Drama and censorship in *Sir Thomas More*

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Upon receiving some papers to be signed, whose contents the play leaves open, the protagonist enters the path of no return, leading to his inevitable fall. Thomas More's refusal to give his consent to the legal acts of Henry VIII led many researchers and historians to question the particular reasons for the behaviour that resulted in his death in 1535. Approximately sixty or seventy years later, his rise-and-fall story was adapted for the theatre by several authors, including Anthony Munday and William Shakespeare. The theme was still extremely relevant to the period, as conflicts related to legal, devotional and liturgical practices still dominated the political scenario in England in the late sixteenth century. The play entitled *The Booke of Sir Thomas More*, written and reviewed during the last years of Elizabeth I and the early years of James I, occupies a prominent place in the study of the time and has a strong relationship with issues of drama and censorship, as it is one of the few documents containing the marks left by a censor, as well as the subsequent amendments and additions made after such recommendations. Despite the presence of the intriguing character at the centre of the action, the play was not acted until the twentieth century and was only recently added to the Shakespearean canon. Such initial characteristics can allow for analysis of the diverse spheres that surround the play, such as its status as an object produced by the Elizabethan culture, its plot and its reception history.

To proceed with the proposal, linearly and succinctly, the concept of censorship will be broken down into three categories, namely: exception, subversion and demarcation. Such a play stands out because of its implicitly or explicitly subversive character in a defined area – a type of art, work, or verse

– that makes it something out of the norm. Thus, we intend to focus on the object divided into three gradual aspects: firstly, its critical and troubled history of more recent reception; followed by external factors, such as the manual intervention of the censor and the problems on the period of the play; and, finally, on its internal aspects, such as outstanding features within the plot, especially in places often marked as problematic. The purpose of this is to cover these aspects of the work of *Sir Thomas More* on the ideas of exception, subversion and demarcation, in order to understand the relationship between theatre and censorship in a work that now occupies a more differentiated place between the works of the period than it occupied in the past.

1. Criticism

Starting from the outermost layer of the work and progressing to a more internal viewpoint, with regard to criticism of the play, we can observe how the censorship process impacted on the play without even considering its plot and protagonist. Throughout the twentieth century, *Sir Thomas More* was considered an apocryphal play, when it was not considered as 'partially attributed to Shakespeare', and only a fragment of the sixth scene attributed to Shakespeare was published in some editions of the *Complete Works*. To isolate an excerpt, however beautiful it may be, does not offer the reader the opportunity to understand the conditions in which the character has declared it, and under what circumstances and who were their interlocutors. In making this exception from the excerpt within the whole, the whole is excluded for an excerpt, to which it is linked, but, at the same time, unlinked. This approach can be compared to the theorizing exception of Giorgio Agamben, about belonging and being included paradoxically, that is, "what cannot be included in the whole of which it is a member and cannot be a member of the whole in which it is always already included"[1]. Such reasoning leads inevitably to questions about the clarity of the distinction, such as: What other works also contain excerpts prepared by Shakespeare's hand? Which plays of the bard contain contributions from other playwrights? Who are they? What are the excerpts? Answers to such questions may fit in with interesting philological and textual discussions, but, in this case, they left the

[1] AGAMBEN – *Homo Sacer*, 2007, p. 24-25, quote on p. 25.

play about the Chancellor of England closed in a circle of specialized discussion of authorship and dating issues rather than on interpretation and analysis. The most significant impact of such delimitation of the text was the reading restriction of the play itself. Moreover, at the same time, it is not useful to voluntarily close one's eyes to the fact that the plays were produced collaboratively, as it has been elucidated by several critics[2], and to the complexity of the editing Shakespeare's texts throughout the times, detailed expertly by Gary Taylor and John Jowett[3].

Moreover, the recovery of the manuscript that accompanied the discussions on dating and authorship allowed, at the beginning of this century, all work done with the text to be returned to the public in the form of very stringent editions. After all, the questions asked above, if taken to the extreme, can lead towards an impossible trend to establish a strict relationship between the man and the work for a play produced during Shakespeare's time, a period where "anonymity, collaboration, and the absence of authorial rights were typical circumstances of dramatic writing" [4]. By mutilating the text and giving labels, we are dealing with a great power and with the impossible task of defining Shakespeare's textual essence. The impact of these actions will be immense both in terms of publications and studies, and especially in possible play performances. It can be argued that the aesthetic concerns with the excerpt, or the presence of Shakespeare's hand, can ultimately silence the work of other playwrights from this period, who are usually seen as being eclipsed by the bard. To examine a play in which he collaborated can be a productive way to think both about other Elizabethan playwrights and about the modes of production that the contemporary theatre was subject to, to enhance the role of the atmosphere of the time in assessing the work.

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[2] About the collaborative nature, see the recent studies: GIESKES, Edward – *Representing the Professions: Administration, Law and Theater in Early Modern England*, 2010, Chapter 4; SHAPIRO, James – *Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010, p. 60 and 172; MIOLA – "Shakespeare and the Book of Sir Thomas More", 2011, p. 14-15.

[3] See the books: JOWETT, John – *Shakespeare and Text*. Oxford Shakespeare Topics. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 and TAYLOR, Gary; JOWETT, John – *Shakespeare Reshaped 1606-1623.* Oxford Shakespeare Studies. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

[4] JOWETT – *Shakespeare and Text*, 2012, p. 8.

2. Period

Having characterized the environment of the critical literary position which *Sir Thomas More* was allocated in the last century, we will address the second point, which deals with the interventions of the censor Edmund Tilney. After evaluating the initial version of the play, without the additions, the following annotation can be found right at the top of the manuscript:

> Leave out the insurrection wholly and the cause thereof, and begin with Sir Thomas More at the Mayor's sessions, with a report afterwards of his good service done being Sheriff of London upon a mutiny against the Lombards – only by a short report, and not otherwise, at your own perils. E. Tilney (*Sir Thomas More*, Scene I, margin notes by the censor)[5]

The censor's recommendation is accompanied by a long vertical line in the pages comprising the aforementioned event, also present in specific verses, in other parts. If it were followed to the letter, approximately seven of the seventeen scenes that compose the play in its final version would be eliminated. As the events preceding the receipt of title of knighthood – that establishes the protagonist as 'Sir Thomas More' –, his rapprochement with King Henry VIII and his subsequent appointment as Lord Chancellor of England, would need to find another mechanism that would serve as a ladder for honours.

Besides the insurrection itself, Tilney asks that this 'cause' should also be abandoned. This revolt was historically known as 'Ill May Day' and had its origins in commercial disputes between British citizens and foreign traders. According to the historian Susan Brigden, in *London and the Reformation*, the city authorities had difficulty acting in the areas occupied by immigrants and some of them had privileges – like monopolies –, in relation to the London citizens, and abused those powers, regarding works and the market[6].

In the first scene of the play, two foreigners take items purchased in the market from an Englishman, report the extortion of money from another and

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[5] All quotes from the play are from the Arden Shakespeare *Sir Thomas More*, edited by John Jowett in 2011.

[6] BRIGDEN – *London and the Reformation*, 1989, p. 129 *apud* JOWETT, 2011, p. 42.

try to take away the Englishman's wife for themselves. The Englishmen, who find themselves in a situation where they cannot do anything due to the impunity of these people and primarily due to obedience to the King, begin to organize. The uprising, led by the merchant John Lincoln and the goldsmith's wife, Doll Williamson, brings together many workers from a poor area of London, in order to combat these abuses. Initially, they resort to a priest to read an account of abuses, and by doing so, through the authority of the speaker and the identification of the people with the evils described in it, they are able to raise forces to resolve the situation. The report states that:

> To you all the worshipful lords and masters of this city that will take compassion over the poor people your neighbours, and also of the great importable hurts, losses, and hindrances, whereof proceedeth extreme poverty to all the King's subjects that inhabit within this city and suburbs of the same. For so it is that aliens and strangers eat the bread from the fatherless children, and take the living from all the artificers, and the intercourse from all the merchants, whereby poverty is so much increased that every man bewaileth the misery of other; for craftsmen be brought to beggary, and merchants to neediness. Wherefore, the premises considered, the redress must be of the commons knit and united to one part. And as the hurt and damage grieveth all men, so must all men set to their willing power for remedy, and not suffer the said aliens in their wealth, and the natural-born men of this region to come to confusion. (*Sir Thomas More*, Scene I, 118-134)

There is a very important historical demarcation in this event occurring in 1517. This was the same year that Thomas More was finalizing his greatest work, *Utopia*. In addition, it is located on the eve of one of the most important events in European history: the Reformation, which according to Agnes Heller, is the "first great *popular movement* of the time [...] and at the same time making possible the expression in religious and ideological terms of the parting of ways among the nations"[7]. The relationship of More and the play with such an event are extremely important regarding making the choice to present the events of May, 1517 in the play.

What may have caused the play to be so firmly marked is not exactly the past contained in it, but how it was updated with regard to the perspective of

[7] HELLER – *Renaissance Man*, 1984, p. 30, Italics by the author.

the end of the sixteenth century. According to a recent editor of the play, John Jowett, in the 1590s London was home to approximately 50,000 immigrants[8], and among them religious refugees. Xenophobic allusions could incite conflicts and difficult situations. Tilney's concern with this was not small, as in cases where the nationality of the opposing English was made explicit by Munday, and he himself imposes the substitution for the word 'stranger' or 'alien', demarcating spaces of greater neutrality.

According to Jowett, Tilney apparently did not mind the fact that the play had Thomas More as the centre of the action[9]. Even though he was condemned for high treason during the reign of Henry VIII, a rise-and-fall story could easily fit into a moralizing perspective, drawing a path that must not be followed to avoid the same consequences. However, with the proposed deletion, most of the compliments paid to More's character would vanish from the play, as the various references to the poor and the authorities praising the character of More would also be eliminated. Tilney proposes that everything should be transformed here into an oral report, as it had been done previously when in the reigns of Mary or Elizabeth biographies of More, with references to the martyrdom, were published.[10] However, the solution adopted by the playwrights was to make changes – including additions – in the scenes dealing with the riot. This is where Munday's play was probably first added to by Shakespeare.

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[8] JOWETT – 'Introduction', 2011, p. 41-47.

[9] JOWETT – *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[10] Biographies on the life of the famous Lord Chancellor appeared shortly after his death in 1535. Two biographies, by William Roper and Nicholas Harpsfield, were written during the brief reign (between 1553 and 1558) of a Catholic Queen, Mary I. It is also from this time that the publication in English of Thomas More's works, whose original versions were written in Latin, occurred. We can observe, in the first two works, reports of the life of a public figure who had recently died, amid a series of legal and religious changes in England. These texts were produced during the brief re-establishment of Catholicism, which had provided a very fertile ground for interest in More. However, it is perplexing that a third biography, written by Stapleton, was produced and labelled as the "Life and Illustrious Martyrdom" of More, in the second half of the government of a Protestant queen, in the era that followed the victory of England over the Spanish Armada (1587-88) and coincident with the excommunication of the monarch, issued by the Pope; environment which, according to Monta, was hostile to Catholicism (MONTA, 2003).

3. Plot

In focusing on the modifications made after Tilney's review, it is necessary to examine the structure of the play itself rather than concentrating on critical perspectives on contextual aspects of the play, especially the sixth scene. After achieving popular support, the leaders of the revolt begin to discuss how they will cope with the problems they face. Even in the Court the reasons that led these Englishmen to rise up are discussed, and the same procedure happens in the city of London. Therefore, there is some agreement between both the branches of the government and the city about the abuse, but they must contain the movement before it becomes uncontrollable.

More had been appointed by the two powers as a man who could talk to the rebels and pacify them. His appearance here completely changes the play. As noted by Robert Miola, in the sixth scene, the organized and oppressed group changes into a mob[11] which becomes totally out of control and which wishes to resort to drastic measures to destroy the houses where the immigrants live. This configuration resembles the choices made by Shakespeare whenever he portrayed a rebellion in his plays, as in *Henry VI Part II, Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet,* where he portrayed 'the people' as being like a flag that changes position according to the wind direction. This same solution is seen in the verses of Shakespeare in *Sir Thomas More*. There was a reason why this same formula was followed in various plays which were condemned by the censor and had to be rewritten. We might think that the difference between Shakespeare's plays mentioned above and this one is precisely the more detailed characterization of both the characters and the reasons that led to the rebellion, thus making the play more like *Coriolanus*. On the other hand, we can already see in such a characterization that there is a way to represent and to be censured, and that it is possible to strike a balance between them.

After the arrival of More and several attempts so that the environment becomes minimally adequate to the dialogue between them and the rebels, the speech written by Shakespeare begins. More encourages obedience to the King, providing as an argument the idea that traditional divine power that is

[11] MIOLA – "Shakespeare and the Book of Sir Thomas More", 2011, p. 17.

granted by God to the majesty. To disrespect and raise arms against the King is thus a way to disobey the will of God and to rebel against God Himself. This type of marking is found at various locations during the Elizabethan period, as for example, in Homilies. Another point of his argument, and in a sense related to ethics and not the divine origin of the sovereign, is the recurrence of the principle that what they do to foreigners today could be done against them if they were not in the homeland that now harbours them. Therefore, More's speech ends up giving the delimitations of the force of authority to the play, reproduces the behaviour and instruction models that are desired and convinces all the citizens in attendance to stop these acts. More gives his word that he will get a pardon from the King and that they will not be punished. Later, however, the leader of the revolt is executed, but the scene contrasts, at the same time, an impulse of extreme and barbaric violence against a pacificatory and calm eloquence.

> MORE
> […] Alas, alas! Say now the King
> As he is clement, if th'offender mourn,
> Should so much come too short of your great trespass
> As but to banish you: whither would you go?
> What country, by the nature of your error,
> Should give you harbour? Go you to France or Flanders,
> To any German province, to Spain or Portugal,
> Nay, anywhere that not adheres to England:
> Why, you must needs be strangers. Would you be pleased
> To find a nation of such barbarous temper,
> That, breaking out in hideous violence,
> Would not afford you an abode on earth,
> Whet their detested knives against your throats,
> Spurn you like dogs, and like as if that God
> Owed not nor made not you, nor that the elements
> Were not all appropriate to your comforts
> But chartered unto them? What would you think
> To be thus used? This is the strangers' case,
> And this your mountanish inhumanity.
> (*Sir Thomas More*, Scene VI, 138-156)

Taking as reference Stephen Greenblatt, in the famous text 'Invisible Bullets', 'subversive' can be seen as "a term to designate those elements in the Renaissance culture that contemporary authorities tried to contain or, when containment seemed impossible, to destroy" [12]. Following this definition and what had already been said about the process of censorship that the play had been submitted to, it can be said that *Sir Thomas More* ends up acting as its own censor, but without simply following Tilney's instructions, in that it actually incorporates into the character itself the entire discourse that characterizes the ideological force that artistic expressions were subject to. If More's speech is the counterpoint of the distinct forces operating in the same play, it can be said that the subversive tone is highlighted, as it nullifies, using the authority, the element that they want to contain or destroy. This process happens textually and is observable through the handwritten composition of the play. However, this Shakespearean intervention will also give the play a touch of irony that tempers the historical plays, as it can also be seen in More's speech, when he asks "who will obey a traitor?" (Scene VI, 132).

In the same text, Greenblatt insists that there is "no end to subversion" [13]. The rebellion is calmed only when the leader Lincoln is executed and the others are all pardoned by the King. However, the play follows the protagonist advancing into increasingly senior positions until, as we know, More refuses to sign the documents relating to the king's supremacy over the English church, although, probably to avoid controversy the play gives no clues to the content of these documents. However, the documents are identifiable by several features planted in the scene, as, for example, the refusal of Bishop John Fisher, who eventually had a similar fate to that of More. The play shows More as a person who first calls for obedience to the king but then, after obtaining all the honours that a Londoner of his stature and training could receive in life, disobeys the King himself. More's actions eventually constitute a repetition of Lincoln's, on another level, and the play encourages reflection on him being chosen as the man who will appeals to the city for

[12] GREENBLATT – 'Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*', 2006, p. 443.

[13] GREENBLATT – *Ibid*., p. 455.

obedience, but will later refuse that obedience himself. In both cases, however, he is still subject to authority and not above it. Both Lincoln and More are players in the same game, and each one conceives a form of mystification of political authority according to the situation experienced. While Lincoln takes on the responsibility standoff standing up against the king and against God, and is punished for it, More chooses to be a faithful servant of God as something above his loyalty to the King.

Finally, the play enters its last great movement, when the poet the Earl of Surrey says, soon after the execution of his friend: "A very learned worthy gentleman / Seal error with his blood" (Scene XVII, 125-6). It is noteworthy that, years later, this same Surrey will come to the same end as More. The person responsible for the 'error' is not necessarily identified as More himself, but by inference Henry VIII himself. The play is one of the few to touch on topics avoided throughout the whole period, such as the English Reformation and the divorce of the king.

The three aspects discussed above can be summarized as being entirely dependent on the relationship between the reader and the text. Censorship of a text depends on the interpretation, the form of reading and the elements that may or may not be found by the person who holds the power to establish authorship, mark their passages and identify ambiguities. Therefore, Annabel Patterson's idea, expressed in *Censorship and Interpretation*, in which the text is often in a relationship of functional ambiguity, is very important when considering Elizabethan plays, mainly because it is a characteristic that is independent of the work, author and which changes with the times. The stability of some reading options can be instrumentalized to find in *Sir Thomas More*, for example, a play that both affirms and questions a monarch's authority over his subjects, or even puts doubts what actually constitutes obedience to the transferred power. Similarly, as Jowett suggests, it may seem necessary to negotiate a kind of peace with the Catholic past[14] to recover the reputation of one of its key representatives. However, at the same time, the presence of an anti-Catholic denouncer and pamphleteer as a lead author, in the case of Anthony Munday, can lead to other different read-

[14] JOWETT, *Ibid.*, p. 6-7.

ings. Ambiguity and its instrumentalization traverse all layers, from the farthest to the nearest to the text, the play and its distinguished protagonist.

More, unlike many tragic protagonists, is not executed during the play, but carried off stage, in the direction of the sunset. This movement points to the Christian belief in resurrection and suggests that, even if unsuccessful, More will not be allowed to die on stage in front of the spectators. His resistance thus remains as alive as his character. Everything starts again when the presentation begins. Finally, the play that portrays the life of the illustrious Lord Chancellor of England is not just a work with Shakespearean verse, but one of the most intriguing dramas in the study of the Elizabethan theatrical practice, as it is, in all aspects briefly raised here, an way of dealing with many of the most important social, economic, religious and political issues of the period in discussion in terms of topics such as civility, ethics, justice and order.

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