

Thomas More Reader: Historical Tales and Commentaries: Part Two

36. "The Duke of Buckingham's Oration"

[From *The History of King Richard the Third*, Works, pp. 61b-65a]

Then on the Tuesday following this sermon, there came unto the Guildhall in London the Duke of Buckingham, accompanied with divers lords and knights, more than happily knew the message that they brought. And there in the east end of the hall where the Mayor keepeth the hustings, the mayor and all the aldermen being assembled about him, all the commons of the city gathered before them. After silence commanded upon great pain in the Protector's name, the Duke stood up, and (as he was neither unlearned and of nature marvelously well-spoken) he said unto the people with a clear and a loud voice in this manner of wise:

"Friends, for the zeal and hearty favor that we bear you, we be come to break unto you of a matter right great and weighty, and no less weighty than pleasing to God and profitable to all the realm—nor to no part of the realm more profitable than to you the citizens of this noble city. For why, that thing that we wot well ye have long time lacked and sore longed for, that ye would have given great good for, that ye would have gone far to fetch—that thing we be come hither to bring you without your labor, pain, cost, adventure or jeopardy. What thing is that? Certes, the surety of your own bodies, the quiet of your wives and your daughters, the safeguard of your goods: of all which things in times passed ye stood ever more in doubt. For who was there of you all that would reckon himself Lord of his own good, among so many grins and traps as was set therefore among so much pilling and polling, among so many taxes and tallages, of which there was never end and oftentimes no need; or if any were, it rather grew of riot and unreasonable waste, than any necessary or honorable charge. So that there was daily pilled from good men and honest great substance of goods to be lashed out among unthrifths so far-forth that Fifteens sufficed not, nor any usual names of known taxes, but under an easy name of benevolence and good will the commissioners so much of every man took, as no man would win his good will have given. As though the name of benevolence had signified that every man should pay, not what himself of his good will list to grant, but what the King of his good will list to take; which never asked little but everything was hawsed above the measure: ameracements turned into fines, fines into ransoms, small trespass to misprision, misprision into treason. Whereof I think no man looketh that we should remember you of examples by name, as though Burdet were forgotten, that was for a word spoken in haste, cruelly beheaded, by the misconstruing of the laws of this realm for the prince's pleasure; with no less honor to Markham, then Chief Justice, that left his office rather than he would assent to that judgment than to the dishonesty of those that either for fear or flattery gave that judgment. What [of] Cooke, your own worshipful neighbor Alderman and Mayor of this noble city? Who is of you either so negligent that he knoweth not or so forgetful that he remembreth not, or so hard-hearted that he pitieth not that worshipful man's loss? What speak we of loss, his utter spoil and undeserved destruction, only for that it happened those to favor him whom the Prince favored not? We need not, I suppose, to rehearse of these any more by name, sith there be I doubt not many here present that

either in themselves or their nigh friends have known as well their goods as their persons greatly endangered either by feigned quarrels or small matters aggrieved with heinous names. And also there was no crime so great of which there could lack a pretext. For sith the king preventing the time of his inheritance attained the crown by battle, it sufficed in a rich man for a pretext of treason to have been of kindred or alliance near familiarity or leger acquaintance with any of those that were at any time the King's enemies, which was at one time and other more than half the realm. Thus were neither your goods in surety and yet they brought your bodies in jeopardy beside that [which] comes [by] adventure of open war, which albeit that it is ever the will and occasion of much mischief, yet is it never so mischievous as where any people fall at distance among themselves, nor in none earthly nation so deadly and so pestilent as when it happeneth among us and among us never so long continued dissension, nor so many battles in the season, nor so cruel and so deadly fought, as was in the King's days, that dead is—God forgive it his soul.

In whose time and by whose occasion, what about the getting of the garland, keeping it, losing it and winning again, it hath cost more English blood than hath twice the winning of France, in which inward war among ourselves hath been so great effusion of the ancient noble blood of this realm that scarcely the half remaineth, to the great infeebling of this noble land; beside many a good town ransaked and spoiled by them that have been going to the field or coming from thence. And peace long after not much surer than war. So that no time was there in which rich men for their money and great men for their lands or some other for some fear or some displeasure were not out of peril. For whom trusted he that mistrusted his own brother? Whom spared he that killed his own brother? Or who could perfectly love him, if his own brother could not? What manner of folk he most favored we shall for his honor spare to speak of; howbeit this wot you well all, that who so was best bear always least rule; and more suit was in his days unto Shore's wife, a vile and an abominable strumpet, than to all the lords in England, except unto those that made her their proctor, which simple woman was well-named and honest, till the King for his wanton lust and sinful affection bereft her from her husband, a right honest substantial young man among you.

And in that point which in good faith I am sorry to speak of, saving that it is in vain to keep in counsel that thing that all men know, [that] the King's greedy appetite was insatiable, and everywhere over all the realm intolerable. For no woman was there anywhere young or old, rich or poor, whom he set his eye upon, in whom he anything liked either person or favor, speech, pace or countenance, but without any fear of God, or respect of his honor, murmur or grudge of the world, he would importunately pursue his appetite, and have her, to the great destruction of many a good woman, and great dolor to their husbands and their other friends, which being honest people of themselves, so much regard the cleanness of their house, the chastity of their wives and their children, that they were liefer to lose all that they have besides than to have such a villainy done them.

And all were it that with this and other importable dealings, the realm was in every part annoyed. Yet specially ye here, the citizens of this noble city, as well for that among you is most plenty of all such things as minister matter to such injuries, as for that you were nearest at hand, sith that near here about was commonly his most abiding. And yet be ye the people whom he had as singular cause well and kindly to entreat, as any part of his realm, not only for that the prince by

this noble city (as his special chamber and the special well-renowned city of his realm) much honorable fame receiveth among all other nations, but also for that ye not without your great cost and sundry perils and jeopardies in all his wars bear ever your special favor to his part which your kind ¹⁸ minds born to the House of York, sith he hath nothing worthily acquitted, there is of that house that now by God's grace better shall, which thing to shew you is the whole sum and effect of this our present errand.

It shall not, I wot well, need that I rehearse you again that [which] ye have already heard of him ¹⁹ that can better tell it and of whom I am sure ye will better believe it. And reason is that it so be— I am not so proud to look therefore that ye should reckon my words of as great authority as the preachers of the word of God, namely a man so cunning and so wise that no man better woteth what he should say, and thereto so good and virtuous that he would not say the thing which he wist he should not say in the pulpit, namely, into which none honest man cometh to lie, which honorable preacher ye well remember substantially declared unto you at Paul's Cross on Sunday last passed the right and title that the most excellent Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester, now Protector of this realm, hath unto the crown and kingdom of the same. For as the worshipful man groundly ²⁰ made open unto you, the children ²¹ of King Edward the Fourth were never lawfully begotten, forasmuch as the King (living [with] his very wife, dame Elizabeth Lucy) was never lawfully married unto the Queen, ²² their mother, whose blood, saving that he set his voluptuous pleasure before his honor, was full unmeet to be matched with his, and the mingling of whose bloods together hath been the effusion of great part of the noble blood of this realm. Whereby it may well seem the marriage not well made, of which there is so much mischief grown.

For lack of which lawful coupling and also of other things which the said worshipful Doctor rather signified than fully explained, and which things shall not be spoken for me as the thing wherein every man forbearth to say that he knoweth, in avoiding displeasure of my noble Lord Protector, bearing as nature requireth a filial reverence to the Duchess, his mother, for these causes I say before remembered, that is, to wit, for lack of other issue lawfully coming of the late noble Prince Richard, Duke of York, to whose royal blood the crown of England and of France is by the high authority of parliament entailed, the right and title of the same is by the just course of inheritance according to the common law of this land devolute ²³ and come unto the most excellent Prince the Lord Protector as to the very lawfully begotten son of the fore-remembered noble Duke of York. Which thing well considered and the great knightly prowess pondered, what manifold virtues which in his noble person singularly abound, the nobles and commons also of this realm and specially of the north parts, not willing any bastard blood to have the rule of the land nor the abusions before in the same used and longer to continue, have condescended and fully determined to make humble petition unto the most puissant Prince, the Lord Protector: that it may like his grace at our humble request to take upon him the guiding and governance of this realm to the wealth and increase of the same, according to his very right and just title. Which thing, I wot it well, he will be loath to take upon him, as he whose wisdom well perceiveth the labor and study both of mind and of body that shall come therewith to whomsoever [who will] so well occupy the room, as I dare say he will if he take it.

Which room I warn you well is no child's office. And that the great wise man well perceived when he said, "*Veh regno cuius rex puer est.* Woe is that realm that hath a child to their king." ²⁴ Wherefore so much the more cause have we to thank God that this noble personage, which is so

righteously intitled thereunto, is of so sad ²⁵ age and thereto of so great wisdom joined with so great experience. Which albeit he will be loath (as I have said) to take it upon him. Yet shall he to our petition in that behalf the more graciously incline if ye the worshipful citizens of this, the chief city of this realm, join with us, the nobles, in our said request. Which for your own weal we doubt not but ye will; and nevertheless I heartily pray you so to do, whereby you shall do great profit to all this realm besides in choosing them so good a king, and unto yourself special commodity ²⁶, to whom his majesty shall ever after bear so much the more tender favor in how much he shall perceive you the more prone and benevolently minded toward his election. Wherein dear friends what mind you have, we require you plainly to shew us."

When the Duke had said, and looked that the people whom he hoped that the Mayor had framed ²⁷ before should after this proposition made have cried, "King Richard, King Richard," all was hushed and mute, and not one word answered thereunto. Wherewith the Duke was marvellously abashed, and taking the Mayor nearer to him, with others that were about him privy to that matter, said unto them softly, "What meaneth this, that this people be so still?" "Sir," quoth the Mayor, "percase they perceive you not well." "That shall we mend," quoth he, "if that will help".

And by and by ²⁸ somewhat louder he rehearsed them the same matter again in other order and other words, so well and ornately and nevertheless so evidently and plain with voice, gesture and countenance so comely and so convenient that every man much marvelled that heard him, and thought that they never had in their lives heard so evil a tale so well told!

But were it for wonder or fear or that each looked that other should speak first, not one word was there answered of all the people that stood before, but all was as still as the midnight, not so much as rounding ²⁹ among them, by which they might seem to con ³⁰ what was best to do. When the Mayor saw this he with other pertainers ³¹ of that council drew about the Duke and said that the people had not been accustomed there to be spoken unto but by the Recorder, which is the mouth of the city, and happily to him they will answer. With that, the Recorder (called FitzWilliam, a sad man and an honest) which was so new come into that office that he never had spoken to the people before and loath was with that matter to begin, notwithstanding thereunto commanded by the Mayor made rehearsal to the commons of that the Duke had twice rehearsed them himself. But the Recorder so tempered his tale that he shewed everything as the Duke's words and no part his own.

But all this nothing no change made in the people, which always after one, stood as they had been men amazed. Whereupon the Duke round unto the Mayor and said. "This is a marvelous obstinate silence," and therewith he turned unto the people again with these words: "Dear friends, we come to move you to that thing which peradventure we not so greatly needed but that the lords of this realm and the commons of other parties might have sufficeth, saving that we such love bear you and so much set by you that we would not gladly do without you that thing in which to be partners is your weal and honor, which as it seemeth either you see not or weigh not. Wherefore we require you give us answer one or other, whether you be minded as all the nobles of the realm be, to have this noble Prince, now Protector, to be your king or not."

At these words the people began to whisper among themselves secretly, that the voice was neither loud nor distinct but as it were the sound of a swarm of bees, till at the last then in their end of the hall a bushment ³² of the Duke's servants and Nashfeld's and others belonging to the

Protector, with some apprentices and lads that thrust into the hall among the press, began suddenly at men's backs to cry out as loud as their throats would give, "King Richard, King Richard!" and threw up their caps in token of joy. And they that stood before cast back their heads marvelling thereof, but nothing they said.

And when the Duke and the Mayor saw this manner they wisely turned to their purpose, and said it was a goodly cry and a joyful to hear, every man with one voice, no man saying "nay". "Wherefore, friends," quoth the Duke, "since that we perceive it is all your whole minds to have this noble man for your king (whereof we shall make his grace so effectual report that we doubt not but it shall redound unto your great weal and commodity), we require ye that ye tomorrow go with us and we with you unto his noble grace to make your humble request unto him in manner before remembered.

And therewith the lords came down and the company dissolved and departed, the more part all sad; some with glad semblance that were not very merry and some of those that came thither with the Duke, not able to dissemble their sorrow, were fain at his back to turn their face to the wall while the dolor of their hearts burst out at their eyes.

NOTES

(1) **Following this sermon** : On Sunday, June 22, 1483, **Dr. Ralph (or Rafe) Shaw** preached at St. Paul's Cross on the text, "But the swarming progeny of the wicked will come to no good; none of the bastard offshoots will strike deep root or take firm hold....Children engendered in unlawful union are living evidence of their parents' sin when God brings them to account" [*The Wisdom of Solomon* 4:3-6]. Shaw may have been prompted to preach the sermon on the urging of his brother, the Lord Mayor of London. According to More (*Works* , p. 60), Shaw supported Richard's claims to the throne on the odious grounds that (a) King Edward IV, Richard's brother, had contracted with Lady Eleanor Butler before his secret marriage to the widowed Elizabeth Woodville, and therefore this contract made illegitimate his children—Elizabeth, Richard (Duke of York), and his heir, Prince Edward; and (b) furthermore, neither King Edward himself, nor his brother, the Duke of Clarence, were legitimate, because of (alleged) adultery of their mother, Cicely Neville. In other words, Shaw made public what Richard, Duke of Gloucester, personally and privately had maintained, that his own mother was an adulteress and his brothers bastards. He claimed legitimacy for his own birth, however.

(2) Henry Stafford, second **Duke of Buckingham** (1454?-1483) joined Richard against his brother, the Duke of Clarence, and later acted as Great Chamberlain at Richard's coronation. Although up to that time he had supported Richard and indeed agreed to speak on his behalf to the citizens of London, he soon after became disillusioned, presumably abetted by Cardinal Morton (See No. 22, n.1) and in three months' time raised an army against him, but bad weather and defections rendered his force useless and he was captured and beheaded at the marketplace in Salisbury. In Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII* , the Duke of Buckingham's son, Edward, would have played the part his father "meant to act upon Th'usurper Richard," whom, if he had granted an audience to Buckingham before his execution, the Duke would "Have put his knife into" (I,iii,197-199). Ironically the Duke of Buckingham's son was also pronounced traitor and suffered the same death as his father, on May 17, 1521. Some of his inherited manors were given

to Sir Thomas More (and others to Sir Thomas Boleyn, the father of Henry's future paramour and queen) in the official dissolution of the Duke's enormous estates.

(3) The **Court of Hustings**, the highest tribunal for London before which complaints or actions in connection with civil or domestic matters could be brought, convened at the east end of the Guildhall.

(4) **In the Protector's name:** I.e., Richard's. The Duke of Gloucester, left in charge of the kingdom during the minority of King Edward IV's son, overthrew the party favoring the king's widow. He was recognized by the Council as legal Protector of Edward V.

(5) **Burdet** was (probably) a merchant dwelling in Cheapside in a house named "The Crown", who said in jest to his son that he should inherit the crown of Edward IV (P.S. Allen and H.M. Allen, p. 175 and p. 65). **Sir John Markham**, Chief Justice of the King's Bench, 1461 (deprived, 1469), was famous for his impartiality. **Sir Thomas Cooke** (d. 1478), was warden of the Drapers' Company, and an intermediary between Jack Cade and the citizens of London in 1450; Sheriff of London, 1453; Lord Mayor, 1462; imprisoned and fined by Edward IV in 1467-8 for lending money to Queen Margaret, wife of the Lancastrian enemy, King Henry VI. Sir John Markham refused to find him guilty of treason.

(6) **Elizabeth Lucy** was one of Edward IV's mistresses (see above, No. 27, n.1) probably the mother of his illegitimate children, Arthur and Elizabeth. Cicely Neville, **The Duchess:** i.e., Duchess of York. Richard's presumed "filial reverence" towards his mother is inconsistent with Dr. Shaw's comment (see above, n.1) that Richard considered his own mother an adulteress. Buckingham side-steps the issue by saying simply that "for *lack* of other issue [i.e., Richard's brothers, King Edward IV and George, Duke of Clarence] lawfully coming of the late noble Prince Richard, Duke of York," the crown should therefore come to Richard. **Duke of York:** i.e., the only son of Richard, Earl of Cambridge, the grandson of Edmund, fifth son of King Edward III. He married Cicely Neville in 1438. Richard, Duke of Gloucester, was their youngest son and eleventh child.

(7) **Recorder** : i.e., the magistrate appointed by the Mayor to record court proceedings. He was often called upon to repeat testimony. **Sir Thomas Fitzwilliam** (1427-1497) of Lincolnshire was appointed to his office as recorder on June 19, 1483, a few days before Buckingham's oration. R.S. Sylvester and D.P. Harding (p. 254) suggest that More may have known Fitzwilliam and relied upon him for an eye-witness account of the occasion. **John Nashfield** of London had charge of the guard around Westminster at this time.

¹ Perchance

² Because

³ *Grins and traps* : snares and pitfalls

⁴ *Pilling and polling* : i.e., ruining by extortion, etc.

⁵ Arbitrary taxes, tolls, or levies

⁶ I.e., a tax of one-fifteenth imposed on personal property

- ⁷ I.e., Edward IV
- ⁸ Raised
- ⁹ Arbitrary fines
- ¹⁰ Misdemeanor
- ¹¹ Slight
- ¹² *inward war* : i.e., the Wars of the Roses, Lancastrians vs. Yorkists
- ¹³ I.e., Clarence
- ¹⁴ *Shore's wife* : i.e., William Shore's wife, Jane
- ¹⁵ Patron, advocate
- ¹⁶ *Keep in counsel* : i.e., keep secret
- ¹⁷ *Commonly...abiding* : i.e., where he most often stayed
- ¹⁸ Sympathetic
- ¹⁹ I.e., Dr. Ralph Shaw
- ²⁰ Thoroughly
- ²¹ I.e., Elizabeth, Richard (Duke of York) and young Edward V
- ²² I.e., Queen Elizabeth (Woodville)
- ²³ Legally transferred
- ²⁴ *Ecclesiastes 10:16*
- ²⁵ Mature, wise
- ²⁶ Benefit
- ²⁷ Convinced in advance
- ²⁸ *By and by* : immediately
- ²⁹ Whispering
- ³⁰ Know
- ³¹ Partners
- ³² Surprise party