

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



Betteridge, Thomas. Writing Faith and Telling Tales: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Work of Thomas More

Dan Breen

Volume 39, numéro 2, printemps 2016

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1086554ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26864>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (imprimé)

2293-7374 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Breen, D. (2016). Compte rendu de [Betteridge, Thomas. Writing Faith and Telling Tales: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Work of Thomas More]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 39(2), 182–184. <https://doi.org/10.33137/rr.v39i2.26864>

© Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2016

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

marital state to their Medici relatives. This was a delicate dance and it would seem that most of these Medici women were adept indeed.

The virtually seamless nature of this collection, with one essay flowing into the next from Eleonora di Toledo to Anna Maria Luisa, makes this an excellent overview for the two centuries of Medici rule. Yet, each essay is also a freestanding discussion of the individual woman. This outstanding volume will engage the scholar and expert, while also serving as an alternative introduction and overview for this significant period of European history.

JACQUELINE MURRAY
University of Guelph

Betteridge, Thomas.

Writing Faith and Telling Tales: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Work of Thomas More.

ReFormations: Medieval and Early Modern. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013. Pp. xi, 256. ISBN 978-0-268-02239-6 (paperback) \$38.

Few scholars would question Thomas More's significance to our understanding of the political and religious landscape of England in the early sixteenth century, yet though there may be general agreement on the fact of his importance, the nature of this importance remains the subject of some debate. Most frequently, critics and biographers draw upon his friendship with Erasmus, his links to other prominent European scholars and theologians, and *Utopia*, his most famous work, to depict More as intelligible primarily as an exponent of Continental humanism. Such portrayals overlap neatly with those offered by scholars of More's devotional and polemical writing, which view him as the last great English Catholic writer before Henry VIII's break from Rome. In each of these versions of More, however, something is undoubtedly lost by attempting to understand him primarily (or solely) in relation to his European and Classical influences. In *Writing Faith and Telling Tales*, Thomas Betteridge asks whether we might reconsider More's work as emerging from a medieval English tradition of writing on politics, philosophy, and religion. Aligning his study with recent work by James Simpson and Greg Walker, Betteridge argues that More's approach to questions of political and devotional theory and

practice developed from his engagement with fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English authors, and his writing reflects characteristically medieval resistance to unilateral exercises of power, or of interpretive authority. For More, it was essential to think and write in a variety of genres and a variety of ways, because such varied discursive habits preserved a multifariousness that More believed to be fundamental to discourse itself.

From the beginning, the book locates More's work within intellectual contexts created by medieval vernacular writing in England. The anti-tyrannical (and perhaps, indeed, anti-monarchical) politics of More's biography of Richard III are linked in chapter 1 not to Livy but instead to Chaucer and Langland who, like More, were suspicious of any attempt to insist unilaterally on the imposition of arbitrary limits to philosophical debate or political practice. Like Langland's rebellious commons of 1381, More's Richard seeks to impose a social and political vision that will not acknowledge the potential validity of any alternative. For Betteridge, the danger of this single-mindedness is a constant preoccupation within More's political thinking, and lies at the centre of *Utopia* as well. In *Utopia*, More addresses a tradition of political and religious writing in England that insists upon the exercise of reason as an unerring mechanism for sorting desirable from undesirable outcomes. Although the reader may perceive that the unflappably rational Hythloday is generating a series of inferences that depict Utopia as vastly preferable to the corrupt and brutal England of book 1, the implication that the reader is forced to decide between them collapses under the weight of the text's self-ironizing gestures. *Utopia*'s playfulness serves to undermine the notion that rational choice requires an absolute separation of wheat from chaff; in the end, all of the competing narratives in the main text and the epistolary apparatus are allowed to coexist within the single, physical book.

Betteridge extends his argument in innovative ways in his chapters on heresy and devotion. While some critics have found it difficult to see much intellectual texture, especially in More's polemical work, Betteridge demonstrates convincingly that More's opposition to heresy is founded on more than the rhetorical position of the propagandist. More critiques the Lutheran and quasi-Lutheran writings of Tyndale and others as absurd—and indeed, as Utopian—fantasies that insisted upon the absolute primacy of scripture against reason and on the fundamental uselessness of the creative imagination. The elimination of these habits of thought from human attempts to understand and

practise faith would not serve to renew the human community of the Church, but would in More's estimation threaten to destroy it. Equally remarkably, the devotional works More wrote at the end of his life seem to reflect this same emphasis on discursive openness. Reading and prayer become for More practices through which Christians can progress toward fuller understanding of Christ's teachings, rather than opportunities to reflect on an intellectual world that has already assumed a theological stability. This is especially significant given More's focus in these late works on aspects of his faith—most notably the Passion and the sacrament of the altar—that were in fact established as litmus tests for orthodoxy, even in the mid-1530s when the reforming party was in the ascendancy at Henry VIII's court.

The achievements of *Writing Faith* are considerable. Betteridge has provided a much-needed complement to studies of More that emphasize the Continental aspects of his humanism, and he has also presented us with a version of More as a truly literary writer, one whose investment in so many different genres derives equally from his varied philosophical commitments and from his abiding interest in storytelling. It might be objected that by asserting as he does that "More is a medieval writer" (14), Betteridge risks engaging in a tug-of-war with critics who are anxious to read More as a harbinger of the Renaissance, and so using him as a fulcrum for an impressionistic and interminable dispute about periodization. I am not certain, however, that such an objection would be justified. It seems rather that Betteridge's book has moved beyond this dispute altogether by offering a reading of literary tradition as consistently vital and influential, and capable of expanding to include new perspectives formed as the weight of tradition is brought to bear on new questions and problems. Scholars would do well to consult this book, both because of the arguments it advances and because it serves as a conceptual model for new studies in the many ways it successfully bridges the gap between medieval and early modern.

DAN BREEN

Ithaca College