

Travis Curtright. *The One Thomas More*.

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The difficulties of responding to any of the masters of suspicion are considerable. This brand of hermeneutics tends to raise its suspicions by innuendo and to allege hidden motives for action. Since it often takes the absence of counterevidence as a confirmation of its allegation, this strategy puts a respondent at a great disadvantage. Too strong a response leaves the conviction that where there's smoke, there must be fire. But a reply that is too weak can give the impression that no defense is available. Guilty on either count.

Travis Curtright deftly navigates the shoals made up of these unpleasant alternatives. Like a veteran harbor pilot, he carefully outlines the charges against the integrity of Thomas More that are raised by the likes of G. R. Elton and John Guy and then argues for a more plausible interpretation of the data from More's life and writings. By tracing the shifts that can be observed in the currents of historical and

biographical scholarship on More, he explains why a number of writers have felt free to set the picture of a religious and humanist More over against a pragmatic and unscrupulous politician, as if there were more than a single figure under discussion. He battles against the notion that the ideological maneuvering sometimes at work have made the real Thomas More simply inaccessible.

Happily, Curtright's method does not yield to the temptation of giving tit for tat. Instead, he recalls More scholarship to the patterns of evidence and argument that make for a more reasonable verdict on the data invariably associated with a controversial figure. Above all, he contends for a unity within the career and writings of Thomas More and thereby provides an important corrective to the tendency to fragment More into a patchwork of irreconcilable tendencies or to abandon the field in reluctant skepticism about ever determining who the real Thomas More was.

Each of the chapters in this volume takes up one or several of More's major books and situates the important events of his life within the political and historical context that brought More to write them. This technique allows the author to examine not only the biographical and historical details of More's life and times, but also the application of deconstructive and iconoclastic strategies to his public actions and literary works during the past forty years of scholarship. The result is a well-balanced view of More's life and achievements that is achieved precisely by setting the record of contradictory critiques straight.

The opening chapter on More's *Life of Pico della Mirandola* (1504–10), for instance, explores the concerns of a young Thomas More with a charismatic humanist and recounts the evidence for seeing More even in his youth as able to discern the diverse movements of spirit that preoccupied Pico. The following chapter on the maturation of More's mind through writing his *History of Richard III* (1514–18) details the political astuteness that would mark the career of More the statesman. It also permits Curtright to exhibit the way in which More shared the humanist fascination with history, biography, political good sense, and prudent reservation of judgment. Much as More learned about politics and statecraft from his reflections upon the life of Richard, his decision not to publish either the English or the Latin version of this work testifies to what the title of the chapter calls "humanist realism." Here, as elsewhere, Curtright joins to his focus on More's life and writings a sophisticated review of the reasoning offered by the critics who would split the one More into many.

Like the chapter on More's *Utopia*, the chapters on the periods of More's life that are anchored by his *Dialogue concerning Heresies* (1529) and by the *Debellation of Salem and Byzance* (1533) offer a similar program: an insightful reading of More's writings as an entrance into his mind, a plausible account of the inner unity of the positions More took in his books and in his actions as a public official, and a courteous but firm critique of the readings that try to fragment More and that risk making him inaccessible or unintelligible. A masterful survey in all respects.

JOSEPH W. KOTERSKI, SJ
Fordham University