More Matter for a May Morning: Evil May Day, 1517
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Abstract

My seminar paper surveys accounts of Evil May Day from 1517 to The Play of Sir Thomas More (1603-04). It begins by analyzing contemporary accounts and chronicle histories. It then moves on to consider the ways in which the event has been understood by biographers as a seminal moment in the life of Thomas More. Shifting from the historical to the literary, it gestures towards the ways in which Utopia anticipates and attempts to make impossible events like Evil May Day, in large part because of Utopia's radical reimagining of the early modern calendar.. My general position is that time-reckoning is contested throughout the early modern period, and that it is both more malleable than traditionalists would allow, and more sticky than reformers would prefer. Evil May Day is an unusually potent symbol for social conflict and social cohesion, and an anniversary which lingered in early modern imaginations.

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> *The Utopia should perhaps be distinguished from the religious millennium because it comes to pass not by an act of grace, but through human will and effort. But neither specific reforms of a limited nature nor mere gadgetry need be admitted. Calendar reform as such would not qualify as Utopian; but calendar reform that pretended to effect a basic transformation in the human condition might be*. -Frank E.Manuel (1967: 70)

Employing an oxymoron which I am sure Thomas More would have relished, C. S. Lewis famously described *Utopia* as "a holiday work". Lewis meant that while *Utopia* contains moments of genuine and serious social satire, it is not a consistent philosophical treatise, and what it principally affords its readers is not hard thinking, but entertainment (1954: 169). Nor for Lewis is *Utopia* "holy day work"; just as *Utopia* is distanced from the serious political treatise, it is distanced from the religious writings of St. Thomas More. But is the phrase "holiday work" really an oxymoron? Thomas More took his holidays seriously. Indeed, *Utopia* offers a radical rethinking of holidays, of calendars, and of the social uses of time. That novel calendar is not the only or even the main agent of change within *Utopia*. Nevertheless, that calendar is an integral part of *Utopia*'s legacy both as political philosophy and as humanist fiction.

To understand why More had reason to take holidays seriously, I want to consider the

events of Evil May Day (also known as Ill May Day). The example is admittedly extreme, since Evil May Day has been called the most serious disturbance to start in London in the sixteenth century (Fletcher and MacCulloch 1983: 120). It is also, with respect to *Utopia*, anachronistic. But More provides his own account of events, and his participation has been a touchstone of representation and interpretation from contemporary historians to current biographers, including Shakespeare, if his is hand D in the collaborative play *Sir Thomas Moore*. If nothing else, Evil May Day provides a paradigm of one element of the discourse of holiday observance in early modern England: the holiday protest turned into riot.

Exactly what occurred in London during the month of May in 1517 is difficult to determine. The historical record is relatively full, but its narratives are partisan. Both Edward Hall's *Chronicle* and Polydore Vergil's *Anglica Historia*—the most complete accounts written by contemporaries—are distinctly interested histories, and subsequent accounts and interpretations of Evil May Day are bound up with highly charged notions of nation, religion, and class. Nevertheless, we know a great deal about Evil May Day, and while contemporary accounts differ in specific details, the general pattern of events is reasonably clear.[1]

In the months leading up to May, 1517, anti-foreign sentiment was running high, and, despite efforts by the authorities to control events by imposing a curfew, violence erupted on May Day eve. Crowds began to gather at about 9:00 p.m., and when the Alderman John Monday (or Mondy) tried to enforce the curfew and break up one such group, the young men cried "prentices and clubs!", and hundreds or thousands of men and women (accounts varying) took to the streets. These crowds broke into the prisons, releasing several men, and continued through the streets. At this point, Thomas More enters the story. As Edmund Hall describes the events, as the crowd

ran a plump through Saint Nicholas Shambles, & at Saint Martin's gate, there met with

them Sir Thomas More and others, desiring them to go to their lodgings. And as they

were entreating, and had almost brought them to a stay, the people of Saint Martin's

threw out stones and bats, and hurt diverse honest persons, that were persuading the

riotous people to cease, and they bade them hold their hands, but still they threw out

bricks and hot water. Then a Sergeant of Arms called Nicholas Dounes, which was there

with master Moore, entreating them, being sore hurt, in a fury cried down with them.

Then all the misruled persons ran to the doors and windows of Saint Martin, and spoiled

all that they found, and cast it into the street, and left few houses unspoiled. (Hall 1809:

589)

The crowd continued to riot through the streets of London, destroying and plundering the shops

of foreign craftsmen and merchants. The uprising was eventually quelled, but not before the

Lieutenant of the Tower, Sir Richard Cholmeley, fired ordinance upon the city, and the Earls of

Surrey and Shrewsbury entered the city in force.

The aftermath of Evil May Day was appalling. Gallows were set up across the city, and

mass executions followed. Commentators differ in their account of how many were put to death

for the Evil May Day events: Hall mentions seventeen executions (1809: 590); Polydore Vergil

puts the number at fifteen (1950: 245); and the Grey Friars Chronicle simply states that "at the

last divers of them were hanged" (Nichols 1852: 30). Some Italian statesmen posted in England,

however, set the death toll much higher: Francesco Chieregato wrote that sixty of the rioters

were hanged, and that "others were subsequently quartered, beheaded, and drawn to the hurdle"

(Brown 1967: 385). And the Venetian Secretary in England, Nicolo Sagudino, wrote that since

May 5th "severe example had been made of about 20 of the offenders." In the same letter

Sagudino provides a chilling description of the entire affair: "The mischief done was not very great; and the people cannot bear that 40 of their countrymen should have been hanged and quartered, although no strangers were killed. It was horrible to pass near the city gates, where nothing but gibbets and the quarters of these offenders were exhibited" (Brown 1967: 395). The citizens of London who endured this spectacle were under martial law, well aware that hundreds of their fellows--including, according to Hall, women and children as young as thirteen--remained in prison awaiting sentence.

Evil May Day ended with a piece of grotesque theatre. On May 22th, Henry VIII held court at Westminster Hall, all of the prisoners appearing with halters around their necks. Apparently poised to condemn them all, Henry eventually relented in the face of pleas for mercy from (depending on which source one follows): the assembled Lords (Hall); Cardinal Wolsey (Sagudino); or Queen Catherine (Chieregato). What role Thomas More himself might have played in securing this amnesty is a matter of speculation, but the amnesty was granted, and the scaffolds finally taken down.

Long after the event, More offered his own account of Evil May Day in *The Apology of Sir Thomas More, Knight* (1533): "I remember many times that even here in London, after the great business that was there on a May day in the morning, by a rising made against strangers, for which diverse of the prentices & journeymen suffered execution of treason, by an old statute made long before, against all such as would violate the kings safe-conduct" (*CW* 9: 156). In its broad strokes, this account agrees with the other Tudor witnesses that the violence on May Day was principally motivated by anti-foreign sentiment ("a rising made against strangers") and that the main participants were the apprentices and young men of London. However, More's account is idiosyncratic, to say the least, in the way in which he describes the causes of the

rising: "I was appointed among others to search out and enquire by diligent examination in what wise and by what persons that privy confederacy began. [...] We perfectly tried out at last, that all that business of any rising to be made for the matter, began only by the conspiracy of two young lads that were prentices in Chepe" (*CW* 9: 156). Could all of the blame for Evil May Day be attached to two Cheapside apprentices? Apparently, this is what More would like his readers to believe, and he emphasizes the covert nature of the "privy confederacy," the "conspiracy" that he and his fellow investigators had to search out. This rhetoric of secrecy is coupled with a corresponding increase in the social rank of the rising throng as their numbers swell:

> Which after the thing devised first and compassed between them twain, perused privily the journeymen first, and after the prentices, of many of the mean crafts in the city, bearing the first that they spake with in hand, that they had secretly spoken with many other occupations already, and that they were all agreed thereunto. And that besides them there were two or three hundred of serving men of divers lords houses, and some of the king's too, which would not be named nor known, that would yet in the night be at hand, and when they were once up, would not fail to fall in with them and take their part. Now this ungracious invention and these words of those two lewd lads (which yet in the business fled away them self, and never came again after) did put some other by their oversight and lightness in such a courage and boldness, that they wende them self able to avenge their displeasure in the night, and after either never to be known, or to be strong enough to bear it out and go farther. (CW 9: 156)

More displays his astute insight into crowd psychology in this depiction of how one's neighbours might be gulled into rioting simply by announcing that such a riot was already in the works. It's a kind of bubble, a crowd that is an "invention," without authentic leadership and hollow at the

core. Thus, Evil May Day is thoroughly depoliticized.

What More specifically omits from his account of Evil May Day in the Apology is the extended escalation of rhetoric and physical violence described by those of his contemporaries who discuss the causes of the rising that preceded the actual uprising or riot. Whatever else might have begun the disturbances, it wasn't just two Cheapside apprentices stirring up trouble. Intriguingly, two Cheapside apprentices appear in Hall's *Chronicle*, too; crucially, however, in the Chronicle they are innocent holiday makers who are playing at bucklers when a rather pompous Alderman Monday tries to arrest them for breaking curfew; they "instigate" a riot only insofar as a crowd takes up arms to free them (Hall 1809: 588-89). By reducing the causes of Evil May Day to mere apprentice mischief, More obscures the underlying causes of London discontent against foreigners, just as Polydore Vergil does (for different reasons, as a resident alien himself) in blaming two Monks who encouraged the broker John Lincoln, who's to blame for everything that follows (Vergil 1950: 243).

Even Vergil, however, acknowledges that the apprentices of London merchants *felt* as though they were economically oppressed, carrying on a struggle "with the foreign craftsmen and merchants, because they were especially envious of their skill in buying and selling"; Vergil simply doesn't agree with their assessment, thinking that what the merchants objected to was the very essence of international commerce (243). This economic oppression is developed in Hall's *Chronicle*, in which John Lincoln is an authentic spokesman, articulating the much more pervasive economic hardship the London merchants were actually suffering. As Lincoln puts it, alongside their unseemly pride and outrageous behaviour, which is said to have offended many, the "Genoese, French.men and other strangers" received preferential economic treatment, special treatment that made the foreign traders appear above the rules. Moreover, "the multitude of

strangers was so great about London, that the poor English artificers could scarce get any living" (Hall 1809: 536). Here is John Lincoln's attempt to convert the doctor of divinity Beale to the merchants' cause, as paraphrased in Hall's Chronicle:

> how miserably the common artificers lived, and scarce could get any work to find them, their wives and children, for there were such a number of artificers strangers, that took away all the living in maner. And also how the English merchants could have no utterance, for the merchant strangers bring in all silk, cloth of gold, wine, oil, iron and such other merchandise, that no man almost buy of an Englishman. And also outward, they carry so much English wool, tin, and lead, that Englishmen that adventure outward can have no living. (Hall 1809: 587)

The existence and legitimacy of such economic motives among the crowds profoundly influences our understanding of the nature of their grievances. We might well have more sympathy for them, and be less inclined to dismiss the crowds as mobs.

We might also expect that Thomas More had (or should have had) more sympathy with such protesting crowds. Such sympathies are conspicuously absent from More's own account of Evil May Day. Many of the idiosyncrasies in More's version of events can be explained when the context within which it occurs-the polemical Apology of 1533—is considered. More uses the events as an analogy to the activities of heretics: of "the irresponsible revolutionary," in R. W. Chambers' more general formulation (1963: 142). More is out to discredit every act of the Reformation, and it does not serve his purpose to treat the May Day rising as a credible threat, motivated by legitimate grievances. This helps to explain why he performs such a *reductio* (literally, and rhetorically, *ad absurdum*) upon the size of the Evil May Day crowds, omits all mention of the participation of Catholic clergy in their instigation, and remains silent about any

economic motivations which might legitimate anti-foreign demonstrations.

Nevertheless, while knowing the contexts of his *Apology* helps to explain the incongruities in More's account of Evil May Day, it does not explain why he chose those events as an example of motiveless malignancy in the first place. Assuming that the London crowds had legitimate economic concerns which erupted in the violence of the oppressed, and that More knew this, why then would he represent the lower orders in this way? In Chambers's influential biography, the answer lies in the sixteenth-century legacy (instanced and elaborated in the play Sir Thomas Moore) of More as the hero of London (Chambers 1963: 140-44), so that More's attempts to quell the unrest and in his attempts to secure the pardon of the guilty are acts in the interest of all Londoners, poor and rich alike. (We might note, that he foreign merchants are left to shift for themselves.) Through impassioned rhetoric alone, Chambers argues, More manages to articulate a "respect for authority which was the foundation of the political thinking of Shakespeare and of More" while simultaneously preserving the lives of the lower orders in paternalistic fashion—truly a man for all London (144).

In Richard Marius's Thomas More, too, More's behaviour on Evil May Day and his account of it in the Apology present him as "a voice of the city" (1985: 197). Marius challenges "the widely held notion that More was always the guardian of the poor against the voracious greed of the rich," and shifts the burden onto his readers to prove otherwise, since "More voices no special concern for [the poor] in anything that he wrote after *Utopia*—not in his letters, not in his theological works, not in his devotional treatises" (195). Marius even goes on to speculate that the Evil May Day riots in particular had a catalytic effect on More, that they correspond with a kind of conversion in More's attitude towards the poor in which "his mind turned to order rather than to equity, and it is at least plausible that his experience quite literally in the middle of

the Evil May Day riot was one cause for this change" (195). Evil May Day becomes a key moment for Marius as a particularly well documented moment between *Utopia* and More's later polemical writings. It is not the sequence of events itself which matters nearly as much as its timing in More's life, and what Marius most takes issue with is the celebratory biographical tradition of which Chambers's is the secular paradigm. For Marius, More's later writings reveal the authentic man-profoundly Catholic, conservative, and capable of tremendous vehemence and violence in his defense of a waning order-against which his earlier writings are best understood. Accepting entirely More's account of Evil May Day, and dismissing every pan of Edward Hall's explanations of the building resentment of the London Commons up to the event, Marius manages to imply that More was never any real friend of the poor, that *Utopia* is an anomaly in More's writings and as a work of fiction is no reflection of the author's actual political beliefs.

Intriguingly, the Chambers-Marius debate over Evil May Day and More's reputation as the champion of every Londoner has recently been revived. Even more intriguing, for my purposes, are the terms within which the debate has been recast.

Peter Ackroyd's Life of Thomas More (1998) breathes new life into the tradition of understanding More as, first and foremost, a Londoner. And the Thomas More that emerges in Ackroyd's biography is thoroughly medieval in his sympathies and advocacy; he is the defender of a common culture, and theorizes that defense in the discourse of custom:

> *Consuetudo* is the Latin noun for custom or habit; it can be taken as a reproof to those
> scholastics who twist language beyond the range of its ordinary meaning but, again, in
> More's subsequent writings it acquires larger authority as the term denoting the body of
> inherited practice and behaviour. When at the close of his life More, faced with his
> accusers, declared that he would 'conforme my consciens' only to 'the generall Councell

of Christendome', he was reinforcing the same general principle. It is impossible to over-emphasize the authority which custom and tradition exercised upon More; he was, in that sense (as in others) one of the last great exemplars of the medieval imagination.[2]

For Ackroyd, More's defense of this common culture is most clearly revealed in his embracing of the festivals and holy days of the ritual year, and in his laments for "a time, soon to come, when there would be no more lights and images, no more pilgrimages and processions, no guild plays and no ringing for the dead, no maypoles or Masses or holy water, no birch at midsummer and no roses at Corpus Christi" (1999: 111-12). James Wood, in an unflattering review of Ackroyd's *Life*, takes issue with the celebration of the traditional calendar, both by More and by Ackroyd: "For although the Reformation did indeed end a common calendar of feast days and processions [...] the religious share of that calendar had become a bullied almanac of rote and rite, the codification of mass ignorance" (1999). Wood goes on, in strong language that echoes the discourse of Sabbatarian reformers, to call this an "evil." It is an evil that Wood sees as manifested in pagan animism and superstition (along the lines of what Keith Thomas surveys in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* [1973]) and in the general dumbing-down and curtailing of religious instruction. Moreover, the fact that this almanac is "bullied" indicates that the common culture had already been split, that priests were imposing a false temporal order upon a resisting lay public.

What fundamentally divides Ackroyd and Wood is disagreement over the extent to which Thomas More should be identified as a champion of the London polity as a whole. The calendar controversy, then, stands as a synechdoche for More's relationship with English culture or cultures; defending holiday or holy day customs and observances becomes an index of More's more general social politics and ideological positioning. It is the same pattern that we saw in the

case of Marius and Chambers: evaluations of More hinge upon how catholic—and, of course, how Catholic—More's world really was. And More would have understood this interpretive strategy, since it informed early modern understanding of the political dimension of holidays like May Day.

It was not mere chance that the rising against strangers occurred on a holiday. Holidays were common times for expressions of political dissatisfaction, especially among the lower orders. There were practical reasons for this. Holidays were non-working days, making assembly possible. Traditional holiday pastimes could even serve as cover for expressions of social discontent, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie exhaustively demonstrates in Carnival in Romans (1979). Polydore Vergil, for one, believes that this was precisely what happened on Evil May Day: "They determined that early on the morning of May Day, when traditionally accustomed to do so, they would pour out into the fields, and then return, carrying back leafy branches so that no suspicion of slaughter would be aroused; then they would attack the foreigners, giving some a beating, depriving some of their lives and others of their wealth" (1950: 243). The custom of "Gathering the May" certainly was a frequent target of censure by holiday reformers, usually because it was seen to be no more than a pretext for stealing wood, or because of the sexual activities that were said to occur under its cover. Appropriating the custom of Gathering the May as a cover for deliberate violence, rather than the disorder and random acts of violence which frequently accompany holidays, was a different matter. Indeed, the memory of Evil May Day would haunt the collective memory of London authorities throughout the sixteenth century, leading to riot prevention measures all out of proportion to typical May Day events (Lindley 1983). Moreover, the historical shadow cast by Evil May Day would be one reason for the transformation of the customary holiday observances appropriate to the occasion. John Stow, for

one, breaks off his discussion of traditional May Day festivities in his expanded edition of his

Survey of London with the observation that their waning was strongly influenced, if not entirely

caused, by "an insurrection of youthes against Aliens on may day, 1517, the ninth of Henry the

8" (Stow 1:99).

It is not difficult to grasp what has happened. By 1603, "Evil May Day" no longer refers

exclusively to particular events in 1517; instead, it has become the emblem of lower-class

violence under the guise of holiday license. For many Londoners, it seems, the very definition of

May Day had changed, forever after including the residual meaning of xenophobic violence

perpetrated by the lower orders. And so it remains today-despite important changes to the

meaning of May Day observances as a holiday for the working class-at least according to the

Oxford English Dictionary:

> Ill (or Evil) May-day: 'the 1st of May, 1517, when the apprentices of London rose
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> against the privileged foreigners, whose advantages in trade had occasioned great
>
> jealousy.'

Evil May Day, of course, still lay in the future when More was writing *Utopia*, nor did he know

of other instances of Protestant civil disobedience and riot-in particular, the Peasant's War in

Germany in 1525 and the Sack of Rome in 1527-which surely were in his mind when he came to

write The Apology in 1533.[3] With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can see that the spectre

of holiday violence is not absent from *Utopia*. Quite the contrary. Everything in The Best State

of a Commonwealth and The New Island of *Utopia* is calculated to make an Evil May Day

impossible.

Notes:

1. In addition to Hall's Chronicle (1809: 586-91) and Virgil's Historia (1950:242-47), my account of Evil May Day draws upon the Grey Friars Chronicle (Nichols 1852:30), and letters from Italian diplomats collected in Brown (1867). For details on the differences between the versions of events in Hall and Holinshed, see Patterson (1994:195-99).
2. Ackroyd 1998: 43. A fuller discussion of the rhetorical slippages in the usage of *sensus cmmunis*, *consuetudo*, distinguishing more carefully than does Ackroyd, can be found in Lewis 1964:164-65. For an influential argument about the significance of the *consensus fideum* in More's thought, see Greenblatt 1980:61.
3. See J. B. Trapp's introduction to The Apology (CW 11:lxxxiii).

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