Thomas More's *Richard III*: Moral Narration and Humanist Method*

PATRICK GRANT

When Sir Thomas More mounted the scaffold where his head was to be struck off, he said to a lieutenant conveying him "praye you ... see me safe up, and for my comming downe lett me shifte for my selfe." The lieutenant's attention is directed, humorously, to the poor workmanship of the scaffold – "so weake that it was redy to fall," Harpsfield tells us, and the remark was, we are assured, "saide merily."¹ How, More wants to know, can you get me onto this thing without it falling down? The tone is magnanimous, the victim is whimsically co-operative with the instruments of his destruction, and he seems unafraid. Once he is up there, his worries are over: a dead man's concerns are no longer with the rickety structures of this world. And yet the remark is not so benignly compliant as it first appears, for it vibrates with a sinister energy quite typical of More, and especially astringent because of its apparent levity. The lieutenant is reminded of the shoddy and makeshift structure upon which this execution is mounted, and he is asked to consider that although More's troubles will soon be over, his own will not. The lieutenant must make do, among such makeshift structures, and bear the burden elsewhere, disposing as he can of the consequences of his part in the action.

More, of course, was careful not to antagonise too directly those empowered to inflict physical pain. He exercised the habit of evasion especially during his sojourn in the tower, and his letters to Margaret from prison are clever combinations of private sentiment and public prudence. The author well knew his words would be scrutinised for evidence against him, and he became well-practiced in the art of providing none, while refusing also to betray his principles.² So with his merry jests on the way to execution there is an apparent winning lack of contentiousness, but we feel also at the centre some crystal-hard assurance of the integrity of his own position, which he allows his hearers to detect without stating plainly. The merry jests, we begin

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to see, are free as is the gracious movement of a limb: pleasing to observe because underneath anchored to bone by ligaments.

It is not as if More learned about the exercise of arbitrary power only late in life, or just in the struggle with Henry VIII. His youthful epigrams are full of reflections on tyranny, and throughout his career the question of how to combat political oppression was never far from his mind.³ Certainly, he had thought about the subject sufficiently to know very well that the degree of resistance to or compliance with established power is perennially a matter of tact and judgement, and he also knew that too much self-righteousness may easily taint one with the very same prideful disease one would expunge. The clear line of opposition, in short, between tyrannical Turk (to use his own metaphor) and orthodox Christian becomes blurred when subjected to the test of experience. Given his acute sense of irony and ambiguity, More's appreciation of this fact is scarcely surprising, as we can see very well, for instance, by turning to *The History of Richard III*, More's full-blown study of a tyrant, written in the heyday of his literary productivity as a humanist, though unpublished until after his death.

Richard III is, in part, a mediaeval morality, an exemplum against tyranny, a story of the rise and fall of a prince on fortune's wheel. It is also a Humanist history, eclectically modelled on Sallust, Tacitus and Suetonius, from whom More learned how to represent the shaping force of character upon historical events through dramatic presentation and strong psychological portraiture.⁴ It is also a unique document in the history of modern prose: More, claims R. W. Chambers, was the originator and master of a school of historical writing, the first Englishman to have an "effective prose, sufficient for all the purposes of his time" to record contemporary events through a living, dramatic narrator.⁵ Although, for religious reasons, most of More's works were unread in England after his death, *Richard III* was immediately acknowledged a masterpiece, and continually reprinted in the chronicles of Grafton, Holinshead, and Stow. With revolutionary effectiveness, according to Chambers, More brings native eloquence from the cloister to the political needs of sixteenth-century England.⁶ And yet the work is unfinished; it exists in Latin and English versions (which stop at different places); it is peppered with historical inaccuracies, both in detail and, perhaps, in the general conception of Richard;⁷ it is not quite a drama (though the long, formal speeches of the principals are given to us in direct speech); it is not quite a biography either, nor an old-fashioned morality (except perhaps in an inverse way).⁸ It is, instead, an unusually successful period piece (if we view it against Shakespeare's mature drama), and a work of peculiar originality (if we view it against its precedents). It does remain, however, unmistakably Humanist in its rhetorical methods and its exploration of the political theme – which is not to say that mediaeval thinkers had been uninterested in problems of kingship; rather, that More saw political tyranny as substantially the *outcome of a certain abuse of language*, an abuse

amenable to mitigation by the kind of education and sensibility Humanism could provide. Insofar as More uncovers those distortions of language in which tyranny takes root, we might say he remains a master ironist, aware of the double-play of language and the follies and enormities perpetrated under the masks of words. Insofar as he is a moralist against tyranny, however, his message remains straightforward and unambiguous. And just as in the remarks recorded pending his execution, the ironist and the moralist here, too, are in precarious equilibrium – an unsteady state, so to speak, characteristic not only of More, but of Humanism itself. In *Richard III*, this unsteadiness can be especially evident in a certain vacillating relationship between narrator and reader.

First, More's moral lesson against tyrants is plain. Richard III, we are told at the start, in downright terms, is the worst kind of criminal. By nature uncle to the princes, by office their protector and bound by oath, he nonetheless "al the bandes broken that binden manne and manne together, withoute anye respecte of Godde or the worlde, unnaturallie contrived to bereve them, not onelye their dignitie, but also their lives."⁹ He was, moreover, born "unnaturallie" (p. 7), feet first, and with teeth. He grew up crook-backed, ill-featured, and dwarfish, and from even before his birth, he was "malicious, wrathfull, envious" (p. 7). The analogy More draws between Richard's physical and spiritual deformity is complete and unflinching. Richard's general policy of murderous dissimulation is clearly outlined (p. 10), and his death suitably lurid, "hacked and hewed of his enemies handes, haryed on horsebacke dead, his here in despite torn and togged lyke a cur dogge" (p. 87). We are asked to reflect that God "never gave this world a more notable example" (p. 86). All that is quite plain, and the intent is unquestionable: here we must meet the narrator head on, and take his message.

So far, then, we have a lesson but not literature, and to discover the true distinction of *Richard III*, we must ask how More's text complicates his moral. In one respect it does so simply by creating such a density of circumstances that the lesson cannot be adjusted comfortably to the facts. The world is more peculiar and wayward, more strangely full of perplexities ensuring our complicity with evil than we are likely to think, or to find reassuring. Some of the participants, for instance, were still alive as More wrote, as the text itself reminds us. These include King Edward IV's daughter Katherine (p. 3), Mistress Shore (p. 56), and even the murderer Deighton (p. 87). Others, like Thomas Howard, who had fought for Richard and now served under Henry VIII, would evidently not wish to be reminded of their past allegiances, and More's oral informants – none of them named – would very likely have doctored their stories to protect themselves against suspicion of disloyalty. For all his humanist love of ancient models, therefore, More seems bent on showing us that the immediate past lives in and through the present in complex ways. When the narrator interjects scathingly, for instance, of

Richard's murdering the princes, "Loe the honourable corage of a kynge" (p. 86), the remark is transferable in principle to *any* king: he does not say, "Richard is craven and wicked," but "Any king may be craven and wicked in this fashion." Given that Henry VIII, who had no male heir, executed Edward IV's nephew Edmund de la Pole in 1513, such an observation could be uncomfortably close to current affairs. Indeed, Richard Sylvester, among others, suggests that More did not have his work published because of the wide variety of politically sensitive issues on which it touches.¹⁰

The point here, of course, is still not quite literary, but insofar as such matters complicate the moral, they do have literary consequences.¹¹ The more fully rendered in actual historical dealings, it seems, the less clearcut is the lesson, and More capitalises on this fact by rendering artfully perplexing the position of some of the principal characters with respect to Richard's nefarious activities. Hastings, for instance, in quieting the Lords' fears in Richard's favour, is in two minds: "part hym selfe believed, of part he wist the contrarye" (p. 23). Although he is a dupe, to some degree he is a willing dupe. At the conclusion of Buckingham's hortatory speech to the Assembly at the Guildhall (he repeats it, because the first recital fell flat), the responsible burghers "thought that they never had in their lives heard so evill a tale so well tolde," but they all remain "styl as ye midnight" (p. 75), and none speaks out against the usurper. Some, of course, *are* entirely duped, like Rivers (p. 18), and in the case of Stanley's dream of the boar, which he takes as a warning against Richard, intuition sends a message which common sense overrules (pp. 45–46). And there is the painful case of the council, in a state of mind at least close to good faith, thinking that no hurt is intended against the prince, and therefore siding with Richard's decision to remove the child from sanctuary by force: honest men operating in good conscience can be dangerously wrong.

With surprising economy, More manages repeatedly to create, throughout *Richard III*, a sense of how the sheer complexity of circumstances and of our unwitting complicity with past events can be morally compromising,¹² and the single character who understands these facts just as fully as More, and who is a master at turning them to sinister advantage, is Richard himself. But the narrator allows us to appreciate Richard's frightening success by showing us how peculiar and anomalous can be the patterns of experience that render us vulnerable to men like Richard, even when we have good reason to think our defences are firm. Such a sense of things "comming together partly by chance, partly of purpose" (p. 45) to make and mar human destinies simultaneously *is* a major literary achievement.

A case in point is the treatment of Edward IV's marriage to Elizabeth Grey (herself formerly married to Edward's enemy), in the context of his liaison with Elizabeth Lucy, in the teeth of his mother's opposition, and against a more general background of rumour about his generally libidinous habits (pp.

60–64). Despite the legitimacy of the marriage and of its offspring, the circumstances are fertile with morally compromising and suggestive possibilities, so that Richard can plant his rumours of illegitimacy with high hopes that they will produce fruit rapidly. The result he desires is not just wholesale discrediting of the late king, but of disorientation and ambivalence; not the entire blackness of defamation, but a half-light appropriate for shady dealings, and sufficient to provide a purchase for his specious claims. Edward's circumstances, as More shows, are all compact of strength and weakness; the marriage is legally firm, but it is circumstanced, and we can see how shrewdly Richard appreciates the ironies of Edward's situation. Even as the king lies dying, giving voice to an ideal of political unity, to which he appeared, indeed, at last to have given some physical shape, Richard already sees behind that momentary achievement to the antecedents which would ensure its dissolution.

Or consider the account of the Queen's flight to sanctuary. She, we recall, sees through Richard's designs before the others, and, knowing the danger to her children, takes to sanctuary "in all the haste possible" (p. 20). As she departs the Archbishop visits her:

Aboute whome he found muche heavynesse, rumble, haste and businesse, carriage and conveyance of her stuffe into Saintuary, chestes, coffers, packes, fardelles, trusses, all on mennes backes, no manne unoccupied, somme lading, somme goynge, somme discharging, somme comynge for more, somme breakinge downe the walles to bring in the nexte waye, and somme yet drewe to them that holpe to carrye a wronge waye. The Quene her self satte alone on the rishes all desolate and dismayde. (p. 21)

Far from flying in haste, the Queen in fact is immobile and dismayed, as all the details indicate, so that "all the haste possible" turns out to generate very little speed. The scene is one of impractical energy and burdensome, even comic inefficiency. But that, More implies, is the nature of circumstances; we are more firmly tied than we think, more burdened and less free to manoeuvre than we ought to be, more compromised than we imagine. And when the Queen does get to sanctuary, of course it turns out to offer, in effect, no protection at all.

More seems pleased to pique us when he can with this kind of perception of life's anomalies: Clarence for instance is executed by drowning in a butt of malmsey (p. 7); Richard orders strawberries from the Bishop of Ely's garden to preface his grotesque accusations of sorcery against the Queen and Shore's wife, and his arraignment of Hastings. Despite the basis in tradition for the malmsey story, and the possible symbolic dimensions of strawberries,¹³ these details stand out as both odd and fascinating, somehow unsettling, and yet just the kind of peculiar thing that would happen: the ingenuities of cruelty lie exactly in the surprising and perverse uses of familiar comforts, and the very

detachment of such effects from their predictable uses is both convincing and disturbing to our equilibrium. Richard, of course, knows all about life's anomalous dimensions; after all, he *chooses* to order strawberries. It is a demonstration of his control, of his capacity totally to mismatch the visible signs with actual intent, and to relish the shocking effects. He is deliberately theatrical; for instance, when he greets the prince with a kiss, the action is at once poignant and cruel. The boy's mother has just parted from him with a kiss, and stands weeping as Richard, whose malign intent she all too deeply suspects, mimics her action – theatrically for the onlookers, but mercilessly emphasising to her the finality of her deprivation. As the margin note “O dissimulation” suggests, we should appreciate the theatricals; Richard is able totally to dislocate a conventional public gesture from private intent, and at the same time to communicate his pleasure at doing so. This is the Richard who dresses up in old armour to suggest that he must have been suddenly put under duress by Hastings (p. 52), who struts on the gallery voicing mock refusals of the kingship, who parades Shore's wife through the streets as a public penitent, who prepares an elaborate coronation (p. 44) to distract attention from his own designs to terminate the kingship he pretends to celebrate, and so on. It has even been suggested that More's originality in *Richard III* to a large extent lies in his adaptation of theatrical metaphors to the purposes of history. For instance, he contrives a series of audiences.¹⁴ At the centre is the main illusionist, Richard himself, who draws people into his performance. The Queen, however, and some others soon see through his act. Gradually, so also do the people, who are a kind of audience within the play, so that there are various degrees of credulous participation in, and knowing observation of, Richard's performance as the story unfolds, reaching out at last to the reader, who is treated also as an audience at a play. As Richard's performance becomes increasingly shoddy, so his credibility increasingly fails. The narrator, like a morality actor, accordingly steps on stage to clarify the didactic intent, and to keep our vision clear.

All this is terribly helpful, and does capture More's design, but there is a refinement also worth mentioning because it is of the sort wherein More's genius especially resides. Richard, from the start, is *not* a convincing actor:¹⁵ he fools some of the people some of the time, and at critical moments effects confidence tricks, but when he attempts to put on a show to cover up his misdeeds, he inevitably does it badly. Indeed, he is such a bad actor that it almost requires a kind of obtuseness *not* to hold him gravely in suspicion. More's history becomes, therefore, substantially an examination of just this kind of obtuseness: the sort by which, in all their well-meaning banality, ordinary people can allow free rein to such men as Richard.

The fascination of More's villain is not, after all, that of Iago, whom everyone thinks honest. Richard does not care to be thought honest, only sufficiently credible, or interesting, to take advantage of the ordinary man's

moral ambivalence. He knows the immense gulf between rhetorical structures and moral intent, between words and action. Appropriately, the terms "colour" and "frame" are used frequently to describe his devisings: he presents "colorable prooffe" (p. 24) that Rivers and the Dukes are guilty, he puts "some colour" (p. 52) on the matter of Hastings' arrest, he accuses Shore's wife when he cannot "colour" (p. 54) matters otherwise, he uses "colour" (pp. 59, 66) craftily to suggest the illegitimacy. Shaa undertakes to "frame" (p. 58) the city, things are "oute of al frame" (p. 68) when the sermon goes wrong, and Buckingham expects a response from an audience that "the Mayer had framed before" (p. 75); Hastings advises the lords not to raise objections that might put things out of joint so that they "shold never be brought in frame agayne" (p. 23). All this suggests painterly illusion and perspective, which Richard knows how to manipulate, not so much in order to simulate a real world, as to raise questions – as in the various experiments in curious perspective among Humanist painters – about the peculiarities of our own point of view.¹⁶ Richard provides just sufficient colour, a just sufficiently oblique angle, to raise a doubt in the mind of observers about the structure and identity of the thing observed. He disturbs their equilibrium just sufficiently to make their day-to-day passivity seem positively tempting.

The *History* is full of details that exploit in some such manner the ironic and unsettling consequences of actions admitting a variety of perspectives. Consider, for instance, the humiliation of Mistress Shore, forced to walk the London streets "out of al array save her kyrtle only" (p. 54), with a taper in her hand, and walking before a cross. The people (and other observers) are titillated – captivated and prurient, "more amorous of her body then curious of her soule" (p. 55). Richard of course counts on this, for he is devising and exploitative, arranging the spectacle because his previous accusations of sorcery are so badly received. The narrator is at once full of sympathy for Mistress Shore (admiring her beauty, wit and graciousness), and also severe, moralising against concupiscence and the transitoriness of physical beauty (look at her now, he says, old, lean, withered, and dried up). It is hard to know where the reader stands; the event invites his participation from three perspectives simultaneously, and the result is to complicate the moralising element of the narrator's speech, not to clarify it.

In one way, it is easy enough to see how More's intent in all this is, broadly speaking, Humanist – his subject is the world of affairs and the responsibilities of rulers; his models are the classics adapted to present circumstances; his intent is educative and moral. But, the more we look, the more obvious it becomes that the narrator is frequently oblique, disturbed, and not quite morally the master of all the circumstances he describes, ostensibly, with clear didactic intent. What, then, are we to make of this combination of effects that are, it may now strike us, not at all far removed from the temper of More's remarks on his way to the scaffold? There, too, unshakable moral certainty

accompanies the skilful indirection and ironic poise and ability to shift the perspectives of his interlocutors in surprising ways to reveal their complicity in evil beyond their expectation.

By way of attempting to clarify this issue, I would like to turn briefly to Erasmus, doyen of the Northern Humanists, and More's admired model. Throughout his career, a number of positions remain basic to Erasmus' thinking. These are based on his concern for "grammar" and *bonae litterae*: for the exact study, that is, of the ancient languages, especially with a view to providing scholarly texts of the Bible and the Fathers. Philology, Erasmus held, in providing insight into the precise meaning (and, therefore, the spirit) of Christ's message, permits a true "philosophia Christi" based on the practice of a Christ-like life, on morality rather than doctrine or argument, and calling for reform of the interior life. True followers of Christ are tolerant, peace-loving and charitable; they hate violence, and pursue openness, clarity, and co-operation. The study of *bonae litterae* educates them in the expression both of exact meaning, and in the tact and refinement necessary to deal undogmatically and sympathetically with those whose perspectives are different. Underlying all this is a conviction that if people think about language and literature in Erasmus' fashion, and if they could manage to imitate his style (or at any rate his advice about style), society would be better off; certainly, less prey to tyranny and the disasters of war.¹⁷

Part of Erasmus' thinking therefore calls simply for open-mindedness and common sense. Truth, he argues in *The Paraclesis*,¹⁸ is more powerful when simple and plain (p. 94); be without guile, he advises, and have a "pious and an open mind" (p. 96); "Christ wishes his mysteries published as openly as possible" (p. 97); a true philosophy calls for co-operation (p. 97), so that even "a common laborer or weaver" (p. 98) can be considered a theologian. According to Beatus Rhenanus (his contemporary biographer), Erasmus' "great openness" (p. 47) occasioned the rebuke of certain scholars who accused him of "divulging our secrets," but Erasmus desired nonetheless to make truth accessible to everyone. At the same time, he wished to retain an allegiance to the general ideal of Christendom, and he seems never to countenance (however much his thought anticipates) progress as embracing either secularism or Protestantism. The main enemy he held, rather, to be scholasticism (or what he, and a great squad of Humanists, considered scholasticism to be).

The degeneration of Christianity from an original purity, Erasmus argues, can be blamed on the substitution of Aristotle's authority for Christ's, which has caused men to forget that Christ's teachings are directed primarily at practice, not theory. For a genuine Christian life, he states in *The Paraclesis*, "there is no need for ... syllogisms" (p. 94). The aridness and formalism of the technical scholastic arguments are of course endlessly the butt of Humanist reproof and contempt, and Erasmus in England would have heard Colet's

denunciation of scholasticism's pedantic and sterile procedures directly in the context of a revolutionary attempt to preach sermons based on a historical and philological approach to scripture.¹⁹ In Colet's spirit, Erasmus never hesitates to equate scholasticism with the kind of formal abstraction which impedes the *philosophia Christi*: "they still boast that they can see ideas, universals, separate forms, prime matters, quiddities, eccities. . . . And how they despise the vulgar crowd."²⁰ The scholastics are obscurantist, but their carefully harboured secrets are, in truth, insubstantial and meaningless.

All this is commonplace enough, but Erasmus' case against the scholastic metaphysicians takes a distinctive twist when he associates their love of abstraction and their obscurantism with war and tyranny. If priests and schoolmasters, Erasmus flatly argues, would inculcate the "vulgar doctrine" instead of "that erudition which they draw from the fonts of Aristotle and Averroes, Christendom would not be so disturbed on all sides by almost continuous war" (*Paraclesis*, p. 99). The philosophy of Christ should be made as "simple as possible and accessible to all" (p. 112), instead of having the "joined shields" of the "most subtle and seraphic doctors, some speaking as nominalists, others as realists," promote their intricate arguments. In the wars against the Turks, such prescriptive and arid procedures will only show forth our ambition and "our loud, tyrannical clamouring"; clearly, the attitude inculcated by such habits leads us to kill, not to save by example (p. 113).

The line of thinking here is fairly clearcut: because scholastic formalism is technical and difficult, it is elitist, and its major utility is the preservation of power based on elitism and, therefore, on pride and arrogance. The scholastics "fear good scholarship merely because they are apprehensive for their absolute power" (p. 82) and so "they toss their heads in pride" (p. 68); "They bring everyone to task; they condemn; they pontificate; they are never in doubt; they have no hesitations; they know everything" (p. 69). In a splendid piece of satire in *The Praise of Folly*, the narrator suggests sending "these argumentative Scotists and pigheaded Ockhamists and undefeated Albertists along with the whole regiment of Sophists to fight the Turks and Saracens instead of sending those armies of dull-witted soldiers with whom they've long been carrying on war with no result" (p. 161). This at once suggests the causal relationship between scholastic obscurantism and war (it would be appropriate for the philosophers to take responsibility for what they have started) while denouncing the brutality of actual war (the barbarities of the dull-witted), and, of course, satirising the real impotency of the philosophers: if they were sent to fight with *their* weapons nothing very grave would happen. The tragedy of war is that the barbarities and the destruction of social order actually promote the obscurantist elite in their superstitious ignorance and intolerant power by making impossible the pursuit of *bonae litterae*, for which peace is necessary and in which alone lies the hope of continued peace.²¹

True learning, Erasmus therefore argues, is the best antidote to war and political tyranny; Christ taught the same doctrine as Socrates, Diogenes and Epictetus, though more fully (*Paraclesis*, p. 101), and knowledge of the ancient languages makes available not only the moral teaching of the ancients, but their relationship with true Christianity as distinct from the "instances, relations, quiddities," and the "obscure and irksome confusion of words" (p. 101). But "studies," Erasmus says, must be "transmuted into morals" (p. 105), for the philosophy of Christ is not to be learned off like a doctrine or formula: it depends on a "disposition of mind" (p. 98), communicated by a quality of life, "by the very expression and the eyes" (p. 98). What is important is not proved logically, not defined, but is an attitude of the whole being, a kind of personal tact; the true philosopher, he argues, can avoid discord and violence only by "what I might call a holy artfulness."²²

Erasmus thus combines a radical faith in Humanist secular learning, especially philology, with an ideal "plain man's" straightforwardness, based on co-operation and the open communication of knowledge, and opposed to elitism and the powerful interests it protects. His anti-scholasticism, his sense of progress directed at the betterment of human society, and his egalitarian open-mindedness are forward-looking, modern attitudes, and yet Erasmus (like More) was himself anything but the plain and straightforward man²³ of his own prescription. The education of a truly Christian disposition, "the holy artfulness" of true diplomacy and learning, as he well knew, was indirect and subtle. The Christian philosopher especially must monitor and carefully adjudicate the degree of truth and falsehood contained in "venomous language" and "poisonous defamation," because tyranny arises from just such "false accusations"²⁴ rooted in powerful interests, and given to the manipulation of words.

Erasmus' thinking about morality is, it becomes clear, deeply rooted in the sense of what language is and is not, with respect to its objects. We need to be artful simply because the masks of language are so deceptive, and in teaching us how to achieve the discrimination he recommends, Erasmus combines, in his own writing, the simple and complex in a manner we can describe only as literary.

The fact that what we today call *literature* best expresses the main teachings of Erasmian humanism was very well understood also by Thomas More, and this is especially clear in his *Letter to Dorp*,²⁵ in which More defends Erasmus' practice in *The Praise of Folly*, as well as Erasmus' major ideas. More's letter duplicates the main points of Erasmus' position as I have outlined it, except that More is frequently more tedious, and distinctly more combative. Otherwise, the main ideas recur. More, for instance, vigorously defends the study of "grammar," arguing that exactness of knowledge is necessary for apprehending the meaning of texts, especially of sacred texts (p. 14): "Grammar teaches correct speech" and "advises those who are unskilled

in speech not to violate the customs of language" (p. 23). Grammar, in short, protects the "normal meaning" of words against distortion and misinterpretation, and those who have studied the scriptural languages most closely are "most deserving of having their names placed on the list of theologians," rather than those who spend a hundred years on the "trivial quibbles" of scholasticism.

More also makes a strong case for textual criticism, arguing, basically, that the literal sense of the original languages is often difficult to grasp, and that understanding requires humility, hard study, and open-mindedness (p. 34). Jerome and Augustine emended texts the better to clarify meaning, and such a process, More suggests, is potentially interminable (p. 44). The act of translation, it seems, does not cease, and the dialogue between meaning and style, calling for attention to the reader's perspective, to the demands of grammatical rigor and customary usage, is perpetually renewed.

In contrast to the humility and learning required for pursuit of exact philological knowledge, More, predictably, places the scholastic quibbles and formalised nonsense which he holds are perversions of ordinary language and clear meaning; "sheer nightmares and wild imaginings" (p. 20). He isolates especially Peter of Spain's *Little Logicals*, the principal handbook of arts scholasticism, routinely pilloried by Humanists. He cites examples of "enunciations ... so silly, they have practically no meaning" (p. 21), and opposes them to "customs of the language ... ordinarily observed" (p. 23) and rooted in the "nature of things," that is, as "a common possession" (p. 23). The arguments of the scholastic pseudo-dialecticians, More claims, are entirely futile, and he shares Erasmus' fears that such obscurantism aids those who desire illegitimate power by enabling them to assert their egotistical wills under the guise of true authority. He cites the example of a theologian at a dinner party (p. 30) who reacts to any piece of conversation by at once tearing it apart with a syllogism (p. 30). The host, an Italian merchant, eventually takes to baiting the theologian with fake Biblical quotations, a ploy that not only reveals the theologian's ignorance of scripture, but also the extreme arbitrariness of his arguments, which are based on "petty quibbles" and directed not at all at the truth, but at gratifying his own power and superior authority. "Sophists," More argues (meaning scholastics), use words deceptively (p. 24), but theirs is "a dull-witted form of cleverness and a stupid kind of ingenuity," because they base their victory on a sense of the words "secretly agreed" among themselves, and "contrary to universal acceptance" (p. 24). Again, elitism and obscurantism combine to assure the hegemony of those in power. More then proceeds to accuse Dorp of joining in this scholastic habit of mind by deliberately misquoting Erasmus (p. 26). Does he not see that "there is nothing so insignificant that calumny cannot find a place for itself therein" (p. 27), including Dorp's own words (pp. 26, 27)? A "malicious interpreter" (p. 26) can always cause trouble if not disposed to read with a kindly eye (p.

27) and to seek common truth in the clear light of day, rather than to pursue his own self-will, consumed by pride, and bent on the distortion of words.

If we now reconsider *The History of Richard III*, we can see the degree to which it, too, is a Humanist document in an Erasmian sense. The plain moral, as we see, is against tyrants, and the implied moral is that good rulers are plain-spoken, open, and co-operative. In Richard's ferocious malignity, which comes alive amidst the massive double-play of language, shifting perspectives, contradictory arguments, wilful misconceptions, and all the red herrings and decoys that his interlocutors argue and debate, we catch the drift of a tyrant's progress. The narrator as moralist thus instructs us clearly, and as ironist he offers us some practical training in the world's ambiguities, appreciative of how easy it is to fall victim to the distorted perspectives and intentions of others. And in discovering a way to combine this kind of simplicity and complexity, More achieves for his curious piece a true literary distinction, amounting even to a discovery, a new thing for English letters.

And yet, as we now begin to see, *Richard III* is built upon a deep contradiction, on which this discussion has been touching all along, for More, like Erasmus, was attracted simultaneously to two contrary impulses with respect to language. On the one hand he argues for plainness, openness and co-operation, based on ordinary speech and common meaning. On the other hand, he also argues that clarity and plainness are never sufficient, because their abuses can only be corrected and guarded against by those who know the unreliability of language, its inherent distance from things, its endlessly translatable meaning, its unrelatedness to disposition, and its impotency to effect reform from within. The language such as men do use is itself no clear guide to the secret direction of the individual will, as *Richard III* shows. More, like other Humanists, genuinely desired to bring the God of Christian tradition closer to the centre of individual lives, but his chief satiric weapon, irony (based on a sense of the division between words and meanings), was in fact hugely successful in demonstrating how language is not transparent to intent, and how the inner life of the spirit remains secret and mysterious. It may be argued that More, like Erasmus, thereby prepared for the very separation of theology from worldly affairs that neither of them desired. Only when Luther made explicit a conclusion that had all the time lain latent in the "Erasmian manifesto" (namely, that the inner life is inaccessible to mediation by words) were Erasmus and More forced to take stock of, and correct, an unsuspected consequence of their own theories.

It is, of course, a commonplace that to defend Christendom against Luther, More ironically falls back on the institutions (and to some extent the language) of scholasticism itself; not, admittedly, the Terminist vocabulary of Peter of Spain and the College of Montaigu, but the realist principles of the theologians who turned logic towards metaphysics in the defence of theology. More's polemical works, in short, powered by his fear of anarchy and tyranny

to which he thought revolutionary Protestantism would surely give rise, centre consistently on his defence of the real presence in the eucharist, and on arguments that would confirm the real participation of sign and signified which that doctrine entails.

In the letter to John Frith²⁶ (who had written against the doctrine of the Real Presence), for instance, More deplores the “evyll,” “canker” and “contagyon” of lurking heresy (p. 44), and argues against Frith’s “allegorye” (pp. 444, 449, 451) – an interpretation, that is, whereby the bread and wine signify but do not really contain the body and blood of Christ. More then appeals to “the hole trew catholyke fayth” (p. 444), to the “commune Catholyke Church” (p. 446), to “all good Chrysten folke” (p. 459), to the “olde holy Docturs” (p. 458), as well as to Christ’s plain words to confirm the mystery, which, admittedly, the human mind cannot fathom, but which it is imperative to believe: the eucharist really contains what it signifies. The “wurst kynde” (p. 457) of alternative interpretation, More avers, is the kind offered by Frith, for everyone will then end up believing what he wants (p. 457), and religious truth will, in that case, have no real place in everyday life.

In the *Treatise on the Passion*²⁷ (and elsewhere), More repeats and develops these positions. There are two elements in the sacrament, he claims: the bodily substance and the accidents of bread and wine (p. 140), which are also Christ’s body and blood. This fact is basic to faith (p. 141); the sacrament not only betokens, but contains (p. 152), and the language of substance and accident, matter and form, by which this unity is conventionally described, is both metaphysical and traditional.²⁸ Louis Martz has argued that More’s doctrine of the eucharist is the heart of his spirituality,²⁹ and this is so, I suggest, not least because metaphysical realism guaranteed, for More, meaning to the world and to human experience by maintaining a true, rather than a merely token relationship between signs and things, words and reality, events and meaning. The potential tyranny of the elitism that caused More in the first place to suspect the language of metaphysicians, he now modifies as the opposite kind of tyranny threatens – that of a world from which God, for all practical purposes, is absent. God is not much mentioned in *Richard III*, presumably because More assumed his presence in events, but a major achievement of the *History* is to show us how ironically and in what disturbing ways ordinary, unregenerate people going about their everyday business behave godlessly. And it might then easily appear that such an ordinary, unregenerate world must take its own course – anarchic, disoriented, confused, violent – in a realm for all practical purposes separate from the world of traditional religious values, with which (for linguistic reasons) it can have no effective discourse. This prospect was frightening to More, but the fact remains that he helped to introduce just such a development; at his hand, a certain modern view of the world begins to take shape, filled with uncertainty, ironic, anti-metaphysical, expedient, secular, hard-edged.

A commentator on More's execution wondered how the condemned man could joke at such a time.³⁰ Part of the answer is simply that he had the confidence to do so; confidence born of an awareness that the true play of language depends at once on the binding of words to meaning, and on a sense of their freedom, their evasive distance from things. Too rigid a binding, or too much volatility have a way, equally, of becoming tyrannous. More's language as a literary man, as we see in *Richard III*, is (like his jokes) most fully human, finding a place between, and thereby expressing some of the problems of reconciling secular behaviour with religious morality. As he felt a chasm increasingly opening between these realms, More looked increasingly, and with increasing urgency, to the intuitions of traditional metaphysics. There he found a vocabulary for reconciliation, as it were, between the world and God, but it was a vocabulary More did not feel himself to be inventing or shaping as a metaphysical myth. It had always been there, and he argued that he merely returned to the language of Christendom itself, the corporate myth, traditionally and self-evidently true. And yet the note of anxiety remains not only in More's imaginings of an imminent dissolution of Christendom, but in the polemical violence of his defence of tradition against the radical reforms of Luther and Tyndale. In his later career, More is increasingly the defender of a tradition that has hardened behind him;³¹ the metaphysics to which he reverts is less a self-evident matter of fact than a matter of fact that people must be persuaded again to acknowledge.

University of Victoria

Notes

- 1 Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sr Thomas Moore, knight, sometimes Lord high Chancellor of England*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock, intro. by R.W. Chambers, *EETS*, OS, 186 (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1932), p. 204.
- 2 See Louis L. Martz, "Thomas More: The Tower Works," in *St. Thomas More: Action and Contemplation*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester (New Haven and London: Yale University Press for St. John's University, 1972), p. 61, describing More's letters from the tower as "some of his finest works of art," partly because "they show the most artful regard for the presence of two or three or more different audiences," including his jailers and Cromwell himself. As well as the letters to Margaret, see the letter to Dr. Nicholas Wilson, *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), no. 208, pp. 533 ff. More was not unafraid of physical pain: see Rogers, *Correspondence*, no. 210, p. 543; no. 206, p. 530; no. 211, p. 546. And see *De Tristitia Christi*, ed. and trans. Clarence H. Miller, *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 14, part 1 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 57–59; *Dialogue of Comfort*, ed. Louis Martz and Frank Manley, *Complete Works* (1976), vol. 12, pp. 244 ff. Walter M. Gordon, "Tragic Perspective in Thomas More's Dialogue with Margaret in the Tower," *Cithara*, 17, no. 2 (1978), 3–12, deals with the tension and complexity of More's attempt to reconcile his earthly and heavenly loves, in the context of his fears and anxieties.
- 3 The *Epigrammata* of 1518 show considerable concern with tyranny. See *The Latin Epigrams of Thomas More*, ed. L. Bradner and C.A. Lynch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), pp. 26, 48, 49, 51, 52, 57, 69, 83, 93, 96, 97, cited also in *The History of King Richard III*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester, *Complete Works* (1963), vol. 2, p. xcix. See also Judith P. Jones, *Thomas More* (Boston:

- Twayne Publishers, 1979), p. 34. Erasmus tells us that More always loathed tyranny; see *Erasmii Epistolae*, ed. P.S. Allen, H.M. Allen, et al., in 12 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906–58), vol. 4, p. 15. See also Stephen Gresham, "The Dramaturgy of Tyranny: More's *Richard III* and Sackville's Complaint of Buckingham," in *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More*, ed. Michael J. Moore (Boone, N. Carolina: Albion, 1978), esp. pp. 40–42.
- 4 For the *de casibus* tradition, see L. Dean, "Literary Problems in More's *Richard III*," *PMLA*, 53 (1943), 22–41, in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. R.S. Sylvester and G.P. Marc'hadour (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1977), pp. 315 ff.; A.R. Myers, "The Character of Richard III," *History Today*, 4 (1954), 509–21; Stephen Gresham, "The Dramaturgy of Tyranny," pp. 35–42. P.M. Kendall, *Richard III* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1955), p. 423, points to the "stunning vitality of More's literary talent" in inverting the advice-to-princes genre. Robert Reiter, "On the Genre of Thomas More's *Richard III*," *Moreana*, no. 25 (1970), 15–16, sees the work as an inversion of the conventional mediaeval saint's life. For humanist history, see C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 167; Richard S. Sylvester, ed., *The History of King Richard III, Complete Works* (1963), vol. 2, pp. lxx-civ; Damian Grace, "On Interpreting St. Thomas More's *History of King Richard the Third*," in *European History and its Historians*, ed. Frank McGregor and Nicholas Wright (Adelaide: Adelaide University Union Press, 1977), pp. 11–12, and "Is *Richard III* a 'Satirical Drama'?" *Moreana*, no. 57 (1978), 31–37. Elizabeth Story Donno, "Thomas More and *Richard III*," *Renaissance Quarterly*, 35 (1982) 401–47 argues that More does not write history in a mediaeval or Tudor manner, but on the model of a sixteenth-century declamation, in an epideictic vein, and on the model of a paradoxical encomium.
- 5 A.W. Chambers, "The Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and His School," in *Harpfield's Life*, ed. Hitchcock, p. liii.
- 6 *Ibid.*, pp. cxxii and xliii.
- 7 For discussion of the two versions, see Richard S. Sylvester, *Richard III*, pp. l ff., suggesting that both versions were written together; Alison Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians, 1483–1535* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 198 ff., suggesting (against Sylvester) that More wrote an English draft first. Michael A. Anderegg reviews Hanham's argument, *Moreana*, no. 57 (1978), 39–46. Alistair Fox, *Thomas More, History and Providence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 104 ff., argues that the Latin Arundel is first or concurrent with the English, and that More then developed the Latin Louvain. Questioning the historicity of More's account are A.R. Myers, "The Character of Richard III," and Paul Murray Kendall, *Richard III*. But compare A.L. Rowse, *Bosworth Field and the Wars of the Roses* (London: Macmillan, 1966), pp. 352, 270–73, which accepts the general account as reliable. For specific historical inaccuracies, see A.F. Pollard, "The Making of Sir Thomas More's *Richard III*," in *Historical Essays in Honour of James Tait*, ed. J.G. Edwards, V.H. Galbraith, and E.F. Jacob (Manchester, for subscribers, 1933), pp. 223–38, in *Essential Articles*, ed. Sylvester and Marc'hadour, pp. 421–31.
- 8 There is a tradition of commentary interpreting *Richard III* as drama. See R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More*, p. 117; Walter M. Gordon, "Exemplum Narrative and Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*," *Clio*, 9, no. 1 (1979), 75–88; Alison Hanham, *Richard III and His Early Historians*, pp. 174 ff.; Arthur Noel Kincaid, "The Dramatic Structure of Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*," *SEL*, 12 (1972), 223–42; A.R. Myers, "The Character of Richard III," p. 515; A.F. Pollard, "The Making of Sir Thomas More's *Richard III*," *Essential Articles*, ed. Sylvester and Marc'hadour, pp. 426 ff.; M.M. Reese, *The Cease of Majesty* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1961), p. 46; W.G. Zeeveld, review of Richard S. Sylvester's *Richard III*, in *Moreana*, no. 1 (1963), p. 68.
- 9 All quotations are from Richard S. Sylvester's edition, and page numbers are indicated in the text.
- 10 See *Richard III*, ed. Sylvester, pp. lxxix; xcix-civ.
- 11 On this general point, see Donald S. Stauffer, *English Biography Before 1700* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1930), on More's "delicacy of presentation" (p. 39) and "dramatic and psychological skill" (p. 40); Walter M. Gordon, "Exemplum Narrative in Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*," *Clio*, 9, no. 1 (1979), 75–88; James L. Harner, "The Place of 'Shore's Wife' in More's *The History of King Richard III*," *Moreana*, no. 74 (1982), 69–76.
- 12 Alistair Fox, *Thomas More. History and Providence*, pp. 75 ff., argues that More comes to see that any engagement with politics necessarily forces us to compromise with evil, and in *Richard III* a "massive failure of free will" in the body politic enables Richard to succeed. This point overlaps with mine,

though I read Alistair Fox's study after writing this article. Our interpretations differ in that Fox analyses More's preoccupation with history and providence, while I concentrate on a linguistic problem.

- 13 See Sylvester, *Richard III*, pp. 165, 217.
- 14 I summarise here the interesting article by Arthur Noel Kincaid, "The Dramatic Structure of Sir Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*." See also, Alice Hanham, *Richard III and his Early Historians*, especially pp. 174 ff., treating the work as a satirical drama in five acts.
- 15 More often presents his opponents as bad actors. See Richard S. Sylvester, "A Part of His Own: Thomas More's Literary Personality in his Early Works," *Moreana*, no. 4 (1967), 29–42.
- 16 See Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 17 ff., treating More in context of Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, and Ernest B. Gilman, *The Curious Perspective. Literary and Pictorial Wit in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1978), *passim*.
- 17 See *Antibarbarorum liber*, trans. Margaret Mann Phillips, *The Antibarbarians, Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 23 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), pp. 28 ff., 42 ff. Erasmus suggests that violence and negligence in education produce violence and sedition in the state.
- 18 Trans. John C. Olin, *Christian Humanism and the Reformation* (Gloucester, Massachusetts: Peter Smith, 1973). Page numbers are cited in text.
- 19 Erasmus, *The Lives of Vitrier ... and John Colet*, trans. J.H. Lupton (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1883), pp. 21–22.
- 20 Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. Betty Radice, intro. A.H.T. Levi (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1971), p. 152. Page numbers are cited in the text and refer to this edition.
- 21 *Erasmii Epistolae*, ed. P.S. and H.M. Allen, no. 200. *The Complaint of Peace*, trans. Thomas Paynell (London: 1559), sig. Di, ff. *The "Julius exclusus" of Erasmus*, trans. Paul Pascal, intro. J. Kelley Sowards (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 72 ff., 81–82, 88, *et passim*.
- 22 Letter to Jodocus on Luther, in Olin, *Christian Humanism*, p. 263.
- 23 Richard J. Schoeck, "The Place of Erasmus Today," in *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, ed. Richard L. De Molen (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971), p. 80, cites Julian Benda, *La Trahison des Clercs*, trans. R. Aldington (New York: William Morrow, 1928), p. 80, on Erasmus being "a great patrician of the mind." See also James D. Tracy, "Erasmus the Humanist" in the same collection, p. 38, on Erasmus' theory of education being aristocratic. H.A. Mason, *Humanism and Poetry in the Early Tudor Period* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1959), maintains that Humanism at large was a learned and elitist game.
- 24 Letter to Paul Volz, trans. Olin, *Christian Humanism*, pp. 123, 127.
- 25 See *Selected Letters*, ed. Rogers, pp. 8–64. Page numbers are cited in the text and refer to this edition.
- 26 *Correspondence*, ed. Rogers, no. 190. Page numbers are cited in the text and refer to this edition.
- 27 *Treatise on the Passion*, ed. Garry E. Haupt, *The Complete Works*, vol. 13 (1976). Page numbers are cited in the text and refer to this edition.
- 28 More, however, was not simply an old-fashioned metaphysician: see Walter M. Gordon, "A Scholastic Problem in Thomas More's Controversy with John Frith," *Harvard Theological Review*, 69 (1976), 131–49. Gordon points out that "Underlying this stout corpus of materials lay a variety of metaphysical presuppositions used in support of the differing [scholastic] schools" (p. 135), but More's job was to offer a popular defence of tradition, and so it would be wrong to "assign More a place in any of the scholastic traditions" (p. 143). Nonetheless, as Gordon also points out, George Joye, who entered the debate on Frith's side, "scoffs at the 'Thomistical papists' and their 'Thomistical mystery' and the 'strange Thomistical sense' which More makes of Christ's words" (p. 145). This sense of More's implicit affirmation of general scholastic principles within a non-technical discussion is exactly my point.
- 29 Louis L. Martz, "Thomas More: The Sacramental Life," *Thought*, 52 (1977), 302.
- 30 Edward Halle, *The Union of the two noble and illustre famelies etc.* (London, 1548), sig. ppp4v., cited by Richard S. Sylvester, "A Part of His Own: Thomas More's Literary Personality in his Early Works," *Moreana*, no. 4 (1967), 30.
- 31 See Richard J. Schoeck, "The Place of Erasmus Today," in *Erasmus of Rotterdam*, ed. Richard L. De Molen, pp. 77 ff., on Erasmus maintaining a sense of living tradition, which is not present in More's polemical writings, in which tradition "is now a repository which must be safeguarded" (p. 87).