

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

21. "Geese and Glosses"

[From *A Dialogue concerning Heresies* ; Works, p. 169a]

"Methinketh," quoth he, "the text is good enough and plain enough, needing no gloss if it be well considered and every part compared with others."

"Hard it were," quoth I, "to find anything so plain that it should need no gloss at all."

"In faith," quoth he, "they make a gloss to some texts that be as plain as it is that twice two make four."

"Why," quoth I, "needeth that no gloss at all?"

"I trow so," quoth he. "Or else the devil is on it."

"I wis," quoth I, "and yet though ye would believe one that would tell you that twice two ganders made always four geese, yet ye would be advised ere ye believed him that would tell you that twice two geese made always four ganders. For therein might ye be deceived. And him would ye not believe at all, that would tell you that twice two geese would always make four horses."

"Tut," quoth he, "this is a merry matter. They must all the twice twain always of one kind. But geese and horses be of divers."

"Well," quoth I, "then every man that is neither goose nor horse seeth well that there is one gloss yet."

"But now," quoth I, "the geese and the ganders be both of one kind and yet twice two geese make not always four ganders."

"A sweet matter," quoth he, "ye wot what I mean well enough."

"I think I do," quoth I, "but I think if ye bring it forth it will make another gloss to your text as plain as your text is, and ye will in all holy scripture have no gloss at all. And yet will ye have collation made of one text with another and shew how they may be agreed together, as though all that were no gloss."

22. "The Tale of the Lion, the Boar, and the Fox"

[From *The History of Richard the Third* ; Works, pp. 70b-71a]

[Cardinal Morton] "Howbeit if the secret judgment of God have otherwise provided? I purpose not to spurn against a prick, nor labor to set up that [which] God pulleth down. And as for the late Protector and now King '—."

And even there he left, saying that he had already meddled too much with the world and would from that day meddle with his book and his beads, and no farther.

Then longed the Duke 'sore to hear what he would have said, because he ended with "the King," and there so suddenly stopped and exhorted him so familiarly between them twain to be bold to say whatsoever he thought, whereof he faithfully promised there should never come hurt and peradventure more good than he would ween, and that himself intended to use his faithful secret advice and counsel which he said was the only cause for which he procured of the King to have him in his custody where he might reckon himself at home, and else had all been put in the hands of them with whom he should not have found the like favor. The Bishop right humbly thanked him and said, "In good faith, my Lord, I love not much to talk much of princes, as things not all out of peril, though the word be without fault for as much as it shall not be taken as the party meant it but as it pleaseth the prince to construe it. And ever I think on Aesop's tale that when the Lion had proclaimed that on pain of death there should none horned beast abide in that wood, one, that had in his forehead a bunch of flesh, fled away at great pace. The Fox that saw him run so hasty asked him whither he made all that haste. And he [i.e., the Boar] answered, 'In faith, I neither wot nor reck, so I were once hence because of this proclamation made of horned beasts.' 'What folly,' quoth the Fox, 'thou mayest abide well enough. The Lion meant not by thee, for it is none horn that is in thine head.' 'No, marry,' quoth he, 'that wot I well enough. But what and 'he call it an horn, where am I then?!"

The Duke laughed merrily at the tale and said, "My Lord, I warrant you, neither the Lion nor the Boar shall pick any matter at anything here spoken, for it shall never come near their ear."

NOTES

(1) **Cardinal John Morton** (1420?-1500) was involved in the civil wars of the Yorkists and Lancastrians, favoring first one side then the other. Under Edward IV he was elected Bishop of Ely, only to be arrested and imprisoned by Richard III. He escaped, however, and fled to Flanders. After Richard's fall, he returned to England and rose rapidly to become privy councillor, Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Chancellor and Cardinal (1493)—a roster of titles matched only by that of the inexhaustible Thomas Wolsey. In this passage quoted from the English version of More's *Richard III*, Cardinal Morton, who had been kept under house arrest in the custody of the Duke of Buckingham, had begun, carefully and through a screen of fictitious fables, to sound out the Duke in a scheme by which Richard would be overthrown. The Duke was taken in. (See No. 36, n. 2) More describes his former patron and employer as "a man of great natural wit, very well learned, and honorable in behavior, lacking no wise ways to win favor" (*Works* , p. 70).

23. "Aesop's Ape and Crow: an Analogy"

[From *The Apology of Sir Thomas More Knight* ; Works, p. 845a]

So well stand I not (I thank God), good reader, in mine own conceit and thereby so much in mine own light ; but that I can somewhat with equal judgment and an even eye behold and consider both myself and mine own. Nor I use not to follow the condition of Aesop's ape that thought her own babes so beauteous and so far passing in all goodly features and favors, nor the crow that accounted her own birds the fairest of all the fowls that flew. But like as some (I see well) there are [those] that can 'somewhat less than I, that yet for all that put out their works in writing. So am I not so blind upon the other side but that I very well perceive very many so far in wit and erudition above me that in such matter as I have anything written, if other men as many would have taken it in hand as could have done it better, it might much better have become me to let the matter alone than by writing to presume anything to meddle therewith.

No. 24. "Jupiter and the Snail"

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* ; Works, p. 1250a-b]

[Anthony] "Some are there I say also that are loath to die for lack of wit which, albeit that they believe the world that is to come, and hope also to come thither, yet they love so much the wealth of this world and such things as delight them therein that they would fain keep them as long as ever they might, even with tooth and nail. And when they may be suffered in no wise to keep it no longer, but that Death taketh them therefrom, then if it may be no better, they will agree to be (as soon as they be hence) hanced ' up in heaven and be with God by and by. These folk are as very nidiot ' fools, as he that had kept from his childhood a bag full of cherry-stones and cast such a fantasy thereto that he would not go from it for a bigger bag filled full of gold.

"These folk fare, Cousin, as Aesop telleth in a fable, that the snail did. For when Jupiter (whom the poets feign for the great god) invited all the poor worms of the earth unto a great solemn feast, that it pleased him—I have forgotten upon what occasion—upon a time to prepare for them, the snail kept her [self] at home and would not come thereat. And when Jupiter asked her after wherefore she came not at his feast where he said she should have been welcome and have faren well and should have seen a goodly palace and been delighted with many goodly pleasures, she answered him that she loved no place so well as her own house. With which answer Jupiter waxed so angry that he said, sith she loved her house so well she should never after go from home but should always after bear her house upon her back wheresoever she went. And so hath she done ever since, as they say, and at the leastwise I wot well she doth so now and hath done as long time as I can remember."

[Vincent] "Forsooth, Uncle, I would ween the tale were not all feigned. For I think verily that so much of your tale is true."

[Anthony] "Aesop meant by that feigned fable to touch the folly of such folk as so set their fantasy upon some small simple pleasure that they cannot find in their heart to forbear ' it neither for the pleasure of a better man nor for the gaining of a better thing. By which their fond froward

fashion "they sometimes fall in great indignation and take thereby no little harm."

25. "The Old Hart that fled from a little Bitch"

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* : Works, pp. 1253b-1254a]

But yet I remember the fable that Aesop telleth of a great old hart that had fled from a little bitch which had made suit after him and chafed " him so long that she had lost him and, as he hoped, more than half given him over. By occasion whereof, having then sometime to talk, and meeting with another of his fellows, he fell in deliberation with him what were best for him to do: whether to run on still and fly farther from her or turn again and fight with her. Whereunto the other hart advised him to flee no farther, lest the bitch might happen to find him again at such time as he should with the labor of further fleeing be fallen out of breath and thereby all out of strength too; and so should he be killed lying where he could not stir him. Whereas if he would turn and fight he were in no peril at all. For the man with whom she hunteth is more than a mile behind her, and she is but a little body scant half so much as thou, and thy horns may thrust her through before she can touch thy flesh by more than ten times her tooth length. "By my troth," quoth the other hart, "I like your counsel well and methinketh that the thing is even soothly " such as you say. But I fear me when I hear once that urchin-bitch " bark I shall fall to my feet and forget all together. But yet an you will go back with me, then methink we shall be strong enough against that one bitch between us both."

Whereunto the other hart agreed; and so they both appointed them " thereon. But even as they were about to busk them " forward to it, the bitch had found the foot " again, and on she came girning " toward the place. Whom as soon as the harts heard, they two go both twain apace.

And in good faith, Uncle, even so I fear it would fare by myself and many others too, which, though we think it reason that you say and in our minds agree that we should do as ye say (yea, and do peradventure think also that we would indeed do as ye say), yet as soon as we should once hear those hell-hounds " , these Turks " , come yalping and bawling " upon us, our hearts should soon fall as clean from us as those other harts flee from the hounds.

26. "The Fond Tale of Mother Maud: The Confessions of an Ass and a Wolf"

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* ; Works, pp. 1183a-1185b]

[Anthony]: "My mother had (when I was a little boy) a good old woman that took heed to " her children. They called her Mother Maud. I trow you have heard of her."

[Vincent]: "Yes, yes, very much."

[Anthony]: "She was wont when she sat by the fire with us to tell us that were children many childish tales. But as Pliny saith that there is no book lightly " so bad that some good thing a man may pick out thereof, so think I there is almost no tale so foolish but that yet in one matter or

other to some purpose it may hap to serve. For I remember me that among others of her fond ²³ tales she told us once that the Ass and the Wolf came upon a time to confession to the Fox.

The poor Ass came to shrift ²⁴ in the Shrovetide ²⁵ a day or two before Ash Wednesday, But the Wolf would not come to confession till he saw first Palm Sunday past, and then foded ²⁶ yet forth farther until Good Friday. The Fox asked the Ass, before he began "Benedicte" ²⁷, whereof he came to confession so soon, before Lent begin. The poor beast answered him again, for fear of deadly sin, if he should lose his part of any of those prayers that the priest in the cleansing days ²⁸ pray for them that are then confessed already. Then in his shrift he had a marvelous grudge ²⁹ in his inward conscience that he had one day given his master a cause of anger, in that with his rude roaring before his master arose, he had awakened him out of his sleep and bereft him of his rest. The Fox, for that fault (like a good discreet confessor) charged him to do so no more but lie still and sleep like a good son himself till his master were up and ready to go to work; and so should he be sure that he should not wake him no more.

"To tell you all the poor Ass's confession, it were a long work. For everything that he did was deadly sin with him, the poor soul was so scrupulous. But his wise wily confessor accounted them for trifles, as they were, and swore after unto the Badger that he was so weary to sit so long and hear him that, saving for the manner's sake, he had liefer have sitten all that while at breakfast with a good fat goose.

"But when it came to the penance giving, the Fox found that the most weighty sin in all his shrift was gluttony, and therefore he discreetly gave him in penance that he should never for greediness of his meat do any other beast any harm or hindrance; and then eat his meat and study for no more.

"Now (as good Mother Maud told us), when the Wolf came to Father Reynard--that was, she said, the Fox's name—to confession upon Good Friday, his confessor shook his great pair of beads upon him, almost as big as bowls, and asked him wherefore he came so late:

'Forsooth, Father Reynard,' quoth he, ' I must needs tell you the truth [why] I come (you wot well) therefore. I durst come no sooner for fear lest you would for any gluttony have given me in penance to fast some part of this Lent.'

'Nay, nay,' quoth the Father, 'for I am not so unreasonable. For I fast none of it myself. For I may say to thee, son, between us twain here in confession, it is no commandment of God this fasting, but an invention of man. The priests make folk fast and put them to pain about the moonshine in the water ³⁰ and do but make folk fools. But they shall make me no such fool, I warrant thee, son. For I eat flesh all this Lent myself, aye. Howbeit indeed because I will not be occasion of slander, I therefore eat it secretly in my chamber, out of sight of all such foolish brethren [who] as for their weak scrupulous conscience would wax offended with all. And so would I counsel you to do.'

'Forsooth, Father Fox,' quoth the Wolf, 'and so (I thank God) I do as near as I can. For when I go to my meat I take none other company with me but such sure brethren as are of mine own nature, whose consciences are not weak, I warrant you, but their stomachs are as strong as mine.'

'Well, then, no force,' ³³ quoth Father Fox.

"But when he heard after, by his confession that he was so great a ravener that he devoured and spent sometime so much victual at one meal as the price thereof would well find some poor man with his wife and his children almost all the week, then he prudently reprov'd that point in him and preach'd him a process of his own temperance which never used (as he said) to pass upon himself the value of sixpence at a meal—no, nor yet so much neither:

'For when I bring home a goose,' quoth he, 'not out of the poulter's shop (where folk find them out of the feathers ready plucked, and see which is the fattest, and yet for sixpence buy and choose the best) but out of the housewife's house at the first hand--which may somewhat better cheap afoorth ³⁴ then (you wot well) than the poulter may—nor yet cannot be suffered to see them plucked, and stand and choose them by day, but am fain by night to take at adventure; and when I come home am fain to do the labor to pluck her myself, too. Yet for all this, though it be but lean and I ween not well worth a groat, serveth it me sometimes (for all that) both dinner and supper, too. And therefore, as for that you live of ravin ³⁵, therein can I find no fault: you have used it so long that I think you can do none other. And therefore were it folly to forbid it you, and (to say the truth) against good conscience, too. For live you must, I wot well; and other craft can you none. And therefore (as reason is) must you live by that. But yet, you wot well, too much is too much, and measure is a merry mean, ³⁶ which I perceive by your shrift you have never used to keep. And therefore surely this shall be your penance: that you shall all this year never pass upon yourself the price of sixpence at a meal, as near as your conscience can guess the price.'

"Their shrift have I shewed you, as Mother Maud shewed it us. But now serveth for our matter the conscience of them both in the true performing of their penance.

"The poor Ass after his shrift, when he waxed anhungered, saw a sow lie with her pigs, well lapped ³⁷ in new straw. And near he drew and thought to have eaten of the straw. But anon his scrupulous conscience began therein to grudge ³⁸ him. For while his penance was that for greediness of his meat he should do none other body none harm, he thought he might not eat one straw there, lest for lack of that straw some of those pigs might hap to die for cold. So held he still his hunger till one brought him meat. But when he should fall thereto, then fell he yet in a far further ³⁹ scruple. For then it came in his mind that he should yet break his penance if he should eat any of that either, sith he was commanded by his ghostly ⁴⁰ father that he should not for his own meat hinder ⁴¹ any other beast. For he thought that if he eat not that meat some other beast might hap to have it; and so should he by the eating of it peradventure hinder another. And thus stood he still fasting, till, when he told the cause, his ghostly father came and informed him better. And then he cast off that scruple and fell mannerly ⁴² to his meat, and was a right honest ass many a fair day after!

"The Wolf now coming from shrift, clean soiled ⁴³ from his sins, went about to do as a shrewd wife once told her husband that she would do when she came from shrift: 'Be merry, man,' quoth she now, 'for this day, I thank God, was I well-shriven; and I purpose now therefore to leave off all mine old shrewness and begin even afresh.'"

[Vincent] "Ah, well, Uncle, can you report her so? That word heard I her speak but she said it in sport to make her good man laugh."

[Anthony] "Indeed it seemed she spake it half in sport, for that she said she would cast away all her old shrewness, therein I trow she sported. But in that she said she would begin it all afresh, her husband found *that* good earnest."

[Vincent] "Well, I shall shew her what you say, I warrant you."

[Anthony] "Then will you make me make my word good. But whatsoever she did, at the leastwise so fared now this Wolf (which had cast out in confession all his old ravin), and the hunger pricked him forward [so] that (as the shrewd wife said) he should begin all afresh. But yet the prick of conscience withdrew and held him back because he would not for breaking of his penance take any prey for his mealtide that should pass the price of sixpence. It happened him then, as he walked prowling for his gear ^{as} about, he came where a man had in few days before cast off two old lean and lame horses, so sick that no flesh was there left upon them. And the one, when the Wolf came by, could scant stand on his legs and other already dead, and his skin ripped off and carried away. And as he looked upon them suddenly he was [at] first about to feed upon them and whet his teeth on their bones. But as he looked aside he spied a fair cow in a close, walking with her young calf by her side. And as soon as he saw them his conscience began to grudge him against both those two horses. And then he sighed and said unto himself:

'Alas, wicked wretch that I am, I had almost broken my penance ere I was aware. For yonder dead horse, because I never saw no dead horse sold in the market (and I should even die therefore, by the way that my sinful soul shall, too!), I cannot devise what price I should set upon him. But in my conscience I set him far above sixpence, and therefore I dare not meddle with him. Now, then, is yonder quick ^{as} horse of likelihood worth a great deal of money, for horse be dear in this country, specially such soft ^{as} amblers. For I see by his pace he trotteth not nor can scant shift a foot ^{as}, and therefore I may not meddle with him, for he very far passeth my sixpence.

'But kine this country here hath enough; but money have they very little. And therefore considering the plenty of the kine and the scarcity of the money, as for yonder peevish ^{as} cow seemeth unto me, in my conscience, worth not past a groat—and she be worth so much. Now then, as for her calf—[it] is not as she by half. And therefore while the cow is in my conscience worth but four pence, my conscience cannot serve me (for sin of my soul!) to praise her calf above twopence: and so pass they not sixpence between them both. And therefore them twain may I well eat at this one meal and break not my penance at all.'

"And so thereupon he did, without any scruple of conscience. If such beasts could speak now (as Mother Maud said they could then) some of them would, I ween, tell a tale almost as wise as this wherein, save for the minishing ^{as} of old Mother Maud's tale, else would a shorter process have served. But yet as peevish ^{as} as the parable is, in this it serveth for our purpose that the night's fear of a conscience somewhat scrupulous (though it be painful and troublous to him that hath it, like as this poor Ass had here) is less harm yet than a conscience over-large, or such as for his own

fantasy the man list to frame ⁴⁹ himself, now drawing it narrow, now stretching it in breadth after the manner of a cheverel ⁵⁰ point, to serve on every side for his own commodity ⁵¹ as did here the wily Wolf."

NOTES

(1) *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the epithet "**Mother Maud**" "hag" or "beldam (a hideous woman) and cites More's use of this expression in the earlier work, *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (1532) as its first recorded use: "So I see well Tyndale meaneth for his mother some old Mother Maud" (*Works*, p. 685). In this selection from *Comfort against Tribulation*, Anthony (who it is believed may well represent More's thoughts in the dialogue with Vincent) refers to a family nanny and intends no disparagement of her character or looks, and he specifically notes that she was a story-teller. It would seem that More is speaking of a Mother Maud in the sense of "any older woman who tells foolish tales," not as some hideous old hag; nor can More be here alluding to some actual domestic in his parents' household, since he uses the term to scoff at Tyndale.

(2) **Pliny the Younger** records that his uncle, **Pliny the Elder**, "made extracts of everything he read, and always said that there was no book so bad that some good could not be got out of it" (trans., B. Radice, p. 177).

(3) In the **Tale of Mother Maud** More conflates elements from medieval adaptations of the traditional Aesopic fables. The two main elements in More's unique creation derive chiefly from medieval fables of the wolf *and* the fox. In William Caxton's *Fables of Esop* (1483, Book 4, f.86), there is a brief anecdote about a wolf who made a fart while getting out of bed one morning; in *The Fables of Esope in Englysshe* (ed. of ca. 1550, Book 5, f.122f) the tale is somewhat embellished: the wolf who made a fart was required to undergo penance from Jupiter (not, as in More, from Father Reynard), who in frustrated fury threw his axe at the wolf. More enlarges and Christianizes the penance motif considerably, but omits any reference to farting--though in his time such vulgarity was much appreciated: Robert Copland boasts that his translation from the French of *Gyl of Braintfords Testament* (ca. 1560) contained "xxvi farts and a half," a comment attached to the book's colophon! Sir Thomas More adds to the wolf-confessional motif important elements from the very popular cycle of fables about Reynard the Fox, tales first collected in the twelfth century--a lengthy thirteenth century version was ultimately translated and printed by Caxton as the *Historye of reynart the foxe* (1481). It is an amusing satire on monks and nuns, cast in the form of a dialogue, as in More's *Comfort against Tribulation*, between an Uncle and his Nephew. In Caxton's version, Reynard the Fox confesses before the Lion (the King); is shriven and sent to Rome on a pilgrimage, making confession twice en route. Ultimately however he is hanged, drawn and quartered--a tragic end which More himself must have anticipated while in prison for treasonable refusal to sign the king's Oath of Allegiance to the Act of Succession. (In the seventeenth-century mammoth collection by L'Estrange [p. 439], the Wolf resolves to keep an extended twelve month Lent, but on finding a hog in a puddle, and confusing the word "*porcus*" for "*pisces*," he ate the pig, "unwittingly" breaking his vow not to eat anything but fish.)

(4) **scarcity of the money** : Inflation during the sixteenth century was generally two or three

percent annually but costs rose rapidly with rising rents and demand increased for foodstuffs, raw materials, etc. Some rents rose exorbitantly, however: "What was let for 20-40 pounds yearly, now [about 1550] is let for 50 or 100 pounds," says Bishop Latimer (*Sermons* , p. 84), who laments publicly the number of unpaid laborers, some of whom have not been paid for three or four months; and he lashes out at the speculators in the corn market who buy up the grain, hold it, then resell it at high profit (*ibid* ., p. 242). Simon Fish had blamed the wealthy clergy for the misery of the poor and had suggested dissolution of church property to alleviate their misery. Henry VIII himself had been concerned apparently only that beggars and vagabonds be swiftly dealt with. The statute of 22 Hen. VIII., c.12 (*Statutes* , III, pp. 328-332) spells out in drastic detail the punishments for petty crime: vagabonds begging out of their limits shall be stocked; all able-bodied men who beg shall be whipped and returned to their home town. Scholars, sailors and fortune-tellers (curiously lumped together in one category), if found guilty of begging shall be whipped; fortune-tellers, palm readers and the like, if found guilty the second time shall be scourged for two days, pilloried for over twenty-four hours and have one ear cut off; on the third time the same punishment shall be followed by loss of the other ear.

¹ *He* : i.e., the Messenger in the *Dialogue*

² I.e., King Richard III

³ I.e., Duke of Buckingham

⁴ If

⁵ *Stand I...in mine own light*: (proverbial) i.e., I do not obstinately hold my own opinion to such extent that it injures my own interest

⁶ Have knowledge

⁷ Raised

⁸ Idiot

⁹ Avoid

¹⁰ *Fond...fashion*: foolish stubborn way

¹¹ Angered

¹² Truly

¹³ Roguish little cur

¹⁴ *Appointed them* : agreed together

¹⁵ *Busk them* : set out together

¹⁶ I.e., scent

¹⁷ Snarling, baying

¹⁸ Fiends

¹⁹ I.e., Protestants

²⁰ *Yalping and bawling* : (like dogs or soldiers), shouting (or barking) hoarsely, and bellowing

²¹ *Heed to*: good care of

²² Perhaps

²³ Foolish

²⁴ Confession

²⁵ I.e., Sunday before Lent

²⁶ Fobbed off (with excuses)

²⁷ I.e., a form of greeting with a blessing

²⁸ Cleansing days: I.e., Ash Wednesday and the three days following

²⁹ Scruple, misgiving

³⁰ *Put...water* : I.e., make them do foolish, useless things

³¹ No Matter

³² *Cheap aforth*: bargain for elsewhere

³³ *Of ravin* : i.e., by devouring prey

³⁴ *Measure...mean* : i.e., the mean between extremes is best

³⁵ Comfortably nestled

³⁶ Trouble, vex

³⁷ *Far further* : greater

³⁸ Spiritual, i.e., clerical

³⁹ Injure, hurt

⁴⁰ "Properly", "politely"

⁴¹ Absolved (from sin)

⁴² Food

⁴³ Living

⁴⁴ Gentle, slow

⁴⁵ *Shift a foot*: i.e., by raising both legs on the same side together

⁴⁶ Wretched

⁴⁷ Shortening

⁴⁸ Foolish

⁴⁹ Suit

⁵⁰ Kid-leather, i.e., flexible

⁵¹ Advantage