

"The Riddle of the Wife of Culnam"

Now if he means to read his riddle in this fashion then he soileth¹ his strange riddle as bluntly as an old wife of Culnam did once among scholars of Oxford that sojourned with her for dearth². Which while they were on a time for their sport purposing riddles among them, she began to put forth one of hers, too, and said, "Aread³ my riddle, what is that: I knew one that shot at an hart and killed an haddock." And when we had everybody much mused how that might be, and then prayed her to declare her riddle herself, after long request she said at the last that there was once a fisher that came aland in a place where he saw an hart and shot thereat, but he hit it not, and afterward he went again to the sea and caught an haddock and killed it.

And surely Tyndale readeth his riddle much like, if he understand by his riddle they sin and yet sin not.

[*The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*; Works, p. 552a]

¹ Assoils, explains

² I.e., for economy

³ Solve

"A Bridegroom's Ring"

Now his example also of his bridegroom's ring, I very well allow. For I take the blessed sacrament to be left with us for a very token¹ and a memorial of Christ indeed. But I say that whole substance of the same token and memorial is his own blessed body, whereas this man would make it only bread.

And so I say that Christ hath left us a better token than this man would have us take it for, and therein fareth like a man to whom a bridegroom had delivered a goodly gold ring with a rich ruby therein to deliver over to his bride for a token, and then he would, like a false shrew², keep away that gold ring and give the bride in the stead thereof a proper ring of a rush³, and tell her that the bridegroom would send her no better: or else, like one that when the bridegroom had given such a gold ring to his bride for a token, would tell her plain and make her believe that the ring were but copper or brass, to minish the bridegroom's thank⁴.

[*A Letter of Sir Thomas More Knight impugning the erroneous writing of John Frith against the blessed Sacrament of the Altar*; Works, p. 835a]

¹ Symbol, keepsake

² Villain

³ *Ring of a rush*: mock wedding ring

⁴ Love, gratitude

NOTES

- (1) More here disputes John Frith's views of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Frith argued that the wine and wafer taken at Communion were symbolic representations of the blood and body of Christ. More held the traditional Roman Catholic doctrine that the whole substance of the bread and the wine are actually changed into the body and the blood of Christ. More draws an analogy between the Protestant doctrine of transubstantiation and a cheap imitation wedding-ring. For a full discussion of the Eucharistic controversy, see Introduction to *The Answer to a Poisoned Book*, edited by Stephen Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller (CW 11, pp. xvii-lxi).

"A Wife's Comment on a Sermon"

Now was this word taken up and walked about abroad among the brethren and sistern, so highly well-liked among them that some of them said that all my reasons were avoided clean with the one word. Howbeit, indeed, one of their own wives yet told her own husband at home, when she heard him boast it how jollily it was preached:--

"Better poisoned bread than no bread, By Our Lakins¹, brother husband," quoth she, "but as properly as it was preached yet would I rather abide the peril of breeding worms in my belly by eating of flesh without bread than to eat with my meat the bread that I wist well were poisoned."

[*The Apology of Sir Thomas More Knight*, Works, p.849b]

¹ Lady, i.e., Mary, Mother of Jesus

"The Witch who prescribed Medicines"

[Anthony] "And many fond fools are there that when they lie sick will meddle with no physic in no manner wise, nor send his water to no cunning man¹ but send his cap or his hose to a wise-woman, otherwise called a witch. Then sendeth she word again that she hath spied in his hose where, when he took no heed, he was taken with a spirit between two doors as he went in the twilight; but the spirit would not let him feel it in five days after, and it hath all the while festered in his body; and that is the grief that paineth him so sore. But let him go to no leechcraft², nor any manner physic, other then good meat and strong drink, for syrups³ should sauce him up⁴. But he shall have five leaves of valerian that she enchanted with a charm and gathered with her left hand. Let him lay those five leaves to his right thumb, not bind it fast to, but let it hang loose thereat by a green thread. He shall never need to change it. Look it fall not away, but let it hang till he be whole and he shall need no more.

"In such wise witches and in such mad medicines have there many fools more faith a great deal than in God. And thus, cousin, as I tell you, all these kind of folk that in their tribulation call not upon God but seek for their ease and help otherwhere to the flesh and the world, and to the flinging⁵ fiend."

[*A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*; Works, p. 1163a]

NOTES

¹ *Cunning man*: i.e., doctor

² Phlebotomy (bloodletting)

³ Medicated liquids

⁴ *Sauce him up*: i.e., make him feel better

⁵ Raging

- (1) **Nor send his water:** Numerous popular medical works were published during More's life-time which treated the subject of urine analysis. The most popular and first printed work fully concerned with the subject in English was *The Seynge of Uryns of all Colors that Uryns be of. With Medycynes annexed to every Uryne* (1525), which book quickly passed through at least eleven editions in less than forty years. The printer provided illustrations of specimen containers as rubrics for each section! According to *The Seynge*, a diseased person's urine might be colored white, flesh-colored, yellow, red, black, green or some variation thereof, depending upon the particular disease.
- (2) From ancient times until as late as the nineteenth century, there were three common methods of curing almost any sickness: phlebotomy; the giving of laxatives; or the prescribing of medicines to induce vomiting. Phlebotomy, that is, cutting and cupping blood or sucking blood out by leeches, was believed to benefit an ill person by renewing his senses. It also helped to clean the brain, relieve eye soreness, restore sleep, correct imbalance of humours and even to mend the voice. Detailed instructions were provided for the correct time of day, month, season of year, etc., for drawing of blood, as well as giving the precise locations and methods of extracting it, as seen for example in sections 82-91 of *Regimen sanitatis Salerni*. This popular medieval work was translated in 1530 by Thomas Paynell, the patient priest who lovingly compiled a lengthy but quite useless "Table of many matters" contained in Sir Thomas More's *English Works*. In a later adaptation of the *Regimen*, Sir John Harington spells out the precise equipment required for

the delicate operation: viz., a linen fillet about one ell long and two fingers wide, with strings; two square bolsters; two vessels to receive the blood; a sponge with warm water; two assistants who "must have no fear"; and vinegar, wine, or wine and essence of Rosemary, to revive a patient who faints (*The Englishmans Doctor*, 1608, section 64).

- (3) **Valerian** (compare heliotrope) "which some do call the blessed herb," has roots which were used often as a cerebro-spinal stimulant, or, with opium, as a sedative. According to *The Great Herbal* (1526), Valerian "is hot and dry in the second degree. The roots be gathered in summer and dried in the sun and may be kept 3 years in goodness." It was used by physicians to cure "strangury," a disease of the urinary tract, and the gout. For liver ailments, it was recommended together with wine and fennel seed. Most herbal medicines were based ultimately upon *The Greek Herbal of Discorides*, in medieval Latin versions.

"Evensong and Matins"

"Of saying service," quoth I, "this is much like as at

Beverley late, when much of the people being at bear-baiting, the church fell suddenly down at Evensong time and overwhelmed some that then were in it. A good fellow that after heard the tale told:--

"'Lo!' quoth he, 'now may you see what it is to be at Evensong when ye should be at the bear-baiting.'

"Howbeit, the hurt was not there in being at Evensong but in that the church was falsely wrought. So was in him or any man else none harm but good in saying of divine service, but the occasion of harm is in the superstitious fashion that their own folly joyneth there unto, as some think they say it not but if they say every psalm twice."

"In faith," quoth your friend, "then if I were as he, I would mumble it up a pace or else say none at all." "That were as evil," quoth I, "on the other side. There is a mean may serve between both."

"Ye," quoth he, "but wot ye what the wife said that complained to her gossip¹ of her husband's frowardness? She said her husband was so wayward that he would never be pleased, for if his bread (quoth she) be dough-baken², then is he angry. 'Marry, no marvel,' quoth her gossip. 'Marry, and wot ye what, gossip?' quoth she. And if I bake it all to hard coals yet is he not content neither, by Saint James. 'No,' quoth her gossip, 'ye should bake it in a mean³.' 'In a mean?' quoth she, 'marry, I cannot happen on it.'"

"And so in a pair of Matins⁴ it is much work to happen

on the mean. And then to say them too short is lack of devotion. And to say them too seriously is somewhat superstitious. And therefore the best way were, in my mind, to

¹ Close friend

² I.e., imperfectly baked (too doughy)

³ *In a mean*: i.e., moderately

⁴ Prayers recited sometimes at daybreak; *pair*: i.e., "set of"

say none at all."

"Ye," quoth I, "but then is God as wayward an husband as ye spoke of, that will neither be content with his bread burned to coals nor dough-baken neither."

"By Our Lady," quoth he, "but be He content or not, I ween he hath much dough-baken bread among. For the Matins I tell you be in some places sung faster than I can say them."

"Peradventure," quoth I, "so were it need. For if they should sing Matins no faster than ye say them they should, I ween, sing very few Matins in a year."

"In faith," quoth he, "and some that say them make me to doubt much whether the bees in their hives use to say Matins among them, for even such an other buzzing they make."

[*A Dialogue concerning Heresies*; Works; p. 208a-b]

NOTES

- (1) **Baiting of bears** (and bulls) by dogs was a legitimate and leading national sport in More's day, and had its origin in classical antiquity. Bears were maintained for the purposes of baiting, and under Henry VIII the mastership of the royal game of bears, bulls, and mastiff dogs became a Court office. In 1526 (two years prior to More's writing the above passage) the Manor of Paris Garden, a kind of circus or amphitheatre for such contests, was erected on the Bankside in Southwark. A thousand spectators were provided for in this one building. About 1570 a second circus was added for bull-baiting, and the older ring was then used almost entirely for bearbaiting (P. Simpson, II, p. 428). Occasionally there were mishaps involving the escape of bears used for baiting. Henry VIII was unexpectedly entertained in his boat on the Thames once when a bear broke loose in an accompanying boat, causing the guards to fall into the water and sinking the boat itself, dumping Archbishop Cramer's secretary into the river. Henry commanded swimmers to strip naked and save the floundering passengers (A.F. Pollard, p. 31f.).

the Nature of the Universe"

Then must Tyndale, if he make his reason like mine, make the synagogue of the Jews like to the church of Christ in perpetuity of lasting and continuance upon earth, or else shall his argument and his example be as like to mine as I wist once a gentlewoman made unto her husband, which longed sore to teach her and make her perceive the treatise of the sphere, and bidding her consider well what he should shew her.

"And first he began at the earth and to make her perceive that the earth hangeth in the midst of the world by the peise¹ and weight of himself; and the air compassing the water; and the earth round about on every side."

'Ye must,' quoth he, 'learn and mark well this, that in the whole world, higher and lower, is nothing else but utter and inner; so that of the whole world, earth, water, air, and all the spheres above being each in a round compass over other, the earth lieth in the very midst, and, as we might say, in the womb; and that is of the whole world from every part the innermost place, and from it upon all sides toward the heaven (as it is outward, so it is higher), so that, as I tell you, in the whole world all is one higher and more outward, lower and more inward. And therefore the earth, sith he is in the very midst (that is, the most inward place of the whole world), he is, therefore, in the lowest (for of the whole world, the inmost is as I told you the lowest). And then, sith the earth lieth in the lowest, his own weight, ye wot well, must needs hold him there, because, ye perceive yourself that no heavy thing can of himself ascend upward.

'And then the earth lying already in the lowest place, if he should fall out of place on any side (like as he should fall

¹ Weight, importance

from the inner part to the utter), so should he fall from the lower place into the higher. And that, ye wot well, it cannot, because it is heavy. And, therefore, imagine that there were an hole bored even through the whole earth. If there were a millstone thrown down here on this side from our feet, it should finally rest and remain in the very midst of the earth. And though the hole go through, yet the stone could not fall through because that from the midst, as it should go outward from the innermost part, so should it--which a millstone may not do--ascend higher from the lowest place, because (as I told you) in the whole world upon every side, to go outward from the innermost is ascending, and to go inward from the uttermost is descending; and ever the utter part is on every side of the whole round world the higher, and the inner part, the lower.'

"Now while he was telling her this tale, she nothing went about to consider his words but, as she was wont in all other things, studied all the while nothing else but what she might say to the contrary. And when he had with much work and oft interrupting brought at last his tale to an end:--

'Well, quoth she to him, as Tyndale saith to me, 'I will argue like and make you a like example. My maid hath yonder a spinning wheel; or else, because all your reason resteth in the roundness of the world:--

"Come hither, thou girl, take out thy spindle and bring me hither the whorl²."

"--Lo, Sir, ye make imaginations I cannot tell you what. But here is a whorl and it is round as the world is, and we shall not need to imagine an hole bored through, for it hath an hole bored through, indeed. But yet (because ye go by imaginations) I will imagine with you. Imagine me now that this whorl were ten miles thick on every side, and this hole through it still; and so great that a millstone might well go through it.

² Flywheel in a spindle

Now if the whorl stood on the one end and a millstone were thrown in above at the other and, would it go no further than the midst, trow you? By God, if one threw in a stone no bigger than an egg, I ween if ye stood in the nether end of the hole five miles beneath the midst, it would give you [such] a pat upon the pate that it would make you claw³ your head, and yet should ye feel none itch at all!"

[IN MARGIN: *Woman lack no words!*]

"It were too long a tale to tell you all their dispositions. For words would she none have lacked, though they should have disputed the space of seven years. But, in conclusion, because there is no more words but one whereby he might give her a true example, nor she could not perceive the difference between the world and the whorl but would needs have them like and both one (because both were round), her husband was fain⁴ to put up his sphere and leave his wife her whorl, and fall in talking of some other matter."

[*The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, Works, pp. 628a-629a]

³ Scratch

⁴ Obligated

NOTES

- (1) More's complex "clarification" of the nature of the universe is drawn from medieval adaptations of classical theories devised chiefly by Ptolemy in his *Almagest*. The geocentric universe was believed to have consisted of an orderly series of spheres, one enclosed and rotating within the other, much like the popular Chinese ivory ball. At the center was the Earth, lowly in position and yet dignified as the center of all the spheres; it was fixed immovably in space and subject to the influences of the ever-widening spheres which surrounded it. Beyond the elements lay the crystalline spheres of the Moon, the Sun, and the known planets: they were thought of as hollow spheres nestled within each other and giving off individual musical notes by intelligences or (later) by angels, together producing heavenly music. Beyond the planetary spheres lay the sphere of the fixed stars and beyond that the *Primum Mobile*, or Prime Mover (M. Boas, p. 40). The Husband in More's tale also tries to explain gravity, which theory baffles and annoys the Wife, and perhaps for good reason: Ptolemy himself had only a vague conception of a force which tended toward the center of the earth and which not only kept bodies upon its surface but in some way also upheld the order of the universe. It was not until Sir Isaac Newton that the law of gravity was clearly formulated.

More was not the only one who tried to explain the operation of the orbs and failed. His own brother-in-law, John Rastell, printed (and probably also wrote) a short interlude called *The Four Elements* (ca. 1525) in which Mother Nature tries to explain that Earth is a point or center "situate in the midst of the world," and that "it is of itself pondrous and heavy"; and every star

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and sphere in a strange manner "upon his own poles moveth diversely, which now to declare were too long to tarry"--"Nature" (and Rastell) appear simply to give up.

- (2) This present tale of a good wife who would teach her husband a "lesson" when he tries to teach her the nature of the heavenly spheres is a *tour de force* in self-parodying obfuscation. The husband presents a description of the globe, its enveloping spheres, and the forces of gravity relating to their nature in a highly complicated, redundant manner. But the wife ridicules her husband in her own discussion of the spinning wheel. More most likely conceals a polemical message in this digression.
- (3) In Ellis Heywood's *// Moro* (A Dialogue in Memory of Thomas More, written in Italian) Sir Thomas More's wife, Dame Alice, berates the scholars in much the same manner as the Wife in this section: [Peter] "Laurence, you have fallen into the great error of equating a beautiful woman, that is, a material body, with the discovery of her beauty, which is a subtle proportion that only strikes our eyes by rare good fortune. So will I answer your [Laurence's] argument by saying that is exactly like that stroke of genius of Madame, your wife, Mr. More [*Madama la vostra consorte S.T. Moro*], which I have several times intended to tell you. It was one time when we were instructing your daughters in the properties of the line and were having difficulty making clear to them that it is mere length without breadth or depth. After the lesson was over, she had the children called to her

NOTES (continued)

room, saying. 'What is the matter with my girls? Does their father have to beat his brains for a whole hour to show them what a line is? Look here, you silly things,' and she pointed to a great beam that crossed the roof of the room, 'this is what a line is.' " (Trans., R.L. Deakins, p. 52f).

- (4) The character of Dame Alice presents a contradiction not easy to figure out by More's biographers. Manley holds that More's portrait of Dame Alice "was probably a truthful portrayal of her as she functioned in the society of the family" but it was "a quasi-literary creation of More's own", no doubt a "caricature" (CW 12, p. cxxxix) though a rough and gruffly affectionate gesture toward Dame Alice herself. On the other hand, Professor Elton (*More Symposium*, p. 113) considers More's portrayal as "mildly contemptuous": More "did not disguise his conviction that his second wife was a bit of a fool" (quoted by Manley, CW 12, p. cxl, footnote 1). Richard Marius, the most thorough analyst of her character, calls her "quarrelsome, petty, ignorant, and even stupid" (*Thomas More*, p. 42); and if she was the character of the Wife in the story of the Sphere, she "made no effort to understand" when More was "trying to teach her something to improve her mind, something abstract and intellectual and beyond her" (p. 218-219). But far from stupid, she was as Marius himself admits, "a good steward" as a household manager (p. 41) who gave "loving attention to More's offspring," which must have required a pleasant, not quarrelsome, nature. Furthermore, she took over large managerial responsibilities of the establishment at the "Old Barge" in Bucklersbury Street (p. 218); and when they moved to Chelsea in 1524, these responsibilities increased and

Alice "handled them efficiently". More wrote to her once asking what they should do, seeking good counsel from one "in whom he had complete confidence" (p. 218). Perhaps most significantly, More addressed Dame Alice "as the religious leader of the band when he was away" (p. 231). His marriage, unhappily, however, "may have been a continuing penance" (p. 42): indeed, Marius questions whether or not More slept with his wife. Possibly More did write some tales "as illustrations of female stupidity" in the bad medieval tradition of misogyny, but there appears to be ample evidence that More's own wife, Dame Alice, was *not* an example herself.