

**“Differing Designs, Differing Rhetorics:
Why Two Versions of More’s *Richard III*?”
— Questions and Discussion
with Dr. Elizabeth McCutcheon**

Gerard Wegemer: Do you trust the narrator? Do you trust him in one part or another more?

Elizabeth McCutcheon: He’s cagey. He’s very cagey. The whole thing is a construct. More has taken the facts and shaped them; he’s worked them, so it is very difficult to know where to stand with that narrator. You could check the narrator against the facts. Some of them, no one knows. The Buckingham-Richard alliance is obviously one that—they didn’t have tape recorders then, they didn’t have Bob Woodward. (laughter) So, you know, they’re coming to speculate all of them, and it could have gone either way, as the narrator suggests. So, it’s a murky business, politics, in the 16th century and politics today, and the narrator is watching his p’s and q’s as well.

Clarence Miller: Is he not establishing himself as the credible narrator by being willing to admit that he does not know, and that it is not known, and that it could be one way or it could be another. That is, it could be called cagey, but it could be, simply, that I’m trying to be as honest as I can, no?

McCutcheon: Well, yes and no. More had to know when the coronation was, and the narrator purports not to know, or he misinforms. Now, coronation dates are something that, if you grow up in a country with a king, you *know*.

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Miller: But there are striking things, striking inaccuracies, you know that the age of Edward, and things like that...that could be...I don’t know how that could happen unless its just haste, carelessness, would be corrected later...that kind of thing.

McCutcheon: I have trouble, at times, distinguishing between More’s hyperbole, which is very real. He loves to play with under- and over-statement, and for a good rhetorical position, the king should be older than he is, in a sense. In the beginning, he wants an older, kinder king. I read an interesting article lately, which is arguing that Edward IV had one thing really going for him: that the common people did like him. And that comes out in that early speech, so, even there, its hyperbole, its exaggerated. Buckingham is probably more correct about certain things, and yet, if you think of the role of the people, that early stress on Edward IV didn’t have that mystique of kingship apparently that Richard was aiming for. I mean, Edward IV married a commoner, or, at least, not royalty, and when he went hunting, he invited people to join him, and Richard didn’t do that. Richard, actually, apparently, its historical fact, Richard did go around with a crown on his head, and that crown was found on the battlefield at Bosworth and was placed on Henry VII. Richard was very anxious to establish his authority, and on his processions, on his progresses, he’s wearing a crown. Apparently, Edward IV didn’t do that. So the common touch seems to be a part of it. So, it’s very hard to separate out these strands.

Miller: I think he did, occasionally, leave blanks that he wanted to fill in later, check dates, and things like that, but something as important as the coronation, you don’t forget that.

McCutcheon: Yes, you don’t forget the coronation. And he gives different dates for it in the different Latin versions. It’s very strange.

Miller: But you seem to be suggesting that the Latin one is rounder in a way. That the English is not. Obviously, the English is going to go on after that, but that the Latin had reached a type of period.

McCutcheon: That’s my feeling about it. As I say, I’m going out on a limb on that, but it makes a very nice—whether it was accident or deliberate—it makes a nice stopping point, especially the way he treats the coronation because that is very different from the way that the other chroniclers treat it. It is obviously a put-down. It’s a satiric trick. It’s kind of like what Milton does later when, after Satan goes back to Hell and Adam and Eve have fallen, and he’s telling his troops how wonderful everything is, and he’s expecting applause, and instead the troops turn into snakes and they all go, “Hissssss.” And something like that is happening. The coronation, which should have been the high point, is just a kind of afterthought. And that’s a real slam at Richard.

Miller: The fullness...you think of the Cataline and the lyrical thing; they also have a kind of, they come to a kind of end. And the Latin, you can think of it as coming

to a kind of end, whereas the English seems to go on. But you made another point when you were talking earlier about Buckingham because in the early 1520's another Buckingham got his head cut off, and whether More thought that this was time to stop playing the game of kings.

McCutcheon: I'd like to know more about More and that Buckingham because in *The Four Last Things*, More is very upset by that beheading of the Buckingham in the early 1520s, and Collard made that point a long time ago, and I think there's some truth to it because he's shaken by it, in a way.

Miller: He wants the reader of *The Four Last Things* to be shaken by it also. This very powerful man is suddenly...

McCutcheon: Right. Right.

Mary: I was wondering if there is anything to the fact that in More's day the word "History" could mean "Story," and the word "Story" could mean "History." I wonder if in the Humanist idea of History, you were supposed to be creative from time to time. And I noticed that two of the names that he got wrong, supposedly the first names, Hastings and Joseph, the names that he substituted were Edward and Richard. One guy's real name was William.

McCutcheon: Yes. Shaw. I think he gets the preacher's first name wrong.

Mary: I wonder if when he made Hastings' name—one of them he made Edward and the other one he made Richard—was there a point to that, maybe?

McCutcheon: Well, I think More was a poet, as Erasmus says. And I think he was extremely creative. And he is writing in a time when he, in particular, is interested in fiction and fictionalizing. Dr. Logan talked about that in those wonderful episodes in the first book of the *Utopia*. And that fiction actually is uncannily close to fact. It can move either way. You can take fact and turn it into fiction, or you can take fiction that really is fact, and he plays with those, and its related to his stage metaphor of life is a stage-play metaphor, too.

Mary: Could More have meant that to play with the facts is okay, as long as you just don't slander anybody?

McCutcheon: Some people would say that he slandered Richard. There is a fierce debate going on about Richard III, but for More he is clearly a usurper king, almost as Dr. Logan pointed out, this tyrant theme, but unfortunately not the only one, you see, Edward IV was a usurper, Henry VII was a usurper...

Audience: Henry IV was a usurper.

McCutcheon: I know. English history is not very happy at this period.

Audience: Thank you very much. One of the parts of the psychology that I find

least believable is the part with Edward IV's speech expecting everybody to be reconciled and to play nice. I'm wondering if you could comment on the psychology of it, if you have any thoughts, and particularly what I'm thinking about is, as we've been trying to discuss the rhetorical strategy of More, is it possible that maybe what this is, is what we have is somebody who didn't take care enough to secure the protection and then finds himself at death's door and needs to do what he can, but doesn't take decisive enough action, but that, in a way, the rhetorical presentation of it may be, in addition to whatever of historical fact there is, that what this is in that episode and in many other episodes, is more a meditation on kingship, not a meditation on how to be a tyrant, but a meditation on how easily it is to fail to rise to the challenges of statecraft and of kingship.

McCutcheon: Let me back up a bit. The real Edward died unexpectedly. He was relatively young, and they didn't really expect him to die. Now, More complicates this by making him older and thus, presumably, should have made more plans. I see it really the way Dr. Logan talked about it this afternoon where, ominously, the king is describing a situation which happens and which foreshadows a lot of the action to come. And I don't know that I can address the particular question you're asking because I haven't read it that way, truthfully, except that, Edward's speech is not listened to by the people around him. So, from the very beginning, you have something being said and the people; the nobles around him feign friendship, which, in fact, is false. So that false note is struck from the very beginning. And that's important.

Logan: The whole scene is very artificial. The speech is quite artificial; here's a guy almost on the point of death, who speaks in beautifully symmetric sentences and so on, who's spry and who makes jokes that he'll soon be in that place that all the preachers are talking about, and he laughs that he knows more about it than they do. And of course the audience is artificial too. He is giving an unbelievable deathbed oration. I don't think people on their deathbed talk like that; of course, not many people can talk that way even when they're in the prime of health, it's such a beautifully crafted speech.

McCutcheon: In a way its like opera, isn't it? Opera is beautiful, even when people are dying.

Logan: That's really a good parallel. This is not something out of real life at all. It is something out of a heightened version of life. And again, this is typical of the genre. These people are always giving these wonderfully eloquent speeches in histories of this kind. And, of course, if the speech and the speakers are artificial, the audience is artificial too. They are not really paying a bit of attention; they are only paying attention in that they say the polite thing. More says they say what they thought at the time, but they are not really listening. They do not intend to change their behavior one little bit. Two things: one, the response of the audience suggests what the courts are like. Hythloday's remarks on courts of *Utopia* certainly forms a nice gloss on the courtly behavior in *Richard III*: they're all self-serving sycophants. All are ambitious for themselves. Two, regarding the artificiality of Edward's speech, what it's really *there* for is for thematic purposes. What More wants there is

a prediction—an accurate, detailed prediction—of what exactly is going to come true, and it just happens that Edward is the vehicle for that prediction. His other choice would have been to say it as narrator, but he decided it would be more dramatic to have it come from a dying king. And it also gave him the opportunity to imitate a classical passage—a passage in Sallust’s *Jugurtha* that I quote in the edition.

McCutcheon: There’s another factor, which is this taste for rhetoric. There are incidents in the Renaissance where someone was preaching for three hours, and at the end of it he stops, and people say, “No! No! Continue!” It is hard to imagine any audience today responding in that way. They lapped up rhetoric. It’s hard for us because we have phonographs, we have radios, we have ipods, we have all this stuff surrounding us, but there, they had the human voice, and the music, and the street cries. They are tuned in a different way, orally, and it may not have seemed quite so artificial to them as it does to us, although there is obviously convention there, too. It is hard to put yourself back. I did a little study of a lady-in-waiting at the court of Elizabeth, and, unusually, she is not writing letters of suit; she is writing letters back to her family reporting on what is going on at court. And she will report that the Lord Admiral came up to her and asked her something, and said that he was “her good friend,” and “friend” is a cold word at this time. Friends are allies, friends are people who are going to do favors for you, or who want you to do a favor for them. And at the end of this little exchange, she says to her father, “I will walk very warily. I spoke no more to him that day.” And that walking very warily is what the narrator is doing, what More doubtlessly did, what I think everyone had to do in that court situation; it’s very scary, very scary stuff. There were spies all around, I’m sure the ambassadors are writing back and forth. Look at Hastings trusting Catesby and getting upended. You just have this terrifying... I think of Skeleton Scoosier’s court. Skeleton really gets at that anxiety and fear of that poor courtier who doesn’t know which end is up. It was a dangerous game to play, no matter how you played it.

Matthew Mehan: How do you trust the narrator in getting the coronation date dead wrong, emphatically, several times. I wonder if there is a relationship between that, if it is intentional and not a mistake or inclusion at the end, and the intentionally getting it wrong that we see over and over again, as the process that the Londoners say, maybe its king’s games. They come up with various reasons why they ought not to say anything, why they ought not to get involved. And even the narrator provides various excuses for why they did not speak, whether it’s from awe, or looking around hopefully to let anyone else speak first, or fear. I wonder if there is an analogue to the narrator’s getting facts wrong, or whether there is a relationship there, and it may be carefulness and then the Londoners saying to themselves, “Let’s get it wrong so that we don’t have to get it right.”

McCutcheon: I think some of the facts that he gets wrong are just haste. On the coronation, that is a different kind of mistake. But you are also asking, or seeming to suggest that the people should have responded differently?

Mehan: Not necessarily that they should have responded differently, but that whether there was a response at all, maybe silence was the best move, but that

afterward then they have to interpret their silence, and they clearly did not interpret their silence honestly. It was fear; whereas, its “Well, no, it’s actually this process and I have no place.” They would have been afraid if they had had no place. So there would have been no fear if they had had this option to speak. So there is this sort of fear, this sort of getting it wrong on purpose that there is in politics.

McCutcheon: I don’t know that they get it wrong. They are playing a part that they feel safe about. Is that the same as getting it wrong?

Mehan: The Londoners say, “Well, we don’t want to get up there because we’re afraid they’ll smack us on the head.” But, it’s not because it’s a show; rather, it’s because of the smack on the head that they are worried about marring the play. It’s not that they want the art to continue but that they don’t want to get hit on the head.

McCutcheon: I don’t know if I’m understanding you. I think they are afraid of being hurt. There is a class thing operating here. There are nobles and the mayor, and different power groups are all opposed to the king. No one asked me who these people are. It’s easier to say who they are not than who they are. The narrator slithers a little bit on who these people are. At times, he is not just talking to the servants. The people are what we would call the common man, the citizens, or people living comfortably enough but have no notion of really rising in the world, and they are playing it safe. And in this world, that is a sensible position to play. It is not a happy position to play. Two hundred years later, we might call it “people power” which is a fit anachronism.