

Simon Fish

d. 1531

We know nothing of the early life of Simon Fish. Some sources claim that he was an Oxford graduate, but all we know for certain is that he entered Gray's Inn around 1525. Committed to the cause of the Protestant reformers, he went into exile twice on the Continent. He first fled London because of his participation in a circle of young reformers, who, playing upon the popular dislike of Cardinal Wolsey (Henry VIII's lord chancellor [1515-29]) and discontent over clerical abuses, presented a subversive dramatic interlude, the prime purpose of which was to satirize and embarrass the powerful Wolsey. Fish, fearing retaliation for taking a part in this drama, spent some time with Tyndale and other English exiles in the Low Countries; his sojourn with William Tyndale and the exiled reformist community spurred his commitment to the cause of Protestant reform in England. Returning to London in 1527, Fish was instrumental in introducing Tyndale's New Testament into England and in ensuring its distribution. Late in the same year, this activity forced his second, self-imposed exile to the Low Countries and while there he probably wrote *A Supplication for the Beggars*. Published in Antwerp in 1528-29, the *Supplication* was smuggled into England by Protestant reformers in the same year. Returning to London in 1529 (prompted partly by the fall of Wolsey), Fish found himself in dire trouble over the *Supplication*; he and his pamphlet were roundly condemned as heretical by Bishop Warham and Thomas More, Henry VIII's lord chancellor (1529-33). Although his compendium of Protestant theology, *The Sum of the Holy Scripture* (a trans. from the French of Bomelius' *Summa der godliker scrifturen*; Antwerp, 1529), was accused of containing no fewer than 92 separate heretical teachings, the *Supplication* was a far more personally dangerous performance, since the pamphlet quickly became both a popular success and a political club for Henry to use against his opponents. Although according to John Foxe the pamphlet was, through the agency of Anne Boleyn, presented to Henry VIII, the King's private approval of the tract did not seem to translate into direct public support and protection. However, Carole Levin points out that the "well-organized and dramatic distribution of the [pamphlet] through the streets of London [just before Parliament met in November] suggest[s] the collusion of the authorities."¹ While Thomas More states that Fish finally recanted and returned to the Roman Catholic faith, there is no supporting evidence for this claim, and indeed Fish is viewed by his contemporary Protestants as a mainstay of the Reformation. His stature is testified to by John Foxe's decision to include the entire text of the *Supplication* in *Act and Monuments* (1563), his encyclopaedic account of English resistance to papal tyranny. Factually, all we know for certain is that Fish died of the plague in 1531.

Fish has been linked in modern literary and historical studies not only with William Tyndale but with Thomas More, lord chancellor and Catholic humanist who was finally executed in 1535 for his refusal to support the King's decision to break away from Rome. As chancellor, More spent much of his time in the 1520s writing against Protestant tracts and actively persecuting Protestants for heresy. While he wrote against Tyndale and others, Fish's *Supplication* provoked special hostility, since More considered it a dangerous enough tract that it needed to be answered, as he did in his invective-laden *A Supplication of the Souls* (1529). Described as "one of the most remarkable and formidable writings of the time,"² *A Supplication for the Beggars* was also "probably the most widely read Protestant tract of the period,"³ and the first to take reformist controversy out of the realm of academic disquisition and into that of the popular press.⁴

EDITION: *A supplicacyon for the beggars*. [Antwerp?: J. Grapheus?, 1529?.] STC 10883.



¹ "From Beggars to Souls: Thomas More's Response to Simon Fish's *Supplication*," *Lamar Journal of the Humanities* 16.2 (Fall 1990): p. 8.

² A. Ogle, quoted in Levin, p. 8.

³ C. Levin, "From Beggars to Souls," p. 8.

⁴ J.S.W. Helt, "Simon Fish," *DNB online*.

A Supplication for the Beggars

To the King Our
Sovereign Lord.

Most lamentably complaineth their woeful
misery unto your Highness, your poor daily
beadsmen,¹ the wretched hideous monsters (on
whom scarcely for horror any eye dare look), the
5 foul unhappy sort of lepers, and other sore²
people, needy, impotent,³ blind, lame, and sick,
that live only by alms,⁴ how that their number is
daily so sore⁵ increased that all the alms of all
the well-disposed people of this your realm is
10 not half enough for to sustain them, but that for
very constraint⁶ they die for hunger. And all this
most pestilent mischief is come upon your said
poor beadsmen, by the reason that there is in the
times of your noble predecessors past craftily
15 crept into this your realm another sort not of
impotent but of strong puissant⁷ and counterfeit
holy and idle beggars and vagabonds, which
since the time of their first entre⁸ by all the craft
and wiliness of Satan are now increased under
20 your sight not only into a great number, but
also into a kingdom. These are (not the herds,⁹
but the ravenous wolves going in herds' cloth-
ing devouring the flock) the bishops, abbots,
priors, deacons, archdeacons, suffragans, priests,
25 monks, canons, friars, pardoners and summon-

¹ *beadsmen* a person paid or endowed to pray for others; especially a pensioner or almsman charged with the duty of praying for the souls of his benefactors. Beadsmen were often employed by the religious guilds of the period, corporations set up partly to provide funerals and prayers for the souls of deceased members, whose names would be recorded in the guild's bead-roll.

² *sore* physically and/or mentally suffering.

³ *impotent* powerless, helpless; decrepit.

⁴ *alms* charity for the relief of the poor.

⁵ *sore* seriously, severely.

⁶ *constraint* oppression, affliction, distress.

⁷ *puissant* mighty, powerful.

⁸ *entre* entrance.

⁹ *herds* A "herd" is a keeper of a herd or flock of domestic animals; a herdsman; figuratively, a pastor or spiritual guardian.

ers.¹⁰ And who is able to number this idle ravenous sort which (setting all labour aside) have begged so importunately that they have gotten into their hands more than the third part of all
30 your realm? The goodliest lordships, manors, lands, and territories are theirs. Besides this they have the tenth part of all the corn, meadow, pasture, grass, wool, colts, calves, lambs, pigs, geese, and chickens; over and besides the tenth
35 part of every servant's wages, the tenth part of the wool, milk, honey, wax, cheese, and butter. Yea,¹¹ and they look so narrowly¹² upon their profits that the poor wives must be countable¹³
40 to them of every tenth egg or else she getteth not her rights at Easter [and] shall be taken as an

¹⁰ *bishops ... summoners* a roughly hierarchical list of some of the ecclesiastical positions in the Roman Catholic, pre-Reformation English church. A bishop is in charge of an administrative division known as the diocese; he ranks below the archbishop, but above the other ranks (priests, deacons, archdeacons, etc.). An abbot is the spiritual and financial head (or superior) of a religious house or monastery, assisted by a cleric known as a prior; a prior is also the head of a religious house in one of the mendicant orders, the orders whose members (called friars) were forbidden from owning property in common and thus either worked or begged for alms to support themselves. A deacon assists the priest in his pastoral duties and in the celebration of the sacraments, and was also traditionally responsible for the collection and distribution of alms. An archdeacon has limited administrative authority in a diocese, usually over the diocese's property and the behaviour of the clergy. A suffragan is an assistant bishop. A priest is a cleric in the second of the holy orders (below the bishop but above the deacon), whose function is to administer the sacraments of the Church, such as Communion and Confession. A monk is a member of a religious community who has sworn vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, although the actual set of community regulations (known as the "rule") differed from order to order; unlike friars, monks do not move about, but remain in their communities. A canon is a member of the clergy attached to a particular cathedral or collegiate church. A pardoner is a person licensed to sell papal pardons or indulgences; essentially a pardon or indulgence promised that the recipient would be forgiven the penalties which he or she would still normally expect to pay for forgiven sins in the afterlife; for a late medieval example of the scandalous and mercenary attitude of professional pardoners which was one of the constant complaints of the Protestant reformers, see Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale*. A summoner is an official who summons people to appear in court; here, the Church courts are clearly implied.

¹¹ *Yea* indeed, truly.

¹² *narrowly* carefully, closely.

¹³ *countable* i.e., accountable, answerable.

heretic.¹ Hereto have they their four offering days. What money pull they in by probates of testaments,² privy tithes,³ and by men's offerings to their pilgrimages,⁴ and at their first masses?⁵

45 Every man and child that is buried must pay somewhat for masses and dirges⁶ to be sung for him or else they will accuse the dead's friends and executors of heresy. What money get they

50 by mortuaries,⁷ by hearing of confessions (and yet they will keep thereof no counsel),⁸ by hallowing of churches, altars, superaltars,⁹ chapels¹⁰ and bells,¹¹ by cursing of men and absolving them again for money?¹² What a multitude of money gather the pardoners¹³ in a year? How much money get the summoners by extortion in a year, by assiting¹⁴ the people to

¹ *or else she ... heretic* i.e., she who is not given her rights at Easter shall be thought to be (and perhaps even arrested as) a heretic. Fish claims that a disgruntled priest (stinted of even so small a remuneration as the tenth egg of a poor rural farm wife) may deny her the opportunity to perform her religious duties ("rights") at Easter. Since every parishioner was obliged to receive the sacraments of Communion and Confession at Eastertide, and since the reception of these sacraments declared one's commitment to the Roman Catholic faith (one's religious orthodoxy), to be seen not to fulfil this obligation was to run the risk of being accused of heresy; the penalty for heresy was death.

² *probates of testaments* A will or testament had to be probated (proven to be legally valid through the provision of a certificate to that fact), and this was a responsibility of the Church courts, and a charge was levied for the service.

³ *privy tithes* literally, "secret tithes." Tithes were a tax, mandated by Church law, for the maintenance of the clergy; ten per cent of every parishioner's income, either in cash or in kind (e.g., agricultural produce), was given to the parish priest for his and his household's personal support. Although ideally tithes were meant for the support of the local parish priest, in reality they were often paid to "a distant pluralist or a wealthy ecclesiastical corporation" (W.J. Sheils, *The English Reformation, 1530-1570* [London, 1989], p. 6). Refusal to pay one's tithes could mean prosecution by the Church courts, which enforced this payment as well as other religious duties and obligations.

⁴ *men's offerings to their pilgrimages* The reformers rejected the idea that they believed most commonly lay behind the pilgrimage—a devotional journey to a particular religious shrine, church, or holy site—that "God will be sought more in one place than in another, or that God will hear thee more in one place than in another, or more where the image is than where it is not." Such a belief "is a false faith, and idolatry, or image-service" (William Tyndale's 1531 *An Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, ed. H. Walter [Cambridge, 1850], p. 63).

⁵ *first masses* unclear; perhaps a reference to the monetary "gift" expected from the parents of those children participating in Communion for the first time.

⁶ *dirges* hymns sung for the dead during the burial mass. Families had to pay a fee to ensure the proper burial of their kin, and this form of tithing was especially resented, as was the mortuary; see the story of Richard Hunne, below, p. 10, note 8.

⁷ *mortuaries* a particularly resented title which involved giving the parish priest a recently deceased parishioner's second-best animal or possession.

⁸ *by hearing of confessions (and ... counsel)* We have not come across a specific reference to fees levied against parishioners for the hearing of their confessions (Confession was the sacrament which involved an individual parishioner privately confessing his/her sins to the priest and receiving in return absolution for these sins, upon the condition that the parishioner fulfilled the penance enjoined upon him/her by the priest; this penance might consist of saying certain prayers, the undertaking of acts of charity or corporal mercy, etc.). Perhaps Fish refers to the practice of exacting a monetary "donation" to the church as part of such a penance. While a priest was supposed to maintain the "seal of the confessional" (i.e., not reveal to anyone whatsoever anything that a penitent had said under any circumstances), Fish claims that priests regularly broke this rule.

⁹ *superaltar* a portable stone slab consecrated for use upon an unconsecrated altar, a table, etc.; some superaltars were very ornate, and they became an emblem of clerical extravagance.

¹⁰ *chapels* a place of Christian worship; an oratory, often attached to a parish church or cathedral.

¹¹ *hallowing of churches ... bells* A priest, bishop, or other qualified religious would bless, consecrate, or hallow all of these places of Christian worship (church, chapel) and liturgical articles (altars, bells, superaltars). The reformist opposition to the blessing or consecrating of places and objects (as essentially sorcery) turns up as well in Latimer's "A Sermon on the Ploughers," p. 123, ll.520-36.

¹² *by cursing ... for money* Fish refers to the practice of excommunicating parishioners, placing them under a ban or "curse." An excommunicant could not attend mass or receive the sacraments; Fish implies that priests could and did use this power of excommunication in order to make money, lifting the ban in exchange for a fee. One of Richard Hunne's legal actions (see p. 10, note 8) was a charge of slander which he brought against the priest Henry Marshall, who refused to celebrate mass while Hunne was present, saying, "Hunne thou art accused and thou standest accused, and therefore go thou out of the church, for as long as thou art in this church, I will say no evensong nor service" (quoted in S.F.C. Milsom, "Richard Hunne's 'Praemunire,'" *English Historical Review* 76.298 [January 1961], p. 82).

¹³ *pardoners* see p. 2, note 10.

¹⁴ *assiting* acciting; citing, summoning.

the commissaries' court and afterward releasing
the appaunce for money?¹ Finally, the infinite
number of begging friars, what get they in a
60 year? Here, if it please your Grace to mark, ye
shall see a thing far out of joint.² There are
within your realm of England 52,000 parish
75 churches. And this standing,³ that there be but
ten households in every parish, yet there are
520,000 households. And of every of these
households hath every of the five orders of
friars a penny a quarter for every order; that is,
for all the five orders five pence a quarter for
every house. That is for all the five orders 20
80 pence a year of every house. Summa,⁴ 520,000
quarters of angels.⁵ That is 260,000 half angels.
Summa, 130,000 angels. Summa totalis, £43,333,
6 shillings, and 8 pence sterling. Whereof not
four hundred years past they had not one penny.

Oh, grievous and painful exactions thus yearly
to be paid, from the which the people of your
noble predecessors, the kings of the ancient
Britons, ever stood free! And this will they have or
else they will procure him that will not give it them
80 to be taken as a heretic. What tyrant ever
oppressed the people like this cruel and vengeable
generation? What subjects shall be able to help
their prince that be after this fashion yearly
polled?⁶ What good Christian people can be able
85 to succour us poor lepers—blind, sore, and
lame—that be thus yearly oppressed? Is it any
marvel that your people so complain of poverty?
Is it any marvel that the taxes, fifteens⁷ and subsi-
dies⁸ that your Grace most tenderly of great com-

90 passion hath taken among your people to defend
them from the threatened ruin of their common-
wealth have been so stoughtfully,⁹ yea painfully,
levied, seeing that almost the utmost penny that
might have been levied hath been gathered before
95 yearly by this ravenous, cruel, and insatiable gen-
eration? The Danes, neither the Saxons, in the
time of the ancient Britons should never have
been able to have brought their armies from so far
hither into your land to have conquered it, if they
100 had had at that time such a sort of idle gluttons to
find at home. The noble king Arthur had never
been able to have carried his army to the foot of
the mountains to resist the coming down of
Lucius the Emperor¹⁰ if such yearly exactions had
105 been taken of his people. The Greeks had never
been able to have so long continued at the siege of
Troy¹¹ if they had had at home such an idle sort
of cormorants¹² to find. The ancient Romans had
never been able to have put all the whole world
110 under their obeisance¹³ if their people had been
thus yearly oppressed. The Turk now in your time
should never be able to get so much ground of
Christendom¹⁴ if he had in his Empire such a sort

⁹ *stoughtfully* i.e., stoutly, severely.

¹⁰ *The noble king Arthur ... Lucius the Emperor* Book 5 of Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* recounts the Roman emperor Lucius' demand of tribute from Arthur, Arthur's refusal, and the speedy uniting of all the various kings and lords of Britain under his banner when he declares war on the Romans. In a great battle, Arthur slays Lucius and is later himself crowned emperor of Rome. As R. Pineas suggests, "the mention of Arthur was ... an appeal to Henry [VIII]'s family pride, for he claimed descent from the British hero, and his elder brother had been named Arthur" ("Thomas More's Controversy with Simon Fish," *SEL* 7.1 [Winter 1967]: p. 18).

¹¹ *The Greeks ... Troy* The Greeks besieged Troy for ten years, before the walls were breached and the city destroyed.

¹² *cormorants* large sea-birds, traditionally thought greedy and voracious.

¹³ *obeisance* authority, rule, sway.

¹⁴ *The Turk now ... Christendom* In the mid-fifteenth century, "a new Islamic power, the Ottoman Turks" achieved what the earlier Caliphate had not: the capture of Constantinople (1453). What followed was "a series of Ottoman invasions and victories ... including Athens in 1459, Otranto in 1480, Rhodes in 1522, Budapest in 1526, [and] the siege of Vienna in 1529" which fuelled a widespread contemporary fear of Islamic military expansionism (D.J. Vitkus, "Introduction," *Three Turk Plays from Early Modern England* [New York, 2000], p. 7).

¹ *the summoners ... for money* Summoners were responsible for citing individuals to present themselves formally in an ecclesiastical (commissaries) court to present or answer a particular charge (the appaunce or appearance); anti-clerical tracts often presented summoners as given to bribery.

² *out of joint* i.e., out of order; disorganized, perverted.

³ *this standing* i.e., this being the case.

⁴ *Summa* Latin, "in total."

⁵ *angels* a coin worth (during Henry VIII's reign) 8 shillings.

⁶ *polled* pillaged, plundered, especially through excessive taxation.

⁷ *fifteens* a tax consisting of one-fifteenth part of personal property imposed by Parliament for the use of the monarch.

⁸ *subsidies* pecuniary aid granted by Parliament to the sovereign to meet special needs.

115 of locusts to devour his substance. Lay then these
 120 sums to the foresaid third part of the possessions
 of the realm that ye may see whether it draw nigh
 unto the half of the whole substance of the realm
 or not. So shall ye find that it draweth far above.
 Now let us then compare the number of this
 125 unkind, idle sort unto the number of the laypeo-
 ple and we shall see whether it be indifferently
 shifted¹ or not that they² should have half.
 Compare them to the number of men, so are they
 not the one hundredth person.³ Compare them to
 130 men, women, and children, then are they not the
 fourth hundredth person in number. One part,
 therefore, in four hundred parts divided were too
 much for them except they did labour.⁴ What an
 unequal burden is it that they have half with the
 multitude and are not the fourth hundredth
 135 person of their number? What tongue is able to
 tell that there was any commonwealth so sore
 oppressed since the world first began?

And what do⁵ all these greedy sort of sturdy,
 135 idle, holy thieves with these yearly exactions that
 they take of the people? Truly nothing but exempt
 themselves from the obedience of your Grace.
 Nothing but translate all rule, power, lordship,
 authority, obedience, and dignity from your Grace
 140 unto them. Nothing but that all your subjects
 should fall into disobedience and rebellion against
 your Grace and be under them. As they did unto
 your noble predecessor King John: which for

¹ *indifferently shifted* equally apportioned.

² *they* i.e., the clergy.

³ *so are they not the one hundredth person* i.e., they do not constitute one one-hundredth of the male population. Just below, Fish claims that they do not even constitute one four-hundredth of the total population. While today scholars generally agree with Fish's assertion "that the Church owned one third of all the land in England," R. Pineas's calculations based on other contemporary sources show that Fish's other figures are simply incorrect: the friars made a bare fraction of the £43,333, 6 shillings, and 8 pence per annum that Fish cites; the clergy constituted far more than one four-hundredth of the total population ("Thomas More's Controversy with Simon Fish," p. 20); and even the number of parish churches is inflated (M.C., "Simon Fish," *DNB*, p. 52).

⁴ *except they did labour* unless they labour.

⁵ *what do* i.e., what do they do or accomplish [with these yearly taxes]?

145 because that he would have punished certain traitors
 that had conspired with the French King to
 have deposed him from his crown and dignity
 (among the which a clerk called Stephen whom
 afterward against the King's will the Pope made
 150 bishop of Canterbury was one) interdicted his
 land.⁶ For the which matter your most noble realm
 wrongfully (alas, for shame) hath stood tributary
 (not unto any kind, temporal prince, but unto a
 cruel, devilish bloodsupper, drunk in the blood of
 the saints and martyrs of Christ) ever since. Here
 155 were a holy sort of prelates⁷ that thus cruelly
 could punish such a glorious King, all his realm,
 and succession for doing right.

Here were a charitable sort of holy men that
 could thus interdict a whole realm and pluck away
 the obedience of the people from their natural
 liege lord and King, for none other cause but for
 his righteousness. Here were a blessed sort not of
 meek herds but of bloodsuckers that could set the
 French King upon such a righteous Prince to
 160 cause him to lose his crown and dignity to make
 effusion of the blood of his people, unless this

⁶ *As they did unto your noble predecessor King John ... interdicted his land*
 The story of King John and his politico-religious conflict with Innocent III (1160-1216) was popular with reformers (like Fish and Tyndale), who saw it as paradigmatic of papal abuses. When John attempted to protect his right to appoint the archbishop of Canterbury, and subsequently refused to allow the Pope's compromise candidate (Stephen Langton) to take up his papally authorized position, Innocent excommunicated the King and placed the whole country under an interdict, which involved the withdrawal of all church services throughout England, and the personal excommunication of John himself. King John was finally forced to accept Langton as his archbishop and to agree to making England a papal fief, a "tributary," bound to pay a certain sum to the Pope. Fish asserts that John initially came into conflict with Innocent because John learned of a planned coup by several English traitors (including the said Stephen Langton, with the aid and connivance of the French King). Although the reformers' account is not strictly accurate, it does serve to make John an early proponent of English liberty and a king willing to humble himself and surrender his sovereignty ("crown and dignity") in order to protect his people from the threatened invasion of the Pope's French allies. In fact, conflicts between English kings and popes after John's reign were consistently resolved in the kings' favour.

⁷ *prelates* highly ranked church officials, such as bishops, archbishops, or cardinals.

good and blessed King of great compassion, more
 fearing and lamenting the shedding of the blood
 of his people than the loss of his crown and
 170 dignity against all right and conscience, had sub-
 mitted himself unto them. Oh, case most horrible
 that ever so noble a king, realm, and succession
 should thus be made to stoop to such a sort of
 bloodsuppers! Where was his sword, power,
 175 crown, and dignity become whereby he might
 have done justice in this manner? Where was their
 obedience become that should have been subject
 under his high power in this matter? Yea, where
 was the obedience of all his subjects become that
 180 for maintenance of the commonwealth should
 have holpen¹ him manfully to have resisted these
 bloodsuppers to the shedding of their blood? Was
 not all together² by their policy translated from
 this good King unto them?

185 Yea, and what do they more? Truly nothing but
 apply themselves, by all the sleights they may, to
 have to do with³ every man's wife, every man's
 daughter and every man's maid, that cuckoldry and
 bawdry⁴ should reign over all among your sub-
 190 jects, that no man should know his own child that⁵
 their bastards might inherit the possessions of
 every man, to put the right begotten children clear
 beside⁶ their inheritance in subversion of all
 estates and godly order. These be they that by their
 195 abstaining from marriage do let⁷ the generation of
 the people whereby all the realm at length, if
 should be continued, shall be made desert⁸ and
 uninhabitable. These be they that have made a
 hundred thousand idle whores in your realm,
 200 which would have gotten their living honestly, in
 the sweat of their faces, had not their superfluous

riches illected⁹ them to unclean lust and idleness.
 These be they that corrupt the whole generation
 of mankind in your realm, that catch the pokkes¹⁰
 205 of one woman and bear them to another, that be
 brent¹¹ with one woman and bear it to another,
 that catch the leprosy of one woman and bear it to
 another; yea, some one of them shall boast among
 his fellows that he hath meddled with a hundred
 210 women. These be they that, when they have once
 drawn men's wives to such incontinency, spend
 away their husbands' goods, make the women to
 run away from their husbands, yea, run away
 themselves both with wife and goods, bring both
 215 man, wife, and children to idleness, theft, and
 beggary.

Yea, who is able to number the great and broad,
 bottomless ocean-sea full of evils that this mis-
 chievous and sinful generation may lawfully bring
 upon us unpunished? Where is your sword, power,
 crown, and dignity become, that should punish (by
 punishment of death, even as other men are pun-
 220 ished) the felonies, rapes, murders, and treasons
 committed by this sinful generation? Where is
 their obedience become that should be under your
 high power in this matter? Is not all together trans-
 225 lated¹² and exempt¹³ from your Grace unto them?
 Yes, truly. What an infinite number of people
 might have been increased to have peopled the
 realm if these sort of folk had been married like
 other men.¹⁴ What breach of matrimony is there
 brought in by them? Such truly as was never, since
 the world began, among the whole multitude of
 the heathen.

⁹ *illected* allured, enticed.

¹⁰ *pokkes* pox: syphilis; specifically here, venereal pustules or sores.

¹¹ *brent* i.e., burnt; infected with venereal disease, venereal sores.

¹² *translated* conveyed, transferred.

¹³ *exempt* taken out or away; removed.

¹⁴ *if these sort of folk had been married like other men* In Roman Catholicism, priests are required to be celibate; they may not marry. Although some reformist clerics began to marry in the late 1530s and 1540s, this move was opposed by Henry VIII, who in 1539 forced his archbishop of Canterbury and other married clergy to leave their wives. Clerical marriage was really only permitted beginning with 2-3 Edward VI, c.21; this legalization was rescinded by Queen Mary, and even Elizabeth I remained resistant until 1571. The last legal obstacles to clerical marriage were only finally removed in 1603.

¹ *holpen* i.e., helped.

² *all together* everything.

³ *have to do with* have sexual relations with.

⁴ *cuckoldry and bawdry* *cuckoldry* the dishonouring of a husband by adultery on the part of his wife; *bawdry* unchastity, fornication; the business of a bawd or pimp.

⁵ *that* i.e., in order that.

⁶ *to put ... clear beside* to deprive completely of.

⁷ *let* prevent, stop.

⁸ *desert* desolate, barren, unpeopled.

235 Who is she that will set her hands to work to
 get 3 pence a day and may have at least 20 pence
 a day to sleep an hour with a friar, a monk, or a
 priest? What is he that would labour for a groat¹
 a day and may have at least 12 pence a day to be
 240 bawd² to a priest, a monk, or a friar? What a sort
 are there of them that marry priests' sovereign
 ladies but to cloak the priests' incontinency and
 that they may have a living of the priest them-
 selves for their labour? How many thousands
 245 doth such lubricity³ bring to beggary, theft, and
 idleness which should have kept their good name
 and have set themselves to work had not been
 this excess treasure of the spirituality?⁴ What
 honest man dare take any man or woman in his
 250 service that hath been at such a school with a
 spiritual man? Oh, the grievous shipwreck of the
 commonwealth, which in ancient time before the
 coming in of these ravenous wolves was so pros-
 perous that then there were but few thieves! Yea,
 255 theft was at that time so rare that Caesar was not
 compelled to make penalty of death upon felony,
 as your Grace may well perceive in his institutes.⁵
 There was also at that time but few poor people,
 and yet they did not beg but there was given
 260 them enough unasked, for there was at that time
 none of these ravenous wolves to ask it from
 them, as it appeareth in the Acts of the Apos-
 tles.⁶ Is it any marvel though there be now so
 many beggars, thieves, and idle people? Nay,
 265 truly.

¹ *groat* an English coin, worth 4 pence when it was first issued in 1351-52, but which had suffered devaluation by 1529.

² *bawd* a pimp or procurer.

³ *lubricity* sexual lasciviousness, lewdness, wantonness.

⁴ *the spirituality* the entire collective body of ecclesiastical persons.

⁵ Perhaps a reference to Caesar's eloquent speech against the death penalty, delivered at the trial of a group of men who had attempted to overthrow the Republic. He argued that this penalty is never an effective deterrent in the case of any crime. See Sallust, *The Conspiracy of Catiline*.

⁶ *as it appeareth in the Acts of the Apostles* The apostles instructed their early Christian communities on how to support and aid their poorer members, rendering begging unnecessary. Fish may also refer to the fact of the apostles' own poverty and reliance on the freely given (not coerced or institutionalized) financial support of believers.

What remedy? Make laws against them. I am in
 doubt whether ye be able. Are they not stronger in
 your own Parliament House than yourself? What
 a number of bishops, abbots, and priors are lords
 270 of your Parliament? Are not all the learned men in
 your realm in fee with⁷ them to speak in your Par-
 liament House for them against your crown,
 dignity, and common wealth⁸ of your realm—a
 few of your own learned Council only excepted?
 275 What law can be made against them that may be
 available?⁹ Who is he though he be grieved never
 so sore for the murder of his ancestry,¹⁰ ravish-
 ment of his wife, of his daughter, robbery, tres-
 pass, mayhem, debt, or any other offence dare lay
 280 it their charge by any way of action?¹¹ And if he
 do, then is he by and by¹² by their wiliness accused
 of heresy. Yea, they will so handle him or he pass¹³
 that except he will bear a faggot¹⁴ for their pleas-
 ure he shall be excommunicate and then be all his
 285 actions dashed. So captive are your laws unto them
 that no man that they list¹⁵ to excommunicate may
 be admitted to sue any action in any of your
 courts. If any man in your sessions¹⁶ dare be so
 hardy to indict a priest of any such crime, he
 290 hath—or¹⁷ the year go out—such a yoke of
 heresy laid in his neck that it maketh him wish that
 he had not done it. Your Grace may see what a
 work there is in London, how the Bishop rageth
 for indicting of certain curates of extortion and

⁷ *in fee with* in the pay or service of, under an obligation to; hence, in league with.

⁸ *common wealth* the common or public good.

⁹ *available* effectual, efficacious.

¹⁰ *ancestry* figuratively, lineage or descent.

¹¹ *lay it their charge by any way of action* i.e., in the legal sense of bringing an action or legal case [against].

¹² *by and by* straightaway, immediately.

¹³ *or he pass* before he goes by, departs [from the court].

¹⁴ *bear a faggot* A "faggot" is a bundle of sticks used for fuel; *to bear, carry a faggot* was the humiliating public punishment for those who declared heretical sympathies and had then renounced them; it was a token of having recanted heresy, since heretics who did not so recant would be burned.

¹⁵ *list* desire, want.

¹⁶ *in your sessions* i.e., in the times when the courts would hear cases.

¹⁷ *or* before, ere.

295 incontinency the last year in the warmoll quest.¹
Had not Richard Hunne commenced action of
praemunire² against a priest, he had been yet alive
and none heretic at all but an honest man.

300 Did not divers³ of your noble progenitors,
seeing their crown and dignity run into ruin and to
be thus craftily translated into the hands of this
mischievous generation, make divers statutes for
the reformation thereof, among which the statute
of mortmain⁴ was one?—to the intent that after
305 that time they should have no more given unto
them. But what availed it? Have they not gotten
into their hands more lands since than any duke in
England hath, the statute notwithstanding? Yea,
have they not for all that translated into their
310 hands from your Grace half your kingdom thor-
oughly? The whole name, as reason is, for the aun-
cientie⁵ of your kingdom which was before theirs

¹ *warmoll quest* “There is a custom in the City [i.e., London], once a year to have a quest [i.e., inquest; an official or judicial inquiry] called the *warmoll quest*, to redress vices; but alas, to what purpose cometh it, as it us used? If a poor man keep a whore besides his wife, and a poor man’s wife play the harlot, they are punished, as well worthy. But let an alderman, a gentleman, or a rich man keep whore or whores, what punishment is there? Alas, this matter is too bad” (H. Brinklow, *The Lamentation of a Christian against the City of London* [1548], Bviii [quoted in F.J. Furnivall, ed., *A Supplication for the Beggars* by Simon Fish [London, 1871], p. 9, note 1]). The first English edition of *Supplication* (1546) was published bound together with another of Brinklow’s works, *A Supplication of the Poor Commons* (J.S.W. Helt, “Simon Fish,” *DNB online*).

² *action of praemunire* i.e., Hunne brought a charge against the priest that his earlier legal actions against Hunne constituted a violation of the King’s judicial authority. In short, Hunne charged that the priest had tried to settle an issue in the Church courts which really belonged to the secular courts. On Richard Hunne’s life and legal cases, see p. 10, note 8.

³ *divers* more than one, several.

⁴ *statute of mortmain* “Mortmain” refers to the condition of lands or tenements held inalienably by an ecclesiastical or other corporation. The Crown was very opposed to lands attaining the status of mortmain, which happened when an individual, for example, willed land to the Church for the establishment of a chantry, although this opposition was largely “for economic and not ideological reasons” (E. Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* [New Haven, 1992], p. 510). Beginning in 1279, monarchs attempted to curtail this type of land grant, and the many following acts became known as the “Statutes of Mortmain.”

⁵ *auncientie* antiquity; old standing.

and out of the which theirs is grown only abiding
with⁶ your Grace? and of one kingdom made
315 twain: the spiritual kingdom (as they call it), for
they will be named first, and your temporal
kingdom. And which of these two kingdoms,
suppose ye, is like to overgrow the other, yea to
put the other clear out of memory? Truly, the
320 kingdom of the bloodsuckers, for to them is given
daily out of your kingdom. And that that is once
given them cometh never from them again. Such
laws have they that none of them may neither give
nor sell nothing.⁷ What law can be made so strong
325 against them that they—either with money or else
with other policy—will not break and set at
nought? What kingdom can endure that ever
giveth thus from him and receiveth nothing again?
Oh, how all the substance of your realm forth-
330 with—your sword, power, crown, dignity, and
obedience of your people—runneth headlong
into the insatiable whirlpool of these greedy
goulafres⁸ to be swallowed and devoured!

335 Neither have they any other colour⁹ to gather
these yearly exactions into their hands but that
they say they pray for us to God to deliver our
souls out of the pains of Purgatory, without
whose prayer they say—or at least without the
Pope’s pardon—we could never be delivered
340 thence, which if it be true then is it good reason
that we give them all these things, all were it a
hundred times as much. But there be many men of
great literature and judgement that for the love
they have unto the truth and unto the common-
345 wealth have not feared to put themselves into the
greatest infamy that may be, in abjection¹⁰ of all
the world, yea in peril of death, to declare their
opinion in this matter, which is that there is no
purgatory, but that it is a thing invented by the
350 covetousness of the spirituality only to translate all

⁶ *only abiding with* i.e., their “kingdom” had grown only because it has been living within that of the king.

⁷ *Such laws ... nothing* a double negative for emphasis.

⁸ *goulafres* French, “goulfre”: a gulf or whirlpool that swallows up whatever comes in its way.

⁹ *colour* that which serves to conceal or cloak the truth; a pretence or pretext.

¹⁰ *abjection* rejection.

kingdoms from other princes unto them, and that there is not one word spoken of it in all holy Scripture.¹ They say also that if there were a Purgatory, and also if that the Pope with his pardons
 355 for money may deliver one soul thence, he may deliver him as well without money; if he may deliver one, he may deliver a thousand; if he may deliver a thousand, he may deliver them all, and so destroy
 360 Purgatory. And then is he a cruel tyrant without all charity if he keep them there in prison and in pain till men will give him money.

Likewise say they of all the whole sort of the spirituality, that if they will not pray for no man but for them that give them money, they are
 365 tyrants and lack charity, and suffer those souls to be punished and pained uncharitably for lack of their prayers. These sort of folks they call heretics, these they burn, these they rage against, put to open shame and make them bear faggots.² But
 370 whether they be heretics or no, well I wote³ that this Purgatory and the Pope's pardons is all the cause of translation of your kingdom so fast into their hands. Wherefore, it is manifest it cannot be
 375 of Christ, for he gave more to the temporal kingdom; he himself paid tribute to Caesar; he took nothing from him, but taught that the high powers should be always obeyed; yea, he himself

¹ *many men of great literature and judgement ... in all holy Scripture* In Roman Catholic theology, Purgatory is that place between Heaven and Hell, where the souls of the faithful went to pay the penalty for sins forgiven on earth, since divine justice demanded retribution and purgation even for those sins which the faithful had confessed and been absolved of in life. S.W. Haas suggests that Fish refers here to William Tyndale, whose *Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528) explicitly accuses the Pope of inventing Purgatory in order to engross to himself the wealth and lands of England. Both for Tyndale and Fish, Purgatory becomes a justification for a whole array of Catholic mediatory practices, such as indulgences which allowed the faithful essentially to pay for a reduction in the length and severity of their coming punishment in purgatory ("Simon Fish, William Tyndale, and Sir Thomas More's 'Lutheran Conspiracy,'" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 23.2 [1972]: pp. 129-30). Likewise, the Catholic duty of the living to intercede for souls in Purgatory also gave rise, in Reformist views, to many ecclesiastical services to which a fee was attached (e.g., masses said for the dead, and the establishment of chantries for this purpose).

² *bear faggots* See p. 7, note 14.

³ *wote* i.e., know.

(although he were most free⁴ lord of all and innocent) was obedient unto the high powers unto
 380 death.⁵ This is the great scab⁶ why they will not let the New Testament go abroad in your mother tongue,⁷ lest men should espy that they by their cloaked hypocrisy do translate thus fast your kingdom into their hands, that they are not obedient
 385 unto your high power, that they are cruel, unclean, unmerciful, and hypocrites, that they seek not the honour of Christ but their own, that remission of sins are not given by the Pope's pardon but by Christ, for the sure faith and trust that we have in
 390 him. Here may your Grace well perceive that except ye suffer⁸ their hypocrisy to be disclosed all is like to run into their hands, and as long as it is covered⁹ so long shall it seem to every man to be a great impiety not to give them. For this I am sure
 395 your Grace thinketh (as the truth is), "I am as good a man as my father; why may I not as well give them as much as my father did?" And of this mind, I am sure, are all the lords, knights, squires, gentlemen, and yeomen in England; yea, and until
 400 it be disclosed, all your people will think that your

⁴ *free* not enslaved; here, figuratively, "not in bondage to sin."

⁵ *high powers unto death* Christ famously counsels his listeners: "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). He also counsels Peter to pay requisite tribute money (Matthew 17:24-27). Other relevant texts are Romans 13:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-14. See John 18:3-11 for an account of Jesus' acquiescence during his arrest, torture, and death.

⁶ *scab* figuratively, "moral or spiritual disease."

⁷ *This ... New Testament ... mother tongue* The English Catholic Church resisted the translation of the Bible into English, particularly given that this project of translation was undertaken initially by the reformer William Tyndale; his translation of the New Testament (published in Worms, 1525) was reformist and Lutheran in its orientation, and although it was being distributed in England by 1526 it was prohibited by English Catholic Church authorities in the same year, and banned by Henry VIII four years later. By 1536, however, Henry was supporting a new translation of the Bible, and the Royal Injunctions of 1538 ordered every English church to obtain a copy of an English Bible; the deficiencies of the two available translations (the Matthew Bible, and the Coverdale Bible) led to the sponsoring of the first English translation authorized by the government and by the post-Reformation English Church: the Great Bible.

⁸ *suffer* allow.

⁹ *covered* concealed, hidden from view.

statute of mortmain was never made with no good conscience,¹ seeing that it taketh away the liberty of your people, in that they may not as lawfully buy their souls out of Purgatory by giving to the spirituality as their predecessors did in times past.

Wherefore, if ye will eschew the ruin of your crown and dignity, let their hypocrisy be uttered; and that shall be more speedful² in this matter than all the laws that may be made, be they never so strong. For to make a law for to punish any offender, except it were more for to give other men an example to beware to commit such like offence, what should it avail? Did not Doctor Alyn³ most presumptuously, now in your time against all his allegiance, all that ever he could to pull from you the knowledge of such pleas⁴ as long⁵ unto your high courts unto another court in derogation of your crown and dignity? Did not also Doctor Horsey and his complices most heinously—as all the world knoweth—murder in prison that honest merchant Richard Hunne? For that he sued your writ of praemunire against a priest that wrongfully held him in plea in a spiritual court for a matter whereof the knowledge belonged unto your high courts? And what punishment was there done that any man may take example of to beware of like offence? Truly, none but that the one paid five hundred pounds (as it is said) to the building of your star chamber,⁶ and, when that payment was

once past, the captains of his kingdom (because he fought so manfully against your crown and dignity) have heaped to him benefice upon benefice⁷ so that he is rewarded ten times as much. The other (as it is said) paid six hundred pounds for him and his complices, which, for because that he had likewise fought so manfully against your crown and dignity, was immediately (as he had obtained your most gracious pardon) promoted by the captains of his kingdom with benefice upon benefice to the value of four times as much.⁸ Who can take example of this punishment to beware of such like offence?

⁷ *benefice* an ecclesiastical living.

⁸ *Did not Doctor Horsey ... four times as much* The case of Richard Hunne (d. 1514) reveals the strength of anti-clerical feeling among the citizens of London at the beginning of the sixteenth century, the power of the Church, and the conflict between ecclesiastical and secular jurisdictions in the Tudor justice system. In 1511, Hunne came into conflict with his local parish priest, Thomas Dryfield, over a burial fee (mortuary) that Dryfield demanded for Hunne's infant son. When Hunne refused, Dryfield brought a legal action against Hunne in the Church courts which was finally decided in Dryfield's favour. At this point, Hunne turned to the secular courts, bringing an action against Dryfield and others in King's Bench, "accusing them of violat[ing] ... the praemunire statutes": "His claim was that the church courts, since they were under the pope's jurisdiction, formed a foreign tribunal" (D.S. Armentrout, "Hunne's Case [1514-15]," *Historical Dict. Tudor England*, p. 258). Although King's Bench decided against Hunne, his action sought to invalidate the very basis on which the Church courts' authority rested, and was thus a challenge which could not go unanswered by the ecclesiastical establishment. Hunne was soon after arrested and charged with heresy—he clearly held some reformist views: a Wycliffe Bible and other "heretical" books were found in his possession, and he admitted to having spoken publicly and heatedly on the subject of tithes (J. Fines, "Richard Hunne," *DNB online*)—but after his initial interrogation by Richard Fitzjames, bishop of London, he was returned to his cell; shortly after, he was found to have hanged himself (Armentrout, p. 258). Hunne's prosecution for heresy, however, proceeded, and a little more than two weeks after being murdered, Hunne's body was burned as a heretic in Smithfield. This punishment, seen as vindictive and malicious even at the time, caused a public uproar. In this charged atmosphere, a coroner's jury subsequently decided that Hunne had been strangled before being hung up, and it finally charged three men with murder: Dr. William Horsey, Richard Fitzjames's chancellor; Charles Joseph, a church court summoner; and John Spalding, bellringer (in some accounts, William Stradling, gaoler). Joseph actually confessed that he and the others had strangled Hunne (Armentrout, p. 258; Fines, *DNB online*). Although Henry VIII was forced by the growing scandal to call an official inquiry, nothing came of it. In some accounts, Horsey was heavily fined in exchange for a stay of his indictment in King's

¹ *never made with no good conscience* i.e., it was not made in good conscience.

² *speedful* helpful, useful, efficacious.

³ *Doctor Alyn* From approximately 1519 until his appointment as archbishop of Dublin in 1528, John Alen (1476-1534) was Cardinal Wolsey's right-hand man in Wolsey's attempt to centralize all ecclesiastical power and authority under his papal legateship. Although Alen's energetic implementation of Wolsey's plan to concentrate judicial ecclesiastical power in the cardinal's own legantine court usually meant the usurpation of the independence of other ecclesiastical courts, Fish refers here to Alen's treading on royal or secular jurisdictions, his "usurp[ation] ... [of] crown pleas in Wolsey's [own] court" (J. Murray, "John Alen," *DNB online*).

⁴ *pleas* suits or actions at law.

⁵ *long* i.e., belong.

⁶ The room with the star-adorned ceiling in which the King's Council would sit as a judicial body that was known as the court of the Star Chamber.

Who is he of their kingdom that will not rather take
 courage to commit like offence, seeing the promo-
 tions that fell to these men for their so offending? So
 445 weak and blunt is your sword to strike at one of the
 offenders of this crooked and perverse generation.

And this is by the reason that the chief instru-
 ment of your law, yea the chief of your Council¹
 and he which hath your sword in his hand, to
 450 whom also all the other instruments are obedient,
 is always a spiritual man, which hath ever such an
 inordinate love unto his own kingdom that he will
 maintain that, though all the temporal kingdoms
 and commonwealth of the world should therefore
 455 utterly be undone. Here leave we out the greatest
 matter of all, lest that we, declaring such a horri-
 ble carayn² of evil against the ministers of iniquity,
 should seem to declare the one only fault or rather
 the ignorance of our best beloved minister of
 460 righteousness, which is to be hid till he may be
 learned by these small enormities that we have
 spoken of to know it plainly himself. But what
 remedy to relieve us, your poor, sick, lame and
 sore beadsmen? To make many hospitals for the
 465 relief of the poor people? Nay, truly. The more
 the worse, for ever the fat of the whole founda-
 tion hangeth on the priests' beards.³ Divers of
 your noble predecessors, kings of this realm, have
 given lands to monasteries to give a certain sum of
 470 money yearly to the poor people, whereof for the
 ancients of the time⁴ they give never one penny.

Bench, but he "was given quite lavish preferments in other dioceses"
 (G.R. Elton, *Reform and Reformation: England, 1509-1558* [Cambridge,
 MA, 1977], p. 56) and remained the Bishop's chancellor for the next
 sixteen years (Fines).

¹ *your Council* i.e., the King's Privy Council, that powerful council of
 royal advisors that included all the King's major ministers. The chief
 of the Council was the lord chancellor, and both Thomas Wolsey
 (?1472-1530) and Thomas Cranmer (1489-1556) were high-ranking
 ecclesiastics as well as occupying this office.

² *carayn* i.e., carrion: anything vile or corrupt; consisting of or per-
 taining to corrupting flesh.

³ *the fat of the whole foundation hangeth on the priests' beards* i.e., the great
 wealth or abundance of foundations such as monasteries or hospitals
 belongs entirely to the priests [instead of to the poor, for whom hospi-
 tals in particular were established in the first place].

⁴ *ancients of the time* for/during the time stretching from the present
 far into the past.

They have likewise given to them⁵ to have a
 certain masses said daily for them, whereof they
 say never one. If the abbot of Westminster should
 sing every day as many masses for his founders as
 he is bound to do by his foundation, a thousand
 monks were too few. Wherefore, if your Grace
 will build a sure hospital that never shall fail to
 relieve us, all your poor beadsmen, so take from
 475 them all these things. Set these sturdy lobies⁶
 abroad in the world to get them wives of their
 own, to get their living with their labour in the
 sweat of their faces, according to the command-
 ment of God (Gen. 2), to give other idle people by
 480 their example occasion to go to labour. Tie these
 holy, idle thieves to the carts to be whipped naked
 about every market town till they will fall to
 labour,⁷ that they by their importunate begging
 take not away the alms that the good Christian
 people would give unto us sore, impotent, miser-
 able people, your beadsmen. Then shall as well the
 number of our foresaid monstrous sort—as of
 the bawds, whores, thieves, and idle people—de-
 crease. Then shall these great yearly exactions
 cease. Then shall not your sword, power, crown,
 485 dignity, and obedience of your people be trans-
 lated from you. Then shall you have full obedience
 of your people. Then shall the idle people be set
 to work. Then shall matrimony be much better
 kept. Then shall the generation of your people be
 increased. Then shall your commons increase in
 riches. Then shall the Gospel be preached. Then
 shall none beg our alms from us. Then shall we
 have enough and more than shall suffice us, which
 shall be the best hospital that ever was founded
 for us. Then shall we daily pray to God for your
 most noble estate long to endure.

*Domine saluum fac regem.*⁸

—1529

⁵ *given to them* i.e. had given to them.

⁶ *lobies* loobies: lazy hulking fellows; stupid louts.

⁷ *Tie ... labour* a punishment usually reserved for whores, vagrants,
 etc.

⁸ *Domine saluum fac regem* Latin, "O Lord, save the King."