

PETR OSOLSOBĚ

*SIR THOMAS MORE:*

LESS COLLABORATIVE, MORE SHAKESPEAREAN

Is *Sir Thomas More*, in all its fortuitous dramatic unity, the subtle symmetries of its characters, and its network of cross-references a collaborative work? As far as modern editors are concerned, there is a measure of agreement that the original play was the work of Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle, and was completed around 1592-94. Its manuscript contains a number of rewritten and additional passages, attributed to Chettle, Heywood, Dekker and Shakespeare. Gabrieli and Melchiori, in their admirable 1990 Revels edition of *Sir Thomas More*, support the assumption:

playwriting at the time, at least for the public stage, was a collaborative practice between men of letters and actors and the men of the theatre, frequently on the basis of a 'plot' devised by a single author[. Besides,] all the extant or lost plays connected with Munday's name [...] are written in collaboration. (Gabrieli and Melchiori 1990: 13)

Munday's claim to authorship is, furthermore, supported by his access to Harpsfield's *Life of More* as well as to other rare recusant literature used in the play; Munday was the right-hand man of Richard Topcliffe, a notorious priest-catcher under Queen Elizabeth, and his close 'collaborator' in arresting and executing Roman Catholic priests Edmund Campion, Ralph Sherwin and Alexander Briant in 1581 (Gabrieli and Melchiori 1990: 8). Moreover, Munday was familiar with Latin tags and quotations which are abundant in the original text, always correct in spelling, grammar and syntax, owing to his daily usage of Latin during the months he spent as a spy in the Catholic English College in Rome from February to May 1579. This period he vividly and boastingly describes in his *The English Romayne Lyfe* of 1582.

The Revels editors substantiate their view of Munday as an original writer reminding us of his reputation of being "our best plotter" in Francis

Meres' words from *Palladis Tamia* (1598).<sup>1</sup> They repudiate W.W. Greg's observation (in Greg 1923) of a typical scribal error on fol. 21 (*fashion* > *fashis*) as unpersuasive for the conclusion that Munday was a mere copyist, and a careless one, of the crucial episodes of More's imprisonment and execution (manuscript Hand S); on the contrary, the last minute changes prove "that the writer assumed the full rights of an author to improve on his own or anybody else's draft, and even impose, through such changes, his ideological construction on the meaning of the play" (Gabrieli and Melchiori 1990: 13-14).

The dramaturgical issue at stake in *Sir Thomas More* is the moral of the story represented in the play. The protagonist, Lord Chancellor of England, Thomas More, comes out as an admirably intelligent and witty person, whose personal integrity, human compassion for the poor, and love for his family are never questioned, and who, deliberately, with religious resolution, and even with gratification, accepts death on the scaffold rather than the monarch's authority in matters of faith. How could it be that Munday, the priest-hunter, accuser and spy, and a proud one at that, in the service of the repressive apparatus, was ever able to write a play that glorifies a Catholic hero and a 'saint'? As the editors admit, this issue is difficult to explain: probably, Munday's views underwent a transformation and, ten years later, he assumed a different view of More. In the play, Munday avoids raising the question of the conflict between the Roman and the English Churches,

replacing it with that of the freedom of the individual conscience [which was] a question that interested the Puritan and non-conformist London middle class even more than the Roman Catholic dissidents. (Gabrieli and Melchiori 1990: 16)

From this starting point, I would like to present a handful of observations of my own. First, I would argue that the figure of Thomas More as represented in the extant text of the play accords merely with the Catholic image of the saint, albeit truncated of many features we know from his biographies, and that it was artistically shaped and intended predominantly for those types of playgoers who were acquainted with and constant to the old faith. Secondly, I would like to provide several parallels in words, themes and imagery which I consider worth further examination; these might suggest that Shakespeare wrote at least the whole of the second half

---

<sup>1</sup> Could there not be, in Francis Mere's list of the best Comedy authors, a hidden double meaning of 'intriguer', 'machinator' in the description of Anthony Munday as "our best plotter"?

of the play, hastily rewritten by Munday or somebody else. A similar claim has already been made by Richard Simpson (Simpson 1871),<sup>2</sup> and, recently, by Thomas Merriam on the basis of stylometric tests (see Merriam 1987, and Gabrieli and Melchiori 1990: 33-34).

I doubt that “the puritanically inclined City middle class” (Gabrieli and Melchiori 1990: 16) would have been eager to applaud a kind of cheerful and amusing Lord Chancellor who retained so many features of his religious identity along with John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, another hero of the play. For instance, More’s way of prayer is depicted with those significant details of the traditional ceremony deplored by Puritans: “he kneeled and prayed before the image” (*STM* 11.39). Roper’s wife’s vision of More’s prayer evokes an image of “the bare ruined choirs” with a clear reference to the destruction of holy images and roods (the gallery over the choir, housing the crucifix):

Methought I saw him here in Chelsea church,  
Standing upon the rood-loft, now defaced;  
And whilst he kneeled and prayed before the image,  
It fell with him into the upper choir,  
Where my poor father lay all stained in blood. (*STM* 11.37-41)

Because the destruction of images took place soon after More’s death, the passage bore a rather prophetic savour of events which the Elizabethan audiences already knew had taken place. The same prophetic undertone could not be overheard in Catesby’s remark:

A dead man to the world, and given the axe his head,  
But his sweet soul to live among the saints. (*STM* 15.38-39)

The remembrance of ‘*communio sanctorum*’ and of More’s future ‘sainthood’ again would have addressed more probably a viewer with the old faith’s feeling, and the same is true for Lieutenant’s benediction to his new prisoner in the Tower: “God and his blessed angels be about ye” (*STM* 17.26). A listener who kept the older view of the auxiliary office of angels and saints could also find more in More’s exclamation:

---

<sup>2</sup> Simpson presented two sections of our play as in Shakespeare’s hand. He based this claim mainly on the literary evidence, the Shakespearian flavour of these sections, but also on the character of the handwriting, asserting that “the way in which the letters are formed is absolutely the same as the way in which they are formed in the signatures of Shakespeare.” In the history of the authorship debate, it is necessary to mention the edition of papers by Alfred Pollard, W. Greg, E. Maunde Thompson, J. Dover Wilson and R. W. Chambers, published in 1923.

The best I can do to prefer you all  
 With my mean store expect; for heaven can tell  
 That More loves all his followers more than well. (*STM* 13, Add.  
 I.120-122)

That is to say, More pronounces an assurance that he who has reached the ‘state of states’ after all, is now living and will hear the prayer of his clients. If it is so, the cultural paradigm of a religious drama offered a more complicated and subtle way of perception. Every represented deed of a hero had, for the audience, its historical ‘then’ as well as its mystical ‘now’, manifest in the immediate relationship of the audience with the saint in heaven.

The usual pun on the name More, so frequent in the play, is echoed also in Shakespeare’s Sonnet 23:

Who plead for love, and look for recompense,  
 More than that tongue that [M]ore hath more expressed.  
 O learn to read what silent love hath writ[...]  
 (Sonnet 23.11-13)

Recently, Clare Asquith (Asquith 2005) has deepened the interpretation of Shakespeare’s Sonnet 23 with reference to More and explained the coded political meaning which the sonnet itself yields and at the same time professes. As an example of this ‘silent’ language, let us take the closing quatrain of the play spoken by the poet Surrey, who was to ‘perfect his unknown fate’ when beheaded in 1547 on a charge of high treason against Henry VIII (as the audience undoubtedly knew):

#### SURREY

A very learnèd worthy gentleman  
 Seals error with his blood. Come, we’ll to court.  
 Let’s sadly hence to perfect unknown fates,  
 Whilst he tends progress to the state of states. (*STM* 17.125-128)

“Seals error with his blood” is a perfectly ambivalent statement. Its interpretation depends on further qualification of the said fatal error. Whose error? Henry’s, or his Chancellor’s? It provides an equally perfect alibi for the author of this political play, who in the case of accusation can prove his disclaimer.

Another expressive device of the silent language was homophony. The pronunciation of *Rome* and *room* was alike. The pair occurs in Roper’s praise of family contentment in More’s house at Chelsea: “O, what formality, what square observance, | Lives in a little room!” (*STM* 13.12-

13).<sup>3</sup> It may be an allusion to recusant circles of London gentry, especially women like Penelope Rich, Anne, Countess of Arundel, and namely Magdalen, Lady Montague, whose house was so much frequented by Catholic priests saying Mass that it was known in the country as “Little Rome”.

Another related issue is the imagery associated with Rome and its history in the play of *Sir Thomas More*. These allusions are always free from dramatic necessity, and are apparently deliberate. They exceed a historical narrative of events of the schism of 1533 and its immediate consequences for life in England and More’s trial and execution. They propose and display the philosophy of Christian history based on Augustine’s *City of God* and on Virgil’s *Aeneid* in which the city of Rome under divine guidance manifests and grants the permanence of the *ecclesia Romana* against the transience of the *imperium Romanum*. How fascinating the Virgilian tradition was for the recusant culture, has been shown by Gerard Kilroy in his edition of Edmund Campion’s Vergilian epic (Kilroy 2005).

Returning to *Sir Thomas More* we find the Roman allusion to the attribution of the original building of the Tower to Caesar in the scene of More’s arrest:

[I will] add  
My bones to strengthen the foundation  
Of Julius Caesar’s palace. (*STM* 13.176-178)

Similarly, in Shakespeare’s *Richard III*: “Did Julius Caesar build that place, my lord?” (*R3* 3.1.69). And probably in order to enforce the association (or under its suggestion) the author of *Sir Thomas More* has put the following in the mouth of More: “More now must march” (*STM* 13.186; my emphasis) possibly alluding to Caesar’s murder on the ides of March.<sup>4</sup>

Later, in the Tower prison, More remembers his lectures in the Church on *de civitate Dei* by St Augustine<sup>5</sup>: “You were a patient auditor of mine |

---

<sup>3</sup> I am indebted to Gerard Kilroy for the notice of homophones *Rome* – *room* in connection with the tormented “great reckoning in a little room” (*AYL* 3.3.11-12).

<sup>4</sup> Other parallels in structure, imagery and vocabulary have been pointed out with Clarence’s speech in *R3* (1.4.9-63).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Harpsfield’s biography: “yet did Master More, being so yonge,... openly reade in the Churche of St Laurence in London the bookes of the saide St Augustine *de Ciuitate Dei*, to his no small commendation, and to the great admiration of all his audience” (quoted in Gabrieli and Melchiori 1990: 201).



Buckingham in *All Is True* (*Henry VIII*); to name a few analogies, the use of oxymoron for prison's description, as in More's "Fair prison, welcome" (*STM* 14.58), "a goodly scaffold" (*STM* 17.50), and Posthumus' "Most welcome, bondage" (*Cym* 5.5.97); the identification of death with a physician (*STM* 16.27; *Cym* 5.5.101); the act of execution compared with a seal: "seals error with his blood" (*STM* 17.126); "I now seal it, | And with that blood..." (*AIT* 2.1.106-107); and – most strikingly – the discourses about the weakness of our worldly eyes and elevation through death "bove sight" (*STM* 17.109-111; *Cym* 5.5.266-278), connected with the religious symbolism of the East side as the direction from which resurrection in the second coming of Christ will come:

HANGMAN

To the east side, my lord.

MORE

Then to the East. (*STM* 17.119)

A parallel passage is in *Cymbeline*, in the burial of 'Fidele': "Nay, Cadwal, we must lay his head to th'east. | My father hath a reason for't" (*Cym* 4.2.256-257). As for *Cymbeline*, moreover, there are many similarities with *Sir Thomas More* in diction and imagery as far as the Roman Empire is concerned. In *Sir Thomas More* Charles V is called "the good Emperor" by More himself (*STM* 10.54), and England's apurtenance to the universal empire is expressed by the same emblems:

Let German flags wave with our English cross. (*STM* 10.67)

let

A Roman and a British ensign wave

Friendly together. (*Cym* 5.6.480-482)

Also the dramatic usage of divinatory dreams and portents in *Sir Thomas More* bears some similarity to Shakespeare's Lady More, who after having had a prophetic dream, asks Roper: "*You are a scholar*. | I pray ye tell me, may one credit dreams?" (*STM* 11.5-6; my italics). In the same way, Marcellus asks Horatio to speak with the ghost: "*Thou art a scholar* – speak to it, Horatio" (*Ham* 1.1.40; my italics).

In addition to the number of references to various works by Shakespeare already noted in the modern editions of *Sir Thomas More* by Jenkins and by Gabrieli and Melchiori, the above coincidences are so numerous as to make it impossible to deny Shakespeare's hand in the

overall design of the play, whatever questions may be raised as to the authorship of its individual parts.

Even though the author(s) of *Sir Thomas More* intentionally neglected to express the dangerous political motifs involved in the controversy between Henry VIII and his Lord Chancellor – royal divorce, supremacy and schism – and only depicted More and the Bishop of Rochester refusing to subscribe unspecified “royal articles”, the London audiences were hardly ignorant of the fact that when, on 6 July 1535, Thomas More went to the block, he asked the crowd “to bear witness with him that he should now suffer in and for the faith of the holy Catholic Church” (Haigh 1993: 120). The public under the reign of Elizabeth was still well-aware that the execution of Thomas More was no longer just a matter of the king’s marriage; it was the matter of the traditional religion in England now banned and persecuted. And this, again, makes Anthony Munday’s authorship so improbable.

In his “The Misunderstanding of Munday as Author of *Sir Thomas More*”, Thomas Merriam (Merriam 2000) offers another solution to the difficult question of Munday’s authorship. As the Archbishop of Canterbury’s chief pursuivant and Topcliffe’s right-hand man, Munday knew in advance that *Sir Thomas More* should be censored by the Master of Revels. He copied the work of another author (or authors) so as to set a later trap for those involved, or more likely as *agent provocateur*, to encourage them to incriminate themselves by facilitating the play. Merriam’s solution fits well to the style and the methods of Walsingham’s ministry and of Munday’s own confessions.

If the composition of a play about Thomas More in the middle of the 1590s had been Munday’s provocation, Shakespeare and other collaborators were aware of this and used a coded language which, on the one hand, could be interpreted quite innocently but which, on the other, secretly addressed that part of the Elizabethan audience which would have been sympathetic to More and invigorated by his words:

More loves all his followers more than well. (*STM* 13, Add. I.122)

In Shakespeare’s plays we often find the type of a good chancellor suggesting Thomas More, be it Gonzalo, Helicanus, Camillo or Escalus, who, at the end of *Measure for Measure*, merits Duke’s praise and thanks with the somewhat enigmatic compliment:

There’s more behind, that is more grateate. (*MM* 5.1.528)



## Bibliography

- Asquith, Clare (2005). *Shadowplay: the hidden beliefs and coded politics of William Shakespeare*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2005.
- Duffy, Eamon (1992). *The Stripping of the Altars*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992.
- Haigh, Christopher (1993). *English Reformations*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993.
- Gabrieli, Vittorio, and Melchiori, Giorgio, eds. (1990). *Sir Thomas More. A play by Anthony Munday and Others*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990.
- Greg, W. W. "II. The Handwriting of the Manuscript." *Shakespeare's Hand in the Play of Sir Thomas More*. Collection of papers by Alfred Pollard (ed.), W. Greg, E. Maunde Thompson, J. Dover Wilson and R. W. Chambers. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1923: 41-56.
- Kilroy, Gerard (2005). *Memory and Transcription*. London: Ashgate, 2005.
- Merriam, Thomas (1987). "Was Munday the Author of Sir Thomas More?" *Moreana* XXIV: 94 (Jun 1987): 25-30.
- . (2000). "The Misunderstanding of Munday as Author of Sir Thomas More." *Review of English Studies* 51 (2000): 540-581.
- Simpson, Richard (1871). "Are there any extant MSS. in Shakespeare's Handwriting?" *Notes and Queries* Vol. viii (4<sup>th</sup> series): July 1, 1871.