

“Comedy and Tyranny” ? Questions and Discussion with Drs. Stephen W. Smith and Travis Curtright

Jeffrey S. Lehman: What is the culpability of the people in *Richard III*?

Stephen Smith: You can look at the nobles, the clergy and the people as the three guilty parties, and certainly the people don't seem to have any other option but to withhold their consent, and removing one's consent is actually a pretty curious form of resistance, a sort of private witness against tyranny.

One thing that comes out in More's *History*, but also, I think, in his pupil, Shakespeare, is the actual, relative rarity of virtue and freedom, especially among those who appear to be great and free—they can do whatever they want. In fact, the “bastard slips” sermon in *Wisdom* [Chap.4]: If you look at the immediate context of it, right around that line, then you find, “when virtue is present, they imitate it; when it vanishes from the earth, they long for it” [4:2]. And I think that one of the ways in which I'm moved by writing like this is to long for something better that is absent, as it were.

Travis Curtright: Are the people really interested in their own liberty? Or are they simply interested in their own safety? You'd think that if the political prescription is to endow people with liberty, that More would have assumed then that the people were capable of bearing that yoke, right? But then, when you turn to the history, he does portray them as individuals primarily concerned with their own safety. So one option is that it may be anachronistic for us to say that there's a seedbed of democracy in More's England, but it does seem in Epigram #198, and particularly at the end of it, that More does push the envelope on the question of the people themselves, to consider whether or not they should give rule over to anybody, the implication being that they are capable of self-governance. So that does seem to me to be a somewhat revolutionary thought...or a profound misreading on my part. (Laughter.)

Smith: It occurs to me that rule by the people can't be much worse than rule by the kings in *The History of Richard III*. Also, thinking of Shakespeare's history plays: At a minimum, they're very hard on monarchy.

Louis Karlin (lawyer): I'd like to follow up on an observation Professor Logan made last night, where he talked about, in the movement from More's *History* to Shakespeare's play, there was something important lost, where the irony from the narrator was folded into the Richard character. I wonder if you have any thought on

that: About how the narrator becomes part of Richard's own character in Shakespeare.

Smith: Well I hadn't thought about that point at all, but I find it interesting. On the point of irony: The moments of comedy in *Richard III* are *at once* funny and chilling. As I worked through it, I couldn't help it: There's no way to read it as if it were Lucian. Lucian is funny if you're reading *A True Story* or a satire like that, but when Lucian unfolds in the world of history, it's both laughable and sorrowful.

As far as the Shakespeare goes: Where I see the irony of the narrator the most in [More's] *Richard III* is in the art of Shakespeare. I think that the mind that made *Richard III* formed the mind of Shakespeare. So I would find the irony and the art and the interest in Shakespeare, wherever he is.

Curtright: “Hypocrisy with style”: That to me seems the perfect definition of Richard's irony, in *Richard III* *qua* Shakespeare, but also as a narrative strategy at work in the plot. A lot of times the narrator will set up things that are subsequently undermined by either action or speech, by using *martyria* or *testimonia*. “Some men say,” or “other men say, or “I have it on good, credible authority, however . . .” And whatever action has preceded or comes after these comments is oftentimes framed by this sort of ironical deconstruction.

David Oakley (lawyer): Dr. Smith, What do you make of More's going on to more or less equate Shore's wife with the council? Is that comedic, or is that some sort of hit against the counselors to bring them down to a lower level—you have tyranny, and the best you can do is pillow-talk? What do you think about him basically apologizing, saying, Well, you may not think it's important for me to go on like this, talking about this lady, but. . . .

Smith: Well, my first, honest response is that I'm not sure I understand the digression on Shore's wife. But she's a fascinating figure in *The History*, because she seems interestingly different to me from the other characters. A counselor usurping the place of the king is interesting to me too, because, in Edward's own case, the counsel of his own desire usurps his rule over himself, and that, to my mind, would be something like an inner tyranny, understanding tyranny as usurping. Beyond that, I don't have an answer for you. It's a good question.

George M. Logan: That's very interesting about Jane Shore as a good counselor—I'd never thought about that before. But of course counselors in the book in general, and in *Utopia* too, are not put in a very favorable light. What Hythloday says about counselors at the beginning of *Utopia*—that they're self-serving sycophants, that they're knee-jerk conservative, that they're willing to do anything to their careers—is of course borne out not only in *Utopia*, by and large, but certainly by the counselors in *Richard III*, and of course above all in that sanctuary scene, where the assembled grandees of England go along with this wretched proposal. And by striking contrast, Jane Shore is the one good counselor—other than Morton, of course. What the portrayal of Jane as a good counselor links itself to in my mind is More's generally very favorable treatment of

the common people; and this brings us back to an earlier question—whoever it was—about how More sees the common people relative to the clergy and aristocrats. There's no question that he has much more sympathy with, and tends to show higher regard, for common people in both these books. Again, in *Utopia*, the royal counselors, with the exception of Morton, are treated with contempt, and the higher clergy, of course, are villainized in the episode on enclosure. And then, in *Richard III*, in the sanctuary scene, we see the same thing.

By contrast, we have enormous sympathy for the plight of the common people in the Morton episode of *Utopia*, many of whom he says are under "the terrible necessity of stealing, and then dying for it." And in *Richard III*: As far as I recall, there are only two places in *Richard III* where the common people are taken in by Richard's and Buckingham's stratagems. We're told that they are deceived by the display of armor, back on page 29: "Yet much part of the common people were therewith very well satisfied, and said it were almoise to hang them"—it would be charity to hang these guys. And then on page 96, the common people are taken in by the pardoning of Richard's former enemy Fogge: "Which thing the common people rejoiced at and praised, but wise men took it for a vanity." But everywhere else, one of the things that More works to wonderful comic effect, in the Buckingham Guildhall speech, in the Dr. Shaa speech, and elsewhere, is the fact that the common people are not in the least taken in by this stuff. They see through Richard, they usually go as far as they possibly can in withholding their assent. So suddenly this episode with Jane Shore links itself in my mind with those other treatments of the common people. Generally speaking, with some exceptions, the common people are both more perceptive and more decent than their "betters" in both these books.

Mary Gottschalk: I was thinking of what you said, Steve, about when Richard says these patently ridiculous things, and everybody's probably thinking to himself, yeah-right, but nobody says anything. I'm wondering if we could put that together with the way that the book starts by claiming that Edward was 53 when he died. Could this be an equivalent to someone writing a book now that starts with, "JFK was 53 years old when he was assassinated"? All the readers know he was not. The reader keeps reading, but he's thinking, I don't think so! It also could have been a way of getting to write that standard introduction about how wonderful the reign of Edward was, when he was obviously adding on fictional years to his life so he could make this claim. It was during those peaceful, nonexistent years that we all know were nonexistent.

Smith: Well, a couple of things come to mind. One thing I've been thinking through is about the writer of this *History*: If Richard's artful device is dissimulation, invention—things like this—there's a counter-art from More that's *similar*, and yet we have to distinguish it from the tyrant's art. But both are there. I think the text is marked by dissimulation for rhetorical ends that are not bad. This is a large question, but I think the art of the narrator is a counter-art to the art of the tyrant. It comes up in Shakespeare, where the gifted villain and the gifted good man are both presented as artistic, almost like dueling artists. And I wonder about More's writing of this story: It's a counter art to the art of the tyrant. Prospero vs. Iago.

Daniel Janeiro: Towards the end of *Richard III*, the comment is made that "these matters be kings' games," at a point in the *History* in which politics is described as theater, and Richard certainly knows that he *is* good theater and that people are going to want to watch. In that section, the commoners are described as the "audience." In another passage from *Utopia* that also discusses theater, the people are presented more as performers—silent performers. My question is this: Do you think that More places the responsibility on the people to act? Is their silence an action? Are they performers in this play, or are audience-members just watching it?

Curtright: Politics as theater: Well, there are two senses of political theater in your question, I think. One is what we see in Lucian's *Menippus*: that we each have a place in the world, a fortune, so we shouldn't play a tragic role in an ongoing comedy, nor a comedic role inside an ongoing tragedy. And then political theater as a manipulation of appearances, as in the line that the narrator gives us just after Richard and Buckingham hatch their plot for usurpation. It's something to the effect of, But then they both left to direct the minds and eyes of other men away from where their thoughts otherwise cast.

So what part do the people play in this? I think that what Dr. Logan just said about the judgment of the common people is insightful, because, in the sanctuary scene, what's the one argument that really moves Queen Elizabeth? It's the argument that the Cardinal makes when he says that you shouldn't distrust our wit nor our truth. And by wit, he means our capacity to make an intelligent judgment about the Protector's intentions; and by truth, he means loyalty or steadfastness—Our loyalty to you, Queen Elizabeth. And she thinks about that, and she says that she doesn't doubt their truth, or their loyalty to her, but she sometimes fears their wit, that is, whether they've made a good assessment of Richard. And as it is, she makes a calculation: Huh, wit vs. truth—I'll give my son over to people that have truth, loyalty—people that I can trust, even if I don't necessarily go along with their wit, their intelligence.

And the commoners are almost the inversion of that, aren't they? They have wit, but not unflinching loyalties in any one particular direction, so they can see things as they are, and yet, if somebody else is made king tomorrow, then maybe they'll go ahead and salute that fellow as well.

Smith: At the end, where More remarks that wise men shouldn't meddle any further in these things, that's, to my mind, one of the more unsatisfactory moments in the book, because it's clear to me that More himself has meddled in kings' games. So it's a great question to me of how More intends to move the reader. Certainly that line from Hastings, that "he forestudied no peril," and that's why he was undone, seems to link up here. I remember a line from *Macbeth*, where he says, "being unprepared, / our will became the servant to defect / Which else should free have wrought" [2.1.18-20]. So when I think of the artists in this case not taking his advice, meddling in kings' games, precisely for the sake of helping others develop the wisdom that seems to be sorely lacking in the world of *Richard III*, even to develop what he calls "wise mistrust," not only of appearances, but also perhaps of ourselves and our own tendency to follow the counsel of desire rather than truth.