— Questions and Discussion
with Dr. Elizabeth McCutcheon

Gerard Wegemer: Do you trust the narrator? Do you trust him in one part or another more?

Elizabeth McCutcheon: He’s cagey. He’s very cagey. The whole thing is a construct. More has taken the facts and shaped them; he’s worked them, so it is very difficult to know where to stand with that narrator. You could check the narrator against the facts. Some of them, no one knows. The Buckingham-Richard alliance is obviously one that— they didn’t have tape recorders then, they didn’t have Bob Woodward. (laughter) So, you know, they’re coming to speculate all of them, and it could have gone either way, as the narrator suggests. So, it’s a murky business, politics, in the 16th century and politics today, and the narrator is watching his p’s and q’s as well.

Clarence Miller: Is he not establishing himself as the credible narrator by being willing to admit that he does not know, and that it is not known, and that it could be one way or it could be another. That is, it could be called cagey, but it could be, simply, that I’m trying to be as honest as I can, no?

McCutcheon: Well, yes and no. More had to know when the coronation was, and the narrator purports not to know, or he misinforms. Now, coronation dates are something that, if you grow up in a country with a king, you know.

Miller: But there are striking things, striking inaccuracies, you know that the age of Edward, and things like that... that could be... I don’t know how that could happen unless its just haste, carelessness, would be corrected later... that kind of thing.

McCutcheon: I have trouble, at times, distinguishing between More’s hyperbole, which is very real. He loves to play with under- and over-statement, and for a good rhetorical position, the king should be older than he is, in a sense. In the beginning, he wants an older, kinder king. I read an interesting article lately, which is arguing that Edward IV had one thing really going for him: that the common people did like him. And that comes out in that early speech, so, even there, its hyperbole, its exaggerated. Buckingham is probably more correct about certain things, and yet, if you think of the role of the people, that early stress on Edward IV didn’t have that mystique of kingship apparently that Richard was aiming for. I mean, Edward IV married a commoner, or, at least, not royalty, and when he went hunting, he invited people to join him, and Richard didn’t do that. Richard, actually, apparently, its historical fact, Richard did go around with a crown on his head, and that crown was found on the battlefield at Bosworth and was placed on Henry VII. Richard was very anxious to establish his authority, and on his processions, on his progresses, he’s wearing a crown. Apparently, Edward IV didn’t do that. So the common touch seems to be a part of it. So, it’s very hard to separate out these strands.

Miller: I think he did, occasionally, leave blanks that he wanted to fill in later, check dates, and things like that, but something as important as the coronation, you don’t forget that.

McCutcheon: Yes, you don’t forget the coronation. And he gives different dates for it in the different Latin versions. It’s very strange.

Miller: But you seem to be suggesting that the Latin one is rounder in a way. That the English is not. Obviously, the English is going to go on after that, but that the Latin had reached a type of period.

McCutcheon: That’s my feeling about it. As I say, I’m going out on a limb on that, but it makes a very nice— whether it was accident or deliberate— it makes a nice stopping point, especially the way he treats the coronation because that is very different from the way that the other chroniclers treat it. It is obviously a put-down. It’s a satiric trick. It’s kind of like what Milton does later when, after Satan goes back to Hell and Adam and Eve have fallen, and he’s telling his troops how wonderful everything is, and he’s expecting applause, and instead the troops turn into snakes and they all go, “Hisssss.” And something like that is happening. The coronation, which should have been the high point, is just a kind of afterthought. And that’s a real slam at Richard.

Miller: The fullness... you think of the Cato line and the lyrical thing; they also have a kind of, they come to a kind of end. And the Latin, you can think of it as coming
to a kind of end, whereas the English seems to go on. But you made another point when you were talking earlier about Buckingham because in the early 1520’s another Buckingham got his head cut off, and whether More thought that this was time to stop playing the game of kings.

**McCutcheon:** I’d like to know more about More and that Buckingham because in *The Four Last Things*, More is very upset by that beheading of the Buckingham in the early 1520s, and Collard made that point a long time ago, and I think there’s some truth to it because he’s shaken by it, in a way.

**Miller:** He wants the reader of *The Four Last Things* to be shaken by it also. This very powerful man is suddenly...

**McCutcheon:** Right. Right.

**Mary:** I was wondering if there is anything to the fact that in More’s day the word “History” could mean “Story,” and the word “Story” could mean “History.” I wonder if in the Humanist idea of History, you were supposed to be creative from time to time. And I noticed that two of the names that he got wrong, supposedly the first names, Hastings and Joseph, the names that he substituted were Edward and Richard. One guy’s real name was William.

**McCutcheon:** Yes. Shaw. I think he gets the preacher’s first name wrong.

**Mary:** I wonder if when he made Hastings’ name— one of them he made Edward and the other one he made Richard— was there a point to that, maybe?

**McCutcheon:** Well, I think More was a poet, as Erasmus says. And I think he was extremely creative. And he is writing in a time when he, in particular, is interested in fiction and fictionalizing. Dr. Logan talked about that in those wonderful episodes in the first book of the *Utopia*. And that fiction actually is uncannily close to fact. It can move either way. You can take fact and turn it into fiction, or you can take fiction that really is fact, and he plays with those, and it’s related to his stage presentation of it may be, in addition to whatever of historical fact there is, that what this is in that episode and in many other episodes, is more a meditation on kingship, not a meditation on how to be a tyrant, but a meditation on how easily it is to fail to rise to the challenges of statecraft and of kingship.

**McCutcheon:** Let me back up a bit. The real Edward died unexpectedly. He was relatively young, and they didn’t really expect him to die. Now, More complicates this by making him older and thus, presumably, should have made more plans. I see it really the way Dr. Logan talked about it this afternoon where, ominously, the king is describing a situation which happens and which foreshadows a lot of the action to come. And I don’t know that I can address the particular question you’re asking because I haven’t read it that way, truly, except that, Edward’s speech is not listened to by the people around him. So, from the very beginning, you have something being said and the people; the nobles around him feign friendship, which, in fact, is false. So that false note is struck from the very beginning. And that’s important.

**Logan:** The whole scene is very artificial. The speech is quite artificial; here’s a guy almost on the point of death, who speaks in beautifully symmetric sentences and so on, who’s spry and who makes jokes that he’ll soon be in that place that all the preachers are talking about, and he laughs that he knows more about it than they do. And of course the audience is artificial too. He is giving an unbelievable deathbed oration. I don’t think people on their deathbed talk like that; of course, not many people can talk that way even when they’re in the prime of health, it’s such a beautifully crafted speech.

**McCutcheon:** In a way its like opera, isn’t it? Opera is beautiful, even when people are dying.

**Logan:** That’s really a good parallel. This is not something out of real life at all. It is something out of a heightened version of life. And again, this is typical of the genre. These people are always giving these wonderfully eloquent speeches in histories of this kind. And, of course, if the speech and the speakers are artificial, the audience is artificial too. They are not really paying a bit of attention; they are only paying attention in that they say the polite thing. More says they say what they thought at the time, but they are not really listening. They do not intend to change their behavior one little bit. Two things: one, the response of the audience suggests what the courts are like. Hythlodaeus’s remark on courts of *Utopia* certainly forms a nice gloss on the courtly behavior in Richard III: they’re all self-serv ing sycophants. All are ambitious for themselves. Two, regarding the artificiality of Edward’s speech, what it’s really there for is for thematic purposes. What More wants there is
whether there was a response at all, maybe silence was the best move, but that...