

**Friday Sep. 14, 9:00-12:00 pm**

## **“Richard III - History & Philosophy”**

**Chair : Dr. Marie-Claire Phélippeau (Amici Thomae Mori)**

**Prof. Elliott M. Simon, Emeritus, University of Haifa, Israel (esimon@research.haifa.ac.il)**

### **Thomas More's Historical Legacy: The Tudor Tragedies of King Richard III**

Hayden White in his controversial *Metahistory* (1973/2014) argues that the historian begins with a chronicle of events organized into a coherent rhetorical narrative, making a correlation between historical actuality and historical fiction, between what was known to have happened and what was believed, for the moral edification of the reader. For Renaissance humanists, Classical historians Herodotus, Livy, and Tacitus provided models for historical writing, but their historical narratives combined mythic and historical time, legendary and historical figures, and rendered historical events “authorized” by their own ethical values.

In this presentation I will focus on Thomas More's *History of Richard III* (c. 1510/1513-1518, unfinished) and its historical legacy in Polydore Vergil's *Anglicae Historiae* (1534-55), Edward Hall's *The Union of the two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (1532/48), Raphael Holinshed's *Historie of England* (1577/87), and William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of King Richard III* (1592/93), who repeated More's history almost verbatim as “historical facts.” They were considered the “authorities” on Richard III, but they appear more as the “authors” of Richard's life in which history and fiction are literary correlatives.

During the period 1504-1515, More translated Gianfrancesco Pico's biography of his uncle Giovanni Pico (1496) under the title *The Life of John Picus, Earle of Mirandula* (printed in 1510). Gianfrancesco wrote his biography under the censorial influence of Fra Savonarola that emphasized Pico's piety, but ignored most of his philosophical and Kabbalistic scholarship. More emphasized Pico's erudition and embellished his pious civic service to recreate “his Pico” as an archetypal humanist intellectual for the edification of his readers.

In contrast to Pico's biography, More wrote his *History of Richard III* as an archetypal moral example of human depravity. He drew upon the historical works of John Rous's *Historia Regum Angliae* (c.1480-92), with its fantastical descriptions of Richard III; Polydore Vergil's early version of *Anglicae Historia* (1505-1513) with its “politically corrected” versions of Richard III; and the “oral history” of Cardinal John Morton with its Lancastrian and Tudor sympathies. Many aspects of More's history were “fictional inventions” that he used rhetorically to justify the Tudor ascendancy and against Plantagenet conspiracies that threatened the social order. The necessity to maintain a moral social order is a major theme in *Utopia* (1516) and in his defense of Catholicism against Lutherans in his religious polemics (1523-34).

Following More's “history,” later Tudor historians and playwrights continued to present the alleged depravity of the Plantagenet kings. In Shakespeare's “history plays” what was believed to be true took precedence over historical accuracy, and he presented his historical figures as self-destructive monarchs in a tragic mode. In *Richard III* Shakespeare's “historical inventions” are quite remarkable. Historians and playwrights are creative writers; they combined fact and fiction to create an “illusion of reality” by imposing a moral and ethical signification upon historical figures that would serve the interests of their readers and audiences.

