

## **MORE AND MORE**

**By Richard Malim**

My purpose is to try to show that the play *Sir Thomas More* accurately reflects Sir Thomas More's political career and also his economic and social attitudes: how these are repeated by the dramatist as his sympathiser; and, in effect, the possibility that the author as such could be anyone other than Edward de Vere the 17th Earl of Oxford writing as Shakespeare cannot be entertained.

There can be no doubt that the reputation of Sir Thomas More was inextricably bound up with that of Marian persecutors of heretics during Mary Tudor's reign (1553–58) for the remainder of the century. To a large extent this must be More's own fault. His language about heresy and denial of Catholic truths is all about destruction by fire: heresy is like a rotten house which must be destroyed by fire. His apologists seek to say that he was not responsible for the burnings of any heretics, which is literally true, but he supported (whether intentionally or unintentionally) the cast of mind that heresy should be met with death. In truth he sought to say that heresy should be met with the Church's sentence of excommunication, and that the Law in England require the burning of heretics only when guilty of *seditions* heresy. After More left office as Lord Chancellor in 1531 this distinction was not observed, and in his writings More put his own antagonist's argument, 'Marry, but as methinketh, the bishop doth as much as though he killeth him, when he leaveth him to the secular hand.'<sup>1</sup> Understandably, especially as More's own inflammatory writings reflect his almost pathological hatred of heresy and desire for total extirpation, the minds of both bishops and legal authorities took or appeared to take less and less notice of the distinction. The spread of all forms of anti-Catholicism meant there was no possibility of any convicted heretic surviving, and into this horror stepped the political element. By 1580 More was neither read (except in secret) nor published, as beyond the pale of any sort of acceptance.

Yet there were elements of society that preserved good reports of his memory. First there was the Catholic or Catholic sympathising section, which saw More as a martyr and/or as a hero for his willingness to defend his faith and resistance to

the state's illegitimate political demands even unto death. Second there was apparently a folk sympathy amongst Londoners for the memory of his justice and his humour, no doubt not diminishing as it passed through the generations.<sup>2</sup>

Both these elements are preserved in the anonymous play *Sir Thomas More*, whereas the religious dissensions which impacted on the whole of society are totally ignored – except where the policies of Henry VIII in rejecting the Pope's authority and establishing a Church in all respects the same as Rome with the King in temporal authority over that Church are relevant. Even so, a non-Christian if he/she read nothing else would never realise that from More's refusal to subscribe to the King's Articles, the contents of which are neither discussed nor even described. The reader's bewilderment would be only made worse by Surrey's remark in *More*, Scene 10 (60-62):

Tis strange that my Lord Chancellor should refuse  
The duty that the law of God bequeaths  
Unto the King.

More had been promoted by Henry VIII to Lord Chancellor: but he refused to pronounce upon the King's marriage and its proposed dissolution. For this refusal, he was arrested, imprisoned and executed.

It would be very difficult for Edmund Tilney as Master of the Revels and the Cecilian regime's censor to take exception to the version of events given by the playwright, and indeed he makes no comment in writing of any substance on the manuscript after the first scene. Indeed, he might realise that the author was being ironic: for More had told the rioting populace in Scene 6, that it was as much as a sin to rise against the King, as against God himself.

Perhaps as Tilney read further the account of More's resistance and attitude to the King, he may have soon decided that the whole concoction was too antipathetic to the regime to be allowed exhibition on the stage, let alone publication. There is none of the Fletcherian slither of *Henry VIII* ending with the Protestant triumph at the baby Queen Elizabeth's birth. Instead, we have the final lines (again Surrey, Oxford's uncle) as More is lead off to execution:

A very learned worthy gentleman  
Seals error with his blood. Come we'll to court.  
Let's sadly hence to perfect unknown fates,  
While he tends progress to the state of states

The speech contains much opaque matter. What and whose is the '*error*'? Why the '*sadly*' simpliciter when the anticipated glorious triumph of Protestantism had become so obvious? The last line seems to mean he is making progress to his final state of death, or does it mean he in heaven will have a continued care or a watching brief over developments. The very word 'tends' recalls Surrey's commendation, 'the most religious politician/ The worthiest counsellor that tends our state' (Scene 8, 142–3). I think Tilney would hardly have accepted any of these lines.

What evidence can we adduce to identify the author? I am not concerned with who scribed (as opposed to authored) the manuscript of which part, as I am a disciple of the late Fran Gidley who was able to show that the different manuscript hands were the result of dictation by the writer to different scribes,<sup>3</sup> nor with the speculation as to the identity of each scribe. Before I show more of her argument, I ought first to touch on the so called 'Hand D' argument. Some, but by no means all, supporters of the Stratford man's claim to authorship claim the passage in question to be in his original hand. There is of course ample evidence that he was as near totally illiterate as makes no difference, which the 'orthodox' camp does not accept at all. Fortunately, a professional palaeographer has some six years ago without any subsequent refutation demonstrated in an essay '*...the Futility of the Palaeographic Argument*' its total nonsense. Its history is 'a narrative of ambiguous terms, misconceptions and mistakes' without adequate control comparison, and the judgment should be allied to that on the alleged control comparison of the six signatures.<sup>4</sup> These are the work of perhaps three different law clerks whose practice was to cobble up a scribble to represent the signature of an illiterate client.<sup>5</sup>

There is a more respectable attempt to show that Hand D is the work of the author of the canon, and even that does not command total 'orthodox' acceptance. I am in another camp, which accepts with Fran Gidley, that all the work is Oxford's, and that the discrepancy between the quality of the writing in Hand D Scene 6 is readily explained if it is accepted that Hand D is a late sophisticated

addition – it does not fit particularly well with the other scenes anyway. Nevertheless Ms. Gidley tabulated a list of similarities of some twenty expressions. For a perception of the quality of Ms. Gidley’s comparisons these are the first three:

De Bard (a would-be rapist): thou art my prize  
and I plead purchase of thee (*More*, Scene 1, 2–3)

Made prize and purchase of his wanton eye  
(*Richard III*, IV.vii.177)

~☆~

To urge my imperfections in excuse,  
were all as stale as custom (*More*, Scene 6, 232–3)

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale  
Her infinite variety, (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II.ii.241–2)

~☆~

Doll: I do owe God a death, and I must pay him.  
(*More*, Scene 7, 110)

A man can die but once, we owe God a death.  
(*2 Henry IV*, III ii 232–3)

My intention is not to use these similarities as a dating tool, but merely to try to prove the whole of the play is ‘Shakespeare’s’. A much more important element is the matching of the cast of mind. In terms of humour Ms. Gidley’s review is spot on: many would be persuaded of the canonicity of the play with that element added to the comparisons above.

There is a further element before we consider the dating of the play. The riot in the play is not about intolerable conditions of the city poor, but is xenophobic against the arrival of continental refugees, who are probably in a social stratum higher than the actual poor. Tilney the censor wanted the rioters to be shown as targeting the ‘Lombards’, not the ‘stranger’ or ‘the French’ (Sc.3 ll.49 and 53). The play shows the refugees as destitute which was seldom the state of those Italians who came to London in the 1560s or earlier, who had in effect a coterie of co-religionists and racial nationals to fall back on.<sup>6</sup> As a tiny group they were well in with the Court and favoured by the Queen. I think Tilney is perhaps making a

political case against this group's influence (which is anyway anachronistic as a comment relating to London in 1520). This has nothing to do with the playwright's attitude, which is entirely sympathetic with the refugees. That matches Oxford's attitude in the canon towards the dispossessed generally, and with its absence in the works of later middle-class dramatists goes to prove Oxford's authorship of the whole of the play. Apart from xenophobic and anti-Catholic concerns I imagine his view about the exploited poor, enclosures etcetera was probably very acceptable to the groundlings. With the establishment from 1608 on of the theatres that were fully covered and expensive, that tranche of playgoers was choked out, and it may be that 'Shakespeare's' plays were less appealing to the richer patrons and were eclipsed in popularity with those of his successors with less demanding social content.<sup>7</sup>

The manuscripts apart from Scene 6 Hand D portions are the work of the young author, i.e. Oxford in his 'Catholic' period before he was allowed to go to Italy in 1575.<sup>8</sup> There are no Italianisms to date it prior to Oxford's stay in Italy ending prior to 1576. While the play's attitude to the refugees matches his perhaps later take on the dispossessed poor, he introduces in the similarly early play *1 Henry VI* an element of snobbery in the mouth of peasant girl Joan of Arc (*La Pucelle*) as she briefs her troops on her infiltration into English occupied Rouen:

These are the city gates, the gates of Rouen,  
Through which our policy must make a breach.  
Take heed. Be wary how you place your words.

*Talk like the vulgar sort of market men*

That come to gather money for their corn. (*1 Henry VI*, III.ii.1–5)

I suggest the same aristocratic cast of mind puts this thought into the mouth of More, whose family were certainly decent upper-class gentry (and superior to Wolseley, Thomas Cromwell and Cecil), the opening speech of *More*, Scene 8, from which I take:

That I from such a humble bench of birth  
Should step, as 'twere, up to my country's head,  
And give the law out there.

So, it seems to me that Oxford took his pre-1576 version, had it fair copied, and submitted it to Tilney the censor in the mid to late 1580s. Tilney began to make the emendations he wanted, but he saw that the play with its element of hagiography towards More was really not worth his trouble, and tossed it back. Perhaps Oxford entertained the idea that under a less strict regime it might survive and occupied himself writing the great speech in Hand D for Scene 6, which has been justly compared to that of Antony in *Julius Caesar*. Perhaps he lost heart, and the manuscript was effectively buried for 250 years.

A substantial bloc of ‘orthodox’ opinion from The British Library ascribes the basis of the play to Munday as one of the possible scribes aided by a coterie of contemporaries in the 1590s; ‘orthodoxy’ ignores Munday’s employment as Oxford’s secretary n-1579-82. However, the more the play is studied, its pure ‘Shakespeare’ becomes incontrovertible, and the possibility that any other author was involved becomes a nonstarter, for how could a middle-class cook be expected to bake such a political and religious hot potato. Only a young, protected aristocrat would dare to take it on in the first place.

More’s biographer, R. W. Chambers actually goes further and outlines More’s influence on ‘Shakespeare’ and the latter’s debt to More. ‘It is important to remember that Shakespeare came under the influence of More early, when he was learning his work as a tragic poet. It is from More that Shakespeare takes something of the tragic idea in which his *Richard III* reminds us of Greek drama: the feeling of fate hanging over blind men who can see what is happening to others but are unconscious of their own danger’, which is also the moral of More’s own study of Richard III. Chambers concludes that a comparison of Shakespeare’s *Richard III* with *Sir Thomas More’s* leaves one astonished at the debt.<sup>10</sup> I would add that More’s and Oxford’s economic and political views seem readily to coincide.<sup>11</sup>

### **Bibliography:**

*The Book of Sir Thomas More* (1603-04), In: Wells S., Taylor G., Jowett J., Montgomery W., Eds, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Second Edition)

Chambers, R.W., *Sir Thomas More* (Toronto: J. Cape, 1935)

Looney, J.T., *“Shakespeare” Identified in Edward de Vere the Seventeenth Earl of Oxford* (London: Cecil Palmer; and New York: Frederick A. Stokes Co., 1920)

Malim, R.C.W., *Shakespeare’s Revolution* (London: Austin Macauley, 2022); and website, richardmalim.ampbk.com

Moynahan, B, *William Tyndale: If God Spare My Life* (London: Abacus, 2003)

## End notes

1. Chambers, p.281
2. These two paragraphs are broad brush digests of Chambers and Moynahan.
3. Fran Gidley, ‘Shakespeare in Composition: Evidence for Oxford’s Authorship of *The Book of Sir Thomas More*’, *The Oxfordian*, 6 (October 2003) pp.29–54.
4. Diana Price, ‘Hand D and Shakespeare’s Unorthodox Literary Paper Trail’, *Journal of Early Modern Studies* (2016) 5, 329–352.
5. Jane Cox, ‘Shakespeare’s Will and Signature’, *Shakespeare in the Public Records* (London: Public Records Office, 1985); M. Hutchinson, ‘The Slippery Slope of Shakespeare’s “Signatures”’, *The Oxfordian*, 23 (September 1921)
6. Malim, pp.26–27.
7. Malim, pp.281–294: Other reasons for Oxford’s decline in literary reputation.
8. Malim, p.44.
9. Malim, p.161.
10. Chambers, p.117.
11. Chambers, p.143; Malim, p.368 n.47. I think that this political/economic element should be added to the lists of ‘General Influences’ and ‘Specific Qualities’ unearthed by J. T. Looney as he sought the real author. Certainly, modern scholarship (as exemplified in Malim, p.159, 366 n.21 and 368 n.47 and website) is rightly concerned with this angle: I quote More, ‘Your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame, and so small eaters, be become so great devourers and so wild that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves.’ Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, R. Robinson translation, Arber Edition, 1867, pp.40–41.

