ways. The first of these is that *Utopia* offers not merely *arguments* about a reordered polity (though there are plenty of arguments, too) but an *example* of a reordered polity, a description of it as an *existing* commonwealth—that is, Book 2 of *Utopia* isn’t just dialectics, but a sort of fictional travelogue. The significance of this difference is evident in the flood of utopian fictions that have followed over the subsequent centuries: More’s little book gave rise to a major new literary genre.

The second major way in which Book 2 of *Utopia* differs from the accounts of ideal commonwealths in Plato and Aristotle is that Utopia is clearly not in every respect its author’s ideal commonwealth. More distances himself from Utopia—by giving the account of it to Hythloday, by the mocking Greek names he assigns to the island itself, its officers, and its advocate Hythloday, and also by expressing reservations about the Utopian commonwealth both before and after Hythloday’s account of it—; and there are also indications in the account of Utopia itself (and, implicitly, in aspects of the relation between Book 1 and Book 2) that More does not approve of certain Utopian practices. Does he, for example, mean to endorse the regimentation—the nearly total control—of Utopian life? Does he mean to endorse all aspects of Utopia’s foreign and military policy—most of which seems so rational and decent but some aspects of which surely trouble almost every reader?

The most obvious way in which Utopia is not More’s ideal commonwealth, though, is that it is not Christian. Utopia is built on what More took to be purely rational principles: principles that could be derived from reason alone, without benefit of the Christian revelation. What this means is that More was playing Plato’s and Aristotle’s own game, not only with their *method* but also with their *premises*. Evidently he chose to do this because he wanted to make points about the degree of harmony between a purely rational polity and a truly Christian one. On the evidence of Utopia, the degree of harmony is great, but it is not complete. But even playing Plato’s and Aristotle’s own game, More gets results that are different from theirs, especially in two important respects. First, he concludes—in the long section on Utopian moral philosophy—that purely rational analysis leads to the conclusion that individual happiness depends on abiding, in effect, by the Golden Rule; and that, accordingly, the best rational commonwealth will be highly egalitarian: a conclusion quite different from that of Greek political theory. Second, he concludes that even in the best possible commonwealth some desirable things would have to be forfeited, or at last restricted, in order to obtain other, more vital ones. More came to this conclusion, it seems to me (and I have written about this several times, so I’ll be brief), because he had carried systemic theory an important step *beyond* Plato and Aristotle. Plato and Aristotle appear to assume that a commonwealth can have, at least in theory, all of everything it truly needs. All the theorist has to do is figure out what those needs *are*. But More realizes that, since resources are always limited, there will always be conflicts between the realization even of *valid* goals, and thus always have to be trade-offs among them—resulting in less of some kinds of goods, material and mental, than one would ideally like. Thus it is impossible to create a perfect commonwealth even in theory, let alone in practice. It seems to me that this is the explanation for at least many of the unideal features of Utopia. There are, for example, trade-offs between the goal of freedom and that of order. The heavy regimentation of Utopian life presumably reflects not a view that regimentation is a good thing in its own right, but a belief that without it, human society cannot—human nature being what it has been since the Fall—human society cannot be stable, cannot avoid the destructive effects of Pride and the other deadly sins. “It is impossible to make everything good,” More says to Hythloday toward the end of Book 1, “unless all men are good, and that I don’t expect to see for quite a few years yet.” [p. 35] Still counting.

### III. The History of King Richard the Third

But let me turn for the rest of this talk to More’s other great humanist book, *The History of King Richard the Third*—a book in which no one, except two prepubescent children, is portrayed as being altogether good.

In *Utopia*, More based himself in a standard classical genre—the philosophical investigation of the ideal commonwealth—but departed from his classical exemplars in two radical ways. In the *History*, though, he was content to work within the unmodified confines of a classical genre: the genre is rhetorical history, and More’s *History* is one of its summits.

For the humanists, rhetoric—the art or craft of verbal persuasion—was the central discipline; and the key fact about both classical and humanist historiography is that their practitioners regarded history as a *branch* of rhetoric. Moreover, as

Cicero—the great orator and theorist of rhetoric—explains, history belongs to *demonstrative* rhetoric—the rhetoric of praise or blame—, traditionally the branch most concerned with virtuoso stylistic display. As Cicero says, demonstrative rhetoric comprises “eulogies, descriptions, histories, and exhortations,” and, in general, works that are produced as “showpieces,” primarily “for the pleasure they will give.”<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, Cicero insists that “history’s first law...[is] that an author must not dare to tell anything but the truth...And its second that he must make bold to tell the *whole* truth.”<sup>12</sup>

There is an obvious, ultimately unbridgeable tension between these two main points in this theory of history-writing; and modern readers are likely to feel that classical and humanist rhetorical histories—and this category includes almost all the great classical histories—are in some ways closer to the historical novel than to the modern historical monograph. For one thing, these histories are full of rhetorical set pieces—especially orations and accounts of battles—that often have only tenuous connection with known historical facts. More hadn’t reached any battles before his unfinished *History* broke off, but he was a particularly enthusiastic and adept practitioner of the fictional oration: speeches—most of them with small basis in the historical record (such as it was)—constitute about forty percent of the *History* (and over fifty percent, according to Daniel Kinney, of the Latin version). The next stop on this generic road was the Elizabethan history play, and especially Shakespeare’s plays on classical and English history.

More had access to much information about Richard’s usurpation: this was a recent event, which had happened in his hometown, London. He knew many people with first-hand knowledge of the events of 1483, and he doubtless also *read* about the events, perhaps in public documents to which he would have had access as a lawyer and a judge, and surely in various chronicle histories: his sixteenth-century biographer Thomas Stapleton reports that More “studied with avidity all the historical works he could find.”<sup>13</sup>

So More was, as with the observations of contemporary England that underlie Book 1 of *Utopia*, again in the position in which Hans Baron found Leonardo Bruni: looking for “conceptual patterns which he could use to impose a rational order upon the world in which he lived.” The problem he particularly needed to solve this time was that of how Richard of Gloucester had gone from being the greatest English hero of his generation to being by far its greatest villain.

Richard was the youngest of the three sons of Richard duke of York, and, before the spring and summer of 1483, was easily the most admired of the three. His eldest brother, Edward IV, was tall, good-looking, and an inveterate womanizer who, for all his experience with women, made a marriage universally regarded as disastrous. The bride, Elizabeth Woodville, far beneath him in rank, was a widow in her twenties with two children from her first marriage and a large family who, like her, proved to be extremely greedy and unscrupulous. Partly because of the heavy

financial demands these in-laws placed on him in terms of desirable marriages and estates, Edward became ingeniously and unpopularly rapacious in devising means of transferring his citizens’ wealth to his own coffers. The middle brother, George, was—not to put too fine a point on it—a vain fool, who longed for the throne himself and certainly engaged in treasonous activities on more than one occasion before Edward finally had him tried for treason and executed. Despite later rumors, Richard was, by contrast with George, unwaveringly loyal to Edward, and was a sterling military leader, who first distinguished himself at the battle of Tewkesbury, where at the age of eighteen he is reported to have led the vanguard of the royal army. He was widely respected. If he had a physical deformity, by the way, it was minor—though he was slight.

Then came Edward’s death on April 9, 1483, startlingly premature, three weeks before his forty-first birthday. The Prince of Wales—Edward V, thirteen years old—was *in* Wales, in the keeping of the queen’s relatives and allies. *Richard’s* allies, though, especially Lord Hastings, persuaded the queen and the royal council not to have the prince escorted to London by the large force originally intended; which gave Richard and his key supporter the duke of Buckingham, under pretence of joining the prince’s escort some distance from London, the opportunity to seize control of him and to imprison those of the queen’s party with whom he had been surrounded. Hearing this news, the queen prudently took her younger son by Edward, and her daughters, and entered sanctuary at Westminster Abbey. At Richard’s behest, Cardinal Bourchier, ominously backed by armed forces, persuaded the queen to surrender the younger prince voluntarily (because of course just having one prince was no good: you had to have them both: as long as you only had one, you weren’t in a position to effect a *coup d’état*). As soon as the younger prince was surrendered, Richard promptly had both boys installed in the Tower of London, from which they never emerged. At a meeting of July 13th, to plan the young king’s coronation, Richard enacted what was by this stage clearly the next phase of a *coup d’état*, arresting his *now-former* ally Lord Hastings and having him summarily executed and imprisoning still more of those whom he did not trust to support him. On June 26, he took the throne, and on July 6 had his formal coronation. The little princes were almost certainly murdered. It is hard to believe that anyone would have murdered them without Richard’s command; and dynastic murders of this kind had been the rule in analogous situations.

Nobody knows at what point Richard decided to attempt to seize the throne. Possibly he had had the idea in mind for a long time. What seems more likely, though, is that the idea gradually grew on him, was even in a sense forced on him, in the weeks following his brother’s death. He was surely in grave danger from the queen and her allies, who were his enemies and who at first held all the cards—including, most important, of course, the Prince of Wales—but he was able to outmanoeuvre them by taking control of the young prince; at some point, retreat must have come to seem impossible; and, quite apart from that fact, the possibility of being king of England doubtless had its own attractions.

More, however, did not interpret the events of 1483 in such terms. Instead, he interpreted them in terms of the classical Greek and Roman conception of the tyrant.

It was almost inevitable that he would do so. First of all, Richard *was*, by definition, a tyrant, because in this period the word “tyrant” encompassed not only

<sup>11</sup> *Orator* 11.37. Except where otherwise indicated, all references to (and translations of) classical works are to the editions of the Loeb Classical Library.

<sup>12</sup> *De orator* 2.15.62 (my emphasis).

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, trans. Philip E. Hallett, ed. E. E. Reynolds (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), 14.

“despot” but also “usurper”; that is, a usurper’s illegal seizure of the throne qualified him as a tyrant, whatever the nature of his subsequent rule. Second, everybody *else* regarded Richard as a tyrant in both senses of the word—a view encouraged by the general repugnance at what he was assumed to have done to his nephews and also because, as it turned out within two years, Richard was one of history’s losers rather than one of its winners, and thus was not one of those who commissioned history’s judgments of individuals. And finally, More was steeped in the classics, and had a special affinity for two Roman historians who famously treated tyrants.

Greek literature provides a set of defining characteristics of the tyrant and also a set of stereotypes about the tyrant’s behavior and his state of mind. In contrast to the good king, the Greek sources say, the tyrant rules only for himself, not for the people; he hates his subjects and is generally hated by them; he rules in contempt of the law; his actions are usually cruel, intended to keep the people in thrall by breaking their spirit—though sometimes, as Aristotle points out, the tyrant will “act, or at any rate appear to act,” the role of a good king.<sup>14</sup> But for all his power and cunning, the tyrant’s lot is, according to the classical theory, not a happy one: one of the most common of the stereotypes in the classical literature of the tyrant is that, trusting no one, he lives constantly in fear and anxiety—something close to madness.

These stereotypes were regularly incorporated into historical portrayals of individual rulers regarded as tyrants. Two of the most famous of such portrayals are in works by the first-century B.C. Roman historian Sallust: *Catiline* and *Jugurtha*.

The fact that More interpreted Richard at least partly in terms of the stereotypes of the classical tyrant is made unambiguously clear by the interrelations among two passages in Sallust—whose works More knew intimately—and one in the *History*.

Sallust was born only two decades later than the tyrant-wannabee Catiline—whose attempt to seize control of the Roman Republic was also treated in four famous orations by Cicero—so Sallust had (like More with Richard) much genuine information about his subject. This fact did not, however, keep him from applying stereotypes to his portrayal. Here is Catiline suffering the tyrant’s stereotyped unhappiness: Having murdered his stepson, Catiline was left, Sallust says, with a “guilt-stained soul”: he “could find rest neither waking nor sleeping, so cruelly did conscience ravage his overwrought mind. Hence his pallid complexion, his bloodshot eyes, his gait now fast, now slow; in short, his face and his every glance showed the madman.”<sup>15</sup> The stereotyped nature of this passage is underscored by the fact that Sallust wrote in closely similar terms about his *other* tyrant-protagonist, the Numidian usurper Jugurtha. Fearing a rebellion after he had put to death a large number of his enemies, Jugurtha “from that time forward . . . never passed a quiet day or night; he put little trust in any place, person, or time; feared his countrymen and the enemy alike; was always on the watch; started at every sound; and spent his nights in different places, many of which were ill suited to the dignity of a king. Sometimes on being roused from sleep he would utter outcries and seize his arms; he was hounded by a fear that was all but madness.”<sup>16</sup> In turn, More transplanted the same stereotypes to Richard, who, he says, after the murder of the little princes,

“never had quiet in his mind, . . . never thought himself sure. Where he went abroad, his eyes whirled about, his body privily fenced [that is, secretly protected by a coat of mail], his hand [was] ever on his dagger, his countenance and manner like one alway ready to strike again. He took ill rest a-nights, lay long waking and musing, sore wearied with care and watch, rather slumbered than slept, troubled with fearful dreams, suddenly sometimes start up, leap out of his bed, and run about the chamber: so was his restless heart continually tossed and tumbled with the tedious impression and stormy remembrance of his abominable deed.”<sup>17</sup>

More’s borrowing here may be alarming to us—borrowing stereotyped speculations on a character’s state of mind is not, it seems to us, the way to write history—, but if challenged on the matter More would presumably respond that observation and common sense show us that there *is* a tyrannical type—people who do the same kind of (awful) things are the same kind of (awful) people—, and it is therefore legitimate to fill in missing facts about *one* tyrant with corresponding facts (or even suppositions) about *other* tyrants—sort of like patching in a missing piece of DNA from the DNA of another member of the same species. And though we probably wouldn’t entirely buy this argument, still, who would deny that there are striking similarities of character and action among tyrants in different times and places?

Aristotle’s remark about the tyrant acting the part of a good king suggests that one characteristic of the tyrant, in this classical conception of the tyrant—or of *some* tyrants, at least—is dissimulation: something else that we know to be true, not just of some despots but of many, many regular politicians. And it was *this* trait of the classical tyrant that More chose—doubtless encouraged in his choice by many other people’s judgment of Richard—as the way to account for the difference between Richard up to the spring of 1483 and Richard after that time. Dissimulation, More decided, was Richard’s ruling trait, as he indicates first in the character sketch of Richard early in the *History*: “He was close and secret, a deep dissimuler: lowly of countenance, arrogant of heart; outwardly compan[ion]able where he inwardly hated, not letting [—that is, not hesitating—] to kiss whom he thought to kill.”<sup>18</sup> There had been, that is, *no* transformation from hero to villain in the spring and summer of 1483: Richard was *always* a dissimulator: what he had been dissimulating—totally unscrupulous ambition—was finally *revealed* when circumstances were finally right.

Among the factors predisposing More to take this view was probably the fact that the most notorious tyrants in his favorite Roman historians were also dissimulators. Sallust portrays Jugurtha as one, and, far more important to More, the Emperor Tiberius is portrayed as a chronic dissimulator in Suetonius’s *Lives of the Caesars* and, above all, in the *Annals* of Tacitus—the single classical writer with whom More had the deepest affinity. And indeed Tacitus’s Tiberius is the definitive study of the dissimulating tyrant.

Was More *right* to apply this model to Richard? In some respects, doubtless yes; in one respect, probably no. Certainly Richard was a deep and very successful dissimulator in the period from April 9 to June 13 in 1483. But was he a dissimulator

<sup>14</sup> *Politics* 5.11.19, Ernest Baker’s edition (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1948).

<sup>15</sup> Sallust, *The War with Catiline*, 15.4-5.

<sup>16</sup> Sallust, *The War with Jugurtha*, 72.2.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas More, *The History of King Richard the Third*, ed. George M. Logan (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 102.

<sup>18</sup> *Richard the Third*, 10-12.

before that? I haven't seen, in early or modern accounts of him, convincing evidence that he was. Happily, about all More's book deals with is that later period: it's not a biography of Richard but a monograph on the usurpation, limited, apart from a few flashbacks, to the period from April to August. Even in More's treatment of *that* period, though, there's no doubt that there's some guesswork and some deliberate exaggeration, especially of the kind that can turn historical event into satire. Not that More was trying to fool anybody. What he did was within the conventions of the genre he was working in—conventions that he would assume his readers knew; and were we able to ask him about the matter, I think he would say that his fundamental object was, like his predecessors in this genre, to portray the species, not an individual; and that his portrayal of Richard is accurate about the species, but also essentially accurate about Richard. Moreover, I think most readers, having examined the matter, would *agree* on both counts; certainly *I* do, having spent a good deal of time reading various sources about Richard, and living intimately with More's *History* for several years. We've all seen enough self-serving, unscrupulous, even deadly politicians, and read about enough usurpers and tyrants, to know that More has got the *type* right: I guarantee that you'll read the *History* (if you do read it) with the constant wry pleasure of recognizing just *how* right he got it: the outrageousness of the deceptions, the hypocritical religiosity (we think of medieval historiography as Providential historiography: but Providence appears in More's *History* almost exclusively in hypocritical citations of it by Richard and his supporters), the willingness to do absolutely anything to obtain and maintain power. And you'll know enough (thanks to footnotes) about what Richard actually did in 1483 to recognize that, even if the portrayal of him is inaccurate in details, he doesn't, in More's book, really get much worse, if *any* worse, than he deserved.

Be that as it may, in the course of writing about Richard, More took what was already the standard view of him and embedded it so powerfully in the classical literature of the tyrant that it has remained the standard view of him from that day to this. This has been especially the case, of course, because Shakespeare—who read More's *History* in Holinshed's and Hall's chronicles—took from More this interpretation of Richard, as well as a number of particular scenes of the *History*, and made Richard even *more* outrageous: made him a *mocking* dissimulator, by transferring the sardonic wit of More's narrator to Richard himself (who is not, in More's book, at all a witty person).

I wish I had time to read the whole thing to you, or even a full-scale example, but I don't, obviously. I'll do the next best thing, which is to refer you to one of the scenes that Shakespeare adapted from More, and which therefore most or all of you will already know. This scene also has a model in Tacitus (it's reproduced in the appendix to my edition). With this precedent in Tacitus, More developed, and Shakespeare followed him in, a scene where Richard and Buckingham stage a little play themselves. In it, Buckingham proffers the crown to Richard, aloft on the balcony, with a prayer book in his hand and flanked by two clergymen—More supplied the balcony, and Richard's feigned fear of the crowd, and Shakespeare added the prayer book and the clergymen.<sup>19</sup> The duke of Buckingham really did come to Richard's London residence, accompanied by a crowd, on July 25<sup>th</sup> or 26<sup>th</sup>, to proffer the crown to Richard. Whether Richard at first pretended to *decline* the

crown, we don't know. But he certainly does in More and then in Shakespeare, citing his loyalty to his brother's children, his own utter lack of ambition, and his concern for his good reputation. This is the way More puts it: "When the protector had heard the [duke's] proposition, he looked very strangely thereat, and answered that...such entire love he bare unto King Edward and his children, that [he] so much more regarded his honor in other realms about than the crown of any one, of which he was never desirous, that he could not find in his heart in this point to incline to their desire. For in all other nations, where the truth were not well known, it should peradventure be thought that it were his own ambitious mind and device to depose the prince and take himself the crown. With which infamy he would not have his honor stained for any crown..."<sup>20</sup> It is only when Buckingham tells him that the realm is determined that Edward IV's issue shall not reign over them that Richard very sorrowfully and reluctantly agrees to accept the crown.

But then More goes on (and Shakespeare didn't follow him in this) to add a wonderful coda, a passage that employs one of his favorite metaphors—of human life as a stage play—and that is indebted to similar passages in More's and Erasmus's old favorite Lucian and in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly* (both these passages are also in my appendix). More's variation treats the question of why politicians feel obliged—as they evidently still do—to enact these charades:

"But much...[the people] talked and marveled of the manner of this dealing, that the matter was on both parts made so strange, as though neither had ever communed with other thereof before; when that themselves well wist [i.e., Richard and Buckingham well knew] there was no man so dull that heard them but he perceived well enough that all the matter was made between them [i.e., worked out in advance]. Howbeit, some excused that again, and said all must be done in good order, though. And men must sometimes for the manner sake not be known what they know...And in a stage play all the people know right well that he that playeth the...[sultan] is...[perchance] a...[shoemaker]. Yet if one should can so little good [i.e., know so little what is good for him] to show out of season what acquaintance he hath with him, and call him by his own name while he standeth in his majesty, one of...[the sultan's bodyguards] might hap to break his head, and worthy, for marring of the play. And so they said that these matters be kings' games, as it were stage plays, and for the more part played upon scaffolds ["scaffolds" in the period can denote either stages for plays or stages for executions]. In which poor men be but the lookers-on. And they that wise be, will meddle no farther. For they that sometimes step up and play with them, when they cannot play their parts, they disorder the play, and do themselves no good" (94-95).

More never finished the *History*. Despite the sobering insights about royal councils that he puts into Hythloday's mouth in Book 1 of *Utopia*, he joined Henry VIII's council in 1518 and began his rise to the lord chancellorship—and the scaffold. As the Reformation gained momentum in the years after 1517, he expressed deep concern that his humanist writings, with their reformist bent, might help to foster the schism. In 1521, Henry asked More to edit his—Henry's—attack on Martin Luther, which was published as the *Defense of the Seven Sacraments* and, in one of history's neatest ironies, earned Henry the title, bestowed by Pope Leo X, of Defender of the Faith. More didn't write any more of the kinds of books I've been

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Richard the Third* 3.7.

<sup>20</sup> More's *Richard the Third*, 92.

talking about this evening. He was increasingly caught up in the sectarian struggle, writing a series of his own anti-Lutheran works and prosecuting “heretics,” and, in his last years, when Henry’s break with Rome was leading More ineluctably toward martyrdom, writing a series of devotional works. By means of the Reformation, much was lost and much was gained (usually not by the same people). One thing that English literature lost—and it wasn’t a *small* thing—was the rest of what would have been More’s avocational endeavors as a *humanist* writer. But at least we got two very great books.

Thank you.