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### Metaphors of Opulence and Power in the *Life* of Thomas Wolsey, the King's Cardinal

One of the most outstanding characteristics of the Tudor age is undoubtedly the display of opulence which appears to function as an effective strategy for both the consolidation of a dynasty, uneven in its beginnings and always problematic, and of the royal power. Such display began with Henry VIII but reached its zenith with Elizabeth I, whose well-known portraits are striking examples of the amalgamation of opulence and power, in their profusion of jewels, embroidered silks and rich velvets. Every iconographic detail is emblematic and symbolic, a literal “speaking picture” (Sidney, 1984: 101) intending to impress the viewer and emphasize the queen's supremacy. The famous *Rainbow Portrait* by Isaac Oliver (*c.* 1600), to give but an example, constitutes one of the most elaborate items that may epitomize such an amalgamation.

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*The Rainbow Portrait*, Isaac Oliver, c. 1600

The Queen is both Astraea and Cynthia as represented by her dress embroidered with English wildflowers and by a crescent-shaped jewel above her crown, respectively; she is the monarch who knows everything, as represented by the ears and eyes on her cloak; she is the Virgin Queen, whose chastity and royalty are symbolized by a myriad of pearls and the royal crown, respectively; she is the wise sovereign, as shown by a serpent, the symbol of wisdom, on her left arm; finally, she is the embodiment of peace and prosperity, which is implied by the rainbow with the inscription “*non sine sole iris*” – “no rainbow without the sun”. Elizabeth was indeed the inspiring Muse of her courtiers, the light of her time, representing all the positive, magnanimous qualities inherent to the legitimate Prince, whose power comes from God, within a perfect correspondence between the celestial spheres and the microcosmic world.

As we may notice, the best-known portrait of Thomas Wolsey, Lord Chancellor of England during a crucial period of Henry VIII’s reign, lacks the rich items that his king, his king’s daughter and the Renaissance courtiers explicitly exhibit.



Cardinal Wolsey, Christ Church, 1526

Paradoxically, however, the apparent simplicity of the painting also encloses traces of a relevant eminence, contained in two major elements: the position in profile,

which emphasizes the vast mass of his body, and the colour red, which stresses the eminent title of Cardinal.

Now let us consider another portrait of diverse nature, and see how the same character is outlined, bearing in mind the relevant trend of the Tudor age mentioned before. At the very beginning of Elizabeth's reign, George Cavendish – the Cardinal's Gentleman Usher and therefore a privileged eyewitness to many events of the period – produced a written portrait of his master in *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey* (1558). Cavendish's text may be divided into two parts that correspond to the two moments in the character's lifetime: rise and fall, both directly related to the moments when he was in or out of favour with his monarch. In Shakespeare's *King Henry VIII*, the two moments are amalgamated in seven brief lines, spoken by the character himself, which establish a clear correspondence with the Wheel of Fortune and the precariousness of human life:

This is the state of man. Today he puts forth  
The tender leaves of hopes; tomorrow blossoms,  
And bears his blushing honours thick upon him;  
The third day comes a frost, a killing frost,  
And when he thinks, good easy man, full surely  
His greatness is a-ripening, nips his root,  
And then he falls, as I do.<sup>1</sup>

(Shakespeare, 2005: 1267)

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<sup>1</sup> Act III, Scene 2, lines 353-359.

Wolsey's "blossoming" days were indeed full of "blushing honours" and were characterized by an overwhelming wealth. In Cavendish's text, the allusion to such wealth constitutes one of the most recurrent themes but is never connoted as negative; in fact, it is viewed as a natural trait of eminence and as the due reward bestowed upon someone whose qualities deserved to be recognized:

... at last in came presentes, gyftes, and rewardes so plentifully that (I dare sey) he lakked no thyng that myght other please his fantzy to enriche his Coffers/ ffortune smyled vppon hym/ ... (Cavendish, 1959: 13)<sup>2</sup>

His rise was extremely fast, and the successive titles implied the appropriation of his predecessors' riches. According to the narrator:

... [he took] possession thereof And made all the spede he cowld for his consecracion/ the Solempnyzacion wherof endyd he found the means to gett the possession of all his predicessors gooddes in to his handes wherof I haue seen duyuers tymes some part therof furnyshe his howsse/ (15)

In fact, besides the title of Cardinal, the young Almoner would gradually be honoured with an impressive number of ecclesiastical titles: Abbot of Saint Albans,

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<sup>2</sup> All of the excerpts from the work of George Cavendish are taken from this edition. Future citations will thus be followed only by the respective page numbers.

Bishop of Bath and Wells, Bishop of Winchester, Duresme, Tournai, Lincoln, Worcester and Hereford, and, above all, Archbishop of York and *Legatus de latere*, i.e. the representative of the Pope in England. As a consequence, he made sure he was always surrounded by symbols of a personal imagery of power, especially the archbishopric cross and the legacy cross, which would become metonymies of his prominence:

... erected his crosse in the Court and in euery other place [...] Than hade he ij  
great Crossis of Syluer where of oon of them was for his archebyssshopriche/  
And the other for his legacye/ borne alwayes byfore hyme whether so euer he  
went or rode/ by ij of the most tallest and comlyest prestes that he cowld gett  
w<sup>t</sup>in all this realme/ (15, 17)

For Wolsey, it was not enough to hold a place near the king; he aimed at a public and constant display of the vast power that his immense wealth rendered more evident. In practical terms, his eminence, which would always be founded on his ecclesiastical status, proved to be even greater than the king's: as Lord Chancellor, he effectively ruled England; as Cardinal, he was the highest ecclesiastical dignitary of the reign; as *Legatus de latere*, he was invested with a wide authority that simultaneously comprised the whole secular sphere.

Cavendish's descriptive processes are frequent and detailed, in a perfect consonance with the golden times in his life. The initial glimpses of wealth gradually merge into a huge panel of impressive, bright, metaphorical canvases. Contrasting with the plain figure in red and with a relatively modest character at the beginning of the

narrative (the Almoner), Wolsey appears in the text surrounded by pomp and circumstance which will be expanded in the allusion to rich cloths and clothes, jewels and furniture, thus metaphorized:

... a great number of Riche stuffe of sylke ... of all Colours/ as veluett/ Satten/  
Damaske/ Caffa/ Taffata/ Grograyn/ Sarcenett/ (...) the richest Sewtes of Coopes  
(...) a number of plate of all sortes/ as ware all most Incredible/ (...) And bokes  
conteynyng the valwe & wayte of euery parcell ... (98, 99)

This magnificence is expressed in superlatives and hyperboles, in a crescendo that culminates in the highly detailed description of the Cardinal-Chancellor's House, an enormous estate with a horde of servants and attendants – “abought the Somme of fyve hundred parsons accordyng to his chekker rolle” (21) – which constitutes the epitome of munificence. Literally, it is an extension of the monarch's merry court, “yong, lusty”, “disposed all to myrthe & pleasure” (11, 12): Wolsey is the most excellent host, whose banquets and receptions, attended by a myriad of guests (among whom the king himself), are characterized by a profusion of delicacies and artistic performances.

The House included two main mansions – the Palace of Hampton Court and the Palace of Westminster (the latter known as York Place because it was, by tradition, the archbishops of York's mansion) – but also by Tyttenhanger, The More, Esher and Cawood Castle. The quantity, quality, opulence and ostentation, that Wolsey's wealth and status could afford, constitute wide metaphors of eminence and authority. The exorbitant number of the staff (five hundred individuals, as we have seen), together with

the excellence of riches, are described in a sustained metaphor of powerful rhythm by an eye-witness narrator who gives each thematic set an anaphoric beginning: “**Nowe to speke** of the order of his howsse & officers” (18); “**Nowe** wyll I declare to you the Officers of his Chappell” (19); “**Nowe** shall ye vnderstand that he had ij Crosberers & ij Pillers berers” (20); “**Nowe** haue I shewed you the order of his howsse” (21).

Wolsey’s routine (the daily walk to Westminster Hall, the duties in the Chancellery and the usual Sunday visits to the court), as well as some of his ecclesiastical duties (the officiation in the Cathedrals of Canterbury and Amiens), are also characterized by metaphors of opulence: he is always amidst silks, satins, velvets, damasks and cloths of gold and silver, wrapped up in light, perfumes and purple variations; on the other hand, the recurrent emblems are intimately connected to the symbols of power that always ornament him – “a round pyllion”, “a tippet of fynne Sables a bought his nekke” (23) – and that always precede him – “the great Seale of Englonde”, “his Cardynalles hatt”, “ij great Crossis of Syluer ... w<sup>t</sup> also ij great pillers of syluer ... And a great mase of syluer gylt” (23, 26). The mosaic narrative structure is frequently that of a pageant – we visualize a series of images in slow motion, as suits the nature of the highly elaborate procession, daily streaming before the subjects’ eyes, as if they were contemplating their sovereign or even the Pope:

**Thus in greate honour/** tryhumphe & glorue he raygned a long season Rewlyng all thyng w<sup>t</sup> in thys Realme appurteynyng vnto the kyng his wysdome/ And also all other waytie matters of fforrayn Regions ... (24, 25)

The description of the embassy to Charles V in Bruges (and later the one to Francis I in Amiens) gives continuity to the strong pictoric meaning, mainly based on colour. In the phase of absolute glory, the symbolism embodied in various tonalities is continuously stressed by the use of several emblematic elements intrinsic to the Cardinal and leads to a dazzling result. The scarlet colour and its gradations of purple, crimson and red, together with pure gold and goldenness are combined on a background of velvet and other noble fabrics that, in turn, emphasize the brightness of the predominant colour. Above all, the scarlet colour, so strikingly inherent to the figure, stands out as the metaphor of ostentation, as opposite to discretion. A similar sense of excessiveness is present in the report of the embassy but the implicit negativity is not (and will never be) transmitted by Cavendish, who keeps presenting the positive side of Wolsey's reward and eminence within an encomiastic incremental process:

... havynge all thyng therto correspondent & agreable/ his gentilmen beyng in  
nomber very many clothed in lyuere Coottes of Crymmosyn velvett of the most  
purest Colour that myght be Invented/ w<sup>t</sup> chaynnes of gold about ther nekkes/  
And all his yomen And other mean officers ware in Cottes of ffynne Skarlett garded  
w<sup>t</sup> blake velvett and hand brode/ ... (21, 22)

The magnificent welcome in Charles V's court is a natural consequence of Wolsey's prominence and allows him to return triumphantly to England and to consolidate his position beside Henry VIII.

The embassy to France shares the features of both the embassy to Charles V and the daily procession from York Place to Westminster, by emphasizing and reiterating the complex pageant structure that supports the Cardinal-Chancellor's spectacular magnificence: he is the centre of the event, and he is followed by a huge retinue of noblemen, clergymen, attendants and servants, horses and beasts of burden carrying heavy loads, and once again the scenery is dominated by velvet, gold, silver, black and several gradations of crimson (44-45). The embassy starts with the procession leaving York Place and going through the whole city of London towards Dartford and then Rochester, Feversham, Canterbury and Calais; from Calais, to Boulogne, Sandigfield, Montreil, Abbeville, Piequigny and finally Amiens. The slow pace of the narrative is in perfect consonance with the slow pace of the complex procession, in such a way that each sentence is almost literally visualized.

Moreover, the phase of absolute power seems to be thoroughly summarized in a previous passage that describes the emblematic banquet in honour of Henry VIII, in sentences and considerations which function both as a curious proleptic conclusion in the pictoric description and as a proleptic amplification of opulence in its full magnitude:

**Thus/ passed** the Cardynall hys lyfe & tyme frome day to day And yere to yere in  
suche great welthe, Ioy tryhumphe/ & glory hauyng allwayes on his syde the  
kynges especyall fauour/ ... (28)

Bearing in mind Cavendish's literary text and the historical surviving records of the time, the reign and the figure depicted in both portraits, we are led to establish an

inter-relation between the text and the canvas, as well as between the canvas and the way the character has survived in the collective imagination since the Renaissance. As we have seen, the art work does not explicitly show what both the innumerable Tudor-Elizabethan portraits and Cavendish's narrative openly expose. As we have also seen, the metaphors of opulence and power achieved through a hyperbolic process in the literary work, together with many other rhetorical devices, result in a set of metaphorical canvases depicting a vivid portrait that discloses what the actual painted canvas seems to encapsulate. In this one, we can trace the same metaphors of opulence and power; they are, however and curiously, achieved through what is not shown, therefore not seen, through what is but suggested, therefore merely guessed: the vastness of a huge, red body that occupies the whole canvas is a powerful hint, because the portrait is the representation of someone who played a vital role in the consolidation of the royal power; who was the leading subject of the nation during a significant period of his lifetime; and who was an active member in a court which would be the embryo of the English Renaissance court par excellence, ruled by an emblematic 'Faerie Queene'.



*The Darnley Portrait*, anónimo, 1575

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