

ABSTRACT

RANSOM, EMILY ANN. Fingerprints of Thomas More's *Epigrammata* on English Poetry. (Under the direction of Robert V. Young.)

Thomas More's Latin epigrams, published with the second edition of *Utopia* in 1518, were apparently widely read both among contemporary European intellectuals and during the subsequent development of English poetry. With a humble audacity that could engage Classical authors in a Christian posture, More cultivated a literary climate that could retain the earthiness of the middle ages in dialogue with the ancients, and is more responsible for the ensuing expansion of vernacular poetry than perhaps any other Henrican author. This thesis probes the Classical influences and Humanist practices at work in the epigrams, explores their contemporary reception on the continent, and traces their legacy among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English poets.

Fingerprints of Thomas More's *Epigrammata*
on English Poetry

by
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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

English Language and Literature

Raleigh, North Carolina

2009

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DEDICATION

To Tim Otto and the Rutba House for sending me on,
and to Mom, Dad, Byron, Esther, Giff, Ashley, Gideon, Samwise, and Peter
for giving me a reason to stay.

BIOGRAPHY

E. A. Ransom received her Bachelor's degree at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill while living in France on holidays, and has appreciated additional opportunities to take classes at Oxford University, the Folger Institute, and University College Cork. She has something akin to reading proficiency in Greek, Latin, French, and Spanish, and hopes to add Italian, German, and Old English in the near future. Ransom's first love is for poetry, and she wishes all literary criticism were still written in heroic couplets or even Latin hexameter. She appreciated the irony of attending All Saints Anglican Church in Durham and St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Raleigh while researching St. Thomas More, and she longs to see reconciled what More saw divide.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ransom is deeply grateful to Robert Young for his of direction and wisdom in multiple arenas, and to Reid Barbour and Thomas Lisk for support on her committee and throughout her academic career. She is also indebted to the instruction and guidance of several other professors at UNC and NCSU, including Jessica Wolfe, Thomas Hester, John Wall, Larry Goldberg, Christopher Armitage, and John Headley. Finally, she thanks Vicky Janssens and Konstantin Doulamis for two rigorous crash courses in Greek and Latin at UCC, without which she could not have tackled this research.

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Introduction

In paper, many a Poet now suruiues
Or else their lines had perish'd with their liues.
Old *Chaucer*, *Gower* and Sir *Thomas More*,
Sir *Philip Sidney* who the Lawrell wore...
-John Taylor the Water Poet, *The Praise of Hempseed* (1620)

For a man who never published an English poem, Sir Thomas More acquired a curious reputation among Renaissance authors as a foundational English poet. While modern scholarship for the most part relieves him of the laurel and remembers instead his works of political philosophy and theological polemics, the poets themselves include him in their number as a revered patriarch of English verse. Indeed, if Dr. Johnson is any authority on the matter, it was in More's verse that "our language was then in a great degree formed and settled," and Ben Jonson himself considered his works "as models of pure and elegant style" (Edwards xxxv). This is curious when we consider that More's only published poetry was in Latin and, at least according to his *Letter to Brixius*, "was snatched away and published while he was still thinking about it."¹ It is even more curious when we look at the poetry itself, observing either the technical flaws that made the offended Brixius prophesy (evidently falsely) that "neither this age or the coming age will read"² his Latin epigrams, or the standard medieval archetypes that make his English verse appear uninspired and formulaic. Though one could dismiss the reputation on the grounds that political and religious renown can cover a multitude of sins in a man's poetry, More's influence as a Renaissance poet demands recognition, if only because Renaissance authors recognize it. On the cusp of an

¹ *quid adhuc meditantis subductum est atque uulgatum ei* (Miller 628).

² *Nec legit haec aetas, nec leget adueniens* (Miller 502).

era of literary exploration and language transformation in England, a single collection of exploratory Latin epigrams and a handful of posthumously published English verse apparently made enough of a stir to be remembered two hundred years later as having been formative. If we follow the influence of his poetry through the English Renaissance, perhaps we may, like Samuel Daniel in 1603, conclude that Thomas More was not only “a great ornament to this land,” but also an important English “Rymer” (Daniel 142).

More’s Poetry

When his nephew William Rastell published More’s English works in 1557, praising the “greate eloquence, excellent learninge, and morall vertues” of the works he “wrote in the Englysh tonge, so many, and so well, as no one Englishman (I suppose) euer wrote the like” (More ii₁), it does not seem to be More’s English poetry he has in mind. On the contrary, though the volume begins with the poems, the table of contents lists them after all the other entries, stating as if an afterthought, “And firste in the beginninge of thys booke, be iiiii short thinges written by Syr Thomas in his youthe, for hys pastyme” (More iii₂). Like most humanists of his day, More did not seem to consider vernacular verse a significant literary endeavor, and with two pithy exceptions he did not write English verse past the first decade of the sixteenth century. This early poetry was strikingly medieval in form and style: a slapstick “Mery iest how a sergeante would learne to playe the frere,” the somewhat melodramatic “Rufull Lamentacion” upon the death of Henry VII’s wife Elizabeth of York, some somber “Fortune Verses,” and a collection of emblematic “Pageaunts” written to

accompany wall hangings at his father's house signifying the various ages of man.

Additionally, he wrote some verse translations to accompany his *Life of Pico*, his earliest published work, and two snippets of epigrammatic verse from the Tower of London while he awaited execution in 1534-5. With the exception of the Tower verses, he wrote all of his English poetry before he was a prominent literary figure, and with the exception of his *Life of Pico*, he did not take any of it seriously enough to push it past the manuscript stage. More's English verse seems to be little more than a youthful "pastyme" or a preparatory exercise of wit before he would eventually find his place in the intellectual scene with his Latin prose.

In order to probe More's relationship with English poetry, therefore, we must begin with the poetry he seemed to value: his Latin epigrams. Even though his *Epigrammata* was also among his earlier works (written "while he was still growing up"³ according to Erasmus, though many were certainly later than that) and might not have been published but for the insistence of Erasmus, More seems to have taken these poems more seriously, if only as a means of distributing of his *curriculum vitae* around Europe. Erasmus at least took them seriously; he apparently read the manuscript from his friend in the same visit to London that precipitated the 1516 publication of *Utopia*, and their correspondence over the next two years reveals his intention to publish the epigrams himself. While the letters give evidence that the *Epigrammata* was not quite as *subductum* as More claimed,⁴ the author's lack of involvement in

³ *olim adolescens* (Erasmus *Opera* II-5 282).

⁴ Though, in sympathy to More, perhaps the advent of print did take an author's words another degree removed from their source, as Socrates argued writing did in Plato's *Phaedrus*: "And once something is written down, every speech is whirled about every which way, picked up as well by those who understand as by those who have no business reading it" (tr. Stephen

the publication explains some of its peculiarities that lead at least one modern scholar to assert that “By no means is it a spectacular book” (Carlson 142). Some of these Latin poems are not epigrams at all and are hardly epigrammatic, not if we even loosely define an epigram as a short poem that makes a proverbial or satirical point with a concluding witty turn—several are neither short, proverbial, satirical, nor witty. There are many examples of multiple attempts at the same epigram, as if Erasmus got a hold of several drafts and could not decide which he liked best. And though More asked Erasmus to use his judgment with the series of biting quips against the French poet Germain de Brie known as Brixius, Erasmus apparently cut none of these jibes that quickly created a rivalry between his two friends. From all appearances, More submitted his poems to the discretion of a friend who used no discretion and published all 260 poems indiscriminately. What emerged from Froben’s publishing house in Basel at the end of the 1518 publication of *Utopia* under the heading “Epigrams of the most famous and learned Englishman Thomas More”⁵ therefore, was More’s poetic portfolio, demonstrating not only the strength and dexterity of his wit but also the breadth of his faculties.

Of course, a portfolio of epigrams is no minor literary publication for a Renaissance author, even if it is published reluctantly and edited negligently. It was certainly not treated lightly by the offended Brixius, who responded to the newly printed six-year-old epigrams by

Scully, p. 66). Once More’s words were printed, they could spread beyond the time and place for which they were written and become “ill-treated and unjustly abused.” Similarly, when More later tried to suppress the spread of his *Letter to Brixius*, there were already too many copies for him to locate and buy back all of them, and once again his words could be “whirled about every which way.”

⁵ *Epigrammata Clarissimi Disertissimique Viri Thomae Mori Britannii*

writing the 581-line *Antimorus* (almost twice as long as the original poem the *Chordigera* More had been mocking) that begins with the most severe insult the Frenchman could muster: “You say that I smell too much of ancient poets. Certainly no one would be able to say this of you,”⁶ though as evidence to support his accusation he mostly cites technical errors of syllable lengths. Nor was it treated lightly by the poet himself who immediately responded to Brixius’ attack with a published letter of polemical counterattack and additional epigrams that ridicule the *Antimorus* which only speaks the truth when “this most witty man discovers and writes that all the Furies surround his witty head.”⁷ Froben evidently agreed that the epigrams were important enough to be treated seriously; he reprinted the 1518 edition of *Utopia/Epigrammata* later that year with four corrections (and ten new misprints), and in 1520 he published the *Epigrammata* in its own volume with over 40 typographical corrections (and about 40 new errors in their place), several revisions from Brixius’ criticisms, a dozen sharpenings of syntax, seven title corrections, and eleven new epigrams (Miller 6-9). Whether or not More’s Latin verse is as laudable as Beatus Rhenanus’ opening letter claims—“I’ll be damned if he is not as great in talent, and truly greater in usefulness”⁸ than the Italian epigrammatists Pontanus and Marullus—More’s contemporaries certainly treat it as a significant poetic debut, both for the man himself and for the country he represents.

Thus it is perhaps appropriate to investigate the concern behind Brixius’ polemic: More’s imitation of Classical styles, the degree to which he follows in the footsteps that he

⁶ *Me nimium veteres dicis redolere poetas. / Nimirum hoc de te dicere nemo potest* (ll. 102-3).

⁷ *Inuenit et scribit lepidum lepidissimus mones / Cingere caput sibi furias* (no. 266).

⁸ *at dispeream, si non tantundem in hoc est naturae, utilitatis uero plus* (Miller 75).

accuses the Frenchman of following too closely “because you follow at their heels so much that you knock off their shoes which your own feet cannot equally fill.”⁹ Certainly Brixius did not direct his criticism to the *Progymnasmata*, the series of 18 Greek-to-Latin translations with William Lily that begin the *Epigrammata*, unless it be his name-calling of the mere “English versifier.”¹⁰ In these verses, More is in the posture of linguist rather than poet, writing Latin poetic translations that are fairly faithful to their Greek models, with only a brief instance of editorial intervention in the epigram about the *saeva* Spartan woman who killed her son for deserting in battle (Miller 18). While Revilo P. Oliver calls the collection “a stroke of pedagogical genius” (Miller 13), the compilation is a demonstration of his skill as a translator rather than a poet. For the former he is quite adequate, enough to make Hoyt Hopewell Hudson conclude that “More was one of those fortunate individuals who catch the sense of a passage in a foreign tongue, not by analysis, but, as by intuition, from the whole” (Hudson 44). As the title of the collection suggests, they are merely preparatory exercises, practicing his skill in Greek comprehension and Latin composition before the true demonstration of his poetry begins.

The line between translation and composition becomes more blurred in the main bulk of the *Epigrammata*. Seventy-two of the epigrams are headed *e Graeco*, and do not include the variants of those or the imitations he failed to label,¹¹ both of which are many. But in

⁹ *sic inheres vestigijs ut eorum decutias calceos quibus tuos pedes haud quaquam aequales obuestias* (Miller 612).

¹⁰ *Versificatorem...Anglum* (l. 116)

¹¹ Oliver counts nos. 27, 35, 36, 46, 53, 55, 58, 99, 100, 103, and 137 among these (Miller 19).

these epigrams More has moved from the role of a translator to that of a poet in true Renaissance style: beginning by simple translation of the ancients, continuing through imitation of their poems with variation according to his wit, and finally writing epigrams of his own after he has practiced the craft of his predecessors. The *e Graeco* epigrams represent that second step; they are not pure translations like those within the *Progymnasmata*, which is apparent even without a knowledge of Greek. For example, no. 27,¹² one of the Greek imitations More failed to identify in the heading, is followed by six variations that range from syntactical renderings to expanded extrapolations. The first four are identical in length and similar in wit. The first one states:

A blind neighbor carries a lame man; and cleverly he borrows
eyes and lends feet.¹³

Subsequent renditions do not alter the epigram dramatically: while the first focuses on what the blind man borrows and lends, the second focuses on what both men lend, the third on what both men borrow, and the fourth on what the lame man does (“he looks ahead and guides the other man’s feet with his eyes”¹⁴). In these four epigrams More is still playing the role of the translator, but in a loose way that can vary the emphasis without changing the sense.

But in the next three epigrams he takes liberties to adjust the moral of the epigram. No. 33, the last of the series, is as concise as the first four, but still manages to play with the

¹² All numbering for the *Epigrammata* is taken from the Yale edition of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol III, Part II, 1984.

¹³ *Claudipedem gestat caecis uicinus ocellis, / Conducitque oculos arte, locatque pedes.*

¹⁴ *prospicit atque oculis huic regit ille pedes*

sense of the epigram, saying that the men “contracted a mutual alliance,”¹⁵ and thereby transforms them from the beggars (*mendicos*) the title calls them into entrepreneurs. No. 31 emphasizes the “unhappy fortune” that overtakes the “two wretches,”¹⁶ and thus the conclusion demonstrates camaraderie born of common suffering. No. 32, the longest of the seven, is much more optimistic through and through, sandwiching the story of the beggars between proverbs about friendship and the humble life. He begins with a couplet that could come from the book of Proverbs, saying:

Nothing can be as helpful as a loyal friend, who lessens your
hurts through his efforts.¹⁷

This is an epigram of its own in the Greek style of the genre, and it is followed by an expanded rendering of no. 33’s emphasis on the pact between the men, in this case an “alliance of firm friendship.”¹⁸ Thus the Greek epigram has become a subservient illustration of More’s own epigrammatic proverb, a specific example to prove his timeless declaration.

By the end he is more deliberately epigrammatic, musing sagaciously:

Harmonious love shuns the swelled inner chambers of kings
and reigns in the poor hut.¹⁹

In this couplet the humble hut is contrasted with the king’s chambers; and *regum*, the last word of the first line, is overcome by *amor*, the final word. By paralleling the words and moving the noun *regum* of the first line to the main verb of the second line as *regnat amor*, More

¹⁵ *lege paciscitur aequa*

¹⁶ *Tristis erat nimium miseris fortuna duobus*

¹⁷ *Vtilius nihil esse potest, quam fidus amicus, / Qui tua damna suo leniat officio*

¹⁸ *Foedera...solidae...amicitiae*

¹⁹ *Alta superborum fugitat penetralia regum, / Inque casa concors paupere regnat amor.*

has created a clever epigram of his own that is not envisaged in the Greek original. These sandwiching couplets are not the only possible interpretations of the Greek poem, as demonstrated by the fact that More produces others, and the contrast between proud kings and humble love is his own invention. No longer is More producing mere translations; now he is producing poetry.

Although the *Epigrammata* demonstrates a strong preference for the proverbial Greek epigram, More also has the hubris to try his wit alongside the Latin master.²⁰ Nos. 199, 210, and 214 are a series of interpretive renderings from Martial's Book VI, this time without the purpose of translation. Martial's writes about a half-blind "well-known drinker"²¹ who is told by his doctor that he will lose his failing vision if he continues to drink. The man laughs, bids farewell to his vision, orders more drinks, and, for the punch-line, "Phryx drank wine and his eye drank poison."²² More borrows the 8-line epigram three times for his own shortened, equivalent, and extended versions, adjusting the witticism to conjecture the reason a fool might forgo his eyesight for another drink. In no. 199 the man reasons with More's characteristic consciousness of death, "It is better to destroy my eyes by drinking than to preserve them for sluggish worms."²³ No. 210's drinker uses less morbid reasoning: "To be sure, I have seen enough, but up to now I have not drunk enough."²⁴ In no. 214, the longest

²⁰ Charles Clay Doyle, with references to the Bradner/Lynch edition, identifies 102 epigrams from the Greek anthology, three from Diogenes Laertius, four from Aristotle, one from Arsenius, three from Martial, and two from Aesop (Doyle "Neglected" 6-9).

²¹ *potor nobilis*

²² *vinum Phryx, oculus bibit venenum* (VI.lxxviii).

²³ *Perdere dulcius est potando, quam ut mea seruem / Erodenda pigris lumina uermiculis.*

²⁴ *Nempe satis uidi, non satis usque bibi.*

of More's renditions, the drinker attempts to heed his physician's warning, but when he can bear sobriety no more he offers a farewell tribute to his eyes and watches the wine's color fade while the taste lingers on his tongue, consoling himself that "he would be deprived of merely the least of the wine's gifts."²⁵ These variations are bolder than the *e Graeco* epigrams because they imitate the master in his own craft with his own tongue. More rises to the challenge competently enough, demonstrating in the first case that he can write Martial's epigrams with a new punch in fewer lines.

For the most part, however, More does not imitate Latin epigrams directly, and he only refers to Martial again twice in passing. In these cases, he is no longer imitating; he has become a poet in his own right, crafting epigrams that rest completely on his own wit and invention. No. 242 quotes from Martial's Book VI—"A book must have genius in order to endure"²⁶—in order to mock the "Man of genius"²⁷ who should not pray that his book "may be devoid of genius"²⁸ when it certainly "is devoid of talent,"²⁹ because any immortality it would gain from its "evil geniuses"³⁰ would be "eternal death."³¹ In no. 147 the play on Latin words is a little neater, though More cites Virgil as the "poet who is second to none"³² rather than Martial, who declares in his dedication to Book IX, "I am the one whose trifles

²⁵ *Dote meri minima quod cariturus erat.*

²⁶ *victurus genium debet habere liber*

²⁷ *Genium*

²⁸ *careat Genio*

²⁹ *caret ingenio*

³⁰ *Genijs...malis*

³¹ *aeterna...morte*

³² *Vates secundus nemini*

are praised second to none.”³³ Virgil is the appropriate source because he praised Aeneas as having “piety second to none,”³⁴ while the “stupid poet”³⁵ whom More mocks mixes up his Latin grammar and calls his king “a king to whom none is second.”³⁶ More reverses the titles for the punch-line: the poet becomes “a poet to whom none is second,”³⁷ and the king is “a king who is second to none.”³⁸ The parallels of phrases are not as clean as they could be, but the epigram nevertheless delivers its joke cleverly, taking advantage of Latin declensions in order to invert a Classical phrase and then turn it back again with an insult to the *stultum poetam*. Perhaps it is his profound commitment to learning from the ancients by imitation and exercise that makes More so snide toward poets who think they can tread in the footsteps of the ancients before their feet have grown into them.

This is at least his criticism of Brixius, the only subject of mockery in his epigrams whom he identifies by name. More ridicules Brixius more frequently than any other of his frequent subjects of mockery—cuckolds, astrologers, courtiers, frivolous women, short men, painters, or priests. The 1518 *Epigrammata* contains nine epigrams that refer to Brixius or his poem by name,³⁹ and the 1520 edition includes four new ones.⁴⁰ It is apparent from these

³³ *ille ego sum nulli nugarum laude secundus*

³⁴ *nulli pietate secundum*

³⁵ *stultum poetam*

³⁶ *princeps cui nemo secundus*

³⁷ *vates, cui nemo secundus*

³⁸ *Rex qui secundus nemini*

³⁹ 188-195, 209.

⁴⁰ 266-9.

and from other less direct epigrams⁴¹ that the poet More is zealous for the plight of poetry. In fact, it is a common understanding that More's *Letter to Brixius* can be considered his *ars poetica* (Miller 551) because his criticisms of the Frenchman are rooted in the deeper field of the direction of poetry in general in the Renaissance. A poet who has learned to write by repeated careful imitation and exploration of the ancients, More criticizes the way Brixius borrows from those he would claim as his predecessors. According to no. 193, Brixius culls the poets' lines "here and there like flowers and buds by the handful"⁴² in a patchwork fashion that honors its sources only because "what you gather truly identifies its origins and shines out among your lines more brightly than the stars gleam in the night."⁴³ It is not, More makes clear, that Brixius' lines "smell too much of antiquity,"⁴⁴ but that the young, sophomoric Frenchman "would imitate everything in the worst way."⁴⁵ To make the accusation epigrammatic, Brixius' method of imitation is not "wrestling Hercules' club away"⁴⁶ as a hubristic humanist may try to do, but is instead "secretly stealing it when it is laid down."⁴⁷ More is critical of "painstaking dullness"⁴⁸ that comes from using lines of the ancients as embellishments of poorly conceived and poorly executed poetry.

⁴¹ There are five other epigrams about unnamed poets (147-148, 236, 240, 242), three in a series that mocks a dead man's heir for demanding a rhymed epitaph at the expense of substance (159-161), and three with less direct insults that relate to education (95, 100, 202).

⁴² *hinc et inde flosculos et gemmulas / Manu capaci*

⁴³ *nempe qua tu congeris, / Suos parentes indicant, / Magisque resplendent tua inter carmina, / Quam nocte lucent sydera*

⁴⁴ *nimis redoleant antiquitatem* (Miller 610)

⁴⁵ *quum omnia pessime sis imitatus* (Miller 610)

⁴⁶ *Herculi clauam ui eripere* (Miller 612)

⁴⁷ *repositam furto subripere* (Miller 612)

⁴⁸ *accuratissime stolidis* (Miller 604).

But Brixius' primary sin runs deeper than a cheap form of imitation that makes for bad humanism, and even deeper than the dishonor he does the poets by using his cheap imitation as ornaments for French anti-English propaganda. More spends much more space both in the epigrams and the letter deriding him for shameful dishonesty, because "you would not envelop truths with falsehoods, but you would fabricate almost the whole matter from complete lies and craft new facts out of your own judgment."⁴⁹ The issue at stake is the credibility of poets whom Plato had banished from his republic centuries earlier for the very reason Brixius uses to defend his poem: "Fictions belong to the poets; if you take them away, there will be no poetry."⁵⁰ It is a dangerous form of "heedlessness"⁵¹ that has a destructive effect on the art of poetry as a whole. As Brixius destroys the credibility of poets with his lust for reputation, he does not write as "one craftsman envying another,"⁵² but rather as "one envying the glory of art itself."⁵³ Who will commission any elegies to be written at all, More asks, if elegists are permitted to make up any lies to please their patrons?⁵⁴ Bad poetry destroys all poetry; if poets lose their credibility, no one will waste time reading them.

⁴⁹ *non ut uera falsis inuolueres / sed ut rem ferme totam meris mendacis fingeres / atque ex arbitrio tuo concinnares nouam* (Miller 600)

⁵⁰ *sua sunt figmenta poetis, / Quae si sustuleris, nulla poesis erit* (ll. 138-9).

⁵¹ *imprudens* (Miller 614)

⁵² *faber fabro inuidens* (Miller 614)

⁵³ *arti prorsus ipsi suam inuidens gloriam*

⁵⁴ We may be reminded of More's experience being commissioned to write an epitaph for Henry Abyngdon, no. 159, which the heir rejected and demanded one in rhyme. After nominally submitting and writing an insubstantial rhymed epitaph which the heir used, More wrote no. 161 to mock him, concluding that "he is worthy of being shut immediately in the same tomb and distinguished by the same verses" (*sub eundem protinus obdi / Atque ijsdem dignus uersibus ipse legi*). More was critical of writing gaudy poetry to please tasteless patrons.

If Brixius' poetry is most shameful because it is dishonest, it may be assumed that More aspired to write epigrams that were "true," in some sense of the term, epigrams that would maintain the credibility and respectability of the poet, the *fides*, to use the Latin. But a commitment to honesty can be precarious when addressing monarchy, and More's bold familiarity in his coronation ode to Henry VIII and the four epigrams that follow does not go unnoticed by his literary enemy. These introductory epigrams that praise the new king as the lifter of a ravaged country may be reminiscent of Martial's praise of Caesar in his collection *De Spectaculis Liber*, but in a way that makes him vulnerable to Brixius' dangerous criticism that "you defame and tear to pieces the father of Henry."⁵⁵ More emulates the decorum of the Classical master as he celebrates his young king, but adds too much bold familiarity. Unlike Martial, who refers to himself as a poet "who hurries that he may please you, Caesar,"⁵⁶ More spends his dedication to Henry VIII excusing his nine-year-delay in publication because of his illuminator's bout of gout. And while Caesar may be flattered to be told that "Rome is returned to herself"⁵⁷ under his rule, Brixius insists that Henry VIII should be outraged if More calls his reign "the limit of slavery, the origin of liberty, the end of sadness, the source of joy"⁵⁸ at the expense of his father.

Nevertheless, it is precisely because of his connection to Martial that More can get away with these implications about Henry VII. The connection is fairly explicit; he calls his

⁵⁵ *Henrici infamas, lacerasque parentem* (l. 194).

⁵⁶ *festinat, Caesar, qui placuisse tibi*

⁵⁷ *reddita Roma sibi* (DSL.ii.11)

⁵⁸ *Meta haec seruitij est, haec libertatis origo, / Tristitiae finis, laetitiaque caput.* (19.12-13).

king “worthy to be the sole ruler not only of a people but of the whole world,”⁵⁹ evoking Martial’s Caesar who singly rules peoples of “diverse language,”⁶⁰ and indeed later in the *Epigrammata* he is so direct as to call Henry “a king both mightier and better than Caesar.”⁶¹ This parallel allows him freedom in his Messianic⁶² description of how the new king “will wipe the tears from all eyes, and give joy in place of long groaning”⁶³ without attacking the dynasty. Rather than insulting the father, More can argue that he is evoking antiquity when he says, “Now it is a pleasure to despise informers; no one fears to be denounced except he who denounced others before,”⁶⁴ for Martial likewise announces the time when “the informer has the exile that he was giving.”⁶⁵ Though he bends Martial’s declaration that the people love greatness because of Caesar⁶⁶ in order to suggest daringly that “your rank gave you the manners fitting for a ruler,”⁶⁷ the Classical voice keeps the poem flattering. This is a direct contrast to the way Brixius fabricates lies to praise his country; More carefully praises Henry with words that, lavish and exaggerated though they may be, could be true if Henry were to live up to them.

⁵⁹ *populi non unius usque, sed orbis / Imperio dignus totius unus erat* (19.16-7).

⁶⁰ *diversa vox* (DSL.iii.11)

⁶¹ *Henricus... princeps / Magno tam maior Caesare quam melior* (no. 244)

⁶² Isaiah 25:8 – The sovereign God will take away the tears from all faces and take away the disgrace from his people throughout the whole earth (*et auferet Dominus Deus lacrimam ab omni facie, et opprobrium populi sui auferet de universa terra*).

⁶³ *cunctis lachrymas detergat ocellis, / Gaudia pro longo substituat gemitu* (19.18-9).

⁶⁴ *Iam delatores uolupte est contemnere, nemo / Deferris, nisi qui detulit ante, timet* (19.44-5).

⁶⁵ *delator habet quod dabit exilium* (DSL.iv.4).

⁶⁶ *te propter populus praemia, Caesar, amat* (VIII.lvi.4).

⁶⁷ *mores tamen illi / Imperium dignos attulit imperio* (19.92-3).

If More's poetry to his king approaches a dangerous familiarity with monarchs, his less direct verses about monarchs and tyrants are boldly critical. His epigrams, both the translations and originals (which in some cases sound enough alike that scholars have a difficult time determining his sources), are saturated with animal imagery and earthy subjects that often make him sound more medieval than Classical. Like Martial,⁶⁸ he writes from the perspective of a hunted hare and mouse in nos. 37 and 257, but his identification with the prey demonstrates more rustic sympathies than the Roman had, and could almost justify Taylor's association of More with Chaucer and Gower quoted earlier. The Classical poet admires strength, ferocity, and cunning in the tigers and greyhounds he likens to Caesar; the Englishman shows the same caution with ferocious animals that he does with the wrath of kings, depicting a shrewd spectator in no. 181 who fears the tamed lion's native ferocity: "I myself, he said, will dare to endure the tongue of the lion, but I will by no means do it when the teeth are so close."⁶⁹ Likewise in More's treatment of kings he points out the *spinas* on the multicolored rosebush of Henry VIII in no. 23, and says that a bad king is not a guardian of the flock but is rather the *lupus* himself in no. 115. Nevertheless, kings and tyrants alike are mortal—as nos. 80, 110, 114, and 121 remind us—and no. 39 from the Greek compares "breaking wind"⁷⁰ to the power of "dreaded kings,"⁷¹ combining this perspective of tyrants with scatological humor reminiscent of Martial and Chaucer alike. But while Martial always treats Caesar with honor, one can imagine a character from *Canterbury Tales* saying with no.

⁶⁸ I.xiv, I.xxii, XIV.cc

⁶⁹ *Ipse, ait, audebo linguam tetigisse leonis / Sed tam uincinis dentibus haud faciam*

⁷⁰ *efflatum ventris*

⁷¹ *Terrificis regibus*

201's *rusticus*, "Is that the king? I think you are making fun of me. To me he looks like a man in fancy dress."⁷² Though More learns his craft from the ancients, the Christian employs it with epigrams that are perhaps more cynical and certainly more English when they touch the matter of kings and tyrants.

Of course, his epigrams do not confine frailty and cynicism to kings; there is plenty of mortality to share. No. 59 reminds us, with a nod at the sexual subjects More never perfects like Martial, that man is born out of a fusion of "filthy lust and a pitiful droplet."⁷³ Thus he can treat all humanity with equal candor, and "brings the epigram out of the scholar's closet and into the world of merchants, lawyers, and courtiers" (Headley 236). Doctors face criticism, as do inept artists, astrologers, priests, cuckolds, large-nosed men, short men, ugly women, dark women, bad wives, girls who ride horses astride,⁷⁴ consumers of cosmetics, and those with bad breath. In this way, the *Epigrammata* serves as a poetic example of Erasmus' principle in *The Praise of Folly*: "he who overlooks no category of men would appear to be angry at no person, but at the vices of all."⁷⁵ Indeed, most of these quips do not come across as harsh; they read almost like the sixteenth-century equivalent of red-neck jokes, and some are too exaggerated to take seriously. The only traits that would make a person worthy of the severe scorn he shows for Brixius and for tyrants is pride; perhaps even the mockery of the Brixius epigrams would not be biting for a poet with less self-importance. More's

⁷² *Hiccine rex? Puto me derides... Ille mihi picta ueste uidetur homo*

⁷³ *libidine foeda and guttula... misera*

⁷⁴ This epigram, no. 235, is in fact his most successful sexual epigram.

⁷⁵ *qui nullum hominum genus praetermittit, is nulli homini, vitiis omnibus iratus videtur* (Erasmus *Opera IV-3* 68).

understanding of humanity pitifully born and inevitably dying manifests itself in epigrams that emphasize foibles lightly and criticize pride harshly.

Of course, a denigration of pride above all other vices is a particularly Christian principle, and More's faith influences the way he handles this pagan genre of mockery. Though he does offer many a jab at bad wives, he likewise criticizes those who select wives based on mere beauty or money, and his tender epigram about his wives makes it clear that he distinguishes "pure and impure love."⁷⁶ As More converses with perverse and cynical antiquity, he pursues higher ideals of Christian love, and maintains that "true is the love which a sharp-sighted man enters with thought, with reason as his guide"⁷⁷ rather than men (like those Martial depicts) who "love money of its own."⁷⁸ Love is not the only topic More addresses from a Christian posture in his *Epigrammata*; the conciseness of the epigram provides an ideal space for him to try his wit against Solomon's as he does with Martial. No. 125 "On moderation,"⁷⁹ though an *e Graeco* epigram, uses an illustration of honey also found within the book of Proverbs⁸⁰ to make its point. Later, he attempts to follow a Biblical exhortation to make his words few in the house of God,⁸¹ offering the 2-line no. 137, "What God should be asked, in few words"⁸² as a combination of Christianity and the epigram tradition:

⁷⁶ *amorem castum et incestum* (no. 123)

⁷⁷ *At uerus est amor / Quem mente perspicax, / Ratione consule / Prudens iniuerit* (no. 143)

⁷⁸ *amauerit / Propter pecuniam* (no. 143)

⁷⁹ *De mediocritate*

⁸⁰ Proverbs 25:16 – You have found honey: eat only enough for you, lest you accidentally become gluttoned and vomit it (*Mel invenisti: comede quod sufficit tibi, ne forte satiatu evomas illud*).

⁸¹ Ecclesiastes 5:1 – For God is in heaven, and you are on earth; therefore may your words be few (*Deus enim in caelo, et tu super terram; idcirco sint pauci sermones tui*).

⁸² *Quod paucis orandus Deus*

Give what is good, God, whether asked or not; and withhold
what is bad, whether asked or not.⁸³

In these clever lines, More's request is catchy for its repetitiveness and droll for its completeness. In the end, while staying engaged in the subject or format of the epigram, he succeeds in navigating a genre of mockery from a Christian posture, and has remained faithful to his ancient models, his Christian principles, and his English roots.

After all, we must remember that, although More was a humanist publishing Latin epigrams influenced by the Greek anthology published by his Dutch friend in Basel, his poetry was aimed at (among other things) enhancing English. Rather than abandoning his native tongue, his poetry brought England into the European intellectual scene. Published alongside his Classical epigrams are verses that highlight his country's quirks, such as no. 95, titled "To an Englishman who affected to speak the French language,"⁸⁴ that no doubt inspired Ben Jonson's epigram on the same topic a century later. This epigram mocks the French accent an Englishman feigns when he speaks all other languages, concluding cleverly that "French is the only language that he speaks with a British accent."⁸⁵ The descriptions of the ordeals he undergoes to appear French (such as mistreating his servant, notably) make it clear that More criticizes him not only for masquerading as something that he is not, but for masquerading as something laughable: a Frenchman. No longer is England a place of shame in the intellectual scene, nor is its language and literature a mere pastime for barbarians. As if to make that very point, More translates two English songs into Latin, which he makes sure

⁸³ *Da bona siue rogere deus, seu nulla rogere, / Et mala siue rogere nega, seu nulla rogere*

⁸⁴ *In anglum gallicae linguae affectatorem*

⁸⁵ *Nam Gallicam solam sonat Britannice*

his readers know by heading nos. 81 and 82 with *e cantione Anglica* as he so often heads others *e Graeco*, a suggestive decision in a collection full of Classical translations. Just as his epigrams about courtiers and peasants blur the line between high- and low-born people, his English epigrams blur the line between high and low languages.

Whether or not More published his epigrams in an active attempt to transform the language and literature of his country, he would have been well aware of the potential for that effect. An exercise of wit was an act of intentionality for a humanist, and even if More did not anticipate this particular volume having a direct influence on the next few generations of English poets, he certainly practiced his craft with that eventual desire in mind. Therefore it would come as no surprise to his contemporaries that the *Epigrammata* served as an active agent of transformation in a time when the English language was becoming “formed and settled,” to repeat Johnson’s phrase. The instruments of that transformation were apparent immediately, as the internationally-published collection acquired its initial reputation abroad and paved the way for future Anglophones to be taken seriously. Additionally, More’s poetry was discussed both at home and abroad not only as an example of poetic accomplishment but also as a declaration about the nature of poetry itself, its scope, and its purpose. As a result, his epigrams eased their way into English literary culture as vernacular poetry began to gather momentum in the sixteenth century, showing up in works that range from collections of epigrams to popular jest books as amateur poets practiced a similar process of translation and imitation of More’s verse that he had demonstrated with the Classics. The ramifications of this process on the development of the English language over the next two centuries are

obvious, and are even apparent in the contrast between More's early English verse and his later snippets. Less obvious but equally significant are the effects on the broader scope of English literature, extending to poets from Sir John Harington to William Shakespeare himself. Just as the birth of the English Renaissance and the English Reformation look to More at their formation, English poetry itself owes specific features of its development to this saint and statesman whose literary career was as colorful as his life.

Marking the Turf

When Beatus Rhenanus said in his letter to Willibald Pirckheimer that introduced the *Epigrammata*, “take this book in hand, read it, and become an admirer of More,”⁸⁶ he was verbalizing the request that Erasmus' actions had already made. The location of the printing itself made that request, endowing More with “a humanism by association” (Carlson 156). Basel was a hot-spot of humanist literature, and Froben's publishing house had already produced works such as Erasmus' Greek New Testament, his edition of Seneca's works, Aesop's fables, and Jerome's *Opera Omnia*. Erasmus had recently chosen Froben for the 1515 publication of the *Adagia*, and showed at least the same concern for More's yet-to-be-cemented reputation as his own. According to him at least, “the matter of the More's *Utopia* and *Epigrammata* is of greater concern to me than my own affairs.”⁸⁷ Indeed, despite the fact that *Utopia* had already been published in Louvain in 1516 and presumably sold well enough to merit a second printing with revisions, Froben's acceptance of the task and his use of the

⁸⁶ *Hoc libelli in manum cape, lege, et Moro...faue.* (Miller 76)

⁸⁷ *De Mori Utopia et Epigrammatis res mihi magnis erat cordi quam mea ipsius negocia* (Carlson 151).

acclaimed Hans Holbein for the woodcuts represented something of a gamble, setting his stakes on the substance of More's new popularity. Erasmus approached the project with forceful urgency, writing his printer frequently during the period between 1516 and 1518, asking to know the progress of the work and urging him "especially that More's writings may be carefully prepared."⁸⁸ The 355-page volume of the *Epigrammata* with *Utopia* and Erasmus' own epigrams, each with its own Holbein cover plate to suggest its merit as its own separate work, was a strategic move to cast More's line into the European intellectual scene. Froben took the bait, and by 1520 he was already printing the *Epigrammata* for the third time in its own volume.

The strategy to cement More's reputation as a humanist who could match wits with the poets went beyond garnering the support of Froben, Holbein, Rhenanus, and Pirckheimer; it needed to extend into what the *Philomorus* calls "a sort of freemasonry of scholarship" among writers of Latin verse (Marsden 21). Therefore, with the same publishing house in the same year, Erasmus helped boost More's poetic acclaim across Europe by including one of his *e Graeco* epigrams (no. 52) in the 1518 publication of the *Adagia*. "A deaf man was suing a deaf man," Erasmus translates from Greek into Latin, "but the judge was deafer than either."⁸⁹ It is a close, concise, faithful translation, as More and Lily write in the *Progymnasmata*. But this Greek epigram is one that More takes liberties to expand in his translation, and, whether or not modern scholars appreciate the ridiculous humor of the joke, Erasmus seems to find it commendable.

⁸⁸ *praecipue vt Morica diligenter orment* (Allen, 3, 52).

⁸⁹ *Surdaster cum surdastro litigabat; iudex autem erat vtroque surdior.* (Erasmus *Opera II-5* 282)

Some time ago this was cleverly translated by Thomas More, while he was still growing up, as follows:

A case was being tried. The defendant was deaf, the plaintiff was deaf, yet the judge himself was deafer than either. The plaintiff demanded five months' rent for a house. The defendant replied, "My mill was running all night." The judge looked up at them and asked, "Why do you quarrel? Indeed, is she not the mother of both of you? Both of you, support her."⁹⁰

Erasmus clearly intends his readers to be impressed with More's "clever" translation, but not, apparently, on its merits as a translation, at least not in the sense that modern scholars think of the term. By expanding the proverb about deaf justice into a comic scene, he actually turns an adage into an epigram, converting breadth into specificity. His mockery is far from concise and remains in the third person rather than the second, but the method of highlighting absurdity through specific example is inherently epigrammatic. Thus in this excerpt, Erasmus is commending More's talent in crafting his own poetry, poetry that reflects the ancients but stands on its own feet, epigrams that can engage timeless adages without losing a natural delight in ridiculous humor. In a sense, Erasmus is proclaiming More's epigrams to be "poetry for all seasons."⁹¹

⁹⁰ *Id Thomas Morus olim adolescens scit verit hunc in modum:*

Lis agitur, surdusque reus, surdus fuit actor, / Ipse tamen iudex surdus vtroque magis. / Pro aedibus hic petit aes quinto iam mense peracto; / Ille refert: Tota nocte mihi acta mola est. / Aspicit hos iudex et: Quid contenditis, inquit, / An non vtrique est mater? vtrique alite. (Erasmus *Opera II-5* 282)

⁹¹ Indeed, the Dutchman had already lauded his English friend as an *omnium horarum hominem* in *The Praise of Folly* seven years earlier for that very reason. The foolery that Erasmus defends in his dedication seems to be the same trait he admires in More's *Epigrammata*. If epigrams are mere trifles, they are so only with the understanding that "literary trifles may lead to serious matters and fooleries may be handled such that a reader who is not completely dull-witted may gain more of a return from them than from the sharp and showy arguments

It certainly seems to have been poetry for the season that gave it birth. Even the translation exercises of the *Progymnasmata* found a favorable climate in the humanist program of the sixteenth century. As it turned out, More's work was on the cusp of what was to become a significant trend in Renaissance pedagogy: poetic verse translations of Greek works into Latin. The title of the collection connects the long history of Greek rhetorical exercises beginning in the fourth century BC (Weaver 14) to the humanist revival of the Classics, specifically Greek. The More/Lily collection was one of the first of its kind in Europe, and certainly "was the first printed adaptation of the ancient *progymnasmata* by English humanists" (Weaver 131). The editors of the Yale edition of the works of Thomas More suggest that Johann Heyl (Soter) may have been inspired by More and Lily when he wrote his similar *Epigrammata Graeca* (Cologne, 1512), which seems likely enough since Soter used several of the translations of More and Lily in his collection (Miller 13). These publications began a trend; Soter's collection with More's epigrams appeared in reprinted editions in 1528 and 1544, and expanded collections in 1529, 1570 and 1597 (Miller 14). The form typically follows the More/Lily model; in John Stockwood's *Progymnasma Scholasticum* (London, 1597), each Greek epigram is followed by compiled Latin translations by various authors, including More in 23 cases. It seems that whether the *Progymnasmata* began a movement in Europe or merely contributed to its spread, it certainly drew the attention of other Neo-Latin poets to the wit of

of some that we know" (*nugae seria ducant, atque ita tractentur ludicra, vt ex his aliquanto plus frugis referat lector non omnino naris obesae, quam ex quorundam tetricis ac splendidis argumentis*) (Erasmus *Opera IV-3* 68).

the *clarissimi disertissimique viri Thomae Mori Britannii*, inviting everyone as Rhenanus said, to “become an admirer of More.”

It would seem that this invitation was accepted across Europe throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some of More’s best epigrams were printed in anthologies such as Leger du Chêne’s *Flores Epigrammatum* (Paris, 1555), *Epigrammatum Graecorum* (Frankfurt, 1600), *Mensa Philosophica* (Frankfurt, 1602), *Jocorum atque Seriorum* (Lichæ, 1604), Johann Hilner’s *Gnomologicum Graecolatinum* (Leipzig, 1606), and Johannes Heidfeldus’ *Sextum renata* (Herborn, 1612). Du Chêne’s anthology of Neo-Latin poetry showed particular honor to the Englishman, including more of his verse in than any other poet (Hudson 30). Early on in More’s career, he was already in the canon of exemplary contemporary poetry. Beyond the anthologizing, authors across Europe showed him this honor by translating his epigrams into their various vernacular languages as one might do for Martial or other classical poets. During the sixteenth century, More’s epigrams entered into Italian, French, and Spanish with the help of Lodovico Domenichi, Cornelius Agrippa, Turquet de Mayerne, Antoine du Verdier, Pierre Tamisier, and Melchor de Santa Cruz de Dueñas (Schoeck 67, Doyle “More’s” 89). More’s popularity in Europe was not short-lived; even into the seventeenth century his epigrams were still being translated, entering the German vernacular by means of Georg Rodolf Weckerlin’s *Gaistliche und Weltliche Gedichte* (Hudson 75). If European anthologies and translations are any indication, one publication of epigrams printed in the right place and recommended by the right people seems to have been enough to secure More’s place as a Renaissance poet.

Beyond the anthologizing and translations, More's status as a Renaissance poet is most vividly demonstrated when other Neo-Latin poets compete with him. There are many examples of Latin verse adaptations of More's epigrams, continuing as late as Matthew Gwinne's *In assertorem chymicae sed verae medicinae desertorem* (1611) and Joannes Placentius' *Crepundia poetica somniata* (1642) (Doyle "More's" 89). Perhaps the earliest and most popular examples of Latin imitation of More's epigrams are the ones Charles Clay Doyle points out in the *Nugae* (Basel, 1522) and *Nugarum libri octo* (Lyons, 1538) of Nicholas Bourbon the Elder. Bourbon does not merely quote or translate More; he takes the compliment to a higher level by crossing pens with him as More had done with Martial, writing Latin imitations of the Latin epigrams. Though only one of his titles credits the Englishman—"Of the anxious life of rulers / taken from an epigram of Thomas More"⁹²—Doyle's study points out six other clear imitations of More. Some of these, of course, are More's own imitations of Greek epigrams, but it is clear even in these cases that Bourbon is imitating the Englishman rather than the ancients. For example, while both poets credit Aristotle for an epigram on sleep, More's no. 107 significantly expands the Greek *sententia*, and Bourbon borrows More's extrapolations. The *Adagia* simply translates Aristotle as saying, "for half their life, nothing differentiates the fortunate from the unfortunate."⁹³ More's version, *De somno / e Graeco / sententia Aristotelis*, makes the proverb epigrammatic by giving it specific characters.

⁹² *De sollicita potentum vita / Tale fere est epigramma apud Thomam Morum* (Doyle "Bourbon" 3)

⁹³ *dimidio vitae nihil different felices ab infelicibus* (Doyle "Bourbon" 9)

Almost half of life is slept away. In that time the rich and the poor lie equal. Thus Croesus, wealthiest of kings, for almost half of life needy Irus was equal to you.⁹⁴

Bourbon attempts to match wits with More in the same amount of space with his similarly titled *Aristotelis sententia, e Graeco*.

Nearly half of life is slept away, and through sleep itself the rich and the poor lie the same. Therefore, Croesus, wealthiest of kings, for almost half of life was not needy Irus equal to you?⁹⁵

The epigrams are so similar in wording and syntax that it is hard to discern what Bourbon attempted to gain by his retelling. If he was challenging More to a duel, perhaps it ended in a draw, in which case More would win by default for being the original. But one way or another, Bourbon's epigrams demonstrate that More was becoming not only an authority to be cited, but also a landmark to be emulated.

Establishing Authority

The publication of the *Epigrammata* therefore served to establish across Europe More's poetic authority that his friends already recognized. Philip Dust argues that, beyond the mentions in the *Praise of Folly* and the *Adagia*, "cross-fertilization" in the poetry of More and Erasmus is evident in Erasmus' epigram against Julius II, written sometime between 1510 and 1513 (Dust 105). If the Dutchman had been exposed to More's epigrams in manuscript during the long visit in which he wrote *The Praise of Folly* in 1509, then Dust has ample

⁹⁴ *Ferme dimidium uitae, dormitur: in illo / Aequales spacio diues, inopsque iacent. / Ergo Croese tibi regum ditissime, uitae / Ferme dimidio par erat Irus egens.*

⁹⁵ *Hic prope dimidium uitae dormitur, & ipsum / Per somnum, similes diues inopsque iacent. / Croese igitur regum ditissime, num tibi ferme / Dimidio uitae par fuit Irus egens?* (Doyle "Bourbon" 9)

grounds for his argument, whether or not the speculations about the possible reference to More in the dedication scribbled on the back of the manuscript are correct. Erasmus' *Carmen iambicum* echoes many themes prevalent in More's epigrams, such as satire on the clergy and monarchs.⁹⁶ Most memorably, Erasmus ends with a couplet that echoes a frequent punch-line in More's epigrams: death levels the proud, in the same way, perhaps, that sleep elevates the humble in many of More's other epigrams. Erasmus declares, "Therefore, one thing alone remains that you be altogether Julius: that another Brutus strike you."⁹⁷ Similarly, More writes a 14-line epigram titled "Death unassisted kills tyrants"⁹⁸ that ends by saying of the dead tyrant, "he will in turn be laughed at, who was once feared."⁹⁹ In both cases, the point is the same: the most terrible of monarchs stands just as mortal as the rest of humanity. Since by all accounts most of the epigrams included in the first edition of the *Epigrammata* were written before 1510, it is probable that More's epigram precedes that of Erasmus. One way or another, the long visit in 1509 must have inspired a great deal of "cross-fertilization" between the two. More's influence as a humanist poet was already spreading before his epigrams were even published.

Even his authority as a translator was recognized before the *Progymnasmata* reached European booksellers. In 1517, a year before the publication of the *Epigrammata*, Richard

⁹⁶ The Bradner-Lynch edition of More's epigrams cites as many as 13 epigrams against tyranny (Bradner 162).

⁹⁷ *Vnum illud ergo totus ut sis Iulis / Superest, vt aliuis Brutus obtingat tibi* (Dust 100).

⁹⁸ *Sola mors tyrannicida est* (No. 80)

⁹⁹ *uicissim / Iam ridendus erit, qui metuendus erat.* (No. 80)

Pace's *Benefit of a liberal education*¹⁰⁰ emerged from the same press where More's epigrams were being set in type. In it, Pace proclaimed,

that no one ever existed who did not compose the meanings of sentences out of words, excepting only our Thomas More. For on the contrary, he gathers the meanings of words out of sentences, especially in his studies and translations of Greek. This is not alien to grammar, but it is somewhat more than grammar, and an instinct of genius.¹⁰¹

At that point, More's only published translations were his Latin translations of Lucian and his English translations of Pico. However, as Pace was a friend of both Erasmus and More, it is probable that he would have read manuscript copies of the epigrams that were being prepared at the same printing house. After all, contemporary poetry in the Renaissance was primarily circulated in manuscript rather than published books, and by the time Pace's words hit the press Rhenanus had already written his prefatory letter. It is a safe assumption that among the evidence of translational "genius" that Pace saw in More were his Latin epigrams.

Nor should one assume that Pace's superlative praise refers solely to the precise, literal translations of the *Progymnasmata* at the exclusion of the *e Graeco* epigrams in the rest of the collection. As stated earlier, Renaissance translation is as much a matter of composition as it is rendering; the only fitting way to translate poetry is to write poetry. The "genius" of More is two-fold, according to Rhenanus, "for he composes most elegantly and translates most

¹⁰⁰ *De fructu qui ex doctrina precipitur*

¹⁰¹ *neminem unquam extitisse, qui non ex uerbis collegerit omnes sententias, excepto uno Thoma Moro nostro. Nam is e contrario, ex sententijs colligit uerba, & praecipue in graecis intelligendis, & transferendis. Ceterum hoc non est a grammatica usquequaque alienum, sed paulo plus quam grammaticum, id est, ingeniosum* (Manley 102-4)

feliculously.”¹⁰² Although More’s admirable qualities are evident “particularly in [the epigrams] which he himself composed,”¹⁰³ the preface acknowledges that “undoubtedly the labor of the translator is often greater.”¹⁰⁴ The *Epigrammata* displays a particular approach to verse translations that, far from being natural, is artfully developed throughout the Renaissance thanks to the labors of poets like More who strive “to look about continuously in the pursuit of something else”¹⁰⁵ while writing poetry that is only partially their own. In that labor, Pace and Rhenanus agree, More demonstrates his skill not only as ample among his contemporaries, but as exemplary.

For this reason, the escalated reaction of the offended Brixius actually becomes appropriate, even oddly complimentary. When the *Antimorus*, in More’s words, “retaliated against a jesting epigram with an astonishing virulent volume,”¹⁰⁶ Brixius rightly perceived that More’s attack on him was substantially weighty and would be taken so across Europe. By responding so virulently, he acknowledged the danger of More’s dismissive nonchalance, which the Englishman made with typical Renaissance *sprezzatura* in a couple of “jesting” epigrams. Furthermore, he rightly judged that their quarrel was rooted in a broader issue about the nature of poetry, since intellectuals across Europe were by no means in agreement about how revival of the Classics would be best executed. It is an old quarrel, dating at least back to the Classical authors whom the Renaissance poets imitate; Martial defends his

¹⁰² *nam elegantissime componit, et felicissime uertit* (Miller 74).

¹⁰³ *praesertim in his quae ipse genuit* (Miller 74).

¹⁰⁴ *labor certe uertentis saepe maior* (Miller 74).

¹⁰⁵ *aliud subinde respicere cogitur* (Miller 74).

¹⁰⁶ *tu rursus epigramma iocosum retaliaris mirum quam uirulento uolumine* (Miller 606).

epigrams against those “who call them mere frivolities and jests”¹⁰⁷ by saying that “all bombast is far from our little books, neither does our Muse swell with tragedy’s raving robe.”¹⁰⁸ Erasmus takes the same side as Martial on the issue of poetic diction, criticizing a poem of Ammonio’s for its verbose decorations, preferring instead “verse that is not far removed from prose, albeit the best prose.”¹⁰⁹ Clearly part of the same conversation, More criticizes Brixius’ absurdities and Brixius scorns More’s trivialities; More indicts Brixius as a treacherous liar and Brixius lambastes More as lazy versifier. In both cases, the fate of poetry hangs in the balance: whether it will fall into ridiculous buffoonery that robs the poets of any rational glory on the one side, or whether it will be sloppily managed by trifling versifiers who write “barbarous figures and tropes and taunts which sound nothing of Greek or of Latin”¹¹⁰ on the other. By taking so much effort to present More as a bad poet, Brixius in effect acknowledges that More is an important poet.

Perhaps in some ways Brixius was reacting to the mode of publication as much as to the poetry itself, for More’s poems had been written years earlier and circulated in manuscript long before the 1518 publication incited the polemic of the *Antimorus*. To some degree, as David Carlson points out in *English Humanist Books*, the publication of the *Epigrammata* changes the meanings of the poems by the mere shifting of their presentation. Epigrams circulated around a coterie are scribbles on a page; the same epigrams published in Basel with Holbein cover plates are a proclamation. Similarly, when No. 148 appears at the

¹⁰⁷ *qui tantum lusus illa iocosque vocat* (IV.xlix.2).

¹⁰⁸ *a nostris procul est omnis vesica libellis, / Musa nec insano symmate nostra tumet* (IV.xlix.7-8).

¹⁰⁹ *carmen quod a prosa, sed optima, non longe recederet* (Allen, I, 545).

¹¹⁰ *tropos, et schemata barbara, quaeque / Scommata nil Graium, nil Latiale sonant* (ll. 122-3).

beginning of Bernard André's *Hymni Christiani* in 1517 under the heading "A Hexadecastich of Thomas More, on the Hymns of Bernard André of Toulouse, Poet Royal"¹¹¹ among other commendatory verse, the poem seems complimentary and earns André's thanks at the end of the volume. When it appears the following year in the *Epigrammata* with the new title "On a certain author who wrote hymns in honor of the saints unlearnedly, testifying in his preface that he wrote them extempore without observing the rules of verse, and that his subject matter would not require eloquence,"¹¹² the same poem becomes satirical, especially sandwiched between epigrams with the titles "On a stupid poet"¹¹³ and "On Stratophon, a worthless prizefighter."¹¹⁴ The new title and presentation make the same phrases—"he wrote in haste, but even so with howsoever long a time he could not have written better,"¹¹⁵ or "if you weigh each word, it will be for you such great pleasure"¹¹⁶—take on entirely new meanings. No longer is the verse commendatory; it has become satirical, a criticism of lazy poetry that Brixius himself makes as well (Carlson 160). The method of delivery transforms specific messages into broad ones about the nature of poetry, and it is clear from the reaction of his opponents that More's authority was taken seriously.

If friends and enemies alike acknowledge More's authority in Europe, it should come as no surprise that authors of his own primitive England show a similar admiration. The

¹¹¹ *In Hymnos Bernardi Andree Tolosatis poete regii, Thome mori Hexadecastichon* (Carlson 160).

¹¹² *In quendam qui scripserat hymnos de diuis parum docte, testatus in praefatione se ex tempore scripsisse nec seruasse leges carminum, et argumentum non recipere eloquentiam* (No. 148)

¹¹³ *In stultum poetam* (No. 147)

¹¹⁴ *In Stratophonta pugilem ignauum* (No. 149)

¹¹⁵ *subito scripsit, sed sic ut scribere posset / Quantumuis longo tempore non melius* (ll. 11-2).

¹¹⁶ *Singula si trutines, erit hinc tibi tanta uoluptas* (ll. 21-2).

younger contemporary John Leland, notable for his influence as an English antiquary under Henry VIII whose famous itinerary attempts “a definition of the identity of England” (Scattergood 64), treated More’s poetry as a landmark in English literature. After all, it was no small feat for an Englishman to butt heads with a continental poet and win, an encounter Leland saw fitting to celebrate in an epigram of his own:

Brixius is full of dazzling splendor, and the other engendered
frank words of sound sense. Brixius has matched More in
honeyed song, but More had renown for more spirited
talent.¹¹⁷

The epigram is a fair portrayal of the scuffle, biases notwithstanding. Indeed, Brixius would have wanted to be remembered for his splendor and More for his sound sense. The result, according to Leland, was equality of beauty but not of talent. The man who aims for splendor at the expense of sense achieves aesthetics without genius; the man who pursues sound sense achieves both. Whether or not Leland’s generous gesture to Brixius’ honeyed song is deserved, his judgment of More’s renown for talent has certainly proved true then and now; More’s talent is continually recognized, and Germain de Brie is only remembered as the poet who threw stones at a giant.

Likewise, Leland insists elsewhere, More’s poetry can hold its ground before antiquity and posterity alike. In his epigram *Ad Valerium Martialem*, Leland suggests that had More been given the contemporary material Martial utilized in his unsurpassed epigrams, he would have

¹¹⁷ *Brixius est niuei candoris plenus, & ille / Iudicij veri libera verba serit. / Brixius aequauit mellito carmine Morum, / Caldior ingenij nomine Morus erat* (Hudson 58).

equaled the master. In the lengthier “Concerning certain poets of our time,”¹¹⁸ Leland proclaims that More’s greatness will be recognized among future generations as well. “Our age lauds the wit and acumen of More,” he says; “even more gratefully will posterity sing of them.”¹¹⁹ In the context of the poem, Leland is putting More on the level of Pontanus, Marullus, and Bourbon (the former two Rhenanus had declared inferior to More in his prefatory letter), and saying in effect that More is worthy of being remembered beside the best of European poets. Of course, the superlative praise is reminiscent of standard Renaissance decorum. After all, what noteworthy poet does not have someone declaring his verse to be worthy of the ancients, above contemporaries, and destined for posterity? If More is indeed exceptional, it is not because Leland said these things of him, but because he was right in saying them.

In fact, whether or not Leland’s declaration of posterity’s indebtedness to More’s excellences is fully realized today, the next few generations of English poets certainly concurred. According to William Vaughan’s *Golden Grove*, at least, More’s “poeticall works” were “as yet in great regard” in 1600 (Hudson 77), and twenty years later Henry Peacham extrapolated the reason in *The Compleat Gentleman* of 1622. After lamenting that poetry had “fallen from the highest Stage of Honour, to the lowest staire of disgrace” (Peacham 78) and that “Poets now adaies are of no such esteeme, as they haue beene in former times” (Peacham 82), Peacham presents More as a poet capable of restoring the glory days of

¹¹⁸ *De quibusdam nostri saeculi poetis*

¹¹⁹ *Ætas nostra sales, ac Mori laudat acumen, / Gravior haec eadem posteritasque canet* (Hudson *Epigram* 76).

Martial himself. “In *Martial*,” he says, “you shall see a diuine wit, with a flowing puritie of the Latine tongue, a true Epigrammatist” (Peacham 89). But after Martial came “that long tract of ignorance, vntill the dies of *Henrie* the 8” when learning flourished under Sir Thomas More, “a man of most rich and pleasant inuention: his verse fluent, nothing harsh, constrained or obscure; wholly composed of conceipt, and inoffensiuie mirth” (Peacham 92). Once again, Peacham is notably praising More for his fluent verse, which is primarily in Latin, rather than the deluge of English works that come later. Over a century after the publication of the *Epigrammata*, English authors are acknowledging their indebtedness to More’s poetry as Leland had predicted they would.

This is not to suggest that English poets always knew exactly how they were indebted to More’s poetry. In fact, because More was such an eclectic author, opposing sides could cite his authority to back their contrasting arguments regarding the development of English verse. For example, when Thomas Campion wrote his *Observations in the Art of English Poesie* (1602) that argued against the use of rhyme, suggesting instead that English authors develop a system of long and short syllables as the Classical authors used in Latin, he cited More’s series of epitaphs for Henry Abyngdon to back his argument. More’s first epitaph “in learned numbers” (Campion 295) began beautifully, “May the famed singer, Henry Abyngdon, draw your eyes hither; in times past he had drawn your ears.”¹²⁰ When this epigram was “dislik’t” and Abyngdon’s heir demanded an epitaph “in rude rime” (Campion 295), More wrote a rhyming epitaph self-consciously sing-songy, beginning, “Here lies Henry, the constant friend

¹²⁰ *Attrahat huc oculos, aures attraxerat olim / Nobilis Henricus cantor Abyngdonius* (no. 159).

of piety. Abyngdon was his name, if anyone should inquire his name.”¹²¹ Though
Campion’s point is about the rudeness of rhyme in the development of English poetry, the
anecdote also demonstrates More’s authority among English poets over eighty years after his
only published book of verse. Champion can allude to More’s epigrams with assurance that
his readers are familiar enough with the poems to remember them with little description.
More significantly, he assumes that the support of this famous political figure strengthens his
argument about the still uncertain development of English poetry, demonstrating that More’s
authority applies specifically to the mechanics of English verse. At a time when English
poetry was undergoing transformation and exploration, he was already established as a
monumental icon in the process.

The interpretation of that authority, however, was far from clear. Samuel Daniel’s
Defence of Ryme published the following year in answer to Champion’s *Observations* uses the same
figure to make the opposite argument. In his summary of the literary development of the
Renaissance when various authors “adorned Italie, and wakened vp other Nations likewise
with this desire of glory,” Daniel refers to More as “a great ornament to this land, and a
Rymer” (Daniel 142). He is correct, of course; More’s sparse examples of English verse are
all rhymed, and though some of his poetry is playful and thus falls into Champion’s category of
“rude rime,” others are quite somber or even epigrammatic. Though English poetry was not
More’s primary pursuit as a writer, he wrote enough to demonstrate a notable degree of
respect for it, enough that later English poets remember him as their patriarch. This

¹²¹ *Hic iacet Henricus, semper pietatis amicus. / Nomen Abyngdon erat, si quis nomina quaerat* (no. 160).

contribution alone is enough to establish More's influence on the development of English poetry in itself; in his work as an English intellectual, he had boosted the international reputation of English poets and given his countrymen a goal to pursue in the following centuries. His influence, then, seems undeniable; the only question remaining is what that influence produced.

Entering the Vernacular

Perhaps the best way to shift the discussion into the realm of the development of English poetry is to begin with a small detour into one of More's own vernacular poems, which Campion would most certainly have dismissed as "rude rime." *A mery gest how a sergeaut woulde lerne to be a frere* was probably written contemporaneously with the earliest of the epigrams in the first decade of the sixteenth century, and was printed in quarto by Julian Notary around 1516 without attributing it to the rising intellectual who was currently publishing the first edition of *Utopia* (Edwards cxiii). The poem, written in a tight *aabccb* rhyme scheme¹²² with four- and six-syllable lines, tells a comic story of a sergeant who attempts to apprehend an evasive debtor by masquerading as a friar. The plan does not go as smoothly as the sergeant intends, and ends with the two men in a brawl as "They roll and rumble, / They tourne & tumble, / Lyke pygges in a poke" (ll. 372-4), until the debtor's wife

¹²² However, in both Notary's 1516 edition and that of Richard Jones in 1576, some of the lines are combined and the rhyme is obscured. The Yale edition points out that there are "few parallels to this scheme in the verse of the early sixteenth century, and this paucity may explain why it caused particular trouble for Notary" (Edwards cxiv). Whatever may be said about the standard medieval tropes in More's English poetry, he was at least in this way experimental within a traditional genre.

finally enters the room and conveys to the assailant “Many a iolle / Aboute the nolle, / With a grete batylldore” (ll. 390-2). The poem ends with the same dubious moral with which it began, in typical English jestbook style:

Now maysters all,
And now I shall,
 Ende there I began.
In only wyse,
I woulde auyse,
 And counseyll euery man,
His owne crafte vse,
All newe refuse,
 And vtterly let them gone:
Play not the frere,
Now make good chere,
 And welcome euery chone (ll. 423-34).

It is a problematic moral for the story, treating the sergeant’s trickery as if it had been a vocation change, and treating his defeat in the brawl as if it demonstrates his ineptness in his new trade. It would be fairly simple to explain this oddity as laziness that demonstrates a humanist disregard for popular literature, or even a thoughtful satire of the genre through a ridiculous portrayal. More’s single dip into the realm of English jestbooks seems to be either carelessly sloppy or intentionally troublesome.

However, in either case it is a definitive dip into a slapstick genre of popular literature that one may find surprising for a rising humanist intellectual. Furthermore, these arguably barbaric¹²³ lines were written as the author pursued his Latin translations of Greek epigrams,

¹²³ Notably, as the bulk of his *Works* indicates, More rejects the notion that the vernacular is inherently barbaric, despite his training in Greek and Latin. On the contrary, he insists that “as far as that our tong is called barbarous, is but a fantasye. And if they would call it barayn

and were printed the year that *Utopia* stirred the intellectual waters of Europe and that Erasmus acquired manuscripts of the *Epigrammata* with clear intentions for publication. Furthermore, it is at least suggestive that a sizeable portion of the English translations of his epigrams throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were published by various obscure compilers of English jestbooks. Many of More's countrymen encountered his epigrams in works such as *Tales and Quick Answers* (1532), *The Philosophers Banquet* (1614), *Banquet of Jests* (1639), *Pasquils jests* (1650), and *London jests* (1684), and it seems safe to say that whether or not More associated the genres of epigrams and jestbooks, his first few generations of translators did. These publications may be testaments to the popularity of the *Epigrammata*, demonstrating that his quips had become the kinds of anecdotes that compilers of jestbooks such as John Taylor the Water Poet would gather "out of Tauernes, Ordinaries, Innes, Bowling Greenes, and Allyes, Alehouses, Tobacco shops, Highwayes, and Water-passages" (Wilson 127). Regardless, it suggests that an investigation of English jestbooks may be significant for an appreciation of More's influence on English poetry in the early stages of his vernacular translations.

Though jestbooks are classified as popular literature and therefore are generally of more interest to scholars of print history than to literary critics, their early readership is not confined to a single class of readers. Simply defined, a jestbook is "a collection of comic prose tales or anecdotes designed for the entertainment of the reader" (Wilson 122). While there are earlier examples such as Notary and William Caxton, the printer of the first major

of wordes, there is no doubt but it is plenteous enough to expresse our myndes in anye thing wherof one man hath vsed to speke with another" (More 243).

publication of English jestbooks is none other than John Rastell, brother-in-law of Thomas More and father-in law of More's friend and fellow epigrammatist John Heywood. Though *A C. Mery Tales* (1526) does not have any direct translations of More's epigrams as later jestbooks do, some scholars have suggested that, considering the kinship, "It would be astonishing if More and Heywood, two notable jesters, did not contribute to Rastell's collection" (Wardroper 4). Rastell and his son are also notable for publishing More's *Life of Pico* and several of his polemical works, and some of their other publications by authors such as Chaucer, Coverdale, Frith, Heywood, Littleton, and Skelton demonstrate a camaraderie with More as proponents of the English tongue. Jestbooks may be part of that quest in an indirect way; as the seventeenth-century Water Poet explains, "though my lines no Scholership proclaime, / Yet I at learning haue a kind of ayme" (Kastan 125). Indeed, these collections show a familiarity with Classical authors such as Homer, Virgil, Plato, and Ovid; with English authors such as Chaucer, Spenser, and Drayton; and with humanists such as Erasmus, Du Bartas, and More (Kastan 125). Rather than slapstick hodgepodes for the ignorant, jestbooks seem to be collections of common cultural wit, both rustic and intellectual, that make the wit common through the collecting of it.

Although it would be a bit rash to suggest that jestbooks should be regarded as high literature merely because they amalgamate intellectual and rustic wit, they certainly contribute to all strands of literature in the Early Modern period. As reprints such as *Shakespeare's Jest Book* argue, "there is a link between the great dramatist's art, in tragedy and festive comedy both, and the folk wisdom and fun handed down from generation to

generation” (Ashley vi). This link not only exists in the works of Shakespeare; Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Traveler* emulates the jestbook tradition, and the link between epigrams and jestbooks is maintained in Sir John Harington’s epigrams (Whipple 349). The 1707 jestbook *The Wise and Ingenious Companion* recommends that gentlemen should learn jests to enhance “the Quickness of their Wit, their deep Learning, and good education” (Boyer A4), and it is easy to imagine humanists such as More and Erasmus arguing the same thing for a scholar’s education. Indeed, the fact that such a declaration is part of the received cultural wisdom two hundred years later may attest once again to the influence of More’s works in the sixteenth century. Jestbooks may serve as a way to teach,¹²⁴ demonstrating “the superiority of common sense over wittol-like logic-chopping or scholastic dogmatizing” (Zall 8), and lightening the load of philosophical lessons with comic relief. As Anthony in More’s *Dialogue of Comfort* says,

he y^t cannot long endure to hold vp his head and heare talking of heuen except he be nowe and than betwene...refreshed with a meri foolish tale, ther is none another remedie but you must let him haue it (Kahrl 166).

While jestbooks are not high literature in and of themselves, they may be part of the educational training of the authors and thinkers who read them.

It is in this eclectic popular genre that the *Epigrammata* received its initial English renderings. Thomas Berthelet’s *Tales, and quicke answers* (1535), printed the year of More’s

¹²⁴ Notably, the increasing publication of jestbooks coincides with the rise of popular literacy. During the “educational revolution” of Elizabeth’s early reign, literacy of husbandmen in some regions of England went from 10% to 30%, yeomen from 45% to 75%, and tradesmen from 40% to 60% (Watt 260). Inasmuch as jestbooks can be considered “popular,” they represent an easily digestible exposure to the Classics for the growingly literate populace.

death, draws jests from several Classical and humanist sources such as Erasmus, Poggio,¹²⁵ Martial, and Gellius (Bush 280). Seven of the prose tales paraphrase More's epigrams, such as "Of the courtier that bade the boy hold his horse":

A courtier on a time that alighted off his horse at an inn gate said to a boy that stood thereby, "Ho, sir boy, hold my horse!" The boy, as he had been afeared, answered, "O master, this is a fierce horse. Is one able to hold him?" "Yes," quod the courtier, "one may hold him well enough." "Well," quod the boy, "if one be able enough then I pray you hold him your own self." (Wardroper 98)

Those familiar with More's epigrams and his quips at the expense of the pompous will remember the same story in no. 207:

A courtier, dismounting from his horse, said to one of the bystanders, "Whoever you are—hold this horse." They bystander, as he was frightened, said, "Lord, I ask you, is one man then sufficient to hold this fierce horse?" The courtier said, "One man can hold him." The bystander retorted, "If one man is able, you yourself can."¹²⁶

Berthelet's translation is fairly close; the only substantial emendations are details of the setting and identity of the jokester. Perhaps transforming him from More's bystander to Berthelet's boy at an inn gate makes him a more sympathetic protagonist, but it loses some of the bite of More's epigram. In the original, the ambiguity of the bystander exposes the courtier's

¹²⁵ Poggio's *Facetiae* of 1477 is commonly regarded as the first Renaissance jestbook. Though the word is not in his epigrams themselves, the Oxford English Dictionary cites More as being the first author to use the word *facetiae* in English, which would take on the definition "Humorous sayings or writings, pleasantries, witticisms." In a literal sense, then, More brought jests into the English language.

¹²⁶ *Quum descendit equo, de circumstantibus uni / Aulicus, hunc teneas quisquis es, inquit, equum. / Ille, ut erat pauidus, dixit, domine ergo ferocem / Hunc rogo qui teneat, sufficit unus, equum? / Vnus ait potis est retinere. Subintulit ille, / Si potis est unus, tu potes ipse tuum.*

arbitrary arrogance; in the translation, the boy could easily be an employee of the inn with a devious temperament. The tale goes from shaming the courtier's pretentiousness to applauding the boy's cleverness. It is a subtle distinction, and the social satire is certainly still present in the latter form, but the emphasis has gone from cultural criticism to instruction in wit.

Of course, English translations of More's epigrams did not end with jestbooks; established as exemplary epigrams, they became ready resources for English poets attempting to adapt the Latin genre to a less flexible language. As English verse proliferated at the end of the sixteenth century and beyond, More's epigrams that were already well established in the cultural repertoire proved a ready source for translation and imitation. Verse translations appeared in works such as George Turberville's *Epitaphs, Epigrams, Songs and Sonets* (1567), Timothy Kendall's *Flowers of Epigrammes* (1577), Sir Richard Barckley's *The felicitie of man* (1598), Samuel Rowlands' *Humors Looking Glasse* (1608), Edward May's *Epigrams divine and Morall* (1633), Sir John Mennis' *Wits recreations* (1641), Thomas Pecke's *Parnassi Puerperium* (1659), John Donne, the younger's *Donnes Satyr* (1662), and Charles Cotton's *Poems on Several Occasions* (1689). More's verse was exemplary of a genre that epigrammatists tried to adapt into English, a daunting task in an exercise developed in an inflected language with great capacity for compression and terseness. This was especially complicated, R. V. Young demonstrates, when trying to imitate Martial, "a poet devilishly difficult even to translate" (Young 138). More, on the other hand, as even Leland's superlative praise admits, approached his poetry with a different set of tools than Martial had at his disposal. Despite

being one of the most acclaimed Latinists of his day, he proved a more accessible epigrammatist for amateur English poets to imitate.

Nevertheless the difficulty of translating More's Latin into English was also daunting, for he too utilized Latin's resources for compression and terseness so characteristic of Martial's wit. For example, his epigram "On the illiterate bishop"¹²⁷ manages to turn one scriptural allusion into two separate punches in a mere six lines:

You, great father, cry, "The letter kills." This single phrase
"The letter kills" you have always in your mouth. You have
taken good care that no letter would be able to kill you; you do
not know any letter. And not in vain do you fear that the letter
may kill; you know that the spirit which would give you life is
not with you.¹²⁸

Perhaps in these six lines we can understand why Leland calls More an English Martial. By probing the bishop through the lens of a Biblical reference that says, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life,"¹²⁹ More manages to satirize illiterate clergy who feign learning, and to connect this caricature to a deeper spiritual issue by using the priest's very reference against him. The epigram is succinct and effective, and uses a pagan genre of mockery to highlight shortcomings in the Church in a way that implies the need for reform. If it is harsh, it is at least constructively harsh, and the epigram's resonance with contemporary issues and diction provides an approachable resource for rising epigrammatists.

¹²⁷ *In episcopum illiteratum* (no. 202)

¹²⁸ *Magne pater clamas, occidit littera, in ore / Hoc unum, occidit littera semper habes, / Cauisti bene tu, ne te ulla occidere possit / Littera, non ulla est littera nota tibi. / Nec frustra metuis ne occidat littera, scis non / Vivificet qui te spiritus esse tibi.*

¹²⁹ II Corinthians 3:6 – *littera enim occidit, Spiritus autem vivificat.*

But the inflexibility of English still causes translators problems with More as it does with Martial. When Francis Thynne renders this epigram into his “A preist which knewe not anie letter,” he manages to include most of the content without the directness of wit or cleanness of diction:

Good zealous preist, thy hart more than thy skill,
thy zeale more than thy learning or thy witt,
the sacred eares of mightie Ioue must fill,
or ells for god thou wilt be nothing fitt.
Of holie Pawle, yet thou the heavenlie voice
canst ringe aloud, and sound this sentence true,
'the Letter kills,' wherby thou maiest reioyce,
that of one Letter the forme thou never knewe.
ffor least that this deade letter should thee kill,
thou didst beware the letters for to learne,
and that aptlie, since of godds holie will
the quickning spirrit thou never couldst deserne (Thynne 60).

Thynne's cumbersome epigram employs a quatrain for each of More's couplets, and in this extra space the reader loses sight of the central reference, which had been in the first line of More's poem and does not arrive until the seventh of Thynne's. Whatever Thynne may gain with his extra lines is not worth the cost of the terseness of More's, which is generally the primary device of the epigram. Lines 7-8 mostly repeat the two lines before, and it is unclear what the additions of Jove and Paul in lines 3 and 5 contribute other than distraction and space. Curiously, the only possibly witty addition to the poem is an additional scriptural reference in line 2 that evokes a Paul's assessment of the Jews' zeal without knowledge,¹³⁰ but adds a sympathetic element to the portrayal of a bumbling but well-meaning priest, making the poem go from More's constructively harsh satire to a mere caricature. Most significantly,

¹³⁰ Romans 10:2 – *emulationem Dei habent, sed non secundum scientiam.*

while More's punch-line rests on the verb *Vivificet*, the logical and Biblical counterpart to the oft-repeated verb *occidit*, Thynne tries to imply the reference with the easily passed-over adjective "quickning," and the punch is significantly softer. Thynne succeeds in translating the sense of the poem without the wit, and thereby demonstrates the difficulty facing translators of Latin verse.

Nevertheless, More's verse is at least more approachable than Martial's, and some English translators engage it with more success. More's two-line translation of the Greek epigram "To a man with an extremely long nose"¹³¹ (no. 228) packs a fairly elaborate description into a small amount of space:

If your nose should be set up toward the sun with open mouth,
you would aptly show on your teeth the hour.¹³²

To grasp of this epigram one must visualize the image making it challenging in the delivery, but the actual joke is no more witty than a modern redneck joke. Thus the task of the translator involves replicating the image without letting the reader get distracted, and requires the poet to be clear but not necessarily multi-limbed. Turberville's "Of one that had a great Nose" meets the challenge aptly:

Stande with thy Nose against
the Sunne with open chaps,
And by thy teeth we shall disseerne
what tis a clock perhaps.

Turberville's lines are succinct and clear. He only gets wordy toward the end when his third line takes on an extra two syllables and his final word is entirely expendable and clearly

¹³¹ *In uehementer nasutum*

¹³² *Si tuus ad solem statuatur nasus hiante / Ore, bene ostendas dentibus, hora quota est.*

included only for the difficult rhyme of “chaps” (“mouth” or “lips” would not have been much easier), but these crimes may be excusable in the context of the fairly juvenile joke. The problem is not insurmountable; *A Banquet of Jests* gets around the difficult word in 1639 by restructuring the sentence—“Gape ‘gainst the Sun, and by thy teeth and nose, / Tis easie to perceive, how the day goes” (Hudson 74)—but Turberville stays closer to the original, and is easier to follow despite its slight wordiness. In this way, he has risen to one challenge that faces the epigrammatist: increasing the flexibility of the English tongue.

As an exerciser of language, More’s influence on the development of English poetry was no less essential for its being indirect. While his work in the vernacular served to develop what R. W. Chambers calls “an effective prose, sufficient for all the purposes of his time: eloquent, dramatic, varied” and makes him “the direct ancestor of the prose-style of the great English dramatists, not excluding that of Shakespeare” (Visser vii), his Latin epigrams paved the way for future generations of English authors to do the same for poetry. It has been observed that James Sanford’s version of the oft-translated epigram on the cuckold astrologer may predate the Oxford English Dictionary’s first entry for the definition of *give*, meaning “to bestow to another one’s affection.” In 1569, Sanford writes, “to Daphne, Sol did geeue / His loue,” while the OED does not show that usage occurring until 1592 when Juliet met Romeo “And gaue him what becomed loue I might” (Dean 142). More’s verb *Recolit* certainly provides plenty of room for suggestive connotations, being primarily defined as, “to till or cultivate again, to work anew.” It may be that More is just as responsible for the new associations for the word “give” as Sanford; by compressing enough connotations into his

lines, some of them are liable to slip off onto whatever words his translators choose. The Latin epigram provides a breadth of meaning that the English language grows into through its very attempt to accommodate it.

Of course, if Chambers is right to honor More as the developer of the first effective English prose, this contribution alone is enough to establish his influence in English poetry. It must be assumed that More's careful attention to Latin, especially to the elegance of Latin epigrams, contributes to his own development as a vernacular author. If even his English prose becomes capable of handling the breadth and compression of the best epigrams, then establishing More's influence on the English poetry may be as simple as demonstrating it in his own English poetry. Though he does not leave enough examples of vernacular verse to show that influence conclusively and without other variables, he leaves enough to be at least suggestive. Among his early English poems are 314 lines of "Fortune verses," written sometime between 1505 and 1509. The following two stanzas can give us a taste of the diction and language, not to mention the tone and style, of the rest of the poem:

...Fortune, O myghty & varyable
What rule thou claymest, with thy cruel power.
Good folke thou stroyest, and louest reprouable.
Thou mayst not waraunt thy gyftes for one houre.
Fortune vnworthy men setteth in honoure.
Thorowe fortune thinnocent in wo & sorow shricheth.
The iust man she spoyleth, & the vniust enrycheth.

Yonge men she kylleth, & letteth olde men lyue
Onryghtuously deuydyng tyme and season.
That good men leseth, to wycked doth she gyue.
She hath no difference, but iudgeth all good reason.

Inconstaunte, slypper, frayle, and full of treason
Neyther for euer cherysshynge, whom she taketh
Nor for euer oppressynge, whom she forsaketh... (ll. 37-50)

Without exploring these lines at length, we may notice the short sentences, the repetitive syntax, the melodramatic tenor, and the moralizing inclination. They seem to belong more fittingly in the collections of medieval poets than in More's own *oeuvre*.

In the next thirty years that encompassed the writing and publication of the *Epigrammata* and all of More's other Latin works, he seems to have become an entirely different English poet. From the Tower of London between 1534 and 1535, More writes this stanza on the same topic with the same rhyme scheme,¹³³ titled "Davy the Diser":

Longe was I ladye lucke your seruyng man,
And nowe haue I loste agayne all that I gate,
Wherefore whan I thinke on you now and than,
And in my mynde remember this or that,
You may not blame me though I beshrewe your catte,
But in faythe I blisse you agayn a thowsand tymes,
For lendinge me nowe some laisour to make rymes.

Unlike the early "Fortune Verses," this poem is all one sentence, and within the seven lines of varied grammatical structure are biography, reflection, and humor. As the story narrated drops from optimistic to disparaging in the first two lines, the interpretation of the poem rests on the conclusion of his reflection, which one may expect to take on a justifiably beshrewing tone, coming from the author of the previous lines. Thus the entire poem rests on the surprising final turn, and the closing word "rymes" may earn a chuckle when the reader realizes that the preceding lines have been the good fortune that the narrator receives in the

¹³³ Chaucer's seven line rhyme royal (Tucker 16)

end. Thus it seems that after writing hundreds of influential Latin epigrams, More's own English poetry has become epigrammatic.

Leaving an Inheritance

Beyond the quotations and translations by anthologizers and amateur poets, More's direct influence on Renaissance poetry becomes harder to trace. This is not to suggest that the value of his poetry is limited to the training of emergent writers and does not apply as English poetry develops in the next two centuries, but simply that greater poets tend to hide their sources more effectively. Nevertheless, in his crafting of elegant language, his commitment to the credibility of poetry, and his pedagogy of the merry jest, More's contribution to literature extends into the works of some of the greatest English poets. Not only distinguished epigrammatists, but also celebrated sonneteers, epic writers, and dramatists demonstrate familiarity with the proverbs and jests that More bequeathed to his countrymen, and thus his commitment to elegance, fidelity, and wit replicate themselves in the proceeding generations. Indeed, however forgotten and obscure the *Epigrammata* may be today, its influence was certainly appreciated during the most pivotal years in the development of early modern literature, and it may not be unwarranted to suggest that without More there would be no Shakespeare. At any rate, by catching wisps of the *Epigrammata* among the renowned works of authors from Sir John Harington to William Shakespeare himself, we may appreciate our own indebtedness to the epigrams of Sir Thomas More.

We must be careful, however, not to imagine his impact into existence simply because we expect to be there. It would be easy to suggest, for example, his influence on his own niece's husband, John Heywood. While T. K. Whipple surmises that in Heywood's time "National taste was not yet ready for the classical epigram" (Whipple 310), his proverbs and wordplay certainly attempt the brevity of diction that his famous uncle's poetry exercised. One could imagine More agreeing with his declaration that, "Who wéenth him self wise, wisdom wotth him a fool" (Heywood 177), and appreciating the epigram that urges the marriage "Of wit, will, and wisdom" (Heywood 96), and both kinsmen have epigrams at the expense "Of a stepmother" (Heywood 97). More directly, it is tempting to suggest that, "On Breaking Wind,"¹³⁴ one of More's examples of boyish body-humor, finds itself replicated in fewer lines in Heywood's "Of blowyng":

What winde can there blow, that doth not some man please?
A fart in the blowyng doth the blower ease. (Heywood 114)

However, Heywood's epigram has a decidedly different moral than More's, which is actually among his many epigrams of kingship:

A fart destroys you, if you keep it too long in your belly. In the same way, if you dispatch it, it can save you. If a fart is able to save and to kill, might it be that a fart is as powerful as dreaded kings?¹³⁵

If Heywood's epigram is an imitation of his uncle's, it is an unsuccessful one, losing More's ultimate theme in his brevity. In More's, the emphasis is on the power of a mere *crepitus* to

¹³⁴ *In efflatum uentris* (no. 39)

¹³⁵ *Te crepitus perdit, nimium si uentre retentes. / Te propere emissus seruat item crepitus. / Si crepitus seruare potest et perdere, nunquid / Terrificis crepitus regibus aequa potest?*

kill or save a man, comparing this power to dreaded kings and thereby comparing a king's power to a mere fart. Heywood's lines do not have that implication; rather, they seem to be Heywood's own attempt to adapt one of Erasmus' proverbs from the *Adagia*: "Everyone thinks his own fart smells sweet,"¹³⁶ a proverb More himself deploys in his letter to Martin Dorp.¹³⁷ Since this epigram is the most directly Morean of Heywood's epigrams, we must conclude that, while the kinsmen are part of the same dialogue and passive influence is unavoidable, Heywood's epigrams do not attempt a close imitation of More's.

Sir John Harington's epigrams, on the other had, make no attempt to hide some of their Morean sources. In fact, *The Metamorphosis of Ajax* uses this very epigram, though a Greek one, to justify the "wanton and vaine toyes (if they be all wanton and vain)" (Harington *New* 99) of the rude wit of Martial. Among the epigrams of "pleasant Sir Thomas" that Harington cites to justify his rude humor is the epigram about the *crepitus*, which he translates thus:

To breake a litle wind, sometime ones life doth save,
For want of vent behind, some folke their ruine have:
A powre it hath therefore, of life, and death expresse:
A king can cause no more, a cracke doth do no less (Harington *New* 100).

Harington makes explicit what is in More's version implicit: the reversal of the comparison that deflates the power of kings to mere "wind." Perhaps for him clarity of the moral is more

¹³⁶ *Suus cuique crepitus bene olet* (III iv 2).

¹³⁷ But so flattered is a man by his own reason and so well do his own farts smell to him that while we furrow our brow at other men's jokes and do not endure their roughness we embrace our own that are not as clever and are more sharp. (*Sed ita sua cuique blanditur ratio tam bene suus cuique crepitus olet, ut quum ad aliorum iocos frontem contrahimus et uelut asperos non patimur, nostros neque magis festiuos, et magis mordaces amplectamur*) (Kinney 111).

important: while More seems to assume and challenge the interpretive capacity of his readers, Harington is defending the worth of his poetry against the delicacies of his readers. But in that defense, which also applies to another translation of More that recommends the covering of the odor of garlic with dung,¹³⁸ we hear echoes of the dedication of *The Praise of Folly* that insists upon lightness and foolery as a means of instruction, and of More's epigrams that earn Brixius' criticism of rudeness in the *Antimorus*. Thus Harington gives evidence not only of reading More, but having learned from him.

This education is manifest not only in his direct translations, but also in Harington's presentation of himself as a poet. Indeed, although the idea is not originally More's, the preservation of the *fides* of the poet at the heart of More's dispute with Brixius shows up as Harington introduces his poetry. In the opening poem of his first book, he promises "That his Poetrie shall be no fictions, but meere truths" (Harington *Letters* 149), a familiar enough declaration for poets from Martial himself through the present day. But it must be remembered that when More criticizes Brixius of "envying art its own glory,"¹³⁹ both humanists are conscious that their dispute will have ramifications for the direction of poetry over the next few generations. Eighty years later, Harington's epigrams wage a similar battle against poets who deceive with showy poetry that over-reaches its author.¹⁴⁰ Poems such as

¹³⁸ If you of Onions would the scent expell, / Eat garlick, that shal drown the onions smell; / But against garlikes savour, at one word, / I know but one receipt. whats that? go looke (Harington *New* 99).

¹³⁹ *arti prorsus ipsi suam inuidens gloriam* (Miller 614).

¹⁴⁰ My Mall, the former verses this may teach you, / That som deceiue, some are deceiu'd by showes. / For this verse in your praise, so smooth that goes, / With one false point and stop, did ouer-reach you (Harington *Letters* 162).

“Of Plaine dealing” that states, “You loue not to heare truth, nor I to flatter” (Harington *Letters* 170) suggest that the victory in the More/Brixius debate among English poets went to More. Harington is by no means unique in his appreciation for honest poetry; John Owen’s Latin epigrams, for example, present a speaker who is told he cannot be a poet “because I speak the truth.”¹⁴¹ For a while at least, English poets were concerned with the credibility and veracity of poetry above its power to move.

The credibility of the poet is especially important for More and Harington, both of whom, according to Gerard Kilroy, use epigrams as an indirect way to instruct monarchs and criticize tyrants. Kilroy counts one-tenth of More’s epigrams being devoted to topics of kingship and tyranny, which Harington admires, though his muse warns his friends “that no man should follow Sir Th. Mores humour, to write such Epigrams as he wrate, except he had the spirit, to speake two such apothegmes as he spake” (Kilroy 34). Nevertheless, Kilroy argues that “Harington follows More in offering advice to the King” and “echoes More’s wider concern for justice in the kingdom” (Kilroy 33), although he would rather end up like Heywood who “scaped hanging with his mirth” (Kilroy 34). While More’s epigrams about Henry VIII, like Harington’s about James I, are laudatory and flattering, they “constitute a reminder of the high hopes” (Kilroy 32) for their respective monarchs based on the principles expressed in the epigrams about wolfish tyrants. Perhaps the *Epigrammata*, by its

¹⁴¹ *Quia vera loquor* (Owen 18). Jesus had likewise told the crowds in John 8:45, “But if I say the truth, you do not believe me” (*Ego autem si veritatem dico, non creditis mihi*).

establishment within the English stockpiles of intellectual and popular commonplaces,¹⁴² allows More's ideals an inhibited resonance in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

While his theological treatises can be censored as the words of a papist executed for treason, a mere *epigramma iocosum* does not appear threatening, and indeed the *Epigrammata* is reprinted in London as late as 1638. If Kilroy is right to treat More's epigrams as an indirect address to Henry VIII, Harington's indicate that later epigrammatists were echoing More's approach to monarchy in English poetry.

Indeed, even Ben Jonson's polished epigrams may indicate some Morean influences in their conception. Whipple's assertion that the English master "was not a follower of any other English epigrammatist" (Whipple 386) may only apply to English as a language rather than a nationality; as mentioned earlier, Jonson's epigram "On English Monsieur" (LXXXVIII) echoes the wit of More's "On an Englishman affecting the French language,"¹⁴³ and considering More's popularity it seems likely that Jonson was familiar enough with this epigram to adapt it into English. Both begin by going into detail regarding the man's French clothing, specifically mentioning his hat,¹⁴⁴ scarf,¹⁴⁵ shoes,¹⁴⁶ and garter.¹⁴⁷ From there they

¹⁴² More's epigrams had become common enough that when Sir John Davies, the poet through whom "the English epigram comes into its own" (Whipple 338), writes his eulogy "Of Tobacco," he assumes his readers to be familiar with the epigram about onions, garlic, and dung enough that he does not bother explaining it: "And though ill breaths were by it [tobacco] but confounded, / Yet that vile Medicine it doth far excell, / Which by sir Thomas Moore hath bin propounded, / For this is thought a gentleman-like smell (Nemser 50).

¹⁴³ *In Anghum Gallicae linguae affectatorem* (no. 95)

¹⁴⁴ Jonson only uses the word once; More lists his *Filtro*, *bireto*, and *pileo*.

¹⁴⁵ Somewhat different from More's *lacemulas*

¹⁴⁶ *calceis*

¹⁴⁷ *subligare*

go to different insults to French behavior; More emphasizes their cruelty to servants, and Jonson the licentiousness incarnated in the “French disease.” Jonson, however, concludes by returning to jokes about French clothing, while the wittiest line of More’s epigram comes at the end when he describes the accent the Englishman affects:

with open palate in a sharp sort of sound, in the way of a woman’s effeminate chatter, but stammering pleasantly of course as if the mouth were full of beans, emphasizing those letters which the foolish French avoid as the cock avoids the fox or the sailor the cliffs.”¹⁴⁸

He wittily manages to insult both the French accent and the Englishman’s poor imitation of it by concluding that “French alone he speaks with an English accent.”¹⁴⁹ Though Jonson is too much his own craftsman to plagiarize More’s wit, the implication is there in his opening couplet which points out “That his whole body should speak French, not he.” The ridiculousness of both the language and the clothing are central to both epigrams. Actually, with Jonson’s addition of the “French disease,” Sir John Davies’ epigram “In Floram” may serve as a link between More’s and epigram and that of Jonson. He asserts that Flora appears to have the “French disease,” though she does not bear the normal signs of the ailments on her body, but rather “speaks a little through her nose” (Davies 157). Davies manages to take stabs at the licentiousness that Jonson criticizes and the accent that More mocks. The affinity of the three epigrams suggests that the epigrammatists are in

¹⁴⁸ *Palato hiante acutulo quodam sono, / Et foeminae instar garrientis molliter, / Sed ore pleno, tanquam id impleant fabae, / Balbutiens uidelicet suaviter / Pressis quibusdam literis, Galli quibus / Ineptientes abstinent, nihil secus, / Quam uulpe gallus, rupibusque nauita.*

¹⁴⁹ *Gallicam solam sonat Britannice.*

conversation with each other, and thus Jonson may not be as void of native sources as Whipple suggests.

As More's epigrams continued to "flie over all Europe for their wit and conceit" (Harington *New* 99), their influence in other genres becomes harder to trace. They are undoubtedly still on the minds of the greatest authors of English literature; Sir Philip Sidney, for example, makes a brief reference to one of the epigrams in the 1590 *Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*. It is not an important moment in the text: Damætas commissions a painter for some symbolic work, and being asked why he did not include captions to explain his obscure meanings, he answers "that it was indeede like the painter, that sayeth in his picture, Here is the dog, and here is the Hare" (Sidney 298). The reference is to one of More's epigrams (no. 186) about a bad painting in which a hare and a dog are depicted so similarly that no one can tell the difference. When faced with the problem, the painter responds by supplying captions beneath the ambiguous creatures. Sidney's reference does not add anything to his overall story or to More's joke, but it shows that More's epigrams were familiar to authors and readers outside the genre of epigrams in some of the most significant works of English literature.

The primary problem facing the exploration into the broader territory of English literature is that of compounding the variables of language and genre. But even if the influence of specific words and phrases is matter of mere conjecture, there are enough of these conjectures to be worth mentioning. After all, if we remove the variable of language and look only at More's English wit, there are some possible quotations in celebrated works

such as Edmund Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. In William Roper's *Life of Syr Thomas More*, when More is requested to attend the coronation of Anne Boleyn, he explains his refusal to the messengers with an adapted story of Tiberius Caesar. The emperor made a certain crime punishable by death but exempted virgins from the penalty. When a virgin committed the offence and the council sat perplexed as to how they could punish her, one member finally provided the solution. "Why make you so much adoe, my lords, about so small a matter?" he asked. "Lett her first be deflowred, and after may she be deuoured" (Roper 96). After comparing the prospect of attending and defending the controversial coronation to the loss of virginity, More concludes, "Now, my lords, as for myself, it lyeth not in my power, but that they may deuoure me, but God being my good Lord, I will prouide so that they shall neuer deflower me" (Roper 97). Though the words were written twenty years after the event by Roper, we may still attribute the wit to his father-in-law from whom we would assume he heard many such quips. At any rate, when the same pairing of words appears in Book IV of the *Faerie Queene* as the Saluage Man captures virgins and "with his shamefull lust doth first deflowre, / And afterwards themselues doth cruelly deuoure" (IV.vii.12), it is More's wit that is evoked, whether or not they were his actual words. Though Spenser is certainly capable of coming up with his own witty couplings of rhymes, the epigrammatic quality of these lines indicates that More's wit has resonance in genres as disparate as epic, and we must not underrate its significance even as specific links become untraceable.

For example, while the frequent speculations of possible Morean influences in Shakespeare's lines are even more problematic, they may indicate that More's epigrams

furnished English literature with the Classical thought and wit that allowed Shakespeare to flourish. John Howard Marsden's *Philomorus* identifies several possible Shakespearean references to the *Epigrammata*, and Hudson adds a few others. Though individually they are weak, taken as a whole they are suggestive of More's broader influence on England's greatest dramatist. More's epigram "On fame and popular opinion"¹⁵⁰ that concludes with the witty couplet, "What does fame do for you? You may be praised by everyone, but a joint aches, what does fame do for you?"¹⁵¹ could be "an anticipation" (Hudson 45) of Falstaff's lines: "Can honour set to a leg? No. Or an arm? No. Or take away the grief of a wound? No. Honour hath no skill in surgery then? No" (*1 Henry IV*, V.i.131-3). Likewise, Hudson suggests that More's prayer for God to give what is good and withhold what is evil "whether asked or not"¹⁵² anticipates Menecrates' wisdom: "We, ignorant of ourselves, / Beg often our own harms, which the wise powers / Deny us for our good; so find we profit / By losing of our prayers" (*Antony and Cleopatra* II.i.5-8), a Stoic commonplace Hudson seems to credit More for accentuating. Marsden hears More's rendering of the English song that concludes, "Come, dreaded death, and free me from such great woes"¹⁵³ in Pistol's exclamation, "Then death rock me asleep, abridge my doleful days!" (*2 Henry IV*, II.iv.195), which, stretch though it may be, connects his Englishing of the epigrammatic tradition to its influence upon the greater body of literature (Marsden 216). Not only may More's epigrams influence Shakespeare; More's declaration that "I mourn the living, whom the fates disturb with the

¹⁵⁰ *De Gloria et populi iudicio* (no. 132)

¹⁵¹ *Quid tibi fama facit? toto lauderis ab orbe, / Articulus doleat, quid tibi fama facit?*

¹⁵² *seu nulla rogere* (no. 137)

¹⁵³ *Mors ades, et tantis horrida solue malis* (no. 81).

long fear of what is to come”¹⁵⁴ harkens to Milton’s “What need a man forestall his date of grief, / And run to meet what he would most avoid?” (Marsden 189). Though none of these suggest direct causal relationships, they indicate that authors such as Shakespeare and Milton take part in a conversation into which the *Epigrammata* brought England and for which it furnished space in its language.

In fact, if it is true that More’s epigrams argue for a particular direction of poetry away from the gratuitous sensationalism and mendacious polemics of Brixius toward a poetry that uses lightness and foolery to teach truth, drama may be a fitting place to end this investigation. In the collaborative manuscript play *The Booke of Sir Thomas Moore* written by several hands identified as Anthony Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, and possibly William Shakespeare, More is remembered on the Elizabethan stage for wisdom that is always cloaked in wit. At the center of the drama, More commissions players to enact a play titled “The mariage of witt and wisdom,” because, he says, “To marie wit to wisdom, asks some cunning, / Many haue witt, that may come short of wisdom” (Greg 31). This is the theme around which the entire drama revolves, from More’s opening scene in which he procures pardon for a thief named Lifter¹⁵⁵ with “a merrie iest” (Greg 7) right before calming a mob “wth breath of gravitie not dangerous blowes” (Greg 73), until he spouts out a couple Latin proverbs and jests about his “headlesse arrand” as he approaches the scaffold in the final scene (Greg 63). Many of these jests come from Thomas Stapleton’s *Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Thomas More* (1588), such as the one in which the jailor asks him for his

¹⁵⁴ *Defleo uiuos, / Quos urunt longo fata futura metu* (no. 55).

¹⁵⁵ An English version of the name of the thief in More’s epigram no. 117, *Clepticus*.

uppermost garment and he responds by handing him his hat, an anecdote that is repeated in jestbooks all the way into the eighteenth century.¹⁵⁶ Peter Milward suggests that the most infamous of these jests, when More asks for help up the scaffold and adds, “As for my coming downe, / let me alone, Ile looke to that my selfe” (Greg 63), is echoed by the blind Gloucester as he asks Edgar to lead him up the cliff of Dover and adds, “From that place / I shall no leading need” (Milward 31). Whether or not Shakespeare thought of More when he penned those lines, this collaborative drama in the hands of some of the greatest Elizabethan playwrights demonstrates the legacy of the *Epigrammata* without being tied to any specific poems or phrases. More’s epigrams sharpened the wit of the English language while drawing its literature into the wisdom of the ancients; it is fitting that English dramatists would remember him as embodying the marriage of Wit and Wisdom.

¹⁵⁶ It is, for example, listed among other Morean jests in *Joe Miller’s Jests* of 1759.

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