

Thomas More on Tyranny¹

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The first biography of More—just a nine-page sketch—appears in a 1519 letter of Erasmus, the great Dutch humanistic scholar who was the preeminent public intellectual of the early sixteenth century. By 1519, Erasmus had known More for twenty years, and, among other points of contact, had coauthored a book with him in 1505-6 and had drafted his satiric masterpiece, *The Praise of Folly*, while a guest in More's house in 1509. So Erasmus spoke with the authority of long acquaintance when he said, in the biographical sketch, that More “has *always* had a special hatred for tyranny.”

And indeed there is much evidence, in More's writings, that this was the case. The book he wrote with Erasmus was a collection of translations, from Greek into Latin: a collection of short works by the second-century A.D. satirist Lucian, and for it More and Erasmus each wrote a translation of Lucian's declamation “Tyrannicide,” and a response to it. Moreover, tyranny is the subject most frequently treated in the 280 or so Latin epigrams—that is, short, pointed poems—that More wrote in the years roughly 1500-1520—that is, in his twenties and thirties: see the “Poems on Politics” that the Center has made available to us online. Most important, tyranny is, as we shall see in detail in a few minutes, arguably the central concern of *Utopia*—published in 1516—and *inarguably* the central concern of More's other great political work—which was written around the same time—, *The History of King Richard the Third*.

Exactly what did More mean by tyranny? More was a Renaissance humanist, steeped in classical Greek and Latin, so it is safe to assume that the term encompassed for him the usual senses that it carried in those languages—which are, moreover, its senses in the English of More's time. The English word “tyrant” derives, via French, from the Latin “tyrannus,” which in turn transliterates a Greek

word. In these classical languages, “tyrant” means an absolute ruler, especially one who gains power by extra-legal means—by usurping it. The term is, though, not necessarily pejorative: it can designate *any* holder of absolute power. Vergil, for example, applies it to Aeneas. The great *Oxford English Dictionary* documents the fact that “tyrant” had these same senses in sixteenth-century English: “usurper”; “despot”; and the morally neutral “absolute ruler.”

In one particular genre of classical writing—political theory—, though, which developed in the participatory, constitutional governmental milieu of Athens, “tyrant” is *always* a pejorative term, opposed to “king”—*good* monarch. In these writings, the tyrant is associated with various bad traits of character and various kinds of bad behavior—most of these the behaviors that we ourselves associate with tyrants—, but what I'm particularly interested in here is one simple, low-threshold criterion for tyranny, enunciated by Aristotle. Elaborating on a passage in Plato's *Statesman* [31], Aristotle promulgated [*Nicomachean Ethics* 1160] a six-fold classification of governments, divided into three pairs, each of them opposing a law-abiding good form to its lawless, despotic version: aristocracy versus oligarchy, constitutional democracy versus mobocracy, and kingship versus tyranny. Aristotle's analysis of tyranny is characteristically systematic and detailed. He is, for one thing, very clear on the defining difference between a king and a tyrant: the difference is that a king rules in the interest of the people, and a tyrant in the interest of *himself*: “tyranny is monarchy ruling in the interest of the monarch” [*Politics* 1279b; cf. *N.E.* 1160a-b]. Aristotle also expresses this difference metaphorically: the rule of a king over his subjects is like the relationship of a (good) father to his children, whereas the rule of a tyrant is like the relationship of a master to his slaves; alternatively, the relationship of a king to his subjects is like that of a shepherd to his flock.

Centuries later, Aristotle's simple, economical definition of tyranny was propagated in medieval scholastic philosophy; and in Britain it is in evidence near the time of More's birth, notably in writings of the pre-eminent political thinker of fifteenth-century England, Sir John Fortescue, chief justice of the Court of King's Bench.

For More, too, this is clearly the central meaning of “tyrant”: his conception of the difference between a true king and a tyrant is precisely Aristotle's, right down to the metaphors. In one of the Latin epigrams, No.120, the true king is pronounced to be safe among his people, because “they judge none other would promote their interests better.” By contrast, in No.198, a bad king “feels that the people were created for him so that...he may have subjects to rule.” And the metaphors: in No.109, “The Difference between a Tyrant and a King”: “A king[,] who respects the law[,] differs from a cruel tyrant thus: a tyrant rules his subjects as slaves, a king thinks of his as his own children.” And No.115, “On Kings, Good and Bad,” changing Aristotle's shepherd to sheepdog: “What is a good king? He is a watchdog, guardian of the flock, who by barking keeps the wolves from the sheep. What is the bad king? He is the wolf.”

With this conception of the difference between true kings and tyrants in his mind, what do you suppose the monarchies of Europe looked like to More? Right. At the end of *Utopia*, Raphael Hythloday—the fictional character who in the second section of that work (called “*Book 2*”) delivers the account of the fictitious newly discovered island commonwealth of *Utopia*—makes it forcefully and memorably

¹ The following is a lightly edited transcription of Dr. Logan's talk at the 2006 conference.

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clear what *he* thinks of the governments of Europe: “When I consider and turn over in my mind the various commonwealths flourishing today”—i.e., all of them—“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” [105—here as elsewhere, quoting Logan/Adams edition (2002)]: not *purely* tyrannies, as the word “conspiracy” implies—there’s more than one rich person, not just the king, in most or all of these countries—but a deadly combination of *two* of the corrupt forms of government, tyranny and oligarchy. (Aristotle had stressed that both tyrants and oligarchs are marked by what he calls their “aim and end of amassing wealth” [*Pol.* 1310b]. It’s not hard to think of examples.)

The fact that Hythloday regards the European states as pernicious combinations of tyranny and oligarchy doesn’t necessarily mean that *More* did: if there is one central, well-established point in modern criticism of *Utopia*, it is that we cannot simply *assume* that Hythloday always speaks for *More*. But in fact the identity of their views on this particular point is surely confirmed when we examine the treatment of the European states in the rest of *Utopia*.

Book 1 of *Utopia* is a dialogue—debate—on the question of whether Hythloday should engage with practical politics—as distinguished from political theory—by joining a king’s council. This is just a fictionalized way of exploring the general question of whether people like *More* and *Erasmus*—that is, humanist sages—should take this step. The “pro” position is argued by *More* himself—more precisely, by a somewhat simplified, mildly fictionalized version of himself. *More* argues that people like Hythloday can do some good by counselling rulers, and that it is therefore their duty to do so. The “con” position is taken by Hythloday, whose argument is that it is useless for people like himself to join a royal council (roughly equivalent, in that monarchy-dominated era, to what would now be taking a job in the White House). He offers two principal reasons for his position. First, most kings “apply themselves to the arts of war, in which I have neither ability nor interest, instead of to the good arts of peace” [14]. Second, kings’ councils are populated by “people who envy everyone else and admire only themselves,” and whose only object is to ingratiate themselves with their superiors, so that no genuine exchange of ideas goes on in councils.

Like other humanists, Hythloday is fond of proving his points by examples, and so he supports his position here by recounting at length a conversation that took place, he says, around 1497, at the dinner table of John Cardinal Morton, who was Henry VII’s Lord Chancellor. (In fact, *More* made up the conversation, though surely he had heard some similar ones, perhaps actually at Morton’s table, since he had *waited* table there during the two year’s when he had been a page in Morton’s household.)

The conversation that Hythloday quotes verbatim—which is thus a dialogue *within* the dialogue on whether he should join a royal council—is on the subject of English criminal justice; in particular, why the punishment for theft (for theft of any size, the punishment is hanging: one strike and you’re out) is not working. The dialogue opens with an observation, by a pompous lawyer at Morton’s table, that although thieves are “being executed everywhere, . . . with as many as twenty at a time being hanged on a single gallows” [15], the incidence of theft is undiminished. (*More*, voted “lawyer of the millennium” in a 1999 poll of British lawyers, has nothing good to say about lawyers in *Utopia*.) The position that Hythloday reports

himself as having taken on the punishment of thieves—and *here* there is nothing to suggest that he’s not speaking for the author—is that capital punishment is simply not a good solution to the problem of theft, not only because this punishment is morally wrong (in view especially of “Thou shalt not kill”) but also because it’s bound to be ineffective, since it attacks the symptoms of the problem but not its causes.

Hythloday’s purpose in recounting the conversation at Cardinal Morton’s is to illustrate—in the dismissive response, to his ideas, of the lawyer and the rest of those in attendance on the chancellor—that no real exchange of ideas goes on in councils. But the *author’s* purposes are broader than those of his character Hythloday, and this episode of *Utopia* is *primarily* interesting for its analysis of the ills of English society, into which (as in other societies), issues of crime and punishment provide a window. The root cause of most theft, Hythloday reports himself as having argued at Morton’s, is not thieves, but the nature of the English social and governmental system, which, not checking the greed and vanity of the upper classes and thus countenancing a grossly inequitable distribution of wealth, forces some poor people to *become* thieves—that is, in order to feed themselves and their families. Not *all* theft is the result of poverty—it’s not as if *More* didn’t believe in Original Sin—but much of it is. As a consequence of existing law, and of the unfettered ability of the strong to make themselves richer at the expense of the weak, many of the poor are, as Hythloday terribly says, “driven to the awful necessity of stealing and then dying for it” [16]. This is a perfectly accurate assessment of the situation at the time.

Obviously the person in the best position to do something about this situation is the king—Henry VII, at the time of the supposed debate—, as he certainly would if he were a *true* king—that is, one who ruled in the interest of all the people. But Hythloday does not say one word about the king—though *More* despised Henry VII, and certainly regarded him as a tyrant. (*More’s* attitude toward Henry is abundantly clear from the Latin poem he wrote on the occasion of the king’s death in 1509 and the accession of his son: “This day”—that is, the day of Henry *VIII’s* coronation—“is the limit of our slavery, the beginning of our freedom.”) But by 1516, when he wrote Book 1 of *Utopia*, *More* evidently thought it just as well not to directly criticize the father of the current ruler, even through the voice of a fictional character distinguished from himself. So instead, in Book 1, he explicitly blames only a bad law and the *rest* of the rich: the oligarchs—the bad eggs among the nobility and gentry, and some leaders of the clergy.

But if *More* didn’t feel free, in *Utopia*, to write openly about Henry VII as a tyrant, and in 1516 still thought Henry *VIII* was a *good* king, he felt perfectly free to characterize other European monarchs as tyrants—especially the kings of England’s old enemy France.

When Hythloday concludes his account of the debate at Morton’s, he finds that *More*—that is, the character *More*—agrees with everything he has said. But *More* still doesn’t agree with the conclusion that Hythloday draws from his example, namely, that there would be no point in his joining a royal council. So Hythloday tries to persuade him with two further examples: in this case, accounts of two meetings of particular royal councils—fictional accounts, and developed as satire, but in essence all too realistic, just as his account of English criminal justice had been.

The first of these additional examples is an account of a meeting of the council of the king of France: Hythloday doesn't specify which one, but what he says about this king seems to point especially to the one actually reigning at the time More wrote, Francis I. In the classical theory of the tyrant, one of the hallmarks of tyrants is their taste for war, and of course the fact that "most...[kings] apply themselves to the arts of war" was the first reason Hythloday offered for not wanting to join a council. In Hythloday's example, the king of France has a truly boundless interest in war. The imagined council meeting that Hythloday narrates is one on foreign policy—that is, one in which "all...[the] king's most judicious councillors [are] hard at work devising a set of crafty machinations by which the king" may conquer as much of other kings' territory as he possibly can: in particular, how he "might keep hold of Milan and recover Naples, which has proved so slippery"—in the period, France won and lost Milan and Naples a couple of times each—; "then overthrow the Venetians and subdue all Italy; next add to his realm Flanders, Brabant, and the whole of Burgundy"—ruled by the Hapsburgs at the time—, "besides some other nations he has long had in mind to invade" [28].

This is not an outrageous slur on the king of France. The list of intended conquests is exaggerated a little—heightened for satire—but in fact the account conforms closely to actual French policy in the period. Why is this policy tyrannical? Because, of course, it is in the interest of the king rather than of his subjects (though it's not even really in the *king's* interest, Hythloday very plausibly argues—and we have a fresh reason to know that wars and occupations don't always turn out to be in the interest of the leaders who instigate them). The point that the wars are not in the interest of the subjects is made in the second half of the example, where Hythloday imagines himself, as a *member* of the council, rising to oppose the "crafty machinations" of the other councillors:

Now in a meeting like this one, where so much is at stake, where so many distinguished men are competing to think up schemes of warfare, what if an insignificant fellow like me were to get up and advise going on another tack entirely? Suppose I said the king should leave Italy alone and stay at home, because the kingdom of France was almost too much for one man to govern well, and the king should not dream of adding others to it? Then imagine I told about the decrees of the Achorians, who live off to the south-east of the island of Utopia. Long ago these people went to war to gain another realm for their king...When they had conquered it, they saw that keeping it was going to be no less trouble than getting it had been. The seeds of fighting were always springing up: their new subjects were continuously rebelling or being attacked by foreign invaders; the Achorians had to be constantly at war for them or against them, and they saw no hope of ever being able to disband their army. In the meantime, they were being heavily taxed, money flowed out of their kingdom, their blood was being shed for someone else's petty pride, and peace was no closer than it had ever been...Moreover, suppose I showed that all this war-mongering, by which so many different nations were kept in turmoil for...[the king's] sake, would exhaust his treasury and demoralize his people, yet in the end come to nothing through one mishap or another. [29-30]

Does this sound at all familiar? Whenever a parallel of that kind comes to your mind (perhaps one or two already have), it's an indication that More has accomplished

what he *set out* to accomplish, which was not merely to illuminate sixteenth-century politics, but, more important, to illuminate politics in *general*: he's a political *theorist*. In both these books, the number and precision of parallels with other times—especially times *after* More's, which of course he hadn't witnessed—show how astonishingly accurate and deep and general More's understanding of politics was.

But back to Hythloday, who, after his French example, offers another one, also of an imagined meeting of a royal council. This second council is on domestic policy; and just as foreign policy turns out, in the French council, to mean "how the king can conquer as much of other kings' territory as possible," domestic policy turns out to mean "how the king can fill his treasury by appropriating as much of his citizens' property as possible." The account of this council has exactly the same structure as the account of the French one: a plethora of nefarious schemes proposed by the other councillors, and then Hythloday imagining himself rising to oppose these schemes, in a beautiful speech that nearly makes one weep, in its simple common sense and common decency, and its sad distance from the way politicians usually think and speak. As in the first council, Hythloday's final point—made to "More" at the end of the example—is that giving such speeches in such councils does absolutely no good—as, for example, they did absolutely no good in the run-up to our current war. This is, again, why Hythloday thinks guys like himself should keep out of politics.

More doesn't say what country this second king rules: he's just "rex quopiam"—"some king or other." But who he really is, at least primarily, is clear: he's Henry VII. Various ones of the extortionate policies discussed in the meeting were employed by various European monarchs of the period. But *all* of them were employed by Henry VII.

The passage also has a clear connection with the famous—or notorious—part of Aristotle's treatment of tyranny in the *Politics* [V], where he dispassionately summarizes the methods by which tyrannies can be preserved. There are two opposite methods. The first of these encompasses the "traditional" methods of the tyrant, which he sums up under three headings: "breeding mutual distrust among the citizens"; rendering the citizens incapable of action by impoverishing them; employing various means "to break the spirit of...[the subjects]. Tyrants know that a poor-spirited man will never plot against anybody." This last one is quite close to the last thing Hythloday tells us about the recommendations of "some king or other"'s councillors: "It is important for the king to leave his subjects as little as possible, for his own safety depends on keeping them from getting too frisky with wealth and freedom. For riches and liberty make people less patient to endure harsh and unjust commands, whereas poverty and want blunt their spirits, make them docile, and grind out of the oppressed the lofty spirit of rebellion." In 1498, the Spanish ambassador to Henry VII's court reported to Ferdinand and Isabella on "the impoverishment of the [English] people," and added that "The King himself said to me, that it is his intention to keep his subjects low, because riches would only make them haughty" [*Sp. Cal.* I, 177; quoted *CW* 4.365].

Then there's the second, opposite method for preserving tyrannies, which is for the tyrant to "act, or at any rate appear to act, in the role of a good player of the part of King." Rapacity, for example, can be masked. Several of the policies recommended by "some king or other"'s councillors are beautifully crafted

instantiations of this tactic. One councillor “suggests a make-believe war, so that money can be raised under that pretext; then when the money is in, . . . [the king] can make peace with holy ceremonies, which the deluded common people will attribute to the prince’s piety and compassion for the lives of his subjects” [31]. (Something very like this happened in England in 1492, when Henry VII not only pretended war with France and levied taxes for the war—which was hardly fought—but collected a bribe from the French king for not fighting it.)

Though More felt, by 1516, that his treatment of tyranny in the reign of Henry VII needed to be coy, no such need inhibited his account of Richard III. The view of Richard as a tyrant was one that everyone shared—or, at least, everyone who spoke up—; and it was a view that the Tudor monarchs who succeeded Richard strongly encouraged.

But here let me insert an excursus on the question of whether Richard really *was* a tyrant; that is, on whether More’s depiction of him is accurate in this fundamental respect. Richard has of course had many passionate defenders. A notable recent instance was a 1996 mock trial at the Indiana University Law School, a trial of Richard (*in absentia*) on the most notorious of the charges against him, that he ordered the murder of his brother’s children, the “little princes in the Tower.” William Rehnquist presided in a three-judge panel, and Richard was acquitted on a split decision. All I can think is that the prosecution must have had a lousy lawyer, or else the fix was in. Be that as it may, there is little doubt that Richard committed acts that satisfy the sixteenth-century criteria for a tyrant. (He doesn’t necessarily satisfy *our* criteria: it is a sad commentary on our time that we have reset the bar for tyrants very high. In the aftermath of the twentieth century, to qualify as a tyrant you pretty well have to kill many thousands of people, or millions: be a Saddam Hussein or a Hitler or a Stalin; and Richard is very small potatoes in *that* league.) Once established on the throne, Richard did not rule despotically. He made a great point of ruling by law, and through Parliament, and he was especially interested in law reform and the administration of justice. If More had gotten that far in the *History*, presumably he would have interpreted this aspect of Richard’s reign as an application of Aristotle’s second method for preserving a tyranny: acting, “or at any rate appear[ing] to act, in the role of a good player of the part of King.” But by sixteenth-century lights, Richard was a tyrant in any case, for two reasons.

First, recall that simply being a usurper would qualify him, irrespective of the nature of his subsequent reign. To be sure, Richard had his henchmen proclaim—and in 1584 had Parliament proclaim—that his brother Edward’s children were illegitimate, which would certainly make Richard the rightful heir. But his case was damaged by the fact that shortly after Edward’s death he had publicly sworn, and caused many others to swear, allegiance to Edward’s elder son as the rightful heir, and he had in fact accepted appointment as the young Edward V’s official “protector” for the period of his minority. Some protector: it seems impossible to dispute More’s caustic remark that by the appointment of Richard to this office “the lamb was betaken to the wolf to keep” [29 in the Logan edition]—which resonates with his characterization, in one of the Latin poems I quoted earlier, of the wolf as an appropriate metaphor for a tyrant.

Richard also had a good claim to the title of tyrant from the extra-judicial killings that he *certainly* ordered in the period leading up to his coronation, as well as those two others that he is *presumed* (with all due respect to the Indiana verdict)

to have ordered shortly after it. The certain ones were the executions of the queen’s brother Lord Rivers, a son by her first marriage, and Sir Thomas Vaughan—all of whom Richard took prisoner when he seized control of the young king—and the execution of his ally Lord Hastings. Even if we were to grant the validity of Richard’s charges against these men (which there is not much basis for doing), his executions of them without trial were certainly the lawless actions of a tyrant. Then there’s the putative murder of the little princes. There isn’t really any way to prove this charge beyond a shadow of a doubt (though I think the test of “beyond a *reasonable* doubt” is met), but the charge is made not only by More (and, of course, by Tudor apologists) but also in seemingly all accounts from the years of Richard’s reign, including what are now regarded as the most authoritative contemporary accounts of his rise. (Recall that *More* wrote about thirty years after the events.) Moreover, mainstream modern historians are generally agreed that it is highly likely that Richard did commit this heinous crime—which, to be sure, was of a kind—“dynastic” murder (in the nature of things, usually of relatives)—not uncommon in the vicious politics of the era.

Since More’s account of Richard breaks off around September 1583—that is, only a couple of months after the usurpation—the subject of the *History* as it stands is, of necessity, primarily the means of *gaining* a tyranny rather than (*Aristotle’s* subject) the means of *preserving* one—which in fact Richard wasn’t very good at. What, in More’s view, enabled Richard to seize control of England—which he *was* very good at?

First, it required certain personal qualities in Richard, which More sums up in the character sketch of him near the beginning of the work—one of the many brilliant rhetorical set pieces in the *History*. (In the kind of history-writing that the humanists revived from classical Greece and Rome, character sketches were a standard and even essential feature, since individual character was regarded as the primary causal agent in history.) The key personal qualities in More’s character of Richard included some that we could only call “good”: Richard had “wit”—that is, intelligence—and courage; and More concedes that he was a good military leader. And then there were the *bad* traits. “He was malicious, wrathful, envious”; and above all, two other traits, which More dwells on especially. (1) He was a profound dissimulator: “He was close and secret, a deep dissimuler: lowly of countenance, arrogant of heart; outwardly companionable where he inwardly hated, not letting”—refraining—“to kiss whom he meant to kill. . . .” (2) (Already implicit in the sentence just quoted,) he was “dispiteous”—pitiless—“and cruel,” especially in the service of his ambition: “Friend or foe was muchwhat indifferent to him:”—that is, the distinction was not important to him: the execution of Hastings is of course the great example—“where his advantage grew, he spared no man’s death whose life withstood his purpose” [9-12].

Another excursus: are these claims about Richard’s character accurate? Yes, I think so (unlike the stuff about his physical deformity and his ominous birth—some, at least, of which More himself clearly takes with several grains of salt). Richard *was* intelligent and courageous, a good military leader—a *real* one: he did lead his troops in battle at Bosworth Field. “Dispiteous and cruel”? The example More gives—“He slew with his own hands King Henry the Sixth, being prisoner in the Tower”—is of doubtful validity (and More acknowledges that the evidence for it is only hearsay), but there are other examples that support this charge: especially

those extra-judicial killings that are certain. And as for “deep dissimuler,” there is no doubt whatsoever. Richard and his agents did deceive the queen into having the young Edward V escorted from Wales to London by a relatively small force, so that he and the duke of Buckingham and *their* armed force could seize control of the young king and his principal attendants. Moreover, he certainly deceived his key allies into thinking that he sought only to counter the queen’s undue influence on Edward V, not to displace him. Perhaps that was all that he sought at first: opinions have varied on this point. But surely he was dissimulating when he still maintained this claim as late as six days before finally tipping his hand via Dr. Shaa’s scandalous sermon proclaiming the bastardy of the young king and his brother.

But More also believed that Richard’s ability to seize the throne depended on the existence of certain qualities in *others*—namely, the realm’s other wielders of power, the aristocracy and the higher clergy. That these conditions were requisite for Richard’s rise to power is, in effect, asserted in another rhetorical set piece near the opening of the work, the deathbed oration of Edward IV. Though Edward doubtless spoke some last words of some sort, and though there is an early report [Mancini 69] that he tried, in his final illness, to reconcile the feuding Lord Hastings and Marquis Dorset, the speech More gives him on his deathbed is essentially fictional, like all the others in the work: such glittering fictional orations are the single most conspicuous hallmark of the kind of rhetorical historiography the humanists revived from the classical world. The orations could be used to show off the historian’s rhetorical prowess, to convey his interpretation of the speaker’s character and motives, or to convey his interpretation of the events treated in the work. Here the point—whose validity is illustrated, More clearly thinks, in what follows—is that factional divisions and selfish ambition among the powerful were necessary conditions for Richard’s seizure of the throne: “where each laboreth to break that the other maketh,” he has Edward say,

and, for hatred of each of other’s person, impugnech each other’s counsel, there must it needs be long ere any good conclusion go forward.... a pestilent serpent is ambition and desire of vainglory and sovereignty, which among states [that is, noblemen] where he once entereth creepeth forth so far till with division and variance he turneth all to mischief—first longing to be next the best, afterward equal with the best, and at last chief and above the best.... if you among yourself in a child’s reign fall at debate, many a good man shall perish and haply he too, and ye too, ere this land find peace again. [15-17]

This speech is the major thematic statement of the *History*—the major statement of More’s interpretation of what *happened* in England in the period of Richard’s rise, reign, and fall. In the remainder of the unfinished book, More demonstrates how Richard’s personal qualities, working on the ambition and factionalism of the other aristocrats (and on the—initial—gullibility of the commoners) made possible his seizure of the throne. Nearly every episode of the *History* illustrates this thesis in one way or another; but here I’ll speak only about one of the really crucial episodes, the third major step in Richard’s *coup d’état* (after the seizure of the young Edward V and his attendants, and, later, the arrest of councillors loyal to the king and the summary execution of their leader, Lord Hastings): the extraction of the king’s younger brother from sanctuary.

The sanctuary episode is the longest one in the unfinished *History*, occupying nearly a fifth of it, and it is also one of the most brilliant, made up very largely of the characteristic virtuoso orations of classical and humanist historiography—which here, in the cases of Buckingham’s speech and the preceding, much briefer one by Richard, serve, among other things, to underscore the point that *rhetoric*, specifically in combination with Richard’s dissimulation, was another important factor in his rise to power.

That rhetoric could be a powerful tool for bad purposes was of course no news—and is no news to you and me, in the closing weekend of an American election campaign. For us, though, “rhetoric” is a word that has almost entirely lost its original signification and has now become merely a synonym for “BS.” In Western educational, legal, and political tradition from fifth-century B.C. Greece through the nineteenth century, however, it meant “the art of verbal persuasion,” and it was a highly *developed* art, which constituted, along with philosophy, one of the two great educational traditions of classical Greece and Rome, and was passed on to the Middle Ages and beyond as one of the three fundamental educational disciplines that constituted the “trivium” (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic).

From the time of Plato, the power of rhetoric for evil was an enduring theme, especially of the rival tradition of philosophy. The Sophists of fifth- and early fourth-century B.C. Greece, famous for their rhetorical skills, were condemned—in a phrase that stuck for two millennia and more—for “making the worse appear the better cause.” Rhetoricians themselves were aware of, and their works sometimes discussed, the dangerous power of rhetoric when directed to bad ends; and this was still a concern in the early-modern era, both of philosophers (such as Hobbes) and of masters of rhetoric (such as Milton).

As the phrase “make the worse appear the better cause” suggests, a center of concern was with the rhetorical technique known as *paradiastole*—“redescription”: the redescription, especially, of a good thing as bad (for example, of a virtue as a vice), or of a bad thing as good. Googling *paradiastole*, I was charmed to find an example cited from the comic strip “Frank and Ernest”: advertising a car that won’t start as having a “very quiet engine.” *Paradiastole* is now known by the much easier-to-pronounce name of “reframing” (a form of spin) and, needless to say, remains a staple of politicians—and is also no more than every *litigator* is obliged to do, and not necessarily dishonourably.

Buckingham’s oration in the sanctuary episode is identified by its very first words as a paradiastolic exercise. It begins by interrupting the archbishop of Canterbury, who has just said that if he cannot persuade the queen to yield her younger son, it will be the result not of lack of effort on his part but of “womanish fear” on hers. “Womanish fear? Nay, womanish frowardness! quod the duke of Buckingham” [33]. And he is off, to redescribe the queen’s thoroughly justified fear as mere female perversity: a task in which he succeeds, persuading most of his audience—which comprises the secular and religious grandees of England assembled in council—that if the queen refuses to yield the child it will be perfectly legal to extract him forcibly, despite the age-old, very powerful privilege of sanctuary.

Of course rhetoric never operates in a vacuum: its effect is conditioned by the relation between speaker and audience, and other aspects of a speech’s context. In the present instance, there is a strong incentive, especially for ambitious people, to

believe—or, at the least, appear to believe—the second-most powerful nobleman of the realm, especially when he is speaking on behalf of the *most* powerful one. More wonders whether the clergy—normally staunch defenders of sanctuary—who expressed agreement with Buckingham spoke “as they thought” or “for his pleasure” [37]. This is, of course, one of those royal councils Hythloday plausibly claims are always full of self-serving sycophants. And here there is additional reason to agree with the speaker, since most of what he says does in fact make perfectly good sense (sanctuary was, as Buckingham asserts, scandalously abused), and when what he is proposing does not appear to be pernicious: More stresses that neither the laymen nor the clergy would have acquiesced to the proposition that the boy could legitimately be removed from sanctuary if they had thought any harm was meant to him—that is to say, the continuing success of Richard’s dissimulation was a necessary condition of the success of Buckingham’s rhetoric.

This last point, like the importance of having an audience that is eager to please, is underscored by the contrast between the success of Buckingham’s sanctuary oration and the failure of his equally brilliant oration at the London Guildhall (near the end of the book). In the latter case, Buckingham fails because Richard’s dissimulation is no longer in place, and because he is not addressing people with much to gain by believing (or “believing”) him. At this stage, Buckingham is asking—cajoling, threatening—the commons of London to endorse Richard’s claim to the throne; and this time his speech is greeted not with assent but with shocked silence. This had also been the response to Dr. Shaa’s sermon: “the people were so far from crying ‘King Richard!’ that they stood as they had been turned into stones, for wonder of this shameful sermon” [80]. By this time, though, it wasn’t crucial that the rhetoric be successful: once the younger prince, too, was in Richard’s control, the usurpation was a *fait accompli*.

Karl Marx says “Philosophers [have] explained the world in many ways: the point is to change it” [Theses on Ludwig Feuerbach, No. 11]. Marx is not a person with whom I agree very often. But I think he was onto something there. So does More think there is any way to prevent or dislodge tyrannies?

Book I of *Utopia* is centrally concerned with the question of how—or whether—existing tyrannies can be, if not overturned, at least ameliorated. The primary subject of the dialogue of Book I is the extent to which good and wise counsellors can deflect a monarch from tyranny. This had in fact been a subject of debate in political theory dating back to the *Republic* Plato is famously pessimistic on the matter: there’s no use sending philosophers to counsel kings: there will be “no...road to real happiness, either for society or the individual,” unless philosophers become kings, or kings somehow—not by having philosophers as counsellors—become philosophers [473C-D]. Until that time (evidently not imminent), philosophers, as he says in another passage, realizing that “political life has virtually nothing sound about it, and that they’ll find no ally to save them in the fight for justice”—so that, if they mix with politics, “they are likely to perish like a man thrown among wild beasts, without profit to themselves or others,—...will...keep to themselves, like a man who stands under the shelter of a wall during a driving storm of dust and hail” [496C-D].

This is the position that Hythloday maintains in Book I of *Utopia*. In the course of his argument, in fact, he quotes both these passages from the *Republic* [28, 37]. His one significant change from Plato is to postulate a different, but no more cheering,

fate for the humanist philosopher who is foolish enough to attempt to counsel kings: his colleagues will either “seduce...[him] by their evil ways, or, if...[he] remain[s] honest and innocent,...[he] will be made a screen for the knavery and folly of others” [36-37]. Since 2003, I simply cannot read this passage without thinking of Colin Powell at the U.N., expending much of the credibility he had gained in an outstanding career by making other people’s bogus case for Saddam’s WMDs.

There had, however, been an opposed strand in political theory in classical antiquity. Plutarch, for example, had argued that it is a wise man’s duty to counsel rulers, because he can in this way positively affect their behavior. In *Utopia* Book I, as I noted earlier, More puts this position into his own mouth; and he argues it as powerfully as he makes Hythloday argue the opposite one. In his own *life*, of course, More ended up following this path, joining Henry VIII’s council two years after the publication of *Utopia*. He did so, though, evidently without any illusions as to the limits on what he might accomplish. As he has “More” say in perhaps the most memorable passage of the book, “If you cannot pluck up bad ideas by the root, or cure long-standing evils to your heart’s content, you must not therefore abandon the commonwealth....you must strive and struggle as best you can to handle everything tactfully—and thus what you cannot turn to good, you may at least make as little bad as possible. For it is impossible to make everything good unless all men are good, and that I don’t expect to see for quite a few years yet” [35]. Still counting. At best, then, More looks for very modest results from people counseling rulers.

Nor does the *second* book of *Utopia* offer reason for optimism that tyrannies, once established, can be successfully opposed—except by external force: the Utopians, Hythloday reports, sometimes go to war “to liberate an oppressed people, in the name of compassion and humanity, from tyranny and servitude” [85]. The commonwealth of Utopia has seemed problematic to many readers in various ways, not least in this interventionist foreign policy—of which we have learned to be suspicious from recent times’ experience with “wars of liberation,” whether undertaken by bad guys (various Communist states) or supposedly good guys (us)—and there are compelling reasons to doubt that Utopia was in all respects More’s ideal commonwealth.

But whatever we—or More—may think of Utopia in general, there is no question that its governmental structure was carefully designed as a thought experiment in how to prevent tyrannies from arising. Plato (in his later political work *The Laws*, not the *Republic*) and Aristotle agree that the best *possible* constitution is a mixed one. For them, this is a mixture of monarchy and democracy. In the mixed constitution of the commonwealth of Utopia, however, the element of monarchy is very strictly limited, and democracy is combined with *true* aristocracy—an aristocracy of intellect and character—to produce a government that acts in the interests of the citizenry rather than its own, and is carefully safeguarded against tyranny. Utopia is a federation of fifty-four largely independent city-states, each with an elected assemblyman for each thirty families; these assemblymen elect the chief executive officer of the city-state, from a slate of four chosen by the people of the four quarters of the city. Actively seeking any office disqualifies a person for all of them [82]. The chief executive of the city holds office for life, “unless he is suspected of aiming at a tyranny” [48]. There is no national executive, though once a year a national senate meets “to consider affairs of

common interest to the island" [43]. Very tellingly, Hythloday reports that the Utopian officials "are never arrogant or unapproachable," and "are called 'fathers,' and that indeed is the way they behave" [82]. That is, the traditional metaphor for a good king fits *all* the Utopian officials.

There is reason for thinking, too, that this governmental structure is close to what, given a free choice, More would have chosen for England. One of the longest and most interesting of More's Latin epigrams speaks directly to this matter: No. 198 (which I quoted earlier), entitled "What is the best form of government," argues that government by an elected senate and consul—as in the Roman Republic—is superior to monarchy: "a senator is elected by the people to rule; a king attains this end by being born...the one feels"—this is the part I quoted before—"that he was made senator by the people; the other feels that the people were created for him so that...he may have subjects to rule." More does acknowledge, though, that it's not easy to find a senate-full of good people (as we know). Moreover, the epigram comes to a dispiriting conclusion, which is that there is no practical point in discussing the possibility of a different form of government, since only an absolute monarch has the power to bring about such a change! A similar point is made at the end of *Utopia*, where More has himself say that

while I can hardly agree with everything...[Hythloday] said..., yet I freely confess that in the Utopian commonwealth there are very many features which in our own societies I would wish rather than expect to see. [107]

The *History of King Richard the Third* offers perhaps a little more hope. There are several junctures where, More suggests, Richard's rise might have been forestalled. If factionalism had not riven the nobles, he would not have been able to play one group of them off against the other. Then there is a series of moments where a little less gullibility on the part of one person or another could have saved the day: there were missed opportunities at each stage of Richard's coup. If the queen had not been persuaded to reduce the size of the young king's armed guard...In connection with the fall of Hastings, More avers that Richard could have been stopped by the aristocracy, if not for Hastings's fatal gullibility and over-confidence: if Hastings had paid attention to Lord Stanley's suspicions and his urgings that the two of them flee London, then, More says, they would have "departed, with divers other lords, and broken all the dance" [53]—upset all Richard's plans. In the sanctuary episode, there are three institutions that, especially working together, had the power to stop Richard: the aristocracy—especially in this late-feudal era when aristocrats could raise private armies among their retainers—; the Church; and that greatest, impersonal English institution, the common law. As More shows, though, the aristocracy and the Church were brought—by the artistry of Richard's dissimulation and Buckingham's rhetoric—to collude with Richard rather than oppose him. But why could the *law* not stop Richard? The other brilliant speeches in the episode are the queen's; and the principal matter of her longest speech is the legal arguments that substantiate her right, and her child's right, to sanctuary: twice in the speech she directly cites legal opinion for points of common law [44, 46]. Her arguments on the legal position are surely correct; why do they not prevail? Because all that is necessary in order to neutralize the force of law is for one

cunning rhetorician to ambiguate the legal position, which Buckingham very successfully does.

Yet even if Richard had been thwarted, the book, and our knowledge of More's times, suggest that he could not have been terribly optimistic about the prospects of good government resulting: for the alternatives to Richard were not much better. It's impossible to know how the young Edward V would have turned out, though More makes the prince's own father express plausible fears about the likely effect on him, when he takes the throne, of the rival blandishments of the warring courtly factions: "while either party laboreth to be chief, flattery shall have more place than plain and faithful advice; of which must needs ensue the evil bringing-up of the prince, whose mind...shall readily fall to mischief and riot, and draw down with this noble realm to ruin, but if grace turn him to wisdom" [15].

And indeed if Edward V had lived and turned out badly, he would, given his father and mother, have come by it honestly. One of the surprising things about the *History* is the difference between the way Edward IV and his reign are characterized at the beginning of the book and the way they are characterized toward the end of it, in Buckingham's Guildhall oration. In the opening of the *History*, More praises Edward as a sort of J.F.K.: supposedly a good king, though admittedly a skirt-chaser. In Buckingham's speech, though, we have a radically different portrayal of him, as not merely a sexual predator out of control but also as an ingenious and relentless extorter of his subjects' money; above all, a master in using the law as a mechanism of extortion. And in truth, though Buckingham is hardly a disinterested authority, and though his rhetoric is hyperbolic, his account of Edward is on the whole much closer to the historical Edward than is the idyllic portrayal in the book's opening pages. More, then, knew the charges of Edward's detractors, and he surely knew—judging from his generally accurate representation of the charges, through Buckingham, and of the supporting evidence for them—that the charges were valid.

So this was the king who (except for the three months in which Edward V was nominally king) preceded Richard. And who followed him? Henry VII, whom, as we have seen, More regarded as little, if any, better than Richard. And possibly by the time More broke off the *History*—we unfortunately don't know when that was—he was beginning to foresee that Henry's *son* might turn out to be the worst of the lot. Tyranny in Aristotle's and More's sense was simply the order of the day in More's Europe, as indeed it has been in almost all times and places. Though More clearly felt—as evidenced in his public career—that one was obliged to try, he believed that *most* of the features of a good society were in the category of things he "would wish rather than expect to see."

On the other hand, the fact that he wrote the two books I've been discussing (though he left one of them unfinished) is perhaps an indication of hope. I don't believe he wrote just to enhance his stature in the community of humanists—Erasmus and the others. His books teach us to see the political world clearly. And any hope of effective action against tyranny—against government in the interest of the rulers rather than the ruled—lies, obviously, not in the actual or would-be tyrants but in the rest of us, and depends crucially on our being successfully educated: for one thing, educated to be immune to *paradiastole*: to be able to see things for what they really are, and call them by their right names. On Tuesday you'll have a chance to show what you've learned.