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The Literary Significance of the English Works of St. Thomas More

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THE LITERARY SIGNIFICANCE

OF THE ENGLISH WORKS OF ST. THOMAS MORE

By

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Loyola University

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VITA

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INTRODUCTION

Saint Thomas More is one of the few men in the history of the world who have won superlative praise in almost all aspects of their life and character. For as scholar and statesman, as friend and father, as champion of the poor, as a humorist, as philosopher, and as pioneer in social thought he has been acclaimed with real admiration and affection. Evidence of this versatility in virtue may be found in the almost similar expression of such dissimilar men as Dean Swift, who called More "the person of the greatest virtue this kingdom ever produced," and Lord Chancellor Campbell, who declared that his character came "as near perfection as our nature will permit." Though Sir Thomas More has been misunderstood and disagreed with, even his enemies have conceded his greatness.

But the critics of English literature, as if afraid that too much praise is not good for a man, have for the most part withheld theirs, allowing his varied and voluminous work to be quite overlooked in histories of English literature and prose, and limiting general knowledge of him to the European tradition of Latin-humanistic scholarship as embodied in the Utopia.

One who reads the English writings of Thomas More is, then, surprised to find there a freedom of manner and a fluency of form appealing to the modern ear, and clothing opinions and ideals that bespeak a profound sympathy with human nature and a keen interest in the ways of men. Further reading reveals also that in almost every case where scholars and critics have made an intensive analysis of More's English works, they give him high
praise and claim for him a significant place in the development of our literature.

This thesis proposes to produce the evidence for what has just been said, to suggest explanations for the obvious neglect of More's works, and, further, to show briefly their excellences and their claims to a place in the history of English language and literature.

The English works of St. Thomas More have been preserved to us in the excellent edition made by his nephew William Rastell in 1557, though almost all of them had been published in separate form during his lifetime. The volume comprises almost fifteen hundred pages, containing in the order of composition: four poems of some length written in early manhood, the Life of Pico della Mirandola, the History of Richard III, Treatise on the Four Last Things, Dialogue concerning Tyndale, Supplication of Souls, Confutation of Tyndale, the Letter against John Frith, the Apology, Debellacion of Salem and Bizance, Answer to the Poisoned Book, Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation, Treatise on the Body of Our Lord, Treatise on the Passion, and final prayers, meditations, letters and verses written in the Tower.

Of these the best known is the History of Richard III, which was used by all the chroniclers of the century and in Hughes' History of England (1719). The Dialogues against Tyndale have at various times been the target of comments from Protestant bishops and divines. But during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were no reprints; in the nineteenth the Dialogue of Comfort, the Life of Pico, and verses for the Book of Fortune were edited. The past forty years have seen an edition each of the Four Last Things, the English Poems, the Last Letters, the Apology, two
of the *Dialogue of Comfort*, and the beginning of the re-editing in both facsimile and modernized version of the complete English Works by W. E. Campbell. (See Bibliography.)

As far as students of English literature are concerned, his remarkable body of English prose has been allowed to lie practically unknown in spite of its being the only consistent vernacular composition of its size produced during the almost two centuries that comprise the gap between Chaucer and Spencer, or, as regards prose, between the Middle Ages and Dryden.
CHAPTER I

THE POSITION GIVEN TO ST. THOMAS MORE
IN THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE

In his own day St. Thomas More was considered not only one of the most popular public characters of London, and the most accomplished scholar of all England, but he was conceded to be the strongest and most effective speaker and writer of the period. Henry VIII employed him in both these capacities on most important occasions; Archbishop Tunstall chose him before all others to combat with his pen the spread of heresy in England. Roger Ascham and Sir Thomas Wilson, actively interested in the improvement of the language, have left written expression of their high opinion.¹ In one of R. W. Chambers' recent studies are listed writers of the sixteenth and following centuries, including Ben Jonson and Samuel Johnson, who acclaimed More's English writings as "models of pure and elegant prose."²

The first histories of English literature, compiled during the early Victorian period, continue this tradition. Henry Hallam in his 1842 Introduction to the Literature of Europe declares: "Sir Thomas More's Life of Edward V appears to me the first example of good English language, pure and perspicuous, well-chosen, without vulgarisms or pedantry."³ Others, during the second half of the nineteenth century, quote Hallam or agree that More is the leading writer of the period and his prose, as in

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1 Roger Ascham, English Works, ed. Aldis Wright, 126.
2 Thomas Wilson, Arte of Rhetorique, ed. G. H. Main, 147.
Richard III, the best secular English prose yet written. 4

But there appears, during the last fifteen years of the century, what seems almost a conspiracy to ignore or belittle More's work or emphatically to deny its merits. Arnold lists all More's writings individually, but disposes of the Richard III, as "a youthful and rhetorical production, which according to Horace Walpole . . . will nowhere stand a critical examination and confrontation with the original authorities," and admits no prose work of the period into our literature. 5 Earle merely remarks that More wrote some of his works in Latin, leaving the reader to infer that he must have written others in English. 6 Edmund Gosse thinks Hallam has gone too far in his estimate both "positively and relatively;" 7 and Garnett places More among the translators, shining "as long as originality was not required; but he was fitted rather to adorn than to extend the domain of letters." 8 And Saintsbury with a weight of ponderous confidence asserts:

To speak of him as the "Father of English Prose" is to apply a silly phrase in a fashion monstrously unhistorical. Even his history of Richard III which is his chief claim, and (if his) a sound praised one, to a place in the story of style, has been much overpraised . . . an early and not unhappy example of rather colourless classical prose . . . But his place in the strict history of English literature is very small and not extraordinarily high.

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5 George P. Marsh, Origin and History of the English Language and Literature, 1862.
7 Wm. F. Collier, History of English Literature, 1877.
8 Stopford A. Brooke, English Literature, 1879.
11 A Short History of Modern English Literature, 1898, 62.
12 English Literature, I, 318.
13 Short History of English Literature, 212.
In the face of this, only a few voices are raised in favor of More. Henry Craik's *English Prose: Selections* contains a group of well-chosen excerpts from More and an introduction by H. R. Reichel, in whose opinion the classical dignity and strong native vein of *Richard III* make it "certainly the first good historical English prose" and its author a joint claimant with Chaucer for the honor of founding modern English. More's versatile and masterful use of the language gives Jusserand cause for calling him a model of prose writers for his time.  

The chief authorities of the twentieth century, however, hold out against More basing their opinion on the argument against More's authorship of *Richard III*. To Sidney Lee it appears that his "association with the vernacular literature of a secular kind is too small to give him prominence in the history of the written language." Neither can Legouis "follow those who have called him the earliest of modern English prose writers," for "he has strictly no place" in English literature except for some controversial treatises and a history of doubtful authorship. The *Cambridge History of English Literature* hesitates to place him, declaring that "his fame rests chiefly on the Latin epigrams and the *Utopia*."  

It is significant to note that these appraisers of literature practically contradict each other in their reasons for disqualifying More's prose. Lee considers the prose of the controversies (he does not allow More the

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14 III, Chap. I, 17.
authorship of Richard III) as of interest only to "students of popular speech and of popular taste;" 15 while the Cambridge History thinks that the "style of all these English writings, their carefully constructed, well-balanced sentences with modulated cadences, exhibit the scholar and imitator of the classics." 16 Legouis objects chiefly to More's "extraordinary flow of language," his improvisation, his too free spontaneity. 17

Lesser lights of the twentieth century have accepted these dicta; and the popular modern attitude is to call More a leading Renaissance scholar, the author of Utopia, and perhaps the author of the Richard III from which Shakespeare drew his play. This is exemplified, may we say, in John Masefield's English Prose Miscellany, in which, among the more than one hundred selections, More is not included, nor is his absence apologized for in the rather lengthy introduction.

The recent revival of interest in Sir Thomas More, coincident with the process which culminated in his canonization in 1934, has made him the subject of much more intensive study than had before been accorded him; and the last twenty years have seen the production of excellent works which will undoubtedly effect a revision of opinion among students of English literature.

It is first of all of special interest to note that during the very decade that saw his eclipse, two important books were published which, if given proper consideration in the right circles, should have turned the tide in his favor. In 1891 Father T. E. Bridgett gave to the public his

15 Loc. cit.,
Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More, a sane, scholarly exposition with frequent and substantial quotations from the English Works; and soon after the eminent French critic, Henri Bremond, published his Blessed Thomas More (translated into English in 1904) in which he declares:

The surprising thing is that this newly born English of his already sounds like a formal language. Now for the first time, breaking free at last from archaism, there appears in the world this rich mixture of Saxon and Latin, the English of Milton, of Addison, of Burke and Newman.

In 1913 the Dublin Review printed an article by J. S. Phillimore who made some extremely striking declarations; namely, that More's greatest achievement is his English works, that English prose, as he left it, was in no more need of learning from the continental languages, and that More's execution and the subsequent ban on his works, and works of the same nature, practically stopped the channel of humanistic development which should naturally have followed from the Revival of Learning. 19

What is perhaps the greatest actual contribution to the establishment of More's writings in the history of English prose was made the following year by Joseph Delcourt in a judicious and painstaking examination of the language of the English Works of 1557 including also a comparison with More's contemporaries -- Elyot, Ascham and Tyndale -- and the findings of the NED as far as the latter had then progressed. 20 His results led the author to claim More not only as the beginner of modern style, but on account of his versatility the first master of English prose, and, in a sense,

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the founder of modern English literature. 21

During the 1920's R. W. Chambers began to publish the fruits of his extensive investigations into the life and work of Thomas More, which have produced, besides the definitive biography published in 1935, the editing or re-editing of the early biographies, and several important essays. Most significant among these latter are "The Authorship of Richard III" 22 and "The Continuity of English Prose from Alfred to More and his School." 23 It is difficult to choose excerpts from the many pregnant statements of this well-qualified scholar. He sees More as the first Englishman "to evolve an effective prose, sufficient for all purposes of his time, eloquent, dramatic, varied." 24 His prose is a link between Middle and Modern English; it combines the power and native purity of the medieval religious writers with the classical enrichment of the Renaissance, and passes on this composite and fully formed modern prose through the members of his school. Such is the position Chambers would give More in the history of English literature.

Other writers who have made recent appraisals of More have used Chambers' work as also that of W. E. Campbell 25 and A. W. Reed. 26 At present it appears that the long-withheld credit may be at last honestly

21 Ibid., 311.
24 Ibid., liii.
given; but it can scarcely be said that "the effect of More's prose, his dialogue, his narrative, his illustration, upon English literature ... is now generally recognized." 27

CHAPTER II

THE NEGLECT OF MORE'S ENGLISH WORKS

It was seen in the preceding chapter that the studies centering around More and his works placed him high in the history of literature, while the large scale critics and historians considered him negligible. This may be interpreted as showing that the former were partial to their subject; however, a closer analysis will reveal that the latter either did not know More's writings or for some reason hesitated to weigh his merits impartially. Garnett could not, for example, call More a mere translator if he were aware of the great body of impromptu prose in the English Works. Gosse, too, knows only the Richard III; for he objects to Hallam's denying the presence of obsolete forms in More when really he "employs the phraseology of his own times not less freely than ... Bishop Fisher does in his sermons." If Gosse were familiar with the controversial works, his objection would be stated less conservatively. All Saintsbury can say of the controversies is that they are "not quite so free from the rough and tumble argumentation and objurgation of the times as those who regard More as the pattern of sweet reasonableness would wish," a criticism which scarcely argues familiarity with the versatile, rapid-fire, judicious, humorous, dialogues of More. The august writer in the CHEL arouses serious doubt as to his real acquaintance with More's writings when he sees in "all" of them

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only an "imitator of the classics." 4

Even Legouis lays himself open to the charge either of unfamiliarity or partiality. He doubts the authorship of the Richard III; he admits More's dramatic handling of character and gayety of manner, but thinks him too spontaneous, too free and flowing. 5 But then he goes on to praise Ascham because he brings in his own experiences and parentheses to "stimulate flagging attention," because "numerous symmetrical, balanced, antithetical sentences, sometimes marked by alliteration, occur in his work, all that is best in the prose of the Euphuists," though "it is true that Ascham in his Romanised dress is a little stiff and hampered;" and he is glad to note that finally Ascham acquired "relative facility of expression" so that at last the man "can be descried beneath it." 6 It is praise hard-achieved and remarkable, to say the least, in comparison with his judgment on More. He praises Ascham for achieving a little of what More had a great deal of—spontaneity; he praises Ascham, while he must blame him for over-indulgence, for what other critics find also in More—classical restraint. What shall be said of Legouis?

So it becomes evident, as Chambers says, that "our perspective of English literature and English life and English thought has been impeded by our neglect . . . above all of More himself;" 7 and as long as studies in literary history continue to be written without proper attention to him, this false perspective will continue to vitiate the truth and the value of

4 Vide 4, above.
6 Ibid., 133-4.
our knowledge of literature.

Of course, the inaccessibility of the English works of More may be considered as almost sufficient excuse for unfamiliarity with them. The 1557 black-letter edition of Rastell, according to Samuel Johnson one of the best edited works of the sixteenth century, could be obtained only with difficulty from the British Museum, though there seem to be a relatively large number of them in private libraries; and the few partial editions printed during the last hundred years may have supplemented, but could not certainly have replaced it. It is to be hoped that W. E. Campbell's monumental work in publishing the facsimile with a modernized edition will not be too much delayed by the difficulties of present conditions. It has now reached to two volumes and covers about 288 of the 1452 original pages, with collations and bibliographical material most carefully worked out.

Another point to be taken into consideration in exoneration of unsatisfactory criticism is the fact that black-letter is extremely tedious reading and detracts a great deal from the ability to judge fairly of rhythm and fluency, of syntax, balance, and general structure. It is to be understood, however, that the modernizing of More's black-letter consists only in changing the spelling of the words which require it.

There are further implications. The inaccessibility of the English works, while it helped to make possible the error regarding the attribution of the Richard III, at the same time gave that error added weight. For critics who held that work as the only one meriting recognition in the

literary field on account of its artistic or secular nature felt that, without it, More lost all claim for inclusion in the study of literature. (The authorship of the Richard III, incidentally should present no more problems since Chambers' investigation of the matter,⁹ which conclusively returns the Latin as well as the English version to More.)¹⁰

Besides, the fact that the Richard III has been so well known as to give students the mistaken idea that from a reading of it they could competently judge More's contribution, has been another cause for wrong estimations of his place in literature. It explains perhaps why some have seen More only as a classical imitator, why so recent a publication as Baldwin's¹¹ refers only to the Richard III in its study of More and the vernacular, and "since More always composed in Latin first,"¹² sees little value in it for the book's thesis. The Richard III is, in fact, so different from More's other English works that Dr. Whibley in discrediting More's authorship uses this difference as an argument against it.¹³

Though it has been suggested that the difficulty of access to the English works may excuse critics for their neglect of them, still the very fact of their inaccessibility required excuse. Cardinal Gasquet in his introduction to the Last Letters of Sir Thomas More goes so far as to allege a reason which brings into discussion the next important but delicate matter

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⁹ Vide 7, above.
¹² Ibid., 226. Baldwin gives no authority for this statement, nor does any other critic make it.
¹³ CHEL, III, Chap. 17.
of uncritical attitude;

I think it may not unfairly be conjectured that the neglect of the works of this eminent English pre-Reformation scholar is deliberate . . . For Sir Thomas More was considered, at least abroad, and by the best judges for two centuries after his death as undoubtedly the brightest ornament of English learning of his age. Probably then this modern neglect of his writings may be best accounted for by his known and strong opposition to the principles of the sixteenth century reformers . . . Except for this . . . I cannot conceive why this undoubtedly great writer should have been left so long in obscurity. 12

As Hallett remarks, "it is unfortunate for More's literary fame that his works are for the most part religious and on "the wrong side." 15 How else explain the fact that critics studying the literature of a formative period like the first half of the sixteenth century should fail to examine the voluminous works in the vernacular of a writer whose reputation for learning would promise work of considerable quality whether his matter be religious or not? "As it is the central English of a London gentleman, a courtier, statesman and Lord Chancellor, we may assume that it stands for its day in the line of development of modern standard English. Moreover More was a noted public speaker." 16 Thomas Arnold is one of the non-Catholic critics honest enough to admit that the change of religion was a cause for the neglect of More's work. 17

Sidney Lee may be cited as an instance of unwillingness to acknowledge merit. He praises the Richard III but does not consider it More's. For the rest of More's writings, while he praises some of their qualities, he is

16 Dialogue concerning Tyndale, ed. W. E. Campbell, 44.
sure in every case to end with condemnation: the controversial works are
direct, logical, well-illustrated, "but he repeatedly descends to personal
abuse;" his devotional works may rise at times to fervid eloquence, but
"they are mainly noticeable for sincerity and inordinate length;" the secu-
lar verse may be of interest for their popular style, but they lack "the
supreme touch of style and inventiveness." 18 Reading of the English works
themselves, as the following chapters will attempt to show, will reveal
that such emphasis is quite uncalled for. But Lee seems to take special
pains to place More at a disadvantage on account of his religious attitudes;
in the DNB he devoted several columns, much more space than the length of
the article permits, to proving that, in spite of More's own explanation or
the witness of Erasmus and other contemporaries including the popular tra-
dition of Londoners, More was a violent persecutor of heretics. It is not
rash to say that if the works of Thomas More were less interested in reli-
gion from the Catholic viewpoint, Lee would have allowed him a full measure
of praise.

W. H. Hutton, 19 Sir James Mackintosh, 20 and John Howard Marsden 21 are
eamples of open-mindedness; for though they disagree with the religious
principles More upheld and do not consider his arguments successful, they
give unqualified credit for literary excellences where they find them.

Of course the reluctance with which English critics examine More's
works other than the Richard III is easily understandable in the light of

18 French Renaissance in England, 70-2; Great Englishmen of the 16th
Century, Constable & Co., 1904, 58-60; DNB.
19 Sir Thomas More, Methuen & Co., 1895.
20 Life of Sir Thomas More in Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopedia, I.
21 Philomorus, Longmans, Green, 1878.
the tradition against More from the point of view of the non-Catholic aspects of English history. That this is the case even now is evident when practically the only criticism Chambers' 1935 definitive publication on More called forth was objection more or less violent to the discussion of his place in regard to Henry VIII and the Reformation. This decided point of view "against" began immediately after More's death, enforced by authority. While scholars on the continent eulogized his excellence, in England no one dared say anything. Phillimore records that one of the alleged crimes for which Sir Reginald Pole was killed was "that he possessed and delighted in Sir Thomas More's works." Robinson found it necessary in his dedication to the *Utopia* to apologize for More's "obstinacy to truth." Ascham dared speak of his literary skill in high terms only in a letter to John Astley, though his treatises on education and rhetoric might frequently have drawn on More for illustration. Only the interval of Mary Tudor's reign gave opportunity for the 1557 publication of the *English Works*.

Though the London tradition, as revealed in the Elizabethan tragedy, continued to regard More as the friend and hero of the people, the calumny begun by Foxe in his *Book of Martyrs* representing More as a violent persecutor of heretics was carried on in history by Burnet, Strype, Hume, Froude.

Therefore there are found in every succeeding period writers who see

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23 Philomorus, 260-2.
24 Ibid., 17.
More's work only from this aspect and speak of it accordingly. Bishop Atterbury condemns More's controversies in one sweeping statement quoted by Bridgett: "That book (the answer to Luther) throughout is nothing but downright ribaldry with no grain of reason to support it ... and the same may be said of his English tracts."

This charge against the English works has become a sort of stock method of disposing of them. With the exception of the Pico and Richard III, says the writer in the Edinburgh Review, the English Works contains "scarcely anything but the acrimonious invective of religious controversy or the devotional dribbling of superstition." Lee's emphasis on the point has been noted. Legouis makes a nice discrimination in speaking of More's work in controversy as "narrow ecclesiastical quarrels," and of Tyndale's as "an active controversial defense of the Reformation." W. P. Ker devotes a strenuous paragraph to defending Tyndale against the charge of violence, the like of which More's supporters seem not to consider necessary for their case.

There is strong invective in More's controversies; but there is so much more besides that it argues a form of purposeful literary blindness to see nothing but the former. James J. Daly sums up the argument well by saying:

With a public just learning to read, personal invective went further than argument, and boisterous banter than nice appeals to feeling. This concession to the needs of the moment has seriously diminished the literary permanence of the martyr's polemical works in a language

29 Vide 14 above.
31 Ibid., 135.
32 Craik's English Prose, I, 183.
that has thrown all its favor on the side of his oppo-

nents, and has always regarded his as a lost cause. It
remains a matter of regret that the merits of Sir Thomas
More and of his rivals have not been weighed by literary
critics in the same scales.

And the writer in the Times Literary Supplement makes a just pronouncement
when he says:

Even readers who side with Tyndale against More may en-
joy the grace and good temper which smile upon most of
Dialogue (the Dialogue concerning Tyndale), to be bro-
ken only now and then by a scurrility which was in those
days a proper element of controversy, and which Milton
more than a century later easily outdid.

It must be remembered in this regard that the Dialogue mentioned is
the one against which the charge may most justly be made and that it occu-
pies only two hundred of the one thousand pages of controversy in the black-
letter edition; also that the Dialogue of Comfort, which is anything but
controversial and the most charming of all the works, usually falls under
the same condemnation because of its title.

Quite apart from the lack of sympathy natural from the religious view-
point, there are aspects of the work of Sir Thomas that puzzle the student
and hinder a true appreciation of his literary merit. For, though criti-
cism tries to concern itself chiefly with the externals of language and
form, it is quite impossible to separate the form from the content; and
apparent contradictions in an author's basic thought will certainly affect
the freedom of criticism. He is hailed as one of the Reformers, named
in support of euthanasia, considered the originator of socialism, a

33 A Cheerful Ascetic, Bruce Pbl. 1928, 59.
34 July 9, 1931, 534.
promoter of anti-clericalism and of free thought; yet he is raised to sainthood by the Catholic Church. Such divergence is possible in the interpretation of his thought. Students have tried to reconcile or explain what seems inconsistent, but it does affect literary criticism.

The general feeling is that in his youthful years More had been well embarked on the way of free thought and liberalism, following out the enthusiasms toward liberty and radicalism fostered by his Renaissance learning; all of which would have perfectly satisfied the tastes of literary investigators and gained a host of admirers. But when he later took up the cudgels vigorously in defense of what he felt to be the truest safeguards of liberty and independent thinking and the best interests of the individual, those who became by inheritance the upholders of the opposite view find in him a sad retrogression, weak victimization and an insincere vacillation that takes all the glow off his otherwise clever and effective technique.

So, with Legouis, they feel that he does not "appear to advantage," that "he had to contradict his own proposition . . . to speak against liberty," and that the "eloquence of his style" as well as his temper, was spoilt by his attitude.

The chief difficulty arises from what Phillimore calls "the strange misfortune that More should be known to many readers only by the not very characteristic work," Utopia. Dr. Reed, Hallett, Campbell and others have tried to show that it is an error to consider it alone as

representative of More's mind and thought; the *Times Literary Supplement* announces that it is necessary "to get the *Utopia* out of the way first" in order to arrive at the true understanding of his life and writings. It is not easy to estimate how much the popular interpretations of *Utopia* have militated against a true appreciation of More's sincerity and merit both in thought and in expression. Too many scholars fail to see that there is one cardinal point of consistency in all More's works, from the *Pico* to the *Treatise on the Passion* -- it can be discovered only by an open-minded reading in the English works -- namely, that in all of them he is fighting in one manner or another for common sense, for an intelligent attitude toward life, for culture. In the *Dialogue concerning Tyndale* he states his opinion clearly: "And therefore are in mine opinion these Lutherans in a mad mind that would have all learning save Scripture only clean cast away;" for if they will accept the Bible only as the source of truth, disregarding all that the early Fathers had written and all that the philosophers had previously evolved, then they will themselves be disregarding the very Scripture they preach, for

> as holy St. Jerome saith, The Hebrews will despoil the Egyptians, when Christ's learned men take out of the pagan writers the riches and learning and wisdom that God gave unto them, and employ the same in the service of divinity about the profit of God's chosen children ••• the Church of Christ.

If any reader of the *English Works*, whether he holds the Catholic

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40 Reed in Campbell's *English Works*, I, 23.
41 Hallett in introduction to *Utopia*, xvii.
42 Campbell, *More and his Social Teaching*, Eyre, Spottiswoode, 1930.
religion or not, could honestly keep down the wall of disapproval raised by religious prejudice, he would find in the English writings of More an almost constant flow of that wide learning, humane sympathy, depth of outlook and delight in life that is associated with the ideal humanist. And if humanism is the stuff of literature, then it is time that ignorance, prejudice and misunderstanding should be cleared away and that More's works should be allowed the position that their literary and social merit deserves.
CHAPTER III
MORE'S ENGLISH WORKS IN THE DEVELOPMENT
OF ENGLISH PROSE

To say that an open-minded critical examination of the English works of More would have resulted in a clearer understanding of his place in the history of literature is to invite the challenge of evidence. The best answer to such a challenge is to suggest a reading of the Pico, the Richard III, the Four Last Things, one of the controversies, the Dialogue of Comfort, and the English letters. These are all obtainable in modernized editions giving More's lively, versatile style its fair opportunity, freed from the handicap of difficult black-letter reading. In lieu of such a simple expedient, however, the following chapters will attempt to show what careful students have found in the English works significant in the history of our prose and literature, and what further is promised.

Some writers say that More did not try to "mold English prose," that he wrote without an effort to produce literary work. Simply because More did not write a book trying to teach his fellow-Englishmen how to write a book, he does not rate consideration in the study of our prose development. Ascham, who believed in stiffening the language with Latinisms; Elyot, whose Latin importations were much too arbitrary to be accepted -- these are studied for a knowledge of the formation of prose. But More was a teacher of English: R. W. Chambers is doing a remarkably convincing piece of work in editing the unpublished early biographies and other writings of More's

1 Vide bibliography.
2 Legouis, op. cit., 132.
"school;" 3 and More's own works give evidence that he was conscious of and interested in both method and manner in the use of English.

In the Dialogue concerning Tyndale he asserts:

For that our tongue is called barbarous is but a phantasy; for so is, as every learned man knoweth, every strange tongue to other. And if they would call it barren of words, there is no doubt but it is plenteous of words to express our minds in anything whereof one man hath used to speak with another. 4

He occasionally picks up errors in the language of his opponents, exclaiming that though "I cannot make him by no means to write true matter, I would have him yet at the leastwise write true English." 5 He explains most carefully the discrimination of the use of "nay" and "no," and of "yea" and "yes;" and his objection to Tyndale's Bible is less a matter of its being in the vernacular than one of the danger of a change of content by means of the wrong use of words or the use of wrong words. Hollis, in fact, actually finds fault with the Confutation of Tyndale on the score of its emphasis on philological argument. 6 It is not merely, as McKnight suggests, 7 that More's religious ear was shocked by colloquial idiom, for his own writings show that More himself can be startlingly familiar and even humorous in talking of sacred things; but he is arguing for the connotations and etymological sense of words.

True it is that More is not writing for an artistic purpose; "his desire to be useful in writing" really determined the quality of his prose. 8 But

4 Campbell's edition, 243.
5 As quoted in Taft's Apologye, lii.
7 George H. McKnight, Modern English in the Making, Appleton & Co., 1928, 113.
8 Joseph Delcourt, op. cit., 260.
he is writing almost always with an artistic consciousness; a scholar of his training and taste could scarcely do otherwise. Bremond, Delcourt, and Taft bear witness to this; the former calls him "an amateur of style and a literary epicure." In fact, a considerable body of literary theory may be gathered from More's writings though critics have failed to examine them for this purpose.

It is important then to note how More's diction, consciously used to produce its effect, stands in regard to modern prose. The scope of this paper will allow no more than an indication of the chief findings of those who have made it their study.

In regard to vocabulary, Sir James MacKintosh recognized a century ago that

...a very small part of his vocabulary has been superannuated. The number of terms which require any explanation is inconsiderable; and in that respect the stability of the language is remarkable. He is, indeed, in his words more English than the great writers of a century after him, who loaded their native tongue with expressions of Greek or Latin derivations. And Delcourt's meticulous study reveals comparatively few obsolete terms. The great need of the language at its emergence from the medieval Norman-Latin domination was enrichment of the vernacular. While Ascham, Cheke, Elyot and Wilson followed their pet theories in this regard, More seems to have gone to neither extreme, classical or popular; but "his

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instinct for the popular side of the language," "his learning and culture, which while making for the enrichment of the language, he knew how to keep within tactful bounds," "his aptitude for using traditional processes, which by skilful handling he could make fruitful of new means of expression" --- all combined to form a language neither too crudely native nor too heavily classical. 13

His augmentation of the language, according to Delcourt's investigations, consists not so much in coinages as in combinations, compounds, new and figurative meanings, idioms, so that it may be said that "il avait fait usage de tous ces moyens d'apporte au trésor des vocables nationaux des richesses nouvelles." 14 As to the sources of his additions, Delcourt discovers that the Latin importation, important as it is on account of the frequent combinations with prefixes and suffixes and new derivations, is numerically smaller,

et ainsi le vocabulaire anglais, en devenant plus complexe avec More, ne perd cependant pas la belle unité réalisée avant lui. Peut-être cette discrétion, cette réserve dans l'innovation n'est-elle pas un moindre des qualités qui font de notre auteur un des plus illustres parmi les 'makers of English'.

Picturesque compounds from the popular idiom include such familiars as: key-cold, blockhead, hair-breadth, play-fellow, grass-widow; some of the more common derivations and direct importations are: anticipate, absurdity, concomitance, dissipate, fact, marmalade, paradox. More seems
also to be the first to have employed in our modern pleasant, colloquial sense the words: gay, jolly, glorious and pretty.16

Delcourt also shows that More did much to increase the efficiency of the language by the use of auxiliaries and prepositions with verbs, and new couplings of adjectives with nouns, though in general his syntax, while always clear, lacks the conciseness and close sequence English has achieved since then. In this regard, however, close analysis shows that though More's writing precedes that of Wilson and Ascham by some twenty or thirty years, in actual details he is as modern as they.17 He is almost always grammatically correct and always clear, with proper subordination and coordination of ideas.18 The longest sentences emerge triumphantly as grammatic unities.19 They make, in a sense, for proper emphasis; for they form one unit of one idea with all its facets and modifying notes.

In regard to devices and figures More uses both tact and skill. A common device of the period was the use of pairs of synonyms, one of Saxon and one of foreign derivation. Lord Berners' Preface to the Froissart is heavy with them; Elyot, Ascham and others employ them. This is one of the roots of the Euphuistic style.20 But Chambers says of More:

He couples synonyms together when it suits his purpose; but he does not do it with the maddening persistency which Berners, or Elyot, or Hall, or even Fisher display . . . In the same way More uses balanced sentences, and sometimes emphasizes the balance with alliteration; the most characteristic cadences of Lyly's Euphuic are anticipated. But when More has once achieved them, he goes on and tries something else instead of repeating the trick with the reiterated folly of Lyly. 21

15 Ibid., 243-6.
17 Ibid., Chap. III, IV. Also Bremond, op. cit., 130-1.
18 Ibid., 270-5.
19 Taft, op. cit., liii.
Taft also notes his control in alliteration. Though he calls it "perhaps the strongest native influence in More's style," it rarely follows the ornamental pattern of the transverse or the "translaced" alliteration produced by combining it with balance. A few examples will show More's skill and artistic effectiveness in this:

Now flew the fame of this lord's death swiftly through the city, and so forth farther about like a wind in every man's ear.

King Richard himself... slain in the field, hacked and hewed of his enemies' hands, harried on horseback dead, his hair in despite torn and tagg'd like a cur dog.

The world once ruffled and fallen in a wildness.

Another sign of More's freedom in the use of the newly forming language and of his inventive power lies in his wealth of figurative expression. "To pin my soul to his back," "to couch one's ideas in words," Catesby could have "broken all the dance," to have an "itch" to do something -- are uses never before recorded in writing. Other modern colloquial figures first written by More are: from the frying pan into the fire, to hit the nail on the head, to drive one to the wall, fallen in the dumps. Delcourt finds examples of all the common figures, many of which More himself names: similes, synecdoches, metaphors, hyperboles, apostrophes.

It is to be regretted that a work like Mc Knight's Modern English in the Making should not have made use of Delcourt's Essai for the early sixteenth century period instead of Croft's edition of Elyot's The Governor.
which, dated 1883, lacks so much of what modern scholarship has provided through works like the NED with which Delcourt compares his findings. McKnight can accordingly say, "The immediate contribution of this group of brilliant men (Colet, Fisher, More, etc.) toward the development of English language and literature was not great;" 28 and this in spite of the fact that More's English was admired by his contemporaries, both court and clergy having chosen him for their spokesman, and that several of his works were reprinted during his lifetime or before 1550. 29 Another point to be suggested here is that More was in close touch with his printers, both with John Rastell, his brother-in-law, and the latter's son William; so his own careful composition 30 was presented to the public as correctly as the best printing facilities of the time made possible.

Such facts as these presented in the preceding pages quite invalidate any statements asserting the negligible place of More's language in the formation of modern English.

As regards More's style, many things have been said in praise of it, even by those who deny him a place in the development of English language and literature. Jortin, though quite convinced of More's final fall into bigotry, admits that "More had, if ever man had, what is called 'versatile ingenium,' and was capable of excelling in any way to which he would apply himself." 31 The resources of his style, says Delcourt, combine to form a medium rich and complex:

29 Vide DNB.
30 Reed, Dialogue concerning Tyndale, ed. Campbell, 45.
31 Life of Erasmus, London, 1758, 190.
la grâce facile et coulante, qu'il a parfois, ... ne représente qu'une partie de son mérite. Par son habilité à manier et à varier le style oratoire, par sa richesse en observations vivantes et en images, par ses artifices littéraires, par son art de signer, More annonce les premiers développements de la prose anglaise moderne, et même, avec eux, d'autres développements plus récents. On peut, en le lisant, se faire une première idée de ce que, sera et le balance- ment lylien, et l'ampleur des grands maîtres de la période classique, et l'aisance des historiens, et l'enjouement des humoristes." 32

Of this array of stylistic skills, the effect of his classical training and inclination may first be noted. Hallett sees it in his Latin fluency, "well-balanced periods, long and sometimes involved sentences, the rhythm, the sonorosity, and often, indeed, the majesty of his style." 33 Others refer to "the maturity and sureness of the writing," 34 "the sonorous eloquence, less cumbersome than that of Milton, the simplicity and lucidity of his argument, with an unfailing sense of the rhythms and harmonies of sound." 35 One passage out of many that might be quoted will show these qualities, a translation from Chapter five of the Book of Wisdom:

What hath pride profited us, or what good hath the glory of our riches done us? Passed are all those things like a shadow, etc. (sic) or like an arrow shot out into the place appointed; the air that was divided is by-and-by returned into the place, and in such wise closed up again, that the way is not perceived in which the arrow went: and in likewise we, as soon as we were born, be by-and-by vanished away, and have left no token of any good virtue behind us, but are consumed and wast- ed and come to nought in our own malignity. 36

Though More has often and justly been accused of writing in long,

34 Stauffer, English Biography before 1700, Harvard Univ. Press, 1930, 40.
35 Phillimore, op. cit., 18.
loose sentences, he is capable of classic compactness that at times rivals Swift. "As soon as the point of an epigram or the crispness of discussion demands it, it (his style) becomes suddenly condensed and gives the impression of mingled fulness and finality which is the mark of the master," says Bremond. 37

For the scripture is to good folk the nourisher of virtue; and to them that be nought it is the means of amendment.

If he have read it and think himself not satisfied, I cannot make him perceive more than his wit will serve him. 39

Wonder is it that the world is so mad that we had liefer take sin with pain than virtue with pleasure. 40

Twenty men standing bareheaded before him kept not his head so warm as to keep on his own cap. 41

Such conciseness is really no more rare in his writing than the very long sentences that are so much complained of.

His balancing of phrases is done very aptly and musically; even when it is very obvious, it does not cumber his expressions:

Every tribulation which any time falleth unto us is either sent to be medicinable if men will so take it, or may become medicinable if men will so make it, or is better than medicinable but if we will forsake it. 42

More's moderation in the use of balance is distinctly a classical influence. Morris W. Croll points out that though balanced phrases and repetition of rhythm were a strong medieval trait, in fact the pattern and style of structure, yet in More may be observed a purposeful employment of such

38 Dialogue concerning Tynedale, ed. Campbell, 214.
39 Ibid., 176.
40 English Works, ed. Campbell, VI, 495.
41 Dialogue of Comfort, 209.
42 Dialogue of Comfort, 22.
devices, a subordination of them to other elements especially rhythmic
design and periodic construction. 43

Jusserand, too, notes how "he is moved by the tragic grandeur of
events and he tries, following the example of the Latin masters, to express
it without using an inflated style;" he quotes from the Richard III where
More speaks of the uneasiness of the people in regard to Richard's being
made king: "were it that before such great things, men's hearts of a se-
cret instinct of nature misgiveth them, as the sea without wind swelleth
of himself sometime before a tempest." 44

Almost any part of More's works will supply evidence of the classical
influence though it is not so conscious and artificial as to prevent some
critics from describing his style as crude, uncouth, showing little
learning.

It is in this apparent contradiction that the second important element
of More's prose may be discerned; that is, his freedom and originality. He
is no less an ardent Englishman than a leading humanist, as his life tes-
fies; and so with the consummate artistic consciousness of a literary mas-
ter he remembers always that it is to the English people and for the English
people that he is writing. The English language had been for the most part
and for the great mass of the people a spoken language; hence, as Bremond
notes, his English works have throughout a peculiarly conversational tone,
and more than that:

In his writings everything has the power of speech.
... That is the reason why even in the books which
are not in the form of a long dialogue, he often

43 Introduction to Euphues, ed. M. W. Croll and Harry Clemons, Geo. Rout-
ledge & Sons, 1916.
enters on an imaginary conversation, seldom resisting
the little drolleries which that form of writing makes
room for more easily than any other." 45

In this discursive style More readily adopts and gracefully sustains the
familiar atmosphere of "Well, quoth he;" and this tone of pleasant agree-
ment with his reader is quickly resumed or renewed if it should have been
weakened by a serious or eruptive passage. As will be seen this method
of discourse allows for almost unlimited freedom in manner, content, dic-
tion, mood.

In accordance with this is the concreteness of his thought and its
expression; he leaves abstractions to those who will have them and speaks
always in terms of facts and experiences. In answer to Luther's "Bible
the sole ground of truth" principle, he brings definite evidence such as the
acceptance of Sunday for the Sabbath, the layman's power to administer bap-
tism, Mary's virginity, and other articles of faith not explicitly found
in Scripture. 46 He makes use of the great picture of "The Dance of Death"
in St. Paul's, of juggler's tricks, of first-hand homely matter. If he
treats of persons, he lets them be seen and heard and understood. 47 His
range is quite unlimited; he lets no point escape, he evades no challenge,
he scorns no avenue of approach to clearness and conviction. 48

His diversity of method is recognized by Jusserand: there are quarrels
about words, quibbles, retorts, sheer abuse even; but also striking, vivid
portraits, examples, eloquent and almost lyrical apostrophes, playing with
phrases, witty repartee. 49 Another writer says:

46 Dialogue concerning Tyndale, 110-1.
47 Jusserand, op. cit., 99.
48 Hallett, Dublin Review, CXCI, 122.
"When he is writing in confidence (as in the Four Last Things), sure of himself and of his readers, the copiousness, variety, power of his English are far beyond the common. He revels in alliteration and even in puns; he is almost unprintably coarse; he is grossly slangy, he can quibble so adroitly as to make his reader's head whirl... He can fool very demurely... He can go back to his antithetical experiments; he can use his cumulative manner with a dreadful bitterness." 50

This wealth of method and versatility of approach are acknowledged by every careful critic of More's style.

This quality of superabundance is something very much more than style. It is the inimitable quality of quantity of content, a quality that gives to only the great masters their unassailable pre-eminence. It runs through all More's work. 51

It is quite impossible, of course, to give by means of quotation an adequate idea of this quality; but one may be ventured in which it is readily described: the Archbishop comes to the queen,

about whom he found much heaviness, rumble, haste, and business, carriage and conveyance of her stuff into Sanctuary, chests, coffers, packs, fardels, trusses, all on men's backs, no man unoccupied, some lading, some going, some discharging, some coming for more, some breaking down the walls to bring in the next way, and some yet drew to them that helped to carry a wrong way. The Queen herself sat alone, alow on the rushes, desolate and dismayed. 52

Here one notes the wealth of detail in cumulative formation, onomatopoetic effects, alliteration, concreteness, rhythm in phrasing, the creation of an atmosphere of fearful, blundering haste, a realistic touch in "them that helped to carry a wrong way;" the powerful antithesis of the last sentence with its contrast in speed as well as in mood, dignified, musical, reserved

50 TLS., leading article, July 9, 1931.
51 Reed, English Works, I, 193.
in its feeling, but strong.

More's use of illustration is the most lively and most characteristic point of his style; it seems to keep him always in keen command of the situation, as if he held the baton before a great orchestra directing its complete range of tones and effects. Examples of all kinds: apt and delightful, long anecdotes, quaint comparisons, proverbs, odd words, illustrations "of the most forcible, realistic, homely, and learned nature jostle one another for utterance." 53 They may be whimsical, prosaic, poetic, gruesome; they are always vivid, and sometimes so surprising in their aptness that they bring to mind, as Hollis says, Mr. Bernard Shaw, "but whereas with Mr. Shaw the flippancy is often asked to stand in the place of positive argument, with More it is always kept firmly in its proper . . . place." 54

. . . All the delight that we take in the beholding of our substance, is in all our life but a very gray golden dream, in which we dream that we have great riches and in the sleep of this life we be glad and proud thereof. But when death shall once waken us, our gay golden dream shall vanish and of all the treasure that we so merrily dreamed, 55 we shall not find one penny left in our hands.

A tale that fleeth through many mouths catcheth many new feathers, which when they be pulled away again, leave him as pilled (bald) as a coot.

Some folk cannot see death even when he cometh so near that he putteth almost his finger in their eye. 57

The covetous rich "set their hearts upon their hoards," and "spend nothing

54 Op. cit., 120.
55 English Works, I, 492.
56 Dialogue concerning Tyndale, ed. Campbell, 238.
57 English Works, I, 491.
upon themselves, but keep it all for their executors." 58

More's use of such material is never merely scintillating brilliance nor rambling familiarity; it is always purposeful but with a gesture of playfulness. Clayton says this well:

Never is Blessed Thomas More of the high and dry school of writers. No man less so. He will in the gravest of his writings strike a lighter note, and, lest solemnity become oppressive, charm with an unexpected play of fancy, and illuminate the deep places with a sudden flash of humour; . . . the illustration provided, often with a startling abruptness, is always appropriate and to the point. Its sudden introduction wards off danger of loss of interest. 59

Irony also is among his weapons, used most sharply at times, as in the Richard III. Having described the ruse whereby Buckingham secured the collaboration of the Mayor of London in asking Richard to be king, he continues: "These words much moved the protectour, which also, as every man may wit, would never of likelihood have inclined thereunto." 60 And in making a public penitent of Jane Shore, Richard "for this cause (as a goodly, continent prince, clean and faultless himself, sent out of heaven unto this vicious world for the amendment of men's manners) caused the bishop of London to put her to penance." 61

It is, however, Thomas More's gift of humor which Bremond calls "the master quality" of his writings, "the supreme gift never granted to the most skilful stylists." 62 An inherent part of his style, it enters even into the more serious works, like the Four Last Things and the Apologye.

58 Ibid., 490.
60 P. 77.
61 P. 53.
while in the unfinished Treatise on the Passion he goes at least as far as whimsicality. This is not to be wondered at, remembering the classic example of that quality which he gave upon the scaffold.

In a discussion of More's place in the development of modern English prose style, his quality of humor should certainly enter; for the twentieth century likes to think itself wise enough to be able to treat the most serious things humorously. And as More's humor is not a pose, but the clear outflowing of his serenely balanced attitude toward life and death, rather toward the temporal and spiritual lives of man, so his humor in writing far outstrips most modern attempts in its universality, its depth, its purity. Again, it is always at his command.

His use of "mery tales" is at times obviously a diversion, at others an illustration of a point, sometimes a weapon of controversy, again a camouflage for attack. They are tales, Bremond says, that keep their wit even when repeated in other languages.63 Aesop, the philosophers, his own experience, the court, the law, the clerical profession, folk lore -- all furnish material when he does not himself create the story, as in the test case of Wilkin and Simpkin in the Dialogue concerning Tyndale.64 A charming gesture he occasionally uses is to let the person not representing himself in the dialogue tell some of the tales, as the Messenger in the Tyndale dialogue or Vincent the younger man in the Dialogue of Comfort.

But the reader need not wait for these tales to taste of More's humor. In any guise, in any place these plays of his wit may appear,

53 Ibid., 141.  
64 Pp. 198-9.
sometimes piling up so that the author must confess himself "a very gig-glot," and institute a brief investigation as to whether it be wise for a man to find so many things to laugh at, as he does in the Dialogue of Comfort. His manner is various; a sly thrust:

... a very wise woman and (which thing is in woman rare) very mild and also very meek...

a smiling word:

God, like a loving hen, clocketh home to him those chickens of his that wilfully walk abroad.

a well-drawn caricature:

Look if you see not some wretch that scant can creep for age, his head hanging in his bosom, and his body crooked, walk pit-pat upon a pair of pattens with a staff in one hand and the pater noster in the other hand, the one foot almost in the grave already... as greedy to get a groat by beguiling of his neighbor as if he had of certainty seven score years to live.

demure drollery:

the poor drunken vagrant is picked up from the gutter, ... not suffered to take his ease all night at his pleasure in the king's highway that is free for every man.

a whimsical recollection:

St. Francis when he saw a young man kiss a girl once in way of good company, kneeled down and held up his hands unto heaven highly thanking God that charity was not yet gone out of this wretched world.

a descriptive note:

Hold thy babble, I bid thee, thou wife in the red hood!

So Sir Thomas More's humor overflows from the innate cheerfulness and

65 Dialogue of Comfort, 111.
66 Ibid., 102.
67 English Works, I, 491.
68 Ibid., 495.
69 Dialogue concerning Tyndale, 208.
serenity of his character and invests his work with a delightful vitality, without which "literary work however excellent it may be in other respects cannot fail to lack a certain higher perfection," says Bremond.70

Style is finally and in the last analysis the expression of a personality. Whether or not the history of English literature should take cognizance of the literary expression of the character of Sir Thomas More ought not to be a question at all. His character must have been, from almost every aspect, ideal, according to the opinion of his contemporaries and of the students of his life and writings; his literary expression, as has been seen, a lucid, well-mastered medium. Hutton remarks, that "he wrote as he lived, absolutely without ostentation, simply, merrily, honourably and in the true faith and fear of Christ." 71

Every account of his life shows it full and rich; and of his writings Bremond says: "He tingles with life; and images, arguments, authorities, everything sets him in motion as soon as it crosses his thought." 72 The directness and vigor which made him a successful lawyer and executive are recognized in his writing by Marsden, Hallett, and Legouis.73 Lee speaks of the Richard III and the Pico as in style "clear and simple, free from pedantry," of the controversial works as having a rapidity and fluency, at times "a simple directness that comes of conviction unconstrained by fear, vigor and freedom" being their main characteristics.74 From the Dialogue of Comfort:

71 Op. cit., 212.
73 Marsden, op. cit., 40; Hallett, op. cit., 121-2; Legouis, op. cit., 131.
74 Great Englishmen of the 16th Century, 59-60.
I am sure there is many a beggar that may without let
walk farther upon other men's ground, than many a prince
at his best liberty may walk upon his own. And as for
walking out abroad upon othermen's, that prince might
hap to be said nay, and holden fast, where that beggar
with his bag and his staff would be suffered to go forth
and hold on his way. 75

Another simple but pregnant expression of his state of mind in the Tower
is this excerpt from his letters:

Nor never long I, since I came hither, to set my foot
in mine own house, for any desire of or pleasure of
my house; but gladly would I sometime somewhat talk with
my friends, and especially my wife and you that pertain to
my charge. 76

The Times Literary Supplement reviewer describes More's writing as prose
that "swings along, supple, various, yet always close to the sense, as if
the thought had made the word;" 77 and Phillimore quotes an example of
thought and language "inseparably interpenetrating, as they do in the
finest literature:

For as the sea shall never surround and overwhelm the
land, and yet hath it eaten many places in and swal-
lowed whole countries up, and made many places now
sea that sometime were well-inhabited lands, and hath
lost part of his own possession in other parts again;
so, though the faith of Christ shall never be over-
flowed with heresies nor the gates of Hell prevail
against Christ's Church, yet as in some places it win-
neth new people, so may there in some places by neg-
ligence be lost the old." 78

And this classic outpouring of a noble spirit, strong but full of human
tenderness, from the last letter to Margaret Roper who had twice broken
through the guards to embrace him on his way from receiving sentence:

75 P. 266.
76 Last Letters, 96.
I cumber you, good Margaret, much, but I would be sorry if it should be any longer than tomorrow. For it is St. Thomas even and the utas (octave) of St. Peter; and therefore tomorrow long I to go to God; it were a day very mete and convenient to me.

I never liked your manner toward me better than when you kissed me last. For I love when daughterly love and dear charity hath no leisure to look to worldly courtesy. 79

In fact, More's full character may be found delineated in his style: earnestness, courage, judgment, kindness, simplicity, culture, spirituality—all hallowed, it may be said, with the attractiveness of a charming gayety. And when a style like this is found in a period that has very little else to offer, and far outshines that of contemporaries as well as of predecessors in versatility, strength, and grace, in charm and freedom and culture,80 then to ignore it seems a denial of the very aims of literary criticism and history.

Those who hold that More's style and language had no influence on the formation of modern English because it was in the Catholic tradition while the Authorized Version of the Bible is considered the fountain-head of modern prose, forget that there was no other than the Catholic tradition for the first generation of Protestants. Tyndale, Latimer, Cranmer, Coverdale were all, with Fisher and More, reared in the Catholic tradition and their ears trained to the sound of the language and style used by religious speakers and writers. More's own language and style were not out of the line, except that he may be said to have done much to bring forward the heritage of the medieval religious style into its modern phase; and it might be remembered that the writers of the Bible were readers of More.

79 *Last Letters*, ed. Campbell, 118.
80 Hallett, *op. cit.*, 126, makes definite comparisons.
CHAPTER IV

MORE'S ENGLISH WORKS

IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF LITERARY FORMS

Sir Thomas More's English works are significant not only in the development of English prose, but also in studying the beginning of certain forms of peculiarly modern appeal: biography, drama, fiction. In the first two fields a considerable amount of investigation has already been done and credit given, but the incipiency of English prose fiction in More's work has scarcely been recognized.

The Richard III has been highly admired by most critics, as noted in earlier chapters, although the cloud on its authorship has deprived More of the glory. It has usually been described as history, according to its original title: The Historie of King Richard the Thirde, and the use made of it in the chronicles of the period. Schütt and Fueters call it humanistic history; Chambers prefers to call it the "first modern treatment of a limited period of English history." It is considered by Stauffer as "the finest instance of royal biography during the sixteenth century," although he is somewhat puzzled by its unfinished form; but, with other critics, he recognizes that,

with the introduction of Richard as Lord Protectour

1 Grafton, Hall, Holinshed, Camden use it with or without acknowledgment.
2 M. Schütt, Die Englische Biographik der Tudorzeit, Hamburg, 1930, 43.
3 Edw. Fusters, Geschichte der neueren Historiographik, Munich and Berlin, 1936, 163.
5 D. A. Stauffer, op. cit., 37.
the interest of the writer focuses on the artistic problem of composing with mockery and brilliance the living portrait of a tyrant. From this point the presentation does not flag, and the beauty of its biographical unity is not dissipated.  

Glunz's scholarly work, which includes a careful comparison the Latin and English versions of the history, considers it also as an independent, artistically complete production. He quotes the author's own words as his key: "this Duke's demeanour ministreth in effect all the whole matter whereof this book shall entreat." To him it is a unique sort of dramatic or fictionized history, based on the ethical aspects of political ambition and tyranny from a purely humanistic, not a religious viewpoint: "Ethica nicht Pragmata sind das Thema der Erzählung."  

Under any one of these classifications, the Richard III is unapproached by any other work of the period, say most of its critics. Even the rabid Democratic Review article quoted above says "it excels any work of its kind which appeared for a century afterward."  

Stauffer uses it as the chief single work in which "the radical nature of the changes introduced into English biography by the Renaissance may best be studied." It adapts the humanistic method and manner to modern idiom, says Fueters; and in its striving for theatrical effect, for sentimental portrayal, the rhetoric in its speeches, and the coherent relation of events, careful diction, and relative urbanity of polemics, he observes the new classic influence.  

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8 XXVI, 313.
More's portrayal of Richard III has been called unhistorical and overdrawn. That he used all his art to paint him black is obvious; but this deliberate character drawing, so different from the formal admiration of medieval lives of saints and heroes, is a new thing. Stauffer calls it "the critical detachment that verges upon cool malice," and finds classical parallels in Tacitus and Suetonius; but Schütt insists that if it is hate, then hate, being like love interested, "kann zu tieferem Eindringen in ihn führen als kühle Objektivität," and sees the work as a deliberate, concrete embodiment of an abstract idea, an artistic creation.

This introduces other new elements in the treatment of character. Artistry is exercised in that "jedes Wort ist mit sorgfältiger Überlegung gewählt, jeder Ausdruck klug auf seine Wirkung berechnet." Churchill, in his survey of the treatment of Richard III before Shakespeare, shows that More's description of him is significantly advanced in various ways over previous ones; by words: croke-backed, hard-favoured, ill-featured, werish, withered; by stronger details about his unnatural birth; by emphasizing, and adding traits or motives; and by so framing the narration of events as to make Richard the "deepe dissimuler" others had called him.

Besides this deliberate creation of a character by external means, "philosophy and a subtle observation of mental states are for the first time consistently introduced." This unprecedented concern with the

14 Fueters, op. cit., 163.
16 Stauffer, op. cit., 38.
interior workings of character shows itself in the whole manner of treatment, in "a delicacy of presentation," 17 a reserved, discriminating, inward tone that is in line with the complexity of the Renaissance as contrasted with medieval simplicity. 18 Stauffer notes in the early pages of the work an evidence of More's understanding of human nature: "Edward IV abandoned obnoxious means of gathering revenues, for money 'is the only thing that withdraweth the hearts of Englishmen from the Prince.'" 19

Another example of this is in the external revelation of the moral, psychological effects on Richard of his crimes, especially of the murder of the princes in the Tower: the biting of his lips, his hand always ready to his sword, his eyes suspiciously watching others, his sleeplessness. Even more subtly, perhaps, is done the unstrained success of Cardinal Morton's quiet diplomacy in winning away Buckingham's loyalty from the king, with which the account closes.

"Nowhere else," says Stauffer, "in the history of English biography is there 'so evill a tale so well tolde.'" 20

Of the influence exerted on literature by More's Richard III Churchill says: "It fixed in practically definitive form the character and person of Richard as they were to appear in later history and literature." 21 And Hutton: More" did most to originate the historical sympathy for the Tudor dynasty which has been so striking a feature of English literature." 22

The relation of the Richard with Shakespeare's plot will be discussed in

17 Ibid., 39.
18 Glunz, op. cit., 76.
19 Stauffer, op. cit., 38.
20 Ibid., 42.
another connection.

It made men dissatisfied with the usual colorless method of the chronicles, as Ascham complains: "If the rest of our story of England were so done, we might well compare with France, or Italy, or Germany in that behalfe." 23 Still more important for the growth of modern biography is Chambers' contention that More was the originator of and moving factor in the formation of a school of biography among his own circle and their associates. 24 The existence of an actual school of literature and culture in More's house is well known as one of the rare examples of ideal education; but the effect of that training and the later work of the members is only now being examined. Chambers distinguishes the immediate circle of More's own family; the associated group including William Rastell, John Heywood, Lupset; and a third gradation who were heirs, as it were, of the school's treasures, in which are found Nicholas Harpsfield, Cresacre More, with Cavendish, the biographer of Wolsey, and Stapleton. Seven of these, at least, wrote biographical matter, after the manner of their teacher, insists Chambers; and the work so far done in publishing from the manuscripts adds weight to the theory. Common characteristics throughout, he points out, are the use of dialogue, personal details, interest in motive and character traits. A continuation of research in this direction may bring further light upon this very probable and very significant relationship.

In view of such judgments as those cited in the preceding pages, it is surprising that so recent a work as Nicolson's history of biography should dismiss the Richard III with the two remarks: "attitude not scientific,"

23 Vide 16 above.
and "more probably composed by Morton;" and that W. P. Ker should claim honors for Lord Berners in the history of prose and historical writing when he admits him to be not even a great translator and to be successful in so far as he followed the medieval fashion. Of course, the latter writes before the research of the past fifteen years had opened windows upon the situation. It is time, however, that More's biographical works, the Richard III and the Pico, which incidentally is a free translation bearing strongly the imprint of its author's humanistic and moral purpose, should be recognized as the first good English literature in the spirit of the Renaissance. "Each of these works is without prototype in England, and their novel treatment cannot be understood apart from the classical culture which filled with enthusiasm More and his circle of humanists." The drama is another modern literary form in the development of which More's work represents a very definite phase. Chambers draws attention to the fact that the dramatic genius of the Elizabethan period was not an unaccountably sudden manifestation, but the evolution of a temper for the dramatic of which More's use of dialogue for the general reading public and the inclusion of anecdotes told with dialogue of a dramatic turn are a quite obvious confirmation. That More was fully conscious of the effectiveness of dramatic treatment for teaching as well as for entertainment is easily to be seen through biographical and bibliographical evidence.

27 Schutt, op. cit., 36-7.
28 Stauffer, op. cit., 35.
Erasmus records that More wrote and acted in comedies when he first knew him, that in fact he was an impromptu entertainer in that particular form. Medwall and John Rastell, early writers of interludes, were close associates of More during the first years of his career, while John Heywood was one of More's proteges at court.

Frequently, also, references in his works show his interest in theatrical performances. In the Richard III, for example, he explains the people's inaction in regard to the perfunctory election of the king by comparing it to the "willing suspension of disbelief" with which an audience accepts a play:

And in a stage play all the people know right well that he that playeth the sovereign is percase a sowter (cobbler). Yet if one should do so little good, to show out of season what acquaintance he hath with him and call him by his own name while he standeth in his majesty, one of his tormentors might hap to break his head, and worthy for marring of the play. And so they said these matters be but kings' games, as it were stage plays, and for the most part played upon scaffolds. In which poor men be but lookers on. And they that wise be will meddle no further. For they that sometime step up and play with them, when they cannot play their parts, they disorder the play and do themselves no good.

Again in the Four Last Things he twice makes use of this comparison.

Reed notes also that a part of More's translation from Lucian dealt with the play idea; and he quotes a rather lengthy English verse translation which he thinks may be More's also, printed by John Rastell some time before 1520. Its main theme is that life here on earth is like a play where

29 Reed, Early Tudor Drama, 139.
30 Ibid., 47.
31 Ibid., PP. 78-9.
32 English Works, 479, 482.
costume and bombast make the character. It is in this sense that More usually employs the idea.

And with a strong appreciation of the effectiveness of 'make-believe' More creates situations by the use of dialogue. Though the latter is a common vehicle of serious expression during the period, as in other controversial writings and in Ascham's *Toxophilus*, the dramatic power of More's diversified, imaginative, and free-flowing style is far in advance of others. The Dialogue of Comfort becomes a great deal more convincing than would a mere sermon on religious, philosophical resignation. The Messenger in the Dialogue concerning Tyndale, with his alternate gullibility and acuteness, provides opportunity for a graphic presentation of the people's actual problems and reactions, to say nothing of the resulting entertainment. More's use of dialogue shows a subtle recognition of the mind of a people just beginning to learn from books and still in need of being spoken to, as well as of their helplessness in abstract reasoning.

The form and quality of his dialogue are significant, whether used by him directly or by the characters in his books. MacKintosh observes this in the Richard III:

> The speeches have the merit of being accommodated to the circumstances, and of disposing those to whom they were addressed to promote the object of the speaker... (They) were probably as real as he could render them in the substance, but brightened by ornament, and improved in composition... (They) have little of the vague commonplace of the rhetoricians and declaimers... and are fitted to the peculiarities of interest and temper." 34

If space permitted, quotations could be made showing how, whether it be the

crafty Richard, the sorrowing queen, the young prince, a contentious friar, the peasant of Sandwich Haven, a shrewish wife, or a flattering courtier, all speak their own language (even to the use of dialect for the peasant) with a subtle interaction of thought between the characters themselves.

Occasionally More inserts what may practically be called an interlude, as in the Tyndale dialogue when the court is examining the commoners who claimed to know something of the murder of Richard Hunne. Chambers sees in the scene an ancestor of Shakespeare's 'first, second, and third citizen' episodes. Therefore, and for the sake of showing More's patience and his sense of the comic, here the first part of the scene will be reproduced as quoted by Chambers who simply adds paragraphing and quotation marks to the form in the Dialogue.

The greatest temporall Lords there presente sayde unto a certayne servant of hys own standynge there beside, "Syr, ye tolde me that one shewed you that he coulde goe take hym by the sleeve that kylled Hunne. Have ye broughte hym hither?"

"Syr," quod he, "if it lyke your Lordshyp, thys manne it was that told me so," poynting to one that he had caused to come thither.

Than my Lorde asked that man, "Howe saye ye, syr? can ye dooe as ye sayde ye coulde?"

"Forsoothe, my Lorde," quod he, "and it lyke your Lordshyppe, I sayde not so muchas, thys gentleman did sumwhat myssetake me. But in dede I told hym that I hadde a neighbor that told me that he coulde doe it."

"Where is that neighbor?" quod my Lorde.

"Thys man, syr," quod he, brynging one forth which had also been warned to be there. Than was he asked whether he said that he could do it.

"Naye forsoothe," quod he, "my Lorde I sayde not that I coulde doe it my selfe; but I sayde that one told me that he could doe it."

"Well," quod my Lord, "who tolde you so?"

"Forsoothe, my Lord," quod he, "my neighbor here."
It develops finally that it was a woman who could tell, as she could say "mervaylous" things. How? By no worse way than looking in one's hand. Where is she? One could not tell; she was some months gone overseas, an Egyptian, perhaps to her own country!

More has undoubtedly a keen sense of the possibilities of the dramatic situation and of characterization. A supremely well-conceived instance of this is the famous strawberry scene in *Richard III*. Stauffer says of it: "This courteous and trivial conversation ushers in the tense scene of Lord Hastings' arrest as a traitor, . . . demands a sense of statesmanship in the author as well as the dramatist's power to illumine a scene or a mind . . . constitutes a tour de force" in literary expression.36 Briefly paraphrased:

The Protector, having called a secret council, arrives late, greets all with unusual cordiality and a great show of good spirits, asks the Archbishop if he has not some fine strawberries in his garden of which he might taste; while they are being fetched, he asks suddenly to be excused with Buckingham. He returns shortly in apparent anger, exposes a plot against his life in which are involved the wife of Edward IV and Jane Shore with others, he says. And what punishment could be worthy of such heinous traitors? He insists upon an answer from Hastings, who bewildered by the sudden turn of affairs responds:

Certainly, my lord, if they have so heinously done, they be worthy of heinous punishment. What, quoth the protector, thou servest me I ween, with if's and and's; I tell thee they have so done, and that I will make good on thy body, traitor! And therewith as in a great anger, he clapped his fist upon the

board with a great rap. At which token given, one cried Treason! without the chamber. Therewith a door clapped, and in come there rushing men in harness as many as the chamber might hold. And anon the protector said to the Lord Hastings, I arrest thee, traitor, What, me, my Lord? quod he. Yea traitor, quod the protector. And another let flee at the Lord Stanley . . . Then were they all quickly bestowed in diverse chambers. 37

What superb acting More is visualizing here, not only in Richard but in every member of the group! Other successes are listed by Clayton:

In its vital phrases not only is Richard himself revealed as plainly as Shakespeare revealed him, but the characters of the duke of Buckingham, the lord Hastings, the death-bed of Edward IV, the attempts in the city to work up a popular enthusiasm for Richard, and the sorrowful and reluctant parting of the queen from her doomed son . . . are all effectively described. The pathos of the scene where the queen finally surrenders her boy is only surpassed by the incidental allusion to Mistress Shore. 39

Some students see in the Richard III a complete tragic theme dramatic in structure, "a series of episodes set out in dramatic order, a morality prose drama on the evils of ambition." 39 They observe the counter-action of two forces, the rise to a climax that is simultaneous with the beginning of catastrophe, the idea of punishment experienced in the character's own disintegration, a humanistic relation "deren innere Handlung und treibender Konflikt nicht transzendieren, sondern in der Immanenz des Menschenbegriffes sich Abspielen." 40 A paraphrase of Glunz's analysis will show the foreshadowing of Shakespeare's higher tragedy method: the hero's opposition to and destruction of human ideals and propensities to cultural and moral

39 Ibid., 57. Also in Glunz, op. cit., Chap. III; Shütt, op. cit., 44-5.
40 Glunz, op. cit., 182.
fulfillment, his denial of the bonds of human fellowship, carry him to the pinnacle of power and tyrannical might, but end in his finally succumbing to his own "less-than-man"-hood, overcome by the moral power of that very ideal of human development, the humanistic ideal represented here by Cardinal Morton and the forces that secured Richard's gradual and final disintegration. 41

Since it thus becomes evident that More in his English writings employs some of the most characteristic excellences of Elizabethan drama already in highly artistic and complicated form, the question arises as to what positive influence he may have exerted.

That More's History was the source for Shakespeare's play is generally conceded; but that it gave him more than the mere story is not so well known. Churchill sees that More definitely contributed to the idea of punishment through Richard's own conscience, and that "even Shakespeare's picture of the torture in Richard's soul is not greatly superior in vivid power to More's." 42 Glunz, making a careful comparison, observes in Shakespeare's plays immediately following the Richard III a use of the same theme, the struggle between the two sides of every human character. 43

T. S. Eliot makes a more general connection between More and Elizabethan tragedy that is worth noting; "The history of this (Senecal) type of play begins in a sense with the household of Sir Thomas More." 44

The interest of More in the interlude has been referred to, but there are strong arguments for something more than interest. The witty and

41 Ibid., 50 ff.
43 Op. cit., Chap. VI, VII.
44 Selected Essays, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932, 76.
playful disposition of John Heywood must have made him a favorite with More, whose protege he was, and whose niece he married. This association more than suggests a possible influence through the older man's conversations, stories, even advice. Further than that, Dr. Reed admits that he strongly suspects More actually to have been the author of the trilogy of friar plays usually attributed to Heywood, the Four P's, Johan Johan, and the Pardoner and the Frere.

Closely allied to drama, and an outgrowth of the sophistication of the Revival of Learning, is prose fiction. In this field too More shows a premature grasp of essential elements, which has not been taken into consideration by investigators of the origins of English fiction.

As More shows in the Utopia, fictitious narrative is to him a perfectly natural manner. An excellent conversationalist, as became a model of Renaissance gentlemen, story-telling is one of his primary charms; and his English prose, practically written conversation as has been seen, also employs narrative with ease and mastery. Baldwin finds narrative prose first under assured control in More. The following excerpt from the Richard III demonstrates his power in recounting action with vividness, rapidity, and realism:

At these words the people began to whisper among themselves, that the voice was neither loud nor distinct, but as it were the sound of a swarm of bees, till at the last in the nether end of the hall, a bushement of the duke's servants, with some prentices and lads that thrust into the hall among the press, began suddenly at men's backs to cry out as loud as their throats.

45 Reed. op. cit., 47 ff., Chap. V, VI.
46 Ibid., 146.
would give King Richard! King Richard! and threw up their caps in token of joy. And they that stood before, cast back their heads marveling thereof, but nothing they said. And when the duke and the mayor saw this manner, they wisely turned it to their purpose. 49

More's frequent anecdotes constitute really a considerable portion of his writing, and show that his narrative material is extremely wide in its scope: diplomatic and ecclesiastical life, Aesop and the Bible furnish tales for his purpose; but as aptly, homely experiences of ordinary folk, of schoolboys and housewives, also find place in the writing of this complete humanist.

The bearing of the character sketch on the evolution of the English novel is well known. 50 Here too More has been ahead of his time in recognizing the instinctive interest of people in people, and, foreshadowing the work of Jonson and Overbury, has drawn a host of characters graphically, briefly, entertainingly. The vain man, the flatterer, the shrewish wife, the scrupulous maid and her mistress, the proud churchman, the confirmed vagabond, are in his gallery. Sometimes the portraiture, as if merely incidental, is done with a few telling strokes that do not impede the story:

To the execution whereof (the murder of the princes) he appointed Miles Forrest, one of the four that kept them, a fellow fleshed in murder before time. To him he joined John Dighton, his own horsekeeper, a big broad, square, strong knave." 51

More does not, of course, write fiction for its own sake; the days of his playing with scholarship, when the Praise of Folly was commendable as a pleasant pastime for scholars, had gone, though not even the Utopia was

49 Pp. 73-4.
50 Wilbur L. Cross, Development of the English Novel, 24.
51 Richard III, 83.
without a serious meaning. The world was too full of dangers now; the reading public must be taught before it could be entertained; but More would make the teaching entertaining. So the great dialogues, the two against Tyndale, vital as they are in their purpose, and the Dialogue of Comfort, a work of practical philosophy, are built on a fiction. In the latter especially More demurely keeps up the character of the feeble Antony, who likes to look forward to his comforting dinner and to the 'forty winks' following it, who acknowledges that he is garrulous and too fond of jokes, who tricks his hearer into bewilderment and chuckles to hear him try to extricate himself. And occasionally he finds so much delight in the telling of the story that he almost forgets why he is telling it, it seems; but More is too astute and too good a talker ever really to lose the thread of his thought.

While nothing has been done in studying the possible place of More in the development of English fiction, interesting possibilities suggest themselves. Ben Jonson, for example, was an admiring reader of More's works. 52 Lyly's Euphues has a great deal of dialogue and interpolated narrative. At any rate, if all More's anecdotes and tales were gathered together, they would form a fair amount of narrative that might assume a large importance not only in relation to an appreciation of More's literary skill, but also in the evolution of the taste for and the method of fiction in the sixteenth century.

52 Samuel Johnson in Preface to his Dictionary.
CHAPTER V

FURTHER IMPLICATIONS OF THE ENGLISH WORKS

There are in the English works of More still other things to be considered which have a significance in English literary development. The poetry, limited in amount but remarkable in quality, has not been mentioned, nor has the content of his works been examined for its bearing on literature or literary history.

Rastell's folio volume opens with "Fowre thinges Master More wrote in his youth:" "A mery jest of how the sergeant would learn to play the frere," "Verses for the nine pageants showing the stages of life," "A Rueful Lamentation on the Death of Queen Elizabeth," and the "Preface to the Boka of Fortune." Following the Life of Pico are sixty stanzas of More's composition based on Pico's Twelve Weapons of Spiritual Warfare, Twelve Rules for Christian Life, and the Twelve Properties of a Lover. And on the last page of the volume are the two ballads written in the Tower.

Most of More's versifying was done early in life simply because his later years were too much concerned with public business to allow for poetic expression; for in the Tower he tries his hand again and demurely thanks Lady Fortune for granting him "leisure to make rhymes." But he did not disdain poetry as a mere pastime, for he says in the Tyndale Dialogue:

And albeit Poets be with many men taken but for painted words, yet do they much help judgment and make a man, among other things, well-furnished of one especial thing without which all learning is half-lame.
What is that? quoth he.
Marry, quod I, a good mother-wit. 1

1 P. 153.
Sidney Lee writes appreciatively: "All the English poems evince much metrical skill, although the rhymes and grammatical constructions are often uncouth. (This criticism is quite unwarranted when More's are compared with Skelton's.) From the point of view alike of the biographer and of the literary critic, the poems ill deserve the neglect into which they have fallen."\(^2\) Certainly they have been neglected; for when, until recently, have any of More's poems been included in anthologies as samples of Renaissance or early modern poetry? Hazlitt printed the verses for the Boke of Fortune in his *Fugitive Tracts* in 1875, and Methuen and Company published all the "Fowe thinges" with the *Utopia* in 1906.\(^3\) But More has not been named in histories of literature or of Renaissance criticism as a writer of verse of unusual quality.

As MacKintosh suggests, "as the poems of a contemporary of Skelton, they may merit more consideration" even than for their own intrinsic merit.\(^4\)

"Skelton certainly is not a poet, unless some degree of comic humor, and a torrent-like volubility of words in doggerel rhyme, can make one," says Hallam;\(^5\) and yet in a period when writers of poetry are practically non-existent, Skelton alone is proposed as an indication of the status of poetry in England, while More's verses, too, are original and certainly belong to the Renaissance. More's quantity, indeed, suffers by comparison with Skelton's; but that should not be, as it has not been in other cases, the determining factor.

\(^2\)Introduction to *Utopia and Poems*, p. ix.

\(^3\)Hebel and Hudson's *Poetry of the English Renaissance*, F.S. Croft & Co., 1938. includes five of More's verses.


A quotation from "A mery jest" will give an idea of More's skill in
the short-line verse:

Thus part they both
And foworth then goth
Apace this officere,
And for a day
All his array
He chaunged with a frere.
So was he dight
That no man might
Him for a frere deny,
He dopped and docked
He spake and looked
So religiously.
Yet in a glasse
Or he would passe
He toted and he peered
His harte for pryde
Lepte in his syde
To see how well he freered.  

And one of the ballads of his life in the Tower will show the command
and serenity of which he was capable:

Lewis the lost Lover

Ey-flattering Fortune, look thou never so fair,
Or never so pleasantly begin to smile,
As though thou wouldst my ruin all repair,
During my life thou shalt me not beguile.
Trust shall I God, to enter in a while
His haven of heaven sure and uniform.
Ever after thy calm, look I for a storm.

And yet "critics have usually ignored or scorned his English poetry.
Its theme is mainly the fickleness of fortune and the voracity of time.
But freshness and sincerity characterize his treatment . . . More at times
achieves metrical effects which adumbrate the art of Spenser."  

Let a
stanza from the "Rueful Lamentation" illustrate this:

Where are our castels, now where are our towers?
Goodly Richmond sene art thou gone from me,
At Westminster that costly work of yours,
Mine own dere Lord now shall I never see.
Almighty God vouchsafe to grant that ye
For you and your children well may edify. —
My palace builded is, and lo now here I lie.

A modern reviewer thinks that even Sir Thomas Wyatt "would have found it hard to match the movement of that last stanza and the quiet of that last line." 7 Of the "Rueful Lamentation" Reed says:

Cast in the form of a soliloquy, each verse closing with a refrain, More's poem has movement and is not without a note of inspiration. As an English versifier he is here at his best. The poem has a wealth of allusion which alone must save it from neglect. It refers to Henry's new place at Richmond; to the Henry VII Chapel, "that costly work of yours" then a-building; it refers to the recent death of Arthur, Prince of Wales, and to his child-widow, Katherine of Aragon; it speaks of the approaching marriage of Elizabeth's daughter Margaret to James of Scotland; Prince Henry is mentioned, and his sister Mary, "bright of hue," and the Queen's sisters are all addressed, Cicely, Ann, Katherine and Bridget, of whom More was to write again at greater length in the opening paragraphs of his Richard III. 8

Hutton, too, considers the "Rueful Lamentation" better than the verses on the ages of man although the latter show "a certain elegance of force," "a sense of form and style." 9

But it is not alone in its excellence, for there is the "sustained merit" of the Boke of Fortune verses, "in which a little dash of classical learning, and medieval traditions, and moral sentiments, and sensuous delights, and (toward the close) a thoroughly More-ish spice of mischievous humour are pleasantly mixed." 10

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7 TLS, July, 1931, 533.
8 English Works, 16.
10 Loc. cit.
Two stanzas from this rather long series, of which each verse yet has its own particular conceit well expressed, will give evidence of its quality:

Young men she killeth, and letteth old men live.
Unrighteously dividing time and season,
That good men leseth, to wicked doth she give,
She hath no difference, but judgeth all good reason,
Inconstant, slipper, frail, and full of treason,
Neither forever cherishing whom she taketh,
Nor forever oppressing, whom she forsaketh.

Some man hath goods, but children hath he none:
Some man hath both, but he can get no health:
Some hath all three, but up to honour's throne
Can he not get by no manner of stealth.
To some she sendeth children, riches, wealth,
Honour, worship, and reverence all his life,
But yet she pincheth him with a shrewish wife.

Father Bridgett thinks the following stanza from the Fortune "very harmonious," and that "it might have been written by Spenser or Gray:" 11

Fast by her side doth weary Labour stand,
Pale Fear also, and Sorrow all bewept,
Disdain and Hatred on that other hand,
Eke restless watch, from sleep with travail kept,
His eyes drowsy, and looking as he slept;
Before her standeth Danger and Envy,
Flatter, Deceit, Mischief, and Tyranny.

The verses on the Twelve Properties of a Lover are interesting from the point of view of the later love sonnet series. More uses his seven-line stanza, of course; but for each Property he writes one stanza depicting the human lover and then a parallel stanza on the divine lover. Again, a quotation will best show the simple grace, the compactness and completeness of each conceit:

There is no page or servant, most or least,
That doth upon his love attend or wait,
There is no little worm, no simple beast,
Ne none so small a trifle or conceit,
Lace, girdle, point, or proper glove strait,
But that if to his love it have been near,
The lover hath it precious, lief and dear.

Diversely passioned is the lover's heart:
Now pleasant hope, now dread and grievous fear,
Now perfect bliss, now bitter sorrow smart;
And whether his love be with him or elsewhere,
Oft from his eyes there falleth many a tear--
For very joy, when they together be,
When they be sundered, for adversity.

Through his verses More gives evidence of a great deal of restraint

(he was a Latin poet of high reputation on the continent), but his power

of producing brief but vivid images and his pointed paradox are not absent:

Build not thine house on high up in the sky,
None falleth far, but he that climbeth high;
Remember nature sent thee hither bare;
The gifts of Fortune -- count them borrowed ware. 12

It holdeth on a course and will not lin (cease)
But fast it runneth on and passen shall
As doth a dream or shadow on the wall. 13

Lines like those just quoted show an unmistakable union of spirit and form;

and there is sometimes a foreshadowing of Shakespeare:

Thou seest this world is but a thoroughfare. 14

She suddenly enhanceth them aloft,
And suddenly mischieveth all the flock;
The head that late lay easily and full soft, 15
Instead of pillows, lieth after on the block.

12 From the "Boke of Fortune."
13 From the "Twelve Weapons."
14 Ibid.
15 From the "Boke of Fortune."
Several critics note in his verse this strain of prophecy; but there are evidences too of his shrewd humor, as in the Childhood verse for the nine pageants:

But would to God these hateful bookes all Were in a fire brent to powder small.

All the poems except the "Mery Jest" are written in Chaucer's seven-line stanza; this does not allow for great variety, but More's treatment shows a power that would certainly have gone far if exercised. MacKintosh thinks that in the unformed condition of the language and the absence of any body of poetic literature, poetry like this, which shows "a sense of harmony and some adaptation of the sound to the subject" (he has contrasted the tripping meter of the Jest with the stately rhythm of the "Rueful Lamentation") possesses some genius and evidences a poetic sensibility. At any rate, Skelton, who uses the same stanza whenever he is not experimenting with short lines, is much less smooth and readable. And when More sets out to be humorous in verse, he uses the short line without the waste of words and the juvenile manner of Skelton:

A black draper With white paper To go to writing scole, An old butler Becum a cutler I wene shall prove a foole.17

There are few places in that rather long poem that do not fit smoothly.

Indeed, it is because the poems have been practically unknown that they have not been rated as they deserve; for any reader of them will agree with Father Bridgett that they give great promise, and that their

17 From the "Mery Jest."
author might, "had he given himself to this species of composition, have anticipated something of the beauties of the Elizabethan poets." 18

Not only in their literary forms are the English works of Thomas More important to literature, but also in their thought content do they show a keen sense of the needs and tastes and opinions of the new era.

One of the great values of literature and of literary study is the understanding of the thought of an age, of the stage and state of intellectual life in that age. And the thought of an age may best be studied in its spokesmen, that is, its writers. A work of art may then be viewed as the reflection of a period, as revealing the "spiritual conflict" and the complexity of forces that affect human thinking. 19 Delcourt says of More's works:

Et c'est par là, par l'union de ces deux empreintes (that of the Renaissance and that of the Reformation) que l'œuvre de More est intéressante: particulièrement révélatrice de l'esprit de son auteur dont le génie fut toujours de concilier en lui des tendances différentes, elle est, en même temps, éminemment représentative du seizième siècle, dont toute l'activité tient en ces deux mots: la Renaissance, et la Réforme. 20

To see this is to see the crux of More's position in the world both of thought and of literature. He was vitally concerned in both movements; and where many have seen inconsistencies, there exists really only the one character, judicious, alert, broad in interest and outlook, directing his way, and doing his best to direct the way of his countrymen, through the "mismaze of this world" with the help of the two great guides: religion

and learning. This outlook, that is the blend of the classical and the
Christian, is recognized by Hollis, Hutton, Stauffer, especially in
More's sympathy with and interest in the life of Pico della Mirandola; but
other works of his show the same thing. The Four Last Things, according
to Reed, was intended to make a comparison between the Socratic and the
Christian manner of viewing death, and judging their respective moral
force.

Even in his diatribes against heresy -- where some consider him to be
giving evidence of bigotry and superstitious obsession bespeaking a vi-
tiated mind he is prompted by his Renaissance training to defend the
things that human nature as well as Christianity consider wholesome and
good for man's happiness. Clayton says well:

Mankind will go on pilgrimage and More knew it. It will have
its holy places, its treasured memories of departed heroes. Mankind cannot be persuaded to refrain from the tender hand-
ing of relics, it needs must treasure the faded rags, the
tattered flags, broken fragments of things precious, and torn
manuscripts.

In fact, for an unbiased view of the age which is the threshold of the
Reformation, no one, says Pope, "can afford to neglect the evidence of the
Dialogue (concerning Tyndale) as it was the official exposition of the mind
of England -- court and clergy," coming as it did from, or rather through,
More, a cosmopolitan scholar, statesman, layman, and saint.

25 Edinburgh Review, op. cit., 374, says in this regard: "There is no
sight more affecting than the ruin of a great mind (More's)."
27 Hugh Pope, Review of Dialogue concerning Tyndale, Dublin Review,
CLXXXII, (Jan. 1928), 15.
Besides, it is -- and the same may be said of the Dialogue of Comfort--

concerned with fundamental issues and difficulties that are vital in every age: the ridiculous lengths to which prejudice can go, the follies of the superfluously or ostentatiously pious; even the anti-semitic agitation is noted in a typical anecdote of the "gentlewoman which in talking once with my father when she heard say that Christ's mother, our lady was a Jew, first could not believe it . . . and at last: 'and was she a Jew,' quoth she, 'as help me God and halidame, I shall love her the worse while I live.'" 28

Then there are references to the inter-relation of rich and poor, ideas on private property, the stability of land ownership, caste, etc.

Reed observes in the Four Last Things another reflection of the age:

the attitude toward death.

Its theme is not merely the theme of death, but the physical loathsomeness of death. This was in the spirit of the age. We see it reflected in the early sixteenth century play Everyman; and the cadaver is frequent on the tombs of the period . . . (Yet) it illustrates that this vogue was not incompatible with a feeling for the ludicrous. One of the grimmest passages in More's unfinished work . . . (the death-bed scene where the relatives are becoming uneasy about bequests) is written in a vein of vigorous humour. 29

Or in this passage:

The devil waits by the death-bed, and puts us in mind of provisions for some honourable burying: so many torches, so many tapers, so many black gowns, so many merry mourners, laughing under black hoods; and a gay hearse with the delight of goodly and honourable funerals, as though the dying man should stand in the window and see how worshipfully he shall be brought to church. 30

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28 Dialogue concerning Tyndale, 217.
29 English Works, 21, 23.
30 Ibid.
He often "anticipates the spirit and temper of his younger kinsman, John Donne," as in the metaphors of the prison and the gallows and a certain ruthlessness in treating of such things: everyone is sometime or other put to death, "and either worms eat him underground, or crows above." More shows, also, the humanistic interest in the individual, which was to extend further and further toward the democratic conception of social and political life. But he is himself really a great deal in advance of his time. His work in English impresses the reader strongly with its awareness of an audience embracing every man. He wrote indeed, not "for the rabble," as Burnet says (for the rabble of his day could not read), but for the gentry who could; however, he had unmistakably in mind the common folk who were in danger of being misled. This is true certainly of the controversial works; but it is felt also in the homely philosophy of the Dialogue of Comfort, the tone of personal discussion and the universality of appeal in the Four Last Things, even in the Richard III where Hollis sees More expounding a political philosophy based on a strong conception of the power and sanction of authority together with an equally strong sense of the duties and obligations of the sovereign toward his people and their rights. This is perfectly in accord with the spirit in which More is known to have discharged the duties of his public offices, that of under-sheriff in London and that of Chancellor, though it sets him quite apart from the trend of Tudor state-craft.

He was truly a man alone in his time. Where others (as he himself had

Ibid.

Op. Cit., Chap. V. Also vide W. E. Campbell, More and his Social Teaching.
done in youth) taking on Renaissance culture either translated or imitated the classics and the French or Italian modes as a formal source of enlightenment and growth, where, as Greenlaw says, they failed to see how the classic authors fitted into the sixteenth century in a continuity of intellectual development — More turned from learning to living; for while he remained a humanist to the last, he no more sought learning for its own sake. According to Hollis he saw with Pico that Platonism "inevitably led to Christianity," that the culture of Greece was "a part of the Christian unity without whose possession Christendom cannot be at ease," that it was a step in the progression of humanity interpreted with reference to the Redemption economy. More says as much in the first chapter of the Dialogue of Comfort; speaking of the counsels of the philosophers to lift the soul above suffering:

Some good drugs have they yet in their shops for which they may be suffered to dwell among our apothecaries, if their medicines be not made of their own brains, but after the bills made by the great physician God, prescribing the medicines himself, and correcting the faults of their erroneous receipts.  

Is not this the historical sense of which Greenlaw sees no evidence before Bacon?  

Further light is cast on the importance of More's writings as representing his time if we accept Greenlaw's discernment of two distinct ideals in sixteenth century England: the "cult of glory" and the "fall of princes." More saw these two as the trends of the growing age. It is

35 P. P. 8 ff.  
37 Ibid., 146.
not difficult to see in the Richard III, the great dialogues, the Dialogue of Comfort, very pointed acknowledgment of the ambition for glory and power in both high and low, its various forms, its vanity, its true value, and as well, both forebodings of and warnings against the rising tide of rebellion against authority.

From these references briefly taken out of the abundance of More's wide knowledge and interest, his writings show themselves to be highly worthy of study for an examination of the thought and temper of the early Renaissance period. Much more than Ascham, much more than Elyot, St. Thomas More, by reason of his personal vitality, intellectual depth, wide contacts, and intimate understanding of human nature, provides the material suited to a true realization of the elements, social and mental, that make up the early sixteenth century.
CONCLUSION

It may appear, perhaps, that there are too many claims being made for More. But it must be remembered that his period was the formative one for modern English language and literature, and that More was a man popular and admired among all groups, a reputation which survived even a traitor's death at the axman's hand. His literary style and method, it has been shown, were attractive and "modern" and considered models by teachers of rhetoric and writers contemporary with and following him. The subject of his writing was matter at the time of common and vital interest. Though there was a bann placed upon reading his works and honoring his name during much of the remainder of the sixteenth century after his death, he had been sufficiently read by educated people to leave his mark upon their use of the language and to call for emulation, even though imitation of his highly personal style was impossible (though attempted). In the next century Ben Jonson renewed the tradition and the realization of the superior quality of his writing. Add to this the fact that there was no one in the century who approached him in the variety, the effectiveness, the universality, and the attractiveness of both the matter and manner of his prose.

Also for its own sake does More's English writing merit consideration: for skill in suiting the word to the sense, for a fluent, clear, forceful style in spite of the involved sentences, and for a decidedly modern appeal through its figures of speech, its illustrations, its humor and intimacy, its dramatic and fictional manner. As to subject matter, it is true that

1 The addition to the Richard III in Hardyng's Chronicle.
Catholic dogma has for particular reasons little popular appeal; but there is a great deal in More's great works that is not Catholic dogma. In this regard, the *Life of Pico* and the *Richard III* present no difficulty; the *Four Last Things* is simply practical and homely philosophy on the amendment of men's vices from the viewpoint of death -- a serious topic but handled entertainingly and almost gaily. Let the controversies be read merely with the idea of seeing at first hand the advance of the Reformation, though they are mixed with many matters of common interest and contain some of More's best humor. The last letters may be placed among human documents as a most graceful, poignant expression of a noble personality; and the *Treatise on the Passion* (unfinished) is sublime, rich contemplation of a highly spiritual nature, by a soul enduring its own final and redeeming passion.

Of the *Dialogue of Comfort*, however, more must be said. As a recipe for human happiness it has the advantage over others of being written by a man who had really found the way to serenity of spirit, which is what happiness on earth actually consists in. For no one, evidently, has ever felt that Thomas More was in need of pity; his loss of place and fortune, of freedom and of life, drastic as it seems in the lives of most men, had no power to deprive him of his contentment and joy of soul.

It has been said that men write best when they are in high spirits. And More whose low spirits were above other men's high spirits, who had, it seemed to Erasmus, 'been sent into the world for the sole purpose of making witty jests,' felt his heart bound up at the coming of sickness and the imprisonment and the approach of death. His matter is of the gravest. He sits writing in a dark and solitary cell . . . Yet the tone of his writing is as that of a gay wit passing a pleasant hour amidst the laughter of loving friends.  

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The Dialogue of Comfort is full of a cheerful courage, solid conviction, true simplicity and self-knowledge, but light-hearted and fresh and vigorous. It might be called his "Consolations of Philosophy," says Reed; "I sometimes wonder why it is not better known in . . . homes. It is a cheerful book; not without the interest of playful reminiscence." 3

As to its contents, Father James J. Daly sums up:

Under three broad headings . . . is collected a mass of weighty practical philosophy garnered from a career unusually crowded with rich and multifarious experience, and presented with an instinct for literary form, which, in England, at least, was the most highly cultivated of the age. Like Sir Thomas himself, it is a synthesis of unexpected excellences, with surprises around every corner. 4

In it, writes Chambers, "he is no longer defending this dogma or that; he is defending the right of the individual soul, against the command of the civil power, to hold any dogma at all." 5 It is not in the least controversial, however; it is not a struggle against the world. More seems to have written it simply to satisfy himself by an expression or formulation of those considerations which were helping him to live serenely his prison life with its prospect of public execution, and incidentally to help his friends to live in the same way through the troubles he foresaw for them.

But it is quite incorrigible in its good humor. When the young man in the dialogue, Vincent, "apologizes for having asked his uncle to exhaust himself by so much talking, he elicits the following:

Nay, good cousin, to talk much (except some other pain let me)

3 Early Tudor Drama, 84.
5 Dialogue of Comfort, 76.
is to me little grief. A fond old man is often as full of words as a woman. It is, you know well, as some poets paint us, all the lust of an old fool's life to sit well and warm with a cup and a roasted crab, and drivel and drink and talk. 

In other references to the talkativeness of women, his wife, poor Dame Alice, too often acts as the scarcely-veiled subject of the joke. And though he says that truly "this life is no laughing time, but rather the time of weeping," yet he cannot avoid telling jokes about Cardinal Wolsey, (unnamed of course), other pompous churchmen, and making such whimsical comparisons as that life for an old man is "like the snuff of a candle that burneth down within the candlestick's nose." It is in touches like these that Father Daly detects the "background of aged leisure in a country villa in the calm enjoyment of nature and pleasant surroundings" in spite of the dungeon, the scaffold, and the axman waiting.

It seems best, in fact, to quote rather at length from Father Daly, whose own unimpeachable style bespeaks a fine appreciation of literary excellence:

The rare literary quality of the style will not have escaped attention in the passages cited. A homely vigor of phrase, a swift penetration of mind, a balanced condition of judgment, and the easy gesture of magnanimous humor give these pages a Shakespearean flavor which epicurean palates will delight in. The large scroll of life lay unrolled before the eyes of Sir Thomas as before the eyes of the Elizabethans, giving him some of that spacious outlook which our literature was not to know again till some fifty years after his death.

Here, for instance, is a touch which draws the modern and medieval worlds together. Shakespeare could not have seen it or he would have stolen it. Antony has been speaking of the cruel indulgence and false consolation which certain obsequious pastors hold out to the wealthy members of their flocks.

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6 Dialogue of Comfort, 76. 
7 Pp. 204-6. 
8 P. 83. 
9 Ch. Cit., 60.
"And in such wise deal they with him, the rich man, as the mother doth sometimes with her child; Which when the little boy will not rise in time for her, but lie still abed and slug, when he is up weepeth because he hath lien so long, and fearing to be beaten at school for his late coming thither; she telleth him then that it is but early days, and he shall come time enough, and biddeth him, 'Go, good son, I warrant thee I have sent to the master myself; take thy bread and butter with thee: thou shalt not be beaten at all.' And thus so she may send him merry forth at the door that he weep not in her sight at home, she studieth not much upon the matter though he be taken tardy and beaten when he come to school."

What child has not been the victim of this gracious perfidy? Again, speaking of the brief tenure of their worldly estate, which prosperous folk enjoy, a favorite topic of moralizing philosophers, the Dialogue breaks forth into the following noble cadence:

"O Cousin Vincent, if the whole world were animated with a reasonable woul (as Plato had weened it were) and that it had wit and understanding to mark and perceive all things, Lord God! how the ground on which a Prince buildeth his palace would loud laugh his lord to scorn, when he saw him proud of his possession, and heard him boast himself, that he and his blood are forever lords and owners of the land. Then would the ground think the while in himself: 'Ah thou silly poor soul, that weenest thou were half a god, and art amid thy glory but a man in a gay gown. I, that am the ground here over whom thou art so proud, have had an hundred such owners of me as thou callest thyself, more than ever thou hast heard the names of...'

Who owned your castel, cousin, three thousand years ago? Vincent: 'Three thousand, uncle? Nay, nay, in any Kingdom, Christian or heathen, you may strike off a third part of that well enough, and as far as I ween half of the remnant too. In far fewer years than three thousand it may well fortune that a poor ploughman's blood may come up to a kingdom; and a king's right Royal kin on the other side fall down to the plow and cart; and neither that king know that he came from the cart, or carter know that he came from the crown.'"

Does it seem extravagant to discover here for the first time in our literary history the genuine ancestry of that distinguished and dignified port and sad grave demeanor which glorify the prose of Milton, Sir Thomas Browne, Jeremy Taylor, DeQuincy, and Newman? And is it hard to believe that Thackeray, the genial satirist,
could have read the famous description of the emptiness of fame without feeling kinship with Sir Thomas More? 10

In that 'famous description' occurs St. Thomas' favorite figure for worldly honor: "the blast of other men's mouths:" and its end is this climactic, alliterative passage:

And yet there are some fools so fed with this fond fantasy of fame that they rejoice and glory to think how they be continually praised all about, as though the world did nothing else day or night but sit and sing Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus, upon him. 11

Quotations from the Dialogue are practically irrepressible. Every writer on it seems to feel this, that passages simply cry for audience, and quotes at length. In other words, the Dialogue of Comfort is its own best advertisement, its own best critic. It seems always to be aware of itself, lest it offend or bore the reader, while it is at the same time alertly conscious of all the world about, with the humanist's ardent zest for living. But especially, as Clayton points out, "To read it is to know the author with an intimacy no biography can afford. The last words and writings of the saints and sages have a peculiar fragrance of their own. The Dialogue of Comfort is the last will and testament of Blessed Thomas More." 12

Msgr. Philip E. Hallett, whose work as the Vice-Postulator in the cause for canonization of St. Thomas has led him to become one of the most appreciative and understanding students of More, considers it the "finest of all More's writings in style and matter, in beauty and pathos," 13 and has

10 Ibid., 63-5.
11 P. 201.
published a delightful edition of the work which should do much toward making it a popular literary possession. 14

This is what Daly looks forward to when he says:

The attention of Catholic teachers and publishers is respectfully directed to the Dialogue of Comfort, as a promising field of enterprise. Besides its value as a literary monument, it is full of bright little side lights on English life of the fifteenth (sic) century: it should stimulate historical curiosity and research. Whether the reader is looking for literature or history or prudent direction in the spiritual life, he will find the Dialogue of Comfort a treasure. It will bring him into close communication with one of the great men of all times. And this is the surest and, it is commonly acceded, the only test of a classic. 15

If the English works of St. Thomas continue to be made more and more accessible, as they are being made at present, his reputation as the model prose writer of the sixteenth century will again be established; but with this addition: that the Dialogue of Comfort, which, written in the Tower, secretly kept by his family, published only in the reign of Mary Tudor to be again banned by Elizabeth's Protestant activities, was not generally known by his contemporaries, will now be an added glory for its author and a treasure for all his readers.

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