The Role of Humor in Reforming the Imagination in St. Thomas More's *The Sadness of Christ* and *A Dialogue of Comfort*

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This essay analyzes More's use of humor in *The Sadness of Christ* and *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*, and finds that rhetorical devices such as satire, parody and the telling of merry tales play an integral role in engaging the reader's imagination. In these two late works, dealing with the most serious of subjects, the humanist More embraces the rhetorical tradition of Antiquity which assigned a creative function to the imagination and recognized mockery, irony and humor as means of rational persuasion. The essay finds that More provokes laughter for three interrelated aims—to correct and inform the understanding, to strengthen communal bonds, and ultimately to express the joyful hope of the beatific vision.
Keywords: humor, irony, laughter, jokes, merry tales, imagination, friendship

Cette étude analyse l'usage de l'humour dans De tristitia Christi *(*La tristesse du Christ*) et* Dialogue of Comfort *le* Dialogue du réconfort*, et ce faisant, découvre que les procédés rhétoriques tels que la satire, la parodie et les histoires drôles jouent un rôle intrinsèque en faisant appel à l'imagination du lecteur. Dans ces deux dernières œuvres de More, qui traitent des sujets les plus sérieux, l'humaniste embrasse la tradition rhétorique de l'Antiquité qui attribue une fonction créative à l'imagination et reconnaît la moquerie, l'ironie et l'humour comme moyens rationnels de persuasion. L'étude démontre que More provoque le rire dans trois buts*

différents : pour corriger et informer la compréhension, pour renforcer les liens communautaires, et finalement, pour exprimer l'espérance joyeuse de la vision béatifique.

Mots-clés : humour, ironie, rire, blagues, histoires drôles, imagination, amitié

Se analiza en este ensayo el uso que More hace del humor en *La tristeza de Cristo* y *El Diálogo del Consuelo contra la Tribulación*, mostrando que algunos recursos retóricos (sátira, parodia o la narración de cuentos divertidos) juegan un papel integral a la hora de atraer la imaginación del lector. En estos dos trabajos tardíos, mientras se abordan cuestiones tan solemnes, el humanista More abraza aquella tradición retórica de la antigüedad que asignaba una función creativa a la imaginación, al tiempo entendía la burla, la ironía y el humor como formas de persuasión racional. En este ensayo se aclara cómo More provoca la carcajada para conseguir tres fines relacionados entre sí: corregir e informar el intelecto; reforzar los lazos comunes; y, en último término, expresar la esperanza gozosa en la visión beatífica.

Palabras clave: humor, ironía, carcajada, chistes, cuentos divertidos, imaginación, amistad

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> *Now come I to the last fault that the brethren find in my books … that is to wit, where they reprove that I bring in among the most earnest matters, fancies and sports and merry tales. For as Horace saith, a man may sometimes say full sooth in game. And one that is but a layman, as I am, it may better haply become him merrily to tell his mind than seriously and solemnly to preach.*
>
> The Apology of Sir Thomas More, Ch. 20 (*CW* 9)

Introduction

St. Thomas More's imprisonment did not mark the end of his literary output. On the contrary, his efforts to "set the Lord ever before" himself included writing books. Great labors of the imagination, it seems, were an integral part of a personal struggle to be conformed to God's will. *The Sadness of Christ* and *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation* share a common aim: to reform the reader's imagination and, one might add, especially in light of the circumstances of their composition, to strengthen the imagination of the author himself, as he prepared for almost certain execution. Furthermore, in these two works More relies on humor as an essential means of forming a "right imagination"[1] (*Dialogue*, 3.26 at 308, 3.27 at 312).[2] For a spiritually-serious man, writing for his own spiritual nourishment and that of his readers, to recognize the need to reform the imagination is hardly noteworthy. What makes More's case remarkable is his heavy, although by no means exclusive,

[1] In the final book of the *Dialogue*, More uses the phrase, "rightful imagination," four times—three times in Chapter 26 and once in Chapter 27.

[2] All citations refer to *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, Center for Thomas More Studies, 2014 e-text (M. Gottschalk ed.), usually by chapter and page.

reliance on humor—satire, sarcasm and earthy "merry tales." In the Tower of London, contemplating a probable sentence of being hanged, drawn and quartered, More finds humor to be more than a solace or refreshment required by man's social nature. The laughter provoked by humor corrects, instructs, strengthens communal bonds, and expresses the confident expectation of the beatific vision.

At the outset, we must appreciate More's concept of imagination, which derives from the human, rational psychology of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.

> In orthodox scholastic psychology the imagination received the impression of the various senses and combined them by means of the *sensus communis*, passing the image of the thing perceived on to the storehouse of the memory. Thus memory and imagination were closely allied. One had to do with the immediate perception of images, the other with their remembrance. (*CW* 12, cxv-cxvi, fn. 2)

As William Rossky explains, the English Renaissance recovered and embraced the classical notion of imagination which

> unites the various reports of the senses into impressions that are in turn submitted to the examination of a rational power and then passed to memory which retains the impressions and reflects them back to the Imagination and Sensible Reason, should they return to it to recall past incidents. (Rossky 51)[3]

The understanding oversees these faculties and functions, and uses its powers to judge those memories and inform the will.

It follows that an imagination is healthy to the extent that it reflects accurate images of reality. Distorted images can betray reason, distort the judgment and mislead the will into immorality (Rossky 51, 53). For instance, apropos the concerns of the *Dialogue*, when a person is moved by a disordered passion or beset with

[3] William Rossky, "Imagination in The English Renaissance: Psychology and Poetic," *Studies in the Renaissance*, Vol. V, 1989, p.49-73.

"distorted, excessive emotions," his imagination will present a distorted image of reality to the understanding, likely to stimulate irrational terrors (Rossky 63). More understood that reason ought to "direct[] our affections" (*CW* 12, cxiii), which meant that a sound imagination depends on the soul's being governed by reason (Rossky, 63-64).

If imagination's role is to place accurate images of reality before the understanding, what purpose is served by the *Dialogue*'s satire, sarcasm and fictionalized merry tales? The humanist More embraces the rhetorical tradition of Antiquity which assigned a creative function to the imagination. As such, it can "'[f]eign,' 'forge,' [and] 'coyn'" (Rossky 57). Furthermore, "an especially legitimate manifestation of the feigning power of imagination occurs when, feigning [i.e., creating] images which act as counters of thought, it invents, and thus aids in the discovery or creation of new and valuable matter" (Rossky 61). At the same time, however, there was no guarantee that such imaginative creations would be "valuable." All rhetoricians in this tradition—whether Cicero or Sir Philip Sidney—recognize that imaginative creations can serve good or bad ends, which, in turn, depend on whether the creative power is controlled by reason or emotion. Accordingly, the good poet carefully fashions images in the light of reason. His "imagination does not lie, for it creates lifelike, verisimilar imitations of life which thus tell the truth about life" (Rossky 66). The true poet "molds his images to secure the proper, moral response" (Rossky 71). Thus, More's satirical images and merry tales are fictions which present "higher concepts and truths through their embodiment in the concrete" in order to "illustrate […] virtues and teach higher abstract truth by rhetorical example" (Rossky 68).

More evokes laughter in three distinct but intertwined ways: to correct error; to reinforce communal bonds; and to manifest hope. Corrective or transformative laughter issues from a reversal caused

by a defective (often prideful) understanding. More is acutely aware of the reforming power of humor—*castigat ridendo mores*. We are spiritual dullards; our faith is weak. The unreformed imagination sets before us created (usually, sensible) goods in their most alluring forms; in contrast, spiritual goods, including God Himself, are remote and elusive. They do not readily attract. Similarly, to the unreformed imagination, the loss of created goods is a source of alarming anxiety and distress.

> I am struck, [More writes in *The Sadness of Christ*] by the lamentable obscurity of the miserable human condition: often we are distressed and fearful, ignorant all the while that we are quite safe; often, on the other hand, we act as if we had not a care in the world, unaware that the death-dealing sword hangs over our heads. (SC 83)[4]

We do not naturally love what we ought; nor do we naturally fear what we ought. How does one shape the imagination so that it aligns with the truth about the hierarchy of goods and the preeminence of our greatest good? Addressing this ageless dilemma of the spiritual life—sensible goods attract but scarcely satisfy us, while spiritual goods fail to attract but do satisfy us—More opts (in part) for humor. Thus, in the *Dialogue*, Antony recounts how a presumptuous young horseman, who lived a life of sin in the belief that he could make things right with his Maker at the end—a mere "three words" would "make all safe" for salvation—was unexpectedly cast off a broken bridge and died with the words, "Have all to the devil!" on his lips, rather than the saving phrase (2.6 at 92).

M. A. Screech makes an important distinction about corrective humor. Where satire is aroused by "moral indignation and hatred of wickedness" it commands "sardonic laughter." In contrast, there is the "humane laughter" of the "comic satirist" (typified by Rabelais),

[4] All citations to Thomas More, *The Sadness of Christ,* trans. C. Miller, ed. G. Wegemer (Scepter, 1993).

who "can drive out fear at its most acute," and whose "artistic challenge is to turn evil and error, even at their most frightful and terrible, into sources of amusement and laughter" (Screech 5).[5] More in the *Sadness* and the *Dialogue* shows himself to be a master of both sorts of humor. The *Sadness* especially is rife with satire. His greater achievement, however, lies in mastering the more difficult (and entertaining and, perhaps for that reason, more effective) humane laughter, evident in the *Dialogue*.

There is also a community-making or communal laughter of merriment and joy which knits people together in mutual understanding. Humor of this type derives from the concept of *eutrapelia* or *delectatio*,[6] a virtue recognized by St. Thomas Aquinas as the delight and pleasure from sporting and jesting needed to relieve the mind. It is "innocent, moral laughter emanating from joy or fresh delight" and conducing to "the right of joyful laughter to warm the hearts of Christian folk" (Screech, *Laughter*, 140).[7] This laughter, which is "moral" and "Christian," goes beyond mere bonhomie and supplies mutual support to stay a difficult course—which is to say that it shades into laughter reinforcing Christian hope.

In all cases, however, laughter assumes a normative order from which the "butt" has deviated, with derision directed at a defective act or life (Buckley 10).[8] Of course, the comic defect must be correctable, otherwise the joke would be pointless (Buckley 13), and (from a Christian perspective) hopeless. Fittingly, More always has Antony offer strategies for recovering the spiritual virtues needed to remedy the defect, usually by pointing toward a path of humility.

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[5] M. A. Screech, *Rabelais* (Duckworth, London 1979).

[6] Carlo De Marchi aligns *eutrapelia* with the concept of *iucunditas* that Aquinas recovered from the thought of Cicero (De Marchi, "Thomas Aquinas, Thomas More and the Vindication of Humor as a Virtue: *Eutrapelia* and *Iucnditas*," in this same *Moreana* issue, p.95-107).

[7] M. A. Screech, *Laughter at the Foot of the Cross* (Westview P, 1997).

[8] F. H. Buckley, *The Morality of Laughter* (U of Michigan P, 2005).

In addition, because laughter assumes agreement about certain values (Buckley 184), it establishes a bond of trust between the "wit" and the listener. The two become united in the recognition of the comic defect and acceptance of the corresponding virtue. Indeed, through the telling of jokes and merry tales, Antony and Vincent's friendship deepens, along with their mutual trust (*see* Buckley 19). At the same time, More establishes a community of orthodox faith with his sympathetic readers out of Antony and Vincent's shared beliefs. In this way, humor assists in creating and promoting More's "notion of Church as an authoritative discourse community."[9]

Finally, humor serves as evidence and reinforcement that an omniscient and all-loving God is in charge. Thus, for More, laughter is even more than a rhetorical strategy of surpassing pedigree to correct and to reinforce a community of reform. The Catholic faith positively enjoins him to be merry. Indeed, it was his distinguishing attribute, singled out for admiration by his friends and—on occasion—condemnation by his foes. Even taking into account that Erasmus was writing a formulaic panegyric, one concludes with confidence that More cultivated a robust sense of humor. According to Erasmus, More was "disposed to be merry rather than serious or solemn, but without a hint of the fool or the buffoon," and "[f]rom boyhood he has taken such taken such pleasure in jesting that he might seem born for it, but in this he never goes as far as buffoonery" (Letter of 23 July 1519; *TMSB* 5, 7). Similarly, the More of Mundy and Shakespeare's play personifies the title of the play within that play, *The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom*, and exemplifies those twin qualities up to and including his execution (*Sir Thomas More* in *TMSB* 117, 120-24, 152-56)[10]. In contrast, the chronicler of Henry VIII, Edward Hall, in relating More's witticisms

[9] T. Curtright, *The One Thomas More* (Catholic U of America P, 2012) 13.

[10] *A Thomas More Source Book,* Gerard B. Wegemer and Stephen W. Smith, eds. (Washington DC: Catholic U of America P., 2004).

in the Tower and upon the scaffold, found that same marriage a reason for censure:

> I cannot tell whether I shoulde call him a foolishe wyseman, or a wise foolishman, for undoubtedly he beside his learnyng, had a great witte but it was so myngled with tauntyng and mockyng, that it semed to them that best knew him, that he thought nothing to be wel spoken except he had ministred some mocke in the communicacion. (*Lives of the Kings, Henry VIII*, Edward Hall, volume II, London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1904)

As we will show, Hall mistook for mocking the expression of radical reliance on divine assistance. As Frank Manley points out in his introduction to the *Dialogue*,

> More's mirth, which gives his literary works and his life their unique and most characteristic quality, is one of the most mysterious elements in the man, overwhelmingly easy to enjoy, but difficult to understand and fully comprehend (*CW* 12, xcvii-xcviii).

In the light of Catholic belief and practice, More's humor is perhaps less mysterious or difficult to understand—although no less admirable. Indeed, for Walter Gordon, More's laughter arises from the virtue of hope and trust in God's providential order: "The sign of hope is merriness that arises spontaneously as water from a spring".[11] We see obvious examples of merriment born of and meant to reinforce hope especially in Book Three of the *Dialogue*, which opens with news of the imminent invasion of the Turk. For instance, despite their dire circumstances, Antony and Vincent engage in a friendly exchange of the Aesopian tales of the snail and the "old hart" for their mutual encouragement and refreshment. As Gordon observes, More's own joking on the scaffold is the paradigm of such

[11] Walter M. Gordon, "Hope's Movement Toward Love in More and Aquinas," *Moreana* 40.153/154 (Mar 2003), 159–172.

humor (Gordon, 170). Ultimately, all the humor in both *The Sadness of Christ* and the *Dialogue* advances this particular purpose of manifesting and reinforcing hope. Hope, the guarantee of heaven, finds its expression in merriment. It also supplies the reason why More considers himself and his reader capable of reform and why he considers a community of believers amenable to mutual support.

Humor's Role in *De Tristitia Christi*

In *The Sadness of Christ*, this aim of reforming the imagination is set out early with force and clarity.

> [C]ontemplate with a devout mind our commander lying on the ground in humble supplication; for if we do this carefully, a ray of that light which enlightens every man who comes into the world will illuminate our minds so that we will see, recognize, deplore, and at long last correct, I will not say negligence, sloth or apathy, but rather the feeblemindedness, the insanity, the downright blockheaded stupidity with which most of us approach the all-powerful God and instead of praying reverently, address Him in a lazy and sleepy sort of way; and by the same token I am very much afraid that instead of placating Him and gaining His favor we exasperate Him and sharply provoke His wrath (SC 18).

Focusing on "feeblemindedness, insanity and blockheaded stupidity," in contrast with "negligence, sloth or apathy," More diagnoses the besetting defect to be one of the intellect, and not so much the will. We need sound judgment and, above all, faith: "I simply cannot imagine how such thoughts can gain entrance into the minds of men when they are praying … unless it be through weakness of faith. …. [C]ertainly it could never happen that our minds should stray even the least bit while we are praying to God—

certainly not, that is, if we behaved with a strong and active faith that we are in the presence of God …" (SC 22).

There is scarcely a more somber subject than Christ's passion. And yet, in this commentary, humor strengthens judgment and increases faith. "For in man reason ought to reign like a king, and it does truly reign when it makes itself loyally subject to faith and serves God" (SC 93). To help us believe without seeing, that is, to increase our faith, More employs sensible and even gross images. Thus he redirects the imaginative force commanded by sensible objects to impress on us the preeminence of the supernatural order. *The Sadness of Christ* begins with the Last Supper; and More immediately hits the theme of our sluggishness—our failure to live in a manner consistent with ultimate truths—by sarcastically evoking the homely image of a typical banquet:

> Alas, how different we are from Christ, though we call ourselves Christians: our conversations during meals is not only meaningless and inconsequential … but often our table-talk is also vicious; and then finally, when we are bloated with food and drink, we leave the table without giving thanks to God for the banquets He has bestowed upon us, with never a thought for the gratitude we owe him (SC 1).

Thus, that palpable feeling of over-indulgence and shame is evoked to redirect one's attention to God.

Throughout the work, More recurs to this slightly hyperbolic, mocking and satiric tone, which aims to impress on the reader's imagination the great distance between how we ought to behave and how we do behave. At the same time, the consistent use of the first person plural reinforces the tone of fellowship and equality between author and reader—we share the moral understandings, as well as the moral failings, that inform the satire. More's criticism does not issue from a position of superiority and does not shade into derision. And

when More writes in the second person, it is only to invite the reader to consider a point in a new light, and rarely to accuse.[12]

This approach gives rise to the arguably most best-known passage in *The Sadness of Christ*. More deploys the surprisingly gross and, therefore, durable image of someone picking his nose instead of addressing God during prayer.

> And then our actions too, in how many ways do they betray that our minds are wandering miles away? We scratch our heads, clean our fingernails with a pocketknife, pick our noses with our fingers, meanwhile making the wrong responses" (SC 20).

That this passage is so well known and repeatedly quoted demonstrates the success of More's attempt to engage the imagination.

In the next passage, More alludes not very subtly to his own situation and compounds the humor by analogizing the distracted Christian at prayer to a royal subject imprisoned "for high treason against some mortal prince" (SC 20).

> Now when you have been brought into the presence of the prince, go ahead and speak to him carelessly, casually, without the least concern. While he stays in one place and listens attentively, stroll around here and there as you run

[12] Of course, in one of the most powerful and famous passages of *Sadness of Christ*, More abandons this approach and delivers a rebuke. First, he observes how we respond to the demands of Christianity with "sloth and sleepiness," while the enemies of Christ and His Church are "wide awake" (SC 46). But his rhetorical shift is made all the more poignant when he traces this lack of vigilance to the bishops of his own age: "Why do not the bishops contemplate in this scene [of the apostle sleeping during Christ's agony in Gethsemane] their own somnolence?" (SC 46). His bitter disappointment is evident as to "those bishops who sleep while virtue and the faith are placed in jeopardy," because they "do not drift into sleep through sadness and grief as the apostles did. Rather, they are numbed and buried in destructive desires; that is, drunk with the new wine of the devil, the flesh, and the world, they sleep like pigs sprawling in the mire" (SC 46).

> through your plea. Then when you have had enough of walking up and down, sit down on a chair, or if courtesy seems to require that you condescend to kneel down, first command someone to come and place a cushion beneath your knees, or better yet, to bring a prie-dieu with another cushion to lean your elbows on. Then yawn, stretch, sneeze, spit without giving it a thought, and belch up the fumes of your gluttony. ... Tell me now, what success could you hope for from such a plea as this? (SC 20-21)

Thus, More makes a joke about himself. On the one hand, there is the hyper-awareness of his conduct vis-à-vis the king; on the other, there is the casualness of the direct dealings with God. With those who see the incongruity and get the joke, bonds are strengthened and hope is refreshed.

The sarcasm on which More often relies in *The Sadness of Christ* plays a smaller role in the *Dialogue of Comfort*. And this difference makes sense given the direct approach of *The Sadness of Christ* in contrast to the discursive nature of the *Dialogue*, not to mention its dialogic form. This less subtle means of address in *The Sadness of Christ* is highlighted by a passage in which More deals with the same themes and images used in the *Dialogue*:

> Christ tells us to stay awake, but not for cards and dice, not for rowdy parties and drunken brawls, not for wine and women, but for prayer. He tells us to pray not occasionally but constantly. "Pray," he says, "unceasingly." … [O]ur savior tells us to pray, not that we may roll in wealth, not that we may live in a continuous round of pleasure, not that something awful may happen to our enemies, not that we may receive honor in this world, but rather that we may not enter into temptation (SC 27-28).

The humor issues from an exaggerated, overly-direct tone. In a similar vein, *The Sadness of Christ* takes up the examples of Tobias and Job: "Now it is true that both of them bore their calamities bravely and patiently, but neither of them, so far as I know, was

exactly jumping with joy or clapping his hands out of happiness" (SC 41-42). In contrast, however, in the *Dialogue*, More deploys other forms of humor beside sarcasm to advance the work's core concern, namely, how to accept sufferings in their myriad manifestations.

The Sadness of Christ includes an explicit defense of the use of humor, indeed of all "figures of speech," in the task of reforming hearts, strengthening communal bonds and expressing hope. Thus, More's apology embraces his even more elaborate use of humor—of irony and merry tales—in the *Dialogue*. In his commentary on Matthew 26:45-46—Christ's "Sleep on and take your rest"—More argues, contrary to Augustine, that Jesus is using irony (SC 51-54).

> Immediately after He had aroused the sleeping apostles for the third time, He undercut them with irony: not indeed that trivial and sportive variety with which idle men of wit are accustomed to amuse themselves, but rather a serious and weighty kind of irony (SC 51).

More continues:

> I am not unaware that some learned and holy men do not allow this interpretation, though they admit that others, equally learned and holy, have found it agreeable. Not that those who do not accept this interpretation are shocked by this sort of irony, as some others are—also pious men, to be sure, but not sufficiently versed in the *figures of speech* which Sacred Scripture customarily takes over from common speech. For if they were, they would have found irony in so many other places that they could not have found it offensive here (SC 52, emphasis added).

For More, then, Jesus' irony represents a definitive approval of the fittingness of "figures of speech" for a spiritual end. Irony may be a more difficult case than satire and sarcasm because the element of untruth is greater in irony than in sarcasm and satire, which involve not so much double meanings as exaggeration. Still, it is a

fascinating parenthesis that sheds light on More's recourse to literary devices. He understands them, and the humor attending them, not only to be redeemable but useful in the plan of redemption. In expanding his argument to include other examples from Scripture, he says, "What could be more pungent and witty than the irony with which the blessed apostle gracefully polishes off the Corinthians?—where he asks pardon because he never burdened any of them with charges and expenses" (SC 52). "Pungent and witty" characterize many passages of *The Sadness of Christ*. Furthermore, the approval of rhetoric as a tool for the soul's conversion looks back to the *Dialogue of Comfort* and ratifies the literary complexity of his approach, which, of course, includes humor.

Humor's Role in *A Dialogue of Comfort*

Humor and merry tales predominate in the *Dialogue of Comfort*'s middle book, but seemingly play a minor rhetorical role in the first and concluding books. This division highlights humor's function within the work's overarching structure and the special role which it serves in More's anthropology. In Book One, Antony's approach is typically serious and sober-minded, "that we should in this vale of labor, toil, tears and misery … not look for rest and ease … game, pleasure … wealth, and felicity" (1.13 at 41). His central argument—that tribulations, when viewed from the proper faith-perspective, are salutary, and our attachment to worldly pleasures blinds us to this truth and keeps us from the means of seeking and obtaining true comfort—is closely reasoned with little appeal to the emotions and imagination. Accordingly, the use of humor is restrained, in keeping with Antony's avowed distrust of joke-telling. "This life," Antony pronounces, "is no laughing time, but rather the time of weeping …" (1.13 at 42).

However, as evident at the start of Book Two, Vincent is convinced notionally or intellectually, but he is not converted to this severe, disembodied theological understanding. To prohibit any "worldly thing or fleshly," to Vincent "seemeth somewhat hard"; for "continual fatigation" without recreation "would make it dull and deadly" (2.1 at 82). He doubts that he could live the virtue which Antony counsels. While Antony does not concede the point, he takes a different approach in Book Two. The new approach is designed to gain Vincent's trust and deepen their friendship, with the aim of convincing and inspiring a true conversion. Antony uses argument, supplemented by amusing and disconcerting tales, to reform Vincent's imagination. The words "foolish," "wrong," "fearful," "imagination," and especially, "fantasy," recur throughout Antony and Vincent's conversation, with "imagination" and "fantasy" repeatedly used to mean imagination or a false notion or delusion.[13]

Against the "terrors of the night" especially, one needs to reinterpret his circumstances in a new light; and here humor is a source of illumination. One needs a spiritual perspective, informed by faith, which gives the detachment to see one's fears and desires *sub specie aeternitatis*. Finally, in Book Three, the drama lies in discerning the extent to which Vincent has, in fact, reformed his imagination. As the focus shifts to the "terror of the day"—facing direct temptations to betray the faith in the face of persecution—one might expect humor and irony to become extraneous since there is no longer any need to discern whether fears are justified. When confronting undisguised, direct persecution—the "arrow of the day"—the reformed imagination would seek comfort in God and meditate on Christ's cross and resurrection. But the merry tales do not disappear. They continue to play an important role by illustrating

[13] In the context of pre-modern psychology, imagination and fantasy were considered as synonymous terms (Rossky, 50).

Antony and Vincent's friendship and their shared understanding of the psychological realities involved and by affirming the hope of final victory.

Book One

More is well aware that humor and laughter have their dangers; they can be signs of frivolity—a willful failure to discern what it is important, a distraction from the often arduous struggle for the true, and even eternal, good. Indeed, in the *Dialogue*, More highlights humor's moral ambiguity especially in relation to the cultivation of the theological virtues. In Book One, Antony states the case "against" humor. Citing Christ as a witness in favor of the proposition that tribulation (and, quintessentially, the cross) is the chief means for salvation, Antony points out that "our Savior himself wept twice or thrice … but never find we that he laughed so much as once" (1.13 at 42). To reinforce the position, he quotes the Gospel: that if a person would be the Lord's disciple, he must "take his cross of tribulation upon his back and follow" Him—adding, "He saith not here, lo, "Let him laugh and make merry" (1.13 at 43). Citing *Ecclesiastes*, Antony argues that, when the Scriptures commend mirth, it is only to describe the manner of "some worldly-disposed people, or understood of rejoicing spiritual, or meant of some small, moderate refreshing of the mind against a heavy, discomfortable dullness" (1.19 at 69).

Antony sets out to demonstrate that tribulation is actually a gift from God (1.20 at 75), a double medicine that cures past sins and preserves us from future sins (1.9 at 29-30). The challenge is to transform the mind and will to re-imagine tribulation, to be one who "in tribulation longeth to be comforted by God … and referreth the manner of his comforting to God" (1.3 at 16). It is one thing to argue

that, unless we perceive the direct connection between our moral failings and suffering, we cannot achieve the humility necessary to turn to God for forgiveness. But it is quite another to convince someone that he should accept or even seek out suffering, even for such an end. For this reason, Antony does not rely solely on reasoned argument even in his first conversation with Vincent. The affections and emotions must be brought into harmony. As Antony explains later, in Book Three:

> Another manner of receiving affections is by the means of reason, which both ordinately tempereth those affections that the bodily five wits imprint… and also disposeth a man, many times, to some spiritual virtues very contrary to those affections that are fleshly and sensual[14] (3.21 at 282).

Thus, to re-imagine sensuality, Antony presents two emotionally and intellectually arresting images—the first of which employs earthy, shocking humor. He proposes a "lovely lady" who is "good enough" morally. As her physical beauty increases with high health and "fat feeding," she begins to take pride in her looks and attractiveness, so much so that she will be tempted to a "lecherous love"— bedding her "new-acquainted knave" and forsaking her "old-acquainted knight." But God, perceiving the danger, strikes her with stomach flu, thereby making the thought of lovemaking literally revolting (1.9 at 29).

And here we perceive the Morean irony in Antony's denigration of humor: Antony does not merely state that something we would naturally fear and pray to avoid (like a sickness or

[14] Antony develops the point further when he asks, "if reason alone be sufficient to move a man to take pain for the gaining of some worldly rest or pleasure, and for the avoiding of another pain through peradventure more … why should not reason grounded upon the sure foundation of faith, and helped also forward with aid of God's grace … be much more able, first, to engender in us such an affection … and after by long and deep meditation thereof, so to continue that affection that it shall turn into a habitual, fast, and deep-rooted *purpose*" and thereby lead to salvation? (3.24 at 293-94).

financial set-back) can become the most salutary of moral remedies. Instead, he employs a full arsenal of literary devices to draw attention to the irony by challenging our understanding of beauty and health. The passage, shot through with ironic humor, points to a new aesthetic vision. The illness and its symptoms are characterized as "goodly" and healthful; the fever cools the erstwhile lover's hot passion for her body, as he sees the way sickness has wasted her "wonton flesh." Yet, Antony heightens the irony and invites us to reevaluate the idea of beauty by insisting that the sickness "beautifieth her fair fell."[15] The fever wastes her wanton flesh and turns her radiant skin to the "color of the kite's claw"—thereby making her "so lovely that her lover would have little lust to look upon her." The alliteration—lovely, lover, lust—points to the way in which passion and pride have replaced virtue, and caused the lady and her lover to be blind to her spiritual beauty. And the alliteration continues to the scene's climax as Antony imagines what would happen if the lady were to ignore these unpleasant physical counsels and pursue her sensual desires. In a shocking burlesque of the sexual act, the lovely lady, succumbing to nausea, voids her stomach and "suddenly lay it all in [her lover's] neck" (1.9 at 29).

Where the lovely lady example shows how taking on a spiritual perspective transfigures our vision and can cause a reevaluation of our desires, the second key image brings home the destructive nature of "un-Christian comforting."[16] Antony vividly describes seeing dying persons "in their deathbed underpropped with

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[15] Polonius memorably criticizes Hamlet's use of the term "beautified" as "a vile phase" in a passage in which Shakespeare's irony casts doubt on Polonius' insight as a drama critic (*Hamlet*, 2:2).

[16] As Nancy Yee explains: "The ironic reversal of terms wise/foolish and sick/well with which Book I opens is intended to prepare Vincent for the cosmic irony of Christian theology." N. Yee, "Thomas More's *Moriae Encomium*: The Perfect Fool in *A Dialogue of Comfort Against Tribulation*," Moreana XXVII, 101-102 (May 1990), 65-74 at 69.

pillows," who turn to their "playfellows" to comfort themselves with card games. These comforters, instead of disturbing the ease of the dying man by persuading him to examine his conscience and turn to God for forgiveness, urge him to put such "fantasies" out of his head (1.18 at 61). As with the Lovely Lady, More works a reversal—although one that is far darker in its humor. Here, the satiric reversal shows that what is desirable for eternal happiness appears as mere fantasy from the purely human perspective; but staying within the human perspective risks eternal damnation.

Thus, despite Antony's stated distrust of humor, he relies on it as a key aspect of his rhetoric. The work's subtitle, asserting that the *Dialogue* has been translated from Hungarian to Latin to French to English, serves not only to provide some political cover against More's enemies, but also echoes the playfulness of *Utopia*'s prefatory material and warns the reader not to accept all assertions at face value, but to exercise critical, independent judgment. More's joking about the work's linguistic sources suggests that it is the first of many jokes. Furthermore, it raises the possibility that Antony is not the direct voice of More, that there is some distance between character and author.[17] And in this light, Antony's insistence that the human need for humor is merely to be tolerated, almost regrettable, looks suspicious: More's shocking and dark humor, along with recourse to sarcasm and witty retorts, signals that the exploration of this theme is far from complete.

[17] In Manley's elegant reading, "More is both the old man whose purity of heart is such that he does not fear the Turks and at the same time the young man who is anxious and uncertain of how he will conduct himself should the time of trial come" (*CW* 12, lxxxviii, fn. 3).

Book Two

In contrast to the serious tone of Book One, the second book begins with the telling of merry tales. Vincent presses Antony on whether humor and its pleasures must be treated with such disdain as to be effectively excluded from the Christian life. Antony grudgingly concedes a wholesome, limited role for humor as a reward for the merits earned by suffering. But this is merely a kind of sop to the weakness inherent in human nature. Indeed, Antony apologizes for the joy he takes in humor—being "of nature even half a giglot and more! I would I could as easily mend my fault as I well know it!" (2.1 at 83) At this point, the reader must question the extent to which Antony's voice is that of the author.

At the same time, the *Dialogue* distinguishes and ridicules a shallow humor which merely diverts or amuses and thereby prevents us from perceiving the need for spiritual conversion and moral reform.

> But we be so wont to set so much by our body, which we see and feel, and in the feeding and fostering whereof we set our delight and our wealth … and so little (alas!), and so seldom, we think upon our soul, because we cannot see that but by spiritual understanding, and most especially by the eye of our faith … that the loss of our body we take for a sorer thing, and for a greater tribulation a great deal, than we do the loss of our soul. (2.12 at 109)

As Rossky points out, "imagination, like the senses, is attracted by things of the body" (Rossky 54).

Antony then begins the second day's dialogue in earnest by invoking Psalm 90, identifying four categories of fearful temptations which encompass all tribulations. The first is the "night's fear." While all four temptations are characterized by imagination gone awry, the first is most amenable to humor. Antony identifies two causes of the "night's fear"—first, when the cause of suffering is

obscure and, second, when a source of dread is known, but the person's fantasy doubles the fear "and maketh them often ween that it were much worse than indeed it is" (2.12 at 107-08). The remedy is to view the situation in the light of faith, which dispels the darkness and reveals that the peril posed to the soul by the dreaded object "is a far less thing than they take it for" (2.12 at 108). The impediment, however, is that we "set so much by our body" that we fail to consider our situation in spiritual terms (2.12 at 108).

Antony logically treats scrupulosity and suicide under this temptation, both of which traffic in obviously faulty impressions requiring correction. And he uses a highly-developed merry tale to tackle the problem of scrupulosity and the insidious temptation of "framing" one's conscience, that is, convincing oneself that what one wants to do is consistent with the dictates of morality. Interestingly, the tale is repeated (with variations) in the famous letter of Margaret Roper to Alice Alington of August 1534, generally believed to be of More's own authorship or a joint endeavor of More and his daughter.[18] Indeed, Mother Maud's tale offers deep insights into humor's essential role in the *Dialogue*—as well as humor's role in More's life.

The apologue revolves around two penitents, the scrupulous and rather dim ass and the worldly wolf, and their contrasting confessions with Father Reynard, the "wise, wily" priest-confessor. The story of the ass (a thinly-veiled Thomas More in the Alington letter) is straightforward in its light, genial humor. The donkey's conscience is tortured by a minor fault that it takes for mortal sin—waking his master before dawn with his "rude roaring." Yet, while

[18] Wegemer refers to the letter as the Dialogue of Conscience (G. Wegemer, *Thomas More on Statesmanship* (Catholic U of America P, 1996) at 210, and fn. 14 at p. 235). Guy makes a compelling case for More and Margaret's joint authorship (John Guy, *A Daughter's Love: Thomas More and his Dearest Meg* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 239-42).

the ass's "sin" is comically trivial, the reason for his tribulation is deeply serious—the fear of losing the salutary effects of the upcoming Lenten devotions. After hearing the ass's interminable list of "sins," Father Reynard, perceiving them accurately as trifles, identifies gluttony as the most serious, and in his "wily" wisdom imposes a penance which requires the ass to exercise conscientious judgment: "he should 'never of greediness' of his meat 'do any other beast any harm or hindrance' … and eat his meat and study for no more" (2.14 at 115). Being scrupulous and an ass, however, he takes the counsel so literally that he nearly starves because of the imaginary fear that eating *anything* might cause harm to another—after all, even a single straw from the sow's nest might cause her piglets to "die for cold." But, once set straight by his "ghostly father," as to the reasonable manner of interpreting the penance, the ass quickly "cast off that scruple and fell mannerly to his meat, and was a right honest ass many a fair day after" (2.14 at 117).

The wolf's contrasting story is anything but straightforward; its humor is dark, arising from its protagonists' moral ambiguity, if not depravity. The ass is funny because of the ridiculous way in which he magnified minor faults into great sins. At the same time, however, there is no doubt that his desire to live in accord with the truth was sincere and commendable. Indeed, it is his simple-minded devotion which provokes the reader's laughter. This good-hearted laughter at the ass, however, is different from that raised by the sophisticated Father Reynard, who found listening to the confession so tedious that "he had leifer have sat all that while at breakfast with a good goose" (2.14 at 115).

The complex irony in the wolf's tale reflects the deep cynicism that drives priest and penitent. When the wolf honestly explains that the reason for his last-minute, Good Friday confession, was to avoid a penance that would require fasting during Lent, the father-fox withdraws his initial, showy reprimand and confides that

he is "not so unreasonable"—indeed, he does not fast either. In his worldly wisdom, he recognizes that fasting is not a God-given commandment, but a human invention. But, so as not to cause slander[19] among his simple-minded parishioners (like the ass), he eats his meat secretly. Since the wolf follows the same course, there is no need for penance (2.14 at 116). The comic moment of recognition occurs when we discover the way in which Father Reynard's theological sophistication incorporates a social conscience and avoids wholesale licentiousness. When he hears the extent of the wolf's gluttony—including single meals that would feed a poor family for a week—"he prudently reproved that point in him" and counseled a course of temperance (2.14 at 116). Then, like the penance he imposed on the ass, the fox tells the wolf to exercise conscientious self-regulation: for a year, his meals must be valued at less than sixpence, with the comic qualifier, "as near as your conscience can guess the price" (2.14 at 117).

In order to heighten the contrasting psychologies of ass and wolf, More has Antony delay the punch line of the story. First, Antony relates the manner in which the ass performed his penance and, second, he interrupts the Mother Maud tale with another merry tale about a shrewd wife (Dame Alice?), who returns from confession merrily thanking God and vowing to leave off her "old shrewdness and begin even afresh!" (2.14 at 118). After Antony and Vincent joke good-naturedly about whether the wife truly regarded confession as a license to sin anew, Antony returns to the newly-shrived wolf with that question placed firmly in the reader's mind.

The wolf's story concludes with a focus on conscience reminiscent of that in the Alington letter, in which the word "conscience" echoes throughout. In Chapter 14 of Book Two, the

[19] This word has been replaced by some editors with "scandal," which seems, at first blush to fit better. Alternatively, "slander" shows that Father Fox only cares for his own reputation.

wolf repeats the phrase, "my conscience," four times on a single page as Antony comically relates how the creature reasoned his way to over-indulging his appetite while abiding by the rule of his penance: not knowing the market price of a dead horse, he considers the unappetizing dead and sickly horses, which he could easily steal and eat to be valued at "far above sixpence," while the fat cow he longs to take seems in his conscience "worth not past a groat," (2.14 at 119). Antony explains how a comparison of the ass and the wolf serves his purpose of showing how the anxiety caused by a scrupulous conscience may well result from a misperception. But the ass does not fall prey to that kind of self-deception which is more harmful to the soul, namely, an "overlarge," liberal conscience "such as for his own fantasy the man list to frame himself." In Antony's conclusion, More presents the homely but vivid metaphor of stretching and contracting one's conscience "after the manner of a cheverel point to serve on every side for his own commodity"[20] (2.14 at 120).

Mother Maud's tale, thus, requires Vincent and the reader to consider the moral implications from differing points of view without providing a character who embodies wisdom. It takes wit in identifying the levels of irony to "get the joke," that is, to grasp the moral standard which makes the ass, wolf and fox ridiculous. More emphasizes the radical nature of that task by presenting a tale in which the priest is an untrustworthy source of moral theology, but who (in the intelligent reader's mind) becomes the butt of his own sophisticated worldview. Just as the ass and wolf must use their own wits to comply with their penances (for good or ill), so the reader

[20] Some 80 years later, in *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare will use the same kid's-leather metaphor to make the same point, albeit in bawdier fashion. When Anne swears on her "troth and maidenhead" that she does not want to be queen, the Old Lady attendant charges her with hypocrisy, noting "the capacity/ Of your soft cheveril conscience would receive/ If you might please to stretch it" (II.3:39-41).

must tease out the extent to which the ass is truly foolish, the wolf honest, and the fox wise. The tale does not overtly criticize the priest, but the humor occasioned by the wolf's interpretation of his penance reveals a serious concern: not only has Father Fox's enlightened penance failed to reform the wolf, but he has failed to protect his flock from the wolf's rapine. Thus, More declines to explain the moral of the tale and calls on the reader to uncover the lesson. The literary skills needed to "get the joke" are acquired through humanist study which More famously advocates. These skills are its most precious fruit and summarized by him as "a good mother wit" (*Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, *TMSB* 278.)[21]

In the *Dialogue*, More's use of humor reflects a thoroughly Pauline theology: "Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God" (1 Cor 3:18). As Romanus Cessario puts it, citing that same apostolic admonition: "For those who do not accept the wisdom of the Gospel, no matter how much human wisdom they may have, stand condemned to an impoverished, if not outright silly, sort of life" (Cessario, 31).[22] As Antony puts it further on in Book Three, "Mary, I never saw fool yet that thought himself other than wise!" (3.22 at 287). Humor thus cultivates the double vision needed to see that worldly wisdom is actually folly, as well as to see that one who lives by faith is likely to be perceived as an ass by worldly standards.

More's insistence on humor is in accord with the classical understanding that mockery and humor are interchangeable as a

[21] This approach to corrective humor was not limited to his writing. Curtright explains how, by virtue of More's consistently deadpan delivery of jokes, his family members had to judge from the subject matter and context—not his countenance—whether he was speaking seriously or in jest Travis Curtright, *Thomas More on Humor*, Logos 17:1 (Winter 2014) 28-29.

[22] Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Virtues, or the Examined Life* (Continuum, 2002).

"means of deploying eloquence on the side of reason," whereby "the use of humor remains an essential means of persuasion" (Curtright, *Humor*, 16). Repeatedly, the *Dialogue* pushes the point that "I must consider that the cause of my grief is mine own wrong imagination … whereby I beguile myself with an untrue persuasion …" (3.18 at 251). Humor is a corrective, the means for perceiving one's failings as ridiculous in the new and wider theological perspective. And this insight engenders humility, which, as the foundation of all virtues, opens the way to holiness.

Book Two concludes with a long discussion of suicide, in what may be seen as Antony's *reductio ad absurdum* argument as to the dangers inherent in living by false beliefs or images of reality, even those by which one might seek to imitate Christ: living by false beliefs leads to the simultaneous death of the body and soul. Indeed, in his recent article, Curtright beautifully explains how More uses the "merry tale" of the woodcarver who wants to commit suicide *de imitatione Christi* to "refashion[] this fancy as a condition of fearful thoughts, produced by the imagination, which scornful laughter may combat" (Curtright, 25).

Book Three

Humor works differently in the *Dialogue*'s final section, in keeping with the fact that the Turkish invasion is imminent. Antony no longer employs humor to challenge or shock Vincent. Instead, the humorous tales and asides show how the bond of friendship has deepened with the sharing of principles and understandings. And they demonstrate hope—that even persecution unto death cannot extinguish mirth where death is the entrance to eternal life. Antony's primary aim is to foster engagement in the serious contemplation of Christ's passion that will bring true and lasting comfort.

A fascinating aspect of the *Dialogue* is that humor has not been banished even in such dire circumstances. More suggests that such humor can continue to play a legitimate role by having Vincent tell his own humorous anecdote to advance Antony's inquiry into flattery. Vincent's ironic reference to "this good ancient, honorable flatterer" echoes the Mother Maud tale by calling him a "wily fox," revealing how Vincent's humor has assimilated the lessons from Antony's merry tales.

To ensure that Vincent perceives the ridiculousness of a life which is blind to spiritual values, Antony asks Vincent to play the role of the worldly man in a dialogue within the *Dialogue*. The heuristic purpose of such role-playing is shown when Vincent consents to take on the "part" of a man of great wealth who has "so much to lose" by the forfeiture of goods. Vincent, with gentle irony—because he is a wealthy man—says that despite his ignorance of what someone else would say, he will impersonate such a man "as far as mine own mind can *conjecture*" (3.14 at 229). At the end of the inner dialogue, Vincent pleads to end the impersonation, having exhausted all defenses for such worldly folly that he could "imagine," and praying for "the grace to play the contrary part …" (3.14 at 237).

The *Dialogue* emphasizes that unless reason is engaged with "true images," we remain "dull in the desire of heaven" and defenseless against "dread" tribulation. Imagination plays an indispensable role in "send[ing] our hearts hence thither," that is, "out of this world and in heaven" (31.15 at 241). The task entrusted to imagination vivified by grace is a tall order. And, "now being somewhat in comfort and courage," Antony and Vincent consider taking comfort against bodily pain and captivity.

In the end, to be sure, vivid remembrance of Christ's passion, not humor, is revealed as the most crucial exercise of imagination. One might expect humor to bow and withdraw from the *Dialogue*.

And, when Antony and Vincent engage in the serious world-as-prison-dialogue, it appears to do just that. But humor retakes the stage afterwards. More accurately, one would say that humor never left. To reinterpret the world as a prison entails a great imaginative labor, informed by the eternal truth of the Christian faith. The interpretive skills for this kind of contrapuntal understanding, in which natural and theological reasoning lead to simultaneous but opposite meanings of freedom, have been acquired in large part through thoughtful engagement with the merry tales.[23] Indeed, development of those skills allows the reader to appreciate the extent to which the truth of Antony's extreme position must be qualified and tempered by Vincent's objections. One can accept and profit from the understanding that there is a real sense in which, ultimately, we are imprisoned in this world until death, while simultaneously appreciating the human, felt difference in living outside a jail or prison.

More's inclusion of at least two additional merry tales shows humor's legitimate place within serious conversation. Antony tells the merry tale of a woman (bearing a close resemblance to Dame Alice) who, upon visiting a prisoner (in circumstances much like those of More at the time of his writing), voices her personal fear that "if the door would be shut upon me, I would ween it would stop up my breath."[24] The tale, told in a gentle way, provides a

[23] Our use of the musical metaphor is meant to evoke a similar insight to that of Richard Sylvester in his consideration of More's use of merry tales in his three major dialogic works. Sylvester explained how it was "never mere bufoonery, but rather a wise, practical kind of good sense that can both distinguish between heaven and earth and yet see their separate energies as inextricably involved with each other." R. Sylvester, "Three Dialogues," *Moreana*, 16, 64 (March 1980), 65-78, at 66.

[24] Antony also tells the fanciful fable of the origin of the snail's shell, which he attributes to Aesop. Vincent responds to the fable in a way that shows his receptivity and appreciation—his acknowledgment that "the tale were not all feigned," but "much of your tale is true" (3.22 at 286).

straightforward illustration of Antony's point that our fantasies can "frame us a false opinion by which we deceive ourselves and take it for sorer than it is" (3.20 at 276-277). As such, it fits within the conventional understanding of humor's role in reforming personal and social miscues. However, as Elizabeth McCutcheon explains, More's art is far more profound: "We laugh, but this is not just a merry tale. It humanizes and universalizes the prison situation, makes it bearable, and renders our consciousness of self, our perception of boundaries, and the reality of human finitude as tangible, personal, and undeniable as each breath we take" (McCutcheon, 185).[25] Humor brings the philosophical or theological insight down to earth.

And this conjunction of intellect and emotion points to a distinctive aspect of More's understanding of human nature, namely, the integral relation between body and soul, thinking and feeling. As Antony says, "Let no man think strange that I would advise a man to take counsel of a physician for the body in such a spiritual passion. For since the soul and the body be so knit and joined together that they both make between them one *person*, the distemperance of either other engendereth sometimes the distemperance of the other" (2.16 at 152). The merry tales, whether earthy, outrageous or homely, call attention to one's physicality and invite realistic reflection on the bodily-psychological predicaments presented.

By the *Dialogue*'s close, More has demonstrated that right imagination is indispensable to elucidate theological truths, and especially to fashion them into lived truths. In an elegant manner, Antony uses a dual-language pun to show how Vincent's continued struggle to remain on this theologically-informed path promises

[25] E. McCutcheon, "Wings and Crosses: Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae* and More's *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* and Other Writings," 50 *Moreana*, 193-194: 151-186 (Dec. 2013).

spiritual victory. Antony quotes the Latin *Vincenti*, for "him that overcometh," twice from the *Book of Revelation*[26] (3.26 at 309). Not only has the once-worldly Vincent begun to reform his imagination in the hope of writing himself into Holy Scripture, but the "Lovely Lady" of Book One has been transfigured into the theological virtue of charity. With humor as a guide, we have turned from worldly comforts, so that, with "due compassion" we can "conceive in our minds a right imagination and remembrance of Christ's bitter, painful Passion," and find our "key-cold hearts" inflamed with the kind of "hot affection" that inspires "fleshly lovers" to bear pains and risk their lives (3.27 at 312-313).

Here, we discover a remarkable consistency in More's art and life. He concluded his first major work of literature, *The Life of John Picus*, with a largely original English poem, "The 12 Properties of a Lover," in which he "employs Petrarchian conceits into the qualities of one who loves God above all" (Curtright, *The One Thomas More*, 40, footnote omitted). Curtright's apt description of the early poem applies equally to the conclusion of More's late *Dialogue*: "Rather than stress a binary opposition of body to soul …, More's lines propose a synthesis, where erotic longings and oscillating emotions of bliss and longing exist in meditation" (ibid., footnote omitted). His loving relationship with God was so intensely personal that physical imagery came naturally to his imagination. As More explained to his beloved daughter during her first visit to the Tower, "I find no cause, I thank God, Meg, to reckon myself in worse case here than in my own house. For me thinketh God maketh

[26] "As Marc'hadour suggested years ago, Vincent's ancestor need not be sought in the church calendar, but will be found in the Book of Revelation. 'Vincent' is a son of *vinco*, *vincere*, 'he that overcometh', and at the end of the *Dialogue*, More quotes the Apocalypse twice in Latin, with a startling bilingual pun, to reinforce his point: *Vincenti dabo edere de ligno vitae*, and *Vincenti dabo manna absconditum*" (Sylvester 74-75).

me a wanton, and setteth me on His lap and dandleth me" (Roper, *Life of More*, *TMSB* 52).

More's imaginative joy is neither a "fond fantasy" nor a joke. As Carlo De Marchi explains, it is a form of *iucunditas*, a term for humor drawn from Cicero and reclaimed as a virtue by St. Thomas Aquinas. Such joy is "derived from interpersonal communion here on earth, starting from the maxim that holds 'no good thing can be joyfully possessed without partnership,' for he who 'rejoices most is in the company of others" (De Marchi, 7).[27] More is rejoicing in the faith-born hope that is "the very essence of man's spirituality" (De Marchi, 8, quoting Gordon, 170). And More, while imprisoned, is sharing that joy with his beloved daughter, thereby creating a community around his spiritual understanding.

Conclusion

The serious and transformative humor of the *Dialogue* is predicated on an irony central to man's spiritual struggle: the fears which so frighten and the pleasures which so captivate our worldly imaginations take on an entirely different aspect when seen from a theological perspective—*sub specie aeternitatis*. The causes of our present anxieties, when placed in the context of the Cross and Resurrection, are revealed as mere shadows or even welcome challenges. Indeed, what seemed so alluring can appear as ridiculous and even loathsome in eternity's light. As Antony puts it in Book Three of the *Dialogue*, in such instances, the Christian discovers that "our fantasy frameth us a false opinion by which we deceive ourselves and take it for sorer than it is" (3.20 at 276).

[27] Fr. De Marchi explains St. Thomas's mistaken attribution of the maxim to Boethius and identifies the correct source from Seneca.

More's recourse to humor and, in particular, to the earthy and outrageous merry tales, is a means of breaking through the reader's complacency in order to perceive this misapprehension:

> Viewed from this perspective, the merry tales and anecdotes in *A Dialogue of Comfort* would seem to proceed directly from the formal structure of the work. The argument of Book II reasons the need in times of tribulation for the infused theological virtue of hope. But all the while the tone itself, created by the merry tales and anecdotes, demonstrates even more graphically than the argument itself the experiential realization of the hope and trust in God More is speaking of in the *Dialogue* (*CW* 12, xcviii).

More joins wit and wisdom in the *Dialogue*: "In the argument of the book the theological virtue of hope is presented in intellectual terms; in the anecdotes and merry tales it is realized as an emotional experience" (*CW* 12, xcviii).

But More's humor is not merely corrective. As Louis Bouyer perceives, More's humor "'puts everything in its proper place, gently but firmly dispelling all falsity'" (De Marchi, 10, quoting [and translating] Bouyer, *Sir Thomas More, Humaniste et Martyr* [1984]). In the *Sadness of Christ* and *Dialogue of Comfort*, humor plays a vital role in the journey to God. More insists that literary devices, "figures of speech," especially irony and humor, are essential means of seeing ourselves as earthly creatures, fallen but redeemed, who are called to love a divine person. Humor exposes the ridiculousness of our presumption and pride and clears the way for humility. At the same time we are reminded that by turning to God, we are assured of a happy ending. Thus, More's humor on the scaffold was nothing like "taunting or mocking." Edward Hall missed the joke. At the same time, it was not bravado. Rather, by humor, More was putting the executioner at his ease, showing that, *sub specie aeternitatis*, he was doing him a great good. And, for his own part, and for the nascent community of faithful English Catholics, he was fostering

the right imagination needed to recover and reinforce that radical detachment from all created goods which opens the way to Christian hope.

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