

A Sir Thomas More Reader

*There is almost no tale so foolish
but that yet in one matter or other to
some purpose it may hap to serve.*

Sir Thomas More

Satire of Women and Domestic Scenes

No. 1

"The Wife who would Rule the Roost"

Let us now consider in likewise what great worldly wealth ariseth unto men by great offices, rooms and authority-- to those worldly disposed people, I say, that desire them for no better purpose. For of them that desire them for better we shall speak after anon. The great thing that they chief like all therein is that they may bear a rule, command and control other men, and live uncommanded and uncontrolled themselves. And yet, this commodity¹ took I so little need of that I never was aware it was so great till a good friend of ours merrily told me once that his wife once in a great anger taught it him.

For when her husband had no list to grow greatly upward in the world nor neither would labor for office of authority and over² that forsook a right worshipful room when it was offered him, she fell in hand³ with him (he told me) and all-to-rated⁴ him and asked him:

"What, will you do that you list not to put forth yourself as other folk do? Will you sit by the fire and make goslings in the ashes with a stick,⁵ as children do? Would God I were a

¹ Advantage

² Even beyond

³ *Fell in hand*: came to sharp words

⁴ *All-to-rated*: scolded severely

⁵ *Make...ashes*: I.e., sit idly by and do nothing useful

man, and look what I would do!"

"My wife," quoth her husband, "what would you do?"

"What? By God, go forward with the best! For as my mother was wont to say --God have mercy on her soul-- 'It is ever more better to rule than to be ruled.' And there, by God, I would not, I warrant you, be so foolish to be ruled where I might rule."

"By my troth, wife," quoth her husband, "in this I dare say you say truth, for I never found you willing to be ruled yet."
[*A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation; Works, p. 1224a*]

"The Carpenter's Wife that would be Killed"

[Anthony] "There was here in Buda[pest] in King

Ladislaus¹ days a good poor honest man's wife. This woman was so fiendish that the devil, perceiving her nature, put her in the mind that she should anger her husband so sore that she might give him occasion to kill her, and then should he be hanged for her."

[Vincent] "This was a strange temptation indeed. What the devil should she be the better then?"

[Anthony] "Nothing, but that it eased her shrewd stomach² before to think that her husband should be hanged after. And peradventure if you look about the world and consider it well, you shall find more such stomachs than a few. Have you never heard no furious body plainly say that to see some such man have a mischief he would with good will be content to lie as long in hell as God liveth in heaven?"

[Vincent] "Forsooth, and some such have I heard of."

[Anthony] "This mind of his was not much less mad than hers, but rather haply³ the more mad of the twain. For the woman, peradventure, did not cast so far peril therein. But to tell you now to what good pass her 'charitable' purpose came:

As her husband (the man was a carpenter) stood hewing with his chip-axe upon a piece of timber, she began after her old guise⁴ to revile him [so] that the man waxed wroth at last and bade her get her in, or he would lay the helm of his axe about her back, and said also that it were little sin even with that axe-head to chop off that unhappy head of hers that carried such an ungracious tongue therein. At that word the devil took his time and whetted her tongue against her teeth.

¹ I.e., Wladislas II of Bohemia: See Note

² *Shrewd stomach*: sick stomach, i.e., vile disposition

³ Perhaps

⁴ Usual manner

And when it was well sharpened she swore to him in very fierce anger: 'By the mass, whoreson husband, I would thou wouldest. Here lieth mine head, lo!' And therewith down

she laid her head upon the same timber log. 'If thou smite it not off, I beshrew⁵ thine whoreson's heart.'

With that, likewise as the devil stood at her elbow, so stood (as I heard say) his good angel⁶ at his and gave him ghostly⁷ courage and bade him be bold and do it. And so the good man up with his chip-axe and, at a chop, chopped off her head indeed.

There were standing other folk by, which had a good sport to hear her chide but little they looked for this chance till it was done ere they could let⁸ it. They said they heard her tongue babble in her head and call, 'Whoreson, Whoreson' twice after that the head was from the body. At the leastwise⁹, afterward unto the king thus they reported all, except only one, and that was a woman, and she said that she heard it not!"

[Vincent] "The king gave him his pardon."

[Vincent] "Verily he might in conscience do no less."

[Anthony] "But then was it further almost at another point that there should have been a statue made that, in such case, there should never after pardon be granted, but the truth being able to be proved, none husband should need any pardon but should have leave by the law to follow the example of the carpenter and do the same."

[Vincent] "How happened it, Uncle, that that good law was left unmade?"

[Anthony] "How happened it? As it happeneth, Cousin,

⁵ Curse

⁶ *Good angel*: (surely ironic!)

⁷ Spiritual

⁸ Prevent

⁹ *At the leastwise*: at least

that many more be left unmade as well as it and within a little as good as it too, both here and in other countries, and sometimes some worse made in their stead. But as they say,

the let of that law¹⁰ was the Queen's grace¹¹ --God forgive her soul! It was the greatest thing I ween--good Lady--that she had to answer for when she died. For surely, save for that one thing, she was a full blessed woman.

"But letting now the law pass, this temptation in procuring her own death was unto this carpenter's wife no tribulation at all, as far as ever men could perceive. For it liked her well to think thereon, and she even longed therefore. And therefore if she had before told you or me her mind and that would so fain bring it so to pass, we could have had none occasion to comfort her, as one that were in tribulation, but, marry, counsel her (as I told you before) we might, to refrain and amend that malicious, devilish mind."

[*A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation; Works, pp. 1187a-1187b*]

¹⁰ *Let...law*: i.e., not allowing that law (to be proclaimed)

¹¹ Dispensation

NOTES

- (1) **King Ladislaus**: More alludes here to Wladislas (or Vladislav) II, of Bohemia, son of the King of Poland, who was invited by the Hungarian nobility to be their

king. He ruled from 1490 to 1516. His son, Lajos II, died in the battle of Mohács against the invading Turks, being the last king of independent Hungary.

- (2) **Did...therein:** i.e., by murdering his wife, the husband would lie long in hell. The wife, for enticing her husband to kill her would not herself--she thinks--suffer eternally in hell.
- (3) **Whoreson...body:** More, who alludes elsewhere to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, may well have had in mind here the Prioress's tale, in which fable the little school-boy, Hugh of Lincoln, had his throat cut and his entrails emptied by "the cursed folk of Herod," yet could still sing "*O alma redemptoris*" loud and clear. Stories and examples of aspen-tongued wives, however, were ubiquitous. More's own second wife, Dame Alice, was reputed to have been notoriously loquacious.
- (4) More's grandnephew, Ellis Heywood, in 1553 records in Italian a "discussion of true contentment" held by More and six friends at his home in Chelsea in which text the following anecdote appears. Its theme (committing suicide) is similar to that of Selections 2, 3 and 4; and it tells of a Miser who would hang himself but won't pay twopence for the rope: "Either I find a cheaper rope, or, by the blood of the Virgin, I won't hang myself at all!" (trans., R.L. Deakins, p. 19).

"The Rich Widow that would be a Martyr"

[Anthony] "Some of my folk here can tell you that no longer ago than even yesterday, some that came out of Vienna shewed us (among other talking) that a rich widow--but I forgot

to ask him where it happened--having all her life an high proud mind and a fell¹ (as those two virtues are wont always to keep company together), was at debate with another neighbor of hers in the town. And on a time she made of her counsel a poor neighbor of hers whom she thought for money she might induce to follow her mind. With him she secretly broke², and offered him ten ducats³ for his labor to do so much for her as in a morning early to come to her house and, with an axe, unknown, privily⁴ strike off her head; and when he had so done then convey the bloody axe into the house of him with whom she was at debate in some such mannerwise⁵ as it might be thought that he had murdered her for malice. And then she thought she should be taken for a martyr. And yet had she further devised that another sum of money should after be sent to Rome, and there should Means⁶ made to the Pope that she might in all haste be canonized. This poor man promised, but intended not to perform it. Howbeit, when he deferred it, she provided the axe herself, and he appointed with her the morning when he should come and do it; and thereupon into her house he came. But then set he such other folk (as he would⁷ should know her frantic fantasy) in such place appointed

¹ Cruel

² *Secretly broke*: i.e., privately disclosed (her secret)

³ Gold coins valued about 9s 4d each

⁴ Secretly

⁵ Means

⁶ Means of Grace, i.e., religious petitions

⁷ Wished

as they might well hear her and him talk together. And after that he had talked with her thereof what he would (so much as he thought was enough), he made her lie down, and took up the axe in his own hand and with the other hand he felt the edge and found a fault that it was not sharp, and that therefore he would in no wise do it till he had ground it sharp. He could

not else, he said, for pity; it would put her to so much pain--and so full sore against her will, for that time she kept her head, still! But because she would no more suffer any more deceive her so and fode her forth⁸ with delays, ere it was very long after she hung herself [by] her own hands."

[Vincent] "Forsooth, here was a tragical story whereof I never heard the like."

[Anthony] "Forsooth, the party that told it me swore that he knew it for a truth. And himself is, I promise you, such as I reckon for right honest and of substantial truth."

[*A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*; Works, pp. 1188a-1188b]

NOTES

- (1) In telling this and other related tales of would-be martyrs, Sir Thomas More "is well aware of the dangers of spiritual pride in martyrdom which is deliberately sought," as Garry E. Haupt observes (*Treatise on the Passion*, CW 13, p. clxxv). Frank Manley notes also the "genuine sense of wit and humor rising discordantly from the grim circumstances of fear, suffering, and death-tales of humorous suicide and prideful martyrdom side by side with playful anecdotes...", resulting in "one of the most inexplicable features of the work" (*A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, CW 12, p. xcvi).

⁸ *Fode her forth*: i.e., fobbed her off, put her off

"The Carver that would be Crucified"

[Anthony] "Without doubt, Cousin, if he abide at that point and can be by no reason brought to do so much as doubt nor can

by no means be shogged¹ out of his dead sleep, but will needs take his dream for a very truth and (as some by night rise and walk about their chamber in their sleep will so rise and hang himself), I can then none other way see but either bind him fast in his bed or else assay whether that might hap to help him with which (the common tale goeth) that a carver's wife in such a frantic fantasy² helped her husband. To whom, when he would upon a Good Friday needs have killed himself for Christ, as Christ did for him, it were then convenient for him to die even after the same fashion, and that might not be by his own hands but the hands of some other. For Christ, pardie, killed not Himself.

"And because her husband should need to make no more of counsel (for that would he not in no wise) she offered him, that for God's sake she would secretly crucify him herself upon a great cross that he had made to nail a new carved crucifix upon, whereof then he was very glad. Yet she bethought her that Christ was bound to a pillar and beaten first and after crowned with thorn[s], whereupon, when she had by his own assent bound him fast to a post, she left not beating with holy exhortation to suffer so much and so long, that ere ever she left work³ and unbound him, praying nevertheless that she might put on his head, and drive it well down, a crown of thorns that she had wreathen for him and brought him, he said he thought this was enough for that year. He would pray God forbear him of the remnant till Good Friday come again. But

¹ Shook

² I.e., of her husband

³ *Left work*: i.e., stopped beating him

when it came again the next year, then was his lust⁴ past; he longed to follow Christ no farther."

[*A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*; Works, pp. 1193b-

⁴ Desire (i.e., to imitate Christ's crucifixion)

1194a]

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"The Carver that would be Crucified"

NOTES

- (1) **As Christ did for him:** The 1557 edition of More's *Works* omits here the following line, which appears in

the Richard Tottel edition of *A Dialogue of Comfort* (1553): "...she would not in vain plead against his mind and wisely put him in remembrance that if he would die for Christ as Christ died for him..."--a thought that might well have been on More's mind when he put his own head under the executioner's axe. More's grandnephew, Ellis Heywood, must have been a bereaved spectator at More's beheading, memorializing in his *// Moro* (1553) what he felt were More's final thoughts: "And here More stopped, leaving a great admiration in the souls of those who listened to him when they saw how exactly his life corresponded to the words he spoke. Not long after, that admiration was greatly increased by his truly Christian death, when he lowered his head to the very blow of the axe with a happy and open face, reassured by his pure conscience, like one whose great courage faced that final end with more hope of life than fear of death" (trans., R.L. Deakins, p.20).

Although Sir Thomas More was beheaded by King Henry VIII, the Folio edition of his collected English *Works* was allowed to be printed and published in England by his eldest daughter, the very Catholic Mary I, whose mother, Catherine, Henry had divorced. Mary reigned for a brief time from 1553 to 1558. The *Works* appeared in 1557.

"The 'Pacifier' who would Meddle in a Family Quarrel"

And as touching that he saith not the things as of himself but bringeth them in with a figure of "Some say"-- to

that point some other say that for that courtesy no man hath any cause to can him any thank¹. For under his fair figure of "Some say" he may, ye wot well (and some say that he so doth), devise to bring in all the mischief that any man can say. And yet over this without his masker² of "Some say" he saith open-faced some of the worst himself, and that in some things that are as some true men say, not true.

Then, as touching his indifference, in telling the faults of the temporality too, of truth among a great heap of shrewd faults rehearsed against the clergy for which the temporality might, if the things were all true, seem to have great cause of grudge, he rehearseth also some faults of the temporality, too, as that they be to blame because they use the priests overfamiliarly and give them over-gay gowns or light colored liveries, and one or two such things more, as though they might be mended, yet were of no such kind as the priests that so be dealt with all, have been wont to find any cause of great grudge....

* * * * *

But now, good readers, if that it so were that one found two men standing together and would come step in between them and bear them in hand [as] they were about to fight, and would with that word put the one prettily back with his hand and all-to-buffet³ the other about the face, and then go forth and say that he had parted a fray and pacified the parties--some men

¹ *Can...thank*: offer...thanks

² Visor (of anonymity)

³ Slap about hard

would say again (as I suppose) that he had as lief his enemy were let alone with him, and thereof abide the adventure⁴, as

⁴ *Abide the adventure*: i.e., put up with his fate

have such a friend step in between to part them.

Howbeit this Pacifier of this division will say that this is nothing like the present matter because he striketh neither part but only telleth the one the other's faults, or else (as he will say) telleth them their faults both. If it so happeneth, good readers, he found a man that were angry with his wife (and happily not all without cause), this maker of the book of division would take upon him to go and reconcile them again together and help to make them at one, and therein would use this way; that when he had them both before him and before all their neighbours too, then saying for some chance to make it meet for their persons, else he would begin holily (with the same words in effect, with which he beginneth his indifferent mild book of division) and for an entry into his matter first would say thus unto them:

"Who may remember the state that ye stand in, without great heaviness and sorrow of heart? For whereas in times passed hath reigned between you charity, meekness, concord and peace, there reigneth now anger, and malice, debate, division and strife. Which thing to see so misfortunate between any two Christian folk is a thing much to be lamented, and then much more to be lamented when it mishappeneth to fall between a man and his wife. And may good neighbours greatly marvel, I wis, upon what causes this great grudge is grown. And therefore to the intent that ye may remove the causes and amend these matters, and thereby then by the grace of God agree, I will tell you what I hear men say that the causes be."

And now after holy prologue made, [he would] go forth and tell them that some folk say the wife hath this evil condition; and some others say that she hath that evil condition; and yet other some say that she hath another evil condition; and so with twenty divers "Some-says" of other men, say there himself by the poor women all the mischief that any

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man could devise to say, and among those, some things peradventure true, which yet her husband had never heard of before. And some things false also, whereof because the

Pacifier would be put unto no proof, he would not say them as of himself but bring them forth under the fair figure of "Some-say". And when he had all said, then yet at the last, say thus much of himself:

"As for these things here and there, I have heard some others say whether they say true or no, the charge be theirs, for me. But yet in good faith, good sister, sith ye know that the displeasure and grudge that your husband hath to you is grown upon these causes, I marvel much myself that you do use the same conditions still. I wis till you meek yourself and amend them, this anger of your husband will never be well appeased."

Lo! With such words he voideth the color of his fair figure of "Some-say," either by forgetfulness or else by the plain figure of folly. For when he saith of himself that she keepeth those evil conditions still and amendeth them not, he sheweth that all his "Some-says" be of his own saying, though he might happily in some of them hear some other say so, too, besides.

But then if among all these faults so mildly rehearsed against her, he would (to shew somewhat of his indifference) tell her husband his *pars vers*⁵ too, and say, "But yet, forsooth, your wife hath not given you so many causes of displeasure for naught. For I will be plain with you and indifferent between you both. You have in some things toward her not dealt very well, nor like a good husband yourself. For this I know myself that ye have used to make her too homely with you and have suffered her to be too much idle, and suffered her to be too much conversant among her gossips, and you have given her over-gay gear⁶ and too much money in her purse. And surely,

⁵ *Tell...his pars vers*: tell her husband his faults

⁶ *Over-gay gear*: i.e., personal or household goods too elegant or expensive

till you amend all this gear⁷ for your part, I cannot much marvel though she do you displeasure.

[IN MARGIN:Note this ye husbands!]

"And sometimes evil words between you causeth debate on both sides. For you call her (as I hear say) cursed quean⁸ and shrew; and some say that she behind your back calleth you knave and cuckold. And I wis such words were well done to be left on both sides, for surely they do no good, And there, if all those words were prohibited on both sides upon great pains, I think it would do a great good in this behalf."

"Now get you hence as wise as a calf," would I ween the good wife say to this good ghostly⁹ Pacifier. For spake he never so midly and would seem never so indifferent though he looked therewith right simply and held up also both his hands holily, and would therewith swear to the woman full deeply that his intent were good and that he nothing meant but to bring her husband and her at one--would she, think you, for all that, believe him? I suppose verily, nay. Nor her husband neither, if he were wise, although he saw some part of his tale true, as none is so foolish to say all false that would win his credence. But believe the husband as he list, I durst be bold to swear for the wife that he should never make her such a fool as to believe that he meant to mend the matter with rehearsing her faults more than ever her husband had heard of (and some of them false, too), and then color all his tale with his proper invention of "some-say". But she would for his "Some-say" shortly say to him, "I pray you, good man Some-say, get you shortly hence. For my husband and I shall agree much the sooner if no such brother Some-say come within our door."
[*The Apology of Sir Thomas More Knight*; Works, pp. 871b-872a; 872a-873b]

⁷ Business, "goings-on"

⁸ Brazen woman

⁹ Spiritual, clerical