

Thomas More Reader: Clerical Satire and Apocrypha: Part Two

46. "Tyndale and Luther: Goodly Golden Eagles"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, pp. 684a-b]

But yet lest men should take him for a fool if he should set forth such a point so far unlikely and therefore so far uncredible, without any proof at all, he proveth it at the leastwise by the example of a very goodly bird and king of all fowls, the pleasant splayed eagle. For sith that such a bird can spy his prey untaught, which he could never do but by the secret instinct of his excellent nature, so far exceeding all others: It must needs follow, pardie, that Tyndale and Luther likewise, and Huskyn and Zwingli and such other "excellent" heretics, being in God's favor as far above all the Catholic Church as an eagle, the rich royal king of all birds is above a poor penny chicken, must needs, I say, without any learning of many men, be taught to know the true scripture, being their prey to spoil and kill, and devour it as they list, even by the especial inspiration of God.

By now ye see well, good readers, by this reason that Saint Austin in respect of these noble eagles that spy this prey without the means of the church, was but a silly poor chicken. For he confesseth plainly against such high eagle heretics that himself had not known nor believed the gospel, but by the Catholic Church. Howbeit, it is no great marvel, sith God is not so familiar with such simple chickens as with his gay glorious eagles.

But one thing is there that I cannot cease to marvel of, sith God inspireth Tyndale and such other eagles, and thereby maketh them spy this prey themselves: how could it hap that the goodly, golden old eagle, Martin Luther himself, in whose goodly golden nest this young eagle bird was hatched, lacked that inspiration? For he alloweth Saint Austin's saying and denieth not but that himself spied and perceived this prey of the true scripture of God, by being shewed it by the Catholic Church. But if Tyndale say that, Luther therein lieth, and that himself with his feeling faith feel more in Luther's faith concerning his belief of the scripture than Luther doth himself. Howbeit, I wis when our young eagle, Tyndale, learned to spy this prey first he was not yet full-feathered, but scantly come out of the shell, nor so high-flickered in the air above all our heads to learn it of his father the old eagle heretic, but was content to come down here and walk on the ground among other poor fowls, the poor chickens of his mother, this known Catholic Church, of whom when he hath all said, he learned to know this prey.

NOTES

(1) **William Tyndale** left London for Hamburg about May 1524 in order to prepare for the press his translation of the *New Testament*. His contemporaries say he went on to Wittenberg to see Luther, and More certainly assumed he had, for he says "at the time of his translation of the *New Testament* Tyndale was with Luther at Wittenberg" (*Works*, p. 211), but Tyndale himself denied having met Luther. (See Demaus, pp. 114ff).

(2) **Huskyn and Zwingli** : John Huskyn was one of several English forms of the name of the German Reformer, Johann Hussgen (1482-1531), who also latinized his name to Johannes Oecolampadius. He studied theology at Heidelberg and then became a cathedral preacher at Basle, Switzerland. One of his first sermons was a protest against the introduction of humorous stories into Easter sermons, a practice which bears some relevance to More's insertion of merry tales into serious polemical and theological treatises. In January 1528 Huskyn and Zwingli took part in a disputation at Berne which led to the adoption of the new Protestant faith in that canton. Huskyn had considerable influence on the English reformer, John Frith, in both literary and theological matters; and insofar as he was the English progenitor of the doctrine of the Eucharist adopted by Thomas Cranmer, the Church of England was thus strongly influenced by him. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531), a Swiss Protestant Reformer, became the people's priest at the Great Minster of Zurich, and in 1519 began a series of discourses on the *New Testament* . His ministry is now considered the true beginning of the Reformation in Switzerland. After 1525 he differed with Luther on various theological points of view and their differences led to a split in the whole Protestant movement. Zwingli had a very strong influence on English Protestants. The Zwinglian treatise on the sacrament of the altar, *The Souper of the Lords* , presumed to be written by George Joye, prompted More to respond with *The Answer to the first part of the Poisoned book, which a nameless Heretic hath named the Supper of the Lord* (1534). George Joye, like Zwingli, also wrote a defence of the marriage of priests (1539), and he translated Zwingli's *Christinae Fidei Expositio* in 1543. John Frith, thoroughly imbued with Zwinglian doctrines as well as those of Huskyn, persuaded William Tyndale to give up his original Lutheran convictions. (A. Clebsch, pp. 8, 117, 127, 315; and C. Butterworth and A. G. Chester, pp. 225ff.)

(3) **Saint Austin** : i.e., Saint Augustine (d. 430), born of Roman parents, was converted to Christianity in 387 and rose rapidly in the Church, being made Bishop of Hippo in North Africa within ten years. Augustine's Sermons on the future of A Heavenly City were written down when he was an old, ailing man and were inspired, or rather motivated, by the wanton destruction of Rome by Alaric in August, 410, some 1117 years before the Duke of Bourbon's men sacked Rome in May 1527 (see above, No. 38). Sir Thomas More lectured on Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* [*On the City of God*] in a course of addresses (unfortunately not preserved) given in the Church of St. Lawrence in London, after having studied law at Lincoln's Inn and while contemplating entering a monastery. "Austin," the popular medieval contraction for "Augustine," was the name given to one of More's grandchildren.

47. "William Tyndale, Translator"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, pp. 421a-b]

And now using himself in his translation in such malicious and erroneous fashion, he complaineth that goodmen have burned his evil translated books, and will not suffer his heresies to go forward. In the end of this chapter Tyndale telleth me that I have been so long used in my figures of poetry that when I err most I do now as he supposeth by reason of a long custom believe myself that I saw most true, or else as wise people when they dance naked in a net ' believe that no man see them, even so he saith that I think mine errors so subtly couched ' that no

man can spy them. As for mine errors how subtly they be couched I cannot tell, nor what other men shall spy I cannot say. But surely if I could spy any in my writing myself, I would not fail both to confess it to God and the world, and forsake it. Now if I be by custom of poetry so blinded that I can not see mine errors but ween that my lies were true, yet if I find any that can shew them me I shall soon amend the fault. But I have one good likelihood that I do not err or lie after such fashion as Tyndale telleth me, in that if it so were, Tyndale then that pryeth thereupon so narrowly and with such eagle's eyes as he hath were very likely to spy it, namely sith I go so bare dancing naked in a net. And I am sure if he spied any such thing in me he would of his charity be so good to me as to tell me. But surely he hath spied none yet. For all that he hath hitherto poured out and called mine errors be but his own and turn upon his own top, every one. And as for my poetry, verily I can little else and yet not that neither. But it had been good for Tyndale's soul and a thousand souls besides that he had meddled but with poetry instead of holy scripture all the days of his life. For of poetry, though there should have come little good, yet could there never have come such an heap of harm to Christian people as he hath of his blind malice brought in to this realm by this untrue translating and more untrue construing of the holy scripture of God, most maliciously making the blessed word of God to serve him for an instrument to drive men to the devil.

And yet if poetry be as Tyndale calleth it, nothing but feining and lying, then is he cunning enough and can, I assure you, make as much poetry upon any part of scripture as any poet can in England upon any part of Virgil. And he useth in his writing much plain poetry wherewith he danceth naked not all in a net, but for the most part so stark naked without any net at all that there is not the breadth of a silken thread to cover his poetry, of which points of his plain open poetry I have shewed you some already, and shall anon shew you many more.

NOTES

(1) **William Tyndale's translation** (of the *New Testament*) provoked More to write his first as well as his longest treatise in the polemical struggle against the Protestant reformers. Tyndale frequently attacked More on the grounds that his arguments were often mere poetry, something amusing that was made out of whole cloth, like his long narrative, *Utopia*: "He jesteth out Hunne's death [see below, nos. 93 and 94] with his poetry wherewith he built Utopia"; and "His xi chapter is as true as his story of Utopia, and all his other poetry" (*The Whole Works of W. Tyndale, John Frith, and Doct. Barnes*, 1573, pp. 318a, 330b). Not averse to using rhetorical tropes himself, Tyndale taunts More for his alleged excessive use of *elocutio* in a metaphor that produced the astonishing travesty quoted above. Tyndale wrote: ("Howbeit M. More hath so long used his figures of poetry that (I suppose) when he erreth most he now by the reason of a long custom believeth himself that [which] he saith [is] most true. Or else (as the wise people which when they danced naked in nets [i.e., without disguises] believe that no man seeth them) even so M. More thinketh that his errors be so subtly couched that no man can espy them" (*An Answer unto Sir Thomas Mores Dialogue*, 1531, sig. A7^{R-V}). More responded with a "feat propre taunt" accusing Tyndale himself of "writing much plain poetry, wherewith he danceth naked not all in a net but for the most part so stark naked without any net at all that there is not the breadth of a silken thread to cover his poetry[!]" (*Works*, p. 421). In this bitter exchange More had the best, if not the last, barbed words: "For though Tyndale and Frith in their writing call me a "Poet," it is but of their own courtesy, undeserved on my part. For I can [i.e., am skilled in] neither so much

poetry nor so much rhetoric neither, as to find good names for evil things, but even as the Macedonians could not call a traitor but a traitor, so can I not call a fool but a fool, nor an heretic but an heretic" (*Works* , p. 864). See Louis A. Schuster's full account of "Thomas More's Polemical Career 1523-1533," a small book, in CW 8, pp. 1137-1268.

48. "Tyndale, a Schoolmaster"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, pp. 574a-b; 577a-b]

Lo, how angry Tyndale is with his true members of his elect church; and how sore he layeth their sins to their charge. And yet because we should take their faults for much the slighter, he minisheth all the matter and maketh it much the less by resembling and likening them to a good little child, as though their faults were all but childishness, and, as it were, a babe that weeneth and waxeth angry with the kite.

But sith that Tyndale now goeth about to play the master and set all the Catholic Church again to school, and would have us learn such hard lessons as we never heard of the like (as that men may commonly do mischievous deeds without any deadly sin because they do them not willingly where no body compelleth them), let him at the least wise, sith he will make us all young children, teach us our lesson as a good master teacheth his young children.

And let him not teach us our lesson in a small ragged hand, wherein a young beginner can scant perceive one letter from another, but let him teach us in a fair great letter of some text hand that is more easy to learn upon. And therefore we shall pray him to let pass over for this once his long childish example of his good child which for all the nurture of his father and his mother, and all the wisdom that he learned of them, and all his love to them and to their commandments, and all the trust in his father's promises—for which he goeth with good will to school—finding yet by the way some companions that fall to play, is ravished of his remembrance, and forgetting father and mother (and all their promises, and all their kindness, and all their laws, and all the wisdoms that he learned of them, and all the nurture that they taught him), standeth still and looketh on them, and after, falleth to work with them at some such pretty plays of likelihood as children be wont to play—as cherry-stone, maribone, buckle-pit, spurn-point, cob-nut, or quatting.

Let us leave, I say, this good child at his game till he be fet either home with his father or to school with his master, with three stripes for his tarrying and truanting by the way—which is more meet for such a child after his lusts played out, than Tyndale's tragical process of remembrance of his old profession, with temptations over his heart, and the law his right hangman, tormenting of conscience, fear of destruction, and almost desperate dread of hanging.

* * * *

This chapter dependeth upon the chapter before in which he compared his true members of his elect church unto his good child, whom his father taught nurture and wisdom, and sent him to school; and he, like a micher and a truant, played at buckle-pit by the way, and when the game was done, fell almost in despair of life for fear of hanging if his father caught him. And yet, soon

after, well and wisely recomforted himself with the remembrance of his father's old goodness, so came home again like a good little boy and heard his father's voice of forgiveness, which set his heart at rest. And then he went to supper merrily, and then the maid put on his biggin ¹² and brought him to bed; and then he cared for no more but was merry in the morning and ready to go play the boy again as he did before.

NOTES

(1) **cherry-stone...quatting** : These are various children's games popular in More's days: "cherry-stone" involved tossing cherry pits into a little hole: John Lydgate, in a presumably autobiographical passage, recalls that in his "years green" he scoffed and mowed like a wanton ape and was readier "to tell [i.e. count]cherrystone[s] " than go to church (*The Testament of John Lydgate* , ca. 1515, sig. b3); "maribone" (or "marrowbone") was probably a game played with small knuckle-bones, taken from the postern bone or a hind foot of a sheep, ox, etc.; "buckle-pit" was perhaps the game of "buckerels," which was a game used by boys in London streets in Henry VIII's time (A.B.Gomme, I, 48); "spurn-point" was probably a form of hop-scotch; "cob-nut," a game played with hazelnuts (or chestnuts) in which each of two children alternately strike a nut of his adversary, the object being to crush his opponent's nuts: a nut which has broken many of those of his adversary is called a "cob-nut" (A.B. Gomme, I, 71); "quatting" was probably a kind of hide-and-seek game. Of all these games, "maribone," if the same as hucklebones, was one of the most ancient of children's games, popular in ancient Greece and Rome, and of universal interest, being played in Japan, Russia and all of Europe.

49. "Tyndale's Sleeping 'Elect'"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer, Works* , p. 589a-b]

And yet notwithstanding that he seemeth to assign the causes of the rising of his Elects out of their sin to be by the mercy of God always waiting upon them; yet handleth he the matter so that a man may not well wit by these words of his whether he mean that when his Elect is sunken down into his trances ¹³ and fallen asleep in his lusts (as he calleth it for a season); whether he mean, I say, that mercy calleth upon him in his trance and shaketh him out of his sleep, or else let him sleep still in his lusts, and the devil rock the cradle till the baby awake by himself.

And surely he rather seemeth to say that God not awaketh him out of his lusts but letteth him sleep in his lust until his lust have left him. As though God's calling of men from gluttony were not to put them in mind and call upon them busily and inspire good thoughts of temperances while they be at their meat, but let them then alone as in a trance and a sleep, till they be so weary of eating that the grief and grinding in their bellies standing astrut ¹⁴ with stuffing call them up and awake them. And that is a good easy way, too, for then be they the more easy to entreat, to fast and forbear, but not much longer than till they was anhungered again. And as it fareth in the trances and sleeps that folk fall in by the belly, so fareth it likewise in the trances and sleeps that folk fall in by those parts that are beneath the belly. For when rage is thereof (as Tyndale saith) over-passed and that they have in their trance and their sleep played out all their luskish ¹⁵

lusts, then they awake. And then as soon as they be awake, they repent, as Tyndale saith, and come again to chastity without resistance. But evermore I would that Tyndale should remember that all this tale which he telleth us here is for his purpose of Elects a tale of very little effect. For this tale of such sleeping and awaking of Elects is nothing proper "to the Elects but a thing common both to the Elects and to the reprobates," too. And these rages and these trances and these sleeps in sinful fleshly lusts into which folk fall and out of which they wake again and repent, the thing that Tyndale telleth us here as a thing far-fet¹⁸ and sought, and searched out of the very bottom of his deep divinity: the same thing in a manner for as thus far-forth Doctor Ovid describeth us well and plainly in his pleasant poetry entitled, *The Remedy of Love*, where he declareth after Tyndale's fashion full clerkly how some wanton lovers, after their rages passed and their lusts played out, lie then waking, and have meditations of amendment and of leaving off their lecherous love, even [while] lying by their lemans' sides, and think they will come there no more, and would (with good will) that they had not come there then neither.

NOTES

(1) **Elects** : i.e., those especially elected by God for salvation (see above, No. 42, n. 2).

(2) In **Remedia Amoris** Ovid advises that "after pleasure has reached its goal and is spent," you [the man] wish you never touched a woman and think you won't: and therefore you ought to "mark well in your mind every blemish her body has, and keep your eye ever on her faults" (trans., J.H. Mozley, p. 207).

¹ *Him*: i.e., Martin Luther

² Spread

³ *Penny chicken* : i.e., one that costs merely a penny, not sixpence

⁴ Suppose

⁵ Hovering high

⁶ *Dance naked in a net* : i.e., act without a disguise (yet expect to escape notice)

⁷ Phrased

⁸ Bereft

⁹ Brought back

¹⁰ Simple pleasures

¹¹ Naughty truant

¹² Cap (worn in bed)

¹³ I.e., being half-awake (with possible pun on associated sense of "rapture,"

"ecstasy")

¹⁴ Swollen, puffed out

¹⁵ Lazy

¹⁶ Belonging only

¹⁷ I.e., those excluded from salvation

¹⁸ Fetched from afar