Invective and Discernment in Martin Luther, D. Erasmus, and Thomas More*

Constance M. Furey
Indiana University

The scathing insults that fill texts by sixteenth-century Christian reformers can shock even a jaded modern reader. In the prefatory letter to the *Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), for example, Martin Luther begins by wishing for "grace and peace in Christ" before launching his attack on the "brainless and illiterate beast in papist form" and its "whole filthy pack of . . . asses," and concludes by exhorting his reader to rise up against the Catholic hierarchy: "Continue courageously, noble sir; in this way the disgrace of the Bohemian name will be abolished, and the sludge of the harlot's lies and whoring shall again be taken up in her breast."[1] Or consider the nasty invectives by the English Lord Chancellor and future Catholic martyr, Thomas More, against not only Luther but also Matthew Tyndale, who translated the Bible into English. More calls these men the "devil's disciples": Luther "a pimp, an apostate, a rustic, and a friar"; and Tyndale "a babbler, and a devil's ape."[2] Even Desiderius Erasmus, the erudite Catholic humanist, filled his writings with insults both satirical and blunt and proclaimed that theologians "are more stupid than any

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[1]"Gratia et pax in Christo . . . Sic enim vecors illa et indoctissima Papistici corporis Belua . . . totam colluviem suorum asinorum. . . . Macte uirtute, clarissime Heros, sic abolebitur opprobrium Bohemici nominis et redibit meretrici in sinum suum sentina illa mendaciorum et fornicationum suarum." *Weimarer Ausgabe* 10.2:180, 182 in *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Sonderedition der Kritischen Gesamtausgabe [Weimarer Ausgabe]; Weimar: H. Böhlau, 2000) [hereafter *WA*].

[2]Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (ed. Louis A. Shuster; vol. 8.1 in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More* [hereafter *CWTM*]; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973) 13, 76; and *Responsio ad Lutherum* (ed. John M. Headley; trans. Sister Scholastica Mandeville; vol. 5 in *CWTM*; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969) 5:437.

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pig" (*sue stupidiores*).[3] Fierce words commonly appear in the midst of religious controversies, and one may choose to skim past this hyperbolic outrage in search of the real message. Insulting rhetoric, however, does provide a sensitive barometer of religious concerns in the sixteenth century and yields unexpectedly complex answers to a simple question. What does negative speech accomplish?

The answer, according to most modern scholars, has to do with what Trevor Dean calls invective's "social utility." Sociologists and historians alike argue that insults reinforce group cohesion. In discrediting opponents in fierce conflicts or condemning deviations or shortcomings among adherents, the potency of insults depends on collective norms, which they thereby affirm. William Labov's linguistic study of "ritual insults" used by young black men in U.S. cities underscores this link between insults and social solidarity. Labov argues that these insults do not constitute adversarial attacks that create solidarity through exclusion but are instead a linguistic game that binds together those whose skillful use of insults demonstrates that they know how to play. In this case, as in others, the rhetoric of insult is clearly a form of public speech, and like most public speech, it is gendered male. The content of insults thus frequently upholds what Peter Burke, in his study of invective and slander in early modern Italy, calls a "virility centered code" by maligning a woman's sexual behavior or questioning a target's masculinity. The historian Robert Shoemaker relies on this social functional explanation for negative speech to account for the marked decline in the use of public insults in England between 1600 and 1800. As urban culture fragmented society, and the boundary between public and private space became more clearly defined, Shoemaker argues, people no longer felt responsible for censuring one another.[4] These varied examples attest to a pervasive, modern assumption, that insulting language has the purpose of reinforcing social identity and cohesion.

This view, however, underestimates the disruptive and epistemological effects of negative speech—the very things which explain why insults punctuate the texts of the early-modern Christian reformers, Luther, More, and Erasmus. These three prominent men differed in their goals, their problems, and their style of insulting rhetoric,

[3]Erasmus to Dorp, letter 337, *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami* (ed. P. S. Allen; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906–1958) 2:99 (hereafter Allen); *Collected Works of Erasmus* (trans. R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 3:122 (hereafter *CWE*).

[4]Trevor Dean, "Gender and Insult in an Italian City: Bologna in the Later Middle Ages," *Social History* 29.2 (2004) 217–31; William Labov, *Language in the Inner City: Studies in the Black English Vernacular* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972) 335–44; Peter Burke, "Insult and Blasphemy in Early Modern Italy," *Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 96–97; and Robert Shoemaker, "The Decline of the Public Insult in London, 1600–1800," *Past and Present* 169 (2000) 97–132. For other representative studies see also Patricia Thornton, "Insinuation, Insult, and Invective: The Threshold of Power and Protest in Modern China," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44.3 (2002); and Charles Tilly, "Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834," in *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action* (ed. Mark Traugott; Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

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which ranged from mockery to virulent condemnation and from crass put-downs to elegant satire. Each of them drew in different ways on the well-developed use of invective as a rhetorical technique in sermons and in erudite humanist treatises. For humanists trained in classical rhetoric, insults were analogous to praise: both were derived from Quintilian's *inventio,* and instead of an emotional outburst or expression of personal feeling, they were understood to be expressions of intellectual refinement.[5] Yet Luther, Erasmus, and More used insults not just because they were trained in rhetoric, but also because they had to figure out how to challenge the existing order of things without falling prey to the deceptions they diagnosed in others.[6] Offensive, satirical, and condemnatory words were both dangerous and useful because they had the power to distort but also the capacity to expose the truth by piercing through appearances and challenging conventional thought.[7]

The two Catholic reformers, Erasmus and More, bound their social and epistemological issues together. Their concerns about insults emerged from a long-standing desire to align themselves with an amorphous and far-flung community of learned men and women that they thought should be standard-bearers of good judgment and religious values. They sought to define this community by opposing its values to the calculations of self-advantage and arrogance that seemed to them to prevail in the rest of society.[8] Guided by a humanist emphasis on rhetoric and affect rather than on reason and logic, this quest for the right kind of community led them to emphasize internal qualities, such as good will and generosity. In identifying this

[5]On this topic for humanists generally see John K. Hale "Milton and the Rationale of Insulting," in *Milton and Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 159–75. For an explanation of why Luther's denunciations of Erasmus in their famous debate on free will is an expression of rhetorical training and theological conviction rather than personal enmity, see Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform: Erasmus' Civil Dispute with Luther* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983) 92–97. Clearly the polemical use of satire in the Reformation was influenced by the frequent use of both satire and scatological humor in the genre of thematic sermons developed in the Middle Ages. For this tradition see James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from St. Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1974), and a brief but suggestive discussion about how it influenced Luther, see Josef Schmidt, "Luther the Satirist: Strategies and Function of his Satire," in *The Martin Luther Quincentennial* (ed. Gerhard Dünnhaupt; Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1985) 32–43.

[6]Susan Schreiner offers a convincing analysis of how concerns about deception intensified in the sixteenth century among Protestants and Catholics alike in "Appearances and Reality in Luther, Montaigne, and Shakespeare," *Journal of Religion* 83 (2003) 345–80.

[7]Peter Matheson makes an analogous argument in *The Rhetoric of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), his wonderful study of polemical rhetoric in Reformation pamphlets. He calls this rhetoric not just "instrumental" but also "heuristic" (1–11) and illustrates the point by citing Andreas Karlstadt's observation that the upside-down world of corrupt practice has to be reflected in the language (174). See also Josef Schmidt's point that the function of satire was "inextricably linked to the Reformers' central aim: the unmasking and uncovering of the true Christian tradition" ("Luther the Satirist" 45).

[8]For a fully developed version of this argument about how frustrations about status and patronage led Erasmus, More, and other learned men and women to create an alternate religious community in and through their republic of letters, see my book, *Erasmus, Contarini, and The Religious Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

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community with moral characteristics, they thus constructed their visible standard of rectitude on the invisible foundation of virtues.

Martin Luther, by contrast, put even more emphasis on the epistemological function of insults, in part because he, unlike Erasmus and More, was leading a revolt against the visible institution of the Catholic Church. Certain that the church had made it nearly impossible to see Christ with the eyes of faith, Luther used insults to scrub away centuries of detritus. The brush that he and other Protestants used was stiff and punishing, but they applied it eagerly to render transparent the truth of salvation by faith alone. Casting himself as a man compelled by the Word to refute all adversaries, Luther insisted that invectives served the cause of proclaiming the truth.[9] Luther, who frequently warned that Satan could appear in the guise of a friend, knew the difficulty of discerning the truth and, furthermore, that aggressive attacks could intensify rather than defuse the explosive problem of deception. To condemn others was to risk being seduced by arrogance—to misguidedly assume the role of judge under the delusion that one spoke for God. Insults and vicious slander were dirty weapons, the same sort of weapons the Devil used, and they could, conversely, deceive by putting an ugly face on a holy deed. But if insults were part of the muck and mire of human nature and temporal life, Luther recognized that they were, by the same token, part of the realm of sin redeemed by Christ.

The function of this negative language varied according to author and context. For example, the social aspect was more pronounced in Erasmus and More than in Luther, and More came to emphasize the epistemological concerns more strongly, as he battled Protestantism. In each case, however, these authors show us how theological or philosophical, as well as social, concerns motivate and explain their use of invective, satire, and polemics. By analyzing them comparatively, we can develop an appropriately complex picture of what I call the social epistemology of insult: polemical or mocking speech that simultaneously influences perceptions of what is true and who counts as a truth-teller.

Linguistic Potency: Luther on Insults

Consider, for example, Luther's judgment that insults are reprehensible because they engender hostility—a conclusion he reached after his debate in Leipzig in 1519 against the Catholic theologian Johannes Eck. Freshly outraged and pessimistic after a public exchange that stretched over ten days, Luther reported to his supporters that Eck and his party had poisoned the atmosphere with invectives: "I fear that it will seem that discord and dislike were actually born here."[10] Insults, in fact, catalyzed the whole affair. Eck and Luther had corresponded on friendly terms, until Eck published a work that refuted many of Luther's ninety-five theses

[9]Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle offers a subtle analysis of this feature of Luther's self-image in *Rhetoric and Reform,* 46–66.

[10]"Timeo ut discordia et displicentia primum videatur nata." Martin Luther to George Spalatin, July 20, 1519, *WA Briefwechsel* 1:424.

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in personally insulting language. Luther responded with a vehement treatise of his own (*Asterisks,* published in March 1518). The exchange might have ended there, except that Andreas Karlstadt, Luther's colleague at the University of Wittenburg, felt that Eck's attacks on Luther had insulted the whole faculty. Although Eck wrote a conciliatory letter, Karlstadt had already published his own refutation of Eck's arguments, and the ensuing rounds of attacks and counterattacks led inexorably to a formal debate between Eck and Luther before the theological faculty at Leipzig.[11]

Not surprisingly, this public disputation compounded the problem. Luther accused Eck of waging a dirty war, because he could not win a fair fight: "since he had despaired of victory in other points, he could at least cause people to hate me, skilled as he is in beating the puppy in front of the lion, so to speak."[12] Eck's tactics provoked an even further, ferocious response from Luther, "for in this case I not only want to bite vehemently, to the discomfiture of Eck, but I want to prove myself invincible in devouring . . . all . . . who are adversaries of Christian grace. Let them terrify someone else with their flattery and consecrations; Martin despises the priests and consecrators of the Apostolic See." These insults, used to negotiate status and power, fit the sociological model. Luther was trying to humiliate his opponent and to cut the exalted institution Eck represented down to size, knowing that one who is tarred as a fool, a charlatan, or an opportunist would likely be condemned as despicable or dismissed as irrelevant.[13]

Luther had something else besides the social utility of insults in mind, however, when he complained that Eck's invective had "turned a search for truth into a tragedy of hatred."[14] Ad hominem insults may seem to have little to do with theology, because they deflect attention from ideas and arguments to the credibility of the messenger. By miring concepts in the murky depths of character and motive, insults make it difficult to detach theological teachings from human disputes and thus to evaluate disembodied truths. Simultaneously predictable and contemptible, insults are thus easily interpreted as manifestations of human sinfulness—signs of the deforming immersion in worldly affairs that, as Luther frequently emphasized, made the human quest to understand God so difficult. Yet from Luther's perspective,

[11]The circumstances leading up to the debate are described in the preface to the translation by Harold Grimm (ed. Harold J. Grimm; vol. 31 of *Luther's Works*; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957) 31:309–12, 325; see also Heiko Oberman, *Die Reformation von Wittenberg nach Genf* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1986) 125–29.

[12]"Cum in caeteris desperaret victoriam, hic saltem mihi conciliare speravit indignationem, doctus catulum (ut dicitur) ferire coram leone . . . Hic enim vellem non modo esse potentissimus mordendo (quod Eccio dolet) sed invictus quoque devorando." *WA* 2:159–60, *Luther's Works* 31:315, 316.

[13]*WA* 2:159–60, *Luther's Works* 31:315, 316. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968) 192–94, and, for the argument that Bakhtin's idea of how "grotesque realism" stripped the elevated of its awe-inspiring powers explains Reformation propaganda, see Robert W. Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 81–85.

[14]"Et ex disputatione veritatis facere Tragediam invidiae." *WA* 31:315.

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these precise reasons made insults hermeneutically necessary and theologically significant. Insulting language had the capacity not only to spread hatred and sin but also to expose truth by demystifying idols and liars. Like many devout Christians in the sixteenth century, Luther believed that appearances could deceive. As his opposition to the Catholic hierarchy raised alarming questions about how to choose between conflicting claims to truth, he frequently intoned the ominous biblical warning that Satan comes clothed as an angel of light (2 Cor 11:14).[15] With this in mind, he used invective to unmask deception and to expose truth.

Luther's willingness to defend insults grew as his split with the Catholic Church widened from 1517 onward. His interest in the theological significance of insults is, however, evident earlier, as in the Latin sermon, entitled *Contra vitium detractionis*, which he wrote in 1515 condemning the sin of slander. In this sermon he proclaimed that slander was sinful, because those who insulted others claimed God's power for themselves.[16] By presuming to judge other people, denouncing and belittling them with personal attacks that defied refutation, those who used insults became agents of the Devil. By putting their judgments into words, they enabled the sin to ripple out and to capsize onlookers with waves of resentment and reciprocal anger. Insults thereby exposed all persons involved to the world of darkness, as he says, "For the word of God is a holy seed, because it conceives a spirit without violation, and conserves its virginity like the blessed son of God; but the word of the slanderer is the seed of the Devil, spurious and adulterous, corrupting the virgin soul in the hearer."[17]

As this quote suggests, Luther's attack on slander was motivated by his deep respect for the power of language. Words both exculpate and condemn because they affect not only what people think but how they feel.[18] As transitory signifiers that can alter moods and ideas, words seem fully human; yet in their capacity to express ideas about transcendence and to engender faith in eternity, words mediate between humanity and divinity. As Luther often emphasized, this duality is the core of the Christological message: words signify both depravity and transcendence, just as Christ, the incarnate Word, was both human and divine. Luther's conviction that the sacred and the profane are inextricable may explain why he used vehemently insulting language to condemn the use of slander and to spread God's Word:

[15]Susan Schreiner offers a detailed discussion of the hiddenness of Satan in her "Unmasking the Angel of Light: Luther and Teresa on Demonic Deception" in *Mystics: Presence and "Aporia"* (ed. Michael Kessler and Christian Sheppard; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). The change in Luther's thinking over time and the way specific disputes affected his theology are described in Mark U. Edwards, Jr., *Luther and the False Brethren* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975) and *Luther's Last Battles: Politics and Polemics* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[16]*WA* 1.44–52, 47; Luther's own favorable judgment of this sermon is reflected in the fact that years later he sent it, with slight revisions, to a friend. This later version appears in *WA* 4.675–81.

[17]*WA* 1:45.

[18]See *WA* 1:47: "ex verbis tuis iustificaberis et ex verbis tuis condemnaberis." Here Luther quotes Matt 12:37 and cites Jer 23:36.

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> A slanderer does nothing but ruminate the filth of others with his own teeth and wallow like a pig with his nose in the dirt. That is also why his droppings stink most, surpassed only by the Devil's . . . And though man drops his excrements in private, the slanderer does not respect this privacy. He gluts on the pleasure of wallowing in it, and he does not deserve better according to God's righteous judgment. When the slanderer whispers: look how he has shit on himself, the best answer is: You go eat it.[19]

According to Luther, however, no simple duality exists between filth and purity or between good and evil. Thus, human beings are far from God, and the Devil, a fierce opponent, continually threatens to claim the world as his own; those who wallow in the dirt have little exposure to the sun. On this score, one must challenge the Devil and all of his agents, who do Satan's work for him by spreading anger and hatred and by abrogating the power of judgment to themselves. This challenge requires cutting these agents down to size. Believing that he was battling against the greatest slanderer of all times, Luther adopted his opponent's weapon and used the profanity of the Devil to fight what (as Heiko Oberman put it) he viewed as "the diabolical profanation of God and man."[20]

The idea that the defense must match the threat was not, however, the only reason Luther deployed scathing dismissals. He had understandable difficulty disentangling the diabolical and the sacred. Evil often takes the form of glory, and Christ redeemed humanity by becoming lowly—by entering the realm of finitude and depravity. How then can we see past appearances to discern the true state of affairs? The act of exposing underlying truth remained crucial *and* fraught. Certainly, the distinction sometimes appeared clear. Sometimes Satan's perfidious acts were all too obvious, and sometimes Christ's Word rang forth with an irresistible clarity. More often, however, people faced the difficult problem of how to discriminate between good and evil—of how, for example, to distinguish between malevolent slander and insults that were justified, as Augustine had long ago affirmed, when used to fight heresy and to defend truth. Insults consequently expose *in nuce* the epistemological paradox that Luther could not escape: We must fight fiercely and condemn clearly in order to reveal the truth, but by the same token, our use of insults and our impulse to condemn expose clearly our misbegotten urge to abrogate the responsibility of judgment to ourselves.

Thus Luther, simultaneously reluctant and fierce, used insults to great effect, as in his blistering treatise "The Bondage of the Will" (1524), which he presented as a refutation of Erasmus's arguments about free will. Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle has shown persuasively that the treatise dealt as much with *how* to argue as with the arguments themselves. In it Luther influentially tarred Erasmus as a uselessly cultured waffler—a man who did not care enough to commit—and ultimately trumped his opponent by "condemning civility itself." Boyle concludes that Luther embraced

[19]Quoted in Heiko Oberman, *Luther: Man Between God and the Devil* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 108, from *WA* 1.50 and 4.681.

[20]Oberman, *Luther,* 109.

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this slash and burn approach, because he believed that decisive battles affirmed the clarity of the message he defended; his cause thus thrived upon opposition. As Luther explained, the capacity to judge doctrine and sources of inspiration "with absolute certainty" belongs "especially . . . to leaders and preachers of the Word. We exercise it when we strengthen in faith the weak, and confute adversaries."[21] Boyle's astute analysis of Luther's adamant style threatens, however, to smooth over the knotty paradox that motivated him to adopt it. Luther did not mock and berate his opponents, because he was fighting a battle and needed the most damaging weapon he could find. Instead, he used insults to grapple specifically with the vexing problem of clarity. This problem involved the dilemmas of how to expose the sacred as distinct from the profane and how to illuminate the differences between human judgment and divine truth, between human speech and the incarnate Word, between sinful hostility and righteous combat, and, above all, between self-delusion and subjective certainty about salvation through Christ.

So in the beginning of "Bondage of the Will," when Luther explained that his "disgust, anger, and contempt" for Erasmus's arguments had made him reluctant to respond, he reiterated the lesson he himself had preached in 1514, that insults pollute all persons involved and reflect a sinfully arrogant assumption that we, and not God alone, should pass judgment. This assumption presented, to Luther's mind, a symptom of the tendency, which lies at the root of all our problems, to collapse the distance between God and ourselves. It constituted the most infuriating thing about Erasmus, as Luther exclaimed, "You confuse and mix everything up in your usual way, putting the sacred on a level with the profane and making no distinction between them at all, so that once again you have fallen into contempt and abuse of Scripture and of God."[22] Here Luther contended that Scripture rings clear and that only obstinacy keeps Erasmus from reading it correctly. As a theologian, however, whose acute sense of his own sinfulness led him to emphasize that humans attain salvation not by their own effort but by faith alone, Luther also emphasized that the truth of Scripture does not ring so clear, because it confounds appearances and our ways of knowing. As Luther says, "From the beginning of the world there has always been more outstanding talent, greater learning, and more earnest application among the heathen than among Christians or people of God. . . . For as Christ himself confesses, the children of this world are wiser than the children of light. What Christian can be compared to a Cicero alone for talent, learning, or diligence?"[23] Luther's sarcasm underscores his revelatory paradox. What we see does not reveal

[21]Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform*, 96, 42 (for quote about civility), and 66 (for quote about confuting adversaries, citing Luther, *De servo arbitrio* [ed. Otto Clemen, *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*; 6 vols.; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1960] 4:94–293, at 141–42).

[22]*WA* 18:602, "On the Bondage of the Will" (trans. Philip S. Watson, *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation;* Library of Christian Classics; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969) 17:103, see also 123–24.

[23]*WA* 18:649–52, "On the Bondage of the Will," 156.

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in fact the reality of things, and thus Cicero, despite his apparent virtues, did not receive salvation from Christ. Luther believed that this fact invalidated Erasmus's argument that people participate in their own salvation. In countering Luther, Erasmus similarly emphasized the difficulty of using appearances to draw conclusions but used this point to support his argument that skepticism offered a good option and that the skeptic honored Christ by focusing on what Erasmus believed was Christ's primary goal: to cultivate peace. Notwithstanding Luther's sarcastic and polemical tone, he, like Erasmus, took as his starting point the difficulty of separating the sacred and the profane and took as his guide Christ's nature.

Thus Luther emphasized two contradictory propositions: only the arrogant try to clarify when and why appearances deceive, but it is, nevertheless, the crucial duty of leaders and preachers to do so. Luther could sustain this tension because he was convinced that the profane world was not a matter of indifference, easily overlooked, but the site of a cosmic battle between God and Satan. The forces of both good and evil work in this world, and Satan tries to use what God has created as a means of conquest. As Luther writes:

> But if there are any who do not perceive this clarity, and are blind or blunder in this sunlight, then they only show—if they are ungodly—how great is the majesty and power of Satan over the sons of men, to make them neither hear nor take in the very clearest words of God. It is as if someone was deceived by a conjuring trick and imagined the sun to be a piece of dead coal or a stone to be gold.[24]

Although God's message is clear, Satan is sneakily deceptive and his conjuring tricks scarily effective. To try simply to shed false confidence and to take an appropriately humble and trusting attitude in order to avoid the sin of arrogance will not suffice, because even if our innate sinfulness were weakened, a diabolical opponent can still topple us:

> For it is not due to the weakness of the human mind that the words of God are not understood. . . . It is due to the malice of Satan, who sits enthroned in our weakness, resisting the Word of God. If Satan were not at work, the whole world of men would be converted by a single word of God once heard, and there would be no need of more.[25]

We can fight Satan only because of Christ—because Christ, not Satan, became truly embodied. Because Christ truly shared in our profanity, Satan's destructive power is illusory; because Christ shared our darkness, faith in Christ enables us to see through illusion and live in a different reality.

According to Luther, this meant that Christians should not shy away from associating Christ with the foulest aspects of human life. Thus in "Bondage of

[24]*WA* 18:652–61, "On the Bondage of the Will," 167.
[25]*WA* 18:652–61, "On the Bondage of the Will," 167.

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the Will," he wrote that Erasmus should not have condemned "the public discussion of the proposition that God is in the hole or the sewer. . . . The body of Christ himself was human as ours is, and what is fouler than that? Are we therefore not to say that Christ dwelt in it bodily?"[26] This position had rhetorical and epistemological implications; just as Christ redeemed believers by becoming fully human, so too human words—even judgmental, insulting, profane human words—can be redemptive when used correctly. If Christ redeemed this human foulness, humans could oppose Satan with weapons as offensive as those of Satan himself. For Luther, therefore, the theology of the Incarnation seemed to justify the use of insults.[27]

Although Luther had put all these pieces in place, he never drew them together to develop a coherent theological justification for insults, because the problem of appearances and self-deception plagued his argument. Luther's continued uncertainty and ambivalence about insults shows up in the following passage from "Bondage of the Will," in which he takes up the question of his right to insult Erasmus. He darts quickly back and forth between defensive apology and aggressive accusation, only to end with a poignant statement of solidarity:

> However, if I seem to be rather too hard on your Diatribe, you must forgive me; for I do it in no malicious spirit, but out of concern because by your authority you have been seriously damaging the cause of Christ, though for all your erudition you have in fact made no case at all. Now, who can always so control his pen that it never grows warm? Even you, who in your zeal for moderation are almost frigid in this book, not infrequently hurl fiery and bitter darts, so that unless your reader is very patient and well disposed, you may well seem virulent. But all this has nothing to do with the case, and we ought gladly to pardon one another for such things; for we are human beings, and nothing human is strange to us.[28]

Insults, both necessary and dangerous, merit explanation and demonstrate righteous passion. Though they do not in themselves solve the problem of how to know the truth, they facilitate the process of exposing lies and of stripping away the mystique and authority claimed by popes, theologians, aggressive polemicists like Eck, and learned civil scholars like Erasmus. Thus Luther worked within the paradox that required him to condemn and to use insults at the same time. This same paradox explains why his claim of solidarity with Erasmus emerges as a profound Christological statement. All humans sin, but in this misguided and depraved sinning, embody what Christ saved.

[26]*WA* 18:621–22, "On the Bondage of the Will," 125–26.

[27]Heiko Oberman helpfully insists upon this often-overlooked feature of Luther's thought by arguing that those who want to explain away the "cloaca" (the putative site of Luther's theological insight) as a tower, rather than a toilet, miss a crucial aspect of Luther's theology (*Luther,* 156–57). Cf. Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform,* 180 n.53 for the grammatical and philological argument *against* transcribing the *Cl.* in the text as *cloaca*. She proposes *clarissimus* instead. Oberman's point, however, is applicable regardless.

[28]*WA* 18:756, "On the Bondage of the Will," 292.

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Confounding Convention: Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly*

Luther's anxiety about deception and his corresponding interest in the dangers and power of insulting rhetoric surface also in the writings of his Catholic contemporaries, More and Erasmus. Unlike Luther, however, they linked their concerns about, and use of, the rhetoric of invective to the project of creating a particular kind of intellectual community (what elsewhere I have called a Religious Republic of Letters), defined by a shared commitment to the transcendent value of friendship and scholarship. Seeking an alternative to the world of professional and political power struggles and its vices of hubris, ambition, and preening self-deception, they found themselves trying to police motives and dispositions in order to foster clarity about the right values.[29] Consequently, they fixed on insults and, like Luther, alternately condemned them as symptoms of bad faith and used them like cauterizing knives to cut away deceptive appearances. I analyze this phenomenon first in Erasmus's famously insulting satire, *The Praise of Folly,* and then look at two different kinds of texts written by Thomas More. The first comes from a series of letters, which he wrote between 1515 and 1519 defending Erasmus and the humanist project more generally; the second comes from his polemical attacks on Tyndale and Luther, which he wrote in the 1520s.

Erasmus's maddeningly nimble work, *The Praise of Folly*, is animated by the conviction that he needed insults in order to cut through appearances and to locate the truth that conventional assumptions or worldly values had obscured. First published in 1511 and revised by Erasmus in 1514, *The Praise of Folly* received wide attention in thirty-six Latin editions and numerous translations by the time of Erasmus's death in 1536. Frequently condemned, in 1527 by theologians in Paris and in 1533 by Franciscans, it made the Sorbonne's list of condemned books in 1542 and 1543 and finally served as the basis for the condemnation of Erasmus's works in 1564 by the Tridentine Index.[30] The work prompted such vehement reactions partly because readers found the book so insulting. Erasmus's friend and scholarly colleague Martin Dorp, for instance, complained about Erasmus's needlessly offensive satirical style. But Erasmus insisted that he needed the insulting tone precisely because those who took offence at the criticism thereby revealed that they took themselves too seriously. They exposed their own reprehensible self-importance and selfishness by criticizing the wrong thing. Unperturbed by blasphemy against Christ, they quickly objected to slights against the pope or other worldly patrons, and did not object to the equally excessive rhetoric of praise. Thus Erasmus tried to counter the deleterious effects of flattery by praising absurdity.[31]

[29]See n. 8, above.

[30]On *The Praise of Folly (Moriae Encomium)* see Clarence Miller's introduction in *CWE* 27: xx–xxiv and in Desiderius Erasmus, *Opera omnia* (Amsterdam: North Holland, 1971-) 4–3 [hereafter ASD].

[31]"This makes me marvel all the more at the sensitivity of present-day ears which can bear to hear practically nothing but honorific titles. Moreover, you can find a good many people whose religious sense is so distorted that they find the most serious blasphemies against Christ more bear-

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Erasmus claimed that he could differentiate the right sort of praise and insult from their negative counterparts by focusing on the speaker's intentions; he argued that his insults were not bad because they were not personal, and that his flattery was good because it was motivated by a kind of natural goodness and candor (*ab ingenii benignitate candoreque*).[32] The putative clarity of this standard notwithstanding, *The Praise of Folly's* multi-layered paradox addressed the underlying question of how to navigate the world once one has burrowed beneath the comfortingly familiar topography of convention. Erasmus pointed up the ambiguity that inhered in this realm of intentions rather than appearances with his misleadingly simple claim that Folly is transparent, because she does not pretend to be anything else.[33] The bewildering twists and turns in *The Praise of Folly* demonstrate the disingenuous or laughable nature of this assertion of transparency, because one cannot possibly pin down the folly he describes; sometimes it seems to identify a wonderful lightheartedness, at other times a malicious blindness. Erasmus's simple claim about folly's lack of pretence carries great weight, however, because it highlights his frustration with worldly values and his desire to lay claim to an alternative. If folly makes no claim—and never aspires—to conventional appeal, it thus deserves praise. Lighthearted but heartfelt and excessive in the sense of being ludicrous but ludicrous in a way that challenges the comfort of social norms, folly locates the paradox of laughable profundity in human existence. As Folly (personified by Erasmus as a woman) herself puts it, "To whom is it generally agreed life owes its beginning if not to me? . . . What is it, I ask you, which begets gods or men—the head, the face, the breast, hand, or ear, all thought of as respectable parts of the body? No, it's not. The propagator of the human race is that part which is so foolish and absurd (*adeo stulta adeoque ridicula*) that it can't be named without raising a laugh."[34] Erasmus thus associates folly with the feces, urine, blood, and guts that spew forth during a vaginal birth. Though Luther will later berate him for his unwillingness to talk about God in the sewer, Erasmus hereby makes an analogous point; the true source of life resides not in the comfortable realm of appearances but in the foulness that appearances conceal.

This quote makes light of human depravity, but Erasmus played up this lightness in order to bear down hard on those who could not laugh at themselves—on those, in other words, who blinded themselves by self-love. So he invoked women, along with drunken partyers and indulgent friends, as self-evidently laughable. Folly, as Erasmus points out, generates the necessary illusions that enable us to wink at a friend's faults, to see an ugly wife as beautiful, and to find the company we keep deliciously entertaining. Folly thus seems implicated in the very veneer

able than the slightest joke on pope or prince, especially if it touches their daily bread." Erasmus's prefatory letter to Thomas More, ASD 4-3, *CWE* 27:84.

[32]ASD 4-3 130, *CWE* 27:117.

[33]ASD 4-3 74, *CWE* 27:87.

[34]ASD 4-3 80, *CWE* 27:90.

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that Erasmus wants to peel away. These benign examples about salutary illusions, however, serve as a point of entry to a far darker indictment of self-love. Erasmus emphasized that self-love presents a problem because people need it. As he writes, "Is there any duty throughout life which you can perform gracefully [*cum decoro*] as regards yourself or others (for the importance of decorum [*decere quod agas*] extends beyond mere skill and covers every action) unless you have Self-love at hand to help you?" Here, as Clarence H. Miller points out, Erasmus challenges the humanist claim that moral rectitude includes good speech and manners, which he calls "decorum" (following Quintilian and Cicero). For self-love assures worldly success but remains delusional nevertheless: "What is so foolish as self-satisfaction and self-admiration? But then what agreeable, pleasant, or graceful act can you perform if you aren't self-satisfied?"[35] The need for self-love spawns flattery, a foolish act of feeding another's self-deception, and, by the same token, only those who appear foolish are well-positioned to tell the truth. As Erasmus observed, fools "can speak truth and even open insults and be heard with positive pleasure; indeed, the words which would cost a wise man his life are surprisingly enjoyable when uttered by a clown."[36] To speak past the illusion, in other words, one has to remove oneself from the game and to step away from the world of social power that necessitates flattery. By the same token, however, one cannot withdraw far enough, because almost any act requires self-love.

Erasmus thus targeted with his invective those who most clearly played the game. Though women, fools, and others who are caught up in the gauzy wrapping of their silly illusions appear "artful" or silly, the schoolmasters, courtiers, monks, physicians, and just about anyone else who can claim public status show themselves particularly ridiculous because of their "mutual back-scratching."[37] The folly that characterizes these powerful members of society engenders tyranny. It reinforces the status quo and produces mutual assurances done only for mutual gain. So Erasmus indicts the theologians as men filled with "self-satisfaction and self-congratulation . . . [who] believe that they support the entire church on the props of their syllogisms."[38] Monks have a false feeling of superiority that reinforces social hierarchies, as he explained, "their petty ceremonies and silly absurdities and the noise they make in the world enable them to tyrannize over their fellow men."[39] And what could be worse than the courtiers? "For the most part they're the most obsequious, servile, stupid, and worthless of creatures, and yet they're bent on appearing foremost in everything."[40] Even more viscerally destructive, the absurd self-love of rulers brings them to wage wars, and, as Erasmus writes, "Christian blood flows freely while they believe they are the defenders, in the manner of the

[35]ASD 4-3 96 (and 97 for Miller's note on lines 443–44), *CWE* 27:98.
[36]ASD 4-3 114, *CWE* 27:110.
[37]ASD 4-3 138–40 (see also 142), *CWE* 27:123 (see also 125).
[38]ASD 4-3 154, *CWE* 27:129.
[39]ASD 4-3 166, *CWE* 27:135.
[40]ASD 4-3 170, *CWE* 27:136.

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apostles, of the church."[41] Their madness has tragically destructive effects and symbolizes the inherent madness of human nature.

In contrast to the ruinous foolishness of powerful people and all those afflicted by necessary self-love, Erasmus promoted a different sort of folly that redeems by embracing its own manic absurdity. Foolishness thus construed cannot be accused of hypocrisy, because it mocks social convention. By undermining ambition and the search for glory, this kind of folly thereby respects the boundaries between heaven and earth and lies at the heart of the Pauline message about distinguishing between sacred and profane, as Erasmus suggested by citing Pauline verses about the foolishness of worldly wisdom. By renouncing any claims to wisdom, Christians can approach Christ's redemptive act, for Christ, as Paul writes, "was made something of a fool himself in order to help the folly of mankind. . . . Nor did he wish them to be redeemed in any other way save by the folly of the cross."[42] Like Luther's Christ in the sewer, Erasmus locates his Pauline Christ where humans do not want to be. And yet for both men, this Christology leaves them with problems of perspective that they cannot easily solve. Luther cannot simply sanction insults by invoking Christ, and Erasmus does not end with this simple, seemingly reverential affirmation of the Pauline message about the folly of the cross. Appearances are not so easily dispensed with and madness is not simply transformed into truth. The ultimate transformation requires instead something akin to transfiguration achieved through ecstasy (as Michael Screech eloquently argues in his study of *The Praise of Folly*). Erasmus invokes the idea of a measured Platonic ascent in the closing paragraphs of *The Praise of Folly,* but his description of the experience of transcendence bears little resemblance to a philosophical account of such an achievement. As he writes, "Those who are permitted to have a foretaste of this, and they are very few, suffer from something akin to madness. They speak in a manner that is not quite coherent, not in the ordinary manner but with meaningless sounds. Their facial expressions change from joy to sorrow, they weep and laugh and, in short, are outside themselves." This perverse conclusion of Erasmus's text suggests that the apprehension of true religion—truth itself—happens through total self-abandonment. Instead of a Stoic detachment or a convincing argument about the transitory and unsatisfying nature of appearances, Erasmus celebrates the impossible: the end of all efficacious communication and self-possession.

In this way, Erasmus mocks all those who remain in thrall to convention even as he underscores the difficulty of rejecting the apparent order of things. Thus he, like Luther, used scathing attacks to combat the theological problem of deception but risked deepening the problem in the process. So too, as Erasmus affirmed a particular model of community by dismissing all offenders with Folly's darting

[41]ASD 4-3 174, *CWE* 27:139.
[42]ASD 4-3 188, *CWE* 27:148, see 1 Cor 1:21, 3:18, 4:10.

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scorn, he focused on the combination of community and issues of perspective that vexed Thomas More.[43]

Affirming a Communal Perspective: More's Defense of Humanism and Attack on Luther and Tyndale

Between 1515 and 1519, during the period that Luther and Erasmus were writing the texts discussed in the previous section, Thomas More, as a prominent English lawyer and member of the King's Council, had plenty to keep him busy. In the midst of it all, however, he devoted substantial time to writing letters to people who had critiqued his friend Erasmus—the friend who had affirmed their bond by dedicating *The Praise of Folly* to More. Invariably described as apologetics for humanism, these well-known epistles also deal with the warranting of insults.[44] More addressed two of the longest and best known of these letters directly to men, whom he called friends—the letter to Martin Dorp, written in 1515, and the letter to Edward Lee, written in 1519. Although each salutation bore one man's name, More did not write them as private epistles. Dorp had written a letter attacking Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly* on behalf of theologians at Louvain. When More wrote his response, both he and Dorp took for granted as common knowledge what Dorp had written to Erasmus. Similarly, the dispute between Erasmus and Lee heated up when Lee circulated a manuscript volume of annotations purporting to correct Erasmus's faulty work on his edition of the New Testament; Erasmus in turn asked several friends to persuade Lee to stop spreading what Erasmus regarded as false rumors about his scholarly mistakes. More's letter to Lee was publicly circulated in 1520, but the letter to Dorp did not appear in published form, perhaps because Erasmus and Dorp had agreed not to publish it.[45] Nevertheless, though not private letters, they did not either serve as truly public documents. Instead they functioned as communal interventions, and this web of interactions shows that all parties involved assumed that they had a responsibility for policing their community—a republic of letters—through precisely these sorts of exchanges of insults and approbation.

At the heart of his critique in his Letter to Dorp, More claims that Dorp violated communal ethics by launching an intemperate attack against Erasmus. Reminding Dorp that friendship set the standard, More explained that he felt compelled to write because of the shock and regret he experienced when mutual friends told him "something that was as unpleasant as it was incredible, namely that you do not feel

[43]Michael Screech, *Ecstasy and The Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980); cf. ASD IV-3 190–94, at 194), *CWE* 15:150–55 (for quote see 152–53). On the differences between the Platonic and Erasmian conception of illumination see Ernesto Grassi and Maristella Lorch, *Folly and Insanity in Renaissance Literature* (Binghamton, New York: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1986) 61–62.

[44]The content and facts about these letters are ably discussed by Daniel Kinney in his introduction to *CWTM* 15.

[45]*CWTM* 15:xxvi.

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any too friendly toward Erasmus and that your letter to him confirms the fact."[46] More implied that in the absence of good friendship remained only the sycophantic search for status and contemptuously described Dorp as a puppy eagerly seeking approval from the theologians, on whose behalf he had attacked Erasmus. Aside from this jab at Dorp's eagerness to please, More tried to hold himself above the fray by insisting that someone other than he had insulted Dorp by concluding that "[you] are too keen to enhance your own fame and are treacherously attacking another's."[47] The question at hand, More insisted, concerned Dorp's heart. Did Dorp act in good faith? Or did he launch insults because of a malicious desire to secure his own status? More would later accuse Tyndale and Luther of doing the same thing.

More pursued the same strategy in his letter to Lee, who was compiling a study detailing the mistakes in Erasmus's critical edition of the New Testament and was threatening to publish it. According to More, Lee felt that his work had not received enough praise and so critiqued Erasmus out of wounded pride. This petulant desire for public recognition, which More alleged, indicated an arrogance that differentiated good from bad scholars—a point More underscored by insisting that in contrast to Lee, Erasmus affirmed his own worth by displaying a praiseworthy modesty. As More writes of Erasmus, "Who makes fewer definitive claims? . . . He merely points out what the books say. Letting everyone judge for himself, he does not require anyone to agree with him . . . and though he needs advice less than anyone, no one appreciates advice more than he does."[48] Whether or not this evaluation characterized Erasmus accurately, it demonstrated that More viewed humility as a communally shared standard and arrogance a grounds for exclusion. More counseled Lee to recover "Christian charity and serenity" and to halt his aggressive attacks and pitifully frantic attempts to discredit a better scholar. Invoking friendship, as he had with Dorp, More implied that if Lee repudiated his friend, he risked losing access to the sacred values that friendship had awarded to him. In the name of friendship and, as he put it, "something more sacred than friendship," he called on Lee to uphold the Christian values that ought to define the intellectual community.[49]

Like Luther, all of these interlocutors thus struggled to reconcile, on the one hand, the conviction that insults were contemptible and even misleading, with, on the other hand, the awareness that they produced a desired effect. Thus Erasmus's *The Praise of Folly,* a work that insulted many by satirizing wisdom itself as well as all classes of people who claimed status or knowledge, sparked Dorp's invectives against Erasmus. In condemning Erasmus, Dorp cited Jerome's gloss of the verse in Matthew's Gospel, in which Jesus warns that anyone who says, "you fool"

[46]*CWTM* 15:5.
[47]*CWTM* 15:11
[48]*CWTM* 15:175.
[49]*CWTM* 15:193.

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to a "brother or sister" becomes "liable to the fires of Gehenna."[50] Dorp gave this indictment of insults, as one of several examples, to make the point that those who judge others would themselves risk harsh judgment. The gospel's teaching concluded that people should not presume to offer anything to God without first making peace with each other ("when you are offering your gift at the altar . . . first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come and offer your gift" [Matt 5:23–24]). This gospel passage thereby emphasized the link between divine and human relationships. More accepted the force of this biblical argument that insults obstruct the path to God by rending the ties between people. Nevertheless, he defended Erasmus by concluding that Matthew (and, by extension, Jerome) did not condemn insults per se but only a specific kind of insult—namely the personal insult. Erasmus, he hastened to point out, avoided blame, because he directed his satire generally at the fools who can be found amidst various groups of people. Dorp's critiques, however, deserved blame, because he launched them directly against Erasmus.[51] More argued that peace in the abstract did not matter so much as specific relationships within a particular community. Just as the verse in Matthew invokes kinship as the paradigmatic relational model by warning specifically that one should not offend one's "brothers or sisters," so More tried to make friendship the paradigm of community and thereby to hew a new communal standard between the extremes of public and private communication. Personal attacks that threatened to discredit someone within the eyes of the community deserved reprehension, whereas attacks that condemned people communally, by category rather than name, could in fact enable people within a specific community to create a concord rooted in distinctive, communally affirmed values. Men of letters, like More and Erasmus, were thus trying simultaneously to demarcate a community and to delineate its values from the prevailing norms of the broader society. For them, insults were both reprehensible and requisite, though they had difficulty distinguishing the one from the other.

More faced this issue in subsequent years when trying to confute his Protestant adversaries. Luther and Tyndale, according to More, had all the wrong motives. Instead of the self-abandonment and properly foolish humility, which Erasmus's *Folly* had proposed, they embraced arrogance and self-deception. More charged that Luther, inflated by the devil, had "taken on the most monstrous pride, the most cruel hatred, the most virulent spite, and the most pernicious counselors possible."[52] More charged as well that Tyndale's hubris threatened to lead everyone astray: "Judge good Christian reader whether it be possible that he be any better than a beast out of whose brutish beastly mouth commeth such a filthy foam of blasphemies."[53]

[50]*CWTM* 15:41. Dorp is citing Matt 5:22 and Jerome's commentary on Matthew, *PL* 26, 37 A. See Allen 2:99 for the insulting language in Erasmus's letter to Dorp, which Dorp here condemns (language which does not appear in the printed version of Erasmus's letter).

[51]*CWTM* 15:41

[52]*CWTM* 5:181

[53]*CWTM* 8:135

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Here the mixed metaphors heighten the effect, but More sometimes wound himself into a dizzying array of scatological references that left the impression that he was the one frothing at the mouth. For example, he once accused Luther of claiming "a prior right to bespatter and besmirch the royal crown with shit" and so claimed for himself the right to call Luther "fit to lick with his anterior the very posterior of a pissing she-mule."[54] As scholars have often noted, More attacked the claims of Luther and Tyndale to interpret and translate Scripture, because he thought they thereby abrogated to themselves the authority that had rested in the church since Christ commissioned his apostles. To More's mind, the arrogance not only boggled the mind but terrified him. His opponents threatened to turn the church's flawed but sturdy house into a hall of mirrors, where each interpreter would see only himself in an endless cascade of self-reflected meaning. More responded, like all Catholic polemicists, by affirming the power of tradition's consensus—the mutual agreement of Catholics throughout the ages manifest in the doctrines and common practices of the Church. His rhetoric of insult, often overlooked in discussing his response, also reflected his attempts to grapple with the problem of appearances at a moment when the nature of the learned community, or republic of letters, particularly troubled him.

Take for instance his pithy derision of Luther as a *scurra turpissimus* near the beginning of his 1523 response to Luther's *Babylonian Captivity of the Church.* In his authoritative translation, John Headley renders this insult as "foul buffoon." This translation accurately conveys the scathing tone but necessarily elides some connotations of the Latin word, *scurra*, of unknown etymology, which originally meant a "man about town" or a dandy. The word subsequently came to mean city buffoon or jester, but that early definition reminds us that a *scurra* referred to one who tried and failed to seem urbane.[55] Jesters amuse us, because they exaggerate courtly manners, and a buffoon appears foolish, because he tries so hard to act suavely. So when More referred to Luther as a *scurra turpissimus,* he condemned his opponent as superlatively offensive (*turpissimus*) because of his pretensions and aspirations to an alien identity. This exposes one of More's subtle but pervasive fears, that people might mistake appearances for reality and, hence, might wrongly hail a buffoon as a great reformer and interpreter of God's Word.

Although the institution of the Church, in More's opinion, safeguarded against this sort of deception, he had a specific interest in how learned men guarantee clarity and knowledge. So in two different editions of his *Responsio ad Lutherum*, both of which he wrote using pseudonyms, More introduced his own book as the work of a "most erudite" man (*eruditissimi*), a learned, witty, and pious work (*opus elegans, doctum, festiuum, pium*). He labeled Luther an enemy of learning by casting Luther's attack on King Henry VIII as an attack not only on a king but also, and just as consequentially, on a remarkably learned man. Thus it fell to other learned

[54]*CWTM* 5:181

[55]*CWTM* 5:1; s.v. "scurra" in *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) 2: 1713.

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men to expose the fraud. As More explains, he wrote not only because of a pious wish to protect the "church and religion of Christ" against the deleterious effects of heresy but also because of his vexations with Luther's deceptions such as his "false" use of the "pretext of holiness" to cover his true motives, "a greedy desire for renown," and his utter disregard for the right ordering of society.[56] According to More, Luther wanted not a better Christianity but a status he did not deserve.

More emphasized that Luther's works had the potential to deceive the learned. In one of More's prefatory letters to his *Responsio,* an interlocutor asks the author what people at his university originally thought of Luther's books. Baravellus (one of More's pseudonymous characters) responds that "many" scholars found the writing and the skillful presentation impressive, and thought that "through fraud he could appear to the reader as witty."[57] More then indicted Tyndale for the same sort of deception of the learned. Tyndale, he pointed out, tried to present himself as an apostle by beginning his work with a salutation modeled on the Pauline letters. As an "enchanter," he used sweet speech and "gay words of grace and light and faith and fervent love." All this, however, covered for a shameless boldness and scornful dismissal of "every estate" on earth and in heaven. One should see Tyndale rightly as a babbler, who threatened to drown the world in words. Thus More presents Luther and Tyndale alike as men consumed by worldly ambition.[58]

More promised to illuminate their deceptions, to shed light into every crevasse, so they would have nowhere to hide.[59] In his refutation of Luther, More assured the reader that the work in hand "exposed the wretch before all the world in such a way that no mirror can give a clearer image of the body than this work enables one to perceive the execrable soul of Luther."[60] More hereby promised that some words (namely his) would render transparent what other words (namely his opponents') had concealed. But how would that work? More uses intentional invective against Luther in that last quote. As it suggests, More viewed insults as necessary tools of exposure, because the problem lay beneath the words in the affective realm of the speaker's intent. The heart of the problem lay not in what his opponents said, but why they said it. They acted in arrogance, hatred, spite, and malice. Confronting Tyndale, who had translated the Bible into English and then used it to support his critiques of Catholic practices and theology, More tried to guarantee right meaning by insisting that conventional usage govern the definition of words. But Scripture alone did not pose the problem about the right use of words. Anyone in the sixteenth century who based a claim to intellectual status on the ability to use words well (rather than, for example, a university degree) faced this problem. In other words, if eloquence set the standard, what defined the right and wrong use of it? Tyndale, for example, picked up on this problem, when he indicted More as

[56]*CWTM* 5:2.
[57]"ut fuco facto, lectori posset apparere festiuus," *CWTM* 5:7, 11; see also 15.
[58]*CWTM* 8:39–41, 76, 26–27.
[59]On Tyndale see *CWTM* 8:35.
[60]*CWTM* 5:5

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a poet, by which he meant a man who traded in deceptive words. Like many of their contemporaries, Tyndale and More agreed that one could easily accuse poets of manipulating language for the fun of it.[61] More directly addressed this charge by differentiating poetry from theology. Even if one could accuse him of misusing language in his poetry, it did not mean that he would ever treat questions of Christian doctrine in a poetic way. In a broader sense, More addressed this problem by transforming it into a question of disposition and motive. He felt the need to use insults, as necessary, even crucial tools, because they focused attention on the speaker's character and intention. Precisely because of their virulent, extreme, and emotional nature, invectives ensured that those who were skating on the smooth surface created by reasonable arguments or social niceties had to look down and see the murky realities underneath their feet.

Conclusion

To argue, as I have here, that Erasmus, More, and Luther all developed a social epistemology of insult does not suggest that they faced identical problems, sought to achieve the same goals, or used or understood insults in the same ways. Yet the way in which all of them invested their efforts not only in the sociological but also in the epistemological effects of negative language, highlights their shared concern about appearances and anxiety about deception.

These learned men used insults as tools of exposure, but if we follow their discussions about insult we find ourselves, as they did, trying to distinguish valid from vindictive insults, good emotions from malice, and worldly self-deception from religious love. This problem of how to discern between truth and falsehood remains always present but threatens to become insurmountable, when competing institutions or ideologies avidly promote different ways of understanding reality. In the first half of the sixteenth century, humanists like Erasmus and More strongly promoted their intellectual habitus over against monasteries, universities, and scholasticism, while Luther and his cohorts created a clear alternative to the Catholic Church. As a standard part of rhetoric in a tradition stretching back to Aristotle, people use insulting language to discredit opponents, much as Christ used invectives against the Pharisees, or to affirm communal boundaries, as several studies have suggested in cultures ranging from ancient Greece to modern China.[62] But Erasmus, More, and Luther also used invective in contexts where questions about the capacity of language to signify reality lie at the heart of the matter. In these cases, as we have seen, insults form part of a social epistemology that seeks not only to shore up the community that shapes our sense of reality but also to clarify the nature of reality itself.

[61] *CWTM* 8:176.

[62] See Hale, "Milton and the Rationale of Insulting"; Thornton, "Insinuation, Insult, and Invective"; Nancy Worman, "Insult and Oral Excess in the Disputes Between Aeschines and Demosthenes," *American Journal of Philology* 125 (2004); Boyle, *Rhetoric and Reform*.

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