

“The most inconsistent of men”: William Godwin and the “Apology” of Sir Thomas More

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Introduction

Godwin’s unpublished essay, “On the Composition of History, An Occasional Reflection” opens with the dispute of an historical fact, that the Catholic Sir Thomas More tortured Protestants as part of his opposition to Lutheranism in England in the 1520s and ’30s, while in public office.¹ The fact is not so much enquired into to begin with, as stated without comment. Godwin begins with three epigraphs, quotations from standard works by the historians David Hume (*History of England* 1754-67), James Pettit Andrews (*History of Great Britain* 1794, a continuation of Robert Henry’s posthumously-published work), and Henry himself (*History of Great Britain* 1789-94) each of whose account names James Bainham as a victim of More’s persecution, who was either tortured under his supervision or whipped by More himself. After presenting these accounts, similar but not identical, Godwin dives straight in to his implicit challenge:

Here, it will be admitted, we have an historical fact, regularly established, reported in all the forms, & recorded by the historians of our country, who are in possession of the highest degree of fame & respectability. Scepticism will not doubt a statement like this, & the most ungovernable lust of paradox will not inspire any one with the confidence to dispute.

To settle the question at once, I will subjoin an extract from one of Sir Thomas More's works, entitled, "The Apology of Syr Thomas More Knight, made by hym Anno 1533, after that he had given over the office of Lord Chancellour of Englande."²

The question, which in the essay's first paragraph is not admitted to have the possibility of existence, is in danger of being settled in the second paragraph before it has had a chance to arise fully. The negation of all possible opposition to the historical fact (quite what that fact is at this point we are yet to learn, other than the man involved was certainly James Bainham) produces an awkward opening movement in Godwin's essay; he seems too eager to refute a point he has not troubled to inform his readers of. The extract from More's *Apology* which follows covers two and a half folios and comprises his defense against accusations of persecutions privately carried out at his home; it is this which reveals Godwin's question: what if, despite the many contemporary and subsequent reports of this historical fact, More did *not* personally persecute Bainham? If not, then how may this affect the general acceptance of the veracity of other accusations leveled against More? In what follows below I examine the role of imagination in this work of historical biography by Godwin, his exploration of subjectivity as a means to enter the past and to access the character of Thomas More, and the role played by the concept of consistency of character as a means of assisting the historian.³

The influential, powerful and public activities of Thomas More as a statesman, his wit, writings (including works of history, amongst them a life of another disputed figure, Richard III) and scholarly reputation, the disputed facts of his persecution of heretics, his execution, combined with the torrent of highly contentious historical and biographical accounts in the centuries since his death, provide Godwin with an ideal subject for his essay; ideal, because of the volume of material for Godwin to consult, because of the persistent public interest in More's character, and because More was not only a great public figure, but a writer.⁴ As will be discussed below in

relation to Godwin's *Essay on Sepulchres*, the writings of dead public figures form a crucial aspect of Godwin's historical engagement with his subjects, not simply as a source of facts or testimony but as a means to transfuse oneself with the dead. Godwin's interests in this essay, therefore, while primarily based upon the construction of historical accounts and the oversights or errors which may blight them, are also focused upon how history functions or can be made to function in the service of the truth, with the varying weight held by personal testimony or more detached historians' accounts (both of which are equally prone to error), and the nature of that detachment when, as in the case of "On the Composition of History," the historian is discovered conjuring up spirits and imagining himself in the place of his glorious subject, as a means to composition.⁵

"It must be that such stories should be told": pretended facts and low whispers

One of Godwin's immediate concerns in "On the Composition of History" is with the veneration historians have for the title "*A History*," and the deleterious effect its authority has upon the process of enquiry:

The first idea that suggests itself upon reading this extract [More's *Apology*], & comparing it with the above passages from celebrated & authentic historians, is to reflect on the manner in which history is written. When a blunder has once crept in to a book of reasonable dimensions, of a grave & measured style, & entitled *A History*, it is not seldom transcribed from one author to another without suspicion, till the same misrepresentation, the same foul & misbegotten calumny, has been repeated, unexamined, by twenty historians. Very often the book from which the whole commences, is a notorious libel, a farrago of pretended facts, fabricated or coloured for the private purposes of a

party; & this, if the party happens to be a successful one, is transcribed from age to age, & by the courtesy of nations we are contented to call it *a history*.⁶

In another example of the compressed style characteristic of this essay, two problems are collapsed into one: the biases of party historians and their dominance of the genre, and the reliance of historians generally upon previous historical accounts. Godwin's opposition to party histories recurs perpetually in his writing; his preface to his *History of the Commonwealth of England* identifies an entire subgenre of history writing, that of the accounts of the civil war, republic and commonwealth, as blighted by such bias: "What was begun from party-rage, has been continued from indolence. No research has been exercised" and the simplest facts of which persons occupied judicial positions or public office at any one time have "been left in impenetrable confusion."⁷ The slipshod quality of such histories does not preclude their popularity; it may even assure it.⁸

One of the most widely-distributed and read accounts of More's life and times as a persecutor is contained in the *Actes and Monuments of these latter and perilous Dayes*, (1563) better known as *The Book of Martyrs* by the Puritan John Foxe (1516-1587). Godwin describes this as "the oldest authority" on the subject but is blunt about its bias: "If any one authority could be more suspicious than another, this is eminently so"; he is mildly generous towards the "industrious" Foxe, suggesting the purpose of his work may have been motivated by "very good intentions," but it is unmistakably the work of a party writer who has "raked together all the stories that had hitherto been hid."⁹ There is a suggestion here that, party propaganda notwithstanding, Foxe has done history a service by printing these hidden histories of the abuses of power, authority, and religion, though Godwin's remarks on their circulation are suggestive of the inevitability of such an occurrence, rather than giving a clear sense of the desirability or otherwise of their circulation:

It must be that such stories should be told. It is the natural, & I had almost said the reasonable, vengeance

that is taken by the poor & the suffering, upon the elevated personages through whom their sufferings come. The more they are silenced & put down, the most industriously will these stories be propagated within a certain circle. The laws of the natural world are not those of the moral. The lower the whisper, in these cases, & with the more fearful precaution it is uttered, the further it will be sure to be heard, & the longer it will last. Protestantism was silenced in England in the first year of the Reformation; Popery has been forbidden to tell its tale among us, from the accession of queen Elizabeth to the present hour.¹⁰

Despite Godwin's implied scepticism regarding the possibility of Foxe knowing precisely "of the long dialogues they held in their cells to encourage each other to firmness, & the words they employed," and of being able to provide accounts of "the cruel sufferings imposed upon them, to which only the chancellor or the bishop, their tormentor, & his myrmidons were present," the circulation of these hidden histories serves a necessary purpose in countering secrecy and oppression, although not when such histories have been fabricated.¹¹ Though the low whispers described here possess an almost supernatural strength and agency, a power exists to counteract them: More's self-defense. Godwin acknowledges the difficulty in combating rumour, scandal, or prejudice elsewhere in his writings; scenes of false accusation and the failure of defense abound in his novels, despite his assertions in *Political Justice* that truth is "omnipotent" and possesses a "direct and irresistible tendency to produce liberty, and happiness, and virtue," as well as a further invincible quality of influence: "There is an energy in the sincerity of a virtuous mind that nothing human can resist."¹² Godwin suggests here that if self-defense is not elected, then the subject of an allegation "must take his chance for it being repeated, perpetuated, & believed. But here every thing was done that could be done. Sir Thomas More [...] penned the Apology for his conduct."¹³ The reception of this

Apology by historians and its authority for Godwin will be discussed below; first let me consider More's character, and how Godwin goes about re-creating him in his essay.

Reasonable Expectation and True Estimates: Reconstructing the Character of Thomas More

As John Morrow has demonstrated in his analysis of Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth*, Godwin's historical approach is often more focused upon character than system and this enables him to present fresh, intriguing, and non-anachronistic historical accounts; in this case his attention to the personalities of commonwealthmen produced a "distinctive conception" of them "that had more in common with their [the commonwealthmen] own self-image than with the views of many early nineteenth-century admirers who treated their seventeenth-century idols as forerunners of modern popularism."¹⁴ Godwin's historical approach is strongly grounded on the significance of historical context, and he acknowledges in "On the Composition of History" the danger for historians of judging from hindsight, or "from events & conclusions with which we are acquainted, but which it was perhaps impossible for a man living in the time of Sir Thomas More to anticipate."¹⁵ A central principle in his historiographical method is to attempt to view and judge the subjects as they understood themselves. To understand the alleged or actual persecutions enacted by More, therefore, as well as the true tenor of his *Apology*, Godwin sets out in an attempt to enter his mindset and his character.

Sir Thomas More certainly applied himself with great earnestness, both with his pen & his counsel, to support the faith in which he had been bred, & to repress innovation. No historian & no critic has given himself the trouble to assign the reasons, & make a true estimate, of this conduct. Nothing is in appearance so simple, as the fundamental law of moral judgement; the putting ourselves in the place of the party, seeing those things, &

those only, which he saw, & feeling what he felt; & yet in practice, not only no ordinary man, & no sectary, but no moralist, & no historian, is found competent to the application of this rule.¹⁶

The historian's task set out here is singular. The writing of history is privileged as a moral responsibility: to write history is to pronounce a judgment, produced by an initial act of self-substitution for the subject of one's history, familiar from Adam Smith's theory of sympathy in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759); understanding enables judgment, and the "true estimate" can be produced: a simple, and at once impossible, task.¹⁷ The historian, already on a higher plane of enquiry compared with "ordinary" people, must experience a sort of forgetfulness of the present, as well as of himself, in order to see "those things, & those only" which are experienced by his subject. And at best, this impossible task can only produce the curiously ambivalent "true estimate." With this description of the historian's endeavors, Godwin is acknowledging the limitation of even the most talented historians, of the inevitable role of assumption, guess, and speculation, and of how partial, biased, and insubstantial the whole process is, even when secured by evidence such as More's *Apology*. This process, admittedly, exists in a world that overestimates the value of evidence as a whole: "no principles of evidence have yet been laid down that are infallible. Human affairs universally proceed upon presumption and probability."¹⁸ The statement of the "true estimate" as the best version of the past available to us acknowledges this fallibility, but the probability of historical events, experiences, or even feelings is not so flimsy a source of evidence for Godwin the historian as it may at first appear.¹⁹ The act of putting himself in the place of his subject is one which he engages in throughout his historical and biographical works, but it is the emphasis on the corporeality of Thomas More in Godwin's essay, and its connection to More's writing and thought, that I wish to consider next.

Godwin's essay "Of History and Romance" contains the now well-known claim that the study of human passions, of individuals rather

than national events, is the true purpose of history, and for this the romance writer is better fitted than the historian: “while he who was formerly called the historian, must be contented to step down into the place of his rival, with this disadvantage, that he is a romance writer, without the ardour, the enthusiasm, and the sublime licence of imagination, that belong to that species of composition.”²⁰ Yet here too Godwin sounds a note of caution regarding the romance writer and his possession of his subject: “to tell precisely how such a person would act in a given situation, requires a sagacity scarcely less than divine.”²¹ Despite this caution, Godwin credits the actual character of More with being possessed of superlative qualities of consistency of principle, therefore of behavior, and so presents himself as a subject “worthy of universal attention” and uniquely fitted for the historian’s (or romance writer’s) attention, as, regardless of the writer’s skills of divination, More’s probable thoughts and behaviour *can* be told.”²² As a writer, too, More has left behind him a conduit by which he may be reached, which will be discussed presently. Meanwhile, despite the availability of these channels, Godwin still seeks to inhabit his subject imaginatively, and to do this he relies heavily upon the discourse of the body to re-animate More. Throughout his essay he speculates upon More’s physical sensations as much as his thoughts: “To the eyes of Sir Thomas More,” “He saw always before him what appeared to him to be his duty,” “How was it natural that Sir Thomas More should feel” are juxtaposed with statements or speculations about his intellectual responses: “Sir Thomas More believed,” “contemplated,” “thought,” “therefore could not think,” “well knew,” “regarded.”²³ Partly these descriptions are illustrative of Godwin’s narrative style; a lively history cannot easily be written entirely in passive constructions. Partly they are indicative of Godwin’s immersive method, both in researching and composing his historical works: not only the life, the manners, and the times of his subject, but the very intellectual process itself, are sought out – as the preface to Godwin’s 1803 *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* illustrates:

The full and complete life of a poet would include an extensive survey of the manners, the opinions, the arts and the literature, of the age in which the poet lived. This is the only way in which we can become truly acquainted with the history of his mind, and the causes which made him what he was. We must observe what Chaucer felt and saw, how he was educated, and what were the objects, the events and the persons, successively presented to his views, before we can strictly and philosophically understand his biography. To delineate the state of England, such as Chaucer saw it, in every point of view in which it can be delineated, is the study of this book.²⁴

Again we see the attention to feeling, experience, and vision that concerns Godwin in relation to More. Here, however, the scale of the project is much wider and more total, to the point that even "the state of England" itself will be represented. No such ambition is stated, or suggested, within "On the Composition of History." In this brief, unfinished work Godwin is avowedly concerned with historians' oversights rather than the recreation of the Tudor period. Yet still within this essay we can see echoes of Godwin's earlier methodology, the similarities of approach to history and the lives of historical figures either in the long form of the two quarto volumes of *Life of Chaucer* or the short form of a few folio sheets of the essay on More. Most striking is the emphasis on the importance of (and confidence in the possibility of) re-creating the historical period of the character in question, not merely the external events ("the manners, the opinions, and arts") but the experience of the subject himself, in his very particular subjectivity: not simply what life was like *in* Chaucer's time (or More's, or Cromwell's), but *for* him ("what Chaucer felt and saw, how he was educated, and what were ...successively presented to his views"). This type of historiography does not seek to imagine the past (and thus re-create it from facts or speculate about it from possibilities) but more ambitiously, perhaps even

impossibly, seeks to embody the subject himself. Godwin continues his 1803 statement about historical biography as follows:

If the knowledge of contemporary objects is the biography of Chaucer, the converse of the proposition will also be true, and the biography of Chaucer will be the picture of a certain portion of the literary, political and domestic history of our country. The person of Chaucer may in this view be considered as the central figure in a miscellaneous painting, giving unity and individual application to the otherwise disjointed particulars with which the canvas is diversified.²⁵

On these grounds, the sketch of More cannot approach anything like a biography of its subject, as the multiplicity of Tudor England is absent; the sketch is too brief. Unlike Chaucer, More cannot function as a “central figure” in a painting of his time, but perhaps he may do so as a unifying figure in a more abstracted conception of time (that is, within the longer range of the historian’s time) if Godwin’s attempted resurrection of More as a great public figure is successful. Again in his preface to the *Life of Chaucer* Godwin returns to the corporeal, or what remains of it:

It was my wish, had my power held equal pace with my strong inclination, to carry the workings of fancy and the spirit of philosophy into the investigation of ages past. I was anxious to rescue for a moment the illustrious dead from the jaws of the grave, to make them pass in review before me, to question their spirits and record their answers. I wished to make myself their master of ceremonies, to introduce my reader to their familiar speech, and to enable him to feel for the instant as if he had lived with Chaucer.²⁶

There are echoes here perhaps of *The Odyssey* or even *Gulliver’s Travels*, with their conjuring scenes amongst the departed. As Porscha Fermanis has phrased it, here Godwin articulates “a historiography of

presence" and notes that later in the biography when Godwin favorably discusses the approach of the medieval historian William de Lorris he "recommend[s] the kind of historical writing in which the author seems to inscribe himself into his text."²⁷ Godwin's response to More's *Apology*, therefore, is not only an attempt to embody More in "On the Composition of History" but also to position the Godwin of the present moment within More's time, as well as placing Godwin as another embodied subject within his own writing. The temporal, literary and physical distances collapse to produce the ghostly realm where Godwin becomes the "master of ceremonies" of his "review" of shades within the space of his essay, a text that resonates with the ideas of transfusion that pervade Godwin's 1809 *Essay on Sepulchres*, suggesting a similar date of preparation for "On the Composition of History."

In this essay, Godwin unfurls a new argument on posterity, the reputation of "great men" and the construction of history in what Rowland Weston has termed a "necromantic" conception of memory and which Godwin describes as an attempt "to paralyse the hand of Oblivion" by rethinking how we memorialize the dead.²⁸ Criticizing the tombs at Westminster Abbey, and noting the mismatch between those who are memorialized and those who actually achieve posthumous fame, Godwin's solution to the failure of monuments as adequate memorials is to argue for a new significance of place, the place of burial, where the dead body, or its faintest traces, can be visited and conversed with, where "some spirit shall escape from [Milton's] ashes, and whisper to me things unfelt before."²⁹ The memorialized dead can be anyone deemed "great" while living (thus not evading the problem of *who* decides what greatness is and *when* it should be conferred), and the extension of Godwin's idea suggests the nation as a vast necropolis dotted with plain white wooden crosses marking graves. Godwin's alternative to sepulchers is thus at once material – the body matters most – and immaterial, as it is the spirits of the living and the dead that will commune: "let us visit their tombs; let us indulge all the reality we can now have, of a sort of conference with these men, by repairing to the

scene which, as far as they are at all on earth, *they still inhabit!*”³⁰ Reputation, legacy, works, objects, none of these are comparable to the spirit of the dead body for posthumous existence. Nonetheless, while Godwin’s scheme awaits realization, literary works do remain accessible to us when their authors’ remains do not, and with the works, so remain the writers. Writers such as Chaucer and Milton lead a double existence in this sepulchral world, both in spirit, and in words, and thus are accessible to their readers. Not, as Weston identifies, because writing contains their knowledge, but because it retains something of their mind, their spirit.³¹ But for those dead greats who have not written, and whose graves are inaccessible, then other locations associated with them while living may suffice:

The first time I stood in the Gallery of the British House of Commons, Hambden, and Pym, and Bradshaw, and Cromwel were present before me” [...] I no longer trusted to the tale of the historian, the cold and uncertain record of words formed upon paper, I beheld the queen [...] I heard the trampling of horses, and the clangour of trumpets. The aspiring and lofty minded men of former times were seen by me as I passed along, and stood in review before me.³²

This is a scene produced by a highly-sympathetic imagination steeped in reading. According to Godwin, such visions of the past are essential to produce more accurate readings of the works of the dead, as he writes near the end of *Life of Chaucer*: “I want, not only to observe the beauty and solidity of the edifice [the literary works] before me, but also to understanding [*sic*] the materials with which it is built.”³³ For Godwin, visions are a means to producing history, insufficient in themselves perhaps but a history preferable to “the tale of the historian,” enabling something which leads to greater understanding beyond mere historical facts. In “Essay on Sepulchres,” therefore, the preservation of memory enacted by his scheme of monuments also provides an alternative historical register, one in which the figures of the past move, speak, and can be known.³⁴

Atrocious Falsehoods: Reconstructing the Past

Throughout his later prefaces to historical and biographical works Godwin assures his readers of the thoroughness of his searches, his dogged tracing of every accessible source and his acknowledgement of the inaccessible ones, and also his modesty regarding possible errors, despite his efforts. Perhaps the memory of some unfavorable reviews regarding his methodology for his first biography, *The History of the life of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham* (1783), lingered on.³⁵ His description of the activities of his imagined readers again offers a perspective on his own labors as a reader and writer of history: "One reader, in perusing, will often find hints and topics for conjecture and reflection, which may escape the observation of another."³⁶ Godwin's later historiographical method as exemplified by the *History of the Commonwealth* moves a considerable distance from the embodied history of the early 1800s, and as Fermanis argues, he substantially removes the connections between author and subject (and perhaps with the reader too) which he emphasized in *Life of Chaucer*, to produce a more conventional form of history writing focused upon documents and facts, but one which is still unusually attentive to personality, psychology, and the manners of the times.³⁷ But in the *Life of Chaucer* the significance of documents is substantially present. This is an anticipation of Godwin's critique of Hume in "On the Composition of History" for his erroneous reliance upon an English translation of Thomas Camden's Latin *Annales* (1615 and 1627) as the original text, as in the preface to *Life of Chaucer* Godwin states plainly his ownership of his materials: "Throughout this publication, care has been taken to make no reference to any book, which has not been actually consulted, and the reference verified by inspection."³⁸ As Godwin writes in the later essay on More, this method is in marked contrast to Hume's approach, who "is indeed continuously, throughout his history, giving characters of books without having looked at them."³⁹ This is not a fault that Godwin can easily pardon, and he is continually on the watch to avoid any similar imputation, as denoted in the preface to the *History of the Commonwealth*: "I trust it will not be

found, that I have neglected any accessible means of information, or that I have been wanting in industry, and the careful sifting and examination of authorities,” subsequently describing as a “novelty” his dedication to “patient industry and investigation, and a determination to look at the facts themselves, undisturbed by the glosses of party writers.”⁴⁰

Godwin professes his astonishment that no historian, to his knowledge, has ever consulted More’s *Apology* when writing on the subject. Godwin is keen to avoid undue criticism of Hume here; he is the first among equals in his neglect of this vital source: “Historians,” Godwin notes ruefully, “are mere men, & cannot be expected to search every where [...] & the correction of established & inveterate mistakes, are sometimes found in such obscure corners, & in books & under titles where we should have so little looked for any thing of the kind, that we can scarcely wonder if matters of this sort have sometimes lain unknown for centuries.”⁴¹ Industry itself is not always sufficient to produce a complete history, as Godwin knows. And yet the matter of More’s *Apology* is not an ordinary case:

But who would have thought that historian after historian would have failed to look into a volume, The Works of Sir Thomas More, that no English library can be without, or that finding there a title, The Apology of Sir Thomas More, written by Himself, after having given over the Office of Lord Chancellor, would not have been at the trouble to consult it, before he summed up & decided upon the merits of so memorable a character?⁴²

Godwin’s astonishment at this oversight is palpable. His interest in the neglect of this source ignores Andrews and Robert throughout this section (as in the essay generally) to focus on Hume’s oversight. He decides that Hume cannot have read the *Apology* and ignored its contents on the grounds that Foxe was the greater authority on the subject, but no such contest occurred: Godwin ascertains that Hume was completely unaware of More’s *Works*, and therefore the *Apology*, as he later explains. After quoting from Hume’s *History of England* the statement

that "Sir Thomas More, *though he wrote in Latin*, seems to come the nearest of any man of that age to the character of a classical author," Godwin plainly sums up the paragraph with the statement that More's *Works* consisted entirely of his English writings, and that his only notorious Latin work was *Utopia*, which seems to have misled Hume: "When a man shows me that he does not know in what language an author has written, it is not perhaps too much to presume that he is not acquainted with his works."⁴³

Hume's partial knowledge has been exposed here, and Godwin is not yet finished in his critique, but its continuation leads him back to the realm of his literary imagination and embodiment even as it emphasizes the importance of documentary research. Earlier in the essay Godwin describes Hume as "the most superficially informed, but, I had almost said, the most subtle & agreeable of all historians" and now expands upon this.⁴⁴ The superficiality of Hume's preparation is illustrated in Godwin's essay by his errors relating to Camden and More, but he counters this regretfully-expressed criticism with an appreciation of Hume's talents that at once depends upon his imagination and shows its shortcomings. Godwin suggests that Hume's subtlety arises from his ability to perceive the truest interpretation from the "slender *data*" he engages with: "He possessed in himself the touchstone enabling him to discriminate between the value of different authorities, & to draw true inferences from a comparison of particulars."⁴⁵ This is a true historian's judgment, as Godwin sees it: the ability to sift the evidence correctly but based upon something more than straight knowledge. The use of "touchstone" denotes a standard, but also a test for the purity of precious metals; there is a distinct whiff of metallurgy, perhaps even alchemy, in Hume's perception, but he implicitly lacks the literary imagination which fuels Godwin's work. Hume, he writes, thought that Camden was a writer in English rather than Latin, and because of a lack of literary appreciation Hume "mistakes in this passage the relaxed & gossiping style of a translation made towards the end of the seventeenth century, for the best & purest specimen that can be found of the English of the

time of Elizabeth.”⁴⁶ Similarly his ignorance of More’s work can be attributed to a lack of interest in More as a writer, rather than a statesman. In Godwin’s type of history, a writer who seeks to conjure up the figures of the past effectively must be furnished with a mind stocked with knowledge of literature, not just historical facts.

For Godwin, Hume exists in this essay as much of an embodied character as More. In another passage of historical imagination, Godwin muses on the “transport” the “liberal mind of Hume” would have felt had he read More’s defense. His language in these few lines is wholly speculative, and repeated for good measure: “I can easily figure,” “I can easily figure,” “I wonder,” as he attributes feelings of “scorn” and “manly disavowal” toward Foxe, on Hume’s behalf, for circulating calumnies.⁴⁷ The power granted to feeling here is such that it finally constitutes judgment. Godwin ends by pondering how Hume believed Foxe’s account at all, asking why Hume did not “reject the abominable & impossible forgery, merely upon its own merits, without requiring any express evidence to overturn it. In fact no man that lives can hesitate between the two authorities.”⁴⁸ The compression of the two sentences referring to the “forgery” obscures the statement that Godwin has just made of the palpable falsity of the document by moving too swiftly to pronounce More the winner of the contest of authorities – but it is a contest which Hume, at least, cannot observe. No man who lives *would* hesitate, perhaps, but only if he has read both accounts.

The nature of More’s account, that of a first-person testimony, plays a significant role in Godwin’s response to the text, as he seems wholly persuaded by the force of this testimony, which is not always the case in his writings.⁴⁹ Testimonies provide an intriguing inconsistency in relation to Chaucer’s date of birth and later age, in Godwin’s “Dissertation upon the period of the birth of Chaucer,” contained between the preface and the first chapter of the *Life of Chaucer*. Contrasting the evidence of the sworn testimony given by Chaucer in a deposition with the textual evidence of his age and experience throughout his poetry, Godwin presents his prosecution and defense on the subject: “The testimony I

have to oppose is no less than the assertion of Chaucer himself: the substance of the evidence on the other side is of the same description; it is Chaucer against Chaucer."⁵⁰ The humorous incongruity of this circumstance raises an interesting question about the validity or reliability of author testimony, but it is notable in "On the Composition of History" that Godwin readily accepts More's *Apology* as the true account of the contested allegations of persecution. Initially it seems that the affect of the piece carries far more force than the facts within it could do or even need to do. Here Godwin's admiration for More's intellectual gifts seems to have blinded him to other possible interpretations of the defense, not to mention the authority of the historical evidence supporting the claims' validity. In Godwin's description, More's *Apology* vibrates with the unmistakable, all-conquering truth recognizable by everyone "who has a sense within, enabling him to appreciate evidence, instead of a thousand witnesses, that the writer speaks with that unruffled magnanimity of spirit, which can only spring from an unstained conscience."⁵¹ The purpose of each enquiry differs dramatically, too: Chaucer, like an "antiquated belle" may have been circumspect about his age in a manner that matters very little; the accusations of ferocious torture made against More would be very dreadful if proved true, just as his robust defense of his innocence would indicate terrible corruption and craven pleading if proved false.⁵² But the integrity of More's character is something which Godwin seems perfectly certain of, perhaps even prejudiced toward, and it is an integrity which he sees as much in the style and personality of More's general prose writing (the author once again as subject) as in the spirit and content of the *Apology*, which produces the following paean:

I know not in what other author we can find the great questions that were at issue in that memorable period, treated in the spirit of a gentleman & a scholar, free from the shackles of the ecclesiastical profession, & sustained, not because his cast & station in society called upon him to take a certain side in the debate, but from a deep

feeling of public interest & virtue [....] Other men of great eminence either betray a weakness & abjectness of spirit that tarnishes all their merits, or there is a loftiness, a stiffness, a straining after majesty in which at last the candidate is never at home, that relaxes & deadens the partiality they would otherwise excite. Sir Thomas More unites beyond any other man upon record, simplicity with greatness. Nothing can shake him, or ruffle the tranquillity of his soul, & yet we can always see the naked man, simply as he is.⁵³

More is an exemplar as moralist and writer. His unique character fits him perfectly for the subject of one of Godwin's sepulchers. It is not surprising, therefore, that Godwin enters so enthusiastically into More's character and defense, and a critique of scholarly neglect of More's true greatness, which has been besmirched by so many historians who have "excused themselves from labour in the very kernel of their office, & recited so atrocious a falsehood, one after another, without sifting the matter to the bottom."⁵⁴ The collision of weak scholars with More's greatness has produced centuries of misinterpretation of the "most worthy" of men. His restoration has been effected not only by Godwin's researches, but also his desire to make More live again.⁵⁵

The Most Inconsistent of Men

The quotation from James Pettit Andrews' *History of Great Britain*, which provides one of the three epigraphs to the essay, reads thus: "Sir Thomas More was the most inconsistent of men; though said to be human by nature, he could attend for hours on the agonies of a gentleman (James Bainham), whipped & tortured on suspicion of heretical principles."⁵⁶ Godwin begins the essay with this quotation and the similar quotes from Hume and Andrews to exemplify the standard historian's account of More's act of torture. Godwin's ensuing argument about historical veracity and use of sources has been explored above; in this final section I return to this quotation as a means to explore briefly the

principle of consistency, which emerges as one of Godwin's latent concerns throughout the essay.

Consistency of character and principle simplifies the historian's task, but it is more problematic for those critics of history, who, like Godwin, seek to reread history while writing their own account of it. In his essay "Of Posthumous Fame" in *The Enquirer* (1797), Godwin briefly discusses consistency of reputation as an aid, or otherwise, to posterity. The main ground of his disquisition is the increasingly-familiar claim, prevalent in the later editions of *Political Justice* as well as in "Essay of History and Romance" as quoted above, that one can never fully comprehend another person's character, but, more secure accounts of characters or knowledge of them may be attained nonetheless, by examination of evidence:

No man ever completely understood the character of any other man. My most familiar friend exaggerates perhaps some virtues in me; but there are others which I know I possess, to which he is totally blind. For this reason I should lay it down as a maxim, never to take the report of a man's zealous and undoubted advocate against him. Let every thing be examined, as far as circumstances will possibly admit, before it is assumed for true.⁵⁷

The precepts of the historian's proceeding are palpable here. Aligned to the uncertainty of character is the problem of reputation: it is dogged by "fickleness," and suffers much from the vagaries of "popularity," of rapid substitutions of praise and blame; earlier citing the example of Cicero, Godwin argues that one is never remembered in the manner one might expect.⁵⁸ Nothing is more certain than the uncertainty of one's posthumous reputation:

Consistency is one of the virtues most applauded in society, and as to his reputation for which every man is most anxious; yet no quality is more rare. Nor ought it be frequent; there is scarcely any proposition, as to which a man of an active and reflecting mind, may not

recollect to have changed his sentiments at least once in his life. But, though inconsistency is no serious imputation, levity undoubtedly is. If I am right in changing my opinion, at least I was wrong in the hasty manner in which I formerly adopted it.⁵⁹

The charge of inconsistency, then, does not present much of an obstacle for Godwin in praising and appraising More's character; we may begin to suspect that the controversy sparked his interest in his subject, even before he discovered Hume's error. By the end of Godwin's essay, More's persecution of James Bainham, which Godwin begins by disputing, seems to fall back silently into place in the accepted narrative of More's life.⁶⁰ The inconsistency of More's character as noted by Andrews becomes consistent once more, though not because his savagery has been disproved.⁶¹ More's *Apology*, used as by Godwin to ascertain the truth of the reports of this glaring discrepancy in More's actions, acquits him of the charge of private torturer of "those manye myssehandeled and wronge furnished persones."⁶² The *Apology* accounts for the two occasions when he did order an individual to be punished in his home: a young servant whipped for repeating heresies to another child within More's household, and a local man "whiche after that he had fallen into that frantick heresies, fell soone after into plaine open fansye beside" and whose cure, effected at Bedlam, was repeated on More's orders ("by beating & correccion gathered his remembraunce to him"); notwithstanding the change in motivation or purpose, the violent actions remain.⁶³ Elsewhere in More's *Apology* he accounts for the treatment of each of the heretics put to death during his chancellorship, but not in the chapter extracted by Godwin. "On the Composition of History" remains a curiosity; the worst of the allegations have been refuted by More's testimony, but his actions as a persecutor of heretics, chiefly of James Bainham, remains unexamined in the surviving manuscript.⁶⁴

The exoneration of More is not Godwin's aim here: exploring historian's methods is, but the examination of More's character is an integral part of Godwin's exploration, which corresponds with his claim in

"Essay of History and Romance" that "true history consists in a delineation of consistent, human character, in a display of the manner in which such a character acts under successive circumstances, in showing how character increases and assimilates new substances to its own, and how it decays, together with the catastrophe into which by its own gravity it naturally declines."⁶⁵ In the person of Thomas More, Godwin has found a rare "consistent" character, whose defense fills in the spaces between his reported actions and "the unparalleled catastrophe," his execution for treason.⁶⁶ As quoted above, it is More's writing which reveals this character: "we always see the naked man, simply as he is. He gives us the example of an intuitive perspicacity that judges at once without effort or obscurity, & the innocence of a child."⁶⁷ More's judgment is thus declared as unerring, a pronouncement by Godwin which has been brought about almost wholly by the effect of More's writing, but in part too by the embodied character which Godwin conjures in the final part of the essay: the religious thinker who saw destruction of God's law in the preachings of Luther, who (accurately) predicted that these would result in the fragmentation of the centuries-old Catholic church, the unity and extent of which was secured "by the special providence & direction of God" and understood by More and other church thinkers as proof of its divinity.⁶⁸ By entering into More's faith and fears, viewing him from a contemporary Catholic religious perspective, and by acknowledging the probable effects if what he regarded as heresies were not fully countered and suppressed, Godwin casts him as a recognizable, understandable, and ultimately a consistent figure against the backdrop of the church's long history:

Heresies had sprung at various times from the first propagation of the gospel; & the controversies as to which was the true doctrine & which the heretical, were settled for the most part by general councils, consisting of deputies elected & authorised from the different countries professing the Christian religion. Thus the unity of the church, at least through almost all Europe, which had long been regarded as one of the most

eminent marks of its divine origin, had been maintained
& preserved.⁶⁹

More's actions find their motive; within this setting Godwin exonerates him of any error, and the documented tortures and burnings need no further discussion. More has been recovered as a rare man of principle, public interest, and virtue. The rest is calumny.

One of the final fragmented lines in the manuscript contains the question: "But what was it reasonable for Sir Thomas More to expect on the occasion?"⁷⁰ After the contextualization of More's mind and manners, we are returned once again to the historian's speculation. In Godwin's historiography we find a possible answer: history writing is a limited, imperfect act, but by refining the process itself to what is reasonable for historians to construct, an acceptable account may be offered. In "Of Posthumous Fame", Godwin states that "History is in reality a tissue of fables [...]. The story is disfigured by [...] the fictions, probable or improbable, with which every historian is instigated to piece out his imperfect tale. Human affairs are so entangled, motives are so subtle and variously compounded, that the truth cannot be told."⁷¹ In the "Essay on History and Romance" Godwin ushered in the romance writer, better suited to writing in a realm where "all history bears too near a resemblance to fable"; yet he still maintains that "The conjectures of the historian must be built upon a knowledge of the characters of his personages" even as he acknowledges this as impossible.⁷² Twenty years later Godwin affirmed a more practical method, consisting solely of "patient industry and investigation, and [...] a determination to look at the fact themselves."⁷³ In between these accounts lies "On the Composition of History," with its attention to facts, to records, but most of all to the character of Thomas More, in which Godwin anticipates an understanding of him which other historians would not reach for nearly two hundred years. Historians who engage in such a process as exemplified by the embodied-subject form of the Godwinian biography can produce work of interest, perhaps even of illumination.

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Notes

¹ Oxford, Bodleian MS Abinger c.29, fols.5-16. Undated manuscript, paper watermarked 1808. I would like to acknowledge the generous support of the Centre for the Study of the Book, Bodleian Library, Oxford, and the British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, whose award of a fellowship in 2012 enabled me to undertake much of this research, and I also wish to thank the librarians at the Bodleian and at the Robinson Library Special Collections, Newcastle University, for their assistance.

² MS Abinger c.29, fol.5.

³ Godwin's conception of history has long been understood as agent-centered, primarily due to his discussions in the first edition of *Political Justice* of human nature as a type of Lockean *tabula rasa*. See Book I, chapter three, "The moral characters of men originate in their perception," in *Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp, Vol.3 *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Mark Philp (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993), 10-13. Recent critical attention has focused upon the role of character in Godwin's historiography and his changing views of it. Rowland Weston analyses the transition in Godwin's theory of the temporal development of character from its establishment in *Political Justice* as produced by external stimuli to the more nuanced exploration of "the unconscious, unreflective and habitual aspects of private domestic life" evident in the *Life of Chaucer*. See 464-68 in Weston's "Politics, Passion and the 'Puritan Temper': Godwin's Critique of Enlightened Modernity," *Studies in Romanticism* 41 (2002), 445-70, 465. Porscha Fermanis examines the changes in Godwin's approach to history, moving from a reliance upon speculative enquiry toward greater reliance upon documentation, and argues that Godwin's later work demonstrates the belief that "the historian's activity is not primarily philosophical, rhetorical or performative, but rather consists of research into facts and evidence" (786). See Fermanis, "William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth* and the Psychology of Individual History," *Review of English Studies* 61.252 (2010), 773- 800.

For further work on Godwin and history, see Jon Klancher, "Godwin and the Republican Romance: Genre, Politics, and Contingency in Cultural History," *Modern Language Quarterly* 56.2 (1995), 145-65 for a detailed reading of Godwin's "Essay on History and Romance" and its connections to the wider debate about Enlightenment progressive histories; see Tilottama Rajan, "Uncertain Futures: History and Genealogy in William Godwin's *The Lives of Edward and John Philips, Nephews and Pupils of Milton*," *Milton Quarterly* 32.3 (1998), 75-86 for her influential concept of "oblique history" (76); see Adam Rounce, "William Godwin: the novel, philosophy, and history," *History of European Ideas* 33.1 (2007), 1-8, for a brief but helpful overview of Godwin's main ideas and canonical works.

⁴ More's works in English and Latin are contained in *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*, 14 vols., (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963-1997), gen. ed. Richard S. Sylvester, with the *Apology* in Vol. 9 (1979), ed. and introd. J.B. Trapp. One of More's most recent and prolific biographers, John Guy, claims the impossibility of successfully recovering the truth of More's intellectual process or actions via historical biography: More, Guy argues, writing for posterity as well as his contemporaries, and written about from biased, polemical, and fictional perspectives, "is not, and never will be, primarily an historical figure ... his iconic status obscures, rather than illuminates, his historical significance." Furthermore, Guy claims that "Now that I have finished this book, I no longer believe that a truly historical biography of Thomas More can be written. The sources are too problematic." John Guy, *Thomas More* (London: Arnold, 2000), preface, ix-xii; ix, xi. See also Guy's *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), and *A Daughter's love: Thomas and Margaret More* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008).

⁵ Victoria Myers argues that Godwin's *Life of Chatham* (1783) functions as an early model for the type of historiography that Godwin later develops more fully in the *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer* and his other historical-biographical works, by examining Godwin's problematic use

of oratory in the early biography to explore and support both an historian's prized impartiality and a biographer's attention to the private subject. Myers' attention to Godwin's development of "a morally committed impartiality" (155) and reciprocity in the formation of opinion is particularly illuminating when read against Godwin's preface to the *History of the Commonwealth of England* and his study of Cromwell's character in volume four of that work. See "Oratory and History: Godwin's *History of the Life of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*," *Godwinian Moments*, ed. Robert M. Maniquis and Victoria Myers (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), 149-71.

⁶ MS Abinger c.29, fol.7.

⁷ William Godwin, preface, *History of the Commonwealth of England: from its commencement, to the restoration of Charles the Second*, Vol. 1 of 4 vols. (London: H. Colburn, 1824-1828), v-xi, v.

⁸ For a detailed account of the complexities of historians' responses to the commonwealth, the development of party allegiances, and the political interpretation and manipulation of the legacy of the commonwealth by Godwin's contemporaries, see John Morrow, "Republicanism and Public Virtue: William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth of England*," *The Historical Journal* 34.3 (1991), 645-64.

⁹ MS Abinger c.29, fol.7. John Guy notes that Foxe's book was the chief source of allegations against More of private persecutions of heretics (imprisonment in More's home, whipping, and robbery of their goods). See Guy, 13, 107-8. More's *Apology* signifies that these allegations had begun to circulate as early as 1533. Bainham, or Baynam as More refers to him (see Vol. 9 of the Yale *Complete Works of St Thomas More*, 94) was accused of heresy in 1531, arrested, abjured, released, recanted, re-arrested, found guilty of heresy, and burned in April 1532. See J.B. Trapp's note on "Baynam" in Vol. 9, *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*, "Commentary," 279-394, 348.

¹⁰ MS Abinger c.29, fol.8.

¹¹ MS Abinger c.29, fol.7.

¹² “Of Sincerity,” *Political Justice*, ed. Mark Philp, Vol. 3 of *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 142, 137. Godwin’s description of the power of scandal from *Mandeville* (1817), with its echoes of low whispers, is worth reproducing here: “Wherever vindication comes, is not the first thing it tells of the unhappy subject of it, that his character has been tarnished, his integrity suspected, that base motives and vile actions have been imputed to him, that he has been scoffed at by some, reviled by others, and looked askance at by all? [...] All love the scandal. It constitutes a tale that seizes upon the curiosity of our species; it has something deep, and obscure, and mysterious in it; it is whispered from man to man, and communicated by winks, and nods, and shrugs, the shaking of the head, and the speaking motion of the finger. But vindication is poor, and dry, and cold, and repulsive. It rests in detections, and distinctions, explanations to be given to the meaning of a hundred phrases, and the setting whatever belongs to the circumstances of time and of place. What bystander will bend himself to the drudgery of thoroughly appreciating it?” *Mandeville*, ed. Pamela Clemit, Vol. 6 of *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, 8 vols., gen. ed. Mark Philp (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992), 182-83. For an analysis of trial, defense, language, and justice in Godwin’s novels, see Tilottama Rajan, “The Scene of Judgment: Trial and Confession in Godwin’s *Caleb Williams* and Other Fiction,” *Romantic Narrative: Shelley, Hays, Godwin, Wollstonecraft* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 117-43.

¹³ MS Abinger c.29, fol.8. The *Apology* is chiefly concerned with church doctrine, written in response to an anonymous pamphlet, *A Treatise concernynge the division between the spirytualtie and temporaltie*, published in either November or December 1532, which accused the church of eagerly finding heresy where there was none. More’s *Apology* appeared around Easter 1533. More refers to the unnamed author of the pamphlet throughout the *Apology* as “the pacifyer.” The author of the pamphlet is thought to be Christopher St German, a fellow lawyer, writer, and acquaintance of More’s. See Trapp,

"Introduction" to *Apology*, Vol. 9 of *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*, xv-xciii, especially xxxvii-lxvii for a discussion of St German and the pamphlet's argument.

¹⁴ Morrow, 661. See 661-63 for full discussion. For a detailed consideration of Godwin's interest in the psychology of his historical subjects see Fermanis, "William Godwin's *History of the Commonwealth*," 773-800. Victoria Myers has noted that Godwin's interest in the mind-set of his subjects begins as early as his *Life of Chatham*, and argues that Godwin explores oratorical and rhetorical styles in this work "to enter the moral mind of political actors" and further, that "the text links oratory to agent-centred history." See "Oratory and History," 160.

¹⁵ MS Abinger c.29, fol.13.

¹⁶ MS Abinger c.29, fol.10.

¹⁷ For an analysis of Godwin's concepts of human understanding, judgment, and feeling, based upon common-sense moral philosophy and the theories of sympathy of both Hume and Smith, see Weston (2002), 456-60. For a thorough account of private judgment, truth, and reasoning as it occurs in Godwin's philosophy in relation to the tradition of Rational Dissent, and his later revisions of his opinions on truth, see Mark Philp, *Godwin's Political Justice* (New York and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), especially 16-34. Throughout this article I have quoted from the first edition of *Political Justice* where Godwin's faith in the power of truth is at its highest, but as Philp makes clear, this faith was tempered by scepticism regarding the limits of human understanding as Godwin's philosophical thought developed during his career, and between the first and third editions of *Political Justice* in particular. See Philp, 154-59.

¹⁸ "Of the Exercise of Private Judgment," *Political Justice*, 77.

¹⁹ Godwin's mingled use of both philosophical deduction and imaginative speculation in his work is astutely analyzed by Evan Radcliffe in his exploration of narrative use and the formation of judgment in "Godwin from 'Metaphysician' to Novelist: *Political*

Justice, Caleb Williams, and the Tension between Philosophical Argument and Narrative,” *Modern Philology* 97 (2000), 528-53.

²⁰ “Essay of History and Romance” in *Educational and Literary Writings*, ed. Pamela Clemit, Vol. 5 of *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 291-301, 301.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² MS. Abinger c.29, fol.8. See the final section of this article for a brief discussion of consistency.

²³ Each quotation is referenced separately here: MS Abinger c.29, fol.12; 10; 10; 11; 11; 11; 11; 12; 15.

²⁴ William Godwin, *Life of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2 vols. (London: T. Davison, 1803). Preface, v-xvii, viii.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁷ Fermanis, 784.

²⁸ Rowland Weston, “History, Memory, and Moral Knowledge: William Godwin’s Essay on Sepulchres (1809),” *The European Legacy: Towards New Paradigms* 14.6 (2009), 651-65, 656. “Essay on Sepulchres” in *Essays*, ed. Mark Philp, Vol. 6 of *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 8 vols, gen. ed. Mark Philp (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1993), 7-30, 22.

²⁹ “Essay on Sepulchres,” 22.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

³¹ This accessibility means that dead literary champions can therefore act as moral instructors: “For Godwin, memory is a matter of becoming acquainted, intimately, with those *people* who have thought and said these things. As we thus enter into more fully human relations with them, our character is affected and modified in those imperceptible, sympathetic and imitative ways which approach most closely to the more telling and significant modes of normal social life.” Weston (2009), 649.

³² “Essay on Sepulchres,” 20-21.

³³ *Life of Chaucer*, Vol. 2, 582.

³⁴ Julie A. Carlson has discussed Godwin’s preface to *Life of*

Chaucer, the "Essay on Sepulchres," and "Essay on History and Romance," and argued for their relevance to Godwin's conceptions of "futurity," suggesting that the implications of Godwin's history writing may be explored in relation to the future as much as to the past, in that the dead achieve a type of immortality through remembrance or the workings of the imagination (146). See chapter four, "Fancy's History," in Carlson's *England's First Family of Writers: Mary Wollstonecraft, William Godwin, Mary Shelley* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 131-61, especially 143-52, and chapter five, "Living Off and On: The Literary Work of Mourning," 162-211, especially 163-70. Carlson also notes, as does Weston, that Godwin's conception of history in "Essay on Sepulchres" is not progressive but one of arrested progress in the infancy of knowledge (161). Weston's analysis of this point is more detailed, and underlines the urgency in Godwin's notions of memorialization and immortality to render past lives available as sources of moral instruction and therefore improvement, when the progressive Whig model is no longer acceptable to him. See Weston (2009), 660-62.

³⁵ Martin Fitzpatrick notes that Godwin did not have access to Chatham's private correspondence while writing the biography, and that the contemporary reviewers commented unfavorably upon the lack of previously-unpublished material. Introductory note, *History of the life of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham* in *Political Writings* I, ed. Martin Fitzpatrick, Vol. 1 of *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 3. Fermanis is also attentive to Godwin's discussion of his use of sources in his preface to the *History of the Commonwealth*, and argues that this distinguishes him from previous historians by "making the process of source criticism and historical interpretation more transparent" (786), as well as relying less on earlier historians and more upon primary material such as legal documents, which signifies a further shift away from the Humean model.

³⁶ Preface, *Life of Chaucer*, xiv.

³⁷ Fermanis, 785-88. Even in the *History of the Commonwealth*, however, Godwin still cherishes the concept of calling forth the dead in

volume two, in this case the spirit of Cromwell; see Fermanis, 789, for a discussion of this.

³⁸ Preface, *Life of Chaucer*, xv.

³⁹ MS Abinger c.29, fol.9.

⁴⁰ Preface, *History of the Commonwealth*, ix-x, x.

⁴¹ MS Abinger c.29, fol.8.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ MS Abinger c.29, fol.9. The italics here are Godwin's. Godwin has pre-empted modern scholarship in this case. The "Apology" was printed only twice before 1930, first shortly after its composition in 1533, and afterwards in the folio edition of More's English works edited by William Rastell in 1557 (this is the edition which Godwin refers to in his essay). Guy, 108. As a textual authority it now occupies the position Godwin attributed to it. As John Guy observes, "No responsible scholar would now recite the litany of accusation of John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* without reference to More's *Apology*." See Guy, 217.

⁴⁴ MS Abinger c.29, fol.9.

⁴⁵ MS Abinger c.29, fol.9; 9-10.

⁴⁶ MS Abinger c.29, fol.9

⁴⁷ MS Abinger c.29, fol. 9, *passim*.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ See Fermanis for an account of Godwin's attitudes toward the authoritative value of testimonies as historical sources for his seventeenth-century writings, 790. Godwin discusses the differences in competing eye-witness accounts with the example of the seventeenth-century historians Whitelock and Clarendon in "Essay on History and Romance," 300.

⁵⁰ *Life of Chaucer*, preface, xxviii.

⁵¹ MS Abinger c.29, fol.9.

⁵² *Life of Chaucer*, preface, xxvii

⁵³ MS Abinger c.29, fol.7-9; 10.

⁵⁴ MS Abinger c.29, fol.10.

⁵⁵ Interest in More was still current in the early-nineteenth century,

and particularly in later decades surrounding the question of Catholic Emancipation, as evinced by Robert Southey's (antagonistic) *Sir Thomas More; Or, Colloquies on Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829). In the mid-eighteenth century the *Memoirs of the Life of Sir Thomas More* (1758) by Reverend Ferdinando Warner presented an account at once sympathetic but regretful (More was still a ferocious persecutor). Earlier in the eighteenth century a movement to reclaim More as an righteous anticlerical and pre-Reformation reformer (which still could not be reconciled with his persecution of Protestants, but attempted to present him as less aligned with Rome) was begun by Gilbert Burnet in his *History of the Reformation* (1714). See Guy, 16, 13, 109. Trapp notes that while Foxe suppressed most of the charges made against More in his 1563 edition of *Actes and Monuments* in the later 1570 edition, but that nineteenth-century biographers still believed "enthusiastically" in Foxe as a legitimate source. "Commentary," 362, 363.

⁵⁶ MS Abinger c.29, fol. 5.

⁵⁷ "Of Posthumous Fame," *The Enquirer in Educational and Literary Writings*, ed. Pamela Clemit, Vol. 5 of *Political and Philosophical Writings of William Godwin*, 201-9, 206. Godwin's more sceptical views on the possibility of understanding character is connected to his complicated revisions on truth, general perception and judgment in *Political Justice*: see Philp, 202-9.

⁵⁸ "Of Posthumous Fame," 207, 205.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 207.

⁶⁰ Bainham was one of six heretics burned at the stake during More's two-and-a-half-year period as Lord Chancellor to Henry VIII, from October 1529 to May 1532.

⁶¹ Trapp observes that "The *Apology* is Thomas More's defense not only of his and the church's position, but of his own integrity. He had been stern and single-minded in his pursuit of social and religious dissidence. So far from denying this, he affirms it repeatedly in the *Apology*." Introduction, xx. More's actions, violent or otherwise, are brought into conformity with his principles in this work.

⁶² MS Abinger c.29, fol.9. More did confine a number of suspected heretics in his home in Chelsea for questioning, which Foxe and later biographers maintained was illegal, but as Guy notes, More had powers of arrest as a commissioner for the peace for Middlesex. See Guy, 120-21.

⁶³ MS Abinger c.29, fol.6.

⁶⁴ Godwin does raise this problem near the end of the manuscript: "I shall probably be told that in what has been here stated, there may be allowed to be sufficient reason to excuse the conduct of Sir Thomas More in showing himself the zealous adversary of the Reformers: but why was he a persecutor? The clearest principles of reason show that absurdity & injustice of this proceeding." (MS Abinger c.29, f. 12). This suggests that the next part of the essay may have comprised an exploration of possible answers to the question of More's persecutions, if completed. Intriguingly, this question follows on from a brief paragraph expounding on the horror of sentencing men to death (as happened to More's heretics) for their opinions, and calling for the recognition of the "sacred" right of private judgment (*ibid.*); it would be interesting to see how, or if, Godwin could have reconciled More's clarity of judgment with this in the remainder of the essay.

⁶⁵ "Essay of History and Romance," 301.

⁶⁶ MS Abinger c.29, fol.14.

⁶⁷ MS Abinger c.29, fol.10.

⁶⁸ MS Abinger c.29, f.11.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ MS Abinger c.29, f.14.

⁷¹ "Of Posthumous Fame," 204-5.

⁷² "Essay of History and Romance," 297.

⁷³ Preface to *History of the Commonwealth*, x.

