The Argument of Comedy in Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*

WALTER M. GORDON

What C.S. Lewis has said of the literary value of Thomas More's works in general applies most pointedly to his *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*: "Nearly all that is best. . . is comic or close to comedy."¹ While a modern reader may not take enthusiastically to the long passages of the dialogue's argumentative prose, he will have no trouble enjoying the merry tales that appear more frequently here than in any other of More's polemical works.² After reading the book, he may even hold the same tales in his memory long after he has forgotten the issues under question, recalling them as separate *opuscula* in their own right, independent, as it were, from the debate in which they are situated. More, himself, seems to have wondered if the "tales and merry words" belonged there in the first place.³ He mentions, in the introduction to the dialogue, the danger of disturbing certain "sad men" by the insertion of light and diverting stories into serious discussion.⁴ The difficulty, however, which engaged More goes beyond mere playfulness because some of the dialogue's tales, besides being merry, are bawdy as well. In the end, after asking the advice of other men reputed for their virtue and learning, he decided to include those several comic passages which now belong to the work. More's reluctance to excise the merry tales from a controversy which he took in earnest suggests that these stories amount to more than a casual bit of self-indulgence in his predilection for comic narrative; rather it implies that the tales cohere with the author's purpose in writing the book. An examination, therefore, of those ways in which Morean comedy conforms to the dialogue's inner structure and supports its argument should disclose to us a fuller significance of the merry tales by relating them to both the form and the content of the work. This study, then, will first attend to the artistic relevancy of the stories by analyzing the contribution they make within the particular literary genre containing them, and then it will attempt to connect this same comedy to both the main issue under discussion and the central objectives of the book. In trying to achieve this, a balance must be struck between

a representation of the tales as totally purposive and one that sees them as utterly inane. Since More, himself, calls these stories "idle" and "wanton,"⁵ we must not, in a heavy-handed manner, overburden them with argumentative meaning and intention. Part of their effectiveness, even within the controversy, lies in a digressive quality which, as we shall see, is characteristic of all the tales. This, however, is not to say that they are pointless, but only that part of their force lies in their sportive, absurd nature.

As the title tells us, this polemical work is not a tract in which we can expect a one-sided presentation of the material but a dialogue whose art form reaches its fullest expression in the dramatic engagement of not one but two voices. In other words, the genre encourages contention by allowing the representation of more than one mind or one position. In the latter part of the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, especially in the last book, the drama of the piece all but fades out because the Messenger turns passive and pliant, as the author anticipates, perhaps too early, the character's final capitulation. In the early going, however, he is very much alive; and nothing adds more to his vitality than the tales he tells. The comic narrative of both the Messenger and of "More" is ideally suited to the dialogue form since their stories are told in the argumentative and spirited tones not only of their own voices but also of those belonging to the characters who crop up in the tales. Perhaps the wealth of vocal quality found within the narrative constitutes its strongest appeal and also discloses an advantage it enjoys over the more widely known *Utopia*.

As *Utopia* is aristocratic, recondite, and sophisticated, the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* is popular, straightforward, and down-to-earth. Certainly the demands of two different audiences necessitated the change of style we notice when we pass from the Latin to the English dialogue. The former was written for the intelligentsia and those politicians interested in culture and reform; the latter had to appeal to a much wider public which, according to the commission More had received from Bishop Tunstall, included the simple and unlearned.⁶ So More abandoned the language of the scholars and turned to the vernacular. Hence, where *Utopia* develops a style based on Latin literary precedents, the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies'* speech relies less on earlier written works and more on the spoken word of Tudor Englishmen; it speaks less like a book and more like a man with a living voice. The necessity, then, of appealing to a wider audience tapped More's great talent for evoking the rhythms and inflections of vital, native language within a comic ambience. Of course, this vitality of speech diminishes when "More" becomes involved in a lengthy theological proof; but, wherever a merry tale appears, the colloquial verve reasserts itself.

At its best, the style of the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* establishes a conversational tone so that the reader is made to feel he is overhearing the discussion between "More" and the Messenger. The language is speckled with interjection and expletive and thrives on a concrete imagery drawn from familiar settings. The Messenger, observing such frantic devotion in the Catholic recitation of the Divine Office, wonders "whether the bees in their hives use to say matins among them. For even such another buzzing they make" (208). The images, relaxed and ready to hand, recall the domestic activities of baking bread and lighting candles and establish a mood of unaffected homeliness. This atmosphere invites colloquial and proverbial expressions: "as a pair of spectacles should stand a blind frere" (147); "if the wager were but a butterfly, I would never award him one wing" (216); "here was a great post well thwited to a pudding prick" (236). The picturesque diction includes words of Germanic root like "stagger," "underpin," and "stick" in meanings which today are usually expressed by the mellifluous yet less graphic words of Latin pedigree: "vacillate," "support," and "hesitate." The rhythms move in accompaniment to the scenes painted as when the Messenger describes the riotous behaviour involved in the cult of shrines. In one sentence, the stagger and devilish whirl of the pseudo-pilgrims is cadenced into the prose: "But the most part that cometh [on pilgrimage], cometh for no devotion at all, but only for good company, to babble thitherward and drink drunk there, and dance and reel homeward" (140).

As the conversation between "More" and the Messenger develops, the doors and shutters of the study at Chelsea open onto the world about them, introducing a pageant of players whose stage is the whole of Tudor England and the Continent too. The setting shifts from London to St. Albans to Picardy to Leominster and back to Chelsea. In a universal appeal to the English readers of those days, More holds up a mirror to his audience and captures a whole society when he animates a great variety of character types: monks, housewives, gray-beards, fools, friars, harlots, and newlyweds. Many of these speak for themselves in a language tailored to the person. The "old sage father fool" from Kent has his own accent: "Nay, by our Lady, masters, quod he, yche [I] cannot tell you well, why, but chote [I wote] well it hath" (278). These lesser personae find roles in the tales told by the two main actors, and the stories themselves furnish striking examples of More's dramatic artistry, for each narrative passage, as well as revealing the religious propensities and irregularities of the times, tells us much about the personalities of the narrator and the listener. The merry tales are given and received "in character."

When "More" and the Messenger are discussing the important question of miracles, the young antagonist betrays an unreadiness to give credence

to the account of miraculous intervention from on high. "More" sees here a soft spot and explores it to his advantage. Playfully, he baits his hook by implying that he, himself, has seen a miracle but demurs from recounting it because the Messenger is "so circumspect and wary in belief" (131). This ruse stirs the curiosity of the young man who promises total credence since "More" is such a reliable and trustworthy witness. The contrast heightens between the slow, deliberate "More" and the Messenger who sits on thorns until he can hear the tale. Finally, the older man concedes and relates to him the story of a Walbrook couple who, on their wedding night, came together in the bridal chamber. "And the same night. . .," "More" hesitates, "yet abide, let me not lie; now in faith to say the truth I am not very sure of the time, but surely as it appeared afterward, it was of likelihood the same night, or some other time soon after, except it happened a little afore." The narrator delays only to increase the desire for solution in the Messenger (and the reader). Where will he turn now that he has his couple in bed on their wedding night? or is this miracle only a bedroom farce? By leisurely musing on the time of the event, "More" comically detaches himself from embarrassment and aggravates the impatience of the Messenger. "No force for the time," he cries. "More" replies by affirming that the young bride was known for her virtue, so he presumes that she first went to bed with her mate on the wedding night. With the time problem solved, the tale suddenly lurches to its finish as the male semen turns "in the woman's body first into blood, and after into shape of man child. And then waxed quick and she great therewith." The baby then appears as a boy no taller than the "length of a foot" and, when last seen, after an interval of twenty years, had grown an inch longer than the narrator. The Messenger, of course, expresses his disappointment at this miracle which sends "More" into a stirring defense of his vision of the wonder hidden in humdrum daily existence. The teller of the tale has recounted it within the established range of his character: playfully, musingly, tauntingly; and his listener has reacted predictably with the eagerness and impatience which denote him throughout the work.

The impetuosity we see in the Messenger as a listener also typifies his manner of telling a story. When he attacks the abuses of Catholic pilgrimage with the tale of the outlandish shrine at St. Walery, he races through the plot, arrives at a premature ending, and then begins his conclusion: "Was not this — Abide! By God, I had almost forgotten one thing that would not be left for a groat" (195). He then appends a further episode to his tale and extends it by a third. The Messenger's exuberance forces the hasty finish and quick retreat back into the story. In addition to the eagerness so patent here and elsewhere, the disputant musters the details of his assault on St. Walery with great seriousness.

But only when we look at the matter of his tale and know the purpose of this pilgrimage can we appreciate the comic importance of his being earnest.

The holy travellers to St. Walery go there to beg the help of the patron saint "specially sought unto for the stone" and in the chapel of this curious shrine are hung, as thank-offerings for answered prayers, the images of men's and women's "gear made in wax." The rites inside the chapel sanctuary extend the phallic symbolism as the genitals of the suppliant pilgrims are passed through a silver ring at the altar's end. The explosively comic potential at the base of the story obviously originates in the contrast between the religious setting and the material object of the devotions. Waxen pudenda are blazoned in this house of prayer and made the centerpiece for a liturgy. It is, however, the dramatic animation of this scene which realizes its latent comedy to the full. Not only does the Messenger tell his tale in dead earnest, but the main characters inside the story engage in their roles with equal seriousness. A monk, standing at the altar and blessing threads of Venice gold to be later knit about the gear, casts up "his rings and threads in great anger" and goes his way when a merry fellow's sly remark about the size of his wife's gear causes an outbreak of laughter. A "good sad woman" tries to sell to the visiting Englishman a gear-length candle "which should bren up in the chapel and certain prayers should there be said the while. And this was against the stone the very sheet anchor." The Englishman's wife, however, being "a good faithful Christian woman" and loving no such superstitions, prevents her husband's purchase of the candle; for, "when she heard once of brenning up the candle, she knit the brows and earnestly blessing her: 'Beware in the virtue of God what ye do,' quod she. 'Burn up?' quod She. 'Marry God forbid. It would waste up your gear upon pain of my life. I pray you beware of such witchcraft.'" The good wife fears superstition while yielding to it with the other pilgrims, and the grave voices issuing from the slightly mad and delirious ambience intensify with their solemn utterances the comedy in the situation.

The words of the good wife at St. Walery are indicative of the many distinctive voices that rise out of the merry tales. A humorous disparity exists between her tone of authority and the empty, superstitious content of her words. The same might be said of the woman whose devotion to Mary cools when she is told that the mother of Jesus was Jewish: "'What? Ye mock, I wis; I pray you tell truth.' And when it was so fully affirmed that she at last believed it, 'And was she a Jew,' quod she, 'so help me God and halidom, I shall love her the worse while I live'" (137). The harangue of the zealous reformer is captured in the warning Friar Donald hurls at his flock about the dangers of pilgrimage:

"Ye men of London, gang on your self with your wives to Willesden in the devil's name or else keep them at home with you with sorrow" (140). The contention in all of these voices together with the diversity of characterization throughout the tales illustrates how they contribute to the drama and art of this dialogue. Even if, however, we can find reason for justifying the presence of these stories from a literary point of view, this, in itself, does not explain how they pertain to the subject matter of the controversy. What is the connection between the merry tales and the argument of the book?

Although this dialogue wanders freely as its two characters discuss pilgrimages, shrines, images, the scriptures, the punishment of heresy, and the beliefs of heretics, the outcome of the debate hinges on the identity of the true church. If it is equivalent to the established Catholic communion, then all other questions must be referred to the teaching of Rome; if it be not the Church of Rome, then the disputants must locate that body of believers wherein the truth of Christianity can be discovered. As we shall see presently, William Tyndale, More's chief English antagonist,⁷ held to a belief in a spiritual church whose presence is only vaguely defined while More was committed to a most tangible and recognizable assembly of Christians under the leadership of the pope. Of course, the vulnerable side of this latter position lies in the ease with which such a visible, historical, and human society can be observed and criticized, and this is precisely what the reformers at that moment were doing. Rather than suppress the abuses in the church of his day, however, More gives the Messenger a free rein to cite a number of examples of Catholic decadency, and his attack often takes the form of a story. Because these tales told against Catholicism seem, more than the other stories, to run against the purpose of the book, they demand our special attention. Of course, the anti-Catholic tales contribute significantly to the polemical, two-sided structure of the dialogue; but my concern now is with their doctrinal, not their artistic relevance.

The defamatory tales range from parenthetical anecdotes such as the vignette mentioned above of a Catholic woman's anti-Jewish prejudice to the fully embellished and dramatized narrative of St. Walery. The most bawdy and malicious stories are told by the Messenger, who jokingly refers to clerical incontinence in the tale of the husband who, on catching his parish priest making love to his wife, accused him publicly. When ordered by the bishop to withdraw his charge, the frustrated layman, after his formal recantation, felt driven to add, "... 'mouth, mouth, thou liest.' And by and by thereupon he set his hand upon both his eyen and said, 'But eyen, eyen . . . by the Mass, ye lie not a whit'" (127). The Messenger's attack becomes more unsettling when he takes up the case of the pious hoax at Leominster where the

prior of the religious house and his paramour frequently stage a miracle clever enough to draw in great crowds of people from the town and the surrounding country. The lady in question, Elizabeth by name, lives only on the sustenance of the Eucharist which at communion is seen to fly [by means of a device] from the prior's paten into her mouth "as though it came alone" (135). The trick is so deftly rigged that the awestricken faithful cry out for the prayers and intercession of their little saint and give generously to the coffers of the prior. The lady makes her home within an enclosed grille in the rood loft of the monastery church, although, when the chicanery is exposed, it is also revealed that the bars of the place were not strong enough to keep out her lover once night fell.

This tale of Elizabeth and the prior is told within the larger framework of a discussion about the credibility of miracles. It is preceded by "More's" own story of the beggar couple from Berwick who attempt to dupe the pilgrims at the shrine of St. Alban's when the husband, after feigning blindness, claims that his sight is restored him through the intercession of the town's patron saint (134).⁸ Becoming the center of municipal pride and interest, the knave is interviewed by no less a personage than Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, whose initial enthusiasm over the event is cooled when he queries the beggar. Although supposedly blind from birth, he can yet name and discern all the colours of the rainbow. Both the tales of Leominster and St. Alban's, together with that of the previously discussed St. Walery, discredit, at least on the surface, the Catholic regard for pilgrimages and shrines as well as the belief in the miracles associated with these places of devotion.

If, however, we ask ourselves just what it is that we are invited to find amusing in all of these stories, we discover it is neither the practice of pilgrimage nor the notion of miracles in themselves. At St. Walery we laugh at the droll and bemused excesses of the pilgrims; both at St. Alban's and Leominster, the humour centres on the meeting between a naive group of common people and a couple of swindlers who are more than ready to exploit a great willingness to give credence on the part of their fellow men. In all three tales, much of the comedy is directed at an extreme kind of human credulity which More always regarded as a hindrance to sound belief. In his introduction to his translation of Lucian's *Philopseudes*, a dialogue inspiring these tales, More writes of that "superstition, which obtrudes everywhere under the guise of religion" and of those lies uttered in the name of truth by which the common people especially are deceived.⁹ All three of these stories are told in the earthy tradition of the fabliau so popular with the rude and unlettered part of the audience More was attempting to reach. His concern here is not with the heretic but with his listeners'

proclivity to error and deception on which all falsehood thrives. These particular stories, therefore, carry something of a Jonsonian intent when they provoke the audience to behold and laugh at its own folly. Furthermore, the author, in ridiculing excesses that are peculiarly Catholic, is himself laughing at that which, in a sense, is his own.

The readiness with which More introduces this comic picture of the abuses in Catholic devotion is related to the previously mentioned major issue of the debate centering on the identity of the true church. As Richard Marius has pointed out, More defines the church as a "body united by a common confession of faith, not a congregation united by the virtuous living of the membership."¹⁰ This latter view is adopted by Tyndale when he distinguishes between the church made up of "the elect only" and that other multitude consisting of "the common rascal of all that believe, whether with the mouth only, and carnally without spirit."¹¹ In this second congregation Tyndale places those whom God never elected, never called and whose faith is that "of Judas, of Simon Magus, of the devil, and of the pope; in whose hearts the law of God is not written, as it appeareth by their works."¹² Obviously, Tyndale's true church "that sinneth not" cannot be identified with the Catholic Church which More, in turn, contends to be Christ's mystical body. Against Tyndale's church of the few, therefore, More poses one of the many; against the church of the elect, he poses one which must wait for God's final judgement when the cockle will be separated from the good corn; against the church of the impeccable, he poses one "as scabbed as ever was Job" (185) which Christ labours to cure.¹³ More's true church, then, in opposition to Tyndale's, includes within it what the latter called the "common rascal." The presence of this element within the church constitutes the doctrinal antecedent to the comic description we find in the dialogue. More's view of the church in no way obliges him to picture its members without fault; sinners exist within it, and the people are liable to abuse its teachings. So he is free to describe a short-tempered and deluded monk, a woman's prejudice against the Virgin Mary, and the revels at Willesden shrine without betraying the basic principles of his position. His comedy, far from being cramped by his belief, rises quite naturally out of it.

More's realistic humour matches the realism of his faith. If the church is composed of both good and bad, then no place, no group, is so privileged as to enjoy complete immunity from sin. He derides it in the mighty and the lowly, in the clergy as well as in the laity. When the Messenger finishes his tale of the harlot Elizabeth and her masquerade as a saint in Leominster, "More" dryly comments on the credulity of the people: "And also men might well think that a young she-saint was not metely to be shrined quick in a monastery among a meany of

monks" (135). This same shrewd eye was turned on Tyndale after he had hedged in the course of his explanation of how the chosen ones of God do sin on occasion. Tyndale admitted that the elect sinned only in the frailty of their flesh, but never "of purpose," never "consenting unto sin"; and so "as they sin not, so they err not."¹⁴ More's refutation of this doctrine comes in the form of a prayer made by one of the elect while on his way to a rendezvous with his paramour:

... iwis though I go thither with my feet, yet I will not agree to go thither with mine heart lo. Nor I would not come at her at all, good lord, saving that upon the great occasion that I had when I saw her once, I then liked her so well that I... am now carried thither even in a rage. But yet for all the rage I will not cast off thy yoke, good lord, but I will carry thy yoke still about my neck to bed with her, and put it about her neck too, and yoke us both together. And yet after all this, lo, when all the rage is past... then will I pray thee of pardon... And this good mind, good lord, will I keep still and never let it fall out of my heart so that all the while that I lie bassing with Bess and I am doing that horrible deed with my body, yet will I never agree thereto with my heart.¹⁵

In this imaginative objection, More takes what he believes to be a self-contradictory principle in his opponent's position and allows it full play until it dies under the pressure of the absurdities consequential to it. Here we catch Morean comedy entering into the argument of the debate and highlighting the deficiencies in Tyndale's concept of the elect who people his true church.

As well as conforming to the thrust of More's argumentation, the comic presence in this controversy elicits an affective reaction from the reader. There is a rhetoric at work in the fiction of the merry tales which ultimately seeks to persuade the audience of the truth in the author's vision of the church, and it operates even in those stories told by the Messenger which disclose the scandalous abuses of the Catholic side. Of course, these last mentioned, narrative passages function initially as arguments against the established church; but, if we see them and all of these tales within the total perspective of this debate, a vision, not only of the church but also of man, gradually emerges which enjoys an undeniable attraction and underscores a corresponding weakness and lack of attraction in Tyndale's stand.

Tyndale's view of the true church stresses its spiritual essence, an aspect which neither side could afford to overlook, although, in Tyndale's case, his concern for inner nature causes him to neglect the total reality he is attempting to define. His inclination toward a secret, invisible church probably originates in the difficulty he has in finding a visible, organized congregation flourishing throughout the great stretch

of history which answers to his idea of what a Christian society should be. In keeping with his notion of a spiritual Israel,¹⁶ Tyndale lays great emphasis on the inner purity, the spotless conscience, the Christian holiness found in each of the elect who make up this ideal community. As we have seen, whatever sin is perpetrated by one of these chosen souls must be attributed to the weakness of his flesh and not to his own volition or will. Such an outlook disparages the body and allows it little or no place in the religious scheme of things. Tyndale's church, by verging on the invisible and the totally spiritual, tends to do the same with its members so that the force of his appeal is limited to only one half of man, that part which escapes the reach of his senses.

More's ecclesiology leads him to a different view of the body. Since he believes in a visible church, he does not have to confine himself to purely spiritual realities. His church develops out of the mystery of the Word made flesh and appeals to the senses in its rites, statues, pictures, and ceremonies. What abuses we find here, of course, will include a physical side as in the gross imagery at St. Walery. In spite of the excesses, even this last tale announces quite unmistakably that the body has found its place in the church, in its very sanctuary, and this notion is reinforced on a much higher level in the tale of the Walbrook couple where the marriage act is described in connection with God's working the miracle of life. Morean comedy, then, plays an important part in the author's attempt to win his audience to his side by appealing to the whole man, body and soul together; and his rhetoric, freed as it is from the constant need for self-justification, permits the parody of Catholic aberration since More's church unambivalently embraces the fallen, the fooled, the fooling. Mortal, soiled, comic man is the subject of the merry tales; and the author never loses rapport with the human subject of his pageant.

It would be misleading, however, to claim that More's humour manifests a uniformity of excellence throughout the entire range of his polemical writings. In fact, he seems to engage in two distinct species of comedy: one aggressive, hostile, and isolating; the other pacifying, congenial, and communal. In order to define clearly the differences between the two and see which is most apposite to the controversy where they are found, we must first look briefly at the nature of comedy and two basic ways of reacting to it.

Comedy, in paradoxical league with tragedy, chooses as a special domain of its interests that broad field of human failure that the modern statistician optimistically reduces and calls the predictable margin of error. Most often the comic genius sets out to awaken within us a humorous reaction to man's benighted condition. According to Arthur Koestler, this link between laughter and human aberrancy is made by

several philosophers: "For Aristotle himself laughter was closely related to ugliness and debasement; for Cicero 'the province of the ridiculous. . . lies in a certain baseness and deformity'; for Descartes laughter is a manifestation of joy 'mixed with surprise or hate or sometimes with both'; in Francis Bacon's list of laughable objects, the first place is taken by 'deformity.'"¹⁷ If we grant that this degradation does enter into the nature of comedy, we must also insist that the comic subject, falling away from the decorous and the fitting, can be presented either antagonistically or sympathetically. On the one hand, Falstaff, that mountain of vice, enjoys such a rapport with us that we are inevitably disappointed when young King Henry dismisses him. His banishment from the court we can endure, but not from the stage. On the other hand, Volpone's viciousness leads him further and further into isolation until he is divorced from the good feelings of the audience. Whereas Falstaffian humour encourages a kind of festive communion, Volponian mirth, centred as it is on the destruction of others, finally redounds with poetic justice on the perpetrator himself.

Volpone's name, like others in the play, is borrowed from the animal world; and, indeed, his conduct follows a bestial rather than a genuinely human line of action. This fall from manhood results in his isolation from the community of his fellows. Now this abusive, hostile humour of aggression, which intends to cut off the victim from his audience, crops out time and again in More's debates with Luther and Tyndale. This type of comedy carries the sound of wartime jokes made at the expense of the enemy, the pleasure of which is akin to the amusement we get from laughing at monkeys because they are something less than men. More, in fact compares Tyndale to one: ". . . the devil hath stricken him stark blind / and set him in a corner with a chain and a clog, and made him his ape to sit there and serve him and make him sport, with mocking and mowing. . . ."¹⁸ The picture is neither very funny nor does it advance the theological argument. Obviously its purposes are polemical. The deformity present in the caricature exaggerates the animal side of Tyndale, and More's most offensive attacks follow this pattern of attempting to reduce his opponents to a level of animal activity be it of a sexual or a scatological nature. The defender of More is hard put to uphold the vituperation in these outbursts. Such passages surely make for a less appealing comedy and deviate so widely from the religious spirit that they resist integration with the positive theological content of the author's position.

It requires no effort to find in the pages of this controversy the caustic, sectarian mock thrust at the other side: bishops are reviled for being bishops, reformers derided for being reformers. This brand of humour rarely wins us because the mind which conceives it runs the

risk of losing its acuity in the fever of the attack. A person is not funny because he is a bishop or thought to be a dissenter, unless, of course, bishops and dissenters have escaped the range of our experience, in which case we might be capable, if confronted by either, of yielding to that base kind of humour which revels in strangers simply because they are not like us. Surely a more liberal and civilized laughter follows upon the recognition of an obviously human but errant proclivity in the object of our amusement with *hamo ridens*, as it were, laughing at himself. Now, while other writers in this religious controversy could never bring themselves to laugh at anything which they felt to be their own, More does just this in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*; for its humour, at its best, does not depend on the devices of propaganda but on either the mistaken conceits or moral vagrancy of its characters, nearly all of whom are Catholic. We have, then, within this great corpus of literature two generic kinds of humour diametrically opposed to each other: one fosters hostility, the other reduces it; one assaults, the other reaches out; one divides, the other bridges the chasm.

With the unity of Christendom at stake in the great controversy of that day, it is evident that the language of character assassination did not play a cohesive part in a rapidly deteriorating situation which saw Roman and Reformed thinkers drifting further and further apart. Whatever effect mockery has, it can always be counted on to be divisive. The opposite is true of the magnanimous, universal jokes of More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. There the fallen man is pictured as part of a kind and incorporated into the rest of humanity. Not only is the race portrayed as one in this richer comedy, but individual man as well enjoys an integrity here of which he is deprived in the passages of biting satirical abuse. When More is in an assaulting vein, his reference to man's lower parts stresses them as vile, shameful, revolting — somehow foreign to the person. In the best of the merry tales, however, these same parts are blessed (St. Walery), involved with the miraculous (Walbrook), won back, as it were, by laughter to the restored species. More's abrasive temper decomposes man while his congenial mood integrates him: as mankind is one in this greater, more human comedy, so is man. It is obvious, then, how this latter comic spirit adheres to the author's belief in and hope for a united Christendom in a way that the aggressive satire does not. The comedy of belligerence singles out, isolates, and divorces its object from the rest of humanity; the comedy of congeniality assimilates the individuals who are the object of its humour into the human family since it understands folly as part of man's fallen condition. The scoffing jest, because of its divisiveness resists baptism, but the laughter which implies the awareness and acceptance of fallen humanity spontaneously contributes to mankind's communion

by reconciling the individual to both the beam in his own eye and the mote in his brother's.

Erasmus, when describing More's delight in the universe of folly, says that he excelled in making witty remarks and even liked those directed against himself.¹⁹ His ability to take in good part a joke on himself extends to those on his own as well. The ever successful wives' tales that appear in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and several other works doubtless derive from the enjoyment More took from his own Dame Alice's unflinching intrepidity. In such stories, the author shares with others that which amuses and pleases him. The tales of human folly recorded at the Hunne trial, at Sandwich Haven, and at St. Walery issue from the same spirit. Erasmus informs us that More, like his Utopians, delighted in the fool's God-given talent for causing merriment.²⁰ Hence, in More's congenial comedy, we are encouraged to take the clown's antics hospitably much in the same way that the author received the jester Henry Patenson into his own home.

The author's empathy with the characters dedicated to folly who parade through the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* recalls the mind and heart of the pilgrim Geoffrey as he sat at the Tabard observing the people who were to be his companions on the road to Canterbury. We find in this work of More's something of the Chaucerian power to bring together a heterogeneous group of people who, despite their outlandish conduct, are never definitively banished from either the author's or the reader's sympathy. In this sense, the Morean comedy of the dialogue looks back on the world of the *Canterbury Tales*. The pilgrimages which the Miller and the Reeve attended are here described. The friars and monks are discussed with some of the frankness heard on the road stretching through the Kentish countryside. There are miracles in the dialogue too — one which the second Nun might have told of a "very fair young gentlewoman of twelve years" who was delivered from the torments of the devil while praying at the shrine of Our Lady of Ipswich (137). Finally, More himself, the old Knight in burgher's dress, like Chaucer, finds a part on the stage of his drama, indicating by his presence that, for all the folly thereon contained, this was his world and he would remain at one with it and urge it to remain one with itself.

As stated at the outset of this study, the attempt to determine the place of comedy within this polemical dialogue cannot belabour the merry tale as argumentatively purposive, for, by so doing, it will certainly spoil the joke. Although comic narrative can be understood as conforming to the general intent of the work, we would destroy its very essence as play by insisting that it submit totally to the objectives of argument. The merry tale, looked at in its entirety, discloses a dialectical move-

ment: it not only conforms to a purpose outside itself, but, at the same time, it exists primarily for an end within itself. Having already treated the congruency of the tale to More's position, we must now turn to its aberrancy and independence from any external goal in order to redress the balance and preserve its nature as comedy. In other words, it is time to view the merry tale as a diversion from the debate. Paradoxically, we may even find a relevancy in the very act of being irrelevant.

Certain tales in the dialogue seem to exist solely to achieve a kind of strategic distraction from the line of close reasoning. These, as we shall see presently, can be easily identified as examples of More's conscious use of a specific type of diversionary tactic. In another, less deliberately intended way, however, all the merry tales exist as mere interludes within the forensic action. This closing part of our discussion, therefore, will first take up More's depiction of the famous Hunne case where story functions as a digressive ruse, and then it will proceed to show how all the tales prove vagrant to the cause of argumentation.

Near the end of Book Three, the Messenger brings up some rumours he has heard concerning the coroner's inquest into the death of Richard Hunne. A *cause célèbre* of the winter of 1514-15, the Hunne case reveals the strained relationship between cleric and layman, between church and state in those pre-Reformation years.²¹ The tension is reflected in the legal investigations into the life and death of the deceased. While the civil court concluded that Hunne had been murdered, the ecclesiastical judges found him guilty of heresy and ordered his body burned. The entire history of this affair bristles with ammunition for the anti-cleric and the reformer.

Hunne's body was found hanged in a church prison where he had been awaiting trial for heresy. His gaolers claimed he had committed suicide, but many laymen thought otherwise; and the mystery lingered in the minds of the London populace with a hold strong enough for More to feel obliged to treat the case even though Richard Hunne had been dead for over fifteen years. Rather than treat the hard evidence of the coroner's inquest about which, as an officer of the court, More was obliged to secrecy, he directs his attention in the dialogue to the rumours that had accrued around the mystery and its investigation. As the Messenger puts it, "a tale that fleeth through many mouths, catcheth many new feathers which, when they be pulled away again, leave him as pilled as a coot and sometimes as bare as a bird's arse" (238). The imagery is apt and applies especially to More's treatment of the affair: by attacking only the rumours relating to the inquest, he succeeds in making the whole case look as ridiculous as a plucked chicken.

Because of his familiarity with the legal investigation, "More" narrates the ensuing tales. He sets the scene for his parade of fools at

Baynard's Castle where, according to hearsay, it had been proven that Hunne would never have been charged with heresy had he not first initiated a suit of praemunire against certain members of the clergy, that Hunne, in fact, did not commit suicide, and, finally, that a witness appeared who was able to identify the murderer. "More," treating this last rumour first, relates how one of the temporal lords sought to identify this key witness. After interrogating several who had heard tell of such a one, he at last discovers the person in question to be not a man but a woman.

'Well,' quod my lord, 'woman or man all is one; she shall be had where-soever she be.' 'By my faith, my lords,' quod he [a testifying servant], 'and she were with you, she would tell you wonders. For, by God, I have wist her to tell many marvelous things ere now.' 'Why,' quod the lords, 'what have you heard her told?' 'Forsooth, my lords,' quod he, 'if a thing had been stolen, she would have told who had it. And, therefore, I think she could as well tell who killed Hunne as who stole an horse.' 'Surely,' said the lords, 'so think we too, I trow. But how could she tell it, by the devil?' 'Nay, by my troth, I trow,' quod he, 'for I could never see her use any worse way than looking in one's hand.' Therewith, the lords laughed and asked, 'what is she?' 'Forsooth, my lords,' quod he, 'an Egyptian, and she was lodged here at Lambeth, but she is gone over sea now' (236).

After reducing serious evidence to cheap sorcery, "More" takes up the report of the servant whose experience with corpses had told him that Hunne had not hanged himself. When asked by the examiners how he knew this, the fellow replies with wide, bulging eyes that insight reveals it to him. Upon further questioning, however, he explains that his experience with the corpses of those who had hanged themselves has endowed him with this unusual power. Indeed, he has seen a great number of such bodies. The panel, then, questions him to learn how many. Was it an hundred? "Nay," quod he, 'not an hundred.' 'Have ye seen four score and ten?' Thereat a little he studied as one standing in a doubt and that were loath to lie; and, at last, he said that he thought nay, not fully four score and ten. Then was he asked whether he hath seen twenty. And thereto without any sticking, he answered, 'Nay, not twenty.' Thereat the lords laughed well to see that he was so sure that he had not seen twenty and was in doubt whether he had seen four score and ten." Finally, the panel drives him to admit that he had beheld only one such corpse and "that was an Irish fellow named Crookshank whom he had seen hanging in an old barn" (237).

Using the same method of comic deflation, "More" turns to the third of the Messenger's rumours, which relates the witness of a "temporal man" against a high standing member of the clergy.

And first the temporal man, before the lords in the hearing of the spiritual person standing by, said: 'My lords all, as help me God and halidom, master doctor here said unto me [with] his own mouth that, if Hunne had not sued the praemunire, he should never have been accused of heresy.' 'How say you, master doctor,' quod the lords, 'was that true or else why said you so?' 'Surely, my lords,' quod he, 'I said not all thing so, but, marry, this I said, indeed, that if Hunne had not been accused of heresy, he would never have sued the praemunire.' 'Lo, my lords,' quod the other, 'I am glad ye find me a true man. Will ye command me any more service?' 'Nay, by my troth,' quod one of the lords, 'not in this matter; by my will, ye may go when ye will. For I have espied, good man, so that words be all one, it maketh no matter to you which way they stand; but all is one to you: a horse mill and a mill horse; drink ere ye go and go ere ye drink.' 'Nay, my lords,' quod he, 'I will not drink, God yield you.' And therewith he made a curtsy and went his way. . . " (237-38).

These tales from the coroner's inquest constitute the longest, unbroken comic sequence in the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. For the most part, they are doubtless creations of the author's imaginative powers even if these very rumours did exist. Rainer Pineas cites this passage to illustrate More's use of comic narrative as a diversion "from the points at issue" in the dialogue.²² In none of the above tales from the court proceedings does the author offer any concrete proof that Hunne did commit suicide; he only derides certain idle, vacuous suggestions that the man did not. Besides luring the reader away from a sober consideration of the facts, these tales tend to make a trifling matter of the whole mystery. The stories, thereby, divert the audience not only from the point of contention but also from the importance of this very grave matter as well. After dwelling so long on the humorous side of the inquest, the reader will not be inclined to reflect seriously on the case at all.

Now just as we see in More's treatment of the Hunne case a conscious effort on the author's part to distract his readers, by means of comic narrative, from the gravity and significance of the whole issue, so in all the merry tales we find a similar, though less deliberate, attempt to divert the audience from the argument. When, for instance, the two characters debate the problem of Christian resistance to violence, "More" considers the supposed Lutheran view that the decay of Christendom has ensued from the Christian defensive warfare against the marauding Turk. He then compares this position to the fallacious reasoning in the old Kentish man's reply to the council inquiring into the silting of Sandwich Haven. After one of the board had asked him why he thought the damage to the harbour had been caused by Tenterden Steeple, the old fellow answered: "Nay, by 'r Lady, masters,' quod he, 'yche cannot tell you well why, but chote well it hath. For, by God, I

knew it a good haven till that steeple was builded. And, by the Mary mass, cha marked it well, it never throve since'” (278). On the one hand, this tale belongs to the argument insofar as it represents an example of *post-hoc-ergo-propter-hoc* reasoning, the logic which “More” ascribes to Luther in the main line of his exposition. On the other hand, while the story is being told, the contention is suspended, or rather replaced with an inconsequential argument, the scene moves from Chelsea to Kent, and the subject changes from religion to a popular kind of geophysics. Psychologically, the action comes to a halt as the mind takes a momentary rest from the weightier matters under investigation. In the very act of letting go, however, we can detect a rhetoric at work which the tales as a whole exercise over the reader. Herein lies the paradox of an argumentative and persuasive force residing in the apparent lack of purpose that characterizes these tales. In order to describe the nature of this power, we shall look for a moment at the psychology of the recreative act as More understood it.

In Book Two of More's *Dialogue of Comfort*, Vincent pleads the propriety of merry tales against his Uncle Anthony's reluctance to recommend them. The young man points out the value of stories which “refresheth a man much and, without any harm, lighteth his mind.”²³ He appeals to holy writ and to Aquinas' treatment of the Aristotelian virtue of *eutrapelia* that serves to recreate the mind “where continual fatigation would make it dull and deadly.” St. Thomas, in translating the Greek term into Latin, calls *eutrapelia* a *bona conversio* which indicates a talent for giving words and deeds an amusing twist. Implied also in this “happy turn” is the glancing away from serious matters or, as we have seen in the merry tales, a diversionary movement whereby the mind relaxes its serious concentration and comes to rest on something playful. Aquinas places the inner calm provided by such distractions among the basic human needs: “As bodily tiredness is eased by resting the body, so psychological tiredness is eased by resting the soul.”²⁴ This *quies animae*, the spirit's still point, corresponds with Anthony's description of the merry tales as “wanton” and “idle.”²⁵ No advance seems to be made in the discussion while the story is being told, for comedy's pilgrimage mocks human progress and imitates the circular route of the carousel. While he is narrating a merry tale, More gives his readers the impression that he has dropped the reins that control the debate. This ability to ignore for a moment the serious side of the controversy indicates a distance and control which encourages the reader to believe that the author is keeping the discussion within a proper and sane perspective. Comedy, when it pleases, enhances greatly the debater's authority. An inner calm and detachment, associated with the spirit of play, issues from and is attributed to, the extempore

comedian. In this way, all the successful tales persuade and render the narrator benevolent to his readers. Furthermore, as intimated above, these stories, in their very idleness, carry by implication an argument. The best example of this is found at the close of the Walbrook tale.

We have seen earlier that this story simply relates the coming together of man and woman in marriage along with the conception, birth, and growth of a male child. "More" conceives the events in terms of one continuing miracle on God's part, a series of wonderful happenings to which repetition and common occurrence render us insensitive. The Messenger finds no miracle in this and by theological definition he is right; in other words, the tale offers no proof at all. The burden of the story "More" tells reveals a tendency, found in all the tales, to lead away from the point at issue, only here that tendency is pronounced. The narrator seems to become distracted from the point under discussion as he grows more caught up with the idea that the life process is more marvelous than the miracle of raising the dead.

"No" quod I, "can ye tell what is the cause[of man's failure to perceive the miracle of life]? None other sure but that the acquaintance and daily beholding taketh away the wondering, as we nothing wonder at the ebbing and flowing of the sea, or the Thames, because we daily see it. But he that had never seen it nor heard thereof would at the first sight wonder sore thereat, to see that great water come wallowing up against the wind, keeping a common course to and fro, no cause perceived that driveth him. If a man born blind had suddenly his sight, what wonder would he make to see the sun, the moon, and the stars; whereas one that hath seen them sixteen year together, marvelleth not so much of them all as he would wonder at the first sight of a peacock's tail. And very cause can I see none why we should of reason more marvel of the reviving of a dead man, than of the breeding, bringing forth, and growing of a child unto the state of a man. No more marvelous is a cuckoo than a cock, though the one be seen but in summer and the other all the year. And I am sure, if ye saw dead men as commonly called [to life] again by nature, ye would reckon it less marvel to bring the soul again into the body, keeping yet still his shape and his organs not much perished, than of a little seed to make all that gear new, and make a new soul thereto." (132)

In this passage we arrive at the peak of Morean comedy. The story gathers together those qualities of the merry tales that have been pointed out in the course of this essay. As well as illustrating the vital, colloquial language of More's narrative style together with his adroit depiction of character and his lively sense of drama, it captures the essence of the tale as distraction, recreation, *détente*. Like the other stories, it wanders irresponsibly away from the strict line of argumentation only here the point of rest includes a diversion within a diversion when the bedroom scene fades out and is replaced by a cosmic

vision commanding by its wonder our attention and awe. The *bona conversio* of play now becomes the soul's conversion to a vision of the divine, a *metanoia*, a turning round of the mind. Comedy gives way at this moment to contemplation with the two revolving at a point beyond the rancour of the debate.

More, himself, as he tired of controversy, advised his public to read neither his own nor his opponents' books but to concern themselves with such works as *The Imitation of Christ* and Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*.²⁶ He was calling for an end to the dispute by speaking on behalf of contemplative rather than polemical literature. The merry tales, in their affirmation of unity, in their cessation of hostility, and in their delightful vagrancy, conform to and reiterate that appeal. By ceasing to argue, Morean comedy pleads silently for an end to the whole argument and in leisurely fashion suggests that the controversy itself, better than the tales, might bear the charge of being idle and inane.

University of Georgia

Footnotes

- 1 *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1954), p. 180.
- 2 Rainer Pineas in *Thomas More and Tudor Polemics* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968, pp. 92-99) treats More's use of the merry tale as a weapon in religious controversy. Vittorio Gabrieli's "The Merry Tales of Sir Thomas More" (*La Cultura*, 12 [1974], 23-46) offers a generous survey of More's comic narrative. In his edition of *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1965, pp. xxviii-xxix), Leland Miles discusses the function of the merry tale within that dialogue. G.R. Elton's "Thomas More, Councillor" (in *St. Thomas More: Action and Contemplation*, ed. R.S. Sylvester [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972], p. 114) casts a disparaging eye on More's stories as examples of crudity. My own response to Elton's position ("In Defense of More's Merry Tale," *Moreana*, No. 38 [June 1973], pp. 5-12) attempts to reveal More's exceptional humour which can "step to the delicate tune of Utopian irony and romp with a verve and gusto suggestive of Rabelais at his best" (p. 9).
- 3 Thomas More, *The Works. . . in the English Tongue* (London, 1557), p. 106. All further quotations from the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* will be taken from this edition and the page references will be indicated in the text. I have modernized the spelling and punctuation.
- 4 In Book Two, Chapter One, of More's *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation* Anthony and Vincent debate the propriety of religious man's yielding himself to mirth. Vincent cites St. Thomas' defense of recreation. When treating the virtue of *eutrapelia* in the *Summa* (2a, 2ae, 168, 2), Aquinas argues on behalf of play in general although he appears to banish merriment from theological discussion because of the seriousness of the subject.
- 5 *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, ed. Louis L. Martz and Frank Manley (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), p. 83. All quotations from the *Dialogue of Comfort* will be taken from this edition.
- 6 *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 387.

- 7 In the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), More made his initial attack on William Tyndale, whose greatest contribution to the English church and to English literature is his translation of the Bible, much of which was incorporated into the *Authorized Version*. Tyndale replied with his *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1530). This in turn occasioned More's most voluminous contribution to religious controversy: *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (1532). Like his adversary, Tyndale died a martyr for his religious convictions a year after More had been beheaded.
- 8 Perhaps the greatest tribute to the author's honesty and artistry in the merry tales is given by implication when the Protestant apologist John Foxe, in his search for anti-Catholic materials, incorporated the story of the counterfeit miracle at St. Alban's into his *Acts and Monuments*. And it was probably in Foxe that Shakespeare discovered More's comic tale and used it to brighten the second act of *2 Henry VI*. Geoffrey Bullough, in his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (III [London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960], p. 90) traces the literary history of the tale from More to Grafton and Hall to Shakespeare and includes it among the sources of *2 Henry VI* (pp. 126-28).
- 9 Thomas More, *Translations of Lucian*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1974), p. 5.
- 10 Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), p. 1315.
- 11 William Tyndale, *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*. . . , ed. Henry Walter (1850; rpt. New York: Johnson Reprint, 1968), pp. 113-14.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 114.
- 13 The opposition set forth here between Tyndale's and More's notions of the church anticipates the former's *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue* (1531) where he clearly enunciates his ecclesiology. As early as 1528, however, Tyndale had begun to formulate his ideas on the true church when he wrote in his *Obedience of a Christian Man* that the genuine body of Christians consists of a "little flock" made up only of the good who are "chosen out of the world to serve God." See William Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures*, ed. Henry Walter (1848; rpt. New York, Johnson Reprint, 1968), pp. 133 and 165.
- 14 *Answer to More's Dialogue*, pp. 32-33.
- 15 *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, p. 458.
- 16 *Answer to More's Dialogue*, p. 54.
- 17 Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 53.
- 18 *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, p. 127.
- 19 *The Epistles of Erasmus*, trans. Francis Morgan Nichols, III (1918; rpt. New York: Russel and Russel, 1962), p. 391.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 392.
- 21 A good account of More and the Hunne case is found in Richard J. Schoeck's "Common Law and Canon Law in Their Relation to Thomas More," in *Action and Contemplation*, pp. 15-55.
- 22 *Thomas More and Tudor Polemics*, p. 93.
- 23 *Dialogue of Comfort*, p. 82.
- 24 *Summa Theologiae*, 2a 2ae, 168, 2. Translation by Thomas Gilby for the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa*, vol. 44, *Well-Tempered Passion* (New York: McGraw and Hill, 1972), p. 217.
- 25 *Dialogue of Comfort*, p. 83.
- 26 *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, p. 37.