

Why is More So Merry In A Dialogue Concerning Heresies?

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If a contest were held for all-time most amazingly humorous author, surely his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* could by itself cinch the win for Sir Thomas More. For it is one thing to make jokes about things that do not affect one deeply, or as a way to block pain associated with things that do, but who other than the merry More has ever been so funny *while* being maximally serious and feeling the deepest pain?¹ What More sees as the worst poison imaginable has been unleashed on the world. He is waging a pitch battle to stop its spread and to save, by means of inoculations and antidotes, countless endangered lives. The stakes are those he considers the highest possible: God's reputation and people's ultimate, everlasting state.² So why, in such a context, would he make the effort to be funny? And by what means does he so clearly succeed?

The reasons and the means are many. In fact, the rich variety of the expressions and functions of his humor is itself one of the elements that give More the winning edge. But the key element—the one underlying and informing all the others—is his moral and therefore also psychological integrity: his phenomenal determination and ability to keep all realities within conscious and clear view, not blocking or blurring some in favor of others. He does not repress a thing. And one result is the superb humor that in one form or another permeates the entire book.

What came first for More was moral integrity—the consistency of professed belief with actual belief, attitude, and behavior. His thirst for this integrity was boundless. It was not a matter of drawing the line at perjury; he considered despicable any “false” thing or person.³ To him it was unthinkable to not want respectability, and axiomatic that to have it you must live true to your word. Which to him meant, above all, that you do not mentally or verbally profess that Jesus is Lord and not assiduously apply yourself to fulfilling Jesus' every command. More did truly take Jesus as his Lord as well as Savior. And so if Jesus said the greatest commandment is to love God “...with all your mind” (see Mt 22:37), then More would do that. He would love God with *all* (not just the loftier cogitations) of his mind.

¹ At one point in the *Dialogue* the messenger says he has heard that “you are in the habit...of looking so serious when you mean something in jest that many times people think you might be joking when you are dead serious” (p. 92 of the modern-English edition published by Scepter in 2006). He seems to be thinking that at any given time More is in fact *either* joking *or* dead serious, and that it's just hard at times to tell which mode he is in at that moment. But what we find in this book is an even more perplexing reality: that More *is* joking when he is dead serious.

² These concerns surface throughout the book, but see especially pp. 181, 254, 281, 427–28, 453, 456, 462, 483, and 485. (All references to the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* [DH] will be to the above-mentioned edition.)

³ By “false” he generally meant hypocritical and treacherous as well as untruthful or inaccurate. See DH, p. 399 (“it actually being as false as he that said it”), p. 452 (“false sheepdog”), p. 453 (“falsehood of their cloaked collusion”), and p. 476 (“false heretic”). But with the exception of “harmless lies devised for the sake of doing good” (see *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, pp. 135–36), he was adamantly opposed to all falsehoods. (All references to the *Dialogue of Comfort* [DC] will be to the modern-English edition published by Scepter in 1998.)

Now, it so happened that his mind came with a bent for humor. He was naturally fun-loving, as he acknowledged in another maximally serious book.⁴ But that is not the (or even an) immediate reason for the laughs he gives us in these most serious of works. The root reason is the psychological integrity that his moral integrity produced, and all the immediate reasons spring from that psychological integrity. More recognized that the Christian faith if held only mentally is a liability;⁵ and thus he devoted all his energies to keeping things real. All the choices he made—including his decision not to become a priest—he made with a view to keeping faithfully God’s commandments, and especially that greatest one.⁶ In constantly exerting himself to love God with his entire self, he gained, as a natural consequence, psychological integrity—a condition that generates interestingness, one of the essential elements of successful humor.⁷ People find interesting an idea that is in some way new to them. One’s ideas depending largely on one’s set of perceived realities, and no two individuals having identical sets of those, the chances of being interesting are high for someone who keeps in active play his or her whole set. Also, if few others are behaving in this way, then such a person will stand out as extraordinarily interesting. On both counts More scores.

He is a riveting juggler, keeping in constant and coordinated play all kinds of realities, from the most elevated (the Blessed Trinity⁸) to the least (a dog’s turd⁹). And it is primarily that refusal to lose sight of any of them that gets him his laughs. Take, for instance, this little comment in his relating of the miracle of the “beautiful boy”: that the conceiving of the boy probably took place on or soon after the parents’ wedding night, “unless it happened a little before.”¹⁰ It might be a bit funny coming from just anyone, but coming from him it is hilarious, because this is a *saint* talking.¹¹ Consciousness of that fact is also one major reason the whole account of the bizarre goings-on at St. Valery’s shrine is such a riot. For someone so utterly devoted to God to write so frankly and good-naturedly about the silly but perennial obsession with the size of men’s “things”—the apparent incongruity does tickle the funny bone.¹²

True, not everyone sees as merely apparent the incongruity between saintliness and earthiness. One biographer complains of an “odd touch about Sir Thomas’s wit: a preference for the rather crude in the ‘merry tales.’”¹³ Another includes earthiness in his list of More’s faults, saying, “His

⁴ See *DC*, p. 91.

⁵ “If both good works and final repentance of the lack of good works do fail us (we having had the time and intelligence for them), we are likely to fare much the worse for our faith” (*DH*, p. 445).

⁶ See Gerard R. Wegemer, *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Publishers, 1995), pp. 10–15 and 21–24. See the Appendix to this essay for further discussion of More, priesthood, humor, and heresy.

⁷ The first of humor expert Max Eastman’s ten “laws” or commandments of the comic arts is “Be interesting”: see Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (New York: Halcyon House, 1936), p. 290.

⁸ More was keenly aware that the Catholic faith cannot logically be held partially or tentatively, and that to truly believe in its tenets is to regard them as facts. His conviction that “the conclusions themselves are such certain truths that they are not debatable” (*DH*, p. 46) is in strong evidence throughout the book.

⁹ See *DH*, p. 157.

¹⁰ *DH*, p. 103.

¹¹ Not that he knew when writing this that he would end up with “Saint” in front of his name; but it is quite clear, from his whole train of thought, that he already was a saint. (And he may have had some inkling. It is interesting, in light of his famous last words, that he calls saints “God’s good servants”: see *DH*, p. 71.)

¹² See *DH*, 262–63. Another major reason that story is so funny is pointed out by Walter M. Gordon in his article “In Defense of More’s Merry Tales”: “The sheer zaniness of the scene is heightened by the straight-faced account given by the narrator as well as by the intensely serious attitude of almost every character in the tale.... The contrast between the absurd rites and the serious devotees turns potentially tasteless material into a hilarious scene of Rabelaisian mirth” (*Moreana*, no. 38 [Jun 1973]: 9). Also, in “The Argument of Comedy in Thomas More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*” (*Renaissance and Reformation* 4 [1980], 17), Gordon makes this intriguing observation: “The words of the good wife...are indicative of the many distinctive voices that rise out of the merry tales. A humorous disparity exists between her tone of authority and the empty, superstitious content of her words.”

¹³ G. R. Elton, “Thomas More, Councillor,” *St. Thomas More: Action and Contemplation*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), p. 114. Gordon well refutes this claim, in the first place by showing that “there is certainly no preoccupation with the sexual in More’s merry tales taken as a whole” (“In Defense,” p. 8), but also by

sharp-sighted realism gave rise to a Chaucerian earthiness that frequently shocked, then as now. But the fault that worried him the most was pride.¹⁴ Still another, referring to one of More's Latin poems, says, "It might not be the refined humour of sainthood; but by staying closer to a grossly secular level we may come nearer to More himself."¹⁵ However, I see as unwarranted these implied assumptions that one cannot be saintly while or by being earthy. More did not dash off this book. He wrote it very carefully, and had it carefully checked over by upstanding people.¹⁶ Clearly neither he nor they regarded his use of earthy humor as any fault, or lapse from saintliness.¹⁷

Thomas More, to the contrary, saw as spiritually perilous any ignoring of the corporeal side of human nature.¹⁸ It is no accident that a comic-relief interlude in a cerebral argument about faith and reason begins with the mention of a dog's turd. Nor is it an oversight that the story of a most preposterous and sacrilegious fake miracle has a hilariously high-flown peak—"Now lay the prior with holy maiden Elizabeth nightly in the loft"—followed immediately by "till she was...tested in confinement.... And by the longing for food, with the voiding of what she had eaten (which had no saintly smell), she was perceived for no saint...."¹⁹ Throughout this book, whether with humor or not, More is trying to immunize his readers to every kind of dangerous hoax—heresy especially, but not exclusively—by getting them in the habit of running reality checks. In this instance just a little reflection could have spared anyone the pain of being duped, since "people might well think" it inappropriate that a young female saint should be "enshrined alive in a monastery, amongst a congregation of monks."²⁰ Likewise, More would have us ask ourselves if this or that tenet of heretics (or in today's parlance, "dissenters") is consistent with the faith that they themselves claim to have in Christ or in Scripture, and with the earthly knowledge that we all have, and realize that if the answer is no, then that tenet is clearly bogus.²¹

It is no character flaw that accounts for More's use of earthy humor in this book. It is, rather, his awareness that being "overly fearful and scrupulous" can end up catapulting people into heresy, by tempting them to idolize liberty.²² This wise spiritual counselor will not have any reality stashed away in denial and thus able to come back later to bite us. We are not, on his watch, going to forget certain body parts or functions, or pretend not to see anything funny about them. *Any* amnesia, well-intentioned or not, is a potential breeding ground for heresy; the basic defense is unflinching contact with reality at all levels.

The rare extent to which he himself maintains that contact also sparks heavenly humor that has shock value. Being three *Persons*, God gets actually treated as such—not only by way of some bent syntax,²³ but also by way of some humorous turns of phrase that most people would avoid when speaking of him. Take, for instance, these lines: "[Christ] says also that his Father and he will send the Holy Spirit, and also that he himself will come.... To what end, all this, if he meant nothing

calling to mind More's objective of refuting Tyndale, who emphasized the spiritual side of life to the detriment of the physical, and who preached a "true church 'that sinneth not'" (see "Argument of Comedy," pp. 20–22).

¹⁴ Wegemer, p. 3.

¹⁵ Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 93.

¹⁶ See *DH*, pp. 42–43.

¹⁷ He says (on p. 42), "Although I saw no harm in [certain stories and jesting comments], I nevertheless was somewhat worried that to dignified people they might seem too light and frivolous, given the weight and gravity of any such serious matter"; apparently he was not at all worried that to some they might seem dirty. (Though written within a context of fiction, this statement of his is surely factual.)

¹⁸ That is, for 99.99 percent of the population; see *DH*, pp. 61–73 and 81. A major theme throughout the book is that image veneration can foster our spiritual well-being because we are material as well as spiritual beings.

¹⁹ *DH*, p. 112. Again, what really gets the laughs is that mix of highbrow and lowbrow sensibilities.

²⁰ *DH*, p. 113.

²¹ See, e.g., pp. 140–43 and all of Part Four, chapter 11.

²² See pp. 295–98; and also *DC*, pp. 117–19. More apparently did not know about Luther's early problems with scrupulosity (he mentions only Bilney's), and he died before Jansenism came in. So his awareness of what disastrous situations scrupulosity can lead to is truly remarkable.

²³ The most striking instance is the sentence which begins, "For there is no doubt that God and his Holy Spirit *has* so judiciously tempered *their* speech through the whole corpus of Scripture" (*DH*, p. 387; emphasis added). See also pp. 164 and 482.

more than that they would leave the books behind them and go their way?”²⁴ What a casual image—three guys providing books and then taking off. And look at the lines about Christ being “served” in or with silver or gold.²⁵ Humor being a natural facet of his relations with any person he really loved, More was not about to leave it out of his relations with the Persons of the Trinity. Evidently he took to heart Jesus’ statement that the second great commandment (“Love your neighbor as yourself”) is *like* the first, and felt that on account of the Incarnation the divine Persons are entitled to neighborly as well as more exalted love.

In fulfillment of that second commandment, More includes in the *Dialogue* a variety of forms of humor—as well as other things. He wants to heresy-proof us his earthly neighbors, and he knows he cannot do this if he puts us to sleep. Having educated with spectacular success his own four kids (plus a few extras), he has learned a thing or two about how to hold people’s interest. Such as, there’s a natural ebb and flow that you’d better allow for if you hope to sustain it for 450 pages. Well he knows how likely we would be to skip out early if he was all the time doing just one of these things: (1) being overtly pious, (2) flashing his sword of sharpest lawyerly argument, or (3) cracking jokes. He knows he has to vary his modes of exposition as well as his modes of humor. And this he certainly does.

To begin with, surely a more alliteration-loving man never lived. “A holy whoreson hypocritically halting”; “the paltry pleasure of the vain praise puffed out of poor mortals’ mouths with a whiff of wind”²⁶—this kind of fun will be had all the time, regardless of the topic; and sometimes to scathing effect.²⁷ Then we have, of course, the “merry tales”—at a conservative count, twenty-four of them.²⁸ But we also find (within or apart from those tales) repetition-produced humor,²⁹ battle-of-the-sexes quips,³⁰ double entendres,³¹ gallows humor,³² and fun with accents.³³ This Brit does poke a little fun at the French³⁴—and also at such biases and stereotyping!³⁵

²⁴ *DH*, p. 142.

²⁵ See *DH*, pp. 62–63. Another case in point: “Your friend asked me what reason there was that God would assign more value to one place than to another.... To which I answered that as to *why* God would do it, I could give him no answer, any more than Saint Augustine says he could. I was never that much taken into his confidence, nor would I dare be so bold as to ask him” (pp. 82–83).

More has a similarly striking view of the Church as a both singular and plural reality, a true union of persons. See pp. 190–91, where the image slides from that of one man to that of a “company of men and women together,” and then back to that of the singular “person that you must needs go to.” The referent pronoun for the Church is usually “it,” and can be an eloquent “she” or “her” (see p. 238), but occasionally it is “they” or “them” (see pp. 143 and 209).

²⁶ *DH*, pp. 117 and 451.

²⁷ One example: “Among all these things Luther could catch sight of no gold that grievously glittered in his bleared eyes, but only around the cross of Christ” (*DH*, p. 73). There can also be something akin to onomatopoeia, as in the “paltry pleasure” line and the phrase “but a butterfly” (p. 316).

²⁸ The gigantic bird and egg (*DH*, p. 91); “Mouth, mouth, you lie!” (pp. 92–93); the supposedly blind beggar (pp. 110–11); “holy maiden Elizabeth” (pp. 111–12); the halting horse (pp. 116–17); “If she was a Jew...” (p. 117); “What would you have done...in Joseph’s place?” (pp. 185–86); “Saint Disencumber” (pp. 261 and 270); poor Saint Martin (p. 261); the strange goings-on at St. Valery’s shrine (pp. 262–63); the first Lombard (pp. 268–69); the second Lombard (p. 269); Caius and the little smart-aleck (p. 287); the bear-baiting (p. 296); the badly baked bread (pp. 296–97); Wilkins and Simkins (pp. 315–17); Saint Francis witnessing a kiss (p. 329); *Sic luceat* (p. 340); the man who wanted a woman but not a wife (p. 354); the one and only shrewish wife in the world (p. 358); the person who could take by the sleeve the one who killed Hunne (pp. 365–67); the expert in hangings (pp. 367–69); “Drink before you go” (pp. 369–70); Sandwich Harbor (pp. 466–67).

²⁹ See *DH*, p. 262 (“two round rings...but the one was larger than the other”) and p. 366 (“Actually...”).

³⁰ See *DH*, p. 108 (“they are but women, ...two mere women”), p. 132 (“One of that ware...some pain”), p. 217 (“If I were...for the longing to know”), p. 262 (“a married man and yet a merry fellow”), p. 272 (“a few dotty dames”), p. 358 (the line about the one shrewish wife), and p. 400 (“a woman can keep a confidence...”).

³¹ See *DH*, p. 398 (“they would...in their own breast”) and p. 401 (“a beautiful woman...open his mind to”).

³² See *DH*, p. 49 (“for which...burned up”), p. 58 (“they would speak...lips burned”), p. 109 (“I would rather shiver...midst of winter”), and p. 243 (“their displeasure and anger at which sets them on fire...”).

³³ See *DH*, p. 126 (“Ye men of London...”) and p. 467 (“Y’all gentlemen...”).

He uses repartee,³⁶ *reductio ad absurdum*,³⁷ incongruity,³⁸ sudden shift in level of language,³⁹ fun with numbers,⁴⁰ pulling of the other person's leg,⁴¹ visual humor,⁴² outright ridicule,⁴³ the occasional shameless pun,⁴⁴ rhyme (at least one),⁴⁵ and the laugh track.⁴⁶ And, too, some subtler devices: litotes⁴⁷ and other forms of understatement;⁴⁸ irony,⁴⁹ the pulling of a fast one,⁵⁰ nonphysical-facts-of-life humor,⁵¹ the Parthian shot,⁵² amphibology,⁵³ and the authorial cameo.⁵⁴

³⁴ See *DH*, p. 269 (“Crederet...in Dio”), p. 328 (“And this word ‘senior’...”), and p. 332 (“...when we speak French in sport...”). For background to the stories about Lombards, see Germain Marc’hadour, “The Devil and the Lombards: Two Merry Tales by Thomas More” (*Cithara* 19 [1980]).

³⁵ See *DH*, p. 108 (“...that a friar will be a womanizer...” / “see now what a good way...”) and pp. 262–63 (“...her privates were somewhat short”).

³⁶ See *DH*, pp. 90–91, 296–97, and 318.

³⁷ See *DH*, pp. 236–37 (“For if a person...who could tell?”), p. 266 (“The thing itself...statue that is at Walsingham”), pp. 350–51 (“If we shall...two husbands at once”), and p. 458 (“If free will...excused right back”).

³⁸ Between, e.g., “took such spiritual pleasure and inward solace” and “immediately started laughing” (*DH*, p. 340), or the “sober woman” and what she says (see p. 263).

³⁹ See *DH*, p. 252 (“tell them all to take a hike”), p. 335 (“he yet finally said whoa”), p. 369 (“he was told to take a hike”), and p. 370 (“as bare as a bird’s ass”).

⁴⁰ See *DH*, p. 298 (“unless a greater number...”), p. 303 (“not by the words of one or two...”), pp. 327–28 (“But I will show you...reiterated in the book”), p. 349 (“to have twenty at one time—or two, if he wants...”), p. 369 (“Have you seen ninety?...but one in all his life”), and p. 405 (“and too much, too, without more”). (A couple of these examples are riddles.)

⁴¹ See *DH*, p. 90 (“Now, I will not deny...he was being facetious”) and p. 318 (“I do not perceive...construing it to the contrary”).

⁴² See *DH*, p. 265 (“grovel on the ground” / “poor priests...Blessed Sacrament”), p. 315 (“whether one has...like a sheep”), p. 339 (“and this one he picks up...cast an eye into it now and then”), and pp. 367–68 (“But I wish...keep from laughing”).

⁴³ See *DH*, p. 151 (“As though these men...to the Jews”), p. 347 (“Is it not now a wonder...these two magnificent creatures...”), p. 402 (“it was courteous...such provision”), and p. 466 (“And when it should...under the name of wives”). In the *Dialogue*, sarcasm or satire is almost always aimed at the main poisoners and used for one of the oldest purposes of humor: service as a social corrective (see Appendix to this essay).

⁴⁴ I found only two: “just as the hand...some feats” (*DH*, p. 159) and “souls...soles” (p. 259). (I wouldn’t classify the pun on p. 370—“tale [tail]”—as a shameless one.) Compared to our TV news anchors and meteorologists, More shows admirable restraint!

⁴⁵ “Hogs and dogs”: *DH*, p. 172.

⁴⁶ See *DH*, pp. 89, 112, 263, 340, 368, and 369.

⁴⁷ See *DH*, p. 164 (“Origen...as not to say the contrary”) and p. 434 (“...that seems not always true”). See also *DC*, p. 159 (“...a not very clean place”).

⁴⁸ See *DH*, p. 60 (“another kind of attitude”), p. 64 (“...he would not have had so many manual laborers”), p. 208 (“...for they did not dwell here that long”), p. 266 (“she will tell you a difference...”), p. 329 (“in the way of good company”), and p. 351 (“If he should mean...more than so few”).

⁴⁹ E.g., “And therefore I think...’ / ‘so think all of us too, I trust...” (*DH*, p. 367).

⁵⁰ E.g., “And actually I think that what he says is true—the chalices were made of wood when the priests were made of gold” (*DH*, p. 63). See also pp. 147–48 (the whole conversation about the blind-mate).

⁵¹ E.g., “Her father and mother, being quite respectable and rich, were extremely embarrassed” (*DH*, p. 119)), “...I don’t know that we wouldn’t all agree to be winged” (p. 166), and “...not that sorely distressed...” (p. 395).

⁵² E.g., “that the really good people...regarded as evil” (*DH*, p. 230), “And commonly...under no law at all” (p. 381), and “by any good works but faith alone” (p. 442).

⁵³ E.g., “ergo, they are not the church” (*DH*, p. 236), “...whereof much harm grows in the country” (pp. 353–54, “those who put their trust as these Lutherans teach us in their faith alone” (p. 440), and “but will be saved no matter how they live for their faith alone” (p. 446). Amphibology (what I think of as the shooting comet, or the what-was-that?) differs from the Parthian shot, or slid-in zinger, in that it can be read more than one way. Both devices were used to make a point that More didn’t want to take the time to go into, but wanted to call to his readers’ attention.

⁵⁴ E.g., “...and too much, too, without more” (*DH*, p. 405), “That phrase ‘at all’...you more add in yourself than find in the book” (p. 406), and “never be found to be venerated more” (p. 409).

Finally, there is humor that springs simply from charity. One case in point: “He thinks himself safer in his argument than he thinks you in yours.”⁵⁵ More is out not to demolish heresy-bitten readers, but to rescue them. And the unusual wording resulting from that concern elicits smiles and chuckles.

If his integrity is the key to his humor’s success, his charity is the key to its functions.⁵⁶ In fact, all its other functions are offshoots of this primary one of doing what he praises Saint Paul for having done: literally *show* the essentialness of charity.⁵⁷ Look at the very format of the book: it is that of a dialogue between More and an unnamed friend of a friend. The reader gets to listen in as an undetectable observer, never subject to direct refutation or correction. This is already charitable of More, to put us in this safe position. But to get the vaccinal benefits of what More says, the reader also needs to see the messenger as having been dealt with fairly; and to get the curative benefits, the reader has to be able to identify with him, peacefully. This peaceful identification would not be possible if More made him a straw man, talked down to him, or gave himself all the funny lines.

The messenger gets many of them. He, in fact, gets over half of the merry tales. For him, they are usually a way to avoid revealing his true mind, a way of claiming some support, or a way to make himself liked and respected by the famously funny More. For More, they are mainly ways to give the messenger (and, through him, the reader) a break and to challenge, refute, or correct tactfully.⁵⁸ Another notable difference between the two speakers is that in telling a wild but purportedly true story, More does give a source, whereas the messenger does not—though he tries to sound as if he does.⁵⁹ But something else is also going on: More meets the messenger and the reader on a lower level of reality, quite honestly and naturally, to gain their willingness to go along with him to a higher level.

Take, for instance, the *Sic luceat* story and what follows it.⁶⁰ The messenger tells the story, which has to do with a disgraced member of the clergy, and then More says it is regrettable “that we take such a wretched pleasure in the hearing of their sins, and in the sight of their shame.” He does not say the story is not funny. He knows and acknowledges that it is. As author, he has had it told in such a way that it is hilarious, and as interlocutor, he is implicitly admitting that he does take

⁵⁵ *DH*, p. 88.

⁵⁶ His charity is, of course, also a reason for his humor’s success. We wouldn’t find his humor nearly as funny if he did come at us going for the jugular, either directly or in what he says to the messenger.

⁵⁷ See *DH*, pp. 436–37.

⁵⁸ Not just heretical notions, but also abuses perpetrated by nonheretics: see *DH*, pp. 261–63.

I disagree with Gordon’s allegation of “a tendency, found in all the tales, to lead away from the point at issue” (“Argument of Comedy” . . . , p. 30), and especially with these assertions regarding the account of the Hunne inquest: “In none of the [three merry] tales from the court proceedings does the author offer any concrete proof that Hunne did commit suicide; he only derides certain idle, vacuous suggestions that the man did not. Besides luring the reader away from a sober consideration of the facts, these tales tend to make a trifling matter of the whole mystery. The stories, thereby, divert the audience not only from the point of contention but also from the importance of this very grave matter as well” (p. 28). In the first place, More (both here and elsewhere) seems to me not to be trying to lead away from the point at issue, but to be challenging the prevalent assumptions of what that point is or should be. Secondly, More could not offer any concrete proof that Hunne committed suicide, because, as he himself acknowledges, there wasn’t any (see, on p. 373, his statement that God “knows the truth about everything”). But he does give (also on p. 373) his serious reasons for thinking it “much more likely” that Hunne killed himself than that the chancellor of the diocese murdered him. And in his statement of belief that the jurors’ verdict of “not guilty” was correct, this man who would not commit perjury to save his life does go so far as to say “so help me God.”

⁵⁹ See, e.g., *DH*, p. 110 (“I remember . . .”) and p. 111 (“I now recall . . .”); see also p. 362 (“But this that I shall now tell you . . .”) and p. 363 (“so well do I know it . . .”). It is also noteworthy that More often, and the messenger never, forthrightly makes up a what-if scenario (see, e.g., pp. 87, 104, 107, 117, 251, and 343).

⁶⁰ See *DH*, pp. 340–42.

pleasure in certain features of it and similar stories.⁶¹ And by so doing, he increases our openness to other realities.

By the reference to Peter's "crowings," More *shows* us that a model Catholic does not worship saints, or make that point in a heavy-handed way when a pleasant way would be at least as effective.⁶² He knows that he can argue with impeccable logic till kingdom come, but if he does it without love he will gain nothing. In other passages, by laughing at himself, he shows by example the importance of humility;⁶³ and this, too, is for the charitable purpose of being the best leader of souls he can possibly be.

Never does he lose sight of his objective of saving his readers—out of strong and tender love for God and for them—from the lethal poison of heresy. He has Saint Paul's drive to become "all things to all, to save at least some" (1 Cor 9:22). That is what ultimately accounts for his choosing and managing to be so funny in such a serious book.

Appendix:

More, Priesthood, Humor, and Heresy

Thomas More's decision to embrace the married state rather than the priesthood is nearly twenty-five years old when he writes the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, and the pain of it is still palpable. He can be derisive when talking about other ways in which Luther and company insult God (see *DH*, pp. 72–73, 176–77, 234–37, 427–28, and 455–56), but on the subject of their trashing of the priestly vow of celibacy he sounds bitterly hostile and at times even a little shrill (see pp. 194, 347, 394, 416, 418, 426–27, 429, 481–82, and 490). We can gauge from that change of tone how truly and intensely he loved God: enough to have caused him (a) to deeply want priesthood, (b) to renounce that desire, and (c) to be left with a raw nerve. He had loved and respected God too much to take a vow he was not sure he could keep. That Luther could take it and so blithely break it, and encourage other priests to break it, was something More was incapable of discussing dispassionately. The intense loathing he shows here is not a deviation or lapse from the love he normally shows, but rather the flip side of that same coin, of wholehearted and passionate love for God.

Some do take a different view. Walter M. Gordon, for example, in "The Argument of Comedy" (*Renaissance...*, pp. 24–25), claims that "whatever effect mockery has, it can always be counted on to be divisive," although the comic spirit evinced in the merry tales "adheres to the author's belief in and hope for a reunited Christendom in a way that the aggressive satire does not":

The comedy of belligerence singles out, isolates, and divorces its object from the rest of humanity; the comedy of congeniality assimilates the individuals who are the object of its humour into the human family since it understands folly as part of man's fallen condition. The scoffing jest, because of its divisiveness resists baptism, but the laughter which implies the awareness and acceptance of fallen humanity spontaneously contributes to mankind's communion by reconciling the individual to both the beam in his own eye and the mote in his brother's.... The author's empathy with the characters dedicated to folly who parade through the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* recalls the mind and heart of the pilgrim Geoffrey as he sat at the Tabard observing the people who were to be his companions on the

⁶¹ Including even the humorous application of Scripture verses, although he does not directly engage in it. See also *DH*, p. 112; and Anne Lake Prescott, "The Ambivalent Heart: Thomas More's Merry Tales," *Criticism* 45, no. 4 (Fall 2003): 421.

⁶² See *DH*, p. 325; and note 11 above. (There is also the line implying that there have never been priests who were "made of gold": see note 50 above.) More will, however, shoot it straight when no other way will work. See, e.g., p. 199 ("...whereas God would have the Church be your judge...") and p. 394 ("as I see it, it is necessary to tell how wicked [Luther] is").

⁶³ See, e.g., *DH*, p. 42 ("Although I saw..."), p. 92 ("But you are in the habit..."), p. 203 ("Oh, ...that I had forgotten again"), and p. 315 ("our brilliant scenario").

road to Canterbury. We find in this work of More's something of the Chaucerian power to bring together a heterogeneous group of people who, despite their outlandish conduct, are never definitively banished from either the author's or the reader's sympathy. (See *Renaissance and Reformation* 4 [1980], 24–25.)

Probably many share that view; but I believe it is, in the first place, anachronistic. No one in More's day was capable of seeing as mere "folly" or "outlandish conduct," or as a miniscule speck in the eye of a brother, any of Luther's aberrant practices or teachings. Such language is reflective of a culture in which they are regarded as mere alternate lifestyles and opinions, whereas everyone in More's England saw them as being of earthshaking consequence.

Furthermore, there has continued into our own day the traditional view that, as Jon E. Roeckelin puts it, "[one] feature of humor is its 'social corrective' aspect and its value in maintaining group standards, norms, and mores" (*The Psychology of Humor* [London: Greenwood Press, 2002], pp. 182–83). Roeckelin also includes (on p. 58) this quote, dated 1962, from G. Highet: "The purpose of satire is, through laughter and invective, to cure folly and punish evil." More was not wrong in thinking that his use of mockery could have such salutary effects; it did in the instance of *The Supplication of Souls*, which he wrote less than a year after the *Dialogue*. About a year after *Supplication* was published, Simon Fish, the target of the mockery in it, died, reconciled to the Church.

More cannot reasonably be expected to have seen invective as necessarily divisive, or dividedness as something to be avoided at all costs, since his Lord, who was constantly out to save people (see Jn 4:4–42, 8:2–11, and 18:33–37), took no such view (see Lk 11:37–54 and 12:49–53, and Mt 23:13–37). But the decision to use invective was not one he made lightly. Well aware that his readers might "think that I am being too harsh in calling [Luther] by such odious names," he gives this response: "I neither do it nor would want to were it not that the matter itself does by reason require it. As I see it, it is necessary to tell how wicked he is, because the worse the man is, the more mad it is for sensible people to give his false fables a hearing against God's undoubtable truth..." (*DH*, p. 394).

For an in-depth discussion of the Chaucer connection, see Alistair Fox, "Thomas More's *Dialogue* and the *Book of the Tales of Caunterbury*: 'Good Mother Wit' and Creative Imitation," in *Familiar Colloquy: Essays Presented to Arthur Edward Barker* (Ottawa: Oberon Press, 1978).