

## Thomas More Reader: Clerical Satire and Apocrypha (modernized selections)

### 39. “Sickness in Heretics”

[From *The Supplication of Souls* (Scepter, 2002)]

But then you will sometimes see there some others whose bodies are so incurably diseased that they will toss and turn, and wring their hands and gnash their teeth, and their eyes will water, their head ache, their body writhe, their stomach convulse, and their whole body shiver with pain, and yet they never vomit at all, or if they do vomit, they keep vomiting and never find any relief thereby.

See, thus it happens (as a small thing may be likened to a big one) with the souls deceased and departed from the world, that those who are clean and unstained can feel no discomfort at all in the fire, while on the other hand those who go so deadly poisoned with sin that their stains are indelible and their filthiness is unpurgeable, lie writhing and frying in the fire forever.

### 45. “A Protestant Rhetorician”

[From *The Supplication of Souls* (Scepter, 2002)]

Look how this zealous supporter of the commonwealth cries out to the King that his sword is not strong or sharp enough to cut off the heads of the innocent! He probably ransacked all of Dame Rhetoric’s rolls of parchment to find this splendid figure of speech, this device of calling out to the King and asking His Highness, “Where is your sword?” and telling him his sword is too dull. As though he would have him take it to the cutler’s to sharpen, so that he could cut off the head of Father Horsey—whom His Grace had found blameless and himself had declared innocent. If this man were here matched with someone like himself, someone who has the eloquence that he has, who could find such comely figures of rhetoric as he finds, furnished and phrased with such vehement words as he thunders out like thunder blasts, who has no fewer matters in his mouth than the great big bottomless ocean full of evils, the weakness and dullness of the King’s sword, the removal of the King’s kingdom, and the ruin of the King’s crown, with grand exclamations—“O grievous and painful exactions! O cause most horrible! O grievous shipwreck of the commonwealth!”—what might one who had suchlike eloquence say here to him? Surely so much and in such a way that we poor, helpless, whimpering souls could neither think of nor utter.

But certainly two or three things we see and can well say. First, these great matters are not meet for the mouth of the beggars’ spokesman. Nor is it appropriate for him to do such preaching about the need for a reformation of the Church and an amendment of the world, when with clear and obvious heresies and ruinous errors he busily goes about poisoning and infecting the world. Nor is it very appropriate for him to take it upon himself to give counsel to a king, when he shows himself to have so much presumptuousness and so little sense as to ask the King a

question and dictate to him the answer, and to tell him there that all the world knows something to be true which the King himself has already, both through his attorney general and his judges in a public trial and in his high court of record, testified and confessed to be false. If that man were not for malice as mad, not as a March hare, but as a mad dog that runs out and attacks he sees not whom, the fellow could never with such obvious foolishness so rashly make such blunders.

Among others, he has one wherein he shows, in his ranting against the clergy, a principal part of his excellent eloquence. For there he uses his royal figure of rhetoric called repetition, repeating often, about the whole clergy, "These are they," in the beginning of his paragraph: "These are they that have made a hundred thousand idle whores in your realm. These are they that impair the procreation of the human race in your realm. These are they that draw men's wives into incontinency in your realm." And after several such "These are they's," he concludes and closes his argument with his accustomed vehemence fetched out of Luther's volumes, asking, "Who is able to number the evils in the great big bottomless ocean of them that this injurious and sinful generation brings upon us?" As though every single member of the clergy, and no one other than they, fit that description. But of all his "These are they's," this is the one which, as the worst and most vehement complaint, he sets in the forefront of them all: "These are they that by abstaining from marriage do so hinder the procreation of the people that eventually the whole realm, if this continues, will be made desert and uninhabitable."

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

[From *The Supplication of Souls* (Scepter, 2002)]

But now, what if this good man had the rule in this matter and did put out all the clergy and tell them to go get married? He would perhaps find some who would not much balk at that. But they would be of the worst sort and such as are now disgraces to their orders and whom there would be the most need to keep from procreating, lest bad crows bring forth bad birdies. But as for the good priests and religious whose children would likely be the best and the best brought up, they would not marry; they would not break their vows. And thus you would have the bad begettings increase, of which there are too many already, and of the better, never the more.

What would this good man do now with the good folk of the clergy who would not marry? He would probably tie them to carts and beat them—and then make them get married on top of all that. But now, what if women will not wed them, especially since he sends them out with absolutely nothing, except shame, disgrace, and insulting degradation? What remedy will he find for that? He will probably force the women to wed them. And should the wench play loose and wanton but hard to get, then he will beat her to bed too!

Surely here we cannot but confess the truth, that these loose and wanton words do not very well become us. But we must ask God and you to pardon us. For in all honesty, this matter of monks' marriages is so merry and so mad that it can make someone laugh who lies in the fire; and so much the more because of how much more earnestly he preaches at the King on this point, that he should by all means have the clergy robbed, despoiled, tied up, beaten, and wedded. By which you can easily tell what opinion he has of marriage, since you can well see that if he thought it

good, he would not wish it on them.

## 60. “A Talkative Nun and a Quarrelsome Housewife”

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Anthony: Actually, Nephew, when someone is very weak, many words spoken without any pauses intervening will, perhaps, as you said just now, eventually somewhat wear them out. And so I did wish after you were gone that last time—since, to tell the truth, I did feel a little worn out—that I had not talked for such a long time all by myself. I wished that we had more often exchanged words, sharing the talk between us. I wished that there had been more involvement on your part, as there is between the characters that the learned set up as disputing with one another in their feigned dialogues. However, on that point I soon excused you and left the blame right back where I found it, which was on my very own neck. For I realized that between you and me it had gone as it once did between a certain nun and her brother.

Very virtuous was this lady, and of a very virtuous place—a cloistered convent. She had been there for a long time, during all of which she had never seen her brother. He, too, was very virtuous. He had been far off at a university, where he had earned a doctorate in theology. When he came home he went to see his sister, as one who highly rejoiced in her virtue. So she came to the grate that they call, I believe, the grille. And after exchanging their holy password (the form of greeting that was customary in that place), the one took the other by the tip of the finger, for no hand could be squeezed through the grille. And right away the lady began to give her brother a sermon on the wretchedness of this world, the frailty of the flesh, and the subtle schemes of the wicked fiend. She gave him counsel that was surely good (except for being somewhat too long) on how he should be very wary in his living and should master well his body for the saving of his soul. But before her own discourse came to an end, she began to find a little fault with him. She said, “Really, brother, I am somewhat surprised that you, who have been studying so long and are now a doctor and so learned in the law of God, do not now, during our visit (for we meet so seldom), of your charity give to me, who am your sister and a simple, unlearned soul, some fruitful exhortation. For I have no doubt but that you could say some good thing yourself.” “In all truthfulness, good sister,” said her brother, “I couldn’t do that for you, because your tongue never stopped. But you’ve said enough for us both.”

And so, Nephew, I realized that once I had gotten started, I gave you hardly any chance to get a word in edgewise. But now I will take another way with you. I will make sure you do half the talking.

Vincent: Now, really, Uncle, that was a funny story! But if you’re now going to make me do half the talking, you’re going to find contentment far differently than did, not long ago, a woman in your own family—I won’t tell you which one; guess her if you can! This woman’s husband took much pleasure in the attitude and behavior of another honorable man, and therefore spent a lot of time with him. In fact, more often than not, he was away from home at mealtime. Well, one day it happened that both he and his wife dined with that neighbor of theirs, and she playfully picked a fight with this man for making her husband feel so happy elsewhere that she could never keep

him at home. “Actually, ma’am,” he said (for he had a dry sense of humor), “nothing keeps him in my company but just one thing. Give him the same thing, and he’ll never be away from you.” “What wonderful thing might that be?” our relative then asked.

“Indeed, ma’am,” he said, “your husband dearly loves to talk, and when he’s with me I let him have all the words.” “All the words?” she asked. “Well,” she said, “I’m quite willing and content to let him have all the words just as he’s always had them—which is, I speak them all myself and give them all to him. In that way, for all I care, he can still have them all. But to say that in some other way he shall have them all—you can keep him forever, rather than he get the half!”

Anthony: Indeed, Nephew, I can soon guess which of our relatives she is! And I wish we had none, for all her playful words, that less would interrupt their husbands in order to talk!

Vincent: Indeed, she is no less good than she is playful. But whereas you find it a fault, Uncle, that I don’t talk enough, I was really ashamed that I talked so much, asking you questions that I found, from your answers, might better have been spared, since they were of so little merit. But now, since I see you so well content that I not refrain from boldly showing my foolishness, I will no longer be bashful, but will ask you whatever I want to.

#### **64. “A Loud Preacher in Saxony”**

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

To be sure, my Uncle, I’ve been less amazed by all this ever since I heard the way their preachers talk over there. For as you will recall, when I was in Germany these matters were, in a sense, still up in the air. Luther had not yet gotten married, nor monks out of their habits; but those who would eventually be of that sect were allowed to preach freely to the people whatever they wanted. And I myself actually heard there the words of a certain friar who was reputed and taken to be very good, and who himself lived, to all appearances, a somewhat austere and penitential life. His preaching was amazing. To this day I can still hear him, with his loud, shrill voice and his less than average learning. His subject matter was, in large part, fasting and all other kinds of affliction undertaken as penance. He called them human inventions. Repeatedly he cried out to his listeners that they should keep well the laws of Christ, let go of their paltry penances, resolve to mend their ways, and seek salvation in nothing but the death of Christ. “For Christ is,” he said, “our justice and our Savior. He is our whole satisfaction for all our deadly sins. He did full penance for us all upon his painful cross: there he washed us all clean with the water from his sweet side; there, with his dear, precious blood, he brought us out of all danger from the devil. Leave off, therefore, leave off, I beg you, these human inventions, your foolish Lenten fasts and all your paltry penances! Never diminish the credit due to Christ by looking to save yourself! It is only Christ’s death, I tell you, that has saving power—Christ’s death, I tell you again, and not our own deeds! Leave off your own fasting, therefore, and turn to Christ alone, good Christian people, for the sake of his dear, bitter Passion!” So loudly and shrilly did he cry “Christ” in their ears, and so thick did he lay it on about Christ’s bitter Passion, and so piteously did he speak, with sweat dropping down his cheeks, that I was not at all surprised to see the poor women weeping. Actually, he made my own hair stand on end!

And with such preaching the people were so taken in that some started breaking the fasts required on fast days, not (at first) out of frailty or malice, but out of devotion, almost, lest they should take from Christ the credit due him for his bitter Passion. But once they had been nursed for a while on that first point, they could afterward abide and endure many other things by reason of which, had he begun with them, they would have thrown him out.

## 65. “A Vainglorious Lutheran Bishop”

[From *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* (Scepter, 1998)]

Vincent: When I first went to Germany, Uncle, I happened to be somewhat favored by a great man of the Church, one of the greatest and wealthiest in that whole country. Indeed, anyone who could spend as much as he could for one thing and another would hold a very high position in any country of Christendom. However, he was vainglorious beyond all measure, and that was a great pity, for it did much harm and made him abuse the many great gifts that God had given him.

Never could he get enough of hearing his own praise. So one day it happened that he gave, in front of a huge audience, an oration in a certain style, and he was so pleased with himself that afterward, at dinner, he was sitting on pins and needles waiting to hear what compliments he would get from those sitting with him at his table. For a while he sat there musing, trying to find (as I later realized) some pretty, proper way to bring it up himself. But finally, for lack of anything better, and not wanting to postpone the matter for too long, he brought it up quite bluntly. He asked all of us who were sitting at the end of his table (for in his own group at the middle of the table, there sat just himself alone) how well we liked the oration he had made that day.

Well, quite honestly, Uncle, once that problem was posed, I don't think any man among us ate one more morsel of meat until it was fully answered, so deeply immersed was every one of us in the search for some exquisite expression of praise. For anyone who would have come up with an ordinary, commonplace compliment would have thought himself shamed forever. Then, row by row, we said our sentences. We spoke in the same good order that we were seated in, from lowest to highest, as though this were a great matter of state and we were a right solemn council.

When my turn came—and I'm not bragging, Uncle, when I say this—I thought, by our Lady, that I acquitted myself rather well. I was particularly pleased with myself because I thought that for a foreigner, I was speaking German with some real fluency; for I'd decided to leave my Latin alone and just show off my knowledge of German. And I hoped to be liked all the better since I saw that the man who sat next to me, the one who would be speaking right after me, was an unlearned priest—for he could speak no Latin at all. But when he came forward to take his turn at complimenting my lord, that wily fox turned out to be so well familiarized in court with the craft of flattery that he went beyond me to too far. And then I could see, by means of him, what excellence can be achieved by a really dim-witted person in one craft, if in all his whole life he studies and busies his mind with no more than just that one. But afterward I made a solemn vow

unto myself that if ever he and I were seated together at that table again, when we fell to our flattering I would do mine in Latin, so that he could not compete with me. For though I wouldn't mind being outrun by a horse, I would not again let myself be outrun by an ass!

But, Uncle, here's where the game really began. He that sat highest and was to speak last was a great ecclesiastical dignitary who was not only a theologian but also something of an expert in canon law. And a wonder it was to see how he noted every word of every man who spoke before him. It seemed, in fact, that the more felicitous the word, the less he liked it, because it made him work that much harder at finding a better one with which to surpass it. The man even sweat with the labor, so that he was obliged every now and then to wipe his face. When his turn finally came, however, we who had spoken before him had so thoroughly said all that could be said that we had not left him one wise word to speak.

Anthony: Alas, good man—among so many of you, some good fellow should have spared him one!

Vincent: As it turned out, Uncle, there was no need for that. For he hit upon such a strategy that in his flattering he surpassed all the rest of us.

Anthony: Why, what did he say, Nephew?

Vincent: By our Lady, Uncle, not one word. It was like what Pliny, I believe, tells us happened when Timanthes painted his picture of the sacrifice and death of Iphigenia. In the making of the sorrowful countenances of the other noblemen of Greece who beheld her suffering, Timanthes used up so much of his artistic craft and cunning that when he came to make the countenance of King Agamemnon, her father, he had nothing left with which to do it justice. He had purposely saved this for the last, out of a fear that if he painted the king's countenance before some of the others, he would thereby be running a double risk. Either he would have to make those others look less sorrowful than he could make them look, and thus possibly forfeit some part of his praise, or else, by doing his absolute best, he might happen to make someone else look more laden with pity for her pain than her own father—which would be a far greater fault in his painting. But when, as I say, he finally came to the making of his face, he could not think of any kind of new grief-stricken expression or countenance for her father than which he hadn't already given someone else something much more grief-laden. And therefore, so that no one could see what kind of countenance her father had, the painter was constrained to paint him holding his face in his handkerchief!

The same kind of pageant, so to speak, was played out for us there by this good, ancient, honorable flatterer. For when he saw that he could find no words of praise that would surpass all the ones already spoken, the wily fox spoke not one word. Instead, as if transported to heaven with the wonder of the wisdom and eloquence that my lord's grace had uttered in that oration, he fetched forth a long sigh with an "Oh!" from the bottom of his breast, held up both his hands, lifted up his head, cast his eyes up toward the skies, and wept.