

“Educating Citizens for Self-Government” ? Questions and Discussion with Dr. Gerard Wegemer

David Oakley: Is it possible that you’re a little harsh on, say, the Cardinal? He really is not quite sure what’s going to happen. But you’re accusing him of a pretty heinous sin, of making an oath on something he knows is false. I take it that is what you’re talking about—when he says, “Let the kid out of sanctuary and I’ll take care of him.”

Wegemer: According to the narrator, the Cardinal “dared lay his own soul in pledge” (46).

Oakley: Right. I think that seems a little harsh. And a similar, though not as strong, case can be made for Buckingham: It’s a nasty enterprise that can’t be avoided. Aren’t you stretching your case in those two instances?

Wegemer: The narrator points out that Cardinal cuts off the Queen and cuts off her interlocutors at key points. For example, once the Queen’s reason begins to prevail, the Cardinal uses other tactics to avoid reasoning with her. When the Queen is asked, “Well, what evidence do you have that Richard’s going to do your son any harm?”—and she starts listing all the reasons, the narrator tells us that the Cardinal stops that line of inquiry. The Cardinal has also made a deliberate choice to be Richard’s spokesman in a highly controversial political matter. It’s very interesting how the narrator details the way that Richard flatters the Cardinal, or we could say the way Richard “sets him up”: “Oh my good friend the Cardinal,” Richard says. Then Richard praises the Cardinal as the best and wisest spokesman to go to the Queen, since the Cardinal is her friend. But all those references to “friend” and “*fides*” in referring to the Cardinal is similar to the eighty-plus times that the word “Protector” is used for Richard III.

Now, for Buckingham, Buckingham clearly does it because his self-interest is at stake. Does he know how badly? I think the narrator leaves that uncertain, but we get the clear impression that this fellow is governed simply by self-interest.

Don Stevenson (lawyer): Jacques Barzun, in his book *From Dawn to Decadence, Thomas More Studies 2* (2007)

says that “More either invented or allowed himself to propagate in a work of his own the big lie in favor of the Tudors under whom he served, the lie that Richard III, the king whom the Tudor Henry VII overthrew, was a deformed monster who murdered his nephews, the young princes, in the Tower. Ever since Horace Walpole in the late eighteenth-century, a number of scholars have come to believe that Richard was the very opposite of the legend: handsome, able and innocent of blood.” I wonder if there’s anything to the idea that More, in beginning to write this, might have actually tried to be an apologist for Henry VII and then, as it veered into dangerous territory, as it circulated among his friends, they recommended that he not publish. Is there any idea of his initial motivation?

Wegemer: We know that More did not like Henry VII. He even gets into trouble politically because he published a poem that is highly critical of Henry VII. So, I don’t think he has any favoritism towards the Tudors—or towards the Yorkists Richard or Edward; they all come off pretty badly. But I would push the point that More is showing that the difficulty is with hereditary monarchy, with a system based on privileges of a certain bloodline rather than the tested qualities of mind and character needed to rule a free people.

Clarence Miller: Sallust seems to be a follower of Julius Caesar, and benefited by him. That doesn’t suggest that he’s entirely in favor of government by the rule of law. Sallust likes the tribunes of the people; he does not like the Senate because they’re corrupt. But in fact it is Julius Caesar that he admires and follows.

Wegemer: Early in his life, Sallust certainly followed Caesar, but when he writes his *Histories*, it seems quite clear that he’s showing the difficulties with Caesar—as well as the difficulties with Cato. And Cicero, whom Anthony and the followers of Julius Caesar killed, emerges as the great leader for Sallust. But Sallust can’t say so openly or directly. This is the difficulty of writing politically sensitive histories. Although Sallust says only in passing that Cicero was the greatest of the consuls, that’s an explosive parenthetical remark. True, Sallust’s two examples of how Rome becomes great by the virtue of the citizens are Caesar and Cato. And when you first compare them—and this is the most famous part of that history—they seem pretty well-balanced. Yet *does* Sallust think that they’re both equally good: Cato, who defends the Republic, and Caesar, who becomes the great enemy of the Republic? In thinking about the histories as a whole, we are provoked to ask: Who really is better? Cicero is! Because Caesar and Cato each lacks something essential: Cato is overly rigid and overly preoccupied with his reputation for virtue and austerity; Caesar is overly ambitious. Who’s the only Roman who can govern Rome? And who’s the one, in this history of Catiline, that saves Rome? Although Sallust never praises Cicero for the way that Catiline is defeated in that short history, it’s clear to anyone who knows the period that Cicero is the one who saves the Republic. So Sallust is in a very difficult position, just as More is in a very difficult position.

George Logan: I’ve been stewing over that remark by Jacques Barzun. Barzun is obviously a very great scholar, but that’s an offensive couple of sentences, really. He suffered from bad brief there: he hasn’t really done his homework on that. First

of all about More inventing the anti-Richard stuff: As I said yesterday, his take on Richard, far from being invented for the sake of being an apologist for the Tudors, is very, very close to the most authoritative views of Richard from the actual period. These are in the records of an Italian diplomat who happened to be in London at the time of the usurpation, a guy named Dominic Mancini, who went back to Europe and wrote at the behest of his patron an account of the usurpation, which was then not published, and wasn't published until 1936. Lo and behold, when it turns up, it's remarkably close to what More has to say about Richard. And this was the view of someone who was presumably more or less disinterested, who just happened to be in England, was not involved in English politics at all, then went back home to Europe and wrote this. And then, of course, the other most authoritative source, which is regarded as *the* most authoritative narrative source for the period, for the reigns of Edward IV and Richard III, by this anonymous and tantalizingly unidentified figure writing in the monastery at Crowland. This is the so-called “Second Continuation of the Crowland Chronicle.” But whoever this guy was, he was an insider who knew a lot about the politics of the period. He had evidently been in the government in some capacity. And again, his take on Richard and the usurpation is very, very close to More's.

Secondly, it's simply not true to say that Horace Walpole shed the true light on the thing, and that all right-thinking people since Walpole tend to agree that Richard got a bad rap. That's really not the case. Again, modern historians find those two contemporary historians I mentioned to be the most authoritative accounts of the usurpation, so naturally enough, they tend to agree that those accounts are, by and large, pretty close to the truth. It's certainly true that the overall view of Richard has softened considerably since the sixteenth century, essentially because people realize that politics was an extremely nasty game in the late fifteenth century, and that Richard was probably not a whole lot better or worse than the average politician. The murder of the little princes, for example: First of all, there does seem to be pretty strong evidence. What would be surprising, really, would be if he *didn't* murder them (Laughter.), because this kind of dynastic murder in circumstances analogous to these was certainly the rule, and not the exception. In the fifteenth century, people were always having relatives bumped off, because, of course, it was relatives who competed with them, and who were obstacles on the road to the throne. So it was quite standard to pull people out of sanctuary if you needed to have people bumped off. The politics appears very close to *The Sopranos* (Laughter.)—that kind of situation. So I really think Barzun, for all his brilliance and imminence, was speaking without having properly investigated the situation here, and I wanted to come to the defense of More and to the defense of mainline historians, as it were, starting with those guys in the 1580s, and culminating in people now.

Elizabeth McCutcheon: The marriage issue is a fascinating one. It looms large in More's *Utopia*, in the section really about contracts, and marriage in the Renaissance was a contract. Also, of course, the whole hereditary thing depends on legitimacy, but that is all very suspect in *Richard III*, so there are just so many connections between the marriage and the heredity, the legitimacy and illegitimacy of all of this, that I think we can really even say, what you said is wonderful, but we can push that even further. Even if you were a subscriber to hereditary kingship, the

whole thing is suspect in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. That's why they're all usurpers. They're all claiming some kind of legitimacy by inheritance—that's very suspect.

Wegemer: This may be the deepest question: How does one change—from the roots—the weaknesses of a culture? How did Homer do it for his warrior society? How have other great poets done it for their societies? More goes back to the Greeks because he wants to learn from them. How do you get people to think outside of images that they've grown up with?

Another major question has to do with the issue of judgment: How do you see whether a person is a tyrant or a virtuous person? The externals are never going to tell you, so how do you look past appearances? In the classical view, such education is the work of the liberal arts, especially literature. Studying liberal arts was seen as a necessary preparation for those who would govern, liberating or freeing one to see outside one's own traditions, one's own limited conceptions to see the truth of things, horrible as it may be. Literature such as More creates shows the complexity and the danger of being duped by a good “friend” such as Catesby or by a person you've just chosen to govern.

One last point. Look at the picture of the snake and the dove published in the 1518 *Utopia*. In the Latin version of *Richard III*, More alludes to Christ's command to be “wise as a serpent, innocent as a dove” (Mt 10:16). It's a parenthetical criticism of Henry VI for being more innocent than wise. The same allusion is made in *Utopia*, but there Peter Giles, More's good friend is praised for having innocence and wisdom. *But*, as the drawing shows, you need two parts serpent to protect one little dove. (Laughter.) And the serpent *must* be crowned.