

Thomas More Reader: Countryfolk Stories and Animal Fables: Part One

12. "The Tiller who Taught the Maid how to bear home Water in a Sieve"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, p. 652a-b]

And now giveth Tyndale such a counsel as if one that could no good skill¹ of money, and were set to be a receiver², would ask him counsel how he should do to be sure always to take good money³; and Tyndale would advise him to see well that he took no bad. And then if he said again, "Yes, Master Tyndale, but I pray you teach me then how I may be sure that I take no bad."

"Marry," would Tyndale say again, "for that shall I teach thee a way sure enough that never shall deceive thee if thou do as I bid thee." "What is that I pray you?" "Marry, look in any wise that thou take none but good."

Such a good lesson, lo, did the tiller⁴ once teach the maid how she should bear home water in a sieve and spill never a drop. And when she brought the sieve to the water to him to learn it, he bad her do no more but ere ever she put in the water, stop fast all the holes.

And then the maid laughed and said that she could yet teach him a thing that a man of his craft had more need to learn. For she could teach him how he should never fall, climbed he never so high, although men took away the ladder from him. And when he longed to learn that point to save his neck with, she bad him do no more but ever see surely to one thing, that is, to wit, that for any haste he never come down faster then he went up.

Now such a good sure lesson Tyndale teacheth us here.

13 . "The Poor man who feared for his Life, and the Farmer who was given good Advice"

[From *The Debellation of Salem and Bizance* ; Works, pp. 971a; 973a-b]

But now this man that doth detect this heretic, against whom he feareth to make himself an open adversary and accuser, is not in the case⁵ before he becomes his accuser but may sit still, you see well, and hold his peace and needeth not to make that heretic his adversary by his willful accusation. Which if he should once do he will never after happily while he liveth reckon himself so sure from bodily harm that he may after hap to have by him and by his means as he will reckon to be in, if he accuse him not, nor by such open accusation give him an open occasion of displeasure—no, not for all the provision that all the world can imagine for his surety, except only such surety as a poor man devised once for himself, when he came to a king and complained how sore he feared that such a servant of his would kill him.

And the king bad him fear not [this] fellow, "For I promise [the king said] that if he kill thee he shall be hanged within a little while after." "Nay, my liege lord" quoth that poor soul, "I beseech

your grace let him be hanged for it a great while afore. For I shall never live in the less fear till I see him hanged first."

Now will this good man happily say that this manner of reasoning should prove not only that a man for fear would refuse to be an accuser but also to be a witness, and then were it against myself, too....

* * * *

If he think it likely that none of them will become accusers that were present and heard it themselves, then is it yet less likely that he will become the accuser that beareth it but at a second hand. And therefore me thinketh that this device is not much wiser than the device that a good fellow devised once for his neighbour that had a great hillock in his close , which for planing of the ground he counselled him to have it away.

"Marry," quoth his neighbour, "I must carry it then so far that it were less loss to me to give away the close and all." "Marry, neighbour," quoth the other, "I shall soon find a way for that. For I shall devise a provision that it shall be had a way and yet never carried hence. For even there as it lieth, lo, dig me a great pit and carry it never farther, but bury it even in that." "Where shall I then lay that heap," quoth his neighbour, "that cometh out of the pit?" At that the other studied a little. But when he had well bethought him:—"Marry," quoth he, "even dig another great pit under that and bury [for] me that heap there."

[IN MARGIN: *A proper device I ensure you .*]

14. "The Fools and the Rain"

[From *Letter to Lady Alice Alington* ; Works, p. 1436a-b]

The first fable of the rain that washed away all their wits that stood abroad when it fell, I have heard oft ere this. It was a tale so often told among the King's Council by my Lord Cardinal , when his grace was Chancellor, that I cannot lightly forget it. For of truth in times past when variance began to fall between the Emperor and the French king , in such wise that they were likely and did indeed fall together at war, and that there were in the Council here sometimes sundry opinions in which some were of the mind that they thought it wisdom that we should sit still and let them alone. But evermore against that way, my Lord used this fable of those wise men that, because they would not be washed with the rain that should make all the people fools, went themselves in caves and hid them under the ground. But when the rain had once made all the remnant fools, and that they came out of their caves and would utter their wisdom, the fools agreed together against them and there all-to-beat ' them.

And so said his Grace that, if we would be so wise that we would sit in peace while the fools fought, they would not fail after to make peace and agree, and fall at length all upon us. I will not dispute upon his Grace's counsel, and I trust we never made war but as reason would. But yet this fable for his part did in his days help the King and the realm to spend many a fair penny. But

that gear "is passed and his Grace is gone--Our Lord assoil " his soul! And, therefore shall I now come to this Aesop's fable, as my Lord full merrily laid it forth for me.

If those wise men, Meg ", when the rain was gone, at their coming abroad, where they found all men fools, wished themselves fools, too, because they could not rule them, then seemeth it that the foolish rain was so sore a shower that even through the ground it sank into their caves and poured down upon their heads and wet them to the skin, and made them more noddies " than them that stood abroad. For if they had had any wit, they might well see that, though they had been fools too, that thing would not have sufficed to make them the rulers over the other fools, no more than the other fools over them. And of so many fools, all might not be rulers.

Now when they longed so sore to bear a rule among fools, that so they so might, they would be glad to lose their wit and be fools, too; the foolish rain had washed them meetly well. Howbeit, to say the truth, before the rain came, if they thought that all the remnant should turn into fools and then either were so foolish that they would or so mad to think that they should (so few rule so many fools) and had not so much wit as to consider that there are none so unruly as they that lack wit and are fools, then were these wise men stark fools before the rain came.

Howbeit, daughter Roper, whom my Lord here taketh for the wise men and whom he meaneth to be fools I cannot very well guess; I cannot read well such riddles. For as Davus saith in Terence, "Non sum Oedipus," I may say, you wot well, "Non sum Oedipus sed Morus," which name of mine what it signifieth in Greek I need not tell you. But I trust my Lord reckoneth me among the fools; and so reckon I myself, as my name is in Greek.

NOTES

(1) **Cardinal Thomas Wolsey** (1475?-1530), who rose from obscurity to be one of the most powerful men in England at the time, began his rise to fortune as Henry VII's chaplain (1507); under Henry VIII he became Almoner, Dean of York, Bishop of Lincoln, Archbishop of York and Cardinal in swift order. Finally he was made Lord Chancellor (1515) in which office he remained until November 1529, when he was removed for not succeeding in getting Papal acceptance of Henry VIII's divorce from Queen Catherine and marriage to Anne Boleyn. The Chancellorship was given to Sir Thomas More. Wolsey was arrested for treason and died on his journey in November 1530 from his seat at York to London, where he faced trial and probable execution.

(2) **Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor** , ruler of Spain and The Netherlands, and Francis I of France, were young monarchs nearly at war in 1518 and again in 1521. Cardinal Wolsey went to Calais in 1521 to act as mediator but he made a secret alliance with Charles against France.

(3) **Aesop's fable** : Aesop, reputed author of didactic, moralizing fables about animals, supposedly lived about 620 to 560 B.C. A highly romanticized "Life," written in the late middle ages, was prefixed to most editions of his *Fables* , beginning with the first comprehensive collection, which was compiled in the fourteenth century. The *Fables* , together with tales written by Poggio the Florentine and others, appeared first in English in 1484 in a huge edition of 142 folio leaves, translated from French and printed by William Caxton. The source of More's

Aesopic fables, oddly, was not the Caxton edition, but a variety of manuscripts, printed sources and oral tradition. All of More's Aesopic fables with the notable exception of the present fable—appear in the enormous seventeenth-century collection made by Sir Roger L'Estrange.

(4) **Meg** : i.e., Margaret Roper (1505-1544), More's beloved daughter by his first wife, Jane Colt. She corresponded frequently with her father when he was imprisoned in the Tower. A dialogue between them was later recast in the form of a letter from Meg to Lady Alington, her half-sister. The "Letter" (here excerpted) was edited and published by William Rastell in the *Works* (1557). The question of who wrote what in this "Letter" is still unresolved. I would agree with R.W. Chambers that "The Margaret speeches in the dialogue are pure Margaret, the More speeches pure More." Chambers suggests that "When Rastell published the letter, long years after the death of both, their nearest and dearest could not say which had written it" (Chambers, p. 308). But Louis L. Martz ("The Tower Works", CW 12, p. lxi) concludes without question that "The arguments of More in this letter are so circumstantially given, and the language has such a resonance of his own style, that I think one ends up with very little doubt that this letter is primarily More's own composition...its art seems to be all More's"; and the letter is a prime example of More's "art of improvisation, his art of exploration, displayed at length in *A Dialogue of Comfort*." (See also an analysis of More's reaction to the fable, by Wegemer [p.173].)

(5) **Non sum Oedipus** : The quotation is from Terence's *Andria* , I,ii,23. Davus, a slave, is told to straighten out a son who has fallen hopelessly in love. He is certain that the son would see through his attempts to stop him from marrying. The slave says he does not understand, for he's simply Davus, not Oedipus (who solved the riddle of the Sphinx, thus saving Thebes from disaster). More presumably could not solve Wolsey's riddle of who was wise and who foolish; nor could Lady Alington, Margaret nor other well-wishing friends (who urged him to sign the Oath of Allegiance and thus be freed from prison) solve the riddle of whether More was wise or foolish--as More implies in the opening of Meg's letter.

(6) **Non sum Oedipus sed Moros**: Greek for "fool" or "foolish" is [moros]. The similarity with More's name provided innumerable puns for More, his friends, and his polemical enemies as well. The most famous example appears in the little book Erasmus wrote while living with More in London— *Moriae Encomium* , " *In Praise of Folly*" or "In Praise of More". A more elaborate pun occurs in some Latin verses written by the Tudor grammarian famous for his quip that More was a "man of all seasons"—an epithet adapted as a title of a recent play by Robert Bolt. Robert Whittington had written (as translated by R.S. Sylvester): "Pyramus and Thisbe were changed into a *morum* [i.e., mulberry tree] because of their love, / Thus More takes his name from a shortened form of *amor* ." (For full discussion of Whittington's "Ad illustrissimum virum Thomam Morum" ([*Opusculum* , 1519], see R.S. Sylvester, pp. 147-154). George Joye, a Protestant reformer, was *not* amused by More's name. He wrote that "More is become a vain liar... [he has] shown himself a stark fool... *Moros* in Greek is *stultus* in Latin, a fool in English" (*The Subversion of Moris false foundation* , 1534, title-page).

¹ *Could...skill* : i.e., had no real understanding

² Treasurer

³ *Take good money* : i.e., receive fine (pure) coin

⁴ Farmer

⁵ *In the case* : i.e., not brought into court for a decision

⁶ Enclosure, farmyard

⁷ I.e., Thomas Wolsey

⁸ Charles V and Francis I

⁹ Thoroughly beat up

¹⁰ Business

¹¹ Absolve from sin

¹² I.e., Margaret Roper, More's daughter

¹³ Fools