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Thomas More on Humor

Thus, knowing that to move sport is lawful for an orator or anyone that shall talk in open assembly, good it were to know what compass he should keep that should thus be merry.

THOMAS WILSON, *THE ART OF RHETORIC* (1560)

THOMAS MORE MARRIED TWICE and both of his wives were short in stature. When asked the reason for this, More replied, “of two evils one should choose the less.”¹ So reads a selection from the “witty sayings” of More, which Thomas Stapleton compiles in his 1588 biography. Though the quip could be apocryphal, it represents well enough what R. S. Sylvester calls More’s “sharp and ironic view of both himself and others,”² a provocative deployment of wit, which More’s admirers often ignore and his critics frequently misunderstand.

Indeed, whether to celebrate or condemn More’s humor was a subject during his own life and in the immediate years following his death. Erasmus writes of More’s “rare courtesy and sweetness of disposition,” which is so great that there is no one “so melancholy by nature that More does not enliven him.” According to Erasmus, More takes such pleasure in jesting that he seems born for it and “any

remark with more wit in it than ordinary always gave him pleasure, even if directed against himself.”⁷³ Stapleton elaborates upon that sense of wit, writing how More’s “keen humor” functions in tandem with his “never-broken serenity” of mind and “constant peace and joy of his conscience.”⁷⁴ So, too, even though Thomas Wilson was tried and imprisoned for heresy during the reign of Queen Mary, in his *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560), he calls attention to More’s facility in “pleasant delights, whose wit even at this hour is a wonder to all the world and shall be undoubtedly even unto the world’s end.”⁷⁵ Most famous, perhaps, is the *Sir Thomas More* play (c. 1593–1600), which was written, in part, by William Shakespeare. In this work, More appears as a “merry man,” who pull pranks, tells jokes, and performs in plays.⁶

Yet there were also early detractors. The Protestant martyrologist, John Foxe, admits in his *Acts and Monuments* of 1583 that More is “in wit and learning singular” but adds that More “dallieth out the matter, thinking to jest poor simple truth out of countenance.”⁷⁷ More’s jests form part of his poetical and therefore imaginative vision of Catholic doctrine. Thus, of More’s defense of purgatory, Foxe wonders if More writes of another *Utopia* or no place.⁸ More, as “author and contriver” of “poetical” books, merely imagines purgatory exists, according to Foxe.⁹ Earlier, More had written against William Tyndale, “I marvel that Tyndale denies purgatory—except that he intends to go to hell.”¹⁰ And Tyndale, whose biography Foxe would write as the story of a “true servant and martyr of God,”¹¹ first called More “a poet of shame” and the “the proctor of purgatory,” a protector of a non-existent place, what Foxe later labels a *nusquam*.¹²

In this way, More’s mocking rejoinders and polemical style are said to dovetail with too vivid an imagination. By 1587, Edward Hall, a Gray’s Inn lawyer and a historian, records of More that his “wit was fine, and full of imaginations, by reason whereof he was too much given to mocking, which was to his gravity a great blemish.” So Hall wonders of More: “I cannot tell whether I should call him a foolish wise man, or a wise foolish man, for undoubtedly he, beside

his learning, had a great wit, but it was so mingled with taunting and mocking, that it seemed to them that best knew him, that he thought nothing to be well spoken except he had ministered some mock in the communication."¹³

Hall's charge, in effect, recycles and builds upon what More's first interlocutors allege.¹⁴ "They reprove," More remarks of them, "that I bring in, among the most earnest matters, fancies and sports and merry tales." More cites the Roman poet Horace in his defense because "a man may sometime say full sooth in game." Besides, More finds his humor well suited to his state: "And one that is but a layman, as I am, it may be better haply become him merrily to tell his mind than seriously and solemnly to preach." And, perhaps, More does conclude his defense with a mock: "And over this, I can scant believe that the brethren find any mirth in my books. For I have not much heard that they very merrily read them."¹⁵

Whereas More argues from Horace, his own lay state, and with a joke, revisionist scholars find other explanations for More's humor. In this way, the early detractions of More comport with today's reigning assessments.¹⁶ For influential biographers of More such as Richard Marius or important Tudor historians such as G. R. Elton, the merry More of tradition does not exist. In Elton's view, More's "wit, which so enchanted his friends, nearly always had a sharp edge to it: he often, and knowingly, wounded his targets."¹⁷ Of such wounding, Marius writes, "Beneath the wit, beneath the studied efforts to seem fair-minded, beneath the apparent friendliness in tone, there lies an icy inflexibility and an unyielding resolve to make the worst of his opponents, to twist the evidence to make it mean what More insists it must mean, and to prove that anyone who opposes the church is totally wrong and malicious, even insane."¹⁸ More, it appears, displays the vice of malicious sneering rather than the virtue of witty jesting.

As Elton and Marius echo Foxe and Hall in their charges, they refashion Stapleton's assessment about More's joy of conscience or Erasmus's testimony to a man born for friendship.¹⁹ Elton writes

of More that “through all his life he displayed restlessly combative moods,” which allowed him to deal “ruthless and unfair blows.” Thus, More’s merry tales “manifest psychological problems” and are “strikingly anti-feminist tales.”²⁰ So, too, for Marius, More’s personality becomes all-important. Marius cites “the Freudians” and traces More’s temperament back to John More, Thomas’s father, who created in his son an “overpowering superego,” that drives the adult Thomas to set “impossible goals” and then live in “torment” for not achieving them. The consequence was “depression,” a quality that emerges in all More’s works “like some hard, black stain that wit could neither cover nor eradicate.”²¹ Hence, a paradox emerges: the “merry More” is really a snide, depressed, hurler of insults.²² Or to put it in Hall’s terms, More appears as a foolish wise man.

Yet the once widely held revisionist opinion of More obscures how deeply classical rhetoric influences More’s own sense not just of humor but also of humanism.²³ In fact, More understands mockery and humor as interchangeable and both as a means of deploying eloquence on the side of reason. Thus, More follows rather than contradicts conventional humanist teaching, which echoes precisely what Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, among others, claim, namely, that the use of humor remains an essential means of persuasion.²⁴ For the relationship between *ridere* (to laugh) and *deridere* (to deride), it was believed, presents orators with the means of victory.²⁵ Indeed, the classical figures of speech for which More is well known—such as irony and litotes—are piquant ways to cast aspersions upon or to undermine an opponent or a contrary point of view.²⁶ Especially in More’s theological polemics, he employs his wit in the work of persuasion, a point More’s original disputants grasped all too well. Mockery, in other words, need not be considered a vice, a mood, or a consequence of how More’s father raised him; it could be a sign of excellent rhetoric. To see why this may be so, the ancient function of laughter and More’s use of it require examination.

Rhetoric and Laughter

Quintilian, perhaps, best summarizes the general importance of humor for persuasion by claiming that the uses of “wit and pathos,” or humor and the capacity to inspire pity, are “the two most powerful elements in emotional writing.”²⁷ As one of the most potent means of emotional appeal, Roman rhetoricians studied the range of feelings that impart laughter so as to know how to stimulate the right response. Aristotle’s account of the passions, in this way, becomes important to them because it reveals the available means of giving an audience pleasure.²⁸ For example, because most men are fond of themselves, speakers do well in addressing and praising an audience’s own deeds and words.²⁹ Likewise, “amusement” is pleasurable, especially “ludicrous” men, words, or deeds.³⁰ Aristotle even defines “writers of comedy” as those “whose main occupation is with their neighbours’ failings.”³¹ It is no surprise, then, that similar points about laughter arise in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In this work, as tragedy depicts men better than average, comedy portrays those worse than average. Comic characters are worse because they are “ridiculous,” which Aristotle labels a “species of the ugly.”³²

From Aristotle, then, both Cicero and Quintilian come to understand laughter and derision as complementary. As Quentin Skinner observes, Cicero’s *De Oratore* offers “a restatement and elaboration of Aristotle’s point.”³³ For Cicero writes “The proper field and as it were the province of laughter . . . is restricted to matters that are in some way either disgraceful or deformed. For the principal if not the sole cause of mirth are those kinds of remarks which note and single out, in a fashion not in itself unseemly, something which is in some way unseemly or disgraceful.”³⁴

“Materials for ridicule” may be moral, physical, or intellectual. Quintilian concurs, writing that “laughter is not far from derision.”³⁵ To single out such materials without becoming “unseemly” in doing so translates into successful persuasion. Thus, the enjoyment found in humor emerges in precisely the way that mockery does. Aristotle

even defines wit as “well-bred insolence.”³⁶ Persuasive speakers, therefore, should invite disdain of their opponents through a use of humor. Long before More writes or delivers his quips, in other words, students of rhetoric associate laughter with expressions of aversion.

Instead of an idiosyncratic manner unique to More’s psychology, humanists of the period follow classical teachings about wit because contemptuous chuckles not only please audiences but also convince them. A late, though still accurate, indication of how humanists such as More follow Cicero’s teaching are the words of Wilson: “We laugh always at those things which either only or chiefly touch handsomely and wittily some special fault or fond behavior in some one body or some one thing.” And the power to induce laughter deserves respect because “we see that men are full oft abashed and put of countenance by such taunting means, and those that have so done are compted to be fine men and pleasant fellows, such as few dare set foot with them.”³⁷ To give pleasure to an audience by amusing its members entails directing people’s attention to what an orator believes they should hold in contempt. If contempt targets an adversary, it is a formula for winning an argument. In *De Oratore*, Cicero observes that the “ability to arouse hilarity” enables an orator to win the “good will of audience.” He adds, “The same talent is of even greater value in replying to your opponent’s arguments, although it is also of great value in attacking them, since humor can be used to break up his case, to obstruct his arguments, to make light of his case, to deter him from speaking and to turn aside what he said.”³⁸ Making people laugh puts them on your side; there is no need to analyze your opponent’s argument when an opposing speaker or view may be defeated by appearing absurd.

Much of More’s humor comes from this disputatious function of wit. When Christopher St. German, a longwinded opponent, characterizes More’s own works as “railing,” or persistent invective, More wonders if he may be “bold” enough to tell a sad man a merry tale. If so, More writes, hear of a friar who “spied a poor wife of the

parish whispering with her pewfellow.” The friar, becoming angry, shouts, “Hold thy babble, I bid thee, thou wife in the red hood.” To which she replies, “Marry, sir, I beshrew his heart that babbleth most of us both. For I do but whisper a word with my neighbor here, and thou hast babbled there all this hour.”³⁹ The “wife in the red hood” adds vivacity and local color that might have entertained an audience, but her purpose is eristic. In the thinly veiled allegory, the wrathful, self-righteous friar represents St. German while More’s voice emerges in the commonsensical wife in red, as the original charge of “railing” boomerangs back upon St. German.

So, too, More employs humorous anecdotes with incisive, devastating irony. When reformers attack More, apart from being a poet, for not showing his interlocutors sufficient respect, More tells a story from Plutarch in reply. During one of Philip the Macedonian’s wars, some of his enemies would desert their king and join him. Yet the native Macedonians would call such soldiers “traitors” for their services, and these new allies complained to Philip himself, who replies, “Good fellows, I pray you be not angry with my people, but have patience. I am sorry that their manner is no better. But I know you know them well enough: their nature is so plain, and their utterance so rude, that they cannot call a horse but a horse.” More, then, applies the story to his own case: “And in good faith, like those good folk am I. For though [William] Tyndale and [John] Frith in their writing call me a poet, it is but of their own courtesy, undeserved on my part. For I can neither [use] so much poetry nor so much rhetoric as to find good names for evil things, but even as the Macedonians could not call a traitor but a traitor, so can I not call a fool but a fool, or a heretic but a heretic.”⁴⁰ More’s parable about telling the truth unadorned associates candor with his own words, all the while playing against the accusation that he, as a poet, manufactures lies or uses dishonest rhetoric. More, then, turns the charge of poet into an untrue compliment. His opponents are withholding the truth in praising him as a poet because More cannot imagine good names for evil things, which reformers teach.

Revisionist scholars view such retorts as symptoms of a troubled psyche, yet humanists find the *argumentum ad hominem* useful and, of note, ethical. We know More translated and admired another famous ancient rhetorician and poet, Lucian, the Greek satirist of the second century, who taught how comedy could become the friend of reason by unmasking false claims to wisdom. In one of Lucian's dialogues, *Fishing for Phonies*, Lucian explains himself as an "anti-cheatist, anti-quackist, an anti-liarist, and an anti-inflated-egoist," who exposes false philosophers and teachings.⁴¹ Lucian says in his defense: "I soon saw that most philosophers had no real love of philosophy, but only of the prestige that went with it."⁴² Although More did not translate *Fishing for Phonies*, he defends the study of Lucian for reasons similar to Lucian's own apologia against the philosophers. More writes of Lucian that he "everywhere reprimands and censures, with very honest and at the same time very entertaining wit, our human frailties."⁴³ So, too, what Lucian says of philosophers, More applies to theologians who break from Catholic teaching. More refers to the reformer Frith's teaching as "foolosophy," or sophistry masquerading as love of wisdom, following a combination of "fool" and "philosophy" first suggested by Lucian.⁴⁴ Finally, as Lucian defines himself as "an anti-liarist, and an anti-inflated-egoist," Richard Pace records in *The Benefit of a Liberal Education* (1517) that "More declared all-out war on those who don't tell the truth, or things resembling the truth, but things foreign to their own nature." In this account, More is "not so vulgarly witty and urbane that you'd think politeness was his father and wit his mother. And every now and then, whenever the occasion demands, he imitates good cooks and pours sharp vinegar over everything."⁴⁵ The Lucianic combination of censure, reprimand, and wit, then, may also describe how More's own humor of attack functions, which pours the "sharp vinegar" of wit over matters under dispute. So More rebuts with tales from the English countryside or Plutarch, which employ blunt-speaking characters. More's sharp rejoinders are an honest albeit robust attempt to expose false teachers, especially those who, as More views the situation, teach

Christianity without concern for Catholic doctrine.⁴⁶ In context, More's mocks constitute no sin against his famous integrity; to the contrary, they exemplify his unified and consistent opposition to reformed theology.⁴⁷

Minding True Things by Mockery

As an efficacious means of retort, humor reframes issues, questions, and persons in light of an orator's overarching aims of persuasion. Scornful wit was not considered immoral or vicious, in part because it may direct an audience to subjects that are noble, apt, true, beautiful, or correct; it does so by exposing and condemning what is base, unseemly, false, ugly, or wrong. To appropriate words from Shakespeare, we mind true things by what their mockeries be.⁴⁸ In this way, persuasion and education may share a purpose,⁴⁹ following the original advice of Cicero, who teaches that the offices of rhetoric are to prove and to please and to sway.⁵⁰ Humor, if used properly, accomplishes all three.

More's own attempts at educative and persuasive mockery occur most often in his dialogues. In the *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, for example, More tells a story about a man who always used to say that he would do as he pleased while he lived because a few final words "when he died should make all safe enough." But it so happens that long before the fellow grows old, "his horse stumbled on a broken bridge." Despite the rider's best attempts to save himself and his horse, he recognizes that he will be tossed headlong into the waters below. With sudden fright, he cries out—"have all to the devil"—as he falls into the river. "And there was he drowned," More concludes, with those final deathbed words "whereon his hope hung all his wretched life." More's tale here echoes an earlier argument he made against those who argue purgatory is unnecessary because deathbed prayers are enough to bring souls straight to heaven. Yet the presentation in the *Dialogue* is broader and the point transparent. "Let no man sin in hope of grace," More simply writes.⁵¹

Quintilian specifies other uses of humor, which More uses to connect educative and persuasive offices with tales of scorn. Humor may dissolve “gloomy emotions” of judges or refresh and restore an audience that is bored or tired. Finally, humor may function as clever persuasion because it can divert an audience from the facts of a case.⁵²

In the *Dialogue Concerning Heresy*, More employs his merry tales for such ends particularly well. The *Dialogue* presents a university student, called the “messenger,” who is enchanted with the reformers’ attacks upon the Catholic Church, and More, who plays himself, a defender of Church teaching and practices. The matters discussed range from clerical abuses to questions of doctrine, yet, throughout, More introduces humorous asides because a “merry tale,” as he puts it, “cometh never amiss to me.”

So when More and the messenger are arguing over miracles they digress to enjoy a tale of clerical corruption. A “poor man” finds a priest “over familiar” with his wife, yet makes public accusations without corroborating proof. As a result, the priest successfully sues him for defamation and brings the “poor man,” under pain of excommunication, before the church at High Mass on Sunday. At that time, the just but defenseless accuser must rise and shout in self-condemnation, “Mouth, thou liest.” More concludes the story: “Whereupon, for fulfilling of his penance, up was the poor soul set in a pew [so] that the people might wonder on him and hear what he said. And there, all aloud, when he had rehearsed what he had reported about the priest, then he set his hands on his mouth and said, ‘Mouth, mouth, thou liest!’ And by and by thereupon he set his hand upon both his eyes and said, ‘But eyes, eyes . . . by the mass, ye lie not a whit!’”⁵³

Though More defends the Church throughout the *Dialogue*, merry tales like the one about an innocent man and a less than innocent priest reveal how More’s humor dissolves the harsher feelings of one like the messenger, who seems to harbor grudges against clerics. Marius, despite his overall assessment, captures More’s rhetorical strategy when he observes how the merry tales enact “the ancient

rhetorical principle of *concessio*, a concession that parries a blow and robs an attack of its force. Always he admitted an abuse only to launch an ardent defense of the underlying practice.⁵⁴ *Concessio*, in other words, may function like Quintilian's advice for using humor to divert an audience from potentially damaging evidence, in this case, by conceding an opponent's most effective or colorful attack in order to ward it off later.

Indeed, the messenger returns to themes of priests and sexual fidelity, opining that "if a woman be fair, then she is young, and if a priest be good, then he is old. But yet I have seen a priest give light to the people who was but very young." The messenger then provides another tale, which More, as character in the dialogue, will take seriously. "It happened," says the messenger, "that a young priest very devoutly, in a procession, carried a candle before the cross for lying with a wench, and bore it all the whole long way." The people watching the public penance take "such spiritual pleasure" that they start to laugh. And one "merry merchant" shouts to the priests in procession that follow the candle bearer: "*Sic luceat lux vestra coram hominibus!* Thus, let your light shine before the people."⁵⁵ In the punch line about light, we discover what Quintilian identifies as exploiting the ambiguity of a word or turn of phrase for the purpose of a mock. Thus, Claudius Nero says of a dishonest slave that "there was no one in his household more trusted, for nothing was barred or sealed to him."⁵⁶ More's play on the word "light" seems just as good an example.

In reply to this tale, however, More takes occasion to defend the clergy. "Surely," he says, "we have little cause to laugh at their lewdness." The reason is simple but striking: "For undoubtedly, if the clergy be evil, we must needs be worse." More, then, cites the opinion of his friend and one-time dean of St. Paul's, Fr. Colet, who said that the laity would always be a notch beneath the priests because the clergy were "salt" of the world and if that salt gives out "the world must needs become unsavory."⁵⁷ Finally, however, More concludes the matter with an anecdote about his father, John, who was well known for making "shrew" jokes.⁵⁸ More tells the messenger:

I wish that we were all in case with our own faults as my father says we are with our wives. For when he hears folk blame wives and say that so many of them [are] shrews, he says that they defame them. For he says plainly that there is but one shrewish wife in the world; but he says, indeed, that every man supposes that he has her but that that one were himself [alone]. So would I feign that every man would suppose that there was but one man evil in all the whole world, and that that one was himself. And that he would thereupon go about to mend that one; and thus would all become well.⁵⁹

Both Cicero and Quintilian advise orators who wish to refresh or distract an audience to weave humorous anecdotes into a speech, but More's interruptions and digressions are better than that. In the anecdotes about the candle procession and More's father, Marius's observation about *concessio* appears correct. More, as author, will attribute a tale of clerical corruption to the messenger within the dialogue before More, as a character within the dialogue, will refute the claim. By designing the entire conversation, More deflects the blow while receiving the benefit of the joke. More's presentation appears balanced while he guarantees the proverbial last laugh will belong to him through his artful arrangement of the dialogue as a whole.

Even so, the artistry highlights how More views the function of scornful humor as educative and persuasive. In this case, More ultimately urges peace between lay and clerical persons because "neither their part nor ours [has] come to that point but that there are not many good men among us and, as for among them, I know not nearly whether I may say many more or not, but surely I think many better."⁶⁰ In More's presentation, no sooner than we laugh at the follies of priests we must seriously consider our own. Concession, in other words, constitutes more than technique; it aims toward a higher end of moral reflection.

Comedy as Spiritual Combat

And, indeed, what classical teaching recommends for persuasion or victory, More employs as an interior resource for defense of virtue. The scorn of jesting, in More's hands, becomes a weapon to use against temptation. As one might expect, More introduces this teaching with a tale, that of a woodcarver and his wife, which narrates a "frantic fancy" to commit suicide. More, then, refashions this fancy as a condition of fearful thoughts, produced by the imagination, which scornful laughter may combat.

Contrary to Elton, who maintains that there are no tales that portray women as superior to men, in this story the husband is beset by a strange inclination and his wife is the one who is wise.⁶¹ The woodcarver plans to commit suicide for Christ's sake because, after all, Christ was killed for him. His mind is made up and his wife knows that argument with him would not work. So "she well and wisely put him in remembrance," More writes, "that if he wanted to die for Christ, it were then convenient for him to die even after the same fashion—and that might not be by his own hands, but by the hand of some other, for Christ, by God, killed not himself." So that her husband need not involve anyone else in this plot, his wife makes him an offer: "For God's sake, she would secretly crucify him herself on a great cross that he had made," a cross, in fact, that her husband had made for his own death. The woodcarver is "very glad" and More tells what happens next:

Yet she bethought her that Christ was bound to a pillar and beaten first, and afterward crowned with thorns. Whereupon, when she had by his own assent bound him fast to a post, she left not beating [him] with holy exhortation—to suffer so much and so long—that before ever she left work and unbound him . . . he said he thought this was enough for that year. He would ask God [to] spare him of the remainder until Good Friday came again. But when it

came again the next year, then was his desire past; he longed to follow Christ no further.⁶²

The immediate question for this tale becomes how to assess special revelation. What More calls the “frantic fancy” of the woodcarver enacts how a person’s imagination creates what he thinks is a true revelation from God, even if such revelation contradicts God’s other teachings. So the woodcarver believes God asks suicide of him, though God’s putative inspiration defies His commandment, thou shalt not kill.

Yet the question of the woodcarver—what if a man imagines that God calls him to commit suicide?—quickly becomes a question about a mind that despairs of help from God. Suppose the woodcarver was contemplating his own destruction with a “heaviness of heart and thought and dullness”—what would then be the best way to help him? In More’s presentation, the problem may not just be psychological; it could include a spiritual dimension. For the devil tempts people to despair by the occasions of inner weariness “after some great loss” or “for fear of horrible bodily harm” or by “a fear of worldly disgrace.” So, too, such individuals may fall into further self-loathing precisely because they experience “great abomination” at their own melancholy thoughts.

In response, More advises that any thought, no matter how “horrible” and “abominable,” if resisted, constitutes “not any sin at all.”⁶³ Such an afflicted soul, apart from seeking medicine and good counsel, should go to Confession so that “the devil has not the more power upon him.” Nor should one be surprised if the very thoughts that trouble him become more intense during Confession, for “the devil is with that most wroth” or infuriated.⁶⁴ A great part of temptations that arise from fear, however, More calls a fear created by a person’s own “foolish imagination,” which the devil observes and amplifies. Yet More offers a solution for mortifying thoughts and imaginings, which suggest how he put the scorn of laughter to use:

Some folk have been clearly rid of such pestilent fantasies with very full contempt thereof [by] making a cross upon their heart and bidding the devil avaunt—and sometimes *laugh him to scorn* too and then turn their mind to some other matter. And when the devil hath seen that they have so little set by him, after [his] certain assays made in such times as he thought most suitable, he hath given that temptation quite over. Both because the proud spirit cannot endure to be mocked and also, lest with much tempting the man to the sin whereto he could not in conclusion bring him, the devil should much increase that man's merit.⁶⁵

Thus, More ultimately refashions his ridicule of the woodcarver's compulsion into a lesson about how temptation may be attacked with scornful humor. In More's advice about how to deal with that "proud spirit that cannot endure to be mocked," what classical rhetoricians teach about laughing at others becomes a personal and spiritual resistance against the devil, if only one will "laugh him to scorn." More, then, reconfigures humor into a means of mortifying the imagination as part of an interior ascetic struggle.⁶⁶

Playing the Fool

How, finally, should we judge Hall's early assessment that More appears less like a wise man than a fool? More, after all, depicts himself as a fool, though he does so with jibing irony. When More was held captive in the Tower, Thomas Audley, Lord Chancellor at the time, sent a message to him by passing along one of Aesop's fables. In this tale, there was a country of fools with a few wise men. The wise knew it would rain and ran into caves until the storm passed. When they came out, the wise thought that the fools would be ruled by them, but the fools "would have none of that." Audley concludes: "And when the wise men saw that they could not achieve their goal, they wished that they had been in the rain, and dirtied their clothes, with them."⁶⁷ In Audley's view, More's "wisdom" in defying the king

becomes foolishness. Better to leave the Tower, so runs the message, even if it means getting dirty and wet or, as in More's case, defiling his conscience, in order to join the rest of the realm.

More's reply plays with the paradox of foolish wisdom. He first wonders about these wise men, who were "either so foolish that they wanted to [rule fools], or so crazy as to think that they would, being so few, rule so many fools." If the wise "did not have sense enough to realize that there are none so unruly as they that lack sense and are fools, then these wise men were stark fools before the rain came."⁶⁸ What wise man, after all, could or would want to rule fools?

More, then, tells his daughter, Margaret, "Anyway, daughter Roper, whom my lord [Audley] taketh here for the wise men and whom he meaneth to be fools I cannot very well guess; I cannot well read such riddles. For to adapt what Davus says in Terence, '*Non sum Oedipus*' . . . I'll make this, '*Non sum Oedipus, sed Morus*,' which name of mine what it means in Greek, I need not tell you."⁶⁹ More's name in Greek means fool. More's pun, then, acknowledges foolishness. So, too, More quotes Latin lines that allude to a servant, a comic character who explains that he cannot understand riddles like Oedipus can because he lacks sophistication. More thereby answers arguments for him to take the Oath of Succession, leave prison, and go home by claiming that he is too much of a fool to do so.

Although More's words are recorded in a letter, his manner of address may be imagined. Cicero writes that there is a class of jokes that consists of "pretending not to understand what you understand perfectly."⁷⁰ Such jokes are well suited for the use of irony or "solemn jesting," which occurs by speaking continuously in a manner contrary to your thoughts.⁷¹ Irony may be aided by speakers who are "witty story-tellers," who are "helped by their features, intonation and individual style of speaking."⁷² How did More's own "features, intonation and individual style of speaking" appear when he was ironic? Stapleton records of More that "in the midst of his jokes he kept so grave a face, and even when all those around were laughing heartily, looked so solemn, that neither his wife nor any other

member of the family could tell from his countenance whether he was speaking seriously or in jest, but had to judge from the subject-matter or the circumstances.”⁷³ Indeed, More’s deadpan delivery corresponds to what later humanists would write of irony. George Puttenham’s *Art of English Poesy* (1589), defines irony as a means to “dissemble when you speak in derision or mockery.”⁷⁴ *Ironia*, in Henry Peacham’s *Garden of Eloquence* (1593), “pertains chiefly to reprove by derision and illusion and also to jest and move [to] mirth by opposing contraries.”⁷⁵ More’s feigned confusion over and respect for Audley’s point thereby softens the implied yet trenchant question—who would want to rule fools like those who take the oath?—with ironical self-deprecation. For as More himself starkly put the question in his *De Tristitia Christi*: “What could be more stupid than to choose a brief time of misery over an eternity of happiness?”⁷⁶ More’s dissembling reply, then, reassigns the roles of fool and wise man and functions as comic reproof, ironically countering Audley without overt aggression. Stapleton writes of More that “there was never any bitterness or malice in his humor, yet often with the greatest cleverness he turned the laugh against pretentious vanity.”⁷⁷ When More says he cannot understand the riddles of Audley, we may imagine More’s own style and delivery of solemn jests.

Yet independent of More’s ironic manner, his paradox about wise foolishness boldly alludes to St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and, in doing so, appeals to the conscience of all those who read his response to Audley. In Tyndale’s English translation of these verses, Paul writes: “For preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness: but unto us which are saved, it is the power of God. For it is written: I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and will cast away the understanding of the prudent.” In these words to the Corinthians, there is an answer to Hall’s conundrum, whether we should call More a foolish wise man or a wise foolish man, and to Audley’s attack, that wise men like More are actually fools for remaining firm in their opposition to the King. More remains in his prison cell because, like Paul, he believes “Godly foolishness is wiser than men.”⁷⁸

Notes

Unless otherwise noted by the edition of a cited text, I have modernized all quotations from early modern English.

1. Thomas Stapleton, *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*, trans. Philip E. Hallett (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1928), 140.
2. R. S. Sylvester, "Thomas More Conference": Keynote Address in *Moreana*, no. 62 (June 1979): 98.
3. See Erasmus's 1519 letter to Ulrich von Hutten in a *Thomas More Source Book*, ed. Gerard Wegemer and Stephen Smith (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 7. Hereafter the *Source Book* is abbreviated and cited as *TMSB*.
4. Stapleton, *Life and Illustrious Martyrdom*, 135.
5. Thomas Wilson, *The Art of Rhetoric* (1560), ed. Peter E. Medine (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania University Press, 1994), 175. For a brief biography of Wilson, see 3–8.
6. For further discussion of More's depiction, see *Sir Thomas More*, ed. John Jowett (London: Arden Shakespeare, third series, 2011), 47–96. More is called a "merry man" in this edition at 2.1.85. On date of composition, see 424–32.
7. John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or *TAMO* (1583 edition) (HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011) at <http://www.johnfoxe.org/index.php?realm=text&gototype=modern&edition=1583&pageid=836>, 836.
8. For More's most famous text on purgatory, see *Supplication of Souls* (September 1529), which replies to Simon Fish's attack of that doctrine in *Supplication for the Beggars*. Fish's text appears in February of that same year. Both are in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 7, *Letter to Bugenhagen, Supplication of Souls, Letter Against Frith*, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc'hadour, Richard Marius, and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990). Hereafter cited *CW 7*.
9. Foxe, "The Story of Simon Fish" in *CW 7*, 442.
10. Tyndale had argued against purgatory in *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528) and More answered him in his *Dialogue Concerning Heresy* (1529) and in *Supplication* as well. See *CW 7*, 213/5–15 and *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 6, pt. 1, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, ed. Thomas Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard Marius (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 425/22–35; the latter provides More's exact words, which are abridged by and quoted from William Tyndale's *An Answer unto Sir Thomas Mores Dialogue*, ed. Anne M. Donnell and Jared Wicks (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 214. Hereafter the *Dialogue Concerning Heresy* is cited as *CW 6*.
11. John Foxe, "The life and story of the true servant and martyr of God William Tyndall: Who for his notable pains and travail may well be called the Apostle of England in this our latter age," in *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online* or *TAMO* (1583 edition)

- (HRI Online Publications, Sheffield, 2011) at <http://www.johnfoxe.org/index.php?realm=text&gototype=modern&edition=1583&pageid=1099,1099>.
12. See Tyndale, *Answer*, 14, 188, 194, and the "Portrait of More" in the commentary at 14/6–11. Foxe's marginalia, *CW* 7, 442, reads, "Utopia, that is to say Nusquam, no place." More's original pun plays with *Utopia* as "no place" (*Outopia*) and "happy place" (*Eutopia*).
 13. Edward Hall's *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and Yorke*, 1548, is quoted from *Prose of the English Renaissance*, ed. J. William Hebel, Hoyt H. Hudson, Francis R. Johnson, and A. Wigfall Green (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts Inc., 1954), 55, 64.
 14. Cf. Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587), *The Holinshed Project* at http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/holinshed/texts.php?text1=1587_7787, which reproduces Hall's account yet adds: "And albeit the fall of this Sir Thomas More was reproachful, issuing from a treasonable offense, yet, as in pagans, many times there is something which may teach Christians lessons for their learning [and] to their shame. So in this papist was one praiseworthy property among the rest most eminent, which I will note to the rebuke of Protestants. The Reverend Father Doctor Elmer, Bishop of London, in a sermon made . . . in a solemn audience assembled at the Parliament time 1584 . . . said that it was commendable for noble men and gentlemen, and a great furtherance to the love of religion, to be devout: he brought an example of Sir Thomas More, a man for his zeal (said the bishop) to be honored, but for his religion to be abhorred."
 15. *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 9, *The Apology*, ed. J. B. Trapp (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 170/34–71/4. For More's citation of Horace, see the commentary of 170/35. OHereafter abbreviated and cited as *CW* 9.
 16. Although revisionist opinion of More's humor is popular, for an early and influential Victorian defense of More's wit as a function of his piety, see T. E. Bridgett, "The Wit of Thomas More" in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. Richard Standish Sylvester and Germain Marc'hadour (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977), 481–88. Bridgett appears to have made a lasting impression in the much later argument of John Guy's *Thomas More* (London: Arnold, 2000), which combines Marius's assessment of More's angry moods with Bridgett's emphasis upon piety. Guy writes that More "saw humour as a correlative of the Holy Spirit. He used it to cut people down to size, especially himself. The sin of pride was top of his list of pet hates. Humour or 'teasing' kept people in their places" (212). For Bridgett, however, "charity" animates More. See "The Wit of Thomas More," 487.
 17. Elton, "Thomas More," in *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, vol. 3: *Papers and Reviews 1973–1981* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 345.
 18. Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 229.
 19. Erasmus, *TMSB*, 6.
 20. Elton, "Thomas More," 345.

21. Marius, *Thomas More*, 12.
22. The popularization of revisionists' views occurs in Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall: A Novel* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009). In Mantel's fiction, More insults his wife in a Latin language she does not understand and without affection. More tells his dinner guests to eat "all except Alice, who will burst out of her corset" (188). More then asks to be reminded why he married Alice and Margaret replies, "To keep house, Father." More replies, "yes, yes," adding, "a glance at Alice frees me from stain of concupiscence" (188–89). When Mantel's Cromwell describes the evening at More's home as spending time in *Utopia* while discussing "the vices and follies of women" (194), she presents a different picture from Erasmus's statement that More never "dismissed anyone as a result of ill feeling on either side" and that his "household seems to enjoy a kind of natural felicity" (*TMSB*, 9). Mantel, however, mirrors Elton's assessment of More and his wife, who writes, "He is supposed to have treated her with affection; yet the conviction that she was foolish and tiresome rests in great part on sly allusions to female deficiencies scattered through his works" ("Thomas More," 345–46). For a recent historical assessment of More's relationship with Lady Alice, see John Guy, *A Daughter's Love: Thomas & Margaret More* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 37–46, which reviews the charges against More on this count. Guy judges that Lady Alice "enjoyed repartee and banter as much as her husband, and could be just as lethal when turning the events of everyday life into a comedy" (44).
23. G. R. Elton, "Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell" in *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, vol. 4: *Papers and Reviews 1982–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 149–50, writes of More, "I think he ceased to be a humanist in any very real sense about 1521, when he started getting worried about the Lutherans"; More's humanism is "something he grew out of." As a result, More's later religious polemical writings are viewed as distinct from a humanist phase. For "what no one properly to be called a humanist could adhere to was an Augustinian belief in the total and helpless depravity of fallen man, or to Lutheran *solifidianism*, or to a clericalist view by which the priesthood acted as the sole channel of grace, or to a total denial of free enquiry" (G. R. Elton, "Humanism in England," in *ibid.*, 222). So, too, Elton associates "pessimism about mankind" with "conventional Christianity" in "Thomas More," 351. Like the question of a merry or a melancholy More, then, "two Mores" emerge in general by dividing humanist inquiry from faith.
24. Ancient teachings about rhetoric are the very ones that Renaissance humanists most absorbed. On the reception of classical rhetoric in Renaissance England, see Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 19–211; on laughter and scorn, see 198–211, and with a focus on figures of ridicule, 413–25. My analysis follows Skinner's account.
25. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 6.3.7.
26. For a listing of figures of speech well suited to comic scorn and with illustrations

- from Terence, see Marvin J. Herrick, *Comic Theory in the Sixteenth Century* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1964), 189–214.
27. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, vol. 4, 10.1.107.
 28. For Aristotle's account of the passions, see his *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Rhetoric and Poetics of Aristotle* (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), 1378a20–1388b30.
 29. *Ibid.*, 1367b5–10 and see 1371b20–25.
 30. *Ibid.*, 1371b30–1372a.
 31. *Ibid.*, 1384b5–10.
 32. Aristotle's *Poetics* in *ibid.*, 1449a30–35 and see 1448a15–20.
 33. Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, 200.
 34. Cicero, *De Oratore*, trans. E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), II.lviii.236.
 35. Quintilian, *Orator's Education*, vol. 3, 6.3.7.
 36. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1389b10.
 37. Wilson, *Art of Rhetoric* (1560), 165, 166.
 38. Cicero, *De Oratore*, II.lviii.236.
 39. *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 10, *The Debellation of Salem and Bizance*, ed. John Guy, Ralph Keen, Clarence H. Miller, and Ruth McGugan (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 46/10–26.
 40. *CW* 9, 42/25–35.
 41. Lucian, "Fishing for Phonies" in *Lucian: Satirical Sketches*, trans. Paul Turner (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1961), 176.
 42. *Ibid.*, 182.
 43. More's letter to Ruthall is quoted from *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 3, pt. 1, *Translations of Lucian*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 3/9–11.
 44. I modernize the spelling of More's original "folosophy," which he uses in his *Letter Against Friith* (1532), *CW* 7, 256/19–20. More uses "foolish folosophers" in *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 11, *The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, ed. Stephen Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 179/26–33; for the connection to Lucian, see commentary on 179/31. More's English coinage of these terms antedates the first recorded instances of "foolosophy" and "foolosopher" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
 45. Richard Pace, *De Fructu Qui Ex Doctrina Percipitur*, ed. and trans. Frank Manley and Richard Sylvester (New York: Renaissance Society of America, 1967), 104–5.
 46. More's attempt at telling the full truth in jest was considered a virtue for orators. John Rainolds, *Oxford Lectures on Aristotle's Rhetoric*, ed. and trans. Lawrence D. Green (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1986), 349, emphasizes the desire for what he sees as genuine virtue in orators: "I have no wish for a yes man; I want an orator: we must seek wholesomeness for the ill, not sweetness." In Rainolds's view, sweetness connotes flattery and wholesomeness means medicine or true words.

47. Cf. Bridgett, "The Wit of Thomas More," 486.
48. The pun is mine. The actual line refers to inadequate mimesis: "Yet sit and see, / Minding true things by what their mockeries be." See "The Life of Henry the Fifth" in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 4.0.53.
49. Cicero, *De Oratore*, III.xiv.55–56. Socrates caused wisdom to be divorced from eloquence within the liberal sciences at III.xvi.60–62.
50. Cicero, *Orator*, trans. H. M. Hubbell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), xx.69, writes: "The man of eloquence whom we seek . . . will be one who is able to speak in court or in deliberative bodies so as to prove, to please and to sway or persuade. To prove [*probare*] is the first necessity, to please [*delectare*] is charm, to sway [*flectere*] is victory; for it is the one thing of all that avails most in winning verdicts."
51. *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 12, *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, ed. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 92/9–16. Hereafter cited as *CW* 12. For the connection between this 1534 tale to More's earlier argument from the *Supplication* of 1529, see the commentary on these same lines.
52. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, vol. 3, 6.3.1. More states in the *Dialogue of Comfort* that a funny story shared with a friend "refresheth a man much," echoing Quintilian's notion of restoring an audience from fatigue. Yet More also advises that "these kinds of recreation" should "serve us but for sauce and [let us] make them not our meat" (*CW* 12, 82–84). Humor, as in Quintilian's account, emerges as recreation or digression from the matters of substance.
53. *CW* 6.1, 69/17–31.
54. Marius, *Thomas More*, 342.
55. *CW* 6.1, 297/3–19.
56. Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, vol. 3, 6.3.50–51.
57. *CW* 6.1, 297/35–298/17.
58. On John More and shrew jokes, see John Guy, *A Daughter's Love*, 19–20.
59. *CW* 6.1, 313/22–32.
60. *Ibid.*, 298/14–17.
61. Elton, "Thomas More," 345, writes, "I can recall no single story that shows a woman in a favourable light; that world of parables is peopled by shrews and much-oppressed males."
62. *CW* 12, 144/12–22.
63. *Ibid.*, 145–50. The question of despair and suicide is raised at 145/21–23. For how the devil tempts, see 149/20–150/7.
64. *Ibid.*, 152–53.
65. *Ibid.*, 154–55. My emphasis is on "laugh him to scorn."
66. On mocking the devil, see Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore, Knight*, ed. Elsie Vaughan Hitchcock (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 76.
67. "Letter from Alice Alington to Margaret Roper" (August, 17 1534), *TMSB*, 317.

68. "Letter from Margaret Roper to Alice Alington" (August 1534), *TMSB*, 323.
69. *Ibid.*
70. Cicero, *De Oratore*, II.lxviii.275.
71. *Ibid.*, II.lxvii.269.
72. *Ibid.*, II.liv.218–219. The contrast here is between irony and raillery or *cavillatio*.
73. Stapleton, *Life and Illustrious Martyrdom*, 139. See also, *CW* 6.1, 68/35–68/2. Compare both accounts of More with Cicero's advice in *De Oratore*, II.lxxi.289, that "a person who wants to speak humorously must be equipped with a disposition and character that is suited to artifices of this kind, so that even his expression of countenance may be adapted to each variety of the ridiculous." Crassus, it is noted, may deliver jests well with his more stern, sad, or somber expressions.
74. George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy: A Critical Edition*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 273. Puttenham calls *ironia* the "Dry Mock."
75. Peacham is cited from The British Library Historical Collection's digital reproduction of Henry Peacham, *The Garden of Eloquence* (1593), 36.
76. *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 14, pt. 1, *De Tristitia Christi*, ed. and trans. Clarence H. Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 593/5–6.
77. Stapleton, *Life and Illustrious Martyrdom*, 138.
78. The quotation of Paul's letter to the Corinthians is from *The New Testament: The Text of the Worms Edition of 1526 in Original Spelling*, trans. William Tyndale, ed. W. R. Cooper (London: British Library, 2000), 351.