

More's Merry Tales in Re-Formation¹

The operation of a minor epic form in Thomas More's Dialogue Concerning Heresies

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I. Invention: Identifying the Target

In 1528, a layman, Thomas More, was commissioned by the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstal, to compose some books for the laypeople (*simplicibus et ideotis hominibus*)² that would help them face the questions of reformation. The members of the target group were described as simple and ignorant, lacking qualification and professional training in theology but having practical good sense and judgement gained from experience. To reach these common people of common sense, neither writing simply in the vernacular of the day would have been enough, nor the ancient sophisticated dialogue form imitating a live situation would have been satisfactory in itself—not even in the case of one of the most celebrated orators at that time.³ The fortifying of these common people would not have been achieved even given the fact that the “most illustrious layman of the realm” had already proved to be “a frequent and brilliant advocate of the Catholic position” having “set the example for future defenders of the Church.”⁴ The strategic frequency and the tactical

¹ Acknowledgement: This paper has been completed within the second year of the research supported by the Hungarian Scientific Research Fund Programme K 62008 (2006-2009).

² Elizabeth F. Rogers, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947, 387/24. Cited hereafter as “Rogers page/line.”

³ In Tunstal’s words, More “can rival Demosthenes” both in the vernacular and in Latin (*tu ... in lingua nostra vernacula, sicut etiam in Latina, Demosthenem quendam praestare potes*). (Rogers 387/19-20; quoted in Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi and Richard J. Schoeck, eds., *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 8, Parts I-III, New Haven: Yale UP, 1973, 1139. Cited hereafter as “CW8 page.”)

⁴ Rogers 387/21: *Catholice veritatis assertor acerrimus in omni congressu esse soles*; and Rogers 387/26-30: *habes ad id exemplum quod imiteris preclarissimum, illustrissimi Domini nostri Regis Henrici octavi, qui Sacramenta Ecclesie contra Lutherum totis viribus ea subuertentem asserere aggressus, immortalem nomen Defensoris Ecclesie in omne eum promeruit*. Cf., CW8 1139. See also: John M. Headley, ed., *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 5, *Responsio ad Lutherum* (1523), New Haven: Yale UP, 1969; and Frank Manley, Germain Marc’hadour, Richard Marius and Clarence H. Miller, eds., *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 7, *Letter to Bugenhagen* (1526, first published in 1568), New Haven: Yale UP, 1990, 1-105.

arrangement of the popular minor epic form of merry tales in More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529; 1531)⁵ seem to be the preferred device to achieve the desired result, that is, to let these laypeople *clearly see* "the cunning malice of heretics" and have these common people *better instructed* "against the traitorous subverters of the Church."⁶ Common people are stimulated by merry tales to activate their common sense. The discussion of the contextual and compositional operation of these merry tales is expected to clarify the instructive utility of this minor epic form.

II. Antecedents: Preparatory Examples

The genre of merry tales occurred in More's oeuvre as early as 1515. Defending Erasmus's achievement against the theologians in Louvain, More wrote his *Letter to Martin Dorp*.⁷ Discussing the *artes sermonicales*, More includes a merry tale reporting a dramatised merry dialogue between a learned Italian merchant and a theologian from the continent. (CW15 L 50/1-54/13; E 51-55) The theologian wanted to dispute (L 50/3, 5, 9, 18) some premeditated questions (L 50/4-5) to test the English and enhance his own fame (L 50/5-8). After boasting about his own competence in discussing anything even beyond his profession (L 50/11-18), questions of practical theology were raised (L 50/19-52/7). However, it turned out that he was not so well-versed in Scripture (L 52/10), therefore texts "arbitrarily contrived ... out of thin air" (*nusquam*; L 52/14 and L 54/1) were presented for him (L 52/11-19; E 53) and he boldly interpreted them (L 54/4, 9). This adventure produced "more than twenty of these drunken texts and as many drunken glosses" (L 54/10-11; E 55). More's merry tale in a letter that is meant to be a treatise on Erasmian humanism, illustrates the problem of being ignorant concerning philological issues (L 49/22) that can excruciate an interpretation (L 49/24) which can, in turn, violate one's credence.

The first merry tale of this illustrative adventure—taking place in the form of a table-talk (*cenaui*, L 50/1; *cena*, L 50/11 and 54/10) and turning out to be an amusing (*festivum*, L 50/11) incident as if coming from nowhere (*nusquam*, L 52/14 and L 54/1)—seems to introduce its own more dramatised version in the first book of *Utopia*⁸—or *Nusquama*⁹—labelled by the marginal gloss as "A Merry Dialogue between a Friar and a Hanger-On" (CW4 81), that is, a "*Festivus dialogus fratris & morionis*" (CW4 80). This merry dialogue is also shaped as a table-talk related by Raphael Hythlodæus. Once he took part in a conversation at Cardinal Morton's table (*in eius mensa essem*, CW4 L 60/6 E 61/7) discussing public matters concerning the veterans, thieves, beggars and vagrants. The merry dialogue as the coda of the table-talk serves as dessert. Its additional quality is revealed by the speaker's attitude articulated in his words—"I am at loss as to whether it were better to suppress what followed next, for it was quite absurd (*ridicula*, L 80/21)." (E 81/23-24)

⁵ Thomas M. C. Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour and Richard C. Marius, eds., *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 6, Parts I-II, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1981. Cited hereafter as "CW6 page/line."

⁶ Rogers 387/24-26 (emphasis added): *subdolum hereticorum malignitatem aperiant, ac contra tam impios Ecclesie supplantatores reddant eos instructiores*. (Cf., CW8 1139)

⁷ Daniel Kinney, ed., *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 15, *In Defense of Humanism: Letter to Martin Dorp* (1515, first published in 1563), New Haven: Yale UP, 1986, 1-127. Cited hereafter as "CW15 L(atin) or E(nglish) page/line."

⁸ Edward Surtz and J. H. Hexter, eds., *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 4, *Utopia*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1965. Cited hereafter as "CW4 L(atin) or E(nglish) page/line."

⁹ See the note to CW4 112/1-2: "In early pertinent correspondence, the island is referred to as *Nusquama* (*nusquam*, "nowhere," Erasmus, *Ep.*, 2, 339, 346, 354, 359, 372)." (CW4 385) It could also be noted that *nusquama* can be a merry compound of Greek *nous* "mind, brain, thought, intellect" and Latin *squama* "(bot., zool.) scale, scalelike feather or part of bone; splinter; fragment; (of speech, style:) roughness, inelegancy," thus it might merrily mean "fragments of thoughts due to brainstorm," as well.

However, the speaker's next sentence emphasises its relevance—"But I shall relate it since it was not evil in itself and had some bearing on the matter in question" (E 81/24-25).¹⁰ The dual quality of being additional and essential, accidental and substantial is revealed in the designation of the marginal "Hanger-On" or "*morionis*" within the main text: *parasitus* (L 80/23 and its note, 345)—someone or something that *is beside* food. This special dessert-like closure, on the one hand and in its own way, summarises the main part of the table-talk as for the thieves and the vagrants (L 80/30; E 81/35-36), however, on the other hand, imitating the main talk as for the sick and the old (L 80/32; E 81/37-38), and in a shared quality of the beggars (L 82/9, 17; E 83/11, 19), it becomes a parody of the discussion of public matters. In this way, the coda becomes a table-talk about the table-talk, thus claiming its own right as a kind of main course. Besides the previously marginalised Hanger-On that is now a centralised *parasitus*, the previously additional coda turns into an essential form, the previously accidental tale appears as the substantial body of the text as if it were a sophisticated parable to be deciphered. The speaker does his best in it coming to the conclusion that this conversation exhibits the joint attitudes of rejection and approval existing side by side. (L 84/20-30; E 85/27-37) In this sense the coded coda is decoded—reversed at least, if not subverted. The act of decoding is underlined by the second part of this merry dialogue when it turns upon the application of Biblical interpretation that results in philological ignorance or rather abuse according to the marginal gloss (E 85; L 84). As an overall outcome, neither mundane, nor sacred, neither temporal, nor spiritual, neither public, nor private interests are respected. Irrespective of the topics touched upon, the vocabulary of this merry dialogue reflects a consistent philological character: *ridicula*—absurd (L 80/21; E 81/24), *imitari morionem*—imitating a jester (L 80/24; E 81/28), *simulabat*—imitation (L 80/25; E 81/29), *captans risum*—raise a laugh (L 80/26; E 81/30), *rideretur*—object of laughter (L 80/26; E 81/30-31), *non absurda*—to the point (L 80/27; E 81/32), *subrisit*—smiled (L 82/13; E 83/14), *ioco*—jest (L 82/13; E 83/14), *coeperit ludere*—began to make merry (L 82/15; E 83/17), *scurra ... scurrari coepit*—the scoffer began to scoff (L 82/28; E 83/33; and in the Latin line, note the clash of *sacra* and *scurra* together with the hissing alliteration of the sibilants in *citans e scriptura sacra ... scurra serio scurrari* [82/27-28] starting to attack integrity), *homine stulto & ridiculo ridiculum*—a silly fellow...a foolish duel with a fool (L 84/9-10; E 85/13-14), *per iocum*—in jest (L 84/27-28; E 85/36).¹¹ The character of this merry dialogue is that of a ridiculous joke or that of an absurd play. Actually, the texts of More's letters to Peter Giles and the utterances of the speakers in *Utopia* agree on men's "*absurda iudicia*" (L 42/28; cf., L 58/13), that is, "wrongheaded...judgements" and "ridiculous...prejudices" (E 43/33; 59/14), and that there are things—extensively and exhaustively enumerated (E 245/18-26; L 244/15-21)—that "seemed very absurdly established" (E 245/17), "*perquam absurde uidebatur instituta*" (L 244/15). However, when More's epilogue-like letter to Peter Giles also turns to the possibility of the absurd aspect (L 248/5, 21, 24, 26; E 249/6, 25, 29, 32) raising the question of the nature of truth and fiction, no definite answer is given but an open space is provided that represents an ever challenging want or requirement not to be contended (L 248/6; E 249/7). The

¹⁰ The coexisting features of being refrained or restrained and being willing and expressing readiness—though in a rudimentary form—have already been present in More's *Letter to Martin Dorp*; in the merry tale: "Though it would take a while, I would certainly not hesitate to tell you ..." (CW15 L 50/9-10; E 51); and in its own introduction: "Having run across many of this kind, I will not hesitate to describe at least one ..." (CW15 48/24-26; E 49) In *Utopia*, More's prefatory letter to Peter Giles also displays these aspects: "I myself have not yet made up my mind whether I shall publish it at all" (CW4 L 42/25-26; E 43/30-31) and "in the matter of publishing which remains I shall follow my friends' advice ..." (CW4 L 44/25; E 45/30-31)

¹¹ In More's *Letter to Martin Dorp* the merchant also assumed the role of the *ludimagister* when "he started to play with the fellow" (*coepit hominem ludere*). (CW15 E 53; L 52/11)

second merry tale is a parable that generates a series of parallel responses to the question concerning the credibility of a speaker, an utterance, and a text.

III. A Generation of Merry Tales

As for More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, merry tales do not only become frequent, but at points they form sequences. Beyond their anecdotal and entertainment purposes and their role of homiletic expansion, the clustered arrangement of these series in the composition and in connection with a given topic can make a given issue rather puzzling, presenting one with the pattern of a problem which challenges one's response.

A. Parallels

The first tale questions whether one's origin can be accepted as genuine, and on what basis if the possibility of being changed in the cradle cannot be excluded (CW6 63/28-64/6). The second tale is about a man from India thinking that it is against the nature of man to be white (65/3-10). The third tale introduces the refiners and goldsmiths of London and their art of producing wire out of blocks of silver and iron (66/27-67/18). The fourth tale tells about a bird whose wings covered the whole churchyard of St. Paul's in London (68/4-15). In the fifth tale we get to know a poor man who found a priest in a too familiar situation with his wife. The poor man made it public but because he could not prove it he was ordered to give penance by proclaiming at high mass on Sunday, "mouth thou lyeest." He did so, and what is more, after that he also announced that "eyen ... by the masse ye lye not a whytte." (69/19-32)

Through the shifts of these tales it is shown that neither reason, nor nature can adequately and completely explain some phenomena. The parallel arrangement of these merry tales serves as a series of grades towards the question of credence concerning those phenomena (e.g. miracles) that can be neither fully understood nor fully explained.

B. Framing Parallels

The first tale states that a dead child was restored to life (71/22-23). The second tale is about making a beam that was cut short longer in order to suit its purpose (71/24-27). The third tale tells us that a man was taken a mile off from one place to another while a *Pater noster* was prayed (71/29-30). When these units return, the first one is changed for another tale about a boy who was born a foot tall but who is now an inch taller than the speaker. It took place about 21 years earlier when the speaker belonged to the parish of St. Stephen's in Walbroke in London before he went to Chelsea (78/35-79/32). The second tale is opposed to another one about a stone of more than a man's weight carried for more than a mile by a skilful contrivance (80/21-28). The third tale is also opposed to the tale of the refiners and goldsmiths, mentioned above (80/32-81/7).

The framing parallels and the changes resulting in a significant contrast create a space in which it can be discussed that neither nature nor reason denies miracles, and that miracles have to be admitted including those ones that occur as everyday phenomena even if they are the most incredible.

C. Paratactic Accumulation

Either the preceding cases of the merry tales were discussed in an alternating way (tale, discussion, tale, discussion, and so on), or they themselves embraced their own interpretation. In the following case, however, the accumulated sequence of the merry tales itself interprets the merry tales.

In the first one an accident disturbs a Chaucerian pilgrimage. Someone's "horse so fell in haltynge" and it "was so lene and so pore and halted so sore" that "coulede scant kepe fote" with the company. However, when the horse "spyed a mare...forth he lymped on thre legges so lustely that his maysters horse wyth foure fete / coulede scant ouertake hym. But whan he caught hym and cam agayne / he sware in great anger...that he wolde trust haltynge syr Thomas the worse whyle he lyuyd." It turns out that "syr Thomas" is "theyr paryshe preste" who is

as lene & as pore and as haltynge as his horse / and as holy to. But syns he wolde whyle he lyued mystrust the haltynge preste for his haltynge horse / If I fynde and holy *horeson* halte in ypcrysye / I shall not fayle whyle I lyue / to truste all his fellowes the worse.¹²

The typified problem of personal integrity is objectified in the second merry tale about the counterfeited "safyre or byrall" whose deceptive appearance cannot question the existence of "ryght dyamountes" (92/7-12). The objectified problem of personal integrity takes another turn with a remark in the third tale that one "wyll not mystrust saynt Peter for Iudas." (92/8) The theme of the first tale's popular joke is turned into a religious and theological issue represented by these model figures.

In the fourth and at the same time last tale in this accumulation, the problem of interpersonal prejudice is raised that does not violate the integrity of the person of the prejudged but reveals the lack of judiciousness in the person prejudging. In addition, since "our lady" is in the centre of the last merry tale, that is, the Blessed Virgin, whose role is ancillary—marginal—in the history of salvation, therefore indirectly but inevitably the seemingly marginal but ever more central fact of Christ's redemptive act is blasphemed. This is how the pilgrimage to Walsingham (91/23), "a famos shrine in Norfolk dedicated to the Virgin Mary" (see the note, CW6 628) comes to its end. However, it is also a pilgrimage of these paratactically accumulated tales, in which the beastly homophone, the immoral *whoreson* (92/5) can be converted by the embracing references to the implied virginity—as an added value of compositional skill—because the initial attitude of passing judgement on others is finally replaced by the invitation to acquire judicious self-knowledge that can grant personal integrity as a token of credence through which the *whoreson* can become wholesome.

D. Merry Tales as Dramatic Acts

The purifying effect of these paratactically accumulated merry tales is a dramatic experience. However, nothing can be more dramatic than More's recounting the burning of heretical editions of the Bible, the burning of heretical people, and, finally, burning of the corpse, "the dede body of the man hym selfe" (cf., 317/24-26 and 32). This exposition unambiguously refers to the so called Hunne affair:

¹² Pages 91/21-92/6; emphasis mine; see also the notes, CW6, 629.

In 1514, Richard Hunne, who had refused to pay the mortuary fee demanded by a priest for the burial of his infant child, was found hanging by his belt on a spike in the wall of the bishop's prison ... Heretical books with suspect marginal notes were found in his house...His body was tried, and burned. The Messenger is evidently repeating *popular gossip* that had been *circulating* in London for more than a decade, demonstrating that the Hunne case was very much *alive*.... (CW6 692; emphasis mine)

This lively circulating popular gossip serves a pretext (or pre-text) to phrase the opening question: "Who tolde...this tale ...?" (317/32). This question does not only seek a piece of information concerning the person who tells a tale, but it also implies that the nature of the tale and the act of telling a tale has to be put to the test as well. Both the actor and the act have to be tried. The trial is performed in three acts in the form of three merry tales. One of a man "that sayd he cowlde goo take the sleue that kylled Rycharde Hunne" (319/10-11). Another of another man who said that he "hadde sene many men that had hanged theym selfe" and who "by suche experyence as he hadde" together with "good and playne tokens" proved that "Hunne dyd neuer hange hym selfe" (319/17-26). And the third of "a spyrytall man" who "could not deny" that "he hadde tolde a temporall man" that "Hunne hadde neuer bene accused of heresy yf he had neuer sued the premunyre" (319/26-30).

At the start, after revealing that the testimony of these three figures "proued very tryfles" (320/1), the narrator seems to repeat a familiar pattern to start the three acts or merry tales:

I beseche you quod [the Messenger] lette me here howe they proued. I am lothe quod [the narrator] to lette [i.e., hinder] you / and lese your tyme in suche tryfles. Howe be it syth ye longe so sore therefore / rather than ye sholde lese youre chylde for theym / ye shall haue theym all thre.... (320/4-7)

The preparation of this narrator resembles the attitude of the narrators in More's *Letter to Martin Dorp* and *Utopia*. The qualification of these incidents as trifle might etymologically evoke the possibility of a jest that is not necessarily serious, that can be dealt with carelessly fooling away time as with some *squama*, therefore one can even laugh at them (cf., 320/2).¹³

The first merry tale or act performs the use of words that lead to an inconclusive series of hearings through which "a grete post well thwyted to a puddynge prycke" (320/8-321/30). The second merry tale or act stages the caricature of a seer who "loked as though his eyen wolde haue fallen out of his hed into the lordys lappys" (321/30-323/34). In the third merry tale or act it turns out that both the "temporall man" and the "spyrytuall man"—though they are of great credit—"make an vntrue reporte / or vntruely denye the trouthe" (323/34-324/30). This merry tale series, or play of three acts, does not explain the Hunne affair. That would be morbid. This merry play of three acts rather display the fact that honesty, credibility and integrity (cf., 318/19, 319/8, 324/2) can easily be lost by the uncontrolled use of words, even without being aware of the possibility that one can sin in one's words, in one's thoughts, in what one has done or in what one has failed to do. Due to the lack of self-knowledge, self-control or self-awareness, these absurd figures cannot be absolved but laughed at.¹⁴

Although these figures seem to be innocent by themselves, the acts attached to them qualify the lively circulating gossip, that is, "mysse vnderstandynge maketh mysse reportynge. And a tale that

¹³ Cf., "A Mery Gest" by More in Anthony S. G. Edwards, Katherine Gardiner Rodgers and Clarence H. Miller, eds., *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, Vol. 1, *English Poems*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1997, 15-29.

¹⁴ See also 320/2, 321/24, 322/22, 324/27.

fleeth thorowe many mouthes / catcheth many newe fethers / whyche whan they be pulled away agayne / leue hym as pyllled as a cote and sometyme as bare as a byrdys ars” (324/33-325/1). As in a merry tale, the beginning and the end of the digestive track are connected.

E. An All-Inclusive Merry Tale

According to the composition of the *Dialogue*, the instruction by means of merry tales takes the form of a table-talk in the narrator’s “study” (35/21) *sitting* “at a lytell table” (35/24). The questions and problems have to be analysed and synthesised, decomposed and assimilated with the help of merry tales:

More. May a man...better trust his eyes...then his wyt?

Messenger. Ye mary...what may he better truste then his eyen?

More. His eyen may...be decyuyd and wene they se that they se not yf reason gyue ouer his hold / excepte ye thynke y^e iugler blow his galles through the goblettes bottom / or cut your gerdell afore your face in .xx. pecys & make it hole agayne / and put a knyfe into his eye and se neuer the worse / And tourne a plum into a doggys *torde* in a boyes *mouthe*. / Nowe happenyd yt madly that euyng with this worde came one of my folke & asked whyther they sholde make redy for *dyner*. / Abyde...let vs haue better *meate* fyrst. And therwith your frende and I began to *laugh*. (130/12-23; emphasis mine)

At about noon they have dinner. The exchange of utterances, however, insinuates the possible connection, even mutual substitution of intellectual and physical nourishment (185/33-186/5) as the narrator articulates it: “I should *muse* more theron nowe and *ete* no *mete* for *longynge to knowe*.”¹⁵ The minor epic form of table-talks as merry tales has grown into a major epic form of a table-talk as a merry tale. This major form and the clusters of minor forms within it operate as the complex stomach of ruminants.

Rumination as such has its proper importance in zoological physiology and human nutrition. The digestive process of rumination provides special advantages for ruminants in contrast to non ruminants. Ruminants can digest (decompose, and synthesize) vegetable components that cannot be digested by non-ruminants. Ruminants can even assimilate those resources of protein, which non ruminants cannot, and the protein thus produced is of higher biological value and contains greater energy than the ones produced by non ruminants. These advantages are partly due to the complex stomach and partly to the fact that micro-organisms exist in the fore-stomachs of the ruminants. It is a regular symbiosis. The protein synthesized by the bacteria and protozoa is also assimilated by the host organism, which doubles the protein supply of the host organism and increases its biological value.¹⁶ As the symbiosis of the micro-organisms and the host organism increases the value of the host body, so do minor merry tales contextualized in the ruminative macro-organism of the host-text, the major merry tale.

¹⁵ Emphasis mine. See also 187/12-13, 344/32-35, 345/7-9, 435/28-29.

¹⁶ The information on the physiology and digestive process of ruminants has been provided by László Bozzay, DVM, whose generous help I gratefully acknowledge. The following works of veterinary medicine have been also consulted: Potsabay János—Szép Iván, *Háziállatok anatómiája és élettana* (The anatomy and physiology of domestic animals), Budapest: Mezőgazdasági, 1968. 249-250.; Kemény Armand, *Élettan állatorvostan-hallgatók és állatorvosok számára* (Physiology for students and surgeons of veterinary medicine), Budapest: Mezőgazdasági, 1974. 432-441.; Karsai Ferenc, ed., *Állatorvosi kórélettan* (Patho-physiology of veterinary medicine), Budapest: Mezőgazdasági, 1982. 200-242.; Szajkó László, ed., *Szakosított tejtermelés* (Specialised milk production), Budapest: Mezőgazdasági, 1984. 132-136. Clarence M. Fraser, et al., eds., *The Merck Veterinary Manual*, Rahway, NJ, Merck, 1986. 1486-1487.

IV. Merry Tales in Re-Formation

The clusters of merry tales test and taste human credibility and integrity. The sequences of merry tales attempt in various ways to prepare and better instruct the listener and reader in attaining credibility and integrity. This attempt is More's elementary pattern of compositional principle both in form and content: testing and tasting one's own personal integrity and the integrity of one's own work keeps one's Morean and moral awareness ever active. This *Dialogue*, then, is not a dialogue between two interlocutors any more, but a merry dialogue between many tales in the process of re-formation.

Such a delicate approach does not only make the problem in question memorable, but keeps one's mind active. Due to this activity, the motion of the mind alert to the point, the quality of the emotion attached to the action, and the way of presenting one's response can display and reflect a discretion that is the better part of valour.