WRITING FAITH AND TELLING TALES

Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Work of Thomas More

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This book is dedicated to

Janet Betteridge and Priscilla Tolkein.

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NOTE ON CITATIONS

I would like this work to be as accessible as possible. I have therefore modernized the spelling and punctuation of the texts that I refer to where necessary to elucidate the meaning for readers unfamiliar with fourteenth-, fifteenth-, and sixteenth-century writing, except when quoting from *The Yale Edition of the Complete Works of Saint Thomas More*, when quoting poetry, or where I am making a specific philological point. I have also silently expanded contractions. When quoting from translations of works originally written in other languages, I have included the original text as a footnote only where this is necessary for the point I wish to make.
On September 1, 1523, Thomas More wrote to Cardinal Wolsey from Woking, updating him on the correspondence that Henry VIII had recently received.

It may like your good Grace [Wolsey] to be advertised that I have received your Grace’s letters directed to myself dated the last day of August with the letters of my Lord Admiral to your Grace sent in post and copies of letters sent between the Queen of Scots and his Lordship concerning the matters and affairs of Scotland with the prudent answers of your Grace as well to my said Lord in your own name as in the name of the King’s Highness to the said Queen of Scots. All which letters and copies I have distinctly read unto his Grace.¹

More went on to tell Wolsey that Henry, and his queen, Catherine of Aragon, were extremely pleased with the letter that Wolsey had written in Henry’s name to Queen Margaret of Scotland, Henry’s sister. More told Wolsey, “I never saw him [Henry] like thing better, and as help me God in my poor fantasy not causeless, for it is for the quantity one of the best made letters for words, matter, sentence and couching that ever I read in my life.”²
In 1523 More was one of Henry’s key public servants, a member of the king’s council and under treasurer of the exchequer. He was used by Henry and Wolsey as a diplomat, orator, and secretary. More was also a celebrated letter writer and engaged in correspondence with many leading European humanists, most famously Desiderius Erasmus. His praise of Wolsey’s letter is therefore extremely generous. Unfortunately it is impossible to know if it was justified, since the original letter Wolsey wrote on Henry’s behalf has not survived. The appreciation that More showed for Wolsey’s skills as a ghostwriter reflects perhaps a shared sense of the creative requirements but also the compromises involved in being a royal servant: the need to write as someone else, to author another man’s words. More, as Henry’s secretary, was the king’s textual eyes and hands—reading and writing for the king.

Throughout the 1520s More was an important conduit between Henry and his realm, the kind of dependable, discreet civil servant that all regimes require to carry out their business. The letter of September 1523 provides a snapshot of More in his role as royal councilor and secretary, as a trusted servant of the king and Wolsey’s confidant. The courtly political milieu of More’s letter to Wolsey seems on the surface to be many miles from the world of the author of *Utopia*, *Richard III*, or the *Dialogue concerning Heresies*. This disjuncture is, however, more apparent than real. More, perhaps to a greater degree than any other figure in Tudor history, has suffered from being viewed through inappropriate or partial perspectives. In particular, More’s opposition to Henry’s religious policies of the early 1530s and his martyrdom profoundly colored the first Tudor accounts of his life, and this has fed into the modern historical record.

Thomas More was born in 1478 into a relatively wealthy, well-connected London family. His father, John More, was a leading member of the legal profession, rising to become judge of the King’s Bench in 1520. More’s early education was at St. Anthony’s School, a leading London grammar school. Sometime around the year 1489 More entered the household of Archbishop John Morton at Lambeth Palace. Also in Morton’s household at this time was the playwright Henry Medwall. William Roper, More’s son-in-law and early biographer, records More spontaneously leaving his place in the audience and taking part in dramas being performed before Morton’s household. Roper writes that “though he [More] was young of years, yet would he at Christmas-tide suddenly some-
times step in among the players, and never studying for the matter, make a
part of his own there presently among them, which made the lookers-on
more sport than all the players beside.” It is difficult to imagine that More’s
interventions were met with unalloyed pleasure by the players performing
the Christmas revels, but they clearly amused those watching the drama.

In 1492 More went to Oxford University, and two years later he re-
turned to London to train as a lawyer. It was while studying law that he
lodged in or near the Charterhouse, the home of the Carthusian Order
in London. Roper writes that More “gave himself to devotion and prayer
in the Charterhouse of London, religiously living there without vow
about four years, until he resorted to the house of one Master Colt, a
gentleman of Essex, that had oft invited him thither, having three daugh-
ters, whose honest conversation and virtuous education provoked him
there specially to set his affection.”

It is unclear if More lived as a monk during his association with the
Carthusian Order. The passage from Roper’s life describing More’s time
“in the Charterhouse” suggests that in this period More lived as a devout
Christian as well as a gentleman, taking up offers of hospitality from the
likes of Master Colt. In 1505 More married Colt’s daughter Jane. The
marriage to Jane produced four children between 1505 and 1509, the old-
est being his favorite daughter, Margaret. During the period 1505–18
More steadily built up his career as a lawyer. This led to his becoming a
member of the important Mercers’ guild in 1509 and representing West-
minster in Henry VIII’s first parliament. At the same time More and his
family played host to Erasmus, who appears to have enjoyed staying with
More. In 1511 More’s wife, Jane, died, and within a short time he mar-
rried Alice Middleton. In 1518, when More entered the royal service, he
was a highly successful London lawyer, a humanist scholar with a Euro-
pean reputation, and a happy family man. Seymour Baker House com-
ments that “when More joined the king’s council in 1518, he did so be-
cause his training and inclinations had prepared him for exactly that.”

The story of More’s life from his birth until he entered royal service is,
based on contemporary historical records, relatively straightforward. This
is not, however, how it appears when looked at from the perspective of
the various modern accounts of More’s early life, which present a be-
wildering array of different, often incompatible, Mores for the reader to
praise or condemn.
The first significant modern study of More was R.W. Chambers's biography, *Thomas More*, published in 1935. Chambers thought it important to address a number of agendas. Above all he wanted to critique the assumption that More the writer of *Utopia* and More the martyr were in conflict. Chambers thought the idea that these two aspects of More clashed was produced by a false assumption that More’s “modern” humanism and his “medieval” religion were in conflict. Throughout *Thomas More* Chambers argues that what distinguishes More is his ability to combine the modern with the medieval. Chambers writes that

More . . . connects Medieval England with Modern England. . . . Think of him first in connection with the continuity of the English speech, English prose, English literature. To the student of the English language he is a vital link between Middle and Modern English. To the student of English prose his work is the great link which connects modern prose with the medieval prose of Nicholas Love, Walter Hilton, and Richard Rolle. . . . To the student of English thought More is equally vital: he points to our own times; but he also points back to William Langland, and More and his writings help us to see a continuity running through English literature and history.9

Chambers insisted in his work that More’s life and work exhibit a basic coherence. In making this argument, however, Chambers painted a simplistic picture of the medieval period as a time without major conflicts or areas of dispute; in particular he depicted More’s religion as entirely conventional without pausing to consider what this meant in late medieval England.10 Chambers’s More is a reasonable, witty man—a martyr who put his conscience before the demands of a tyrannical king. Chambers spends some time discussing the similarities between More and Socrates. In particular, he argues that as Socrates transcended the particular history of ancient Athens, so More transcended that of Tudor England.11 More’s transcendent nature is for Chambers largely a product of his status as a martyr for the rights of the individual conscience against the demands of government or state.12 This claim is, however, profoundly problematic, since More was a consistent critic of those who placed their own conscience before the teaching of the church.13 Chambers’s understand-
ing of More’s attitude to conscience reflects the most pressing issue in relation to Thomas More, which is that it elides history with hagiography, so that the judgments that Chambers makes, which went on to inform Robert Bolt’s play A Man for All Seasons, are a strange blend of the historically astute and uncritically acclamatory.

It was this combination that above all drove two highly influential critiques of Thomas More, the biography by Richard Marius, published in 1984, and the work on More by G. R. Elton, particularly the article “Sir Thomas More and the Opposition to Henry VIII.” Marius’s More is a man obsessed with sex, a failed monk who could never forgive himself for giving in to his sexual desires and marrying Jane Colt. Marius assumes that More’s time at the Charterhouse represents an attempt by More to become a monk and that it was his sexuality, and the demands of his father, that prevented More from achieving this desire. Marius regards this moment of frustration or failure as the key to More and suggests it created a conflict that runs throughout the rest of More’s life. The evidence that Marius advances for More’s conflicted state is an obsession with sex that Marius suggests is an important feature of the antiheretical writings More produced at the beginning of the 1530s. For example, Marius suggests that “the Confutation rings with the clangour of More’s own repressed sexuality.” The problem is that there is no real evidence that More did “repress” his sexuality. He had two marriages, both of which, as far as can be ascertained, were entirely happy. Marius suggests that More’s second marriage, to Alice Middleton, “was probably a quiet and unobtrusive way of living a life of sexual abstinence while he [More] remained in the world” and that it may even have been “a continuing penance.” There is no historical evidence to back these claims. The fact that More’s second marriage did not produce any children is not evidence that More and Alice did not have sex. Marius’s biography is the mirror image of Chambers’s Thomas More in that it builds castles in the sky on the basis of limited historical records.

G. R. Elton shared Marius’s sense that More was a man caught between competing demands, but for Elton those demands were an obsessive hatred of heresy and a recognition of the need for reform. Elton’s attitude to More was critical and strangely uncomprehending. It is clear that he found it simply impossible to understand More as, or forgive him
for being, a man of reason, a humanist, the writer of *Utopia*, and a principled opponent of the policies pursued by the Henrician regime in pursuit of Henry’s divorce of Catherine of Aragon. Both Marius and Elton suggest that More was “happy” when he was imprisoned in the Tower of London at the end of his life, since finally he could live as a monk. This seems an unfortunate and belittling suggestion. More’s final letters, discussed in the conclusion of this study, indicated More feared death and was desperate to return to his family. In his highly influential study, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, Stephen Greenblatt produced an interpretation of More that is more nuanced than but essentially similar to that of Elton. Again More is depicted as caught between the playful humanist writer and the obsessive heresy hunter. Greenblatt comments of More’s antithetical work that “the possibility of playful, subversive fantasy . . . is virtually destroyed.”17 Elton and Greenblatt both see as a central element of More’s work and life a tension between the medieval, which they implicitly relate to the campaign against heresy, and humanism, which they see as modern or at least modernizing.

Recent studies of More have followed in the paths laid down on one side by Chambers and on the other by Elton, Greenblatt, and Marius. For example, the More of Peter Ackroyd’s *The Life of Thomas More* is, like Chambers’s, one of the “last great exemplars of the medieval imagination.”18 There are two central problems to all of these approaches to More. The first is a simplistic approach to the “medieval period,” invariably treating it as homogeneous and conservative. For example, Marius writes, “A thesis of this biography is that until his imprisonment More suffered the severe inner struggle of a deeply divided soul. Perhaps the fundamental cause was that he struggled to combine medieval piety with the invincible temptations of Renaissance secularism.”19 In this context “medieval piety” implies a dated emphasis on monasticism and in particular asceticism that any normal person would find less attractive than the “temptations” of the Renaissance. Chambers’s apparent exception to this rule is simply a product of his approval of what he saw as medieval homogeneity and piety. The second problem, exemplified in the approach that these scholars have taken to More’s attitude to religion, is a marked tendency to move beyond the available facts in order to support what are extreme understandings of More—he is either saint or persecutor, a humanist or medievalist, reformer or reactionary. Sophisticated writers
like Greenblatt do produce more subtle versions of this dichotomy, but it still exists in their work as an explanatory framework. John Guy’s study of Thomas More, published in 2000, and his earlier work, *The Public Career of Sir Thomas More* (1980), provide a clear-sighted correction to many of the myths about More. Guy comments, “Writing about More presents an extraordinary challenge.” There are, Guy argues, two reasons for this. First, he suggests, More’s sainthood “obscures, rather than illuminates his historical significance.” Second, many of the earliest sources and records of More’s life have been strongly influenced by people for whom More’s martyrdom was by far the most important aspect of his life.

*Writing Faith and Telling Tales: Literature, Politics, and Religion in the Work of Thomas More* is a study of More’s writing that places it within a tradition of late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century vernacular literature. In some ways it therefore represents a return to the agenda pursued by Chambers in *Thomas More*. The texts that I have chosen to discuss are eclectic, designed to represent the traditions within which More wrote; I am not claiming, however, that More had read, for example, the work of Reginald Pecock. What I am suggesting throughout this volume is that many of the concerns that More addressed in his writings are the same as those that interested late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English writers. At the same time, unlike Chambers, I will argue that late medieval English writing is not monolithic or homogeneous. More’s writing engages with the issues and conflicts that interest authors as diverse as William Langland, John Lydgate, and Geoffrey Chaucer. For More, reading and writing, indeed life, were best understood as a pilgrimage, and, as with Chaucer’s pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales*, the important thing was to keep walking, talking, and listening to each other’s tales. More, like Chaucer, was prepared to imagine and defend a promiscuous collection of tales and tellers. The figures that More feared and fought were those like the Pardoner in *The Canterbury Tales*, whose counterfeit, sterile tale and beguiling offer to sell the pilgrims a new pardon “at every miles ende” threaten the very existence of Chaucer’s merry company of storytellers. More regarded his opponents as latter-day Pardoners, peddlers in falsehood, endangering the souls of those they attempted to seduce with their offers of instant and immediate gratification, religious, political, and personal.

More’s commitment to the ideal of a community of storytellers is born out of his engagement with English vernacular writing of the later
fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and his civic humanism. The vernacular as it emerged during the fourteenth century developed a particular sense of itself as offering a language that was an alternative to, and at times more inclusive and authoritative than, learned Latin or other foreign languages. This can be illustrated by briefly examining a scene from the C Text of Piers Plowman where the narrator, Will, and Patience sit down to a meal, presided over by Reason, with a learned Friar. Scripture offers them “food”—Augustine, Ambrose, and the four evangelists—which the Friar rejects:

Ac of these mete the maystre myhte nat wel chewe;  
Forthy eet he mete of more cost, mortrewes and potages.  
Of that men myswonne they made hem wel at ese  
Ac here sauce was ouer-sour and vnsauerly ygrounde  
In a morter, post mortem, of many bittere peynes  
Bote yf they synge for tho soules and wepe salte teres.25

The Friar desires food that is oversour and unsavory and will lead to bitter pains after death. This episode reflects an important motif in Langland’s work, which is the importance of simplicity over complexity. The food the Friar desires is a metaphor for complex, corrupt, overcooked scholarly discourse that will ultimately lead to bitterness and tears. Nicholas Watson comments, “Piers Plowman is . . . one of the first works to argue in English against the formalism of authoritative structures developed in Latin. . . . In Piers Plowman we have both a demonstration of the moment at which English, notionally the language of the ‘lewd,’ challenges this definition of its role, and an analysis of the consequences.”26

The parable of the Friar and Scripture’s meal is about different kinds of language and the authority they confer. It suggests a relationship between ancient Christian teaching and plain, simple wisdom while at the same time criticizing linguistic complexity. Implicit in this moment is a critique of clerical language and, by implication, of scholastic learning, and a claim for the authority of a synergy between the classic Christian teaching and simple or lewd wisdom. Vernacular writing of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was not homogeneous, but it did consistently contain a strain, perhaps particularly in relation to religious writing, that em-
phasized the inclusive nature of writing in English.27 There is a sense in the writing of authors like William Langland and Geoffrey Chaucer that English not only is a proper and appropriate language to write in but also bears a relationship to the lived reality of the lives of ordinary people, the lewd and everyday, a relationship that gives it a particular status and authority. Late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century vernacular writing is experimental or tentative because its writers were testing in their work the limits and possibilities of their language. This led to some writers celebrating the importance of the vernacular while others expressed anxiety and concern about its spread. Piers Plowman and, in a very different way, The Canterbury Tales push the limits of what it is possible to say and do in English. More’s English writing needs to be seen as part of the same tradition of vernacular writing as that of writers like Langland and Chaucer.28 In particular, it shares their sense of English as, at its best, combining classical Christian learning with popular sayings, fables, and tales to create an authoritative ethical language.

As well as writing in the vernacular, More was also famous as a Latinist and humanist scholar. His Latin writing forms an important part of the history of humanism in England and Europe.29 Humanism is a difficult concept to define. It claimed to represent a return to the sources of classical learning, ad fontes, freed from medieval commentaries and glosses. Humanism emphasized the educational importance of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic. This was because humanist scholars insisted on the importance of the practical application of learning to society, which required linguistic skills and eloquence. Humanists like More and Erasmus were strongly influenced by Cicero and his insistence that the learned should play an active part in the public sphere. This had important implications for the kinds of intellectual labor that humanists tended to value. James McConica comments that “the culture of humanism, with its emphasis on the issues of the present, was entirely hostile to philosophical system-building and abstract speculation.”30 This focus on the present and practical was particularly important in relation to the political thought of Northern European humanism, which stressed the Ciceronian understand of learning as, in Brendan Bradshaw’s words, a “moral process—directed to the fulfilment of . . . human potential.”31

More and Erasmus shared an understanding of human potential that was grounded in an Augustinian sense of the mutually supportive
natures of reason and revelation. For them the idea that human reason was inherently and irredeemably sinful was anathema, and they both consistently attacked fideism, the belief that faith and reason are incompatible. Central to More's humanism was the ideal of friendship as an embodiment of amicitia, or love, on the one hand, and reason on the other. In textual terms the key representation of this ideal was the proverb as represented in Erasmus's highly influential work Adages (first published 1500). For Erasmus proverbs were pieces or shards of classical wisdom that could, in theory, be shared by all. As Kathy Eden argues, for Erasmus, “proverbs or adages encode over time and space a collective wisdom that belongs equally to all members of a community.” Humanism for More and Erasmus was not an abstract philosophy. It was a vital, exciting, and reforming movement whose aim was nothing less than the renewal of Christianity across Europe.

The vernacular and humanism are two key influences on More's writing. In this introduction I will examine in detail two texts that More wrote relatively early during his writing career, The Last Things (c. 1522) and the Life of Pico (c. 1510), in order to illustrate More's engagement with late medieval English literature. These works have often been viewed as representing the two sides of More—the medieval and the humanist. I will, however, suggest that it is important to understand them as united in emphasizing the devotional importance of the everyday, of the lived reality of human life. In order to illustrate this argument in detail I will refer to a number of late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century play texts. Although More never wrote a play, it has long been acknowledged that drama was an important part of his life and work. Early Tudor drama exemplifies late medieval English vernacular culture in its heterogeneity and critical engagement with Christianity. In particular, the issues central to the poetics and ethos of the work of Chaucer and his contemporaries were staged in such plays as Everyman, the N Town Play, and the Digby Mary Magdalene.

Vernacular Writing and The Last Things

More's engagement with English vernacular writing was more complex than is sometimes acknowledged. One of his earliest works was “A Mery
Gest How a Sergeant Wolde Lerne to Be a Frere,” possibly written in 1509.34 This relatively short poem tells the story of a Sergeant of Law’s attempts to arrest a debtor by pretending to be a friar. It opens by suggesting that people should stick to their trades, since they will make fools of themselves if they do not:

Whan an hatter
Wyll go smater,
In phylosophy,
Or a pedlar,
Waxe a medlar,
In theolegy,
All that ensewe,
Suche craftes newe,
They dryue so fere a cast,
That euermore,
They do therfore,
Beshrewel themselfe at laste.35

This passage could be regarded as expressing a conservative medieval attitude to society—hatters and peddlers should know their place and keep to it. Certainly the poem ends by advising its listeners to reject innovation and not to repeat the Sergeant’s mistake:

I wolde auyse,
And counseyll euery man,
His owne crafte vse,
All newe refuse,
And utterly let them gone:
Playe not the frere,
Now make good cheere,
And welcome euery chone.36

The narrator of “A Mery Gest” opens and closes his poem with conventional statements of conservative social wisdom. This is despite the fact, which the narrator fails to notice, that the poem’s story does not
endorse the morality encapsulated in the poem’s opening and closing remarks. Instead the story depicts a world of linguistic play and physical comedy. At a basic level the sergeant does not pretend to be a friar in order to improve his social standing. His performance is a product of his existing social role. It is to fulfill his duty as a sergeant of law that he dresses as a friar. The plot of “A Mery Gest” subtly but firmly undermines its narrator’s didactic morality by suggesting that “playing the friar” may be necessary to maintain social norms and rules.

As soon as the Sergeant, dressed as a friar, attempts to arrest the debtor, a fight breaks out:

They rente and tere,
Eche other here,
And claue togyder fast,
Tyll with luggynge,
Halynge and tughynge,
They fell doune both at last.
Than on the grounde,
Togyder rounde,
With many sadde stroke,
They roll and rumble,
They tourne and tumble,
Lyke pygges in a poke.37

The final image of this line is perhaps intended to remind More’s reader of Chaucer’s description of the fight between the two clerks and the miller in *The Reeve’s Tale*, in particular through its use of the phrase “pigs in a poke.”38 For Chaucer’s Reeve and More’s narrator the violence that erupts at the end of their texts raises questions about the amount of control they have over their own works. In both cases tales told by advocates of a conservative morality based upon order and restraint undermine that morality. The violence that breaks out at the end of *The Reeve’s Tale* is excessive, disturbing, and amusing. It generates textual pleasure that clearly exceeds the didactic requirements of the Reeve’s message, which is encapsulated in the two moralizing proverbs with which he concludes his tale.39 There is also no need for the narrator of “A Mery Gest”
to provide a detailed account of the fight between the Sergeant and the Debtor in order to argue for the permanence of the existing social order. It is the requirement to entertain that drives More’s description of the fight, with its Skeltonic rhymes and jangles.

The tension between the form of “A Mery Gest” and its narrator’s morality comes into particular focus in the poem’s emphasis upon the Sergeant’s success in impersonating a friar:

So was he dyght,
That no man myght,
Hym for a frere deny,
He dropped and doked,
He spake and loked,
So relygyously.
Yet in a glasse
Of he wolde passe,
He toted and he pered:
His herte for pryde,
Lepte in his syde
To se how well he frered.40

This passage suggests that being a friar is largely a matter of performance. More invents a new word, “frered,” to encapsulate the extent to which the Sergeant’s playacting is real. In the process the poem again puts pressure on its narrator’s conservative social ethos. In creating a new word is not More meddling, mixing things up that should be kept apart? What right does More, as a lawyer, have to play the part of a word maker? Clearly the Sergeant is, in one sense, a figure for More, and the former’s pride in his “friaring” is a self-deprecating joke on More’s “poeting.”

“A Mery Gest” was one of the first works that More wrote. It is easy to see it as simple, even naïve. In particular, the poem’s apparent moralizing on the importance of knowing one’s place could be seen as reflecting a conservative medieval mind-set. In recent years, however, scholars such as David Aers, Lee Patterson, and James Simpson have ably critiqued the idea that in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries people uncritically accepted the need to maintain the status quo, social, political, or religious.41
“A Mery Gest” can be seen as a typically medieval work, but only on the basis that it offers the modern reader the temptation of medievalism: the possibility of reading without proper care within an existing set of historical and critical assumptions. In “A Mery Gest” More is deliberately and self-consciously mocking a conservative social morality that emphasized the permanency of the existing social order, and he is doing so by deploying the resources of late fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English vernacular writing. Indeed it is arguable that it is the conservative morality of the opening and closing passages of “A Mery Gest” that are modern or, more accurately, typical of the sixteenth century, while the critical, witty middle section of the poem evokes the writing of Chaucer and perhaps specifically The Reeve’s Tale. More is a medieval writer, and it is his critical engagement with the literature of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that provides him with the intellectual resources to critique the emerging political, cultural, and religious norms of the sixteenth century.

More wrote The Last Things at a stage of his life similar to that during which he wrote Richard III and Utopia. It shares with these works a concern with the ethics of language and the nature of a good life. The Last Things was first published in 1557 as part of William Rastell’s edition of More’s English Works. In this work Rastell suggests More wrote The Last Things in 1522. This does seem likely. In particular, the reference in The Last Things to “a great Duke” has been interpreted as an allusion to the duke of Buckingham, who was executed for treason in May 1521. The Last Things is often regarded as an unfinished work and was presented as such by Rastell in his edition of More’s works. Possibly, however, it is more than simply coincidence that the final chapter, dealing with the sin of sloth, is short and breaks off before it is finished. Does not an unfinished chapter perfectly illustrate the dangers of slothfulness? The two chapters preceding sloth concern gluttony and covetousness. They are the longest chapters in the work, coveting textual space and consuming narrative motivation so that little of either is left for Sloth. The Last Things is not a simple work of conventional piety. It raises questions, for example, similar to those Chaucer poses in The Parson’s Tale in relation to specific forms of Christian writing, and in particular penitential teaching as a key aspect of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century religious practice. The Last Things creates an image of a Christian textual community united in the devo-
tional labor of reading. In the process it critiques the emphasis on clerical authority articulated, for example, in the play *Everyman*.

*The Last Things* opens with an introduction that includes a discussion of Christian speech. More comments that everything has its time and it is preferable not to speak rather than to participate in a conversation that is ungodly. He goes on, however, to argue,

Yet better were it then holdynge of thy tong, properly to speake, and with some good grace and pleasant fashion, to break into some better matter: by whiche thy speache and talking, thou shalt not onely profite thy selfe as thou sholdest haue done by thy well minded silcence, but also amende the whole audience, which is a thyng farre better and of muche more merite.42

In this passage More is seeking to justifying the printing of *The Last Things* as an act of Christian devotion. He imagines the emergence of a Christian community through the shared reading of his work. In particular, *The Last Things* consistently deploys witty and comic language alongside devotional discourse to create a diverse text that happily mixes together different forms and genres.43 More, like Augustine, while fully accepting the doctrine of original sin, retained a sense of the salvific potential of sensuous human labor and in particular language.44 This placed him against those fideistic traditions of late medieval religious thought that regarded human wit and imagination as irredeemably sinful and corrupt.

Having discussed the virtue of good speaking, More goes on to reject the imposition of authority upon popular or public speech:

If thou can find no proper meane to breake the tale, than excepte thy bare authoritie sufficient to commaunde silence, it were peraduenture good, rather to keepe a good silence thy self, than blunt forth rudely, and yrryte them to anger, which shal happily therfore not let to talke on, but speake much the more, less thei should seme to leue at thy commaundement. And better were it for the while to let one wanton woorde passe vncontrolled, than geue occasyon of twain.45
More would rather the tale continue than impose a violent, disruptive silence on the community of Christian tale-tellers. In particular, *The Last Things*, despite its focus on the seven deadly sins, is not a penitential work. It does not ask its readers to focus obsessively on their personal sinfulness, and its representation of a good Christian life is far more active and engaged than that of some other early Tudor religious works. *The Last Things* focuses on the need for a Christian to be active in this world. This emphasis upon the active over the contemplative or penitential is ultimately based on the christocentric nature of More’s religious beliefs and in particular on the importance he placed upon Christ’s role as a teacher. Not for More the suffering, relatively passive, “domestic” Christ of works like Nicholas Love’s immensely popular *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*.

More’s emphasis on reason extends to his understanding of the proper approach to Scripture. The phrase “four last things,” referring to death, judgment, hell, and heaven, alludes to Ecclesiasticus 7:36: “Remember thy last things, and thou shalt never sin in this world.” More tells the reader in the opening pages of his work that remembering the last things is a “sure medicine.” He then develops this metaphor, comparing the true healing powers of Ecclesiasticus 7:36 with those of human doctors:

The phisicion sendeth his bill to the poticary, and therin writeth sometime a costlye receite of many strange herbes and rootes, fet out of far countreis, long lien drugges, al strength worn out, and some none such to be goten. But thys phisicion sendeth his bil to thy selfe, no strange thing therin, nothing costly to bie, nothing farre to fet, but to be gathered al times of the yere in the gardein of thyne owne soule.46

More in this passage seems to be drawing a relatively simple dichotomy between the physical and spiritual. The passage tempts the reader to assume that the biblical doctor works on the soul in much the same way as the secular doctor works on the body. The two doctors, however, are in practice quite different. The secular doctor’s cures are largely powerless, with the patient becoming involved in a series of exchanges that ulti-