

## Thomas More Reader: Clerical Satire and Apocrypha: Part Four

### 57. "Friar Barnes and the Hostess of the 'Sign of the Bottle', at Buttolphe's Wharf"

[From *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* ; Works, pp. 756a-757b; 767b-768b; 769a-b]

And therefore as touching the matter, ye have heard all his whole tale garnished and made fair with the example of the soul and the two tokens of the church. But now is this tale fair as long as it is in telling, and goeth fair and smooth by a man's ear, as the water goeth over the goose's back, for else if it tarry still till it wet well to the skin and be well felt and considered, then it loseth all the grace and will appear so foolish that the reader will think that this tale hath more tokens then twain to make him know that the writer had almost no more wit in his head than one that had no soul in his body.

I let pass that he noteth in the margin these words, "how a man may know the church," and then he telleth us in his text not how a man may know it nor any piece of it, but how a man may know in what place it is, and yet not so much neither, for he telleth us not, "go to such a place, and there thou shalt find it, or some members of it," but he biddeth us go and telleth us not whither, and sendeth us to seek and telleth us not where, but telleth us only by what token we shall know whether in the place where we happen to seek there be any such person or no.

But now let us suppose that he told us the first tale, which were yet more to the purpose than the tale that he telleth us now. And yet because he maketh us his tale so plain by the example of the soul, let us put him again for our part some example of some simple soul: some good merchant that were fallen in company with Friar Barnes in the house of his secret hostess at the "Sign of the Bottle," at Buttolphe's Wharf; and finding him walking in a merchant's gown with a red Milan bonnet, and not knowing that he were run out of religion but weening that he were an honest man, told him that he were going towards Exeter and, for as much as he must carry money with him, he would fain find some good company that were going thither, by whom he might be both conveyed the right way and also go the more sure. For he had heard that there were in many inns many loitering fellows that were false shrews and yet seemed as honest and as true as he; which false shrews would feign themselves to be merchants and say they were going thitherward, too, but when they were got in credence and taken into company, then used to lead men out of the way and rob them and kill them too.

Now, if Friar Barnes would say to this man, "Ye be happy that ye have met with me, for I will send you to an inn where ye shall be sure and never fail to find some honest true merchants that are thitherward," and then would send him to a certain place which he would name him. If this merchant when he had heartily thanked Barnes and were going (very glad of his chance in meeting with this good man, by whose sending he should now be sure of good company in his journey), should happen yet to remember himself a little further as soon as he came out at door and thereupon step in again and say, "But, Master Merchant, I pray you tell me yet one thing that I had (like a fool) forgotten before to ask you. In the inn that ye send me to, where I shall be sure

to find these honest, true men that are going toward Exeter, are there not also sometimes some such false shrews as I told you of that make as though they were honest, true merchants, and going thither, till they may make men believe them, and when they be once gotten in company, then led them wrong and rob them and kill them?"

To this question—if Barnes told him there as he telleth us here—[he] said, "Yes, marry, sir, that there be, not only sometimes but always not a few such loitering in the same inn that lie in wait to train men to them and after betray them and destroy them." Then would the man say, "Marry, sir, then I pray you tell me how I may know the one sort from the other."

Whereunto, if Barnes should tell him as he now telleth us: "Nay, brother, I can tell thee no further, but this I will warrant thee, that though there are as always there are in the place that I send thee to many such false thieves, and but very few of those true men that I told these of, yet some such true men are there always there, but how thou shalt know which they be and discern them from the thieves, that can I not tell thee, but that thou mayest as well be there deceived in the mistaking of them as thou hast now been deceived in the mistaking of me, whom thou takest for a merchant, and yet am I a friar."

When Barnes had once told the man this tale, would not the man tell him again, "Marry, then, God amercy for right nought. For now am I never the nearer but thou leavest me as wise as thou foundest me, and so shall I thee too." And thereupon would he take his leave honestly and bid Barnes, "Farewell, fool!"

Now the tale that he telleth us is yet much more false and much more uncertain. For he telleth not us so much as the name of the place wherein we shall be sure to find any of the church, but biddeth us go take the scripture with us and therewith wander about and adventure till we happen upon some place in which we find some man that doth preach us the word of God: that is to say, declare us that same scripture truly, for well, ye wot, he will agree none other thing to be the word of God, saving the scripture only, and then wheresoever we happen to find any man that expoundeth it and declareth it truly without any damnable dreams of men. And where we see that it is well of the hearers received, and also where we see good works that do openly agree with the doctrine of the gospel, these be good and sure tokens whereby that we may judge that there be some men of holy church there.

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Lo! Thus might a wise woman, that could no more but read English, rebuke and confound Friar Barnes upon the sight of his own royal process, in which he would now teach us to know which is the very church. Howbeit, to confound him we shall not greatly need to seek one that can read. For what hath he to say to a poor woman that could not read?

If his own secret hostess, the good wife of the Bottle of Buttolphe's Wharf that, but if she be better amended, halteth both in body and soul were in the congregation present at this communing, and then would limp forth among them and say, "By Saint Malkin, Father Barnes, all your tokens of the very true church will not stand me in the stead of a tavern token or of a mustard token, neither. For I may for the one be sure of a new baked bun and for the other I may

be sure of a pot of mustard; but for your two tokens of your holy church, I cannot be sure of one farthing worth of true doctrine for them both. And therefore I have heard them preach that it is in scripture that the bond servant which knoweth not the will of his Lord and do it not, shall be beaten because of his negligence, but except he will not know it of purpose, else he shall be beaten but a little. But he which knoweth the will of his Lord and then do it not, shall be sore beaten."

And when I heard this preached, methought it went sore against the doctrine of our brother, Tyndale, that saith as our own brethren report in his *Answer to Sir Thomas More*, that when the wit perceiveth a thing the will can not chose but follow. For that is plain false, if the scripture be true that saith that a man may know the will of his Lord and yet leave it undone.

And me seemeth also that the same scripture maketh much against our brother Tyndale and our brother Frith, and against the preaching of all our evangelical brethren concerning purgatory. For I doubt not but that many which have known the will of the Lord and left it undone, and yet were never sore beaten therefore in this life, do yet ere they die so repent that they scape from hell, and therefore do receive the beating nowhere but if there be a purgatory.

Nor it will not help that I heard once of our brethren answer and say: "That when he repenteth then he doth the will of his Lord, and therefore shall not be beaten at all." For is that scripture be as they preach it, then though he shall not be beaten for that time when he did his Lord's will, he shall yet be beaten for the other times in which he left his Lord's will undone.

But surely, Father Barnes, as I told you, methinketh that these common preachers say well in that point that they say that God hath provided surety of doctrine, that is to say, of true preaching the word of God, and making it to be so understanden as men may be sure that they may void all damnable errors if they will, or else they were not to be blamed for falling in thereto. And they that tell us that we shall be damned but if we believe right and then tell us that we cannot know that but by the scripture, and then the scripture cannot be so learned but of a true teacher, and they tell us we cannot be sure of a true teacher, and so cannot be sure to understand it right, and yet say that God will damn us for understanding it wrong, or not understanding at all: they that thus tell us put me in mind of a tale that they tell of Master Henry Patenson, a man of known "wisdom" in London and almost everywhere else, which, when he waited once on his master in the Emperor's court at Bruges (and was there soon perceived upon the sight for a man of special wit by himself and unlike the common sort), they caught a sport in angering of him, and out of divers corners hurled at him such things as angered him and hurt him not. Thereupon he gathered up good stones, not gunstones, but as hard as they, and those he put apace into his bosom, and then stood him upon a bench and made a proclamation aloud that every man upon their own peril to depart, except only those that hurled at him, to the intent that he might know them and hurl at them again and hurt none other body but his enemies. For whosoever taried after his proclamation made, he would take him for one of the hurlers, or else for one of their counsellors, and then have at their heads whosoever they were that would abide.

Now was his proclamation in English and the company that heard him were such as understood none, but stood still and gaped upon him and laughed at him. And by and by one hurled at him again. And anon as he saw that:—

"What! whoresons," quoth he, "ye stand still every one, I ween, and not one of you will remove a foot for all my proclamation; and thereby I see well ye be hurlers or of counsel with the hurlers—all the whole many of you—and therefore have at you all again."

And with [that] word, he hurled a great stone out at adventure among them. He neither wist nor wrought 'at whom, but [it] lighted upon a Burgundian's head and broke his pate [so] that the blood ran about his ears. And Master Henry bade him stand to his harms hardily, 'for why would he not beware then and get him thence betime, when he gave him before so fair courteous warning?

"Now, good Father Barnes," would his halting Hostess say, "ye seem now by your tale to make as though God Almighty would use of a strange affection the same fashion that Master Henry used of folly, that is, to wit, to make us a proclamation in such wise indited 'as we can not understand it without we may be sure of a true interpreter, and then give some of us, such as him listeth, a secret privy knowledge of such one; and all the remnant (that fain would and cannot find out and know the true expounder of his proclamation for lack of that token which he keepeth from them) hurl stones at their heads because they fulfill if not."

In good faith, Father Barnes, methinketh therefore that this lesson that ye teach us herein is a very perilous blasphemy....

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What would Friar Barnes have answered unto his Hostess, if she had told him this, and that he then had seen the other good wife her neighbor begin to gape 'again, as she that were yet ready to bring in some other fault yet found further in his tale, as there might in good faith me seemeth many be found, not only by learned men but even by unlearned women, too, such faults as neither Friar Barnes nor all the learned heretics of all their hundred sects should be well able to void, so strong a thing is truth, and so feeble a thing is falsehead, and so hard to be born out and defended. But then would Friar Barnes have waxed a little warm and bid them sit still and hold their babble and tell them that Saint Paul wist full well what he did when he would not suffer women to take upon them to preach and teach in the church, nor so much as ask a question among the congregation. But if they doubted of anything that they would learn, let them ask it of their own husbands at home. And so would Friar Barnes bid those wives do with sorrow. For if they might be suffered to begin once in the congregation to fall in disputing, those aspen leaves of theirs would never leave wagging!

But then would the wife of the Bottle have answered him again quickly and tell him that she had always taken him for wiser, and would have went he could have taught better. "And some sorrow," would she say, "have I had for the favor of the sects, and so hath my husband had, too. And my Lord Chancellor told me that I was little better than a bawd because I received two nuns in by night that John Birt 'brought me (otherwise called Adrian), specially because I kept them close in an high garret in mine house and suffered two men to resort up thither to them. Howbeit, in good faith I had provided that if they list to sleep, the two men might, if they would lie together by themselves and let the nuns alone. For there were two beds in the garret. But yet as folk be ready to dream the worst, I was with some folk taken for half a bawd there, and all for the

furtherance of love between the brethren and the sistren of the evangelical sect, methought they were in so good a way. Howbeit, since I see now that you, Father Barnes, that were once a doctor, can say no better for it, by Our Lady, I begin so to mistrust all the matter that save for selling of mine ale and uttering of my chaffer "to get a penny by them, I wrought ner, " though there came never none of them any more within my door."

## NOTES

(1) More devotes Books 1-7 in the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* to a rebuttal of Tyndale before digressing in Book 8 (pp. 735-812) in order to attack Dr. Barnes.

(2) **Buttolphe's Wharf** : Located on the Thames just east of London Bridge and a few lanes below Eastcheap (the site of the well-known medieval tavern of Boar's Head), this wharf was near the Hanseatic League's Steelyard, where German merchants were accused of clandestine dissemination of Lutheran literature to the Protestant reformers in England: as Lord Chancellor, More investigated their suspect activities. It is unlikely, however, that the "Sign of the Bottle" was an actual contemporary London inn. The name was no doubt intended as a thinly disguised allusion to the notorious Cambridge White Horse Tavern at which place Dr. Robert Barnes had frequently preached and proselytized before being examined for heresy. (See above, Nos. 42 and 44).

(3) **Milan bonnet** : i.e., an ostentatious hat, popular with servants. More earlier reveals that he knew of Barnes' furtive movements, going about shaved of his beard and disguised as a merchant of eel skins, dressed in a "gown with a red Milan bonnet" ( *Works* , pp. 751, 756).

(4) **going towards Exeter** : It is tempting to hazard the guess that More, in attacking Protestant reformers in this merry tale of an early Tudor innkeeper, may well have been reminding his readers of the likely end for heretics waylaid from the true faith: they may wind up like the reformer, Thomas Dugate, who was martyred at the stake near Exeter in January 1532 for denouncing the church's doctrine. His death occurred fifteen months prior to the publication of Part II of the *Confutation* , which contains the digression on Barnes.

(5) **secret hostess** : i.e., one who is illicit. This quixotic hostess is one such as Shakespeare later made loveable in the character of Mistress Quickly, Hostess of the Boar's Head Inn, which was the setting for charming prince and provocative prevaricator. Although Falstaff may have been an echo of the fifteenth-century Lollard, Sir John Oldcastle, the Boar's Head was a very different kind of inn from the "Sign of the Bottle," a rendezvous for what More believed were malfeasant and damned heretics.

(6) **Saint Malkin** : *The Catholic Encyclopedia* lists no such saint. The oath is surely a pun on "malkin," the name applied to a woman of the lower classes, and also to the name of a female demon or a lewd woman. The oath enriches More's ironic humor.

(7) **mustard token** : i.e., one given to purchasers of mustard, entitling them to later repayment when a certain number was accumulated.

(8) **our...brethren** : More obviously is being ironical in claiming "togetherness" with the Protestant reformers.

(9) **Master Henry Patenson** was More's family fool (thus, ironically, he is called a man "of known wisdom" (T.E. Bridgett, p. 127); for many years he amused More and his friends at his Thames-side manor in Chelsea. More refers to his fool again in the story of Mad Cliff (see No. 91); his daughter quotes Patenson in a letter she wrote to Alice Alington ( *Works* , p. 1141b); and More's grandnephew, Ellis Heywood, includes Patenson in the serio-comic discussion (supposedly held at More's home in Chelsea) in the following merry anecdote: [More speaks] "...they who possess money, they are happiest who do not use it. In fact, his 'happiness' has achieved that end reached yesterday by Patenson...who was standing by my table while we were eating and saw among the guests a gentleman with an unusually large nose. After staring in the man's face for a while, he said, 'By my blood—this gentleman has one whale of a nose!' We all pretended not to hear lest we embarrass the good gentleman. Realizing that he had erred, Patenson tried to put himself in the right again by saying, 'I lied in my throat when I said that this gentleman's nose was so large. On my word as a gentleman, it is quite a small nose.' When they heard this, everybody wanted to laugh out loud, and they ordered that the fool be chased away. But Patenson, who wanted to preserve his honor, would not let the affair end this way because, of all his virtues, the one he most often bragged of was that whatever he set out to do always came out right. To arrange the matter more to his own advantage, he went to the head of the table and said, 'Well, I just want to say one thing: this gentleman has no nose at all.' Everybody laughed so hard at this tale that they almost dislocated their jaws" (trans., R.L. Deakins, p. 20f).

Ellis Heywood, who wrote his Platonic "Dialogue" (in memory of Thomas More) on "true contentment" in Italian, in 1553, was not only the grandnephew of Sir Thomas More, but the eldest son of the early Tudor playwright and proverbialist, John Heywood (More's son-in-law) and uncle to the Jacobean wit, poet and Dean of St. Paul's—John Donne—whose metaphoric juxtapositions of opposites, his Paradoxes, and his delightfully amusing and serious "Ignatius his Conclave; or his Inthronization in a late Election in Hell," continued the tradition of his famous ancestors.

I would like to disagree (merrily of course) with Professor Marius for labelling More's family fool "feeble-minded or mad" ( *Thomas More* , p. 230). Ellis Heywood's comment on Patenson (see above) revealed Patenson's very clever if satiric treatment of guests; his job was, after all, to amuse the family. His delightful conclusion was not an example of feeble-mindedness. Similarly, in the tale of "The Sign of the Bottle," Patenson may have maltreated a Burgundian gentleman by throwing a rock at him, but he had (logically and fairly) given him due warning (albeit in English). And it is curious too that in the famous pen and ink family portrait by Holbein in 1526, Patenson is the only one other than More's distinguished father who is portrayed full front-face, not in profile. He is looking straight ahead with intense eyes; he is elegantly dressed in the contemporary fashion, probably with a Milan bonnet! He *stands* along with others of the family, all of whom are holding or reading, or pointing to, a book. He may also be wearing a Cross. To this reader, he seems more the witty, even brilliant, fool of Shakespeare's plays.

(10) **In the Emperor's Court at Bruges** : More refers to his mission with Cardinal Wolsey on behalf of King Henry to the court of Emperor Charles V at Bruges, in 1521. Earlier, in 1515,

More spent six months in Flanders (where he sketched out his *Utopia* ), having gone there as Under-Sheriff of London to help secure by treaty better protection for English commercial interests, following a clash between London merchants and foreign traders of the Hanseatic League's Steelyard—a clash which snowballed into the infamous May Day riot of 1517 (see below, No. 97).

(11) **John Birt (or Byrt)** , alias John Adrian, a bookbinder, was presumably an associate of the Antwerp Protestant reformers, connected with the publishing trade there (see below, No. 89, n. 3).

(12) **sistren** : i.e., sisterhood, a spelling coined presumably by More--it is not listed in *O.E.D.* — to rhyme with "brethren," and possibly to suggest a pun on "sisters of the bank," i.e., prostitutes—considering the somewhat salacious content of this tale.

(13) **evangelical sect** : i.e., Protestants—a sense first used by More in the *Confutation of Tyndale* ( *Works* , p. 353), and reiterated frequently.

(14) Lurid tales about immoral nuns, Catholic and Protestant, were common in More's time. Here, More amusingly satirizes the Protestants, but surely he must have been aware of an actual event stemming from the notorious behavior on the part of nuns in a convent near Cambridge in 1497 when More was nineteen years of age and recently released from the service of his patron, John Morton, Bishop of Ely, later Archbishop of Canterbury. Morton, as both Lord Chancellor and Chancellor of Oxford, was given license to expel the prioress and nuns from the convent of St. Radegund which had been "reduced to poverty and decay by reason of dissolute conduct and incontinence of the prioress and nuns, on account of their vicinity to the University of Cambridge" ( *Calendar of Patent Rolls, Henry VII: 1494-1509* , 2 vols., 1916, II, 61).

<sup>1</sup> Signs or symbols and revelations by which one may understand the church

<sup>2</sup> Rascals

<sup>3</sup> Confidence, trust

<sup>4</sup> Lead, entice

<sup>5</sup> Limps / is sinful

<sup>6</sup> Worked up, cared

<sup>7</sup> *Stand...hardily* : endure his pain bravely

<sup>8</sup> Written

<sup>9</sup> I.e., babble profusely ( *cf. galp* , vomit forth)

<sup>10</sup> John Birt; see notes

<sup>11</sup> *Uttering...chaffer* : offering my wares for sale

<sup>12</sup> *Wrought ner* : did not