

## More on Tyranny ? Questions and Discussion with Dr. George M. Logan

**Clarence H. Miller:** You suggested that More thought that the Utopian kind of democracy without a monarch or a unifier would be in some ways admirable and useful, but would he not have seen that precisely that sort of arrangement, in a way, in Italy and in Greece, absolutely did not work at all?

**George M. Logan:** Yes, you would think that he would have seen that. Again, we always run into the problem of More's own slipperiness in *Utopia*. Are we supposed to notice that? Are we supposed to do exactly what you've done?—say *hmm*, you know, that's been tried, particularly in fragmented Italy and in a fragmented Germany as well, and it didn't seem to work too well. Maybe we are. Maybe that's not put forth seriously as an ideal by More. On the other hand, maybe it is.

I don't think I've really thought about this before I started writing this paper. I knew tyranny was important in *Utopia*, but I don't think I realized—and perhaps I just deluded myself about what I thought I was writing about—but I didn't realize how important it is. Now I do think you can argue, not entirely implausibly, that it is *the* central concern of *Utopia*, and that the main thing that the Utopian construct in Book 2 is about is to construct a government that would not be liable to tyranny, and would maybe go off to cure some neighboring tyrannies as well. Everything in the Utopian government's structure points this way. The word "tyranny" is used a couple of times: The governor of the city rules forever, unless he's suspected of tyranny, and so on. Everything in it: this democracy with very careful controls, and of course only people from the class of scholars—people like Erasmus and More and Hythloday—are eligible for these public offices anyway—it's very, very carefully constructed to be tyranny-proof. But you do wonder: When you get up to the level of the missing national executive, one explanation would be that you're supposed to see that this is a problem; two other explanations would be that More—and this happens all the time to inventors of an imaginary commonwealth—it's very hard to keep track of everything that you're supposed to keep track of—hey, you're supposed to wash the clothes, run the supermarkets, etc. The world is really, really complicated, an enormously complex system, and

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even if you're as smart as More, it's hard not to leave a few loose ends here and there. And maybe he just didn't think that part through—maybe he was distracted when he wrote that. Or, and this is a third line of explanation, maybe his philosophy, the almost all-consuming nature of his hostility to tyranny, and the strong purpose in the book to come up with a governmental system that would be immune to tyranny—maybe it simply blinded him. He thought, Oh boy—this is really the capstone of all—great, this is good: There can't be a national conflict because there isn't any national leader. I admit: it's so bogus, the desire to create a guaranteed tyranny-proof government, that he's just failed to recognize what the example of Italy and some other places should have suggested to him. It wouldn't work—they had nobody at the top. It's a tantalizing idea—would we be better off with *nobody* at the top? (laughs) Perhaps.

**Miller:** Try Yugoslavia.

**Logan:** Well, no. Exactly. Right. And I immediately think of that wise old proverb that one thinks about all the time now in connection with Iraq: "Better a thousand years of tyranny than one day of anarchy."

**Daniel Janeiro:** You insinuated that, in the sanctuary episode, the three institutions together—the aristocracy, the commoners, and the Church—could have, in their combined strength, resisted *Richard III*, but with two of those institutions in collusion with him, law in itself was incapable of being an obstacle. What would More's opinion be, that the law lacked the interpreters that could interpret it correctly and resist that ambiguation of the law, or are those other institutions necessary in order for law to resist?

**Logan:** Well, they certainly help, huh? Strength in numbers. And that's the crucial episode of the whole story, isn't it? Because More has the Queen say it in some particularly elegant way . . . I can't remember the passage. I've read this book a lot more than most of you, but I've not read it nearly as recently as some of you have. But she says, in effect, that, with just the one son, he's no further ahead. Everything depends on him getting the second son.

And the episode answers your question, doesn't it? We have the brilliant attorney on the one side, Buckingham—just a dazzling speech: It's funny, it's clever. A lot of what he says is absolutely true. He makes tremendous hay with the fact that the system of sanctuary was so scandalously abused and was the subject of such widespread discontent in the period. He turns that background fact tremendously to his advantage in this particular case. But then, when the Queen finally appears, the Queen speaks just as well as he does. She's just as smart; who knows how smart she was in real life? More says she was wise, but again, these are fictitious speeches, and he can make her just as smart as he chooses because *he* was so smart. And he makes her *very* smart—to my mind, she talks at least as well as Buckingham does himself. And of course she has obvious right and common sense—the mother's right to have her children with her on her side. So why didn't it work? Because she wasn't backed up by force. Buckingham's speech makes it more or less respectable; it gives people a way out, as it were—it gives the assembled grandees a halfway decent excuse that they can believe, or at least

pretend to believe, about why it's OK to take that eleven-year-old boy away from his mother and put both those children under the protection of someone who, the queen points out, stands to gain a huge lot from their protection. She would have had to have force on her side to prevail. So no, the law itself, where so much is at stake—the most brilliant lawyer in the world, in a case like that, can't carry the day.

What needed to have happened was for there to have been a profounder vision among the grandees, huh? If half the archbishops and bishops had said, No way, and half the aristocrats had sent their henchmen off to raise their private armies, then this wouldn't have happened.

**David Oakley (lawyer):** Is it safe to conclude that More, with respect to sanctuary, would be in favor of the preservation of the institution? I'm wondering if we can conclude that, based on the fact that he seems so impressed with how powerful tyranny is, mowing down institutions and people and so on, and that, in this sense, sanctuary would function as something of a check—perhaps the *only* check—on political power?

**Logan:** Maybe. Again, I don't know what his position on sanctuary boils down to. I know for sure it was interesting to him. It was apparently a *very* interesting, obsessively interesting, question to a lot of people in that time, in part because it was so abused—what Buckingham says about the way career criminals used sanctuary was absolutely true, not an exaggeration as far as I can make out. And More, always a lawyer and city court judge for a while, must have seen a lot of this.

One of the things that's most impressive about More is that he can do more than one thing at a time—he can do several things at a time. This speech is to illustrate the importance of corrupt rhetoric in Richard's rise to the throne, corrupt rhetoric working in combination with Richard's dissimulation. It's also simply a virtuoso piece. More loves to write speeches: Just about half of this book is speeches. It's one of the ways in which he is most characteristically a Renaissance humanist. Rhetoric is these guys' central discipline. Cicero is their god. They loved to write speeches, and they tended to be very good. And again and again More writes these dazzling speeches for these people.

But I think your point is good. More's so bewildering, huh? You can make an argument for More as a new humanist and as representative of an important radical—we can invoke him—well look at *Utopia*, you know: if ever a guy's got a reputation as a radical political thinker—and yet you can equally portray him as a quite conservative, late medieval figure, the way he's portrayed in Peter Ackroyd's biography from 1998, and of course in the Reformation thing, where he's holding out for a traditional, medieval church against this radical revision. But yes, certainly there is a part of him—he's a guy who's extremely aware of the importance of institutions. Again, that's maybe the most striking thing about the Utopian construct in Book 2 of *Utopia*: the care, the thoughtfulness, that goes into designing institutions which together create a structure which will channel people in the right ways. So yes, I would be surprised if he personally would have been interested in just doing away with the institution of sanctuary. And no doubt one reason why he wouldn't have been was because, every now and then, it figured importantly into the political life of the nation, in the way that it does in this instance. He must have

been pretty discouraged about it, though. One of the things I point out in one of the footnotes in the edition is that this was far from the first time that a prince had been extracted from sanctuary. This had become *de facto* the way things worked: Whenever you were powerful enough, and there was somebody in sanctuary you wanted out of sanctuary, you just went and took him out. A lot of that ran in the family.

**Stephen W. Smith:** In your introduction, you mentioned Cicero's advice on writing history: He said that historians should tell the truth. Then you also note that the opening speech from Edward IV and the characterization of Edward's reign represent the most radical break from the truth as More probably knew it: why do you think More started the *History* with what sounds like a kind of dissimulation of his own?

**Logan:** I do say something about this in the introduction too. I think he started that way because he was knocked over by the recently rediscovered and printed first six books of Tacitus's *Annals*. His "hero" is very much a Tacitean figure: The portrayal of Tiberius in the first six books of Tacitus's *Annals* is really the *locus classicus* the portrayal of a tyrant—specifically a dissimulating tyrant. Tiberius is a big dissimulator, just as Richard is. It's not that hard, I guess, to imagine what this would have been like. In 1509, these first six books of the *Annals*, which were *known* to have existed at some point, but which had been lost for centuries, all of the sudden were discovered, recovered in some monastic library and printed shortly thereafter. And I said it was like if, suddenly, another *Hamlet* were discovered, or three *Hamlets*—here's this huge, big chunk of stuff. And Tacitus seems clearly to have been More's favorite historian—in particular, the historian he felt the most temperamental kinship with. It would be nice to know when he saw these first six books—when did they first reach England? Dick Sylvester, who edited *Richard III* for the Yale Complete Works, hypothesized that this introduction was rewritten in the aftermath—that he had written it in a somewhat different way, and then, when he read Tacitus, said, Oh boy, I've got to have an introduction like that, and went back to replicate what Tacitus does, which is to start with the late years of Augustus, a good emperor, succeeded by a bad emperor. As the passage that I quote in the Introduction indicates, it seems clear that More is imitating quite consciously some of Tacitus. Some of the things he says about Edward's last years are very like some of the things that Tacitus says about Augustus's last years. On top of that, they're not even *true* of Edward—the fact that he's imitating Tacitus there would be clear anyway, but it's made even more clear by the fact that he's gone so far out of his way to do it: he says things that are not just like what Tacitus says about Tiberius, but that are in fact false to what he knew about Edward.

What the whole thing illustrates, of course, is the neighboring point that I made in that section of the Introduction about Cicero and his views of history. Cicero says on the one hand that history is a branch of demonstrative oratory, the flashiest, most rhetorical thing. He gives a list of the genres of demonstrative oratory, and then at the end says that all these kinds of writing are for *entertainment*. He says that on the one hand, then on the other, history has to tell the truth—that's the historian's first obligation. Well of course those two things don't fit together, and as I go on to say—and I don't say it *quite* this way, but nine times out of ten,

number one triumphed over number two. For historians in this tradition, if it were a choice between writing another flashy, fictitious speech or jazzing things up or imitating Tacitus in a beautiful way, *or* telling the strict truth as the documents showed it, they pretty much always chose to write the flashy speech.

**Gerard Wegemer:** Given the importance of rhetoric in this book, as you just mentioned, why wouldn't More give Richard any great speeches like Buckingham or the Queen? Shakespeare reverses it.

**Logan:** Well, but Shakespeare kind of *had* to give him great speeches, didn't he? Because he is the hero and protagonist of the play. And of course, the other thing that Shakespeare does—this has often been pointed out—in a sense, which no doubt made More spin in his grave for a few seconds (he probably still is), he fused the narrator of More's book with the protagonist Richard. And both these works are full of caustic and often enormously funny irony, sarcasm, and so on, but in More's book, it's the *narrator* who says all those caustic, ironic, brilliant, witty things, huh? And Richard himself is not a particularly funny guy at all. He's not a barrel of laughs or anything. But when you turn that material into a play, the narrator of course drops out, and you don't have a narrator. So what are you going to do with all that wonderful, delicious stuff of humor in More's work? What Shakespeare obviously did was transplant it to Richard himself, so that Richard becomes the ironist, the master of sardonic wit.

**Fr. Joseph Koterski:** (**Wegemer:** One last question.) When you raised the question about not preventing a tyrant, but just watching it, the question occurred to my mind—how about tyrannicide? Do you find More ever countenancing that, thinking about that, dismissing it on principle? Does he ever discuss that?

**Logan:** I don't know any place that he talks about it. We do know that he was very interested in Lucian's declamation on tyrannicide, and translated that and wrote a response to it, but that thing is such a rhetorical exercise: It's just a glittering, paradoxical piece, and I don't know if you can draw much of a conclusion from that as to More's actual views on tyrannicide. The standard attitude in the period, interesting and I guess entirely predictable, is that it is *never* right to kill a non-usurping king, however tyrannically he acts. If he were a legitimately crowned king, then Heavens no, it would be the worst thing in the world to kill such a person. But that it *is* OK to kill a usurper. And surely that is the attitude that More would have taken toward this particular usurper if he had gotten that far in the *History*. I don't think there's any question that he would have regarded tyrannicide as absolutely A-OK in this particular instance.