Sir Thomas Elyot's Transgressors and Transgressions: Conflicts of Obedience in Henrician England and Dionysian Syracuse

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Anxiety imposed a constant pressure on Thomas Elyot during his mature years, though his readers will encounter in his work a longing for leisurely meditation and scholarly tranquility. Pearl Hogrefe's book *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Elyot, Englishman* (1967) aptly opens by describing a key moment in the humanist's life, the occasion in 1532 on which he reported to Henry VIII on his extended embassy to the Continent to assess reactions to the king's marital situation. Elyot, along with many others, was in a difficult position as Henry sought official sanction for the annulment of his marriage, and Englishmen steadfast in their devotion to the Church of Rome found their positions eroding as Henry's impatience grew.[1] It had been the humanists who had initiated the strongest criticism of abuses within the church, but such outstanding figures as Thomas More were suddenly being forced to choose between church and king, a decision made more philosophically difficult by the dubious character of the Pope and by the fact that Henry was arguably moved as much by love of Anne Boleyn as by religious scruple. The catastrophic Sack of Rome by the soldiers of Charles V in 1527 had severely damaged the

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[1] In a 1999 essay discussing Elyot's dialogue *Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man* I suggested that Elyot had to some extent abandoned his commitment to humanistic ideals during the period of the king's wrath against those opposing his headship of the English Church. This essay reflects a revised perspective arising from reflection during the years since that paper was published. See "Plato as Protagonist in Sir Thomas Elyot's *Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man*". *The Author as Character: Representing Historical Characters in Western Literature*, ed. P. Franssen and T. Hoenselaars (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1999), 93-105.

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credibility of the Pope and had by imprisoning the Holy Father made it impossible for Henry to negotiate an annulment of his marriage to the Emperor's aunt. Cardinal Wolsey's strenuous efforts to work out a solution pleasing to his king had come to nothing but the end of Wolsey's career, and Henry had come to realize that he could count on strong support from Englishmen who resented the foreign power they saw at work in the Church.

As Elyot returned in 1532 to discuss his mission with the king, he faced an intimidating challenge which can perhaps be appreciated by consideration of a similar moment experienced by Reginald Pole, who came before the king to give his own view of the proposed annulment. In the summary of this interview written by Joseph G. Dwyer, Pole, with some difficulty, manages to tell the king that he cannot approve the divorce. Henry, as Dwyer says, "was intensely disturbed, his face changed in appearance, and he reached for the dagger hanging at his belt. Then he paused abruptly and told Pole he (xv) would consider the matter later. Furious with anger, Henry stormed out of the room after dismissing Pole" (Pole xiv-xv).[2] If this story has any substance to it, one would be inclined to sympathize with those bringing bad news to Henry viii, and Elyot must have gone to his task with some trepidation no matter how clear his conscience may have been. Pole in any case left England for the safety of Italy in January, 1532, but his fellow humanists who remained in England remained in the dangerous storm of events that forced them to decide whether to abide by the Church's commands or by those of their nation's monarch.

Such a decision, of course, required a kind of transgression of either formal religious obedience or of law ordained by the king and his supporters. As readers of Langland and Chaucer know, the church in England had long been subject to sharp criticism, yet the prospect of excommunication remained fearsome for most people while, on the other hand, the king's willingness to execute John Fisher and Thomas More certainly made disobedience to royal command a frightening prospect as well. As humanists looked to the classical past for wisdom to contend with their dilemma, they noted in the career of the great Athenian philosopher Plato an episode of much interest, for Plato,

[2] Pole's biographer Thomas F. Mayer doubts this interview occurred at all. However, Mayer, who describes himself as a "devout agnostic", displays a generally low opinion of Reginald Pole, and it is not surprising that he is skeptical about Pole's account of this confrontation. See T. F. Mayer. *Reginald Pole: Prince & Prophet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 59-60.

whose dialogue form was emulated by that very influential Roman politician and orator Cicero, had had his own nearly fatal encounter with a formidable autocrat.[3] Thomas More had already drawn heavily on Plato's dialogues *The Republic* and *Critias* in his satirical dialogue *Utopia*, and More's friend Erasmus was also an author of dialogues, but, as crisis approached, it was Plato's experience in Sicily, an experience that brought to mind the execution of Plato's teacher Socrates, that focused the sympathy of humanists feeling the danger of conscientious candor in an environment in which power opposed contradiction.

It was Thomas Elyot who effectively brought the story of Plato's Sicilian expedition into the corpus of contemporary humanist writings. His dialogue *Of the Knowledge which Maketh a Wise Man* (1533) recast the ancient narratives found in various lives by Diogenes Laertius and in Plato's letters, presenting a conversation between Plato and the hedonistic Aristippus, who was also a student of Socrates, as they make their way from the port at the Peiraeus to the city of Athens. Plato, still clad in the apparel of a slave, has just returned after having been sold into bondage by the tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse, at whose court Plato had taught philosophy until he angered Dionysius by pointing out the Syracusan's tyrannical inclinations. Aristippus, who had remained friendly to Dionysius, is baffled by Plato's frankness to the king, and, during the journey to Athens, Plato seeks to prove that the truly philosophical counselor will tell the truth to power even at his own risk. Since Thomas More and John Fisher were at odds with Henry VIII at the time this work was composed, readers would have realized that Elyot's objective or at least his hope was to increase royal tolerance of dissent in matters of individual conscience. Given the choleric propensity of the increasingly suspicious Henry VIII, Elyot's literary task involved risk, and, as this work makes clear, he had already encountered opposition. His "Proheme" to the dialogue raises the issue of anxiety very early, as the humanist expresses a bitter animosity to some unnamed detractors. He describes these critics' hostility:

> But divers men rather scorning my benefite than receyuing it thankfully doo shewe them selfes offended (as they say) with my strange termes. Other finding in my bokis the thing dispreysed / whiche they do cõmende in vsynge it. Lyke a galde horse abidynge no playsters be always gnappynge and kyckynge at suche examples and sentences as they do feele sharpe or do byte them /

[3] W. M. Gordon has discussed More's emulation of Plato in "The Platonic Dramaturgy of Thomas More's Dialogues", *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 8, 2 (1978): 193-215.

accomptyng to be in me no lyttell presumption, that I wylle in notynge other mens vices correct Magnificat, sens other moche wiser men and better lerned than I, doo forbear to wryte any thynge (4).

Yet he moves forward with his dialogue, evidently resolved to engage with his detractors as needed, and it is in the Platonic medium based on Socratic procedure that he operates.

As the dialogue begins, Aristippus recognizes an approaching figure as Plato and greets him. Plato returns the greeting and tells Aristippus: "sens thou departiddest from Sicile I haue ben twise in the poynt to haue died / and also twise solde for a bondeman or slaue" (18). Thus the theme of danger for the philosopher is continued from the Proheme. Plato is after all the philosophical heir to Socrates, who was executed by an Athenian faction opposed to his instruction of the young in the interrogation of conventional beliefs. By implication, Elyot links the anti-philosophic Philistines of the ancient world to those he has just denounced as "malicious reders with their incurable fury" (13).

Plato tells Aristippus the story of how King Dionysius of Sicily, from whose court he had recently escaped, had sought his counsel at first and subsequently concluded that Plato's views were an affront to his hedonistic way of life. Aristippus, himself a hedonist, had also been at the Sicilian court and had been well-received by a sympathetic Dionysius. Plato narrates what happened to end his Sicilian visit: "... kynge Dionise frowned and became angry. And interruptynge my words sayd unto me: This is a tale of old fooles / that can not be otherwise occupied. And I aunswered agayne, that those words of his / savored of Tyranny" (22). When Aristippus objects to the imprudence of Plato's response, the latter describes both the consequences of his response – Dionysius at first wishes to kill him but is persuaded to sell him as a slave – and the philosophical justification of his words. It is this justification that informs the rest of the dialogue, a conversation in which Plato is at times impatient and rather rude, while Aristippus is increasingly respectful and impressed by Plato's articulate understanding of the ethical obligations of philosophy. Plato's desire to persuade Aristippus accords with the rhetorical imperative associated with counsel, though for the original Plato, the Athenian philosopher, the rhetorician often was the target of Socratic dialectic.[4] In this first

[4] A. E. Walzer has written articles on the "rhetoric of counsel" in both *Pasquil the Playne* and *Of the Knowledge*. In maintaining that in the *Knowledge* dialogue

of the five Dialogues constituting this work, Aristippus initially seems eager to get the conversation over with and regards their conversation as a convenient way of occupying the journey to town. The meeting place of Plato and Aristippus is a logical one, as the Peiraeus is the port of Athens, but it would also have been known to humanists as the place where Plato's dialogue *The Republic* is set.

The next "Dialogue" involves Plato's efforts to ascertain, with Aristippus' concurrence, what knowledge is and how it differs from animals' ability to do what they do. There seem to be some similarities here to Thomas Starkey's *Dialogue between Pole and Lupset* (1529-1532),[5] and these, whether evidence of connection between works or authors or not, do show that the humanists sense of responsibility for counsel was shared. Dialogue III focuses on argument about the order of nature. Are harmful creations planned to be good? Plato makes the case that adversity can benefit human nature. Dialogue IIII features a lengthy declamation in which Plato seeks to vanquish Aristippus' implicit hedonism with arguments that the soul must remain unmoved by the body's appetites and inclinations. Despite the dubious logic in places, this speech contains a certain dramatic power.

In the fifth and final Dialogue of the work, Elyot, while retaining a Socratic format and at least a generically Platonic dialogical perspective, departs from the theoretical stance of Plato to endorse the humanist view that philosophy must reach beyond being an academic exercise and must take the form of good counsel in the practical world of political life. Here it is interesting to note the parallels – along with some divergences – between Elyot's view here and that indicated in Starkey's *Dialogue*.

Starkey's work was never completed and was only discovered in revised draft form, possibly a confiscated manuscript, in the nineteenth century.[6] Its bold suggestions about English politics make clear that as its author was writing he seriously underestimated the danger that was growing for those on a collision course with Henry VIII about his spousal issues or his role

Elyot's "views on counsel were as unsettled as his future as a courtier" ("Knowledge" 40), Walzer possibly underestimates both Elyot's experience and the contemporary pressure upon him.

[5] For the dates, see T. F. Mayer, *Thomas Starkey: A Dialogue* X.

[6] According to Mayer, "The manuscript no doubt outlasted Starkey because of Cromwell's seizure of his papers when Starkey came within a few months of indictment for treason in 1538" (*Thomas Starkey and the Commonweal* 90).

in the English Church, but Starkey was at last fortunate enough that his dialogue, left unpublished, never brought its author into confrontation with royal authority. Yet Starkey must at times have agonized over his waste of labor – it is a substantial work – and over his unlucky selection of the chief speaker of his dialogue. That fictionalized character, "Reginald Pole", was based on the king's real cousin Reginald Pole, who fell into intense disfavor with the king first by opposing Henry's efforts to annul his marriage to his first wife and then, to the king's outrage and fury, by writing a book attacking Henry for bringing disunity to the church and for executing Thomas More, Cardinal Fisher, and others. Poor Starkey could not have known that by drafting a living person to display philosophic insight in his Platonic dialogue he was taking a mortal risk, but that is what he did. In Starkey's *Dialogue*, Pole's discussions provide the dominant perspective, while his interlocutor is the safely-dead Thomas Lupset. A "mr le" was, as Thomas F. Mayer points out, Pole's dialogue partner in an early draft of the text (*A Dialogue* XI). Perhaps Lee, who seems to have been a living person, heard about Starkey's work in progress and requested that his name be removed. In any case, it is the views of the speaker named Pole that would have been objectionable to the king as his impatience against the Roman Church and its English partisans grew. These views would certainly not have pleased Henry, and, after More's execution, Starkey would not have dared to set them forth. Thus his well-intended work, valuable as it is today as a working draft of a humanist's passionate effort to bring good counsel to a struggling country, is something of a classic example of literary ill fortune.

Early in this work, "Thomas Lupset", a character based on a humanist of recent memory, tells "Reginald Pole" that if Pole is going to describe the good state he must avoid the impracticality of Plato's *Republic*. As Pole is an aristocrat of royal blood, Lupset honors him highly except in some moments of impatience when he thinks his noble friend is mistaken or is playfully dissembling. He says, "loke you to the nature of our cuntry, to the maner of our pepul, not wythout respect both of tyme & of place, that your devyse heraftur by the helpe of our most nobul prynce may the soner optayne hys frute & effect" (18). Plato's *Republic* was, of course, one of the paradigms of humanist counsel, and Plato's efforts to establish a philosophical regime in Sicily seemed well worth imitating to those in England who sympathized with Cicero's reference to the Athenian philosopher as "our god Plato" (*Letters to Atticus* 4.16).[7]

[7] Cicero was also a dialogist, and his *De Republica* was a Roman version of Plato's most famous work. Cicero was eventually murdered by soldiers of Marc Antony.

Clearly, the *Republic* helped give English humanists a sense of what could be done to combine their learning with devoted service to their country. Thomas More's *Utopia* had drawn on the *Republic* for its satirical structure, but the evident absence of practicality in *Utopia* was perceived by both Starkey and by Elyot to have been a missed opportunity as the organization of the Church and in the state became open to alteration and possible humanist influence.

In its early pages, Starkey's *Dialogue* is something of a humanist revision of *Utopia* for English purposes, a revision which brought More's Latin reformulation of Plato's Greek vision into a locally convenient and accessible (so Starkey hoped) form. As an English document, a dialogue between Englishmen focusing on English problems, the text is a kind of practical *Republic* aimed at a philosophical resolution of the kinds of issues raised in Book I of More's great work. Starkey's concern with actual policy and solutions to pressing problems is thoroughly in accord with Elyot's much simpler and more direct message in *Of the Knowledge*, yet Starkey, despite his energy and enthusiasm, lacks the sound experience and practicality Elyot and Thomas More brought to matters of politics and law. More, of course, was a distinguished lawyer. Elyot's father Richard Elyot, like More's father, held a high rank in English legal circles as a king's serjeant and was also a justice of the Court of Common Pleas.[8] Elyot himself was engaged in legal matters from an early age, and it is easy to tell from his frequent references to dogs, horses, herbs etc. that he knew the practical life. As son of a man of some authority, Elyot had been trained to see in the political order an admirable and reliable power which resists chaos, arbitrary exercise of force, and incursions against wisdom and tradition. Though in his dialogue of knowledge he presents a tyrant in action, it is to the end that he may set forth the philosopher's obligation to provide good counsel. By placing Dionysius of Syracuse in confrontation with Plato, Elyot defines the tyrant as a man of bodily appetites who naturally opposes the man of intellectual awareness and spiritual gifts.

While the stories of Plato's defiance of King Dionysius provided one rather forbidding paradigm for English humanism in the grim circumstances of the early 1530s, an alternative paradigm was offered by a more subtle aspect of Plato's philosophical effort – his composition of dialogues. Since Socrates had died because of the philosophical intolerance of a faction of Athenians, Plato sought to practice Socratic

[8] P. Hogrefe, *The Life and Times of Sir Thomas Elyot, Englishman* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1967), pp. 41-2.

dialectic at a remove from direct dialogue between individuals, writing works in which conversations like those of Socrates were presented as fiction. These imagined conversations enabled their author to achieve a variety of artistic and philosophic goals, among them the memorialization of a beloved and unique friend and teacher, the preservation of a remarkable technique of intellectual investigation, and, later, the development of a personal teaching that departed to some extent from the ethical engagement that characterized the conversations of Socrates. Humanists whose Christian convictions derived from the New Testament could find in Plato's works a set of beliefs whose central concern was love and whose ethical honesty accorded perfectly with ideal Christian conduct, so the paradigm of this Athenian's life and works was particularly inspiring, as was his literary engagement with Socratic dialogue. Other classical writers of dialogue such as Xenophon, Lucian, and Cicero were of interest as well, but the works of Plato were written in a lucid and charming Greek which was definitive of classical eloquence and dramatic power. Like the pagan cardinal virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice, and temperance, the wisdom and power of Plato's works seemed in many respects providential.

As Thomas More sought to make good use of his time on a tedious diplomatic mission, he was inspired by Plato's work to compose a good-humored, playful *Republic* of his own, a work shaped by satiric impulse as a perspective upon dysfunctional aspects of his contemporary society. Writing in Latin, he limited the audience of his work, and, enjoying the comic possibilities of an imagined state managed by reason, he did not focus upon the actual possibilities of remediation of social ills. Thomas Elyot and Thomas Starkey, both of them impressed by More's brilliant satire, regretted *Utopia*'s impracticality and hoped in their own dialogues to do what More had failed to do, to achieve practical objectives as humanist counselors and to do so in English, making their classical training serviceable to their countrymen. After all, even Henry VIII, though quite an educated man, was no Greek scholar.

Elyot, unlike Starkey and like Thomas More, had been brought up in the law. His classical learning was evidently the result of his own passion for knowledge, as there is no definite record of his having been a university student. His confidence in his own mental powers is indicated by his having written a medical book *The Castel of Helth* (1536) even though he was not formally trained in medicine, and the diversity of his interests is clear throughout his writing. His main claim to fame is still as lexicographer and is due to his having assembled a Latin-English dictionary (1538). His diligence in tedious matters

indicates that as an apprentice in legal engagements he would have acquired a seasoned practicality under his father's guidance. In the unprecedented situation known as "the king's great matter", however, no one could predict with any assurance what might be the effect of unwelcome counsel or of any statements of position that might be taken as contrary to the king's wishes. Level-headedness, so often an asset in life, was not the quality most likely to assure one's survival in the world of Henrician affairs. The asset most serviceable to courtiers at this time was in fact cunning and the ability to play the sycophant and flatterer, managing the public impression of oneself to the best possible advantage without reference to the good either of the king or of England. But this was the antithesis of the Platonic paradigm, and, in so far as that classical paradigm involved fiction and an imagined reality, it did so as manifestation and consequence of the love of wisdom, even if in its action it generated a story from which the author could reasonably distance himself.

King Henry, according to those working in his behalf during this time – and some of these were honest and honorable men despite the pressure around them – had become intensely averse to statements which conveyed indirect or ambivalent or devious messages. As Thomas Starkey wrote to Reginald Pole seeking to get his friend to give the king a clear statement of his position on the royal marriage, he followed the king's instructions in stipulating that Pole should give a clear and direct answer regarding "hys gracys late defynyd causys, one of the matrymony, the other concernyng the authoryte of the pope" (Herrtage XIV). Starkey further narrates the king's response to his report of Pole's views:

> thys much I sayd, this fer I went, but hys grace not satysfyd therwyth, desyryng to have your sentence therin plainly declaryd, commandyd me thys now to wryte to you, that hys plesure was that you schold lyke a lernyd man, al assertyon by any cause rysyng set asyde, in thos ij causys [XV] pondur and wey the nature of the thyngys as they be in them selfe, and puttyng a-parte al sucessys & daungerouse effectys wych of them may insue, leuyng al such thyngys to hys gracys wysedome & hys pollycy, declare your sentence truly & playn wythout coloure or cloke of dyssymulatyon, (wych hys grace most princely abhorryth)... (XIV-XV).

Henry's suspicion of indirection has become strong, and since his cousin Pole not only had received his education at the king's expense but was also himself of royal descent and conceivably represented a challenge to Henry's claim to the throne, Starkey's assignment must

have been an anxious one, complicated it was by the possibility that his dear friend Pole would defy the king's expectations. When Pole did not provide the statement demanded by Henry, Starkey was ordered to write another letter. In this epistle, Starkey reiterates the king's request, "wych was, in few wordys clearly & playnly, without coloure or cloke of dyssymulacyon, to schow your sentence in hys lately defynyd causys, the wych thyng I am sure you wyl dow wyth glad hart and mynd, for yf I know you wel in such causys you wyl not dyssymbul wyth a kyng (from the wych dyssymulacyon I neuer see to thys day wyth any man a mynd more abhorryng)" (XVIII). The reiteration of Henry's revulsion against concealed intentions did not bode well for the Platonic technique of indirection, and Starkey's tone suggests a hidden fear that humanist wisdom is on the verge of colliding with raw force. Such was the climate of the times. The repetition of the phrase "without coloure or cloke of dyssymulatyon" suggests that these were the king's own words. If, as the evidence suggests, Starkey had already written much of the draft that survives as his *Dialogue between Pole and Lupset*, a work not only embodying devotion to the dialogical tradition of Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* but also a work proposing some radical alterations of the English monarchy, he must have wondered if his own literary indirection would stand the pressure of the royal eye. Yet Starkey did survive the grim days in which the king's violence against humanists brought the force of autocracy to assert its privilege over more philosophical attitudes. If he seems to grovel before the king, modern academics should remember that Henry represented a great patriotic interest, besides which, groveling remains a normal activity in the halls of academe, and, in a contest of relative ethical integrity between Henry's party and that of the Pope, neither side would lose by much.

Thomas Elyot, though appointed, as Hogrefe says, "to persuade Charles into accepting the English king's separation from Catherine without making trouble" (1), was as conflicted as Starkey; however, his own Platonic writings are simpler in purpose. Where in Starkey's *Dialogue* there is a detailed program for a new regime in England outlined by "Reginald Pole", Elyot focuses on the issue of the humanist's obligation to give honest counsel without becoming a flatterer or a sycophant. Elyot likes the story of Plato's defiance of the tyrant Dionysius, and, of course, he finds in this story the moral example of a philosopher turning his wisdom to practical ends, a theme also important to Starkey, whose *Dialogue* commences with a vigorous effort by "Lupset" to persuade "Pole" to give up the life of

private meditation and philosophy and turn his talents to the good of the country.[9] Starkey had apparently begun writing his work with the confidence that it would be given a thoughtful consideration by an appreciative audience, but as the prospects for such a reading waned and as his imaginative flights of political speculation became politically suspicious, he put the work aside and never finished it. Elyot, recognizing that Thomas More had found himself in a zone of increasing danger, saw a fundamental need of a defense for humanist counsel and sought to provide it.

Elyot's short dialogue *Pasquil the Playne* (1533) opens with a sentence which seems to acknowledge the spirit at least of King Henry's impatience with dissimulation. In the passages cited earlier, Starkey had encouraged Pole to "declare your sentence truly and playn" and "in few wordys clerly & plainly". Elyot prefaces his dialogue with an introduction "To gentil reders", which begins "Sens plainness in speking is of wise men commended and diverse do abhorre longe prohemes of Rhetorike: I haue sette out this mery treatise, wherin plainness and flateri do come in trial in such wise as none honest man wil be therwith offended" (42). Not only does the theme echo the king's attitude as indicated in Starkey's letters, but the verb "abhorre" is the same verb used in both letters to express the king's attitude toward dissimulation. As the title indicates, plainness is the theme of the dialogue, especially plainness in the counselor, whose competitors, represented here by Gnatho the flatterer and Harpocrates, whose habit is to maintain a safe silence when his master deliberates, are guided by self-interest rather than that of their master or their state. Announced as an attack on dissimulation, Elyot's fictional conversation defends the work of the honest counselor, and, in a possible vindication of the dialogue form, the author simplifies the dramatic situation, making the chief speaker a Roman statue and striking a tone of slightly rough humor. Where a Platonic dialogue tends to open many interpretive avenues and often leads to *aporia* or a kind of logical standstill, Elyot shapes this work on the one hand to produce distance between the setting and characters and his own world and on the other to bring light to the specific issue of the importance of good counsel in challenging times. He leaves nothing mysterious about the fictional machinery, thus precluding any accusation of inappropriate dissimulation or of

[9] Cicero also knew the story of Plato and Dionysius, and, as Sean McConnell points out, evidently associated his own predicament with that which faced Plato in Syracuse – with Caesar playing the role of Dionysius (108). See also Starkey, *Dialogue* 15.

promoting a hidden agenda. If the dialogue can be taken as a defense of Thomas More's kind of counsel, it can also be understood as an assertion of the perennial urgency of unselfish sharing of knowledge, an activity fundamental to humanist thought.[10] This period produced More, Elyot, and Starkey, but it also produced Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini, and unscrupulous counselors had enough power in politics that in the struggle for England's religious identity it seemed to some that Henry VIII needed reminding that the right kind of guidance was available to him. Once the king began to enforce his will with violence, the humanist impulse was subdued, and Henry's subjects had little choice but to make the patriotic choice between their English king and the Bishop of Rome.

That the acceptance of the executions of More and Fisher was painful to those who privately admired these men there can be no doubt, but the fact was that Henry's state of mind justified the Scriptural admonition that the anger of a king is like the roaring of a lion (Prov. 19:12), and Henry's courtiers were ready to encourage royal suspicion whenever it served their own interests. Starkey bravely expressed regret for the executions in a published discourse pleading for obedience to the king, but he emphasizes the seriousness of the errors for which the men were punished. After arguing emotionally for the necessity of unity in the English church, Starkey maintains that loyalty to Rome was a superstition which threatened that unity. He continues:

> For as touching the superstitious blyndnes of many, we have had lately amonge vs lamentable experience, to al honest hartes greuous and sorrowful, of the whiche many words nowe to speake, I can not without great sorowe: for a sorowfull case it appered to me to see suche men, so notable, bothe of virtue and lernynge, as by common fame, some of them were reported to be, whiche lately haue sufffred, so sturdily to stycke in a manifest superstition, that rather they shulde chose to lose theyr lyues, than to be remoued frome their opinion, wherin they stode so styffely, vnder the perswasion of true religion… (*An Exhortation to the People Instructing Them to Unity and Obedience*, 126).

Though Starkey moves on to enumerate the ways in which the corruption and error of the Roman Church had damaged England, assembling a mass of polemical refutations and accusations and constantly praising the king for his defeat of Romish superstition, his

[10] It is paradoxical, of course, that Pasquil, a "plain" speaker, leads the conversation in the guarded mode of dialogue, in which Plato's best-known speaker was known for irony.

grief is here evident, and if his fear is also communicated perhaps that is to his credit if we keep in mind that any kind words about Henry's victims might have come back to haunt Starkey as the gossip-mill of court ground on.

Other humanists sought to deflect any suggestions of disloyalty or of overmuch sympathy for the executed men. Thomas Elyot, who remained devoted to the service of his country, was a man who already, if we may take his word for it, had been the victim of hostile gossip, and, as he wished to continue applying his talents to the contemporary version of public service, he felt a need for protection. In a letter to Thomas Cromwell written about a year after More's execution, Elyot, who was apparently hoping for royal generosity in some matter, explained his own aversion to the abuses perpetuated by the Church of Rome: "I have in as moche detestacion [31] as any man lyving all vayne supersticions, superfluouse Ceremonyes, sklaunderouse jonglynges, Countrefaite Mirakles, arrogant usurpacions of men called Spirituall and masking Religions and all other abusions of Christes holy doctrine and lawes" (*The Letters of Sir Thomas Elyot* 30-31). Evidently anxious lest his earlier humanist associations prove damaging, Elyot goes on, expressing pleasure at the king's reformation of the church and then addressing the case of the author of *Utopia*: "I therefor besieche your good worship now to lay a part the remembraunce of the amity between me and sir Thomas More which was but *Vsque ad aras*, as is the proverb, considering that I was never so moche addict unto hym as I was unto truthe and fidelity toward my soveraigne lord, as godd is my Juge".

In considering this statement, which Elyot evidently intended as on the practical level a disavowal and which Elyot scholar Edwin Johnston Howard has disdained, one can hardly forget Elyot's previous engagement with the theme of good counsel, and one also recalls his aversion to flatterers, sycophants, and hypocrites.[11] The problem with interpreting the sentence arises from the Latin phrase *Vsque ad aras*, which seems intended as a dismissive modifier deprecating the "amity" in question. Those sympathetic with Elyot tend to have been somewhat embarrassed by the phrase, which might to the devout resemble an echo of Peter's denial of Christ (Matt. 26:70-74), but a wiser interpretation is suggested by the distinguished More scholar Richard S. Sylvester. Though Sylvester actually does not appear to like Elyot very much, yet

[11] Johnston: "Elyot was... accused of having been a friend of More's, and this accusation he rather cravenly denied" (*Of the Knowledge* XXIX).

in his discussion of Elyot's predicament he shows some insight into the humanist's situation, declaring: "Elyot's comment upon his friendship with More may indeed have been ungracious – but in the Tudor and not in the modern sense of the word" (180). He continues, quoting a significant passage from Elyot's *Pasquil the Playne*:

> When one had to act or be silent there was no alternative but to adopt an evasively indirect form of discourse which might assert that 'there be Gnathos in Spayne as wel as in Grece, Pasquilles in Englande as welle as in Rome, Dionises in Germanye as welle as Sicile...; Platos be feue, and them, I doubte where to fynde.' The mode is familiar from More's *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*; stylistically (and perhaps morally) it was the price that men had to pay for the luxury of their lack of action or speech.

Though Sylvester seems slightly muddled in his formulation here, his point is that there was an urgency in Elyot's procedure that pushed aside normal deliberative leisure and required a prudence which was sufficiently compliant to enable continued contributions to the common good while retaining enough mental liberty to understand what counsel was best. If the choice of policy between that of Rome and that of Henry involved compromise on either side, as it certainly did, it was at least clear that Henry was an English king and had a more complete connection to his country's interests than did the inhabitants of Rome. The Plato who defies Dionysius, we remember, was not concerned with his native land as were the humanists of England.

What is most striking about Elyot's letter to Cromwell is that Latin phrase and its significance. Elyot suggests that it is proverbial, but the evidence is that its meaning was not without ambiguity, which suggests that even in this letter to Thomas Cromwell, who was Henry's most powerful minister at this time, Elyot is engaging in some of that "dissymulation" which was so abhorrent to Henry VIII. Though the letter was a private communication, Elyot was quite aware that letters and books were subject to unanticipated scrutiny and possibly hostile interpretation, and in this choice of an ambivalent quotation he was providing himself a measure of deniability while at the same time honoring his conscience.

Of the various scholarly discussions of the phrase "*usque ad aras*", the most comprehensive seems to be that of G. L. Hendrickson, who reviews its classical origin in Plutarch's *Moralia*, locating the Greek original and commenting that these are "words which an early translator of Plutarch renders, *usque ad aras amicus sum*", adding that "the question of meaning in that place is still not at once perfectly

clear" (395). Examining the context in Plutarch and a subsequent reference in Aulus Gellius, Hendrickson translates and summarizes:

> "For my part... I cannot even approve of the well known saying of Pericles, who, in reply to a friend asking him to testify falsely in his behalf, said, 'So far as the altar I am your friend'; for in so saying he comes quite too close to the altar". The reservation which Plutarch here makes is explained in the ensuing words of the chapter. He recognizes of course that Pericles sets a limit to devotion to his friend's cause, and stops short of the altar; that is, of false witness. What he does censure is Pericles' willingness to promise support in any degree to a man who could make such a request (396).

Though Hendrickson goes on to point out that the phrase *usque ad aras* came to be interpreted by those unfamiliar with its rather obscure origin as having "quite the opposite of its early meaning, that is, of 'a friend, faithful to the end, to death, to the last extremity, etc.'" (397), he translates the version from Aulus Gellius in accord with the apparent intention of Plutarch: "It is to be sure our duty to lend aid to our friends, but only so far as (is consistent with) God's law" (396).

The presence of this brief phrase in Elyot's letter seems intended to be both conscientiously complex and discreetly obscure. Hendrickson refers to Elyot's citation of the words, noting that the humanist was "under the suspicion of faintheartedness in the cause of Protestantism" and adding, "thousands in the time of Erasmus, ... were daily confronted with the conflict between private conscience and public or ecclesiastical authority – a characteristic signature of the 16th century" (397).

In associating the phrase with the politically powerful Pericles, Elyot seems to position himself with political authority.[12] In suggesting solidarity with his friend up to a point, he is no doubt being quite truthful, though he necessarily makes an exception which is the logical implication of all human friendship and which here justifies his departure from More's decision to defy the king on religious grounds. More himself was at times concerned that his action resembled suicide, and the decision to accept such a death was not one he recommended for others. Elyot's words might well imply that he and More were friends to the death, and that their different decisions about the king's authority could be seen as occurring at the altars at which the boundaries of religion were delineated. Also, he might well have more

[12] Sylvester oddly declares that Plutarch does not mention his answer to Pericles (179) in the *Moralia*.

fully incorporated the implications of Plutarch's story: if Pericles was wrong to profess friendship to a possibly dishonest friend, Elyot, borrowing Pericles' words, tacitly asserts his own integrity in professing friendship to a man of undoubted honesty. But that assertion would only be understood by a person familiar with Plutarch's generally unfamiliar text – in all likelihood, a humanist.

John M. Major translates *usque ad aras* as "'all the way to (as far as) the altars,' that is, so far as is consistent with religious obligations" (91 n.). Like others, he tends to deplore Elyot's letter to Cromwell, but he believes Elyot was diligent during More's lifetime in writing works indirectly defending More's integrity as royal counselor. More practical than some critics, Major appreciates Elyot's situation. He explains:

> Among the few who carried their sympathy for More beyond feeling into action I think we must definitely include Sir Thomas Elyot. If the reader finds it difficult to accept this statement in the light of Elyot's behavior after More's death, let him reflect that a friend's loyalty could do no good to a dead man, but could do the friend himself a great deal of harm (96).

If Elyot still believed himself capable of making a contribution to England's spiritual or political well-being, he would not have been wise to sacrifice his own life and thus empower the very kinds of scurrilous courtiers he had sought to expose in *Pasquil the Playne* and *Of the Knowledge whiche Maketh a Wise Man*. As Major comments, "if we are to reproach Elyot for what seems to us an abject surrender of principle, so must our censure fall on virtually the entire lot of Elyot's fellow countrymen, only a pitiful handful of whom, like More himself, chose martyrdom instead of Elyot's kind of compromise" (91). It appears to be the case that in the single phrase with which Elyot accounts in a private letter to Thomas Cromwell for his friendship with Sir Thomas More we see not only very feeble evidence of an actual betrayal by Elyot but also something of a spark of humanist indirection that has a touch of boldness about it.[13] One wonders how many academic

[13] Greg Walker rightly argues that "there is no need to see Elyot's comments to Cromwell as representing a betrayal of More's friendship" (130), and, though he does not comment on the ambiguous implications of *usque ad aras*, he does note that "It is important to note just how carefully Elyot chose his words in those two letters to Cromwell" (131). Pearl Hogrefe mentions this letter vaguely and in passing (219), which seems a little less than rigorous, given the tendency of others to make much of it. Stanford E. Lehmberg also declines to comment on this letter, though he quotes the passage in question (154).

sycophants today would risk their annual pay raises on such a subtlety. In apparently transgressing what many have found to be a due loyalty to a noble but dead friend, Elyot might earn just disapproval from those whose personal standards are easy to maintain in comfortable political environments, yet it should be considered, in view of the times, in view of Elyot's remarkable labors on behalf of humanism and of those he admired, of whom Thomas More certainly was one, and in view of the ambiguous and possibly quite courageous Latin phrase in one letter to Cromwell, that there was really no transgression at all, no matter how quietly Elyot may have opposed the less creditable impulses of his royal master.

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