Introduction

C. S. Lewis' striking judgment that the *Dialogue concerning Heresies* is a "great Platonic dialogue, perhaps the best in English,"[1] is bound to surprise most readers today, simply because this great work has not been available in a popular edition for more than four hundred years—even though it was so popular in More's lifetime that it went through two editions in three years and More took time to revise it during his tumultuous tenure as Lord Chancellor of England (1529–1532). The present, modernized edition intends to make this "classic controversy of the Reformation"[2] available again to contemporary readers, in the hope that they may see why the *Dialogue* has been celebrated as the "wittiest" work of the English Reformation, with a "relaxed charm" and "potential to persuade" singular among Thomas More's later works on the theological controversies of his day.[3]

This introduction draws upon chapter 15 of Gerard B. Wegemer's *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage*, rev. ed. (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2005).

[1] C. S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 172.

[2] So this book has been described in the original *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 19 (New York: MacMillan Company, 1909), 1354.

[3] *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 39 (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), 69–70. When one considers that the first full scholarly edition of Thomas More's extensive writings was not completed until 1997, centuries later than those of any other comparable author of the English Renaissance, the strange neglect of More's writings seems somewhat more understandable, though the full story remains to be told. Of More's writings (some 15 volumes strong in the Yale Univ. Press edition), only his famous *Utopia* and *History of Richard the Third* are more widely known. References to the Yale edition of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963–1997) are here abbreviated CW, followed by volume number and page numbers. The definitive scholarly edition of *The Dialogue concerning Heresies* is the Yale edition, edited by Thomas Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard Marius, CW, vol. 6 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1981).

The *Dialogue* was composed in 1528 at the request of Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall of London, who commissioned Thomas More to defend publicly the doctrines of the Church and to respond to the Reformers' new opinions on a variety of controversial matters.[4] Masterfully conceived by a seasoned humanist and statesman, the *Dialogue* is a series of six conversations, taking place over four days, between Sir Thomas and a young university student and tutor, who has been influenced by all the new ideas of the age, especially the theological controversies enkindled by Martin Luther and William Tyndale. In the course of these lively exchanges, More discovers the roots of the youth's confusion by asking probing questions and by artfully addressing his concerns in classic Platonic fashion.[5] These conversations take place in the study and in the garden of More's home in Chelsea. More's hospitality is so great that he entertains his young

[4] See CW 6.2, 455–72, and Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (New York: Nan A. Telese, 1998), 276–79, for helpful discussions of the historical context of the work. The historian John Guy also points out in his recent book *Thomas More* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000) that the composition of the *Dialogue* marks More's transition from "theological councilor" to the Crown, to "public defender of the faith" (119). As with many of More's later public works, it is important to note that he was writing swiftly at the request of the authorities, while under the incredible strain of his many other duties. Such working conditions explain, for example, occasional errors in Scriptural quotations and citations made from memory.

[5] In his earlier writing career, e.g., in the humanist masterpiece *Utopia* (1516), Thomas More had used the Platonic dialogue form and the Socratic method of cross-examination to tremendous effect—indeed, the dialectical character of *Utopia* is one key to its enduring power to prompt reflection and draw the reader into serious thought over the most important questions facing the human being. More's later theological writings do not represent a break from his humanist approach, but rather a development of it that has not been sufficiently studied or understood. As British scholar Brendan Bradshaw has persuasively argued, "the key to interpretation of More's career as a Catholic controversialist lies in his continuing commitment to Christian humanism." See "The Controversial Sir Thomas More," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 (1985): 23–43. Such commitment is evident in More's choice of the Platonic dialogue, with its emphasis on reasoned discussion and debate, to address such grave matters as the Reformation controversies.

guest at lunch or dinner four times, in addition to conducting these engaging conversations. Their serious discussions do not, of course, take place at the family meals—a small yet significant detail that reveals More's sensitivity to the human requirements of different times and places and suggests one reason why he gained the reputation as "a man for all seasons."

In addition to the artful, Socratic character of More's writing, another basis for C. S. Lewis's high praise of this book is surely the subtlety of its characterization. The young man, for example, is no stock character; he is unusually bright and articulate, and moreover he has highly complex motives and a very merry wit.[6] Throughout the *Dialogue* he is called "the Messenger," because he has been sent by a friend of More's to seek counsel regarding the many confused ideas of the time. Despite the press of business, More makes time for this young man and cares for him as he would for the longtime friend who sent him. As the great More scholar Germain Marc'hadour relates, these details from the *Dialogue* are quite true to life—Thomas More in fact enjoyed receiving such visitors from the universities at his home, where "he loved to debate with them" while taking "great care not to crush them under the weight of his learning or office."[7]

More's art of conversation in exploring and answering the Messenger's many difficult questions is highly instructive. In the course of replying to the pointed attacks against the common culture of Christendom and Church doctrine—attacks the Messenger relates energetically without endorsing fully—More in turn emerges as a spirited yet modest conversation partner, despite his great advantages in learning and experience. Indeed, the reader may be surprised to discover

[6] More's success with this vivid characterization has led some to wonder if William Roper, More's spirited son-in-law and eventual biographer, was the model for the character of the Messenger.

[7] CW 6.2, 456.

the image More presents of himself in the *Dialogue*. For those aware of the genius and stature of More's mind, it can be quite moving to behold England's only true genius (as the great Dutch humanist Erasmus claimed) consistently arguing on behalf of docility, obedience, and humility, and freely submitting his considerable judgment and understanding to the teaching authority of the Church, the true nature of which seems to be one of the most important of all contested issues in the *Dialogue*. That said, More's famous good cheer and mother wit are also evident in the opening chapters on saints, pilgrimages, and miracles. For example, he calls attention to the great human wonder that people are slow to believe others who testify by solemn oath to the truth of a miracle, yet those same folks will instantly believe a gossip who relates something startling and apparently evil about a neighbor simply on the strength of the gossip's word alone.

The book opens with the Messenger's arrival at More's home in Chelsea. More welcomes him and reads carefully his letter of introduction. In the original edition, this letter is called "the letter of credence," and it is important to note that the *Dialogue* begins with a simple yet significant human action: More's acceptance of his friend's letter and his willingness to trust him by taking the Messenger into his confidence. As More points out later in the *Dialogue*, "agreement and unanimity can never be where no one gives credence to anyone else," words that shed light on why More the artist begins the *Dialogue* as he does, by showing credence in the possibilities of good conversation. After this introduction, More then listens for a long time as the Messenger presents his many complaints and questions about the state of the Catholic Church. The young man is concerned about the nature of such devotional practices as making pilgrimages and praying to saints, but he is particularly disturbed by the harsh way heretics are treated. It seems to him "that the clergy, out of malice and ill will, are falsely accusing" many good people whom they call heretics (I.1). By relying upon

law and public burnings, they act "contrary to the mildness and merciful mind of [Christ] their Master, and against the example of all the old holy Fathers." The Messenger is also convinced that all studies except Latin and Scripture are a waste of time for the spiritually minded believer.

Faced with these many involved issues, More does not want to give an immediate, "unpremeditated response." Instead, he simply gives the young man a hearty welcome and asks him to return the next morning. More then reflects on the young man's difficulties and works out a four-step plan to address the array of issues raised. In such planning and in the long hours lavished on conversation with this youth, More resists giving easy answers or quick "one-liners" that are easier to repeat than to understand and defend. Instead, More patiently listens and responds in ways helpful to this particular youth and appropriate to the difficult questions raised in the *Dialogue*.

The next day, More devotes the entire morning and most of the afternoon to the young Messenger. Their discussion begins just before 7:00 A.M. in More's study. Although it appears to follow the rambling course of any lively and spontaneous conversation, More actually focuses the whole morning's discussion upon the most basic question the youth raised the night before: How do we know what is true? Sir Thomas helps the Messenger develop a more thoughtful appreciation of the complexities of the world, including the complexities of how we know. To deny the very possibility of miracles, for example, is to oversimplify the concepts of nature and of God and to place the limitations of the human mind upon the liberty and bounty of God. Or to subscribe to the principle of *sola scriptura* is to overlook the difficulties involved in reading and interpreting any text, be it sacred or secular, and to place too much confidence in human judgment without adequately recognizing its tendency to err—and the consequent need for good counsel, something More dramatizes in the earlier

Utopia and the later *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, as well.

After much discussion, More asks the Messenger if he thinks a person should "better trust his eyes than his mind." The youth is surprised at the question, having always assumed that his eyes are perfectly reliable witnesses. More then gives this earthy and vivid rejoinder to counter the Messenger's naivete: "The eyes can be deceived and think they see what they do not see, if reason gives over its hold. Unless you think the magician . . . cuts your belt, in front of your face, in twenty pieces and makes it whole again, or puts a knife into his eye and sees never the worse. And turns a plum into a dog's turd in a boy's mouth" (I.23). At this point the servant comes in and asks, of all things, if he should get dinner ready! More and the youth share another good laugh (they have had many a good laugh already) while the bewildered servant is told to prepare a better meal than the one the magician proposed for the young boy. . . .

This combination of realism and humor characterizes much of Sir Thomas's conversation with the youth. In fact, some of More's best "merry tales" are in these pages. They are composed and arranged to encourage people to take a less simplistic view of life—and to take their own theories less seriously. As More explains in *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, one of several great works he composed while imprisoned in the Tower of London, "a merry tale with a friend refreshes a man much and without harm lightens the mind and amends the courage and his stomach so that it seems but well done to take such recreation."[8] Furthermore, the merry tales are an example of More's lifelong habit of speaking the truth through laughter and revealing that a great author "may sometimes say full truth in jest."[9]

Just as we learn from experience that our eyes do not perceive everything accurately, so, says More, we eventually

[8] CW 12, 82.

[9] *The Apology*, CW 9, 170.