THOMAS MORE'S *CONFUTATION*: A LITERARY FAILURE?

by EAMON DUFFY

Between June 1529 and December 1533 Thomas More published no fewer than seven books comprising more than a million words against the Reformation. The young More had achieved European fame as the author of *Utopia*, and the friend and defender of the greatest scholar, satirist and literary innovator of the age, Desiderius Erasmus. *Utopia* remains one of the handful of books which would have to be included in any representative library of Western civilization. More himself, however, came to place a far higher value on the remarkable stream of English works which gushed from his pen in the four years leading up to his arrest and imprisonment in the Tower, which, however, are nowadays read, if at all, mainly as evidence that More was losing his grip. They form a remarkable series: the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and the *Supplication of Souls*, in June and September 1529 respectively; the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (Part I, the Preface and Books I–III, published in January 1532, and Part II, Books IV–VIII, more than a year later, after his resignation as Chancellor). That same year, 1533, saw the last four in this astonishing polemical outpouring, the *Apology of Sir Thomas More*, the *Debellation of Salem and Byzance*, the *Answer to a Poisoned Book* and the *Letter Against Frith*.[1] Though these books were directed against a variety of authors, More's main target, implicit even in writings ostensibly directed against others, was the Bible translator and controversialist William Tyndale. More viewed Tyndale as the most

[1] In all cases More's writings are cited from the Yale edition of *The Complete Works of St Thomas More*. *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* is vol. 6, ed. Thomas M. C. Lawlor, Germain Marc'hadour and Richard C. Marius (New Haven, CT, 1981). The *Supplication of Souls* and the *Letter Against Frith* are both in vol. 7, ed. Frank Manley, Germain Marc'hadour and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven, CT, 1990). *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* is vol. 8, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, James P. Lusardi and Richard J. Schoeck (New Haven, CT, 1973). The *Apology of Sir Thomas More* is vol. 9, ed. J. B. Trapp (New Haven, CT, 1979). The *Debellation of Salem and Byzance* is vol. 10, ed. John Gut, Ralph Keen, Clarence H. Miller and Ruth McGugan (New Haven, CT, 1987). The *Answer to a Poisoned Book* is vol. 11, ed. Stephen Merriam Foley and Clarence H. Miller (New Haven, CT, 1985).

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important conduit for Lutheran ideas into England, and he saw in Tyndale's version of the New Testament the fountainhead from which lesser heresiarchs drew lethal draughts of error with which to poison the souls of unsuspecting English men and women.

Notoriously, More's anti-heretical English writings were the literary aspect of a struggle which he vigorously pursued by other means. Between 1521 and 1529 Henry VIII and Cardinal Wolsey had orchestrated a theological campaign against the Reformation, of which Henry's own *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* was the first and most famous outcome.[2] More was one of those who vetted the *Assertio* in draft, and he himself contributed to the campaign pseudonymously in a long and vitriolic Latin diatribe against Luther in 1523.[3] From the end of 1525 this specifically theological opposition to the new ideas took on a heightened urgency, directed now against the apparently unstoppable expansion of the trade in imported Protestant books and, from the spring of 1526, especially against Tyndale's English New Testament.[4] As a trusted royal councillor, and a close associate of the circle of humanist clergy who formed the spearhead of the Henrician defence of Catholic orthodoxy (notably Bishops Fisher of Rochester, Tunstall of London and Nicholas West of Ely), More was deeply involved in this campaign. In December 1525, in his dual capacity as a member of Wolsey's heresy commission and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, he led a series of nocturnal raids on the houses of the German merchants of the London Steelyard, the prelude to a series of high-profile arrests and public recantations. He took a lawyer's close interest in the arrests, interrogations and legatine trials directed by Wolsey and by Bishop Tunstall from 1526 onwards, designed to stem the spread of evangelical ideas in the diocese of London, the universities and the kingdom more generally. More was to make powerful use of his insider knowledge of these proceedings in the *Dialogue* and the books that followed. In March 1528 Tunstall sought to harness the specifically *literary* talents of More 'who can equal Demosthenes ... in our native tongue', by formally commis-

[2] For which see Richard Rex, 'The English Campaign against Luther in the 1520s', *TRHS* ser. 5, 39 (1989), 85–106.

[3] *Complete Works of Thomas More*, 5: *Responsio ad Lutherum*, ed. John Headley (New Haven, CT, 1969).

[4] On the shifting of gears in the campaign against heresy, see Craig D'Alton, 'The Suppression of Lutheran Heretics in England, 1526–1529', *JEH* 54 (2003), 228–53.

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sioning him 'to reveal to the unlettered and simple people the cunning malice of the heretics', sending him a parcel of Protestant books and licensing him to read them.[5]

All More's English writings against the Reformation stemmed from this commission, and its first-fruits in 1529 were two polemical masterpieces, the *Dialogue* and the *Supplication of Souls*. But his personal involvement in the campaign against heresy took on a new (and to modern eyes sinister) intensity with his elevation to the Lord Chancellorship in late October 1529. As Chancellor, More considered that he had a special responsibility for the defence of Catholic orthodoxy, despite his lay status, since heresy undermined ancient law, custom and morality and threatened 'the final subversion and desolation of this noble realm'.[6] A proclamation of 1530, which More certainly helped draft, underlined the king's detestation of the 'malicious and wicked sects of heretics and Lollards' who by perverting Scripture and inducing error, sow 'sedition among Christian people, and ... do disturb the peace and tranquillity of Christian realms, as late happened in some parts of Germany, where by the procurement and sedition of Martin Luther and other heretics were slain an infinite number of Christian people'. In the name of the king the proclamation called on civil officials, from the Chancellor himself down to the justices of the peace, and 'other officers having governance of the people', to 'give their whole power and diligence to put away and to make utterly to cease and destroy all manner of heresies and errors'.[7] More acted vigorously on this mandate. With his assumption of the chancellorship, the pace of the London campaign against the underground book trade intensified, and More pushed his legal powers as Chancellor to the limit in pursuing heresy and its fomentors, cutting jurisdictional corners by calling cases into Star Chamber. Several suspects were imprisoned and examined by him in his own house at Chelsea, and evidence collected by him in

5 E. F. Rogers, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton, NJ, 1947), 386–8 (letter 160).

6 P. L. Hughes and J. F. Larkin, eds, *Tudor Royal Proclamations*, 3 vols (New Haven, CT, 1964), 1: 194 [hereafter: *TRP*].

7 *TRP*, 1: 181–6; the proclamation condemns books first published in 1530, making the date suggested by the editors (March 1529) impossible.

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this way was instrumental in securing the condemnation of three of the six heretics burned while he was Chancellor.[8]

Inevitably, the rumour mill got to work on all this: allegations of maltreatment and torture began to circulate. More categorically and convincingly denied all such allegations in the *Apology*,[9] but, elaborated by the Protestant martyrologist John Foxe, they persisted, reiterated in our time by popular historians from Jasper Ridley to Brian Moynahan. Most recently they form the basis of Hilary Mantel's brilliantly hostile portrayal of More, 'our friend in Chelsea', in her Booker Prize-winning historical novel, *Wolf Hall*. It all seems a long way from the wise and genial saint of Catholic hagiography, or the martyr for liberal individualism celebrated in Robert Bolt's superbly misleading play.

Admirers of More, not least his first major twentieth-century biographer, R. W. Chambers, have variously tried to minimize, explain or ameliorate More's implacable pursuit of heresy and heretics.[10] For the last thirty years or so, however, such exculpation has been out of fashion. Instead, it has become customary to emphasize the alleged harshness and imbalance of More's attitudes to heresy and heretics, and the morbid vehemence of his language against them in his polemical writings. This hostile take on More on heresy has been underpinned by elaborate psychosexual speculation about More himself. In a famous character sketch of More in a letter of 1519 to Ulrich von Hutten, Erasmus remarked that More had seriously considered a vocation to the priesthood or monastic life.[11] Discovering in himself however a strong attraction to women, he had opted instead for marriage, considering it better to be a good husband than a bad priest. Pious Elizabethan and Stuart recusant biographers elaborated this single sentence, and on this flimsy base, modern biographers and interpreters of More have erected – the word is emphatically the *mot juste* – a theory that

[8] For summaries of More's activities against heresy, see John Guy, *The Public Career of Thomas More* (Brighton, 1980), 97–174; idem, *Thomas More* (London, 2000), 106–25. For a sane and judicious overview of More's anti-heretical activities and attitudes, see Richard Rex, 'Thomas More and the Heretics: Statesman or Fanatic?', in George Logan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas More* (Cambridge, 2010), 93–115.

[9] More, *Apology*, 116–20.

[10] R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More*, Bedford Historical Series 2 (London, 1938), 274–82.

[11] Erasmus's letter to Hutton is in *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P. S. Allen, H. M. Allen et al., 12 vols (repr. Oxford, 1992), 4: 17 (no. 999).

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More's dealings with heresy were dogged by his own unresolved sexual problems, and that his writings about heresy are therefore obsessive, hysterical and increasingly uncontrolled.

The late Sir Geoffrey Elton set the pattern with a series of debunking essays spread over thirty years, in which he argued that the young More had spent four 'idiot years' [12] trying to be a monk of the Charterhouse, and, having opted instead for marriage, spent the rest of his life struggling with a sense of 'failure in the face of the monastic challenge'. On this account, the man for all seasons was a repressed 'sex-maniac', unable to shake off the conviction 'that he had failed to live up to what he regarded as God's ultimate demand on man', namely, celibacy. As a consequence, More was 'preoccupied with the problems of sexuality', and in his anti-heretical writings returned to the alleged sexual misdemeanours of Luther and the other reformers with 'obsessional frequency'.[13] This, for Elton, was the explanation not only of what he considered More's morbid self-flagellation and hair shirt, but also of the tone of More's writings against Tyndale, 'endless, nearly always tedious, passionate, devoid of humour and markedly obsessive'. The *Confutation* in particular was for Elton one 'interminable high-pitched scream of rage and disgust which at times borders on hysteria', a display of 'helpless fury' rooted in More's own misanthropic pessimism, and above all in his unresolved and morbid sexuality.[14]

This picture received further influential endorsement in 1982 from a highly charged reading of More's entire literary output by the literary historian Alistair Fox. Fox deployed this psychosexual account of More, the guilt-ridden failed monk, as the interpretative key to all the writings up to his arrest and imprisonment in the Tower, and above all as the explanation for what Fox took to be the *literary* failure of More's vernacular writings against heresy. For Fox, the combination of a deep Augustinian pessimism about

[12] G. R. Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, 4 vols (Cambridge, 2003), 4: 148–9.

[13] Ibid. 3: 352–5.

[14] More's most influential modern biographer, Richard Marius, similarly saw in More a man 'cruelly divided' by his decision to marry on the one hand and his longing for the cloister on the other. These unresolved sexual and psychological problems gave a 'terrible intensity' to his anti-heretical writings, and in Marius's view account for the 'grim pleasure' he took in the burning of heretics: *Thomas More* (London, 1993; first publ. 1974), 35, 37, 42, 320–1, 331, 391, 396, 403, 450.

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human moral endeavour and a disordered sexuality underlie and explain More's negative reaction to the Reformation. His controversial writings thus conceal an inner experience 'which ... threatened to destroy his sense of providence and ... eventually brought him close to despair'. In them we find 'a pattern of progressive deterioration: dialogue gives way to debellation, self-control yields to loss of proportion and perspective, candour is replaced by dishonesty'. More's 'snarling invective' and 'polemical ferocity' display 'an almost demoniac emotional violence towards his opponents', a 'vileness of sentiment', which went far beyond sixteenth-century convention. This 'descent into subjective involvement' and the evident accelerating 'deterioration of his self-composure' were rooted in an 'interior psychological conflict arising from a continuing preoccupation with problems of sexuality'. More's astonishing stream of books against the Reformation was therefore a sustained act of morbid compensation, the attempt to assuage his own guilt at not being a monk: 'by continuing to write one book after another he was seeking to prove a central private conviction: that human imperfection was no cause for despair'.[15]

Two related charges, of moral and of literary failure, are embodied in this now very widespread perception of More's writing and legal action against heresy and heretics. It is widely held both that More's dealings with heretics reveal him, in Brian Moynahan's words, as a 'strange, tortured and cruel man'[16] and that, in writing against heretics, More became verbose, repetitive, boring and incoherent. The picture of More as a relentless sadist is of course itself a literary construction, invented by John Foxe in the 1560s, drawing on evangelical testimony which More explicitly and categorically repudiated. But the fiction has persisted, given new and brilliant currency in Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, in which More is portrayed as a master torturer, deploying rack, scourge and the vile machine known as 'Skeffington's Daughter' in 'the twin arts of stretching and compressing the servants of God'.[17]

As will be evident, most scholarly writing on this subject since Elton has depended on a highly suspect cod psychology, and the

[15] Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (Oxford, 1982), 111, 119–20, 123, 125, 143, 145.

[16] Brian Moynahan, *William Tyndale: If God Spare My Life* (London, 2003), 349.

[17] Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London, 2009), 298–9.

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mistaken notion that ascetical practices accepted as routine by medieval Christians, like the hair shirt More wore under his robes of office, constitute evidence of a morbid sexuality. But these negative perceptions also rest to a large extent on the simple and undeniable fact that More unblinkingly endorsed the use of the death penalty against unrepentant or relapsed heretics, and as chief law officer of the Crown acted on this conviction. There is a complex and perhaps ultimately unresolvable issue here about what we are to make of the acceptance by otherwise admirable people in the past of moral axioms and actions which we now find repellent.

But these are all issues for another occasion. My specific concern here is with the widespread perception that More's vernacular writings against heresy fail, individually and cumulatively, as *literary* constructs, and that the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* in particular is a shapeless, repetitious and boring work whose immense bulk and inflamed rhetoric reflects the collapse of More's control over his material, and hence his failure as artist, persuader and polemicist. In this general chorus of condemnation, the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* has fared rather better than the books that followed it. The young Lutheran spark who is More's interlocutor in the book is of course ultimately convinced of the Catholic truth, but along the way he is given many of the *Dialogue's* wittiest lines and all the best jokes, so that C. S. Lewis put the *Dialogue* in an altogether different class from the rest of More's polemical works: written when 'the iron ... [had] not yet entered into More's soul', it was, Lewis claimed, a 'great Platonic dialogue: perhaps the best specimen of that form ever produced in English'.[18]

By contrast, the *Dialogue*'s far lengthier sequel, the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, has found few sympathetic readers, and no advocates for its literary merits. Treated as a shapeless mountain of abuse at odds with More's earlier humanism, it has been quarried for

[18] R. S. Sylvester and G. Marc'hadour, eds, *Essential Articles for the Study of Sir Thomas More* (Hamden, CT, 1977), 392–3. See also the positive view of the *Dialogue* in Brian Cummings, 'Reformed Literature and Literature Reformed', in David Wallace, ed., *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge, 1999), 834–5. For a recent positive discussion of the *Dialogue* which sees it as the signal for a new and sterner phase in the anti-heresy campaign, see Craig D'Alton, 'Charity or Fire? The Argument of Thomas More's 1529 Dyalogе', *SCJ* 33 (2002), 51–70. I have discussed the *Dialogue* at greater length in '"The comen knowen multytude of crysten men": *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies* and the Defence of Christendom', in Logan, ed., *Cambridge Companion to More*, 191–215.

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nuggets of lurid rhetoric. Notoriously, these include More's deliberately shocking dismissal of Tyndale's disciple Thomas Hitton, burned at Maidstone in February 1530, as 'the devil's stinking martyr', and what Elton called his 'relentless harping' on Luther's marriage and the marriages of other leading reformers, as men 'runne oute of relygyon and fallen to fleshe and caryn and lyve in lechery with a none under the name of wedloke, and all the chyfe heddys of them, late monkys and freres, and now apostates and lyvynge with harlots under the name of wyves'.[19] This allegedly 'tedious and hysterical' invective has been variously treated as symptomatic of More's secret envy of the reformers' sex-lives, of a 'frankly vicious self-confidence' and heartlessness, and of a 'fanatical, frenzied loathing' of the victims of the Henrician heresy hunt.[20]

The *Confutation*, especially Part I, published in the spring of 1532, is indeed a ferocious book, which deploys all More's formidable resources of invective and an unrelenting battery of argument against Tyndale and his fellow reformers. But it is neither hysterical nor shapeless, nor is it evidence of failing emotional or artistic control. It is indeed a very different kind of book from the *Dialogue*, but the difference is not a matter of loss of grip, but of considered literary choice. In More's judgement the religious situation in England had worsened dramatically since the publication of the *Dialogue*: the need to alert the literate public to the true nature and threat of heresy and the heretical books now flooding into the country, and to expose the speciousness of their arguments, had become ever more urgent. More therefore dropped the leisurely fictional framework of the *Dialogue* as inadequate to this changed situation. There is indeed still a dialogue in progress in the *Confutation*, but now More brought all his legal skills to bear on Protestant teaching, not as in the *Dialogue* through the ironical fiction of a discussion with a wavering Cambridge scholar, but in a detailed forensic deconstruction of Tyndale's own words, quoted at length and scrutinized minutely for every negative nuance and insinuation. In the process More deployed a literary form, new in English,

[19] More, *Confutation*, 17, 41–2.

[20] Elton, *Studies*, 3: 347, 349, 352, 446; Fox, *History and Providence*, 23; James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 263; David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, CT, 1994), 185.

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though already in use in Latin polemic against Luther by Fisher, Latomus and others,[21] in which long passages from an opponent are given verbatim and then answered sentence by sentence, clause by clause. More was well aware of the dangers implicit in such a form – excessive length, redundancy and repetition, boredom, not to mention the fact that it unavoidably gave added circulation to forbidden heretical opinions. He addressed those formal issues and explained his strategy in risking them explicitly in the *Confutation* itself, and then in more detail in 1533, in the *Apology*. Once that strategy is understood, the *Confutation* takes on an altogether more formidable appearance. And, as we shall see, the form More devised for the *Confutation* was far from being considered self-defeating by More's contemporaries. It was in fact to exercise a direct and decisive influence on confessional debate in the reign of Elizabeth and beyond.

To understand what More was about in the *Confutation* and its sequels, we first need to register the context in which it was published. The two previous years, an anxious time of famine and epidemic disease, had also seen a steady escalation both in the spread of heresy, and in the campaign to halt that spread. In May 1530 Henry had established an Ecclesiastical Commission of court clergy and theologians from both universities to consider the problem of heresy. Presided over by Warham (archbishop of Canterbury) and Tunstall, the Commission had only one lay member, More himself. Despite the inclusion of closet reformers like Edward Crome and Hugh Latimer, the Commission produced an immense list of condemned propositions, culled mainly from Tyndale's writings. It also issued a homily to be read from the pulpit by all preachers, denouncing heretical books, and explaining why at this juncture the king had decreed that it was neither necessary nor desirable to have the New Testament in English translation.[22]

[21] A point I owe to my colleague Richard Rex.

[22] Proceedings of the Commission in Daniel Wilkins, *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae*, 4 vols (London, 1737), 3: 727–37. These measures were reiterated in a proclamation of 22 June 1530, which More almost certainly drafted, so it has been assumed that he endorsed and perhaps even initiated this ban on an English Bible. In fact the ban probably originated with the more conservative clerical members of the Commission, and More probably disagreed with it. He had argued at length for a Catholic translation of the New Testament in the *Dialogue*. Despite the official

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Despite the increased vigilance of the authorities, however, the trade in forbidden books continued unabated. Three thousand copies of Tyndale's venomous anti-Divorce tract, the *Practice of Prelates*, were in circulation by the summer of 1530. Henry was determined to halt this flood of contraband literature. The return of the new and fiery bishop of London, John Stokesly, from diplomatic service overseas the same month was reflected in an immediate intensification of the campaign against heresy in London, as More and Stokesly joined forces to increase the pressure on city evangelicals.[23] More was active in a number of arrests and trials that year. His interrogation of George Constantine proved particularly devastating to the evangelical cause, for Constantine turned king's evidence, and his circumstantial revelations about book smuggling and distribution networks led to a series of arrests and confiscations. In August 1531 Thomas Bilney was burned as a relapsed heretic in Norwich, and December 1531 saw the executions of Richard Bayfield and John Tewkesbury, both of whom had been arrested and interrogated by More at Chelsea.[24]

But this royally endorsed campaign against heresy was complicated by Henry's growing impatience over the Divorce question, and by the consequent escalating campaign of intimidation against the clergy, designed to bully the Church into line over the King's Great Matter. The exigencies of the Divorce even led Henry to authorize friendly overtures to hitherto hunted Protestant activists, who might be useful in mustering international support behind the king's cause. Tyndale himself, whom Henry loathed, was approached by royal agents in the early months of 1531, and the runaway friar, abjured heretic and wanted book-smuggler Robert Barnes, who had taken refuge in Wittenberg, was recruited to bring Luther on side. By November 1531 Barnes was back in London under royal safe-conduct, appearing openly

moratorium on such a translation till the populace 'do utterly abandon and forsake all perverse, erroneous and seditious opinions', More retained his arguments for an official Bible translation in the revised edition of the *Dialogue* published in 1531. As Chancellor he was obliged to defend the ban in justifying royal measures against heresy in the *Confutation*, but he reiterated his personal support for an English New Testament in the *Apology* a year later.

[23] For a (slightly overheated) account of the 1530–1 campaign and More's part in it, see Susan Brigden, *London and the Reformation* (Oxford, 1989), 179–98.

[24] Guy, *Public Career*, 165–74.

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in lay dress and consorting with known dissidents. On 13 January 1532 the third session of the Reformation Parliament opened, and it became clear at once that lay grievance against clerical jurisdiction generally, and the ex officio powers used in heresy proceedings in particular, was to be a major focus of Commons attack. These rumblings, orchestrated by Cromwell, were to culminate in March with the presentation of the *Commons Supplication against the Ordinaries*. Despite ritual protestations of horror at the spread of 'new, fantastical and erroneous opinions', the *Supplication* struck at the very roots of the episcopal campaign against heresy, portraying the suspects as innocent victims of the bishops and their agents.[25]

It was against this background that the first part of the *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* appeared. More has been widely perceived as a desperate man at this stage, aware that power was slipping from him as his known disaffection over the Divorce brought a showdown with Henry ever closer, and conscious that he and the bishops were losing the battle with the heretics. His modern editors endorsed this perception by heading their account of the year 1531 'More's Gethsemane'.[26] But there is too much hindsight here. More was well aware of the danger in which he stood, but in January 1532 there was still everything to play for. For all his flirting with Tyndale and Barnes, Henry remained a determined opponent of sacramental heresy: the Protestant sympathies of many of Cromwell's protégés were as dangerous to them as More's opposition to the Divorce was to him. The *Confutation* is therefore not the long despairing cry of a doomed loser, but a considered and powerful play in a battle which might yet be won.

The first point to be made about the 1532 *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* is that, though it would ultimately form just under half of the completed work, in fact it stands alone and works well as a self-contained book. It is slightly shorter than the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, and like the *Dialogue* it is carefully structured in four discrete parts. A forty-page 'Preface to the crysten reader' sets out More's reasons for writing the book, emphasizing the seditious and destructive character of heresy and the urgency of the

[25] Stanford E. Lehmberg, The *Reformation Parliament 1529–1536* (Cambridge, 1970), 138–9.

[26] So, e.g., Brigden, *London and the Reformation*, 181: 'This Chancellor's campaign against heresy was desperate because he knew that time was short'. For 'More's Gethsemane', see *Confutation*, 1229.

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fight against it, stressing Henry VIII's leadership in the campaign which More and the bishops had been waging for the last three years, and deploying More's unrivalled knowledge of evangelical personnel and networks in England to discredit the claims of the reformers to superior Christian insight or holiness. The rest of the 1532 book tackles successively three distinct aspects of Tyndale's teaching. Book One examines Tyndale's polemic against the Church's sacraments, ceremonies and pious observances, including the institution of vowed celibacy. Book Two focuses on Tyndale's translation of the New Testament, and the third and final book (by far the longest) examines the related questions of whether the Church existed before the gospel or the gospel before the Church, and the authority of God's word, written and unwritten.

Tyndale had begun his *Answer* to More's *Dialogue* with an extended preface which his modern editors describe as a 'foundational essay', setting out all the main planks of his teaching.[27] Throughout the *Confutation*, More focused his fire on this essay, exploiting the clarity and focus of Tyndale's preface to give a uniting theme to successive sections of his own reply. There is no space here to examine each of the component parts of the *Confutation* of 1532. So I want to focus instead on just three of the issues which have most often been taken to demonstrate the failure of the *Confutation* as a literary construct – More's invective against the executed Protestants Thomas Hitton, John Tewkesbury and Richard Bayfield; his repeated references to the marriages of the reformers; and the repetitive nature of the form he devised for the *Confutation*. In fact, most writing about the *Confutation* has ignored the work's formal structure, on the assumption that it has none, only hysterical incoherence. Yet shape and purpose are very much in evidence, and despite the harshness of tone, there is no hysteria. More is perfectly in control of his material, which he marshals into a vehement but carefully crafted piece of advocacy.

For all its monumentality, the *Confutation* of 1532 was an occasional piece, directed to very specific circumstances. The mounting and managed anti-clericalism which was soon to culminate in the *Commons Supplication against the Ordinaries* presented the London campaign against heresy as arbitrary clerical oppression of inno-

[27] *An Answere Unto Sir Thomas More's Dialoge*, ed. Anne M. O'Donnell and Jared Wickes, The Independent Works of William Tyndale 3 (Washington, DC, 2000), xxxv.

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cent victims. More was concerned to vindicate that campaign by demonstrating the poisonous nature of heresy itself, the forbearance of the bishops and their officials in dealing with it, and the duplicity and guilt of the heretics. His own encounters with heretics over the previous seven years, and the ambiguities, evasions and downright deceit which they had understandably deployed to escape detection, had given him a low opinion of their honesty and integrity. 'But and yf they were ones founde out and examined | we se them alwaye first redy to lye and forswere them selfe yf that wyll serve', he had declared in the *Dialogue*. 'And whan that wyll not helpe but theyr falshed and periury proved in theyr faces | than redy be they to abiure and forsake it | as longe as that may save theyr lyves.'[28]

More made that claim before the executions had begun: the burning of six Protestant martyrs since then seemed to give him the lie. In his *Answer* to More's *Dialogue*, therefore, Tyndale claimed that those burned were glorious martyrs for the gospel truth, and he named especially the priest Thomas Hitton, executed at Maidstone in February 1530.[29] That is why More devotes the bulk of the Preface of the *Confutation* to showing that heresy could never make saints, and that these victims in particular had been dupes of the devil and were themselves incorrigible deceivers. The nuggets of abuse which have so scandalized modern commentators are part of that sustained argument, in which More drew on his own detailed knowledge of individual cases to establish a wider point.

England had for several years been in the grip of famine and epidemic disease. More's opening sentence links the failure of the crops directly to God's hatred of heresy: '[May] Our lorde sende us nowe some yeres as plenteouse of good corne, as we have hadde some yeres of late plenteous of evyll bokes'. God punishes sin with the scourge of disease and death, especially 'that odyouse and hatefull synne of the soule, that spyleth the frute from all manner of virtues, I meane unbelyefe, false fayth and infydelyte, and to tell you all at ones in playne englyshe heresye'.[30] England, therefore, stands under God's judgement so long as she tolerates heresy. Books full of 'pestylent poisoned heresyes' had 'in other

[28] More, *Dialogue*, 201, 422.
[29] Tyndale, *Answer*, 112; for the six victims, ibid. 424–6.
[30] More, *Confutation*, 3.

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realms all redy kylled by scysmes and warre many thousande bodyes ... and many mo thousand soules'. Now a few 'malycyouse myschevouse persones', in defiance of the king's proclamations, were flooding England with such books, 'to corrupte and infecte all good and vertuouse people'.[31] Naming some of these propagators of error – Tyndale himself, John Frith, George Joye, George Constantine, Robert Barnes – More put the best face he could on official connivance at the open presence in London of Barnes, 'at thys daye comen to the realme by saufe conducte'. This was by the 'blessyd disposycyon' of the king, who hated heresy, yet who indulged heretics like Barnes 'to thende that yf there might yet any sparke of grace be founden in hym, yt myghte be kepte, kyndeled and encreaced, rather than the man be caste away'. But More recalled ominously that the king had been ill requited for the similar indulgence granted to Richard Bayfield and George Constantine, who had both returned to Tyndales heresies, 'lyke a dogge returnynge to his vomyte'.[32]

All this is the prelude to More's central concern in the preface, his repudiation of the claim that executed heretics like Bayfield and Hitton were Christian martyrs. For Tyndale, More insisted, such deaths were a cause of obscene and unholy triumph: 'the grete feste and glory of Tyndales develysh prowde dyspytouse harte, to delyte and reioyce in the effusyon of such people's blode as hys poisoned bokes have miserably bewyched, and from trew crysten folke, turned into false wycked wreches'.[33]

More's accusation, that Tyndale had no pity for the spilled blood of these victims, may baffle and even repel. More, as we shall see, insisted that most of those burned had gone straight to the eternal fires of hell, and that they were therefore the devil's martyrs. This insistence has struck even well-disposed modern readers as 'heartless mockery' of their deaths.[34] But we need to grasp the precise terms of More's argument here. For him, as for St Augustine and the whole of mainstream medieval Christian theology, heresy was always a culpable choice, and damnation never a cause for pity. The stubborn or relapsed heretic was emphatically not the victim

[31] Ibid. 11–12.
[32] Ibid. 17.
[33] Ibid. 16–17, 34.
[34] Simpson, *Burning to Read*, 265.

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of some unfortunate mistake. The heretic had been shown the saving truth, and God always gave souls the grace to embrace that truth. Through pride and perversity, therefore, they had rejected that truth, and in the process, turned away from God. To die in that state of refusal was to be damned, and the damned were, in a perfectly literal sense, hate-ful. They had deliberately turned their back forever on love, and were therefore themselves impossible to love. As fellow mortals we can lament their tragedy, we can pity the waste, we can grieve at the ruin of one of God's creatures, but we can never forget that they have of their own free will renounced truth, light and love, and placed themselves forever beyond the reach of charity, outside the common life of the redeemed.

The damned have chosen their own destruction, for human will is free. Each had had 'myche favour shewed hym, & myche labour charytablye taken for the saving of hym': the legal process against heresy and the clergy who administered it were both just and merciful. But in the end for their obstinacy each victim had been delivered to the secular arm and 'burned uppe in hys false fayth and heresyes, whereof he lerned the great parte of Tyndales holy bokes', and the spirit of lies 'hath taken his wreched soule with hym from the shorte fyre to the fyre everlastyng'.[35]

But they had been propelled towards that ruin by the influence of others, and More points again and again to Tyndale as the murderer of these men's souls. Hitton, Bayfield and Tewkesbury were indeed damned, since they had died 'of hard herte and malycyouse mynde incurable'.[36] But in hell their damnation would deepen and increase the misery of the one who had perverted them. More dwelt on these double deaths of body and soul not to gloat, or because he rejoiced in suffering, but to bring out the full horror of Tyndale's responsibility for the ruin of these immortal souls. Tewkesbury, he insisted, would never have fallen from grace 'yf Tyndales ungracious bokes had never come in hys handes'. Because of Tyndale, 'the pore wreche lyeth now in hell and cryeth out on hym | and Tyndale yf he do not amende in tyme, he is lyke to fynd hym when they come togyther an hote fyrebronde burnynge at hys bakke, that all the water in the worlde wyll not

[35] More, *Confutation*, 16.
[36] Ibid. 18.

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be able to quenche'.[37] That horrifying vision would not be out of place in Dante's *Inferno*, but like Dante's poem it sprang not from the writer's psychic disorders but from More's imaginative assimilation of the mainstream eschatology of medieval Christendom.

To offset these appalling images of souls doomed to a shared damnation by their own pride and stubbornness and the malign influence of Tyndale's teaching, More offered a portrait of a heretic saved at the very last by the grace of repentance. More had discussed the first trial and abjuration of Thomas Bilney at length in the *Dialogue*, though, since Bilney *had* abjured, More refrained from naming him there. In the *Dialogue*, More had nevertheless been unimpressed by Bilney's protestations of good intent and he had predicted his eventual relapse. So it is all the more striking that in the *Confutation* More returned to Bilney for a portrait of a repentant heretic. Bilney had once been every bit as proud and deceitful as Hitton, Bayfield and Tewkesbury; like them had lied and dissembled to escape detection; had abjured like them; and then, like them, had relapsed though pride and had sought to pervert others from the truth. Yet, according to More, by God's grace at the very last, Bilney had renounced his errors and died repentant, an orthodox Catholic lamenting especially his sacramental errors and the contempt for 'Crystes catholyke knowen chyrche' which was the root of all heresy. During his examination, Bilney had 'waxed styffe and stoburne in hys opynyons'. But by the grace and goodness of God, 'he was finally so fully converted unto Cryste and hys trewe catholyke fayth that not onely at the fyre, as well in wordes as wrytynge, but also man[y] dayes before | he had revoked, abhorred and detested such heresyes as he before had holden'.[38] The legal penalty for a relapsed heretic could not be set aside, and Bilney had been burned. But the man himself had been saved: God 'hath forthwith from the fyre taken hys blessed soule to heven'. Bilney, though no martyr, *was* a saint. Though every unrepentant heretic was doomed to eternal torment, God would accept the repentant Bilney's suffering in the fire as his purgatory, 'and settynge the merytes of hys owne paynefull passion therunto, hath forthwith from the fyre taken hys blessed soule to heven, where he now prayeth incessauntly for the repentaunce

[37] Ibid. 22.
[38] Ibid. 23.

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and amendement of all suche as have ben by hys meanes whyle he lyved, into any suche errours induced or confyrmed'.[39]

The reliability of More's claim that Bilney died a devout and penitent Catholic has been much debated.[40] As a consequence, the literary purpose of his portrait of Bilney, as a deliberate foil to those of the 'devils stinking martyrs', has been largely ignored. Whatever the facts about Bilney's end, More's skilful handling of the episode is designed to balance and contrast with his portraits of the unrepentant heretics Hitton, Bayfield and Tewkesbury, acquiescent victims of Tyndale's false teaching. We are dealing here not with random abuse and relish in burnings, but with a careful if daunting polemical construction.

I have been arguing that a psychological interpretation of More's invective against heresy has blinded readers to the literary and argumentative function of that invective, which is to be found mainly in the opening section of the *Confutation*. The same is true of his much more widespread attacks on the marriages of the reformers. The frequency and vehemence of More's language about the 'bestely bychery' of monks and nuns in bed together has been taken as a reflection of his own sexual preoccupations. In fact, any reader of More's account in the *Dialogue* of the shrine of St Walery in Picardy, famed for its cures of sexual ailments and impotence, hung about with *ex voto* replicas of 'men's gear and women's gear in wax', and ablaze with candles measured to the dimensions of the male pilgrim's genitalia, will realise that More had a robust and unprurient sense of humour about sex. And in the *Confutation* he displays no interest whatever in the details of what these former monks and nuns are actually *doing* to each other in bed. For him, the simple fact that they have not only abandoned vowed chastity but have sanctimoniously disguised that abandonment of their solemn vows with a pretence of positive Christian virtue is the outrage. More importantly, it pulls the rug from under any Protestant claims to truth or holiness. More returned to the marriages of the reformers again and again because he saw in them

[39] Ibid. 23–5.

[40] Starting, classically, with Foxe: John Foxe, *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online*, 1185ff (1570 edn, republ. Sheffield, 2011), online at <http//www.johnfoxe.org >; unpersuaded modern discussions in Gordon Rupp, *Studies in the Making of the English Protestant Tradition* (Cambridge, 1966), 29–31; Guy, *Public Career*, 167–71; Marius, *Thomas More*, 396–401.

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a devastating common-sense disproof of their claims to the moral high ground. He knew, too, that his conservative Tudor audience was likely to share his take on the credibility of a preaching friar who bedded down every night with a nun. For a millennium and a half monks and nuns had taken solemn vows to God to live in chastity, and the whole Christian people had recognized clerical unchastity as an abomination. Medieval literature, from the pulpit invective of the Gregorian reformers to the dirty jokes of the *Decameron*, was full of contempt for the squalors of unchaste monks and nuns. But, however laughable, it was also shocking, and so, More pointed out, people 'have always iested that Antecryste sholde be borne between a frere and a none'.

Even as More wrote, the Protestant presses of Germany were pouring out propaganda prints satirizing the sexual misbehaviour of Catholic priests and religious. Within three years of his writing, Cromwell's monastic visitors would use just such alleged misbehaviour to close down religious houses. More, therefore, was playing a very strong card by reiterating that the leading reformers, monks and friars who had renounced chastity and taken women into their beds, had turned a sick medieval joke into sober modern reality. In defiance of

> the hole consent of crystendome so many hundred yeres ... foure or five fond freres runne out of relygon and lyvynge in lechery, take upon themselfe to preche and saye to the people of theym selfe, we be the spyrytuales, we serche the botome of God's secrets ... and all that have been called holy doctors and interpretours before our dayes, were eyther false or folyes and ... brought all crysten nacyons oute of the right fayth / tyll now that god of hys high goodness sent us and our wyves to preche fayth, and teche heresy, and show lechery to torne the worlde to grace.[41]

More's references to the reformers and their wives always carry this polemical point, because he was confident that even the most unlettered lay man or woman who reflected on this single fact about the reformers would thereby see through them, 'syth ye se Tyndale now teche and allowe theyr lechery and avowe it solempnely for good and laufull matrimony: I nothing fere your iudge-

[41] Ibid. 131.

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ment in this matter'.[42] In confronting the *Confutation's* constant jibes against the reformers' marriages, we are dealing not with the obsessive scratching of a sexual itch, but the strategic reiteration of what its author felt to be an unanswerable populist argument.

I turn finally to the literary form in which the *Confutation* is cast. I have suggested that Part I of the *Confutation* can be treated as an integral work in its own right, and its Preface and successive books focus effectively on distinct aspects of Tyndale's teaching and the Protestant challenge. But the technique of learned literary debate which More was adapting here for a vernacular readership, citing extended extracts from Tyndale and then refuting them at length, inevitably makes for repetitiveness. He was accused of both tedium and redundancy by his evangelical opponents, as he has been by critics ever since. It has also been suggested that the form is doubly self-defeating, because in order to refute it gives wider circulation to the works being refuted.

More was well aware of all these criticisms, and offered a robust defence in the *Apology*. He quoted Tyndale at such length, he wrote, so that no-one should accuse him of distortion: 'lothe would I be to miss reherse any mannys reason against whome I wryte, or to reherse hym slenderly'. More claimed that Tyndale's book could be reconstructed simply by omitting More's refutation, a claim conceded by the far from friendly Victorian editors of the Parker Society edition of Tyndale's works. In this More certainly differed from Tyndale, who, he claimed, distorted by selective or tendentious quotation and 'rehersyth myne in every place faintly and falsely to / and leveth out the pyth and strength'.[43] As for its length, that was unavoidable. The most ignorant heretic could spread a heresy in a single page of eye-catching aphorisms: to unpick the errors in that single page might take the wisest man in the world forty times as long. For all the charge of tedium, nonetheless, More insisted that he knew of good men who had read his book three times over as a comprehensive source of orthodox arguments, making 'tables thereof for their own remembraunce'.[44]

As that suggests, More insisted that his book was not *meant* to be read consecutively or as a whole. The *Confutation* was a

[42] Ibid. 141.
[43] More, *Apology*, 6.
[44] Ibid. 8.

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compendium, a manual of controversies, which could be randomly browsed, or searched for specific issues.

> I sometyme take the payne to reherse some one thynge in diverse fashions in mo places than one, bycause I wolde that the reder sholde in every place where he fortuneth to fall in redynge, have at hys hande without remyttynge ellys where or labour of ferther sekynge for it, as myche as shall seme requysite for that mater that he there hathe in hande.[45]

Readers were prone to 'wexe wery to rede over a long boke': he had designed this book so that 'they shal not need to rede over any chapyter but one, and that yt shall not force greatly whych one thorow all the boke'.[46] So whether some 'yndyfferent' reader picked up the *Confutation* at random, or 'the beste evangelyste of all this evangelycall bretherhed' searched to see what More had to say about 'some chosen piece in whyche hym selfe had went that hys evangelycall father Tyndale sayed wonderfull well', he would find a complete refutation.[47]

Nor did More fear that his book gave fresh currency to forbidden ideas. He knew better than anyone the reach of the trade in evangelical books, and in the preface to the *Confutation* argued that heretics even gave their books away free, 'so greate a pestilent pleasure have some develysh people caught, with the labour, travayle, coste, charge, parell, harme and hurte of them selfe, to seke the destruccyone of other'.[48] Heretical books were already everywhere, to say nothing of the 'bold erroneous talkynge that is now allmoste in every lewde laddys mouth'.[49]

More had declared in the *Confutation* that he would far prefer it if nobody read either his book or the evangelical writings which had elicited it. 'The very tryacle were well loste, so that all venome and poison were utterly loste therwyth'. But where there was heresy, there must be refutation, and the defenders of orthodoxy must not sleep while Judas went about his work. 'Evyl and ungracyouse folke shall ever fynde the meanys that suche bookes shall never in some corners lakke, wherby good people may be

[45] Ibid.
[46] Ibid. 10.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid. 12.
[49] Ibid. 11.

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deceived and corrupted: yt ys more thenne necessary that men have agayne suche bookes as may well arme them, to resyste and confute theym'.[50] But it is clear that in adapting a learned Latin argumentative form to provide that necessary vernacular antidote to heresy, More was conscious of creating a different kind of work, combative, baggy, encyclopaedic, cyclical, a form which should be judged by the targeting and effectiveness of its individual parts, rather than its correspondence to some modern notions of what makes a good read.

Judged in this way, the *Confutation* stands up far better to scrutiny than has been allowed. Entire books can stand alone, especially Book VIII, a sustained polemic against Robert Barnes which returns brilliantly to the comic mode of the *Dialogue* in a series of extended conversations in which Barnes is bested in debate by women, most devastatingly his landlady, 'the good wife of the botell of Botolph's wharf'.[51] But the rest of the *Confutation*, read in short bursts as More envisaged it would be, is full of good things, as in the passages where More deploys common usage or his humanist training in Greek to challenge Tyndale's translation of contested terms,[52] or as in this passage, in which he picks on one of Tyndale's stylistic habits to score a debating point:

> Tyndale is a great marker | there is nothynge with hym now but marke, marke, marke. It is pitye the man were not made a marker of chases in some tenys playe. For in good fayth he sholde be therin mych better occupied than he is in this | when he sytteth and marketh all other mennis fautes and leveth hys owne unmarked | which every other man marketh well inough.[53]

One test of the value of any literary innovation is whether or not the form is adopted by other serious writers. The vernacular debating form More had introduced into English was indeed to have a decisive influence on the shape of the religious debates of the Elizabethan era. In Queen Mary's reign, the *Confutation* was included in William Rastell's superb folio edition of More's English

[50] More, *Confutation*, 36–9.
[51] Ibid. 883–905.
[52] Ibid. 169–73.
[53] Ibid. 139.

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works, a collection designed to provide the Marian Church with a major polemical resource.[54] Eight years later, in 1565, the former Marian activist Thomas Harding, now a Louvain exile, adopted both the title and the distinctive literary form of the *Confutation* for his own *Confutation* of John Jewel's *Apologie for the Church of England*. Harding justified his adoption of the form in much the same terms as More: 'That I might seme to deale uprightly', he wrote, 'I would leave out nothing'.[55] Perhaps more surprisingly, Jewel responded in kind, once again using More's form to structure his own even vaster *Defence of the Apology*.[56] Archbishop Parker thought well enough of Jewel's book to order copies placed in every parish church in England, despite the misgivings of those like Bishop Parkhurst of Norwich, who thought that the form of the book gave hostages to fortune; Catholics too poor to buy Harding's books 'shall finde the same already provided for them'.[57] But the polemical advantages of More's novel form were evidently deemed to outweigh any such drawbacks.

And, in one way at least, Jewel outdid More. In Renaissance writing, *copia*, abundance or copiousness, was considered a species of merit, not a defect. Jewel's immense treatise weighed in at more than twice the length of More's *Confutation*. Yet though many have doubtless found Jewel's book tedious, no-one, so far as I am aware, has seen in the Elizabethan Protestant bishop's adoption of More's literary innovation a symptom of mounting hysteria, or evidence of a mind at the end of its tether.

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[54] *The Workes of Sir Thomas More Knyght* (London, 1557); the *Confutation* occupies pages 614–832.

[55] Thomas Harding, A *confutation of a booke intituled An apologie of the Church of England* (Antwerp 1565); Alexandra Walsham, 'The Spider and the Bee: The Perils of Printing for Refutation in Tudor England', in John King, ed., *Tudor Books and Readers* (Cambridge, 2010), 163–90, quotation at 169. Surprisingly, Professor Walsham makes no allusion to More's responsibility for or use of the form.

[56] John Jewel, *A defence of the Apologie of the Churche of Englande conteininge an answeare to a certaine booke lately set foorthe by M. Hardinge, and entituled, A confutation of &c.* (London, 1567).

[57] Walsham, 'Spider and the Bee', 172, 174.

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