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“LEAVING THEIR HUMOURS TO THE WORD MONGERS OF MALLICE”:  
MOCKING POLEMIC IN *TARLTONS NEWES OUT OF PURGATORIE* (1590)  
AND TWO CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES<sup>1</sup>

BY

LIEKE STELLING

One of the most obvious legacies of the English Reformation was a period of religious dispute fuelled by acrimony and offence. The late 1580s and 1590s were particularly notorious. Patrick Collinson does not hold back when describing the polemical aggression of this “rather ugly decade”, of “[e]cclesiastical vitriol”, arguing “a case for the nastiness of the nineties and for the importance of that nastiness”. As he reminds us, the period ended with a ban, introduced by the archbishop, on a variety of satirical genres that were considered defamatory.<sup>2</sup> According to Debora Shuger, this ban was “the most sweeping and stringent instance of early modern censorship”.<sup>3</sup> The ban could not prevent, however, that late sixteenth-century polemic left a long-lasting mark on literary culture; as Maria Prendergast notes, the late 1580s marked the beginning of a period in which the “rhetorical perversions of railing dominated the English literary landscape”.<sup>4</sup> Early moderns, too, noticed the exceptional vehemence of their debates. One participant described his age as one “wherein the Spirit of Contradiction reigneth, and euerie one superaboundeth in his owne humor, euen to the annihilating of any other, without rime, or reason”.<sup>5</sup> Another noted that his opponents used “[f]ire and faggot, bands and blows, railing and reviling [...] [as] their common weapons”, adding that “slandering and lying [...] is the greatest piece” of their craft.<sup>6</sup>

The person, or rather, persona behind the words of the latter speaker was not, however, the epitome of polite discourse either. Martin Marprelate was the most notorious Elizabethan

pamphleteer and regarded as the exponent of the period's vituperative climate of debate. He acquired this reputation as the pseudonymous author of the anti-episcopal Marprelate tracts: a set of satirical pamphlets that were printed in secret in 1588 and 1589.<sup>7</sup> In these works, Marprelate attacked the structure and government of the Church of England from a Presbyterian perspective, yet they stood out mainly for their style: very witty and irreverent, experimental, and, above all, marked by personal attacks on members of the ecclesiastical establishment. The tracts found a response in a range of anti-Martinist pamphlets that were written by well-known authors of drama and prose fiction, like Thomas Nashe, Robert Greene and John Lyly, who had been recruited by Church officials to beat Martin at his own game. Their texts thus, in turn, adopt Martin's scurrilous, polemical style in order to demonize him. Although Marprelate did not achieve his goal of replacing the established Church with a Presbyterian structure, he did manage to turn polemic into a popular genre.<sup>8</sup>

The Marprelate exchange was one of several pamphlet wars of the period. Contemporaries would also have been able to follow the acrimonious dispute between, for instance, Thomas Nashe and the scholar Gabriel Harvey (accused by John Lyly of being affiliated with Marprelate), which was largely informed by a set of personal insults, and the quarrel between the writers John Marston and Joseph Hall, who attacked each other with darts of satire.

While the vast amount of critical ink spent on the divisive aggression of this decade is largely justified, it suggests, at the same time that public disagreement, especially confessional discord, was *inherently* contentious, divisive and infused with sarcastic venom.<sup>9</sup> As a matter of fact, there are several contemporary sources that articulate a certain fatigue with religious vitriol and approach public disagreement precisely with anodyne humour. An early example is John Bridges's *Defence of the Government Established in the Church of Englande for Ecclesiasticall Matters* (1587), which was the incentive for Marprelate to start his pamphlet war against the religious establishment.<sup>10</sup> The *Defence*, comprising a startling 1401 pages, has often been described as intensely boring and thus indirectly as Marprelate's deserving butt of satire, yet as Eric Vivier shows, this work in fact adopts a subtle and playfully mocking tone vis-à-vis the Presbyterian argument against the interpretative authority of the episcopacy. In so doing, "Bridges always recognized his opponents as his 'brethren in christ,' as members of the same Church and as faithful subjects (more or less) of the same Queen".<sup>11</sup>

In a similar vein, the present article challenges the dominant perception of religious dispute in the Elizabethan 1580s and 1590s as intrinsically aggressive and divisive, and shows examples of texts that are more interested in the inclusionary than exclusionary uses of humour, making deliberate attempts at defusing social tensions. It argues that the anonymous comic prose tale

*Tarltons Newes Out of Purgatorie* (1590), and, to a lesser extent, two contemporary responses to this text, were written in the spirit of providing a friendly counterpoise and antidote to the acrimonious climate of debate that was spearheaded by the Marprelate controversy. My arguments are not based on any explicit references to Marprelate in these narratives, but on the moment of their first publications and on similarities in terms of style and content. Like the Marprelate tracts, *Tarltons Newes* addresses a dispute between two religious enemies, and both the Marprelate exchange and *Tarltons Newes* refer to the figure and passing of Richard Tarlton, the legendary actor and street performer, who had died shortly before the pamphlets were published. In addition, *Tarltons Newes* found a response in another anonymous pamphlet entitled *The Cobler of Caunterburie* (1592), which presents itself on the title page as an “inuective” against *Tarltons Newes*, seemingly adopting an Martinist-style aggressive tone, but in actual fact assuming a kindly mocking one in challenging *Tarltons Newes*. This tone can also be found in *Greenes Vision: Written at the Instant of his Death* (1592), in which the author responds to claims that he also wrote *The Cobler*. Finally, it is worth noting that some of the authors associated with *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler* are also identified with the anti-Martinist pamphlets. Robert Greene is a name that stands out here, as he is mentioned most often in connection with both *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler* and the anti-Martinist campaign. Yet rather than seeking to give conclusive evidence of the authorship of any of these works, I will argue that their anonymity is part of their strategy to mock (religious) dispute and throw into relief the venom of Marprelatian polemic.

*Tarltons Newes* enjoyed considerable popularity, which was undoubtedly due to the celebrity status of the English clown Richard Tarlton. The text was written sometime after Tarlton’s death on 3 September 1588, and before 26 June 1590, when it was entered into the stationer’s register. A second publication appeared without a date, but possibly in 1593 and a third one in 1630. While the timing of the third publication may seem surprising, Naoko Ishikawa reminds us that it makes sense when considering the new wave of interest in jest books in the 1630s and the continuing enthusiasm for Tarlton, as evidenced by the reprinting of the joke collection *Tarltons Jestes*, and the popular *An Excellent Medley*, which was advertised as “Tarletons Medley” in its subtitle, in 1630.<sup>12</sup> A modern critical edition of both *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler* appeared in a single volume, in 1987.<sup>13</sup> Today, *Tarltons Newes* is occasionally referred to in scholarly discussions, mostly in connection with the rich and long-lasting cultural afterlife of Tarlton.<sup>14</sup> An accomplished comical actor, jig performer and street artist, Tarlton was one of the most celebrated performers and best-known entertainers of his day, appealing to people across all strata of society.<sup>15</sup> He featured regularly as a

pseudonymous author and literary character in pamphlet literature in the two decades after his death. In her article devoted to his literary *Nachleben*, Katherine Duncan-Jones adds evidence to the well-known claim that Hamlet's ode to his childhood court jester Yorick can in fact be read as a tribute to Tarlton in early performances, indicating, among other things the "four-fold repetition of this highly unusual name" in the Q1, and suggesting that the name itself is an allusion to Richard – "Dick", or "Rick" – Tarlton, as well as his "familiar[ity]" to the audience: "[y]our Rick".<sup>16</sup> An earlier dramatic homage can be found in Robert Wilson's popular morality *Three Lords and Three Ladies of London* (printed 1590), a sequel to the *Three Ladies of London*, in which Tarlton had performed the part of Simplicity. In the former play, the actor who replaced the recently deceased Tarlton in the part of Simplicity tells the audience he was "the merriest fellow, and had such jestes in store / that if thou hadst seene him, thou wouldst haue laughed thy hart sore".<sup>17</sup> Tarlton's recent passing, moreover, may have triggered an even greater deal of affection for him than when he was alive, and certainly contributed to his "mythmaking".<sup>18</sup>

Not all references to Tarlton were unequivocally laudative. In several of the pamphlet wars that marked the 1580s and 1590s, his simplicity was construed as crudeness and his name invoked to accuse opponents of employing a lowlife style characteristic of Tarlton's extemporizing stage performances.<sup>19</sup> There was even a word coined to designate this particular style: to tarltonize.<sup>20</sup> Tarlton's name was dragged into the Marprelate controversy when anti-Martinists drew parallels between Martin and Tarlton as fools to deride Martin's debased style and cheap stage tricks. However, even in these cases, they wanted to make clear that they considered Tarlton superior to Marprelate. The author of anti-Martinist verse *Mar-Martine* (1589), for instance, presented Martin as an inferior descendant of Tarlton:

These tinkers termes, and barbers jestes, first Tarleton on the stage,  
Then Martin in his bookes of lies, hath put in euery page[.]<sup>21</sup>

In another example, from a *Whip for an Ape: Or Martin displayed* (also published as *Rhymes against Martin Marprelate*) (1589), Martin is presented as a Vice to Tarlton. In addition, and as Karin Kettlich observes, Martin is also accused of aping, or stealing other people's material:<sup>22</sup>

Now Tarleton's dead the Consort lacks a Vice:  
For knaue and foole thou [Martin] maist beare pricke and price.  
The sacred sect and perfect pure precise,  
Whose cause must be by Scoggins iests maintainde,  
Ye shewe although that purple Apes disguise  
Yet Apes are still, and so must be disdainde.<sup>23</sup>

Martin himself, too, refers to Tarlton, in relation to his death and in order to disparage an enemy. In *Hay any Work for Cooper*, he notes: “And sweet John of Cant., if ever thou prayedst in thy life for any bodies’ souls, now pray for thy brother Doctor Squire and Tarleton’s souls.”<sup>24</sup> Both Tarlton and Dr. Squire had recently died and are here associated with the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Whitgift, who suppressed anti-Church of England sentiment and was one of Marprelate’s main targets. Nevertheless, and as Ishikawa poignantly observes, while it is tempting to conclude that, in the words of Collinson, “[w]ithout Tarleton, it seems, there would have been no Martin Marprelate”, it is important to distinguish between the Tarlton of the pamphlet wars and the historical clown, as the former is for the most part a fictitious image suited to the needs of satirists, obscuring the clowning style of the actual Tarlton.<sup>25</sup>

*Tarltons Newes* offers a largely sympathetic depiction of Tarlton, starting with a narrator mourning the passing of the clown. The narrator, who – as I will show below, significantly – calls himself Robin Goodfellow, decides to visit the theatre to cheer himself up, but changes his plans when he notices the large crowd in front of it. He takes a walk by himself, sits down under a tree, and falls asleep. In his dream, a spirit appears to him, who introduces himself as Richard Tarlton and reassures the frightened narrator that he is not a devil but a spirit from Purgatory. In what follows, Tarlton takes over as the main narrator: he defends the existence of Purgatory, and offers a description of the place, which consists of a collection of stories that provide the reasons as to why different residents of Purgatory ended up there. Tarlton takes us through Purgatory and gives us back stories of the people we encounter, including Pope Boniface, friar Onion, the vicar of Bergamo, and two lovers of Pisa. Most of these tales are drawn from Boccaccio’s *Decameron*. As the English translation of this work did not appear until 1620, the author must have based himself on the original Italian or a French, Catalan, German or Dutch translation.<sup>26</sup>

*Tarltons Newes* is inspired by several very popular subgenres of medieval and early modern literature, such as ‘news from Hell’, ‘the dream vision’ and the ‘theological dispute’.<sup>27</sup> For the purpose of this article, the latter is particularly relevant. *Tarltons Newes* offers a mocking take on the confessional controversies of its day by presenting a dispute about the existence of Purgatory. Like Hamlet, the narrator is scared when confronted with the ghost and considers the possibility that, “if the sacred / principles of Theologie bee true”, the apparition must be infernal.<sup>28</sup> Tarlton immediately recognizes the narrator as a “Calvinist”, and gibes at the Calvinist condemnation of what would have been seen by many as relatively innocent traditions, such as maypoles and alehouses. He continues by questioning the Protestant

insistence on heaven and hell as “*Contraria immediata*, so contrarie, that there is no meane betwixt them, but that either a mans soule must in post hast goe presently to God, or else with a whirlwind and a vengeance goe to the divell”. He furthermore endows Purgatory with the authority of age-old wisdom and literary genius: “[Y]es, yes my good brother, there is a *Quoddam tertium* a third place that all our great grandmothers have talkt of, that *Dant* hath so learnedly writ of, and that is Purgatorie. What syr are we wiser then all our forefathers?”<sup>29</sup> Although there is no question that *Tarltons Newes* is an anti-Catholic text written for a Protestant audience, it is surprisingly friendly compared to other anti-papal writings of the age. Naoko Ishikawa, who discusses *Tarltons Newes* in relation to the Marprelate controversy, notes that *Tarltons Newes* expresses its anonymous author’s needs of “*easing* religious tension and mocking theological controversy”. However, she does not explain *how* the work relieves these tensions and she contradicts herself when she later writes about Tarlton’s “vitriolic critique”.<sup>30</sup> Vitriol is precisely, and importantly, what is lacking from his claims. To begin with, Tarlton’s assertion that it is odd to believe that there is absolutely nothing between heaven and hell is presented as considerably reasonable. In terms of wording, the argument bears close resemblance to the rationale of moderation: the Aristotelian philosophy of virtue, which hinged on the idea of a desirable ‘mean’, a term used by Tarlton, between two contrary and extreme states. Considered one of the most important virtues in the early modern period, temperance was often mentioned as an irenic force in relation to religious conflict, and, in the context of jesting and laughter, as the appropriate attitude, as it reflected self-control.<sup>31</sup> Of course, this ideal only applied to earthly matters, and English Protestants would never have taken Tarlton’s contention seriously, but it is relevant to note that his dry reasoning is reminiscent of the way in which the existence of Purgatory was debated six decades earlier.<sup>32</sup> What is more, the relative mildness of Tarlton’s tone is thrown into relief by another humorous “news from hell” pamphlet, entitled *Greenes Newes both from Heaven and Hell*, which may have been inspired by *Tarltons Newes*.<sup>33</sup> Here, it is the ghost of Robert Greene who gives an account of his fortunes after his death. Both pamphlets contain a description of Purgatory as an edifice, but whereas Tarlton notes, with subdued irony, that the first thirty Popes after Christ “went presentlie to heaven” because “Purgatorie was then but a building, and not fully finished”,<sup>34</sup> *Greenes Newes* is much cruder and can barely contain its criticism within the metaphor:

The foundation wheron it was layd, was lyes and foolish fantasies, the rest of the upper buildings, was dreames and doting deuises. All the whole edifice, was of such lyght and rotten stuffe, that after they had beene two or three hundred yeeres patching & peeing it together, a poore silly swaine naked and thredbare, called Trueth, blowing against the building but with a little blast of breath, the gale was of

such force against it, that the whole matter & substance, together with the Founders, Patrons, Proctors, Protectors & Defenders, were all blown immediately into Hell: so that who soeuer he be that seeketh for Purgatory, there hee shall be sure to finde it [...].<sup>35</sup>

This is not to say that *Tarltons Newes* is not critical of Purgatory. Rather, its critique is expressed in a more understated and flippant manner, as illustrated in Tarlton's ironic rhetorical questions:

[W]as there much land and annuall pensions given in vaine to morrowmasse priests for dirges, trentals and such like decretals of devotion, whereby the soules in Purgatorie were the sooner advanced into the quiet estate of heaven. Nay more, how many Popes and holy Bishops of Rome, whose Cannons cannot erre, have taught us what this Purgatorie is? And / yet if thou wert so incredulous that thou wouldest neither believe our olde beldames, nor the good Bishops: yet take *Dicke Tarlton* once for thine Author, who is nowe come from Purgatorie, and if any upstart Protestant denie, if thou hast no place of scripture ready to confirme it, say as *Pithagoras* schollers did (*Ipse dixit*) and to all bon companions it shall stand for a principle.<sup>36</sup>

Indeed, if the strikingly serious passage from *Greenes Newes* evinces genuine concern about lingering belief in Purgatory, *Tarltons Newes* employs its criticism first and foremost for the purpose of entertaining its audiences.

The fact that *Tarltons Newes* has Purgatory being defended by a clown, somewhat in the vein of Erasmus' classic example, Dame Folly, in *Praise of Folly*, is also significant. Indeed, this paradoxical figure was characterized by both foolishness and truth-speaking abilities, which, in Tarlton, finds expression in his silly yet quick-witted defence of Purgatory. The clown was also perfectly suited to cater for a diverse audience. If we go along with Alex Davis's idea of the Shakespearean clown, such as Hamlet's Yorick, or Falstaff, the fool was a highly popular figure who defied social classification and created a world in which "identities appear fluid and even confused".<sup>37</sup> In *Tarltons Newes*, this notion takes shape in a variety of additional senses, with the main character unproblematically transgressing boundaries between a real-life and fictitious, print and performative, and Protestant (the historical Tarlton was a Protestant) and Catholic identity, and, obviously, moving between earthly and afterlife existence. In this way, *Tarltons Newes* opens up the social and religious boundaries that the partakers in the (Marprelate) pamphlet wars sought to consolidate. This effect furthermore resonates in the figure of the narrator of the frame narrative, Robin Goodfellow, who, as a benevolent trickster of folk tradition, has, in the words of Andrew Stott, "a foot in both the sub- and super-lunary worlds and embod[ies] a moral ambiguity [...] [acting] as a signifier in which opposites can come together: through the mediation of the trickster, life and death are reconciled".<sup>38</sup> Robin Goodfellow, moreover, is a significant mask, as it indicates the good-

naturedness of the mockery, as opposed to ill-natured sarcasm, that people would expect from one carrying that name.

So far, my evidence for the relatively mild and inclusive tone of the pamphlet has been based on my interpretation of the character Tarlton and his contentions, but the anonymous author makes the same point himself rather explicitly in his letter to the readers. Referring to the tales, he writes:

Though they be *Crepundia* [toys] yet reade them, and if you find any pleasant *Facetia*, or *Quicquid Salis* [something witty / salty]: thinke all savory, and so pleased without being satirically peremptory: for Momus will have a mouth full of invectives, and Zoilus should not be Zoilus if hee were not squint eide. Therefore leaving their humours to the wordmongers of mallice that like the Vipers grew odious to their owne kinde [...] I bid you farewell.<sup>39</sup>

The author here distances himself from the satirical venom of his day, here embodied by the ancient Greek figures of Momus, the mythological personification of aggressive satire, and Zoilus, “the cynic philosopher” and literary critic, who was “notorious for the bitterness of his attacks on Isocrates, Plato, and especially Homer”.<sup>40</sup> Significantly, the references to these figures, as well as the way in which they are mentioned, resound in Thomas Nashe’s letter to the readers in his *The Terrors of the Night; Or, A Discourse of Apparitions* (1594), with the explicit purpose of exposing Martinist railing: “Martin Momus, and splaiefooted Zoilus that in the eight and sixt age of Poetrie, and first yere of the reigne of Tarltons toies kept a foule stir in Poules Church-yard, are now reuiued againe: and like wanton Whelpes that haue wormes in their tungs, slauer and betouse euery paper they meete withall”.<sup>41</sup> The verbal echoes are striking, the letters to the reader of both texts speaking of Tarlton’s toys (“I present you with a toy of Tarltons”), a reference to a work that was entered into the stationer’s register in 1576 but that is now lost; and the “squint eide”<sup>42</sup> and “splaiefooted” characteristics of Zoilus, for instance. Yet although there is an additional variety of intriguing parallels between *The Terrors of the Night* and *Tarltons Newes* – both focus on dreams, both mention Tarlton in a positive light in relation to polemic, both refer to Robin Goodfellow, and both texts are strikingly amoralistic – it is not enough to convincingly ascribe *Tarltons Newes* to Nashe.<sup>43</sup> *The Terrors of the Night* is nevertheless a significant example of the recognition of Tarlton’s fame, and of the notoriety of Marprelate’s polemic writing style. Indeed, Tarlton is here presented as a king whose peaceful dominion is disturbed by a cantankerous enemy. Elsewhere in the text, in the figure of the narrator of the main story, *Tarltons Newes* confirms the peaceable tone of the text. In his response to Tarlton’s defence of Purgatory, rather than being provoked into a heated argument, he notes: “I coulde not but smile at the madde merry



doctrine of my friend *Richard*, and therefore taking heart at grasse drawing more neere him I praied him to tell me what Purgatorie is, and what they be that are resident there”.<sup>44</sup>

Andrew Gordon has interpreted *Tarltons Newes* from an anti-Catholic perspective, noting that the moments of very mild satire are at most ambivalent, not really informed by a desire to convert Catholics, and “conservative”, endorsing a traditional Elizabethan anti-Catholic agenda.<sup>45</sup> While I agree on this for the most part, I would go a step further and argue that the text is not so much passively conservative as actively and purposefully nostalgic. As Gordon himself notes, the text’s association of Purgatory with “our great grandmothers” and “all our forefathers” indicates a shared past and a shared faith.<sup>46</sup> A similar principle applies to the stories that follow. Several of them are anti-clerical tales featuring lusty monks and conniving friars. These can be labelled as anti-Catholic satire, and, as Sophie Murray demonstrates, this type of specifically anti-monastic humour “was used to provide the imaginative space in which to contemplate the destruction of monasticism” in the 1530s.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the jokes about friars and monks made by well-known Catholics, such as Geoffrey Chaucer, Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, “had become politically and religiously charged by [Henry VIII’s] government’s assault on monastic life”.<sup>48</sup> At the same time, from 1540 onwards, monasticism had disappeared from England, and the anti-monastic jests in *Tarltons Newes* would have been appreciated for their nostalgic value, more so than for their political significance. As such, *Tarltons Newes* appears, at times, almost more inclusive than exclusive of Catholics, and functions as a counterweight to the confessionally motivated polemical aggression of its day. Accordingly, the characterization of the figures in Tarlton’s version of Boccaccio’s tales is marked by a stronger sense of humaneness than in the original, treating, for instance, the cuckold “as a figure of pathos rather than of scorn, to be pitied rather than mocked”.<sup>49</sup>

The least consistent tale in terms of mild anti-Catholicism is an original story and offers the answer to the questions as to why the Painter of Doncaster “in purgatorie [...] was beaten with a Belroape”. It starts by noting that “the Lord” had removed the “good king”, of the English, “and deprived them of the sweete *Manna* of the Gospell, and sent them againe Antichrist with all his traditions, Queene *Marie* lawfull successor in the kingdome”. A group of Catholic parishioners of the Church of Doncaster wanted to show themselves the most devout and obedient to the newly crowned Queen, by ordering a painter to make them a new rood. The hand of the painter, however, “had beene out of use by the space of six yeeres” (when England had briefly been a Protestant nation) and had “forgot the lineaments of the visage, and the other woonted proportion”. The result is a hideous depiction of Christ, “which

was so ill favourde, that all the parish mislikt it, and the children they cried and were afraid of it". The parishioners refuse to pay the painter, who turns for help to the mayor. The latter, who happens to have "favored king Edwards religion", decides that the parishioners should pay him for his efforts and "goodwil", and advises to "clap a paire of hornes on [Christ's] head, and [...] hee will proove an excellent good devill". The story ends with the note that "[t]hus [...] the poore parishioners of Doncaster [were] mockt, and yet paid their money". Their vicar nevertheless makes sure that the painter is punished "for making the ill favoured roode", and ends up in purgatory.<sup>50</sup> Although the story seems to evince Catholic sympathies, as the painter is, technically, put in the right by the mayor, the story's Protestant audience would have appreciated the depiction of the "reformer-mayor", who, as Marguerite Tassi has shown, "has the last laugh", as he makes sure "[n]o images are to be worshipped in his precinct".<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of this and the explicitly hostile anti-Catholic tone at the beginning of the story, its humour is more subtle than it is scathing.

The editor of the 1987 edition of *Tarltons Newes* appears to read the pamphlet not so much as a counterpoise to late sixteenth-century polemic, but rather as an exponent. She notes that the text "quickly became controversial"<sup>52</sup>, a claim made solely on the basis of the publication of *The Cobler of Caunterburie* (1590), which calls itself an "[i]nuective" against *Tarltons Newes*.<sup>53</sup> Like its target, *The Cobler* offers a collection of tales, which are embedded in a frame narrative, in this case modelled after Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. *The Cobler* presents itself as a better and funnier alternative to *Tarltons Newes* and rebukes it for having "stolne [the tales] out of *Boccace Decameron*".<sup>54</sup> The author even alludes to a possible act of revenge by Tarlton: "I know for anger he will almost breake his Taber, and will not rest till he haue reuenged".<sup>55</sup> However, *The Cobler* indicates in several ways that we should not take seriously this seemingly contentious attitude towards *Tarltons Newes*.<sup>56</sup> *The Cobler's* attempt to make its readers laugh harder by offering a work that is "more pleasant, and more full of delightfull tales", can hardly be interpreted as an invective.<sup>57</sup> What is more, the accusation that the tales in *Tarltons Newes* were taken from Boccaccio is made in jest because *The Cobler* does exactly the same: most of its stories are taken from or inspired by Chaucer, and also Boccaccio's *Decameron*.

Indeed, while *The Cobler* suggests, in jest, that it is attacking *Tarltons Newes*, it adopts an attitude towards humour that is very similar to *Tarltons Newes*. Its letter to the readers, for instance, complains about the "sundry schismes the melancholy michers doe publish", and offers his tales as an antidote: "Longer liues a merry man then a sad; a Cobler hath lesse cares then a King: and an / hower past in honest myrth, is worth a tunne full of melancholy. [...]"

[w]hy were tales devised, but to make men pleasant?”<sup>58</sup> Like *Tarltons Newes*’ letter to the reader, *The Cobler*’s epistle refers to “olde wiues”, albeit in a gently mocking way, as they are said to have “wedded themselues to the profound histories” of popular heroes of medieval literature, such as “Robin hood, Clim of the / Clough, and worthy syr Isembras”.<sup>59</sup> This sense of nostalgia is continued in the frame narrative, with Chaucerian stories of Italian lovers, cuckolds of all sorts and ignorant members of the clergy, told by a variegated group of travellers on a barge on their way from Billingsgate to Gravesend. The narrating Cobler is furthermore explicitly described as a “clown”,<sup>60</sup> who, as Richard Preiss has observed, mimics the parlance of the stage clown and “spins off from – and against – that experiment [of *Tarltons Newes*] a pseudo-Tarlton”.<sup>61</sup> This pseudo-Tarlton is, moreover, accompanied by the same related figure as in *Tarltons Newes*, Robin Goodfellow, who offers his own introductory epistle after the Cobler’s letter to the reader. Like *Tarltons Newes*, *The Cobler* became a popular pamphlet, going through several editions, in 1590, 1608 and 1614, and appearing in an adapted form, under the title *The Tincker of Turuey*, in 1630, the year of the third publication of *Tarltons Newes*.

One more pamphlet appeared that explicitly responded to *The Cobler* and, indirectly, to *Tarltons Newes*: Robert Greene’s *Greenes Vision: Written at the Instant of his Death* (1592). The tone of this work is very different from the two earlier pamphlets, as it revolves around a deathbed repentance – possibly informed by the lost works “*Tarltons Farewell* (1588), “*Tarltons repentance*” (1589) and “*Tarltons Recantacyon*” (1589) – and comprises a complex and ambiguous reflection on the merits and purposes of literature in the form of a dream vision. Yet there are some striking reverberations. *Greenes Vision* echoes *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler* by opening with a melancholic narrator who also falls asleep and is confronted with the ghosts of beloved cultural icons of the past, in this case, those of Chaucer and Gower. The narrator’s melancholy is triggered by the very accusation that he is the author of *The Cobler*, “as grieuing that either I shold be wrong with enuy, or wronged with suspicion”.<sup>62</sup> Later, Greene praises the work by mocking it, in a way that is reminiscent of *The Cobler*’s ironic and paradoxical response to *Tarltons Newes*:

But now of late there came foorth a booke called the Cobler of Canterburie, a merry worke, and made by some madde fellow, containing plesant tales, a litle tainted with scurilitie, such reuerend *Chawcer* as your selfe set foorth in your journey to *Canterbury*. [...] they father the booke upon me, whereas it is *Incerti authoris*, and suspitiouslye slaunder me with many harde reproaches, for penning that which neuer came within the compasse of my Quill. Their allegation is, because it is pleasant, and therefore mine: because it is full of wanton conceits, and therefore mine [...].<sup>63</sup>

As Jeremy Dimmick reminds us, Greene's denying of authorship of *The Cobler* here, is not entirely convincing for several reasons, including the fact that the initials of the pseudonyms associated with *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler*, Robin Goodfellow, are the same as Robert Greene's, some passages in *Tarltons Newes* are copied from Greene's work and the bookseller of *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler*, Thomas Newman, was also the publisher of *Greenes Vision*.<sup>64</sup>

Above all, *Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie*, but also *The Cobler of Caunterburie* and *Greenes Vision* have been overshadowed by the many, more aggressive polemical pamphlets that appeared in the same period, and have not been given the scholarly attention they deserve. In each other's context, they offer a mini mock pamphlet war, that uses the conventions of the Marprelate war and other controversies: the deliberate, teasing anonymity, the barefaced imitation of style and content, and pots calling kettles black, but as opposed to Marprelate, all in a self-consciously *gentle*, tongue-in-cheek way, mocking polemic, and often with the purpose not to divide but to forge and lift community spirit. The cheap, popular and relatively new print form of the pamphlet invited literary and stylistic experimentation, so much of the self-conscious plagiarism and teasing was found in other pamphlet literature of the period as well. However, the inclusion of the issue of religious antagonism, of Richard Tarlton, and the fact that *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler* were published in the midst of the rhetorical violence of the Marprelate controversy give reason to think that these works were trying to do more than just providing entertainment, and deliberately sought to defuse the social tensions that had been heightened by their aggressive counterparts.

Despite the fact that the three pamphlets bear intriguing thematic and verbal similarities, or, in the case of *Tarltons Newes* and Thomas Nashe's *Terrors of the Night*, resemblance to a pamphlet by a known author, it is impossible to establish their authorship with a satisfactory degree of certainty. What they do suggest, however, is the possibility that they were by the same hand, and written by one or more authors who had also produced aggressive, agonistic writing for the anti-Marprelate camp, and if it was Thomas Nashe, for the purpose of attacking Gabriel Harvey. This idea is in line with the contemporary climate of experimental writing. It also shows that even polemicists themselves could (temporarily) become tired of the contentious tone of public discourse, and that they did not consider acerbity a defining factor in their creative development. The fact that both *Tarltons Newes* and *The Cobler* became commercial successes shows that this idea also applied to consumers. Indeed, the notion that offending (religious) groups could prevent them from buying pamphlets and that there was a financial need for authors to appeal to as wide a population of readers as possible

will have encouraged them to experiment with inoffensive mockery. Finally, if, as Jessica Milner Davis argues, “[c]omedy is drawn from the most human of strivings: our continual impulse to rebel against convention”, it makes all the more sense that pamphleteers also employed their mastery of mild wit to challenge the caustic humour that had come to dominate the debates of their day.<sup>65</sup>

### Zusammenfassung

Ausgehend von einer Lektüre der humoristischen Prosaerzählung *Tarltons Newes out of Purgatory* sowie zweier zeitgenössischer Antworten auf diesen Text problematisiert der vorliegende Aufsatz die vorherrschende Überzeugung, der religiöse Disput in den 1580er und 1590er Jahren des elisabethanischen Englands sei grundsätzlich aggressiv und spalterisch gewesen. Durch das Spiel mit Konventionen von Fiktion und Autorschaft beziehen sich die Texte auf die notorische Marprelate-Kontroverse und schlagen dabei in religiösen und konfessionellen Fragen einen überraschend ökumenischen Ton an. Auf diese Weise antworten sie auf die polemische politisch-religiöse Satire ihrer Zeit mit gutmütigem Spott.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Jessica Milner Davis and Indira Ghose for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article. Of course, all mistakes and inadequacies are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Collinson, “Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism”, in John Guy (ed.), *The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 150–170, quotes 153, 150, 154.

<sup>3</sup> Debora Shuger, “Civility and Censorship in Early Modern England”, in Robert C. Post (ed.), *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1998), 89–110, quote 89.

<sup>4</sup> Maria Teresa Micaela Prendergast, *Railing, Reviling, and Invective in English Literary Culture, 1588–1617: The Anti-Poetics of Theater and Print* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 1.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Harvey, *Four Letters, and Certain Sonnets* (London, 1592), E3r.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Marprelate, *The Martin Marprelate Tracts: A Modernized and Annotated Edition*, ed. by Joseph L. Black (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 148.

<sup>7</sup> Marprelate (2008), 145–163.

<sup>8</sup> Jesse M. Lander, *Inventing Polemic: Religion, Print, and Literary Culture in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 108.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to Collinson, Prendergast and Lander, see on early modern English polemic in general, for instance: Alexandra Walsham, *Church Papists: Catholicism, Conformity and Confessional Polemic in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1993); Raymond (2003), especially chapter 2; Helen Pierce, *Unseemly Pictures: Graphic Satire and Politics in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). On the Marprelate controversy in particular, see Raymond A. Anselment, “Betwixt Jest and Earnest”: *Marprelate, Milton, Marvell, Swift and the Decorum of Religious Ridicule* (Toronto: University of Toronto

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Press, 1979), especially chapter 3; Joseph L. Black, "Introduction", in Marprelate (2008), xv–cxvi; Joseph L. Black, "'Handling Religion in the Style of the Stage: Performing the Marprelate Controversy'", in Jane Hwang Degenhardt / Elizabeth Williamson (eds), *Religion and Drama in Early Modern England: The Performance of Religion on the Renaissance Stage* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 153–174; Mike Rodman Jones, *Radical Pastoral, 1381–1594: Appropriation and the Writing of Religious Controversy* (New York: Routledge, 2016), especially chapter 4.

<sup>10</sup> Eric D. Vivier, "John Bridges, Martin Marprelate, and the Rhetoric of Satire", *English Literary Renaissance* 44:1 (2014), 3–35. Another important work in this respect is Luc Racaut / Alec Ryrie (eds), *Moderate Voices in the European Reformation* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> Vivier (2014), 10.

<sup>12</sup> Naoko Ishikawa, "The English Clown: Print in Performance and Performance in Print", dissertation, Shakespeare Institute, University of Birmingham, 2011, 118–119.

<sup>13</sup> *The Cobler of Caunterburie and Tarltons Newes out of Purgatorie*, ed. by Geoffrey Creigh / Jane Belfield (Leiden: Brill, 1987). The first work is edited by Creigh, the second by Belfield. All subsequent citations from these two works refer to this edition.

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Alexandra Halasz, "'So beloved that men use his picture for their signs': Richard Tarlton and the Uses of Sixteenth-Century Celebrity", *Shakespeare Studies* 23 (1995), 19–38; Katherine Duncan-Jones, "The Life, Death, and Afterlife of Richard Tarlton", *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 65:268 (2013), 18–32; Richard Preiss, *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>15</sup> Halasz (1995), 19–20.

<sup>16</sup> Duncan-Jones (2013), 30, emphasis added.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Wilson, *The Pleasant and Stately Morall, of the Three Lordes and Three Ladies of London* (London: R. Ihones, 1590), C1v.

<sup>18</sup> Halasz (1995), 22.

<sup>19</sup> Preiss (2014), 119.

<sup>20</sup> Karen Kettlich, "Nashe's Extemporal Vein and his Tarltonizing Wit", in Stephen Guy-Bray / Joan Pong Linton / Steve Mentz (eds), *The Age of Thomas Nashe: Text, Bodies and Tresspasses of Authorship in Early Modern England* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 99–114, especially 102–103.

<sup>21</sup> *Mar-Martine* (London, 1589), A4v.

<sup>22</sup> Kettlich (2013), 105.

<sup>23</sup> John Lyly, *A Whip for an Ape: or Martin Displaied* (London, 1589), A2v.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Marprelate, "Hay any Work for Cooper", in Marprelate (2008), 99–139, quote 137.

<sup>25</sup> Collinson (1995), 159; Ishikawa (2011), 100–104.

<sup>26</sup> Jane Belfield, "Introduction", in Creigh / Belfield (1987), 117–141, 118.

<sup>27</sup> For the 'news from hell' tradition, see Benjamin Boyce, "News from Hell: Satiric Communications with the Nether World in English Writing of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries", *PMLA* 58:2 (1943), 402–437; for the dream vision, see, for instance, A. C. Spearing, *Medieval Dream Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); for religious dispute, see, for instance, Alex J. Novikoff, *The Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice and Performance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

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- <sup>28</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 146. While English Protestants would have appreciated the idea of Purgatory as an amusing Catholic error, many continued to believe in the existence of ghosts, whilst debating their origin; see Peter Marshall, “Deceptive Appearances: Ghosts and Reformers in Elizabethan and Jacobean England”, in Helen Parish / William G. Naphy (eds), *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 188–208, esp. 188, 189.
- <sup>29</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 146. It is interesting to note that it was Martin Luther who referred to Purgatory as a “third place”.
- <sup>30</sup> Ishikawa (2011), 109, emphasis added.
- <sup>31</sup> Luc Racaut / Alec Ryrie, “Introduction: Between Coercion and Persuasion”, in Racaut / Ryrie (2005), 1–12, especially 4; Indira Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 15–51.
- <sup>32</sup> Peter Marshall, *Beliefs and the Dead in Reformation England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 53–73.
- <sup>33</sup> *Greenes Newes both from heauen and hell* (London, 1593).
- <sup>34</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 147–148.
- <sup>35</sup> *Greenes Newes* (1593), G3r.
- <sup>36</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 146–147.
- <sup>37</sup> Alex Davis, “Shakespeare’s Clowns”, in Stuart Gillespie / Neil Rhodes (eds), *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 90.
- <sup>38</sup> Andrew Stott, *Comedy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2014), 56.
- <sup>39</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 144.
- <sup>40</sup> Belfield (1987), 186–187.
- <sup>41</sup> Thomas Nashe, *The Terrors of the Night, or A Discourse of Apparitions* (London: Iohn Danter, 1594), A4r.
- <sup>42</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 144.
- <sup>43</sup> For a list of arguments against Nashe’s authorship, see Belfield (1987), 134–135.
- <sup>44</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 147.
- <sup>45</sup> Andrew Gordon, “The Ghost of Pasquill: The Comic Afterlife and the Afterlife of Comedy on the Elizabethan Stage”, in Andrew Gordon / Thomas Rist (eds), *The Arts of Remembrance in Early Modern England: Memorial Cultures of the Post-Reformation* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 229–246, quote 239.
- <sup>46</sup> Although the grandmothers are also “old wives” whose tales were a byword for superstition, Tarlton makes sure to meet this objection by counterbalancing them with the male authority of Dante and “all our forefathers”, see Alexandra Walsham, “The Reformation and the Disenchantment of the World”, *The Historical Journal* 51:2 (2008), 497–528, quote 520; Halasz (1995), 23.
- <sup>47</sup> Sophie Murray, “Dissolving into Laughter: Anti-Monastic Satire in the Reign of Henry VIII”, in Mark Knights / Adam Morton (eds), *The Power of Laughter and Satire in Early Modern Britain: Politics and Religious Culture, 1500–1820* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2017), 27–47, quote 45.
- <sup>48</sup> Murray (2017), 31.
- <sup>49</sup> Belfield (1987), 139, see also 137.
- <sup>50</sup> *Tarltons Newes* (1987), 170–171.
- <sup>51</sup> Marguerite A. Tassi, *The Scandal of Images: Iconoclasm, Eroticism, and Painting in Early Modern English Drama* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2005), 51.
- <sup>52</sup> Belfield (1987), 117.

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<sup>53</sup> *The Cobler of Caunterburie*, in Creigh / Belfield (1987), 19.

<sup>54</sup> *The Cobler* (1987), 23.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>56</sup> See also Creigh (1987), 7.

<sup>57</sup> *The Cobler* (1987), 20.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 24

<sup>61</sup> Preiss (2014), 130.

<sup>62</sup> Robert Greene, *Greenes Vision: Written at the Instance of his Death* (London: E. Allde (?), 1592), B1r.

<sup>63</sup> Greene (1592), C2r–C2v.

<sup>64</sup> Jeremy Dimmick, “Gower, Chaucer and the Art of Repentance in Robert Greene’s *Vision*”, *The Review of English Studies* 57:231 (2006), 456–473, quote 458.

<sup>65</sup> Jessica Milner Davis, *Farce*, rev. edn (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishing, 2003), 87.