

Thomas More's *Epigrammata*: political theory in a poetic idiom*

There is a bias in the study of political theory towards discursive modes of theorising which is reflected in criticism of the corpus of Sir Thomas More. For historians of political thought the focus of attention is *Utopia*, with companion works such as *The History of King Richard III* and the *Epigrammata* referred to only incidentally. The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the *Epigrammata*¹ as a work of interest to political theory, and to More's use of the epigrammatic form not only as a vehicle for political expression but as an idiom of a political language whose finest expression was *Utopia*. This is not to claim for the epigrams a quasi-speculative status but to take the viewpoint of political theory in its widest aspect, that is the study of political discourse and its changes in time.

More's epigrams as we have them, seem to have been written between 1509 and 1519. They were first published with the third edition of *Utopia* in 1518, and revised and partially corrected by More for a new edition in 1520. The *Epigrammata* of 1520 comprises 253 mostly short Latin poems. The first five were presentation pieces written in 1509 for the coronation of Henry VIII, and 102 others were translations from the *Greek Anthology*. More took some interest in having his verses published, but their good reception amongst his contemporaries has not been echoed in modern readers. When noticed at all they are likely to be dismissed as practice pieces, amusing trifles or worse: "the Epigrams help us by contrast to seize on what is significant in More", wrote one critic; "they are a large and damning fact both in More and in the educated world" which appreciated them.² Perhaps the largest obstacle to sympathetic criticism is the miscellaneous character of the collection. The poems were written over a decade and seem to reflect a variety of interests or even, as Alistair Fox has argued, the recovery of balance in an author given to extremes.³ How, then, should the epigrams be read — as trifles, exercises in translation and imitation, or as records of a personality on its journey towards integration?

More himself gives some help here. In 1515 he wrote in his letter "To Dorp" that publication was more deliberate than composition:

Usually we are swept along by an impetuous drive to write. But when we go over something again and again that we have set aside for a time, we act with decision.⁴

More clearly acted with decision not only in publishing his epigrams but in revising and correcting them, and in deleting some pieces and adding others for a new edition.⁵ It is one thing to write and another to publish: the decisions are separable and their contexts may differ, as in the case of More or John Locke. Without wishing to minimize the importance of More's intentions in writing his epigrams — indeed, they enter into the present argument — this paper focuses on the author's decision to collect them and publish them as one work. And that work, various as it is, remains of

interest not only to the literary critic but to the historian of political thought.

Upon one thing all critics of the epigrams agree: they contain some forceful political comments, especially against tyranny. Bradner and Lynch, the modern editors of the *Epigrammata*, estimate that there are 23 poems "on kings and government",⁶ but these are only the most explicitly political pieces. My own reading yields a higher number of directly political poems — 31 — and suggests that many others in the collection are indirectly political.⁷ Even on Bradner and Lynch's lower figure, however, the political emerges as the largest and most unusual thematic category in the book, others being more conventional such as the faults of women, the closeness of death and the folly of astrology. Both the number and intensity of More's political poems were exceptional for the time, but most unusual was his use of epigrammatic form. Bradner and Lynch note that while many of his political *topoi* were "commonplaces of classical and mediæval political theory", his use of kingship was most original for an epigrammatist: "we know of no other sixteenth-century poet who used this theme for short poems".⁸

Of course, more extended political versification was not uncommon in the early Tudor period, as the works of Stephen Hawes, William Forrest, Alexander Barclay and, most notably, John Skelton testify. The salient contrast between the works of these poets and More's, however, is not mainly in length or even in their use of the vernacular against his use of Latin, but in the critical force of his verses. This forcefulness owes much to the epigrammatic form, for even the indirect and subtle epigrams carry a potent sting in their tails. Or to vary the metaphor, they are like wound springs, their formal compression of matters demanding extension giving them an especial energy. When one considers that with More the epigram is introduced into the English Renaissance,⁹ the strong potential of this novel form as a vehicle for political comment can better be appreciated.

Nevertheless there are grounds for doubting More's seriousness in publishing, if not in writing his political epigrams.¹⁰ The strongest of these has been voiced by H.A. Mason:

I do not think it would be unduly cynical to remark that More cannot have taken these attacks on kings very seriously, since he puts at the head of his epigrams a long poem in praise of his actual king.¹¹

Mason has a point, but has failed to perceive the darker side of the ambiguity. If, on the one hand, the five coronation poems seem to place the political epigrams at a safe distance from the king, on the other they stand almost as a dedication of the entire collection to him. This ambiguity is emphasised in the fact that while the coronation verses are fairly conventional, the political epigrams which succeed them are not: they sit uncomfortably with expectations lately raised by the hopeful words of

welcome typical of coronations. Moreover, this ambiguity is heightened by a structural similarity between the relation of the lemma to the epigram and the relation of the coronation poems to the collection as a whole.

The epigram originated as an inscription on a statue, shield, tomb or memorial. Eventually the object and its inscription became detached, and the place of the statue or other memorial was taken by the title or lemma of the epigram. The inscription became a short witty poem upon the lemma. In locating his coronation offerings (quite properly) at the beginning of the *Epigrammata*, More has mirrored the relationship of epigram to lemma. The coronation poems stand most prominently not only because they come with their own dedicatory epistle to Henry and expatiate upon his virtues, but because the chief poem, a *carmen gratulatorium*, is not an epigram even within More's elastic usage, but an ode. Both formally and substantively this coronation ode presents a challenge to the reader of the *Epigrammata*: either it negates the significance of the strong political epigrams which follow or it serves as a text upon which they comment. If the latter, then the book can be seen to effect a politically significant turn of thought in just the style of the epigram. At the very least a political ambiguity is exposed here, and no justice is done to the author of the subtle paradoxes of *Utopia* in dismissing the politics of his epigrams out of hand.

This is clear from a reading of the poems. Their political character may be observed through at least three gradations: the explicit, the directly ambiguous, and the contextually suggestive. It is not possible to discuss each of these categories exhaustively within the confines of an article, but such a course is unnecessary in stating my argument. The main items of each category may serve to exemplify the point.

Amongst the politically explicit poems, those presented to Henry VIII and those against tyrants stand out. The theme of the former is that a new age has dawned for England: the restoration of the body politic is figured in the virility of her new king.

Meta haec seruitii est, haec libertatis origo,
Tristitiae finis, laetitiaeque caput.

This day is the limit of our slavery, the beginning of our
freedom, the end of sadness, the source of joy.¹²

Henry has righted injustices, banished flatterers from court and replaced them with learned men, encouraged trade and embarked upon the path of virtue. More's recent biographer, Alistair Fox, is not alone in regarding these sentiments as fulsome in flattery: "However sincere More may have been in his praise, his (presentations were) an attempt to gain favour and attention".¹³ Without wishing to deny that More's verses were flattering and designed to impress,¹⁴ I believe that this kind of emphasis distracts attention from the nuances he worked upon conventional themes. It reminds one of the stock disposal of Machiavelli's *Prince* as a job application.

While acknowledging More's participation in ritual welcome of the

new king, one must also be sensitive to justifications of the rhetoric of panegyric. When Erasmus published his *Panegyricus*, he attached an apology in which he argued that his work was

no so much praise as percept; and there is surely no more effective method of reforming princes than to present them with a pattern of the good prince under the guise of praising them ...¹⁵

The minor coronation poems which follow the ode deal variously with a sun shower over the coronation procession, the return of the golden age in the reign of Henry, a tournament free of casualties, and the union of the two roses in one. Whatever their subtleties they would not make exciting reading in their original context. Transposed into the text of the *Epigrammata*, however, they yield a latent potential for ambiguity. This may be observed in their relationship with the epigrams against tyranny.

Four poems are at the core of the attack: *Sola Mors Tyrannicida Est* (Death unassisted kills tyrants, 62), *Sollicitam Esse Tyranni Vitam* (That the tyrant's life is troubled, 92), *Tyrannum In Somno Nihil Differre A Plebeo* (That the tyrant while he sleeps is no different from the commoner, 96) and *Regem Non Satellitum Sed Virtus Reddit Tutum* (A king is protected, not by a corps of guards, but by his own good qualities, 102). These stand in marked contrast with the verses of welcome which begin the volume. The first epigram, *Sola Mors Tyrannicida Est*, is the strongest in the collection. In encompasses many of the themes found in other political epigrams, such as tyranny, fortune, death, pride, riches, the ruler as object of mirth and infamy. It acclaims the enemies of princes, Death and fickle Fortune, as the liberators of the oppressed in an interesting way. More recalls an image he has used in his *carmen gratulatorium* to praise Henry. In the epigram he writes:

Versilis in melius uel te Fortuna reponet,
Vt sola excussa nube nitere dies.

A turn of fortune will improve your state — like the sun shining through scattered clouds.¹⁶

These verses echo lines in the ode:

Omnia discussis arident pectora curis,
Vt solet excussa nube nitere dies.

Every heart smiles to see its cares dispelled, as the sun shines through scattered clouds.¹⁷

Moreover, the image, again suggestive of Henry's virtues, recurs in the second coronation poem:

Nulla tamen Phoebi subdixit lumina nubes.

No cloud, however, obscured the sun's light.¹⁸

This symbol of a new dawn, associated originally with a messianic deliverer, is now attached to fortune, foe of princes. If the people placed their hope in the king in the coronation poems, they are urged to look to fortune instead; if Henry is the restorer of liberty in the coronation ode, Death is "the

defender of liberty" in this epigram.

In More's time it was recognised that some of the verses in the *carmen* referred unfavourably to Henry VII, contrasting the rigours of his reign with the great promise of his son.¹⁹ The epigrams on tyranny recall the complaint against Henry VII²⁰ but Chambers is rather misleading in asserting that

In his own epigrams More expresses his passionate hatred of royal tyranny, in a way he never permitted to himself later, when he was a servant to the King.²¹

When the *Epigrammata* was published, More had been in the king's service for over two years²² and well appreciated the significance of showing his verses to the world. His letter "To Dorp", quoted above, makes this clear. And in June, 1520, he asked Budé to refrain from publishing his letters because

in my remarks upon peace and war, upon morality, marriage, the clergy, the people etc., perhaps what I have written has not always been so cautious and guarded ...²³

Yet More allowed his epigrams to be published with all their indirection and political irony. Perceptions over historical distance can foreshorten the years between events close in time, and it may seem to the modern historian that an epigram like *Sola Mors* is limited in its reference to Henry VII. By the time the *Epigrammata* appeared, however, the late king was a fading memory and the focus of attention was the court of his son.

The poems against tyranny might, then, have been occasioned by the first Tudor, but their publication in the reign of his successor invites more pertinent comparisons. Not that More was calling Henry VIII a tyrant under plain cover: he was, however, warning the young king against the vices which lead to tyranny, most notably pride, self-interest and disregard for the law. In doing so he was drawing upon a rich field of association in political theory from John of Salisbury and Bracton to his own time. Take, for example, an epigram strongly evocative of English political thought and tradition, which is not about tyranny, makes a general point, but carries a didactic sting in its tail: *Populus Consentiens Regnum Dat Et Aufert* (The consent of the people both bestows and withdraws sovereignty, 103).

Quicumque multis uir uiris unus praeest,
Hoc debet his quibus praeest.
Præesse debet neutiquam diutius
Hi quam uolent quibus praeest.
Quid impotentes principes superbiunt,
Quod imperant precario?

Any one man who has command of many men owes his subjects this: he ought to have command not one instant longer than his subjects wish. Since kings, not their own masters, rule on sufferance, why are they proud?²⁴

This epigram is built upon the principle which Sir John Fortescue found to be distinctive of English rule, that "in the body politic the will of the people is

the source of life", for the king of England "rules his people not only regally but also politically ...".²⁵

The point about such general evocations of familiar maxims is to apply them to particular instances. The elliptical or "conceited" nature of the epigram is an invitation to the reader to find a specific significance for it. As Rudolph Habenicht has observed of the "dark saying",

The delight as well as the danger of interpreting these brief abstractions of general truth lies in the fact that every (one) is on (their) own ... the recognition and understanding of them frequently depend solely upon their context.²⁶

Such is the case in the *Epigrammata*. In reworking medieval precepts, the explicitly political epigrams function like the *Apophthegmes* of Erasmus or the aphorisms of Elyot, as potent mnemonics of the rules of politic conduct. In giving these poems bite and intensity, More is able not only to enliven the significance of precepts grown too familiar through reiteration but also to alert his readers to the ramified political significances of the collection. The explicitly political poems form a context for interpretation of less explicit ones.

A case in point is *De Deditione Nerviae Henrico VIII Angliae Regi* (On the surrender of Tournay to Henry VIII, King of England, 228), an obviously political poem in one sense but indirectly ambiguous in another. Henry is congratulated on the taking of Tournay during his expedition against France in 1513. But the poem does not imply approval of the war. The king is praised for taking the town, which quickly chose not to resist, without bloodshed. There was really little reason for congratulation given the poor return on the enormous investment in the Continental adventure, but the epigram might appeal at one level to the princely ideals of chivalry. Had More wished to offer his king unequivocal praise, however, he might have chosen a more suitable location for it: his epigram follows a member of the politically explicit category which stands in direct opposition to the imperialistic inclinations of princes, *De Cupiditate Regnandi* (On the lust for power, 227).

Regibus e multis, regnum cui sufficit unum,
Vix rex unus erit si tamen unus erit.
Regibus e multis, regnum bene qui regat unum,
Vix tamen unus erit si tamen unus erit.

Among many kings there will be scarcely one, if there is really one, who is satisfied to have one kingdom. Among many kings there will be scarcely one, if there is really one, who rules a single kingdom well.²⁷

Henry's search for glory abroad while his own kingdom was pressed by economic problems and invaded by the Scots is exactly the sort of conduct rebuked in *De Cupiditate Regnandi*. This rebuke lends a fine irony to the praises of *De Deditione*, which follow it.

Another indirectly ambiguous poem *Bona Non Cognosci: Nisi Dum Amittuntur* (That our advantages are recognised only when they vanish, 95)

also shows how context can shape interpretation.

Perdendo bona nostra fere cognoscimus omnes.
 Dum possidemus spernimus.
 Sic populo quoque saepe malus, sed sero, benignum
 Commendat haeres principem.

Almost all of us recognise our advantages by losing them. While we have them we ignore them. In this way, also, an evil successor frequently, but too late, enhances the people's memory of a good ruler.²⁸

The political content is saved until the very end where it has most impact. It assimilates the general moral of the poem to a political point. How is this poem to be understood: is it a recantation of sentiments expressed in the *carmen*? The only kings from More's recent past who fit the epigram are the implicitly denounced Henry VII and his son.

On occasion More uses translations from the Greek to make a political point, modifying the sentiment of the original for his own purposes. The best example is an indirect assault upon the pride of rulers: *In Efflatum Ventris* (On breaking wind, 21).

Te crepitus perdit, nimium si uentre retentes.
 Te propere emissus seruat item crepitus.
 Si crepitus seruare potest et perdere, numquid
 Terrificus crepitus regibus aequa potest?

Wind, if you keep it too long in your stomach, kills you; on the other hand, it can save your life if it is promptly let out. If wind can save or destroy you, then it is not as powerful as dreaded kings?²⁹

Here, for comparison, is a translation from the Greek of Nicarchus:

A fart which cannot find an outlet kills many a man; a fart also saves, sending forth its lispng music. Therefore if a fart saves, and on the other kills, a fart has the same power as kings.³⁰

In the original the emphasis is unambiguously on the wind and straight-forwardly facetious. More's version, however, does not concern wind but the pride of "dreaded kings". His use of the interrogative to shift the emphasis, and his omission of colourful detail make this clear.

Such conceit conceals barely enough for decency or, as Sir John Harington observed seventy-six years later, safety.

... I will tell you true, my muse was afraid to translate this Epigram: and she brought me out three or foure sayings against it, bothe in Latine and English: and two or three examples, both of this last poet (More), who died not of the collicke, and of one Collingbourne, that was hanged for a distichon of a cat, a rat, and a dogge. Yet I opposed *Murus adheneus esto nil conscire sibi*, and so with much a do, she came out with it.

To breake a little wind, sometime ones life doth save,
 For want of vent behind, some folk their ruin have:
 A powre it hath therefore, of life, and death expresse:
 A king can cause no more, a cracke doth do no less.

And when she had made it in this sorie fashion, she bad me wish my friends, that no man should follow Sir Th. Mores humour, to

write such Epigrams as he wrote ...³¹

Harington shows that some of the delight in interpreting the political ambiguities of More's verse lies in its dangers.

Another translation which exploits an epigrammatic turn of thought to political purpose is *In Caecum Et Claudum Mendicos* (On two beggars, one lame, one blind, 9-15) upon which More wrote seven variations. The *Greek Anthology* versions³² all work upon the way the two beggars can compensate for the deficiencies of each by working together. Plato the Younger writes, "A blind man carried a lame man on his back, lending him his feet and borrowing from his eyes".³³ More's first translation is close to Plato, and four subsequent poems also comment on the benefits of the arrangement. But his sixth version introduces a new turn of thought:

Alta superbiorum fugitat penetralia regum,
Inque casa concors paupere regnat amor.

The love which united shuns the castles of proud kings and prevails in the humble hut.³⁴

More gratuitously introduces kings, a subject which does not appear in the original. To bring kings into a poem ostensibly declared by its lemma to be non-political is to focus upon the alien element. Moreover, the theme of unity recalls the fifth coronation poem on uniting the virtues of Lancaster and York in Henry VIII, symbolising the unity of the kingdom. The epigram on the beggars, however, casts a shadow across the sentiments of *De Utraque Rosa in Unum Coalita*, for "the love which unites shuns the castles of proud kings and prevails in the humble hut".

Comparisons in this vein are scattered through the text of the *Epigrammata*.³⁵ A dead slave is compared with Darius, giving an epigram about the equality of death a political point (27); Croesus, richest of kings, is for almost half his life the equal of Irus, the beggar, because both must sleep (89); King Atreus serves his brother Thyestes his three sons boiled in a cauldron as a welcome feast, and More comments

Talia regales ornant bellaria mensas.
Crede mihi, non est pauperis iste cibus.

Such delicacies as these mark the tables of kings; I assure you this is not a poor man's fare.³⁶

Such verses show no great enthusiasm for kings and may reflect an inclination in More towards republicanism, as Bradner and Lynch suggest.³⁷

One remarkable epigram, *Quis Optimus Reipublicae Status* (What is the best form of government, 182) actually debates the relative merits of monarchy and republicanism. As usual the point comes in a turn of thought:

...nec iam cui consule tradas

Imperium. Prior est quaestio, an expediat.

Stop considering to whom you may give power. The prior question is whether to give it at all.³⁸

Power is likely to be abused, whoever holds it. Hence, in comparisons of virtue and vice, the powerful are always satirised and the weak made

patterns of goodness. And epigrams on the vanity of life, the afflictions of the rich, the uncertainty of fortune, the rewards of moderation and the common destiny of death are addressed uniformly to those who have power. While all are equally prisoners of their own mortality, the position of the humble or oppressed accords more closely with the metaphysical reality which the rich and powerful seek to escape in pursuing vain pleasures. To be deceived into believing that possessions or rank can actually affect one's condition is to make the profoundest of mistakes. While More takes his subjects from the world at large, it is clear that if their lessons apply generally, they apply superlatively at court.

Epigrams like *Paraenesis Ad Virtutem Veram* (Exhortation to true virtue, 50) caution only the privileged. Yet the poem contains a vital ambiguity in its second verse which sharpens its political point.

Heu miseris quicquid misero blanditur in orbe,
 Illico marcescens, ut rosa uerna, cadit.
 Nec quenquam usque adeo placidis complectitur ulnis
 Sors, ut non aliqua parte molesta premat.
 Imbibe uirtutes, et inania gaudia sperne.
 Sunt animi comites gaudia uera boni.

Alas, whatever in this miserable world attracts miserable man withers at once and dies like the early rose. Fortune has never yet taken anyone into her comforting arms without squeezing him uncomfortably somewhere. Drink in the virtues; abstain from vain pleasures. True joys are the companions of the noble spirit.³⁹

The vernal rose recalls the usage of the coronation poems (especially 5, *De Utraque Rosa in Unum Coalita*). The moral of the poem is typical of advice to rulers, but the warning of death to the early rose generates a host of associations, not only with the rose emblem, but with other epigrams on virtue, death and fortune. The echoes of *Sola Mors Tyrannicida Est* reverberate throughout the text of the *Epigrammata*.

That this reverberation should be taken in the widest sense, to refer not just to the king but to the political community, is indicated both by the ethical character of the book and its esoteric use of classical epigram. As John of Salisbury put it,

tyranny is abuse of power entrusted by God to man. But this evil embraces a vast and varied use of things which are good. For it is clear that tyranny not only exists in the case of princes, but that every one is a tyrant who abuses power that has been conferred upon him ...⁴⁰

It is possible only to offer a sample of More's political use of the epigram in this paper, so it is prudent to anticipate objections to my interpretation. First, if the *Epigrammata* is shot through with political significances, it is not on that account a political book. Hence there would be no point in trying to force every epigram in the collection to conform to a political last. On the other hand, the extension of political meanings beyond the explicitly political epigrams should be acknowledged. Canonical political

theorists, accustomed to viewing their subject as a series of great texts from Plato to the present, might too readily regard as fanciful the kind of retrieval of political meanings offered here. What must be underlined, then, is the moral idiom in which More has chosen to write. It is neither traditional nor overtly religious — though certainly founded on religious assumptions — but, in the spirit of *Utopia* and the *History of King Richard III*, applies what might now be called a secular ethic to social and political problems. For all the variousness of theme and subject in the epigrams, a moral tone critical of human folly is sustained.

There are many epigrams of a satirical nature which are not only congruent with the directly political poems but are strongly associated with them in theme and vocabulary. In discourse which treats of politics in ethical terms, any moral is potentially available for political application, and it is not surprising to find in the *Epigrammata* a fine web of associations anchored to identifiably political reference points. Satire is a form of social address and More uses it to comment on his world of women, poetasters, clerics, snobs, lawyers, doctors, astrologers, soldiers, knights, sportsmen, rhetoricians, courtiers and fools. It is a world where imposture is rampant. Ignorance is mistaken for piety (224); wisdom is attested in the wearing of a beard (139); justice is both blind and deaf (34), and lawyers are mere tricksters (98, 99); beggars pose as doctors (146), and a wanton as a virgin (66); an Englishman affects French manners (77), and a Scottish king pretends fidelity (appendix 1: expunged from 1520). While More's world is large, the main targets of his satire move within the orbit of privilege; the prince, of course, is the sun.

The two dominant moral themes of the *Epigrammata*, that moderation ought to be followed in all things and that imposture, dishonesty and pretension are to be shunned, apply particularly to the prince. He is most liable, because of his position, to be afflicted by pride and to encourage others in the same vice — points made equally forcibly in *Utopia* and the *Richard*. Pride fosters ambition, characterised in the prince by love of sovereignty, territory and riches, and in his courtly followers by a hunger for position, power and wealth. From these "personal" vices issue a host of social evils — war, waste, idleness, unemployment, poverty, violence and other forms of social dislocation. Hence, quite apart from supporting the political epigrams ideologically, those expressing more general criticisms bear upon the traditional connexion between the virtue of rulers and the welfare of the *regnum*.

Even if the political content of the epigrams is conceded there remains the question of whether such compressed and often general witticisms are in any recognizable sense political theory. Here it is important to consider not only the content of the *Epigrammata* but their expression of what Pocock calls a political language or idiom.⁴¹ Although many of More's political sentiments are familiar, the idioms in which he

expressed them — represented in the epigrams, *Utopia* and the *Richard* — are not. If an emphasis is placed on mere content, More's political works might be written off as saying little that is new. If style is emphasized, then *Utopia* and the *Richard* take the palm. Either way the fact that these works and their companion epigrams give expression to an idiom of political discourse is missed.

More was one of a number of Northern Renaissance scholars dedicated to the pursuit of learning, and to reform in church and *regnum*. Foremost among them was Erasmus, whose great edition of the *New Testament*, based on a more scholarly reading of sources than the Vulgate, was to provide the basis for religious renewal. Scholarship in the service of political and social reform produced More's *Utopia* and Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*. These works of humane learning and *belles lettres* contrast markedly with the questions of scholastic theology and the didactic political treatises of the time, and necessarily so. The rhetorical theory behind the adoption of classical and patristic modes of persuasion was also a theory of political psychology. If pride distorted judgement, then judgement would not be free to accept truth contrary to venal self-interest. Ways of healing judgement were needed so that truth could penetrate to the hearts of those in religious and political authority. As Erasmus put it in his apology for his *Panegyricus*,

Do you really believe that one could present kings, born in the purple and brought up as they are, with the repellant teachings of Stoicism ...?⁴²

But one might ask, why were not the teachings of Christianity repellant to those used to having their own way? The reason offered by More is that distorted judgement has made Christianity serve the *status quo* and allowed rulers to sin with easy consciences.⁴³

In *Utopia* More shows how the twin lights of faith and reason have been dimmed amongst rulers and courtiers who have been inculcated with false values. The propensity to vanity inherent in human nature is accentuated in those who hold power. Hence the absurdity that an abbot can engross his lands at great social cost while standing for the teaching of Christ. In a society whose values rest upon the teaching of the Gospel but whose practices reflect a devotion to the world a wide gap should be apparent. But because God's Word is interpreted to legitimise the conduct of ruling elites, the real extent of their departure from the Gospels is disguised. What is neither reasonable nor Christian has become ideologically sustaining in a world of distorted values.

The closed fist of logic finds proponents of these distortions on their own ground, ready to argue over the merest detail, yet indifferent to their departure from the true spirit of Christ. But the open palm of rhetoric is more persuasive. It engages its audience, eliciting responses which are not rote-learned or reflexive. What the Northern reformers sought, then, was a rehabilitation of discourse as an instrument of reform.

Thus Erasmus dedicated his *Paraphrasis in evangelium Lucae* to Henry VIII, felicitously combining Henry's interests in medicine and theology, while suggesting that the ultimate healing power — Christ, the *Logos* — was available through a better rendering of the Gospel:

I send thee Luke the physician, most generous king, not the one whom you used to have previously, but one speaking more clearly and eloquently to Latin ears.⁴⁴

The opponents of the Northern reformers — commonly, but loosely, called "humanists" because of their dedication to humane studies rather than the scholastic sciences — were in the main scholastic theologians noted for their dogmatism and the irrelevance of their studies to the urgent problems of religion and society. Against their attitudes *belles lettres* stand for openness and delight. Instead of dogmatic hammering at the door of understanding, *belles lettres* permit comprehension through charm. Instead of the vain propositions of a debased dialectic, *belles lettres* provide the opportunity for genuine exchange in dialogues like *Utopia*. Not only has argument become debased in the hands of the scholastics, but language itself, contends Vives,⁴⁵ has become meaningless in their works. Their fictions of discourse have become pernicious and stand in the way of urgently needed reform. Eloquence, on the other hand, is eminently practical, and has enormous potential to do good. The orator and the poet are kinsmen, as Cicero observed,⁴⁶ and the eloquence of epigram may be as affective as a studied declamation.

The argument here, then, amounts to this: even though the *Epigrammata* is not a directly political book in the vein of *Utopia* or the *Richard*, it belongs to the same idiom of political discourse. It shares in the same kind of indirection and ambiguity; it has similar *foci* of attention in criticising pride and pretension; and, most of all, it directs its criticism at social elites, especially those at court. Moreover, with its companion works — not only of More, but of the Erasmians generally — it was an attempt to tune discourse to a new key. A present parallel might be the importance attached to language reform by feminists. Whether the Northern reformers were correct in their political and social psychology or not is a different matter. What is important is to recognise the political dimension in the adoption of new literary forms; the political theory of form as well as of content. In both respects the *Epigrammata* is deserving of notice.

More's *Epigrammata* should not be read then merely as exercises in witty versification. Politically, they have much in common with their cousin, the graffito. Their very elegance and refinement, however, make their messages as potent in More's milieu as the best graffiti in ours. That the thunder of the Reformation made the Erasmians seem to speak *sotto voce* is a matter of history. It remains true that the reforming efforts of More, Erasmus, Vives and their intellectual compatriots on the eve of the Reformation, provide evidence for a distinctive political language. If the

historian of political thought is to take up the suggestion of Pocock and identify his author's political language, then the student of Thomas More cannot afford to ignore the poetic idiom of the *Epigrammata*.

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- * I am especially grateful to Conal Condren who read this paper in draft and offered valuable criticism of it. My thanks are due also to *Parergon's* reader for helpful suggestions.
- 1 *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. and trans. L. Bradner and C.A. Lynch. Chicago, 1953; hereafter *Epigrams*. All translations from the epigrams are by Bradner and Lynch.
 - 2 H.A. Mason, *Humanism and Poetry in the Early Tudor Period*, London, 1959, 30.
 - 3 *Thomas More History and Providence*, New Haven and London, 1983, 49.
 - 4 *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters*, E.F. Rogers, ed., New Haven and London, 1961, 60.
 - 5 See Bradner's and Lynch's introduction for the history of the text, *op. cit.*, xiv-xix.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, xxvii; 162.
 - 7 I count the following as explicitly political epigrams: 1-5, 14, 21, 27, 62, 89, 91-7, 102, 103, 124, 144, 165, 166, 182, 185, 190, 208, 210, 222, 227, 228. Bradner and Lynch do not identify their 23 items, except for those on tyranny.
 - 8 *Ibid.* xxvii-xxviii.
 - 9 See H.H. Hudson, *The Epigram in the English Renaissance*, Princeton, 1947, 29; and L.V. Ryan, The Shorter Latin Poem in Tudor England, *Humanistica Louvanensia* 26, 1977, 103-4.
 - 10 This doubt is not widely shared, although Craig Thompson once wrote that More's early interest in tyranny was "literary, not personal or political"; *Translations of Lucian by Erasmus and St. Thomas More*, Ithaca, 1940, 44. But compare his more recent view in the Introduction to his edition of *Translations of Lucian, The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 3, New Haven and London, 1974, xxxix; and the views of J.H. Lupton, ed., *The Utopia of Sir Thomas More*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1895, 92, and W. Mann, *Lateinische Dichtung in England*, Halle, 1939, 33-34.
 - 11 *Op. cit.*, 49.
 - 12 *Epigrams*, 16; 158.
 - 13 *Op. cit.*
 - 14 William Nelson makes a good case for this in, Thomas More, Grammarian and Orator, *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 58, 1943, 332-352; reprinted in R.S. Sylvester and G.P. Marchadour, *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, Hamden, 1977, 150-160.
 - 15 *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 2 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. and trans. R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson, Toronto, 1975, 179. Erasmus also wrote to Jean Desmarez on the matter: "Those who believe panegyrics are nothing but flattery seem to be unaware of the purpose ... of the extremely far-sighted men who invented this kind of composition, which consists in presenting princes with a pattern of goodness, in such a way as to reform bad rulers, improve the good ... and cause even the hopelessly vicious to feel some inward stirrings of shame ...", *ibid.*, 81.
 - 16 *Epigrams*, 39; 162.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, 16; 138.
 - 18 *Ibid.*, 22; 144.

- 19 The French poetaster, Germain de Brie, even accused More of traducing royalty; Hudson, *op. cit.*, 53.
- 20 This has been long recognized; see e.g. J.H. Marsden, *Philomorus*, London, 1842, 28.
- 21 R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More*, London, 1935, 89.
- 22 G. Elton, Thomas More, Councillor (1517-1529), in R.S. Sylvester, ed., *St. Thomas More: Action and Contemplation*, New Haven and London, 1972, 88-9.
- 23 *Selected Letters*, 1985.
- 24 *Epigrams*, 52; 175.
- 25 *De Laudibus Legum Anglie*, ed. and trans. S.B. Chrimes, Cambridge, 1949, 31; 79.
- 26 *John Heywood's A Dialogue of Proverbs*, Berkeley, 1963, 3.
- 27 *Epigrams*, 97; 218-19.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 49; 172.
- 29 *Ibid.*, 28; 148.
- 30 *Greek Anthology*, trans. W.R. Paton, London and Cambridge, Mass., Loeb Classical Library; vol. 4, bk. xi, 395.
- 31 *A New Discourse of a State Subject Called the Metamorphosis of Ajax*, E.S. Donne, ed., New York, 1962, 100-101.
- 32 Vol. 3, bk. ix, 11-13.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 34 *Epigrams*, 26; 148.
- 35 Cf. *De Rege Et Rustico* (185), *De Principe Et Rustico Selando Ridiculum* (190), and *De Aulico Ridiculum* (191), all directed against pomposity.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 94; 214.
- 37 *Ibid.*, xxviii; cf. discussion of the merits of an elected legislative body in Utopia as a check on tyranny and a means to wise administration: *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 4, E. Surtz, S.J. and J.H. Hexter, ed., New Haven and London, 1965, 123-5.
- 38 *Epigrams*, 83; 205.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 35-6; 158.
- 40 *The Statesman's Book of John of Salisbury*, ed. and trans. J. Dickinson, New York, 1972, 25-6.
- 41 J.G.A. Pocock, *Politics, Language and Time, Essays on Political Thought and History*, London, 1972, 25-6.
- 42 *Loc. cit.*, 180.
- 43 *Utopia*, 124-131.
- 44 M. Boyle, Erasmus' Prescription for Henry VIII: Logotherapy, *Renaissance Quarterly* 31, 1978, 163.
- 45 J.L. Vives, *Against the Pseudodialecticians*, ed. and trans. R. Guerlac, Dordrecht, 1979.
- 46 *De Oratore*, 2 vols. trans. E.W. Sutton and H. Rackham, London and Cambridge, Mass., Loeb Classical Library, 1959; vol. 1, bk. xvi, 70.