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psychiatry
in historySir Thomas More, L^D Chancellor – ‘His discourse was extraordinary facetious’

Greg Wilkinson

Sir – or Saint – Thomas More (1478–1535) was a man of conscience, a lawyer, statesman, and Renaissance humanist: a man for all seasons.^a He wrote *Utopia*, published in 1516, about the political system of an imaginary, ideal island nation, ruled by reason – in contrast to unruly contemporary European politics. More became close to Henry VIII and was Lord High Chancellor of England from October 1529 to 16 May 1532. However, he opposed Henry's separation from the Catholic Church (1532–1534); would not acknowledge Henry as Supreme Head of the Church of England and the annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon; and, after refusing to take the Oath of Supremacy, he was arrested in 1534, convicted of treason and beheaded.

His country-house was at Chelsey ... Where the gate is now, adorned with two noble pyramids, there stood anciently a gate-house, w^{ch} was flatt on the top, leaded, from whence is a most pleasant prospect of the Thames and the fields beyond: on this place the L^d Chancellor More was wont to recreate himself, and contemplate. It happened one time, that a Tom of Bedlam^b came up to him, and had a mind to have thrown him from the battlements, saying, ‘Leap, Tom, leap.’ The Chancellor was in his gowne, and besides ancient, and not able to struggle with such a strong fellowe. My L^d had a little dog with him, sayd he, ‘Let us first throwe the dog downe, and see what sport that will be;’ so the dog was throwne over. ‘This is very fine sport,’ sayd my L^d, ‘fetch him up, and try once more;’ while the madman was goinge downe, my L^d fastened the dore, and called for help, but ever after kept the door shut.

His discourse was extraordinary facetious. One night riding, upon the suddaine he crossed himself, *majori cruce*,^c crying out, ‘Jesu Maria, doe you not see that prodigious dragon in the skye?’ they all lookt-up, and one did not see it, nor the other did not see it, at length one had spyed it, and at last all had spyed; whereas there was no such phantom, only he imposed on their phantasies.¹

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^a ‘More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. He is a man of many excellent virtues; I know not his fellow. For where is the man (in whom is so many goodly virtues) of that gentleness, lowliness, and affability, and as time requires, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes and sometime of steadfast gravity — a man for all seasons.’ Robert Whittington, *Vulgaria*, 1520. Whittington's likely debt to More's friend Erasmus is elaborated by Dr. Clarence H. Miller on ‘a man for all seasons’. Thomas More Studies Conference, 5 November 2005 (thomasmorestudies.org).

^b ‘Tom o' Bedlam’ was used in early modern Britain to describe beggars and vagrants who had or feigned mental illness. They claimed, or were assumed, to have been former inmates at the Bethlem (Bedlam), founded in 1247 and still extant.

^c greater cross (i.e. a full ‘sign of the cross’).