

—— Per Sivefors, »Surveillance, Control and Sir Thomas More«

—— A B S T R A C T ——

It is hardly controversial to say that the Elizabethan play *Sir Thomas More* (1592–93?) is insistently preoccupied with issues of surveillance, control and punishment. In its depiction of the Ill May Day Riots in 1517 and the subsequent downfall of Thomas More, the play represents both More’s role as surveyor of the crowd and a victim of royal surveillance and punishment. The play in other words invites discussion of latter-day theories of control and justice such as Michel Foucault’s in *Discipline and Punish*. However, in its twists and turns of plot *Sir Thomas More* transcends generalizations about penal justice. While not staging a “pre-panoptic” system of control, the play frequently but ironically thematizes surveillance as an instrument of power, but it falls short of suggesting that surveillance produces pliable individuals. Instead, *Sir Thomas More* comes close to suggesting repentance rather than retribution as a model of justice, though this model is also made problematic through the character of Thomas More. In other words, the play can be said to defy generalizations about punishment as represented in the theories of Foucault as well as in later research.

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■ — In crucial respects, *Sir Thomas More* (1592-93) and its history as a play can be said to embody issues of observation and control. As is well known, the manuscript of *Sir Thomas More* features annotations and corrections by the Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, making the manuscript a goldmine of information on censorship in early modern theatre – a fact confirmed by the extensive research carried out on the topic since the 1980s.¹ In other words, the history of the play itself bears witness to the importance of control in early modern literature and culture. Furthermore, and also reflecting the theatrical context, the play is only preserved in a single copy at the British Library in the hand of six different writers, one of whom is frequently thought to be William Shakespeare.² Hence, the manuscript reflects another and different facet of control, i.e. how authors and theatre companies controlled – or did not control – the texts they wrote and performed.

However, while acknowledging these contextual and historical aspects, criticism in recent years has become more attentive to the play's contents, its themes and engagement with wider historical contexts. For example, *Sir Thomas More* makes the controversial move of staging a Catholic saint as its protagonist, and has consequently been discussed from the point of view of Reformation politics.³ Other studies have attempted to juxtapose the issue of collaborative authorship with the more thematic aspects of citizenship and civic unrest as they are represented in the play.⁴ While such studies are clearly relevant for an understanding of how control and observation are embodied in *Sir Thomas More*, they have not directly addressed to what extent such concepts are thematized in the play. Basically a chronicle of the rise to power and subsequent fall and death of Thomas More (and based on biographical and historical material on the protagonist found in Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Nicholas Harpsfield's biography on More), the play is preoccupied for most of its first half with the Ill May Day riots in 1517, a series of protests against foreigners living in London in which More played a role as controller of the masses. It then moves on to More's own trial in the 1530s for refusing to comply with the Act of Supremacy where More is ironically destroyed by the forces he has served. In short, the play can be said to be extensively preoccupied with observation and punishment, and it is this pre-occupation that will be at the focus of the present discussion.⁵

Focusing on the character of Thomas More and his dealings with crime and justice, what this essay will suggest is that More goes from being an observer to an observed – from a wise and witty representative of state power who is an observer and controller of events to a controlled, and observed, entity in the play. He is thus by and large defined by his relation to royal power, although as Lucy Munro points out, the monarch is both absent from the stage and »a heavy off-stage presence«. ⁶ More in other words seems entrapped by the very visual means of control that he embodies at the beginning. To be sure, in its ironic twists and turns of plot, *Sir Thomas More* would make any neat generalizations on power problematic. What is unquestionable, however, is the play's extensive thematization of control through visual means, through watching and surveying. Moreover, the notion of punishment represented in *Sir Thomas More* reflects current scholarly views on sixteenth-century culture, according to which repentance rather than retributive justice had become a central concern in a legal context. ⁷ From such perspective, the outcome of observation – be it More's observation of the criminals he disciplines or the more elusive monarch's observation of More himself – is ultimately a focus on the art of dying well rather than on retribution. At the same time, the play does not conclude in an image of the repentant wrongdoer, for More himself remains unrepentant at the end of the play. Indeed, the play itself ends on a note that suggests the ultimate fallibility of control through visual means.

To be sure, issues of surveillance are central to *Sir Thomas More* from its first line. As modern editors have pointed out, the play is notable for the number of characters it features. ⁸ It is almost as if the dimensions of the play themselves suggest the problems of keeping large groups of people under control. Indeed, such problems are certainly a conspicuous feature of the opening scene of the play, a street scene in which a man named Francis de Bard, identified as a »Lombard« in the play, attempts to abduct a woman named Doll Williamson. »[H]aling her by the arm«, as the stage direction says, de Bard declares: »thou art my prize and I plead purchase of thee«, to which Doll retorts, »Away ye rascal! I am an honest plain carpenter's wife [...] whatsoever is mine scorns to stoop to a stranger« (1.1.2–7). ⁹ In other words, foreigners are depicted as having uncontrollable desires. But the response to de Bard's behavior is no less unruly as the scene quickly explodes into a series of xenophobic exclamations by the surrounding people: »It is hard when Englishmen's patience must be thus jettied on by strangers, and they not dare to revenge their own wrongs« (1.1.25–27). ¹⁰ In short, what we have here is a riot scene in which protests quickly result in proclamations against foreigners, who, according to the ringleader John Lincoln, »eat the bread of fatherless children, and take the bread from all the

artificers« (1.1.111–13). From the beginning, then, the scene can be said to telescope a development in which the basic control mechanisms of society collapse. At the end of the scene, the heated street fight has evolved into a full-scale plot against the foreigners, and Doll invites the leaders to »go and drink together, and swear true secrecy upon our life« (1.1.136–37).

After this expository scene, the action quickly switches to a parallel action: The Court of Sessions, in which Thomas More participates as Sheriff (in fact undersheriff) in a trial against a pickpocket, appropriately named Lifter. The thief is found guilty, but More manages to jokingly prove that the crime is due to the foolishness of the plaintiff. More demonstrates this by having the pickpocket remove the purse of the justice, Suresby, suggesting that opportunity makes the thief and thus, one should be clement to the thief since the fault is not just on his side:

— What makes so many fond pilferers and felons
 But these fond baits that foolish people lay
 To tempt the needy miserable wretch. (1.2 .32–34)

More is the extension of the controlling power of the monarch, declaring himself to be »true subject to my king« (1.2.69), but in effect he also becomes a literal manager of the stage action as he instructs Lifter to steal the purse so everyone can see how easily it is done: »All that I aim at is a merry jest: / Perform it, Lifter, and expect my best« (1.2.76–77). Lifter obeys More and gets his freedom, but not because he might serve any other productive ends than proving More's point. There is little suggestion of an intention to reform Lifter into a dutiful citizen; his name is simply »as his profession is« (1.2.10). By implication, More is portrayed as a person of »wit and wisdom« – something which the play repeatedly underscores. It also reveals him as a stage manager who is capable of turning the action into a demonstration of control. He becomes a »supervisor« in a literal sense of watching people from above and manipulating them into proving his point about clemency.

But supervision is also a troubled activity in the play, as the previous buildup with the crowd scene has shown. Indeed, when the news of the riots reaches the court one of the receivers, the Earl of Shrewsbury, considers the events in the words of a worried eyewitness:

— My searching eye did never entertain
 A more distracted countenance of grief
 Than I have late observed
 In the displeasèd commons of the city. (1.3.5–8)

The perspective is from the observing rulers, of course, but the »searching eye« finds nothing but trouble. Since the rioters

have broken into Newgate Prison and freed a number of people, action has to be taken quickly and the delinquents brought to justice. More is commissioned to placate the crowd, and having been set up in the play as the humane and wise controller of things, he insists that they be treated gently. In a scene frequently credited to Shakespeare, More shows that humanist eloquence prevails over the crowd; as a result, they lay down their weapons and »must yield to go to several prisons« (2.3.162). The phrase »to several prisons« is then quickly repeated (2.3.165), suggesting the urgency with which the prisoners have to be spread out across various places in order to control them. The result confirms the stability of the system, with the king as an impersonal instance of surveillance: »life and death hangs on our sovereign's eye« (2.3.229).

The next episode in the play is a gallows scene in which clemency and justice are sustained through the means of controlling the field of vision of the crowd. John Lincoln, the leader, is brought in together with his accomplices and climbs up on the gallows. After a speech of repentance, he jumps off and dies. Doll Williamson, who is also part of the group, asks to go next, although news of their pardon reaches them before she is executed. Arguably, the scene does not represent the separation of the condemned from society so much as their successful re-integration into it. When the execution happens, John Lincoln jumps off entirely by his own will and there is no sense of violence inflicted upon his body by anyone else. He is entirely aware of the justice of the punishment: »I was the foremost man in this rebellion / And I the foremost that must die for it« (2.4.48–49). Doll Williamson, true to character, protests against the Sheriff's treatment of the prisoners (»I would praise his honesty much more / If he had kept his word and saved our lives«, 2.4.103–04), but she still has no problem accepting her fate. As Katherine Royer has recently argued, »the sixteenth century ushered in the Golden Age of the Good Death on the Scaffold in the execution narrative«; that is, »the concept of reformatory justice [...] began to challenge the retributivist discourse of the scaffold in Tudor England«. ¹¹ In accordance with such discourse, it can be claimed that Lincoln's is an exemplary death, a model of how a man should behave when shown on the gallows. For a crowd »whose discipline is riot« (2.3.121), a crowd who literally have turned society upside down, this seems to be a remarkably non-retributive sense of justice. On the whole, the amount of sympathy with the crowd that the play expresses is hard to grasp clearly; as Tracey Hill has argued, the revised additions to the manuscript seem to downplay the positive sides of the conflict so that »the treatment of the unrest becomes less radical«. ¹² Nonetheless, the rebels are treated with a degree of sympathy in the play, although the system as represented by More is shown

to be lenient even while the causes of the leniency may be pragmatism as much as inherent mildness. In any case, whatever the causes of the approach taken by More and the authorities, visualization is key to the successful outcome of their campaign. In his speech to the rioters, he paints a lively picture of the fate of strangers who ask for compassion, and thus »makes his listeners *see* the strangers, acknowledge their misery, and imagine themselves in their position«. ¹³ More's oration relies on verbal skill in conjuring up the strangers and he thus controls the field of vision of his listeners: what they see is clearly the result of his ability to persuade. In other words, More's capability of exerting control is embodied in emphatically visual terms.

But in the end, the play's exploration of visual control amounts to a series of more ironic perspectives on the protagonist and his associations with royal power. Reflecting early modern biographies on More fairly closely, the play in its second half depicts the series of events and the conflict with Henry VIII that leads to More's execution. Here the play gradually turns the tables on More and inverts his position, from having had the power of visualization in his hand to becoming himself an observed person and subject to punishment. In this process, observation is sustained as a significant theme. Act 3 is notable for its complex stage action, featuring a play in the play that is staged in front of More's household with More as a participant and actor. The scene elaborates on More's gifts as a scholar and as wise and witty head of his household. Even Erasmus of Rotterdam figures early in the act and More is pointed out to him by The Earl of Surrey, who declares, as if pulling a curtain, »Now you shall view the honourablest scholar [...] the worthiest counsellor that tends our state« (3.1.139–41). At the same time More is clearly an observer in his own right, for his study is

the general watch of England:

In it the prince's safety and the peace
That shines upon our commonwealth are forged
By loyal industry. (3.1.142–45)

Audience and Erasmus alike are treated to the view of More from a theatrical distance – the watcher watched, as it were. The perspective is reinforced later in the act, when a banquet is held in More's household and a troupe of actors enter and ask for permission to put on a play. Permission duly granted, the troupe provides a choice of plays and More's attention is caught by the title »The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom«. This was the actual title of a play from the 1560s, but it also seems to be an apt description of More as a protagonist. ¹⁴ In the rest of the scene, More intervenes in the stage business and

comes to occupy a sort of in-between space between the play in the play, the audience in the play and the audience in the theatre (probably a fictitious one, too, since *Sir Thomas More* never seems to have been performed until modern times).¹⁵ As a pseudo-director of the play in the play, More is also an actor in the play about him, and he thus becomes an observer and observed at the same time. To be sure, *Sir Thomas More* shares its metatheatrical dimension with several other early modern plays such as *Hamlet* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What makes *Sir Thomas More* stand out is that its metatheatricality is invoked in a legal context of surveying the country. As a »general watch of England«, More is not just a stage manager; his gaze is politicized throughout the act.

Ironically, in the next act More's status as controller is displaced in the direction of More as the target of observation. More may sustain the idea of himself as the benevolent surveyor of the realm from his desk: »Upon this little board is daily scanned / The health and preservation of the land« (4.1.15–16), and he further underlines the visual character of his loyal endeavor in adding that »our toil and careful watching brings the king / In league with slumbers, to which peace doth sing« (4.1.19–20). At this point, however, More's status as observer has begun to crumble. His way of referring to himself in the plural may also suggest that he sees himself as part of a collective »we« ruling England. Yet this is the point at which his conflict with the king comes to a head, due to his refusal to sign the Act of Supremacy. The result is house arrest:

————— you shall straight depart
Unto your house at Chelsea, till you know
Our sovereign's further pleasure. (4.1.91–93)

As previously suggested, however, the king is very much reduced to a shadow in the play. In terms of visibility, the king becomes an almost disembodied watching instance that may be mentioned frequently but is itself unseen, absent in body but ever-present as a controlling force. In a dream retold by More's wife in Act 4, More and his wife are out in a boat on the Thames:

——— Methought 'twas night,
And that the king and queen went on the Thames
In barges to hear music. My lord and I
Were in a little boat, methought – Lord, Lord,
What strange things live in slumbers! – and being near,
We grappled to the barge that bare the king. (4.2.10–15)

But this is all in vain, as »the violence of the stream did sever us / Quite from the golden fleet« (4.2.18–19) and instead their boat

stood still
 Just opposite the Tower, and there it turned
 And turned about, as when a whirlpool sucks
 The circled waters. (4.2.22–25)

The dream obviously serves as a premonition of More's subsequent fate. But it also underscores how the protagonist is removed from the physical proximity of the king and instead ends up opposite the prison-house, the impersonal representation of the controlling power of the monarch. More's vessel »turns and turns about«, underscoring his lack of control and the visual dimension of his fall. His status is that of the exposed one, seen and hence subjected, killed as it were by the very gaze of the king's stony and inflexible embodiment, the Tower.

The remaining action in the play focuses on More's imprisonment in that same Tower, during which various courtiers and members of his household visit him, trying to persuade him – in vain – to change his mind. His cell becomes a lens through which he is watched: »What square observance / Lives in a little room!«, More's son-in-law Roper exclaims, as if punning on »observance« of rules and the »observing« of More. »Those men that stand on tiptoe smile to see / Him pawn his fortunes« (4.4.13–14), Roper adds, also suggesting a pun on metaphorical and literal senses of the expression (eager to gain power, but also literally watching the imprisoned More). To be sure, there is a visual dimension to More's imprisonment, but it is not the force of disciplining powers that reach More from the outside. He is, as suggested by the play (and the biographies the playwrights drew on), entirely at peace with himself.

But if the last acts of *Sir Thomas More* do not end up with surveillance as a viable option, they also to some extent eschew public ritual and execution. Of course, the historical More was subjected to the physical punishment of beheading, but the play does not stage the public spectacle itself. Unlike in the previous execution scene with John Lincoln and Doll Williamson, there is now a hangman whom More jocosely instructs to »take heed thou cutst not off my beard« (5.4.99), but the scene itself, and the play, ends with More going up to the block on »the east side« (5.4.103) of the courtyard. At the same time More's death is »openly presented as a theatrical event« in which the audience watches More, just like the people around More watch him and try to understand what his reasons might be.¹⁶ It is true that we find out very little about More's inward reasons; as Susannah Monta argues, the play even uses More's joyfulness in the face of fate »to hide the inwardness of its protagonist, and thus to conceal the religiously divisive reasons for More's death«. ¹⁷ More is an opaque entity, impervious to control through the human gaze. At the same time he does not conform to sixteenth-century notions of repentance. The death of More cannot be understood

as concerning »the reformation of his soul and reputation and his return to the community of good Christians«, which Royer sees as central to execution in the sixteenth century.¹⁸ After all, More was a Catholic saint and hence, from the perspective of late Elizabethan Anglicanism, *not* a »good Christian«. To be sure, he is an example of the art of dying well since he faces death with equanimity, as witnessed by his exit line »Our birth to heaven should be thus: without fear« (5.4.118).¹⁹ Still, he dies unrepentant, and the play, perhaps understandably, stops short of examining the reasons why he does so.

It is perhaps in line with this evasiveness that observation seems entirely given up towards the end of the play. In his final vision of elevation to heaven, above imprisonment, More transcends the network of seeing and observing that the play has been so preoccupied with. He has previously praised his cell as a place where »public care / Gags not the eyes of slumber« (4.4.13–14), suggesting that eyes are now for sleep more than observing. At this point in the play, he even hints at giving up earthly vision altogether:

— There is a thing within me, that will raise
And elevate my better part 'bove sight
Of these same weaker eyes. (5.4.103–5)

The activity of the eye itself ceases completely even as a sign of grief: »No eye salute my trunk with a sad tear« (5.4.117). Observation, in other words, finally ceases as an activity, and More seems to be above – literally – both notions of observing and of repentance.

If anything, then, *Sir Thomas More* provides a suggestive thematization of observation and power. Seemingly different modes of exacting power intermingle in the play and visual control ironically turns out to be both a source of empowerment and destruction. The play initially sets up the crowd as an uncontrollable force in a scene that is quickly and reassuringly followed up by the suggestion that More is a wise, competent and clement manager of the action. Subsequent parts of the play invoke a more sinister perspective in which More becomes a victim of the very forces he has previously mastered. In addition, the play does not recognize repentance as an outcome of More's destiny. Rather, after having turned More into a victim of a vaguely depicted royal power, vision as such seems cancelled in More's final speech, which shows him as ultimately elusive in relation to the control mechanisms that have entrapped him. Thus, in the end observation and control in *Sir Thomas More* occupy uncertain positions that both sustain and undermine the system of justice. —■

■ — ENDNOTES —

1 For censorship and *Sir Thomas More*, see for example Scott McMillin: *The Elizabethan Theatre and The Book of Sir Thomas More* (Ithaca, NY, 1987), 74–95; Richard Dutton: *Mastering the Revels. The Regulation and Censorship of English Renaissance Drama* (London, 1991), 81–86; Janet Clare: 'Art made tongue-tied by authority'. *Elizabethan and Jacobean Dramatic Censorship* (Manchester, 1999), 51–58.

2 The assumption that Shakespeare collaborated on the play was first made in 1871. For a brief but useful overview of the various attributions, see Robert S. Miola: »Shakespeare and *Sir Thomas More*« in *Moreana* 48 (2011): 11–13. The most detailed investigation into the Shakespearean angle remains the essays in T. H. Howard-Hill (ed.): *Shakespeare and Sir Thomas More. Essays on the Play and Its Shakespearean Interest* (Cambridge, 1989).

3 See for example Donna B. Hamilton: *Anthony Munday and the Catholics, 1560–1633* (Aldershot, 2005), 119–126; Gillian Woods, »'Strange Discourse': The Controversial Subject of *Sir Thomas More*« in *Renaissance Drama* 39 (2011): 3–35.

4 See particularly Nina Levine: »Citizens' Games: Differentiating Collaboration and *Sir Thomas More*« in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.1 (2007): 31–64.

5 The focus on observation and punishment of this essay begs the question of how relevant Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is to the understanding of the play, and while the present analysis does not claim to either »prove« or »disprove« Foucault's already massively discussed thesis, it does rely on some of the revisionist work that has been done in recent years. For a study that emphasizes the role of the prison house in early modern England, see Paul Griffith: *Lost Londons. Change, Crime and Control in the Capital City, 1550–1660* (Cambridge, 2008). Other studies have downplayed the Foucauldian emphasis on retributive justice by looking into aspects of repentance and the art of dying well; see for example Katherine Royer: *The English Execution Narrative, 1200–1700* (London, 2014).

6 Munro connects this ambivalence to the »remarkably evasive fashion« in which the play as a whole deals with the Reformation and Henry VIII's relations with the Catholic Church. See Lucy Munro: »Archaism, the 'Middle Age' and the Morality Play in Shakespearean Drama« in *Shakespeare* 8.4 (2012): 361.

7 For a discussion of this change from the perspective of Reformation theology, see Debora Shuger, »The Reformation of Penance« in *Huntington Library Quarterly* 71.4 (2008): 557–71.

8 Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori: »Introduction« in Anthony Munday and others: *Sir Thomas More*, eds. Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori (Manchester, 1990), 32.

9 All citations to the play are to Anthony Munday and others: *Sir Thomas More*, eds. Vittorio Gabrieli and Giorgio Melchiori (Manchester, 1990). Citations will be to act, scene and line number and will appear parenthetically in the text.

10 These inflammatory lines were actually marked for deletion by the Master of Revels.

11 Royer: *The English Execution Narrative*, 7.

12 Tracey Hill, »'The Citty is in an uproare': Staging London in *The Booke of Sir Thomas More*« in *Early Modern Literary Studies* 11.1 (2005): n.p.

13 Sabine Schülting: »'What Country, Friends, Is This?' The Performance of Conflict in Shakespeare's Drama of Migration« in *Shakespeare and Conflict: A European Perspective*, eds. Carla Dente and Sandra Soncini (Basingstoke, 2013), 30. For another reading that stresses the notion of hospitality as represented in the scene, see Richard Wilson: *Shakespeare in French Theory: King of Shadows* (London, 2007), 257.

14 For a discussion on how this play was used by Anthony Munday when writing his parts of *Sir Thomas More*, see Gabrieli and Melchiori: »Introduction«, 9–10.

15 Gabrieli and Melchiori: »Introduction«, 32–33.

16 Gabrieli and Melchiori: »Introduction«, 6.

17 Susannah Brietz Monta: »*The Book of Sir Thomas More* and Laughter of the Heart« in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 34.1 (2003): 108.

18 Royer: *The English Execution Narrative*, 63.

19 As Gabrieli and Melchiori point out, the idea of death as a new life »is a commonplace of devotional literature«; see Munday and others, *Sir Thomas More*, 207.