

Thomas More Reader: Clerical Satire and Apocrypha: Part Three

50. "A Tale of Robin Hood and William Tyndale"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, p. 697a-b]

And now, good Christian readers, by this tale Tyndale telleth us that all the credence which he gave unto the church, in taking the books of the four evangelists for the very gospels of Christ, was altogether but like Tyndale's mother's blowing upon her finger, and thereby making that pretty baby, her son, believe that the fire was hot and had burned her; and that he would have believed her no less if she had told him the same by a cup of cold water.

And that, in likewise as he believed the church that the gospels were holy scripture, so should he have believed them if they had told him that a tale of Robin Hood had been holy scripture. For sith all was but an historical faith, all must needs have been one.

Consider by the way, good reader, the difference between Saint Austin and the "goodman" Tyndale, in their credence given unto the church. Saint Austin believed the church in teaching him which was the true scripture because he perceived well the same church to be so declared by miracles and many other means to be the true church, that thereby he believed that the doctrine thereof could not be false and that therefore it could not teach a tale of Robin Hood to be the gospel of Christ.

Now Tyndale, as ye see, taketh the credence of the whole Catholic Church, the mother of everyman's Christendom, like his own mother blowing upon her fingers, and hereby making the baby believe what she list. And therefore in this point wherein Saint Austin and the "goodman" Tyndale tell you two so diverse tales, consider well with yourselves the wisdom, the learning, the manners, and the virtue of those two men, and then of them both look whom ye find best, and by mine advice even him believe best.

But now doth Tyndale (he saith) believe the truth, that not a tale of Robin Hood, but the books of the four Evangelists be the true gospel of Christ, because our Lord hath himself so taught it him and so shewed it him now, that all that he hath heard thereof before by the teaching of the Catholic Church moveth him nothing at all, for now he hath an inward proof and experience thereof, and fully and sensibly feeleth it, as he feeleth the fire hot by the burning of his finger.

51. "David and his Sling"

[From *The Answer to the First Part of the Poisoned Book* ; Works, pp. 1125b-1126b]

Here he should have rehearsed what one word I had said of God's almighty power, in which word I was too busy. ¹ Read my letter over and you shall clearly see that I say nothing else but

that God is almighty and that He therefore may do all things. And yet (as you shall hear Master Masker himself confess) I said not that God could do things that imply repugnance. But I said that some things may seem repugnant unto us, which things God seeth how to set together well enough. Be these words, good reader, over-highly spoken of God's almighty power? May not a poor unlearned man be bold to say that God is able to do so much? And yet for saying thus much, saith Master Masker, that I am too busy and have taken too great a burden upon my weak shoulders and have over-laden myself with mine own harness and weapons, and many gay words more to utter his eloquence with all. But Master Masker on other side is not himself too busy at all with God's almighty power in affirming that God hath not the power to make His own blessed body in many places at once. His mighty strong shoulders take not too much weight upon them when in stead of omnipotent he proveth God impotent; and that by such impotent arguments as you see yourselves so shamefully halt that never lame cripple that lay impotent by the walls in creeping out unto a dole halted half so sore. But then he goeth farther for the praise of young David, and saith, "You have over-laden yourself with your own harness and weapons, and young David is like to prevail against you with his sling and his stone."

As for Master Masker's young Master David, whoso look upon his first treatise and my letter together shall soon see that his sling and his stone be beaten both about his ears. And whensoever his new sling and his new stone (which is, as I now hear say, very lately come over in print) come once into my hands, I shall turn his sling into a cockstewe, and his stone into a feather, for any harm that it shall be able to do; but if it be such as willingly will put out their own eyes, to which they never need neither stone nor sling, but with a feather they may do it, and they be so mad.

But an heavy thing it is to hear of his young foolish David that hath thus with his stone of stubbornness stricken out his own brain, and with the sling of his heresies slonken himself to the devil.

NOTES

(1) **my letter** : i.e., More's *A Letter of Sir Thomas More Knight impugning the erroneous Writing of John Frith against the blessed Sacrament of the Altar* (London , 1532?). (See also Nos. 52 and 53).

(2) **his new stone** : More alludes presumably to *A boke made by John Frith Prisoner in the Tower of London answeringe unto M. Mores Lettur* , which was printed (in 1533?) under a "visor" or "mask" of a fictitious printer (one "Conrade Williams") and place ("Münster"). It was probably printed actually in Antwerp by either M. de Keyser or S. Cock (see also below, No. 88, n. 2).

(3) **cockstewe** ; This word presents a philological conundrum. The editors of *The Answer to a Poisoned Book* (CW, 11, p.198) suggest that "cockstewe" is perhaps a misprint for "cockstele," a stick to throw at a cock at Shrovetide (see OED, "Cock," sb. 1, 23).

52. "Hidden Faces"

[From *The Answer to the First Part of the Poisoned Book* ; Works, p. 1039a-b]

But in the treating of this matter with him I shall lack somewhat of the commodity ^s that the man hath in disputing with me. For he hath a great pleasure oftimes, now in one manner, now in another, now to talk of me and now to speak to me by name with "thus, saith More" and "lo, Master More," and sometimes, "Master Mock," and "let More mock on and lie, too," and many such goodly garnishings ^s more. But he will be for his own part sure that I shall not dispute with him by name, and therefore he keepeth it away.

And therefore what folly and what falsehood be found in this book, he forceth ^r very little. For shame he thinketh he can none take thereby while folk know not his name.

Wherein he fareth much like to some beastly body that would not care ^s to sit down with his face to the wallward and ease himself in the open street; and though all the town at once toot in his tail, ^r take it for no shame at all because they see not his face.

And verily as we see sometimes that such as walk in visors have much the less fear and shame, both what they do and what they say, because they think themselves unknown. So do these folk often times a little force what they write that use to put [out] their books and set not their names unto them. They think themselves unseen while their name is unknown, and therefore they fear not the shame of their folly. As some have, I seen ere this, full boldly come dance in a mask, whose dancing became them so well that if their visors had been off their faces shame would not have suffered them to set forth afoot. And Master Mummer under his masker's face forceth not much to shift a false case among ^u with a pair of false dice.

[*IN MARGIN* : *And that is most true!*]

NOTES

(1) **him** : i.e., the anonymous author of *The Souper of the Lorde* , a Zwinglian attack on the traditional Catholic Eucharist, published in Holland in April, 1533. More was convinced that it was written either by William Tyndale or by George Joye. In the opening sections of his defence, More descends to a level of vitriolic sarcasm unlike anything he wrote since his Latin rebuttal in 1523 of Martin Luther's attack on King Henry.

(See *Introduction* , p. 28)

(2) In this passage More draws an elaborate comparison between (1) anonymous writers of religious tracts and (2) medieval dancers (i.e., Mummers) in disguises who present a dance then follow up with a show of loaded dice before a king. Such a ceremony actually took place in 1377 when certain citizens of London rode out to pay court to Richard II, their faces covered with vizards, some "black, like devils." Some 130 men thus disguised presented a dumbshow, accompanied with music, then showed a pair of dice and began to wager with the king. Since the dice were loaded, King Richard "won" their gold and jewels (BM Harleian Ms. 247, fol. 172 ^v , as recorded by P. Simpson, II, 311-312).

In Sir Thomas More's day this ceremony was adapted by King Henry VIII to play a merry joke on his Cardinal, Thomas Wolsey, when the latter was still in court favor. According to Wolsey's biographer and gentleman-usher, George Cavendish, the King was fond of "masques and nummeries," and on one occasion appeared unexpectedly at Wolsey's palace at Hampton Court dressed as a shepherd in cloth of gold and crimson satin, wearing a visor. His arrival was announced by a loud gun shot. A group of maskers, preceded by drummers and torchbearers, went ahead and saluted all the ladies, then "returned to the worthiest [presumably Anne Boleyn] and opened a cup full of gold with crowns and other pieces of coin to whom they set divers pieces to cast at. Thus in this manner perusing all the ladies and gentlewomen, and to some they lost, and of some they won. And this done, they returned unto the Cardinal with great reverence, pouring down all the crowns in the cup, which was about two hundred crowns. 'At all!' quod the Cardinal, and so cast the dice and won them all at a cast, whereat was great joy made" [R. Sylvester, *Wolsey*, p. 40].

More implies in *The Answer* that the anonymous "Master Masker" will certainly lose out in any theological "dice game" with God—as indeed, we may believe that More realized both he and his unfortunate predecessor, Wolsey, had both lost out to King Henry VIII in their game of politics. More wrote shortly before resigning as Lord Chancellor and he may have alluded here to the actual scene which took place at Wolsey's palace when Henry appeared as a shepherd, announced by a loud shot of gunfire. The scene has become immortalized in later generations not only because of Shakespeare's dramatization of it (*King Henry the Eighth*, Act I, Scene iv) but also because the Globe playhouse took fire and burned to the ground on June 28, 1613 from gunshot discharged during the performance of this very scene.

Foley and Miller (edd., *The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, CW 11, p. lxxxiv) give an extended discussion of the "Masker," "one of [More's] most successful polemical techniques: reducing the Masker's often high-flown arguments to the level of common sense—where they fall apart." Furthermore, Maskers spoke, hence More chooses this name for his opponent rather than the silent "Mummer" (p. 240).

53. "A Masker's blushing Face"

[From *The Answer to the First Part of the Poisoned Book*; Works, p. 1136a-b]

But, how now, Master Masker? What have you now to say? With what shameful shift will your shameless face face us out this foolish lie of yours that you make upon me here? If you lied so loud wittingly, how can you look that any man should trust your word? If for lack of understanding how can you look then for shame that any man should trust your wit? Why should we think that your wit will pierce into the perceiving of hard words in the holy scriptures of God, when it will not serve you to perceive such poor plain words of mine?

Ye write that the young man hath here made me don on my spectacles and look more wisely on the matter to find now written therein the thing that I said before was not written therein. But now must you look more wisely upon my words on which you make here so loud a lie; and pore better on them with your spectacles upon your Masker's nose. I wist once a good fellow which,

while he danced in a mask, upon boldness that no man could have known him, when he perceived that he was well spied by his evil-favored dancing, he waxed so ashamed suddenly that he softly said unto his fellow, "I pray you, tell me, doth not my visor blush red?"

Now, surely good readers, Master Masker here, if he were not utterly past shame, hath cause enough to be in this point so sore ashamed that he might ween the glowing of his visage should even pierce through his visor and make it red for shame.

54. "Of Simon Fish and the Marriage of Priests"

[From *The Supplication of Souls* ; Works, pp. 306b-307a]

But he forceth not so much for the matter that he maketh his pretext as he doth indeed to have all vows void that he might get Luther some lewd companions in England. But now what if this good man had the rule of this matter and would put out all the clergy and bid them go wed? He would peradventure find some that would not much stick thereat, but they should be of the worst sort, and such as now be slander of their order, and whom it were most need to keep from generation, lest evil crows bring you forth evil birds. But as for the good priests and good religious whose children were like to be best, and to the best brought up? They would not marry for breach of their vows. And thus should ye have the naughty generations increase whereof there be too many already, and of the better, never the more.

What would this good man do now with good folk of the clergy that would not marry? He would of likelihood bind them to carts and beat them and make them wed in the waniand. " But now what if women will not wed them, namely sith he sendeth them out with right nought, saving slander, shame and villainy? What remedy will he find therefore? He will of likelihood compel the women to wed them: and if the wench be nice " and play the wanton and make the matter strange, then will he bear her to bed, too. Surely we cannot but here confess the truth: these nice and wanton words do not very well with us; but we must pray God and you to pardon us. For in good faith his matter of monks' marriages is so merry and so mad that it were able to make one laugh that lieth in the fire: and so much the more, in how much he more earnestly preacheth upon the King in this point, to have in any wise the clergy robbed, spoiled, bound, beaten and wedded. Whereby what opinion he hath of wedding, ye may soon perceive, for ye see well that if he thought it good he would not wish it them.

Many that read his words ween that he were some merry mad jest, " but he seemeth us far other wise. For, except he were a wondrous sad " man of himself, he could never speak so earnestly in so mad a matter. Yet one thing would we very fain wit of him. When he had robbed, spoiled, bound, beaten and wedded all the clergy, what would he then? Should any of them be curates of men's souls and preach and minister the sacraments to the people or not? If they should, it were a very strange fashion to rob him, bind him, and beat him on the one day, and then kneel to him, and confess to him, and receive the sacrament of his hand on the other day; reverently hear him preach in the pulpit, and then bid him go get him home and clout " shoes.

NOTES

(1) *He*: i.e., **Simon Fish**, actor, propagandist, and former student of Gray's Inn. In 1528 he published anonymously a pamphlet entitled *A Supplicacyon for the Beggars*, in which he argued that Henry VIII should confiscate church property in England. More responded in kind before October 15, 1529, with his brilliant parody, *The Supplication of Souls*.

55. "Of Priests who Marry"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (Part I), *Works*, p.395a-b]

For they "be no further bound to the law but as the cause of the law sought out by themselves leadeth them to and fro, and therefore they be in an evangelical, and in manner, angelical, " liberty to do what they list, so that they give the law some cause that may serve their lust, as they have given to the law and commandment of vows, from which they have set themselves in such a spiritual liberty that monks and friars may lawfully lie with nuns, and live in lechery, and call it wedlock.

And, indeed, they may call it wedlock an they will, as Lollards did of late that put a pig into the water on Good Friday and said, "Go in pig, and come out pike," and so when they had changed the name they took it for fish and ate it. And so many these holy new spiritual men, when monks and friars wed nuns, they may call it wedlock, an they will. But as the poor ploughman said unto the taverner that gave him water instead of wine, "God thank you, Master Winer, " for your good wine, but in good faith, saving for the worshipful name of wine, iche had as lief a-drunken water."

Surely so may we well say to these new holy spiritual married monks and friars—saving for the worshipful name of wedlock, it were as good they lived in lechery as in such bitched bitchery.

NOTES

(1) The Protestant reformers argued that priests could (and should) marry. In this passage More is surely alluding especially to Martin Luther (see Nos. 42 and 43).

(2) **The Lollards** were a group of political and religious reformers of the 14th-16th century, originally followers of John Wycliffe, and considered heretical by Church and State. Although More jests merrily about them here, in fact they suffered immensely in his day: two were burnt in 1511, two more in 1518; five in 1521 were executed. Innumerable numbers of reformers were examined and forced to abjure their errors on pain of death, 342 persons accused in 1521 alone (P. Hughes, I, 128-131).

bitched bitchery; a fanciful reduplication. More excoriates monks (such as Martin Luther) who, he believed, lived in lechery if they married. His emphasis upon *lewd bitch* stridently points to Katharina von Bora, Luther's wife, a former nun. More was fond of using the word "bitched" (cursed, execrable): see below, No. 104, n.1.

56. "Friar Barnes, Doctor of Divinity"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, pp. 735a; 751a-b; *The Apology of Sir Thomas More Knight* , Works, pp. 864b-865a]

Friar Barnes lasheth out against them, their pride and pomp and all their lives spent in whoredom, as though there were not a good priest in all the Catholic Church till they leave the Catholic faith and fall to heresies, for then can they not be but honest, though they would. For then may friars wed whores and call them wives. But yet he jesteth on them further, because they wear crowns and long gowns, and the bishops wear white rochets. ¹⁹ And when he hath likened them to bulls, asses and apes, and the rochets to smocks, ²⁰ then he liketh much his merry mocks, and fareth as he were from a friar waxen a fiddler, and would at a tavern go get him a penny for a fit of mirth.

* * * *

And thus, good readers, yet ye see once again that Friar Barnes proveth nothing concerning the church that he promised, but when instead of one pure and clean without spot or wrinkle, he bringeth one not so clean but that she is spotted and wrinkled. He would win the field with a face and make Saint Peter afeard to call her spots "spots," or her wrinkles, "wrinkles". But it will not be, Barnes! It will not be!

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 ²¹ 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.

Some of the brethren ²² said that I should at the leastwise call Friar Barnes by the name of Doctor, because he was unauthorized and made a Doctor of Divinity by the University. But one answered for me to that and said, "That name was given to serve for that time in which he was meet to teach and not now when he is not meet to teach, but is by the church for false teaching forbidden to teach." But then unto that one of them answered again and asked, "Why should I then call him Friar, still, while he is now no longer a friar no more than a doctor?"

But unto this I could between them tell some reason of difference. Howbeit, rather than to make this book over-long by holding a problem upon every trifle, I shall be content like as instead of "doctor" men call him "heretic"; so instead of "friar" to call him the other name that every man calleth all those that be run out of religion. ²³ Lo, there have I fallen on a fair figure unaware, that is, I trow, called *periphrasis* , ²⁴ to avoid the foul name of "*apostata*" ²⁵ .

NOTES

(1) **Dr. Robert Barnes** , one of England's leading spokesmen for the early Cambridge Protestant

reformers, was a member and later Prior of the Convent of Austin Friars. He studied at the University of Louvain and probably heard Luther discuss theology at the general chapter of Augustinians meeting in Heidelberg in 1518. He returned to England and was incorporated into Cambridge University as Bachelor, then as Doctor of Divinity. Examined by Cardinal Wolsey for his Lutheran teachings, he was found guilty and imprisoned, but he eventually escaped to Germany where he conferred with Luther. He returned to England, this time in favor with Henry VIII, who sent him to Germany in 1535 to procure approval from Lutheran divines for his divorce and remarriage. He fell out of favor with Henry, however, and was burned at the stake July 30, 1540. Sir Thomas More satirized Barnes in several of his polemical treatises, devoting an entire chapter or Book in his *Confutation of Tyndale* to a refutation of his preaching. Apparently More was personally incensed by Friar Barnes' elevation to the doctorate. (See James P. Lusardi's essay, "The Career of Robert Barnes," [CW, 8, pp. 1367-1415] for comprehensive survey on Doctor Barnes brought up-to-date.)

(2) **waxen...mirth** : i.e., Barnes became a fiddler and would earn for himself a penny amusing the tavern crowd—an allusion to Dr. Barnes' teaching Lutheran doctrines at the White Horse Tavern in Cambridge (see above, No. 44). William Tyndale even more than John Frith taunted More for his merry tales and anecdotes inserted in theological discussions. (See below, No. 57, n. 2)

¹ Meddlesome, officious

² Showy, specious

³ Limp

⁴ Slunk away

⁵ Advantage

⁶ Embellishments

⁷ Cares

⁸ Think it amiss

⁹ *toot in his tail* : i.e., take a good look at his bare behind

¹⁰ *Shift...among* : manage a false throw now and then

¹¹ *In the waniand*: at the time of the waning moon, i.e., an unlucky time

¹² Wanton, foolish; *play the wanton* : be coy and dally

¹³ Laughing-stock

¹⁴ (Ironic) very learned

¹⁵ Mend

¹⁶ I.e., Protestant Reformers

¹⁷ Superhuman

¹⁸ Vintner

¹⁹ Vestments, such as surplices

²⁰ Women's under garments

²¹ Am skilled (in)

²² I.e., the brotherhood of Protestant reformers

²³ *Be run...religion* : i.e., have broken one's vows

²⁴ Circumlocution

²⁵ One who renounces his faith