

Damnably Rottenness

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REVIEWED: THOMAS MORE: A LIFE AND DEATH IN TUDOR ENGLAND by [Joanne Paul](#).

Two conflicting versions of Thomas More continue to have particular resonance. One is the principled, compassionate statesman who lays down his life for his convictions in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*. The other, more or less diametrically opposed, is the zealot and vindictive persecutor of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, who takes savage delight in flogging heretics. The attempt to claim, for one agenda or another, this complex, brilliant, troubled man began almost as soon as More died in 1535, with his family and friends casting him as a Catholic martyr, preserving relics including his head – stolen from a spike on London Bridge after his daughter Margaret bribed a guard – and writing hagiographic accounts of his life. Early Protestant accounts were more conflicted. In his 'Book of Martyrs' John Foxe was torn between describing More the humanist poet and More the lord chancellor who brought godly reformers to trial; in the end the persecutor won out. Saint or sinner, scholar or polemicist, philosopher or politician – no single vision of More has ever commanded popular assent. When Erasmus called him 'a man for all seasons', he was commending More for his universal appeal, which combined 'so much real wisdom with such charm of character'. After nearly five centuries of disagreement, however, the phrase might be better used as a commentary on the way every age has reinvented More for its own purposes.

In the light of this fierce competition for More's reputation, Joanne Paul's detailed and readable biography can be praised for its caution. She steers away from large pronouncements and concentrates on telling the story of his life, emphasising his complicated character and the volatile, rapidly changing world in which he lived. She makes clear that More vigorously pursued his career, ambitious for both his literary reputation and his advancement as a lawyer, mercer and privy councillor. He was no saintly figure shunning the riches that came with worldly success. She details his vitriolic attacks on Luther and Lutherans, unpoetically characterised as 'the shit-pool of all shit'. Paul makes clear, too, that More compromised his convictions in the service of his king. We find him not only voicing but defending before Parliament Henry VIII's justification for renouncing his first marriage, suppressing his own opinion. When asked, he replied only that 'several times he had declared his thoughts on it to the king.'

Yet alongside these less than admirable aspects, a picture emerges of a man who strove for good. It is evident that political life was a source of anguish to him, even if it brought prosperity. Paul quotes a passage from More's *Utopia* in which one character recommends as a political strategy, 'what you cannot turn to good you must at least make as little bad as you can.' His companion replies: 'By this approach ... I should accomplish nothing else, than while I try to cure others' madness I myself will go insane.' It is undeniable that More wrestled with the moral dilemmas of civic duty and political obligation even if a profound cynicism about politics coloured many of his remarks. He wrote to John Fisher, who would one day share his fate as a martyr, about the way everyone at court imagined that they were in favour with the king, 'like the London wives who, as they pray before the image of the Virgin Mother of God which stands near the Tower, gaze upon it so fixedly that they imagine it smiles upon them'.

In *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, one of the works he wrote from prison in expectation of imminent death, More described the life of man as like an arrow shot up into the air, where briefly it basks in sunshine before plummeting to the ground. Reflecting on Christ's sadness before death in another text written in the Tower, he exhorted his reader, and perhaps himself, 'not to smoulder with anger, not to seek revenge, not to give vent to our feelings by hurling back insults, not to find an empty pleasure in tripping up an enemy through some clever trick, but rather to set ourselves against deceitful injury with genuine courage, to conquer evil with good'. More could accuse himself of all these errors: he had smouldered, hurled insults, tripped up his enemies. His bid for 'genuine courage' at the last, however flawed, cannot but command respect, whether or not it justifies sainthood.

Paul makes extensive use of More's writings, and quotations from his letters, treatises and polemics, and those of his interlocutors, enrich her narrative. But she is a little too trusting that these were people who gave a straightforward account of their convictions and opinions. More and his humanist friends were fluent in a range of languages. They moved effortlessly between genres and were masters of irony and allusion. They were also adept at self-fashioning, to the point of complete deception. High-minded, sorrowful and penetrating indictments of court corruption and the evils of politics were written by men who were prospering in political life or desperately seeking political advancement. Erasmus's comment that 'There is no journey, no business, that can take the book out of More's hand' is a piece of flattery at odds with the overwhelming weight of More's official responsibilities; when he retired from public office, the thousands of words he wrote in a swift succession of books show how far his literary voice had been suppressed until then.

There is little that can be said for sure about More's intended meaning. We could say fairly safely that his ode to Henry VIII and Katherine of Aragon on the occasion of their coronation contained a large portion of flattery. He praised the king's physical capabilities, 'his hand ... as skilled as his heart is brave' and his 'care for modest chastity', noting with what in hindsight seems like terrible irony, 'How serene the clemency that warms his gentle heart, how removed from arrogance his mind.' Praise for a new king was standard fare for those with political aspirations; other utterances are far harder to read. Although he complained to Erasmus that 'I never much liked the position of an envoy,' More nevertheless advanced his career significantly with the negotiations he undertook abroad. His travels to Bruges and Antwerp to strengthen commercial ties also helped to reinforce diplomatic relations, as well as planting the seed of his most famous work as he encountered the polyglot world of northern European seafarers and scholars. He criticised those who engaged in disputes over religion, describing their plight as 'very much like that of men fighting naked between heaps of stones: neither one lacks the means to strike out; neither one has the means to defend himself.' Yet much of More's literary output aimed at defeating and discrediting those who espoused Lutheran ideas.

More remains best known, and perhaps also least understood, for *Utopia*. His description of an encounter with a mysterious seafarer, who told of a far-off realm and all its fascinating peculiarities of social and political organisation, has never been fully explained. Was it a work of political commentary or an elaborate scholarly joke (it was written in Latin)? Some have seen it as an interrogation of the fashions and flaws of humanist thinking, or as an indictment of social injustice; others have argued over its possible Christian or (less persuasively) communist undertones. What can be said for sure is that it ensnares the reader in skeins of dissimulation, irony, literary brilliance and unanswerable questions. The character of Morus was presumably intended to evoke More himself, but the name is a Latinisation of the Greek word for 'folly', and the well-reasoned case for the place of morality in public life that Morus advances is one that More elsewhere called into doubt. For Paul to argue that the two characters, Morus and Raphael, represent 'a fundamental divergence of opinion' is fair enough, but the idea that this reflects a divide between More and Erasmus doesn't do justice to the intricacies of either man's opinions, or the many layers of disguise in their writings. Some of Morus's utterances in *Utopia* ring true, as when he advocates perseverance, even if the hope of political reform is small: 'If you cannot pluck up wrongheaded opinions by the root, if you cannot cure according to your heart's desire vices of long standing, yet you must not on that account desert the commonwealth.' It is impossible to know for sure, however, how far More had his characters voice his true convictions, and how far he had them act a part. We should be wary of assuming that anything in *Utopia* is what it appears to be.

Scholars in the 16th century were trained not just to look at both sides of any question, but to argue both with equal eloquence. It is no accident that so many of More's works, including *Utopia*, were in dialogue form. He was drawing on the precedent set by classical works but also demonstrating crucial aspects of Renaissance humanist culture, which recognised the importance of scholarly exchange while at the same time showing that skilful interlocution could enable others to be manipulated almost without their knowledge. Morus may be speaking for his creator when he recommends indirect methods of giving advice, 'emotional appeals, hesitation and words broken by silences', spurring the listener to 'seek out the secret which he would not perhaps believe if he heard it openly stated, and to believe in that which he thinks he has found out for himself'. As a scholar

and writer More saw the virtue of never saying anything directly; as a royal councillor, he perhaps saw the necessity of circumlocution; towards the end of his life, he tried to take refuge in silence. It is hard to think of a set of characteristics less amenable to the biographer.

Paul devotes as much attention to More's mundane origins and early life as she does to his tempestuous final years. The epitaph on his tomb offered a reminder that he came not of noble but of honest stock. His family was embedded in the professional life of legal and mercantile London, and although he studied for two years at Oxford, it appears that his most important education came in the household of John Morton, archbishop of Canterbury and lord chancellor to Henry VII, and later at the Inns of Court. Accounts of his life at this time often dwell on his intellectual friendships with other humanists, and his spiritual connections with the Carthusians, but he was working hard as a lawyer, and taking his first steps in public office. He served as an MP, became a member of the influential Mercers' Company, acted as a justice of the peace for Middlesex, and in 1510 was made one of two under-sheriffs of the City of London. His obvious competence soon brought him the attention of Henry VIII, and a place on the king's council. Throughout his life, More had to balance his intellectual enthusiasms and his religious commitment with the demands of political life. In 1517 he was one of those charged with punishing the instigators of the Evil May Day riots, in which foreigners living in London were attacked. More had attempted to quell some of the rioters, with little success, but decades later his efforts were remembered in the play *Sir Thomas More*, to which Shakespeare contributed, in a speech that pleaded for tolerance. The play gives us not the humanist scholar, but the Londoner, the lawyer, the family man and the royal servant torn between dutiful service and the demands of principle. It reminds us of just how many roles this energetic yet enigmatic man had to fulfil.

Paul's historical imagination is not always unerring, but one of the more appealing aspects of her book is its depiction of the crowded streets, halls and palaces of early 16th-century London. More's great-grandparents ran the Falcon on the Hoop brewhouse in Aldersgate; its 54-foot-long hall was also where meetings were held of the fraternity of the Holy Trinity, to which the family belonged. His grandfather was a baker, whose livery company entertained themselves by imposing small fines for social misdemeanours during the meeting of their halimote (assembly); these crimes included fiddling with one's beard, or telling a fellow baker he had a thick skull. As a member of the Mercers' Company, More would leave his home and cross Cheapside to enter the Hospital of St Thomas of Acre, where he represented the Merchant Adventurers in negotiations with Antwerp over trading privileges. Paul's description of Westminster Hall as the 16-year-old More first crosses its threshold gives a strong sense of the cluttered, noisy world of legal London; forty years later More would walk into the same vast hall – the site of so many of his legal and political endeavours – to face trial.

We are familiar with the Holbein portrait of More, with his father, wife, daughters and the other members of his family gathered around him. They sit in dignified repose, many of them clutching books – an ordered and educated gathering. Paul's account of More's earlier decades suggests a more boisterous household: after his 'beloved little wife' Jane died, aged 24, he was left with four children under the age of six. This explains the haste of his second marriage, to Alice, by which he acquired a stepdaughter. But he also opened his house to many others, bringing up several wards, one of whom was the 12-year-old Anne Cresacre, who for the sake of her inheritance had been abducted by a local magistrate and raped by his son; More gave her refuge, and in due course she married his son, John. As grandchildren arrived they too joined the household, and when his stepdaughter, Alice Middleton, was widowed, she and her three children came back to swell the throng. It is clear just how much his family mattered to More. As soon as the Succession Act was passed in 1534, which asserted the king's headship over the Church, he knew what was to follow. It is characteristic that his first act was to put his property in trust and sign over his house in Chelsea to his daughter Margaret Roper and her husband, William. The works More wrote while imprisoned in the Tower were an eloquent and intricate account of one man's faith and its trials, but they are also suffused with longing for the family he missed.

More didn't just love his family; he also educated them. Most strikingly, he educated his daughters to a remarkable level of competence. He was aware that 'erudition in women is a new thing,' but in this he had no

scruples about being innovative. Margaret, in particular, was adept in both Latin and Greek, and her translation of Erasmus's treatise on the Paternoster was one of the first books printed in English by a female author. Its preface praised the learning of women and gently mocked the ignorance of priests. All three of his daughters came to court to participate in scholarly disputation; the youngest, Cecily, was only eighteen at the time. One scholar wrote to More to say how much he wished he had been there when 'your daughters disputed in philosophy afore the King's Grace.' More could sometimes seem to have conservative impulses. He reprimanded the scholar Edward Lee, who had criticised Erasmus's Latin translation of the New Testament, saying he had always thought it best to vote 'the way other men vote, particularly if they were men of manifest virtue and undoubted learning'. When it came to giving his daughters a university-level education, however, he had no such reservations.

Behind any assessment of More lurks the contentious question of how far he was involved in the persecution of those accused of heresy. Even Pope John Paul II at the start of the 21st century, declaring More the patron saint of politicians and statesmen, made reference to the way that 'in his actions against heretics, he reflected the limits of the culture of his time.' Undoubtedly he was involved in the campaign against heresy, as his job required. There is no evidence, however, that he was responsible for torture; More felt indignant enough about these accusations to rebut them in print. Yet he did think that obdurate heretics deserved the fate of being burned at the stake, as nearly everyone at the time did. He also condemned the heretics in vitriolic language, reviling Luther's utterances as 'all the muck and shit which your damnable rottenness has vomited up'. In this, he was giving like for like, since Luther himself was renowned for his scatological and violent language. Luther had condemned Henry VIII for his 'slavish and impudent and strumpet-like insolence', called him a 'damnable and offensive worm' who should be spattered 'with his own muck and shit' and pronounced that 'this royal heretic, unless he comes to his senses, should be burned.' More responded vigorously by saying that if Luther thought he could 'besmirch the royal crown with shit' then More could proclaim 'the beshitted tongue' of Luther 'most fit to lick' the 'posterior of a pissing she-mule'.

This kind of rhetoric sits uncomfortably with the accepted view of More as, if not a saint, at least a scholar of immense sophistication, with a strong social conscience and the courage to accept death rather than compromise his principles. In part, however, any dismay at More's angry condemnation of Lutheranism comes from the abiding tendency in the English-speaking world to revere Luther and his achievement as in some way progressive, even liberal; Mantel's misleading portrayal of Thomas Cromwell as a sympathetic and broad-minded character is in part a consequence of this bias. In the 1520s, when More was writing, Lutheranism looked to him as frightening as any extremist political ideology might appear to us today. It was linked to the terrifying violence of the German Peasants' War in 1525 and widely assumed to have the radical, destabilising potential of previous heretical movements. 'Inflaming the people against princes, plotting battles, disasters, wars, massacres,' More wrote, 'do you call that preaching the gospel?' As far as he was concerned, Luther was the 'leader of an army of savages'. After 1527 Lutheranism was also linked to the Sack of Rome, during which German Lutheran troops had raped nuns, castrated priests and, according to More, slowly roasted living children to extort money from their distraught parents. More described how the Lutheran troops 'like very beasts did also violate wives in the sight of their husbands, slew the children in the sight of the fathers'. Modern commentators might emphasise that early Protestants were chiefly known for bringing the vernacular Bible to the people. More, who supported the idea of an English Bible, knew that some of his contemporaries – even those close to him, like his son-in-law William Roper – found their ideas attractive. He feared, however, that the end result of reform would be to engender mobs who would tear into pieces the 'seamless coat of Christ' that was the Church.

'I die the king's good servant, and God's first,' More declared from the scaffold. What precisely he gave his life for has been much debated, but it is clear that he did not go to the block for the sake of papal authority. He saw the pope as just one member of the community of Christendom and not always a very edifying one. More's love was for the Church, 'a mystical body ... be it never so sick'. His desperate fear was that the spread of heresy would tear that body apart. He did not seek martyrdom and was in no hurry to embrace it. Summoned to

Lambeth Palace to take the oath of succession, he scrutinised both the wording of the oath itself and the parliamentary statute on which it was based. He could accept the changes to the succession, but ‘unto the oath that there was offered me I could not swear, without jeopardizing of my soul to perpetual damnation’. He offered to swear another oath, testifying that his refusal was not founded in any malice. He was told that the oath was backed by Parliament and asked how he could dissent from so evident a consensus. But More had another conception of consensus: ‘the general council of Christendom’. He refused to break faith with this and repeated his conviction at his trial, or so it was reported. ‘For one bishop who agrees with you,’ he said, ‘I have easily a hundred, some of whom are among the saints. And for your one council’ – Parliament – ‘on my side are all the general councils celebrated during the last thousand years.’ His response to the verdict that he was guilty of treason was, it is said, to pray that ‘all of us, though we disagree in this life, will nevertheless agree in another life with perfect charity.’

It is hard to know how More might have reacted to the idea that he is now the patron saint of politicians. The More of the early years might well have roared with laughter at the irony of such a role; the More of later years might have wept for the folly of it all. This biography is wary of asserting judgment where so many have gone before, but it cannot ignore the fact that More spoke truth to power and took a stand against what many were beginning to whisper was tyranny. Few people defied Henry VIII, and those who failed him usually died on the executioner’s block. More stands out, however, alongside his friend Fisher, for having met his death not for reasons of personal betrayal or political failure but on grounds of principle. He could accept the king’s right to alter the succession, bastardise his daughter Mary and make Anne Boleyn his queen, much as he disliked it, but he could not accept that the king could wield authority over the Church. And so – quietly, reluctantly – he defied his monarch. More stubbornly refused to accept Henry’s twisted truth, and chose death, when he could so easily have returned to Chelsea, to his children and grandchildren, and his books.