

Gerard Wegemer. *Young Thomas More and the Arts of Liberty*.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xi + 210 pp. \$85. ISBN: 978-0-521-19653-6.

The words of Wegemer's title are carefully chosen, and they suggest a hedge against the teleological pull of the life of a martyr. Wegemer concentrates in the first half of his book upon the life and writings of More's first three decades, before the *Utopia*, so that when Wegemer turns to the works of More's prime, he has opened a window of rich and surprising interpretation informed by the study of More's world before the crisis of belief and state precipitated by the violent schisms following 1517.

Wegemer exercises his historical curiosity upon the young More's cautious and studied exploration of the idealistic formation of man and state through the humane arts of liberty, yet his study focuses upon the conditions of these earlier writings rather than upon their relation to the events and works that followed them, and Wegemer ends his book by leaving the question of that relation open. Wegemer does not ignore the later More, but frames the book's interpretation in the context of youth. He strives with a deft and even touch to avoid the fallacies of *post hoc*, and his own palpable idealism is thus tried by his intellectual method.

The first three chapters trace More's understanding of the humane arts of liberty through his idealistic classical atavism, relating More's understanding of the aspirations, challenges, and failures of Cicero and Seneca in their programs of humane letters, the good man, peace, and political good to the fortunes of Roman *respublica* and tyranny, while at the same time locating young More's reading of the allegory of classical history upon the uneven moral map of European politics in the early sixteenth century.

Chapters 4 through 9 present nuanced and provocative readings of More's earliest works: the English poems, the translation of Lucian, the *Life of Pico*, the *History of Richard III*, and the epigrams. His reading of the *Life of Pico*, a partial and altered translation of a posthumous biography of Pico della Mirandola by his nephew, deftly demonstrates how More's interpretation of this philosophical renegade intersects More's youthful Charterhouse years of vocational uncertainty and family resistance, Pico's promise and failure being a model of the dangers of philosophical esotericism that the young More relates to other forms of moral error, including his own. Wegemer's reading of the political poems of the Latin epigrams aligns the project of good letters and humane understanding against the cruel trajectory of monarchy unchecked by citizens practicing the arts of liberty, a crisis Wegemer, like John Guy, relates to the warlike policies of young King Henry VIII well in advance of sectarian revolt.

Wegemer's reading of the *History of Richard III* in a subsequent chapter similarly aligns the project of Sallustian narrative with the challenges of the English state in times fearfully stained by civil war and monarchical reaction to it. And his study of *Utopia* suggests how a powerful model of ideologically sanitized tyranny can fool even those wise men of letters who so enthusiastically subscribe to More's project and cast benign and knowing glances in the direction of Thomas Morus.

Wegemer's final, yet proleptic, chapters, "The Un-Utopian Thomas More Family Portrait" and "The Arts of Liberty," are a double and allegorical coda to his stories of young More, and suggest a mature reading of the mature man, who recognizes that stories do not always end as the teller first thought. Those who look at the More family portraits from the frames provided by this book will learn something new because Wegemer has such wisdom in discovering old facts, like what books the sitters have been reading.

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