Sir Thomas More, Humanist and Hero: a Man for All Ages.

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Abstract
Thomas More has appeared in diverse works from the sixteenth to twentieth century; these works have usually treated him as a model of integrity and conscience whose love of truth made him a touchstone for judging a panoply of others. More's own century viewed him in conflicting ways. Tudor apologists--Hall, Holinshed, and Foxe--were critical of More's wit and treatment of heretics and deemed him prideful, whereas the recusants like Roper and Harpsfield pictured More loyal Londoner, devoted father, humanist, and man of conscience. Sixteenth century treatments culminate in those of Ro. Ba. and Munday. Munday's Thomas More, an essentially Protestant play, lionizes More, thus consummating flattering treatments begun by Holinshed. By the seventeenth century, traditions had crystalized; thus the London drama the History of...Cromwell briefly applauds More as does Shakespeare's Henry VIII. That treatment perseveres through Bacon's Apophthegms, wherein little Tudor zeal for attacking More survives. In fact, More's integrity dominates and endures in Baker, Winstanley, Fuller, and Aubrey. In the eighteenth century, Thomas Ward's popular Hudibrastic, England's Reformation, portrays More as avatar of goodness against whom King Henry falters. Addison and Prior also praise More, and Swift celebrates More's greatness in Gulliver's Travels and "Concerning Universal Hatred" by making him a standard for emulation. Whereas other epochs produced several dramatic profiles of More, the eighteenth century fostered but one: Hurdis's Thomas More, a dull play derivative of longstanding traditions. Lamb next briefly tarnished the image, because he could not comprehend More's treatment of heretics; however, in his Ecclesiastical Sonnets, Wordsworth celebrated More's "unbending" will. Southey then used More as one of two discussants in Colloquies who present a liberal political program designed by the poet, but that character is indistinguishable from the one transparently representing Southey. Dickens returned to common usage--More the touchstone--in his Child's History and measured that "royal pig" Henry against More's wit, wisdom, and goodness. The last nineteenth century author to devote considerable effort to More is Froude, who in his History and other works expressed strong Henrician partisanship and opposition to More's politics, but often treated More affirmatively, especially when examining his courage. Twentieth century popular novelists like Hibbert, Hackett, and Anthony and popular dramas like Anne of the Thousand Days have continued the traditions of previous epochs with few aberrations. Bolt's Man for All Seasons and Percy's Love in the Ruins are the contemporary contributions to this tradition, however. Bolt studies More's earthiness and sense of selfhood against the backdrop of family and court in a play objectifying the ascent of an opportunist and the decline of a man of conscience, but the audience is not permitted to overlook the warmth pervading the More family relationships. Walker Percy's novel depicts a modern namesake of Sir Thomas who shares his insistence upon a balance between religious sensibility and of secular life. This bad Catholic is convinced that he can restore balance with his invention, and eventually only prayer to his sainted ancestor saves his world from evil. For over four centuries he has captured near universal admiration because of his humanity, affection for life, generosity, and virtue. More's appeal is also linked to his humanistic studies which convinced him that man's privilege was to engage in an
intensive quest for happiness as a human, not as angel or beast. Happiness also obtains
from industria, and More opted for that life instead of the cloister. His steadfast
conscience exercised the most lasting appeal to writers, for it helped to formulate a
thematic construct portraying More for centuries since his death.

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