

TWELVE RULES OF JOHN PICUS EARL OF MIRANDULA,
PARTLY EXCITING, PARTLY DIRECTING A MAN IN
SPIRITUAL BATTLE¹

If We refuse the Way of Virtue because it is Painful, for the Same Cause ought We to refuse the Way of Sin.

Whoso² to virtue esteems³ hard the way
Because we must have war continual
Against the world, the flesh, the devil,⁴ that aye⁵
Enforce⁶ themselves to make us bond and thrall,⁷
Let him remember that choose what may he shall,
Even after the world,⁸ yet must he need sustain⁹
Sorrow, adversity, labor, grief, and pain.

¹ According to the Yale introduction to *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, these two poems were part of the *The Life of Pico*, which More translated, perhaps, from the Latin version written by Gianfrancesco. S.G. Edwards speculates More's *Life* was published in approximately 1510, but reprinted for certain in 1525; as such, *The Life* was unique in that it was re-printed during More's own lifetime. On the verse poems here annotated, Edwards writes: "More's verse portions of the *Life* are his most radical treatments of the Latin. With the exception of the final "praisure of Picus Mirandula unto god," none of the Latin is in verse. And for most of the rest of More's verse there is no precedent in the Latin at all. The first of the duodecalogues, on the ".xii. rulys of . . . spirituall batail," is an expansion of Pico's prose. But the second and third, on the ".xii. proprettees or conditions of a louer," are entirely More's invention, based only on Pico's brief lists" (xlix). Not only does *The Life* represent More's originality, but also "for a work of quite modest length, More introduced a surprisingly high number of neologisms" (l). Edwards counts over eighty words that become the first recorded usage of them in English according to the OED; among such neologisms are "alacrite [alacrity]," "culture," "mediocrite [mediocrity]," "opprobriouse [opprobrious]," "persuasion," "integrite [integrity]," "ostentation," "peruse," and "scrupulously." See *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 1, editors Anthony S.G. Edwards, Katherine Rodgers, Clarence H. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), xxxvii-lix. Cited as "S.G. Edwards" hereafter. Source text for our modernization comes from *The English Works of Thomas More*, editors W.E. Campbell, A.W. Reed, R.W. Chambers, and W.A.G. Doyle-Davidson, vol. 1 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode Limited, 1931). Cited as "Campbell and Reed" hereafter.

² "Any one who" (OED).

³ "To attach value to. a. In neutral sense, qualified variously by adverbs (highly, lightly, little, well, etc.) or phrases: To hold in (favorable or unfavorable) estimation" (OED). The first English usage of this word is attributed to More's *Confutation*, written in 1532, but this instance would predate it.

⁴ I.e., "Whosoever thinks virtue is the hard way in life because of continual war against the world, the flesh, and the devil . . ."

⁵ "Aye": "a. Ever always, continually; b. at all times, on all occasions" (OED).

⁶ "Enforce" (verb): "To add force to, intensify, strengthen (a feeling, desire, influence); to impart fresh vigor or energy to (an action, movement, attack)" (OED). The "world, the flesh, the devil" reinforce themselves—or intensify their assault—against those striving for virtue.

⁷ "Thrall": "One who is in bondage to a lord or master; a villein, serf, bondman, slave; also, in vaguer use, a servant, subject" (OED).

⁸ "After": "Following with intent to overtake, pursuing, in pursuit of" (OED). Even if one chooses to chase after the world's pleasures, he will encounter sorrow, adversity, labor, grief, and pain. More reminds those struggling to live a virtuous life that some form of struggle is inevitable for human beings, whether one labors for virtue or sensual pleasures.

⁹ Through these poems More appears to use "sustain" according to the following definition: "To undergo, experience, have to submit to (evil, hardship, or damage; now chiefly with injury or loss as object, formerly also sorrow, death); to have inflicted upon one, suffer the infliction of" (OED).

The Second Rule.

Think¹⁰ in this wretched world's busy woe
 The battle more sharp and longer is, I wis¹¹
 With more labor and less fruit also
 In which the end of labor, labor is.¹²
 And when the world hath left us after this
 Void of all virtue: the reward when we die
 Is nought but fire and pain perpetually.¹³

The Third Rule.

Consider well that folly it is and vain
 To look for heaven with pleasure and delight.
 Since Christ our Lord and sovereign captain
 Ascended never but by manly¹⁴ fight
 And bitter passion; then were it no right
 That any servant, ye will yourself record,¹⁵
 Should stand in better condition than his lord.¹⁶

The Fourth Rule.

Think how that we not only should not grudge
 But also be glad and joyful of this fight,
 And long therefore—although we could not judge
 How that thereby redound¹⁷ unto us might
 Any profit, but only for delight—
 To be conformed and like in some behavior
 To Jesu Christ our blessed Lord and Savoir.

As often as thou dost war and strive,
 By the resistance of any sinful motion,
 Against any of thy sensual wits five,¹⁸

¹⁰ “Remember that” in place of “think” might better explain the line’s meaning.

¹¹ “I wis”= “I know.” The speaker interjects to provide personal testimony that worldly struggle involves more work and less fruit than the spiritual one.

¹² Working for the world’s pleasures does not result in serene enjoyment of them, but in continual exercise to re-possess the pleasure experienced; that is, once enjoyed, pleasure evaporates, causing one to search for it all over again. Shakespeare’s lines on lust from *Sonnet 129* provide a complimentary point: “A bliss in proof, and proved, a very woe, / Before, a joy proposed, behind, a dream. / All this the world well knows yet none knows well / To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell” (12-14).

¹³ I.e., the ultimate reward for a life of pleasure is pain and suffering in hell.

¹⁴ “In a manly manner; like a man; manfully, courageously, with valor or energy” (OED).

¹⁵ Record=remember.

¹⁶ Campbell and Reed note that this is an allusion to Matthew 10.24: “No disciple is above his teacher, nor is the servant above his master.” More’s point is that because Christ struggled on earth, his disciples are called to struggle.

¹⁷ “Redound” (v): “To result in, have the effect of, contributing or turning to some advantage or disadvantage for a person or thing” (OED).

¹⁸ “Thy sensual wittes five” refers to the “five senses” of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste.

Cast in thy mind¹⁹ as oft with good devotion
 How thou resemblest Christ: as with sour potion
 If thou pain thy taste: remember therewithal
 How Christ for thee tasted eysell and gall.²⁰

If thou withdraw thine hands and forbear
 The ravishing²¹ of anything: remember then
 How His innocent hands nailed were.
 If thou be tempt with pride: think how that when
 He was in form of God, yet of a bondman²²
 He took the shape and humbled Himself for thee
 To the most odious and vile death of a tree.²³

Consider when thou art moved to be wroth²⁴
 He Who that was God, and of all men the best,
 Seeing Himself scorned and scourged both,
 And as a thief between two thieves thrests²⁵
 With all rebuke and shame: yet from his breast
 Came never sign of wrath or of disdain,
 But patiently endured all the pain.

Thus every snare and engine²⁶ of the devil
 If thou this wise²⁷ peruse²⁸ them by and by
 There can be none so cursed or so evil
 But to some virtue thou mayst it apply.
 For oft thou shalt, resisting valiantly

¹⁹ “Cast in thy mind” probably means “to bring, call to mind; to summon remembrance, remember, set before one” (OED). As More also asserts in the Seventh Rule, the devil can cast into one’s mind temptations, which means that a significant portion of spiritual struggle exists in keeping a certain concentration upon God and heaven.

²⁰ “Eysell”: “variant of EISELL, obsolete, vinegar” (OED). Gall means “the type of an intensely bitter substance” (OED). See John 19:28-30: “After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfill the scripture), ‘I thirst.’ A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of the vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth. When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said: ‘It is finished’; and he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.” The ascetical struggle means fighting against the body, or one’s own senses, a war against one’s own self is waged. More identifies this struggle with tasting one’s own painful potion—“if thou pain thy taste”—and compares it to Christ being offered vinegar to drink on the Cross; we should be encouraged by our situation’s resemblance to Christ’s.

²¹ The actual word is “ravin,” which means “the act or practice of seizing and devouring prey or food; hence, voracity, gluttony” (OED). More warns against pride for those who practice continence.

²² “Bondman”: “A man in bondage; a villain; a serf, slave” (OED). Campbell and Reed suggest an allusion to Philippians 2.7: “but [Christ] emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

²³ “Death of a tree” means dying upon the cross by crucifixion.

²⁴ “Wroth” means “deep anger or resentment” (OED).

²⁵ “Threst, thrust” (verb): “thrust” (OED). Christ was crucified with two thieves.

²⁶ “Engine”: “An instance or a product of ingenuity; an artifice, contrivance, device, plot; and in a bad sense, a snare, wile; also, in weaker sense, an appliance, means” (OED). More is using the term in the second, bad sense.

²⁷ “Wise”: “Manner, mode, fashion, style” (OED).

²⁸ One of More’s neologisms. “Peruse”: “To go through by name; to name or recount in order” (OED). The OED presents the first usage of this word from More’s *Comfort Against Tribulation* (1534), but if the dating for this poem in *The Life* is accurate, the use of “peruse” here would be first.

The fiend's might and subtle fiery dart,
Our Savior Christ resemble in some part.

The Fifth Rule.

Remember well that we in no wise must,
Neither in the foresaid spiritual armor²⁹
Nor any other remedy, put our trust,
But only in the virtue of our Savior:

For He it is by Whose mighty power
The world was vanquished and its prince cast out
Which reigned before in all the earth about.

In Him let us trust to overcome all evil,
In Him let us put our hope and confidence
To subdue the flesh and master the devil,
To Him be all honor and lowly reverence;
Oft should we require with all our diligence
With prayer, with tears, and lamentable plaints
The aid of His grace and His holy saints.

The Sixth Rule.

One sin vanquished, look thou not tarry,
But lie in await for another very hour,³⁰
For as a wood³¹ lion, the fiend, our adversary,
Runneth about seeking whom he may devour;³²
Wherefore continually upon thy tower,³³
Lest he thee unpurveyed³⁴ and unready catch,
Thou must with the prophet stand and keep watch.

The Seventh Rule.

Enforce³⁵ thyself not only for to stand
Unvanquished against the devil's might,
But over that take valiantly on hand
To vanquish him and put him unto flight:³⁶

²⁹ Saint Paul writes: "But since we are of the day, let us be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet that is hope for salvation" (1 Thessalonians 5:8).

³⁰ After one spiritual battle, do not rest, but expect to reenter the fray immediately.

³¹ Campbell and Reed suggest "mad" for "wood," and reference 1 Peter v. 8.

³² 1 Peter 5:8 reads: "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour."

³³ As in keeping watch upon a tower. More uses military imagery to describe spiritual battle.

³⁴ "Unpurveyed": "Unprepared; not in readiness (to resist attack, etc.)" (OED).

³⁵ See note 5.

And that is when of the same deed, thought or sight
 By which he would have thee with sin contract,
 Thou takest occasion of some good virtuous act.

Sometime he secretly casteth in thy mind
 Some laudable deed to stir thee to pride,
 As vainglory maketh many a man blind.
 But let humility be thy sure guide,
 Thy good work to God let it be applied,
 Think it not thine but a gift of His
 Of Whose grace undoubtedly all goodness is.

The Eighth Rule.

In time of battle so put thyself in preace³⁷
 As though thou shouldest after that victory
 Enjoy forever a perpetual peace:
 For God of His goodness and liberal mercy
 May grant the gift, and also thy proud enemy,
 Confounded and rebuked by thy battle,
 Shall thee no more haply for very shame assail.³⁸

But when thou mayest once the triumph obtain
 Prepare thyself and trim thee in thy gear
 As thou shouldest incontinent³⁹ fight again,
 For if thou be ready, the devil will thee fear:
 Wherefore in any wise so even thou thee bear
 That thou remember and have ever in memory
 In victory battle, in battle victory.⁴⁰

The Ninth Rule.

If thou think thyself well fenced and sure

³⁶ In spiritual combat, it is not merely enough to defend oneself from temptation, but to use temptations for attacking evil. So when an evil thought occurs, it serves as a goad for us to say a prayer, or perform some other virtuous act.

³⁷ Campbell and Reed suggest “trim, fighting condition” for “preace.”

³⁸ More means the devil will be ashamed at his failure to tempt you to sin, and, as a result, he will fear to assault you in the future. Can demons be shamed away? For More, using the pride of demons against them is not a metaphorical statement, but real practical advice, offered for an actual spiritual war. In the *Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, for example, More writes: “Many a person has completely gotten rid of such troublesome thoughts by treating them with utter contempt—by making on his heart a sign of the cross and telling the devil to be off (sometimes even laughing him to scorn), and then turning his mind to some other matter. When the devil sees that the person has so little regard for him after he has made several attempts that he thought superbly well-timed, he completely gives up on that temptation—both because that proud spirit cannot bear to be mocked and also because he does not want greatly to increase someone’s merit by much tempting him to a sin that he will never get him to commit.” See More’s *Dialogue of Comfort*, section 2.16, rendered into modern English by Mary Gottschalk, (Princeton: Scepter Publishers, 1988), p. 156.

³⁹ “Incontinent”: “Straightway, forthwith, at once, immediately, without delay” (OED).

⁴⁰ Struggling actively against evil or temptation constitutes a spiritual victory in itself.

Against every subtle suggestion of vice,
 Consider frail glass may no distress endure,
 And great adventurers often curse the dice:⁴¹
 Jeopard not too far⁴² therefore and ye be wise,
 But evermore eschew⁴³ the occasions of sin,
 For he that loveth peril shall perish therein.

The Tenth Rule.

In all temptation withstand the beginning—
 The cursed infants of wretched Babylon!⁴⁴
 To suffer them wax is a jeopardous thing:⁴⁵
 Beat out their brains therefore at the stone:⁴⁶
 Perilous is the canker that catcheth the bone:⁴⁷
 Too late cometh the medicine if thou let the sore
 By long continuance increase more and more.

The Eleventh Rule.

Though in the time of the battle and war
 The conflict seem bitter, sharp and sour,
 Yet consider it is more pleasure far
 Over the devil to be a conqueror
 Than is in the use of thy beastly pleasure:
 Of virtue more joy the conscience hath within
 Than outward the body of all his filthy sin.

In this point many men err for negligence
 For they compare not the joy of the victory
 To the sensual pleasure of their concupiscence,⁴⁸
 But like rude beasts unadvisedly
 Lacking discretion they compare and apply
 Of their foul sin the voluptuous delight
 To the laborious travail of the conflict and fight.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Your luck—or circumstances—may change, shaking your confidence.

⁴² Do not place yourself too far in jeopardy.

⁴³ “Eschew”: “To avoid, shun” (OED).

⁴⁴ The beginnings of temptation are identified with “infants of Babylon.”

⁴⁵ “Wax” means to “grow.” More is saying, “To allow the beginnings of temptation to grow is a dangerous thing.”

⁴⁶ Campbell and Reed suggest an allusion to the Psalms: “O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock! (Psalm 137: 7-9). The speaker is referring to the Jews’ struggle against the Edomites, who are considered daughters of Babylon, but More interprets the psalm allegorically, such that babes dashed against rocks are temptations thwarted.

⁴⁷ “Canker”: “An eating, spreading sore or ulcer; gangrene.” More uses a medical analogy here: As sores that spread to the bones threaten one’s life, so too temptations that are allowed to fester threaten one’s soul.

⁴⁸ “Concupiscence”: “Eager or vehement desire; in the theological use the coveting of ‘carnal things,’ desire for ‘things of the world’” (OED).

And yet alas he that oft hath known
 What grief it is by long experience
 Of his cruel enemy to be overthrown,
 Should once at the leastwise do his diligence
 To prove and essay⁵⁰ with manly defense
 What pleasure there is, what honor, peace and rest
 In glorious victory, triumph and conquest.⁵¹

The Twelfth Rule.

Though thou be tempted, despair thee nothing:
 Remember the glorious apostle Saint Paul
 When he had seen God in His perfect being,
 Lest such revelation should his heart extol,
 His flesh was suffered to rebel against his soul:⁵²
 This did almighty God of His goodness provide
 To preserve His servant from the danger of pride.

And here take heed that he whom God did love,
 And for His most especial vessel chose,
 Ravished into the third heaven above,
 Yet stood in peril lest pride might him depose:
 Well ought we then our hearts fence and close
 Against vainglory, the mother of reproof,⁵³
 The very crop and root of all mischief.

Against this pomp and wretched worlds gloss
 Consider how Christ the Lord, sovereign power,
 Humbled Himself for us unto the cross:
 And peradventure death within one hour
 Shall us bereave wealth, riches and honor:
 And bring us down full low both small and great
 To vile carrion and wretched worms meat.

⁴⁹ More returns to the point of the first stanza, that people reject virtue because they compare its labor with sin's sensual delights. But More introduces a new consideration, the joy and delight of victory over the devil. People forget that virtue involves pleasure as well, such as the joys of victory.

⁵⁰ "Essay" means "assay," as in "to put to the proof, try (a person or thing); to test the nature, excellence, fitness, etc. of" (OED).

⁵¹ More compares the state of one, who after enjoying his sinful pleasure, experiences the sadness of defeat. More wonders again why people compare the pleasures of sin to the work of virtue instead of comparing the sadness of defeat with virtue's joy in victory.

⁵² More alludes to 2 Corinthians 12: 7-9, where Paul explains that he receives "thorns" in addition to his supernatural visions: "Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." What is the "angel of Satan" that afflicts Paul? More speculates here that it was a temptation of the flesh.

⁵³ Reproof (Cambell and Reed).