

On the Development of Thomas More Studies

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I. Biographies

There are two great categories of More biographies: those written in the sixteenth century and those written in the twentieth. That there is such an enormous gap between the two groups illustrates how More fell into eclipse, at least in England (always with the exception of *Utopia* and *Richard III*, because of Shakespeare's use of it). This happened primarily because he was on the wrong side of the great religious and political divide initiated by Henry VIII and perpetuated by his followers (with, of course, the exception of Bloody Mary, whose epithet owes a great deal to establishment propaganda). If More was right then the religious establishment was wrong. I seem to remember someone (probably Germain Marc-hadour) remarking that neither Parliament nor the Royal House was represented at his canonization. You could declare your colors by whether you called him Sir or Saint. (By the by, I am happy to tell you that the British Library recatalogued him as a saint; that is, he was recatalogued under his first name rather than his last because that is the way they do saints.)

To return to the biographies. The three great ones from the sixteenth century are by William Roper, Margaret More's husband who lived in the More household for a number of years; by Nicolas Harpsfield (who gathered a good deal of additional detail; and by Thomas Stapleton, who wrote More's life in Latin, using material from Harpsfield and adding to it. The two English biographies remained in MS in the sixteenth century. Roper was published in 1626, but not again until the twentieth century. Harpsfield's life was also not printed until the twentieth century. Stapleton's life, which was printed in Latin on the continent, remained rare and relatively inaccessible until it was translated into English in the twentieth century.

The great turning point in More biographies was 1935 (which also happened to be the year of his canonization) when R. W. Chambers published his brilliantly written biography portraying More as a sort of English Socrates, dying for the truth. But he tended (like Bolt) to ignore the religious dimension, passing over More's huge English polemical works and the religious battles he fought in print. E. E. Reynolds published two more comprehensive biographies in 1953 and 1968, taking religious

issues into account, writing with much sympathy but not much verve. In 1980 John Guy published *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More*, using his enormous expertise in searching records to recover and explain the somewhat skimpy evidence of More's official activities as a lawyer and counselor. I might mention that John Guy also went on in 2000 to publish a valuable little book making it clear just how difficult it is to bridge a large historical gap in an attempt to reach More's personality and explain his actions. One reason for such caution was needed was the most controversial biography of More ever written (at least in modern times): Richard Marius' *Thomas More: A Biography* (1984). Richard had worked for years at the More Project, contributing most substantially to the huge, three volume Yale edition of More's *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*. He knew everything More had written and just about everything that had been written about him. But unfortunately, perhaps, he was also a fine novelist and he went overboard in destroying what he considered the plaster saint with his revisionist view of More's seething anger and lust. But the book is full of brilliant writing and vivid history; and it must be admitted that Richard was the first biographer of More who took account of all of More's writings and probed (not always with success) the depths of his personality and beliefs.

For that reason I do not think that anyone should start with Marius' biography. I would advise beginning with Roper's brief, personal, poignant life (which almost always brings me to the point of tears toward the end). The newcomer should then move on to Seymore House's brief life in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, then Peter Ackroyd's accurate, vivid, and fairly comprehensive life (1998) or to Gerry Wegemer's more compact and lucid account in *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage* (1995). Graduate students would be expected to go on to Greenblatt's portrait of More in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, but about that I may not be as enthusiastic as my colleague here on the bench (so to speak); but quite frankly I don't remember it very well.

II. Editions

Now let me say a few words about the Yale edition of the complete works of Saint Thomas More, with which I was associated for more than thirty years, the last twenty of them as Executive Editor. In the absence of any other Yale editors, I may be permitted to define an Executive editor as the editor who executes whatever the other editors do not do. I know perhaps better than anyone (except perhaps Germain Marc'hadour) the faults and defects of the Yale edition. But now is no time to go into them but rather to highlight briefly its achievement. More than any biography, more even than the journal *Moreana* (see the adjectival problems More's name gets us into), the Yale edition made More's writings accessible and intelligible, and in the end it is in his writings that we should look for the man. Except for *Utopia*, *Richard III* and *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* the bulk of More's works, English and Latin, were almost unknown because the English could be read only in the difficult black-letter type of the rare 1557 folio and most of the Latin was not easily accessible and had not been translated. It is true that between 1927 and 1931 Campbell and Reed began to publish the 1557 edition in facsimile, but this was still difficult to read, though they provided a modernized version and much useful apparatus. Only two volumes were published: one containing *The Dialogue concerning*

Heresies and the other *The English poems, Richard III, the Life of Pico, and The Four Last Things*. I have heard somewhere that the plates for these (or perhaps for other volumes as well) were destroyed by bombs in World War II. At any rate no more of this edition was completed and it has been hard to get to for decades.

The Yale edition, which was launched in 1958, also began with the 1557 edition and in fact intended to use it as copytext (though this plan later had to be abandoned in favor of using the earlier original editions). A certain Fr. Klein (about whom I know very little) apparently had a copy of 1557. He was ensconced in a room in Sterling Library at Yale, contemplating an edition. I have heard vague rumors that he was somewhat dotty but it was never said just exactly what way. But he had some grant money, from the Grace shipping line (I think). His efforts, however, were abortive and the donors were looking for someone to take up the work. As luck (or providence) would have it, the right persons were at hand. Richard Sylvester, a young newcomer on the Yale faculty had just finished a complex and definitive edition of a sixteenth century life of Cardinal Wolsey by Cavendish, published by the Early English Text Society. And willing to join Dick in the great enterprise was Louis Martz, of well established reputation, whose very influential book, *The Poetry of Meditation*, had been published not long before. Fr. Klein's copy of 1557 ended up at the Project library in the Sterling Library at Yale and was frequently used under the name of the Klein copy. It was originally thought that the edition could be completed in ten volumes; the plan was that it would be finished in about ten years. It ended up as fifteen volumes (containing twenty-three books) and required forty years to complete (1958-98).

I have already told you why I think the edition is important, it made More's voice available. You may want to ask me some questions about it later, which I will answer if I can. There are many technical details about manuscripts and early printed editions that are of interest to experts. I would find it difficult at this late date to explain some of them. There are also many stories and anecdotes connected with it, some of which I not only cannot tell you but do not even want to think about. But for the most part it was a noble effort, supported and advanced for many decades by a skilled and generous crew.

I might add as a footnote that Erasmus' star also began to rise in the middle of the last century, just as More's did (including a new edition of Erasmus' complete works and an eighty-six volume translation into English), though Erasmus had never fallen as completely out of sight as More had.

III. *Desiderata*

Let me list and comment briefly on some further scholarship and study on More that I think is needed and useful:

1. A one-volume, comprehensive index of the Yale edition. As it is, each volume has its own index, and not all of them are of the highest quality. Such a volume was originally planned but was never produced: reasons of time, reasons of cost. Ideally, of course, it would be splendid to have the whole edition on a searchable database, but somehow I don't think we are likely to see this very soon; as More says at the end of *Utopia* it is something we may hope for rather than expect to see.

2. It would be fine to have a complete edition of More's correspondence on the scale of the Yale edition and with a full apparatus. Such a volume was planned but the person who had accepted that task procrastinated so long that the volume fell by the wayside. Fortunately the whole correspondence with generally accurate text and a fairly full apparatus had been published by Elizabeth Rogers in 1947; moreover, the six long treatise-letters (five of them in Latin) had been thoroughly redone in the Yale edition, and they were the ones most in need of fuller and more accurate treatment. We need not deeply regret that official or bureaucratic letters such as diplomatic commissions were not redone but it would have been well if the powerful and touching Tower correspondence and the other family letters could have been incorporated into the "Complete Works." The Cranveld correspondence was not discovered until the edition was finished: I edited it separately (with a few hasty flaws, I am sorry to say).

3. More's use of the fathers. There is a good Yale dissertation by a nun whose name I forget about More and Augustine, but it is not published. I don't know what there is (in a large way) about the other fathers. I once did something on his use of patristics in the Eucharistic controversy for the introduction to *The Answer to a Poisoned Book*. But I would be surprised if there were not a great deal more to be discovered and presented about More's use of the fathers.

4. More's ecclesiology is very important, and I am not sure it has been investigated as thoroughly as it should be (not so much, I think, as Erasmus'). I have vague memories of an Austrian dissertation on the subject, but I cannot pin it down, and I do not think it is published. It would have to include a thorough discussion of the papal-councilar dispute (on which a fair amount has been written) but the central issue was, of course, tradition vs. sola scriptura or sola fides. More was very close to the fountainhead of that long stream of troubled waters.

5. I suspect it would be profitable to investigate More's use of grammar and logic in his polemics--grammar in the old-fashioned sense, which we might call philology or textual analysis. Naturally this is important in his arguments about biblical translation. But he can also be very clever in his manipulation of Aristotelean (even sophisticated) logic. More has shared in the general enthusiasm for rhetoric that grew up in the last century, but it may well be that the other two elements of the trivium have been relatively neglected.

6. And then there is the law (or rather laws). I have recently received a long typescript from H. Ansgar Kelly of UCLA (who knows everything there is to know about canon law in England). It will be published next spring. In it he shows rather convincingly that the canon law discussed in *The Debellation of Salem and Byzance* has been badly misunderstood. More's opponent, Christopher St. Germain, was apparently not as sharp as the establishment has made him out to be--in fact, he was rather ill-informed or even thick-headed about important matters. More's work as an administrator and a judge has been covered by John Guy with all the thoroughness which the evidence allows but it would be fine if someone would write a comprehensive, learned, (and possibly though not probably readable) treatise on More and the law, or rather laws (common law, canon law, civil--that is, Roman--

law, even maritime law). I once spent the better part of a day in the Yale Law library trying to find the legal maxim More invoked at his trial (Qui tacet videtur consentire--whoever keeps silent seems to consent); Bolt reports it also from the Paris News letter. But I had no success. Prof. Kelly documents it fully from canon law: "The Right to Remain Silent: Before and After Joan of Arc," in *Inquisitions and Other Trial Procedures in the Medieval West* (Burlington USA, Singapore, Sydney: Ashgate Variorum, 2001).

7. I think it would be profitable to study More's English prose style further. More's anecdotal style has been emphasized ever since E. K. Chamber's influential essay in Hitchcock's edition of Harpsfield on the continuity of English Prose. A good deal has been done on the remarkably innovative style of *Richard III* and something on the polemic and devotional works. But I don't know whether anyone has really recognized the pioneering work More did in treating technical, theological and philosophical matters in English. Such subjects were normally handled in Latin, and it was at that time by no means easy to do them in English. One good example that has not been noticed, I think, is the analysis of the sacramental theology of the Eucharist in *A Treatise upon the Passion*, but it is probably not the only one by any means.

8. As for More's Latin style, which is extremely supple, muscular, and varied, it has received very little attention. We have Elizabeth McCutcheon's fine piece on litotes in *Utopia*, and I made some analysis in my introduction to *De tristitia* and in some preliminary remarks in my translation of *Utopia*. I sometimes wonder how much of More's Latin, even *Utopia*, has even been read in Latin, especially in the last century. And such stylistic analysis has to be structural as well as lexical or semantic; and above all it should be related to content and meaning as much as possible. It really doesn't help us much to see how classical (or unclassical) More is in his grammar or diction.

9. The changing attitudes toward More in past times and places might make an interesting volume. Three volumes (by Bruce Mansfield) are devoted to the changing attitudes toward Erasmus over the centuries.

I see that I have reached the number nine and it might require considerable help from the nine choirs of angels to complete them. But you will probably not be sorry to see that in laying out these very large and difficult tasks, I will not go to the full Herculean complement of twelve.

IV. Bibliography

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