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Absolute Margaret: Margaret More Roper and “Well Learned” Men

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This article suggests that Margaret More Roper's 1534 letter to Alice Alington is an important witness to Tudor ideas of patriarchy and the history of gender identity. In 1557 William Rastell was the first of many to question not only Margaret's authorship of the letter, but also her acquiescence to authorities and opposition to her father. Evidence suggests, however, that Margaret was a part of Erasmus's humanist network of friendship, remained so after More's refusal to swear the oath and his imprisonment, and that her appeals to her father were genuine. By the time Margaret and More debated conformity, she was inside the humanist network but he had apparently stepped out. With Margaret's opposition to her father, we may have found an example of what some renaissance humanists dimly perceived or feared, an indication that inadvertently they had begun a pattern for feminists to follow.

THOMAS MORE WAS IMPRISONED in 1534 for refusing to swear the oath required by the Tudor Act of Succession. For months, he declined to give his reasons and discuss the case for nonconformity with his colleagues and keepers, but a lengthy justification was sent to his stepdaughter, Alice Alington. The letter appears to be an account of More's visit with his daughter, Margaret Roper, the greater part of which was reserved for a dialogue about conformity and More's dissent. We will probably never know whether the letter recounts an actual conversation or stitches material from several interviews into a narrative that father and daughter worked on together. It was sent to Alington under Roper's signature, but conceivably her father could have invented everything. William Rastell, who discovered the document and published it in 1557 in his album of More's English works, suspected that Roper's share in the composition was negligible. Although he offered neither evidence nor extended argument, the suspicion prospered: witness Louis Martz's intimation that the dialogue is too good to have been Margaret Roper's, that "its art seems to be all More's." But perhaps the issues of More's art and authorship can be dispatched if we acknowledge from the first that the letter's claim to originality was limited.¹

¹Louis Martz, "The Tower Works," in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 12, ed. Louis Martz and Frank Manley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), lxi; and William Rastell, ed., *The Workes of Sir Thomas More Knyght* (London, 1557), 1434. Attributions of this kind make More appear clairvoyant; long before the dialogue was contemplated, he told his daughter that she wrote so well that readers would never believe she composed unassisted. For

The Alington dialogue does not pretend to fashion Thomas More's opinions and anecdotes, only to report them. From what we know of her studies, we may safely assume that Margaret Roper's memory was excellent. As More's confidant and the most frequent visitor to his cell, she was better acquainted than anyone with the stories and style he favored during the last year of his life. Of course, by the same token, More was perfectly positioned to give an accurate account of Roper's thoughts on conformity and objections to his nonconformity. Whoever put pen to paper in 1534, we must be content leaving the last word to R. W. Chambers: "the speeches of More are absolute More; and the speeches of Margaret are absolute Margaret."²

The purpose of this article is to suggest that absolute Margaret in the Alington letter is a tremendously important witness, a witness to more than Thomas More's passion. She reveals critical inconsistencies in his presentation; after reviewing them we will find that she also demonstrates why some current ideas about Tudor patriarchy and the history of gendered identity require rethinking and repair.³

While Thomas More awaited execution, his successor as Chancellor of the Realm, Thomas Audley, was hunting on a friend's estate. Alice Alington, who lived nearby, was pleased with the chance to intercede for her stepfather. She came to Audley who professed friendship for his unfortunate predecessor but confessed that he was one of the growing number of friends who questioned More's motives. Alington did not have More's premonition, see Elizabeth Frances Rogers, ed., *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 302. References to the Alington letter in the Rogers edition (514–32) will be given here, enclosed in parentheses in the text. In the notes, references to other letters in the same collection will be abbreviated, *Corresp.* and references to the Yale edition of *The Complete Works* (1963–) will be abbreviated *CWTM*. For biographical information, see E. E. Reynolds, *Margaret Roper* (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1960); but also note Walter M. Gordon, "Tragic Perspective in Thomas More's Dialogue with Margaret in the Tower" *Cithara* 17 (1978): 3–12; Rita Verbrugge, "Margaret More Roper's Personal Expression in the *Devout Treatise Upon the Pater Noster*," in *Silent But For the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*, ed. Margaret Patterson Hannay (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985), 30–42; and the wildly speculative account of the Mores' "incestuousness," in Jonathan V. Crewe, "The 'Encomium Moriae' of William Roper." *ELH* 55 (1988): 299–304, and n. 10, 305–6.

²R. W. Chambers, "Introduction," in Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More, Knight* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), clxii.

³My rediscovery of Roper's voice was prompted by a conversation with Salim and Jane Kemal of Pennsylvania State University, to whom I am grateful for the goading. For a review of "current ideas," see the articles by Barbara A. Diefendorf and Lynda E. Boose in "Recent Trends in Renaissance Studies: The Family, Marriage, and Sex," ed. Stanley A. Chojnacki, *Renaissance Quarterly* 40 (1987): 661–81, 707–42. Chojnacki's bibliography indicates that Tudorists have been lavishing attention on the court of Queen Elizabeth I and on William Shakespeare's numbing variety of mothers, lovers, shamans, and shrews (752–61). For Margaret More Roper and early Tudor studies, consult Pearl Hogrefe, *Tudor Women: Commoners and Queens* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1975); Suzanne W. Hull, *Chaste, Silent, and Obedient: English Books for Women, 1475–1640* (San Marino, Cal.: Huntington Library, 1982); Retha M. Warnicke, *Women of the English Renaissance and Reformation* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983); Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1984); and Elaine V. Beilin, *Redeeming Eve: Women Writers in the English Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

the answers. She was distressed when Audley “marveyled” that More was “so obstinate in his owne conceite.” All she could do was write to Margaret Roper, who also feared that her father was losing “all those frendes that are hable to do you any good” (515), and recite the two “pretye fables” that Audley used to illustrate his displeasure. Roper was eager to discuss them with More and brought Alington’s letter when she next visited him in prison.⁴

Audley’s first fable ridiculed ambitious men who divined that an imminent storm would make fools of all citizens exposed to the rain. The seers sought shelter, expecting to govern the less provident once the storm had passed. When they emerged dry and unaffected, however, they discovered what they should have guessed from the start: fools submit neither to reason nor rule. Audley’s meaning was that Thomas More was naive to assume that his conscience sheltered him from others’ folly and would earn him great respect and influence once the tempest over recent Tudor legislation was over. In reply, More, who had inserted a variation of the story in the first book of his *Utopia*, assured his daughter that he had no wish to rule fools. He wanted only to be ruled by his conscience without harassment (519–20).

The meaning of Audley’s second fable is more obscure; it is no wonder that Alice Alington could not understand how it applied to her stepfather’s “conceite” and predicament (“I wiste not what to saye”). The story tells what happened when a lion, an ass, and a wolf requested absolution for gluttony. The lion had consumed everything that crossed its path, yet its credentials as king of beasts moved the priest to forgive all. The ass confessed a trifling trespass: it stole and ate a single straw from its master’s show, whereupon its master “did take colde.” Despite its contrition, the ass was denied absolution and sent to the bishop for discipline. Finally, for unspecified excess, the wolf was assigned an exacting penance: it must not take a meal worth more than sixpence. When the hungry wolf soon thereafter encountered both a cow and calf, however, it priced the catch accordingly and devoured the two without compunction. Thomas More presumed that the “folish scrupelous asse” had been introduced to reprove him for being overly conscientious. But absolute Margaret seems to have seen a different point to Audley’s second fable. The wolf declared its conscience the supreme judge and then proceeded to formulate judgments to satisfy its appetite. Roper heard her father protest that he and his conscience were answerable to God and not to his colleagues and critics. Nonetheless, his protest and his silence allowed Audley and others, should they desire, to compare the wolf’s casuistry to More’s conduct.

Absolute Margaret pressured her father to break his silence and tried to break his resolve. More insisted that he respected his friends’ learning, acknowledging that they meant well and that even his critics treated him

⁴*Corresp.*, 512–13.

fairly. The consciences of those good and wise citizens had not prevented them from conforming, and More declined to speculate whether their consciences and conformity imperilled their immortal souls. How, Roper inquired, could her father reconcile his respect for colleagues with his determination “against all other men” to reject their counsel and, in effect, to discountenance their submission to authority with his defiance (517)?⁵

Thomas More first tried to dodge the question or, to be more precise, to deflect it with an amusing tale. He informed his daughter that a jury had once been impaneled to hear evidence against an unpopular yet falsely accused man. Eleven of the twelve jurors were ready to convict the defendant without much ado and deliberation. The twelfth, however, had doubts, and to douse them, the others appealed to camaraderie (“play then the gude companion”). The hold-out replied instantly. He told his fellow jurors that, were he to comply with their wishes, he would surely go to hell for having betrayed his conscience. Having obeyed theirs, they were destined for heaven. Would any of them turn from their path, answer his appeal as he had answered theirs, and accompany him to hell (521–23)?

The story of More’s clever and conscientious juror did not impress absolute Margaret. She immediately pointed out that her father had portrayed the other jurors as mindless bigots, whereas colleagues and critics who pressed for his conformity, by his own admission, were reasonable and even admirable citizens. “They that thinke you shoulde not refuse to swere the thinge that you see so many so good men and so well learned swere before you, meane not that you shoulde sweare to beare them felowship, nor to pass with them for good company” (524). According to Roper, “good men and so well learned” could expect More to follow their lead, if he professed to value their goodness and learning. With this observation, absolute Margaret achieved her first aim. Her father was compelled to break silence, drop the pretense of respect and admiration for “so many so good men and so well learned,” and seriously grapple with questions raised by his stand against their consensus.

For Thomas More, the issue was not how completely the consensus in England overshadowed the few dissenters, but how small and insignificant that consensus seemed when measured against “the comon faith of Christendome.” More heard a great choir of Catholics, living and dead, object to any abrogation of papal power. Compared to that unanimity, the consent and consensus of Englishmen subscribing to Tudor usurpations were contemptible and unworthy of consideration. Roper’s “so many so good and so well learned” were not so many after all.

⁵Compare Alice More’s appeal to “all the Byshops and the best learned of this realm,” in William Roper, *The Life of Sir Thomas Moore, Knighte* (London: Oxford University Press, 1935), 82–83. In the Alington letter, Roper actually accused her father of following Bishop John Fisher “against all other men,” to which More replied that Fisher’s opposition to the government had not influenced him, that “I never entend . . . to pynne my soule at a nother mans backe, not even the best man that I know this day living” (*Corresp.*, 521).

Neither, according to More, were they good or learned. He introduced his remarks on this matter with an apparent concession to his daughter.

If he see but hym self with farre the fewer parte thinke the tone way, against farre the more parte of as well learned and as good affirming the contrary . . . for none other cause but for that they so thinke in dede, this is of very trouth a verie good occasion to move hym, and yet not to compelle hym, to confirme his minde and conscience unto theirs (526).

More was unmoved because conformists were not motivated by virtue or learning. They therefore did not satisfy the crucial condition in this passage, the requirement that they hold their position “for none other cause but for that they so thinke in dede.” More alleged that conformists’ causes were discreditable (“*all* the causes that I perceyve”). Conformity in England was the result of fear, cowardice, and greed rather than conviction. More refused to join colleagues who had taken the oath to preserve their estates or improve their status (527–29).

Margaret Roper did not challenge any of her father’s contentions, which is not to say that she agreed that her “many” were relatively few, her “good” ignoble, and her “learned” more slick than sage. Still, she obviously understood that her father could not be persuaded by her consensus of “so many, so well learned” conformists, so she tried to coax him to follow the course of two fools.

When More concluded his case, absolute Margaret told him that she had spoken with Harry Patenson, the family’s jester, who was indignant when he heard of More’s intransigence: “wherfore sholde he sticke to swere? I have sworne the oth my self.” Roper then made Patenson’s “argument” her own. Why, she asked, should her father “sticke to swere” when she obliged the authorities? More might object to the dissembling of others, “so good and so well learned,” but the candor of two “fools” who agreed in wanting his safety should surely prompt him to reconsider (529). Although Richard Marius has insisted that Patenson’s debut weakens Margaret Roper’s final reply, I believe that depositing him in the dialogue was an excellent ploy. Marius thinks that readers would immediately have recognized Patenson as an “imbecile fool” and would have realized that his conformity (and Margaret’s?) debased the consensus for conformity. But Patenson was hardly an imbecile or ordinary fool; More prized his company, yielded his services only to his father, and ultimately deeded him to the Lord Mayor’s office. What is more to the point, fools and jesters were humanists’ favorite couriers. They frequently uttered wisdom that the wise evaded. More himself was fond of battling the sanctimoniousness of others with his own foolishness; he played the fool earlier in the Alington dialogue and played the jester on the scaffold. By introducing Patenson and then pairing her position with his, Roper stole a page from her father’s book; she

dramatized her disagreement and opposition without making them seem colossally impertinent.⁶

What should we make of absolute Margaret's opposition in the Alington letter—of her persistence, her questions, qualifications, and rejoinders, which were less than defiant yet far more than decorative? To be sure, she yielded ground to her father, conceding, for instance, that his tale of the dissident juror perfectly illustrated the fickleness of friendship. But she immediately positioned herself for another face-off, alleging that the illustration contributed nothing to More's case against "well learned" friends and critics. Given current expectations of family life and filial independence, there is nothing very remarkable about Roper's voice in the dialogue. But the Arlington letter does not correspond to what we think we know about gender and patriarchy in early Tudor England. Initially, the interpreter has but one choice: either deny the force of Roper's interventions or reassess the tidy generalizations about deference and domination found in most histories of gender and family.

William Rastell was not only the first to question whether Margaret Roper played any considerable part in the composition of the Alington letter; he was also the first to suggest that her acquiescence to authorities and opposition to her father were faked. He composed short editorials to account for absolute Margaret's voice in the dialogue, contending that if she subscribed to the Tudor Act of Succession at all, she subscribed only to those provisions that "would stand the law of God." Rastell assumed that authorities permitted her to add the clause to her oath. He also alleged that even her conditional conformity was a trick, part of the performance which included her efforts to urge conformity on her father, who actually arranged the game. But it was really Rastell who dreamed up the rules and the reason for playing: as long as authorities believed that Margaret Roper might succeed where they had failed, might get her father to take the oath, they would not interfere with her visits.⁷

Rastell's reading is ingenious. Direct evidence is wanting, but Rastell could insist that a well executed fraud would have left none. During his final interrogation, More confided that his daughter "used great vehemence and obsecration" to induce him "to incline to the king's desire."⁸ But Rastell could have conveniently incorporated that remark in his explana-

⁶Compare Richard Marius, *Thomas More* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984), 469–70. For More's scaffold humor, see Roper, *Lyfe*, 102–3; and *Corresp.*, 519, where More confided to his daughter, "*Non sum Oedipus, sed Morus*, which name of mine what it signifieth in Greke, I nede not tel you." More's close friend Erasmus of Rotterdam exploited the signification in the oration he composed for the Renaissance's best known fool, *Stultitia*, in his *Moriae Encomium* or *Praise of Folly*. For that celebrated confrontation between Folly and the world's "wisdom," see M. A. Screech, *Ecstasy and the Praise of Folly* (London: Duckworth, 1980); and Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Christening Pagan Mysteries: Erasmus in Pursuit of Wisdom* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 27–61. Thomas More's principal epistolary defenses of Erasmus have been published in *CWTM* 15.

⁷Rastell, *Workes*, 1431, 1441.

⁸Quoted from the manuscript report, in Reynolds, *Margaret Roper*, 103.

tion, had he known of it; he might have said that More was merely taking additional precautions to make certain his daughter's visits were not discontinued as he neared the scaffold and perhaps to increase the chances that she be spared the consequences of his conviction for treason. As plausible and durable as it seems, however, Rastell's story will not clear careful inspection. For one thing, it works against itself. Were Roper trying to deceive the government, it is unlikely that she would have placed Rastell's condition on her conformity. Her pledge to uphold only those provisions that "would stand the law of God" was sure to awaken rather than allay suspicions. Moreover, if Rastell were right, Margaret Roper must join the group of conformists vilified by her father for having subscribed to the succession for personal gain. Whatever oath Roper took to guarantee her access to her father and to console him during his ordeal vitiates the position More articulated in the Alington letter. Understandably, Rastell and other friends of the family were vexed, if not also embarrassed by absolute Margaret's acquiescence and arguments, which they therefore melted into a hoax masterminded by More. But they seem not to have noticed that their explanation wrecked the reputation it was designed to save and damaged the platform More was trying to build. Historians have not caught the contradiction, perhaps because it is easier to think of Margaret Roper as a dutiful and deferential daughter (and More as an inveterate trickster) than to admit that absolute Margaret's "great vehemence" requires some reevaluation of the politics and poetics of patriarchy.

One cannot talk about the traditional view of Tudor patriarchy without referring to Lawrence Stone's bewitchingly simple and influential contention that domestic hierarchy in late medieval England both reflected and reinforced political values. Stone noted that the first Tudor regimes delegated nearly unconditional authority over family property to husbands and fathers. Law and custom licensed "family despots" to use coercion to control unruly wives and children. Domestic patriarchy, according to Stone, then paid immense political dividends, "generalizing an internalized sense of obligation of obedience to the absolute king as father of his people." Stone's commute between drawing rooms and the throne room quickly aroused interest and criticism, to which we will return. He himself acknowledged difficulties: it remained hard to tell whether the family fathered "the new renaissance state," or the state fathered the family. Equivocating ever so slightly, Stone concluded by calling authoritarian government and domestic patriarchy "mutually supportive social systems." On one point, however, he unambiguously and categorically endorsed the traditional view: husbands and fathers ruled their households as the most autocratic king ruled his castle and kingdom.⁹

⁹Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 152–54. But also see Gordon J. Schochet, "Patriarchalism, Politics, and Mass Attitudes in Stuart England," *The Historical Journal* 12 (1969): 413–44.

They certainly seem to have ruled their women. To some small extent, Aristotle admitted the dignity of spousal relations when he recommended male hegemony, advising men to govern their children as subjects and their wives as citizens. Clearly, however, Aristotle placed women at a disadvantage; they were to be governed because their powers of judgment were defective. On Aristotle's authority, theorists thenceforward perpetuated the imbalance of power in the household. To undertake the reevaluation of family roles seemed unnecessary and perhaps a bit irreverent. As Ian Maclean observed, marriage and the accepted order of the renaissance family became "immovable obstacle[s] to any improvement in the theoretical or real status of women in law, in theology, in moral and practical philosophy." Renaissance commentators were fond of reiterating women's household responsibilities set forth in the spurious third book of Aristotle's *Economics*, wherein wives were urged to subject their wills to those of their husbands and to suffer without resentment their men's moods and mischief. In Aristotle's universe, daughters were their father's attendants. Strong-willed and single young women were exceptions and outcasts, repatriated, so to speak, only if they married and became little more than their husbands' housekeepers.¹⁰

Soon we must venture from the realm of theory to that of practice, or at least travel as far in that direction as the evidence permits. But it is important first to note that, if Stone and Maclean are right, there was no breakthrough in the early Renaissance. Increasing interest in the education of women was confined within the traditional patriarchal patterns of domination and deference. Juan Luis Vives, for example, wrote a popular *Instruction* for women in 1523, soon after he arrived in England. The *Instruction* celebrates the feminine virtues of chastity and obedience, allowing that women should have just enough education to make them discerning yet deferential daughters and wives, learned yet listless widows. Thomas Elyot's *Defence of Good Women* (1540) volunteers that women's intellects were as strong as men's (and perhaps stronger), but it veers only slightly from the course set by Vives. Elyot conceded that women, once widowed, could manage their households and justifiably consider public careers. Until then, however, their intelligence and education should serve simply to make them tractable daughters and spouses. Educational theorists were male supremacists; they lounged comfortably in the universe that Aristotle furnished with women whose place was to receive rather than give counsel. Joan Kelly's justly famous essay, "Did Women Have a Renaissance," reaches the sound but sad conclusion that they did not.¹¹

¹⁰Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 50, 57–58, 82–85; and David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 82, 97, 134–35.

¹¹Joan Kelly, *Women, History, and Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19–50; and Maclean, *Notion*, 92: "Humanism, which did much to enhance the dignity of man, was long in liberating the 'man foeminine' from her subordinate status." Also see Ruth Kelso,

The upshot is that we come to think of Renaissance patriarchy in terms of victors and victims, and we assume that the victims were voiceless. After all, most evidence arrives in the form of prescriptions and prohibitions that document the imposition of the sexual ideology of one sex on the self-definition and practice of the other. Correlations between prescribed virtues and social practices would complete the study of imposition and oppression, yet, from its infancy, that project calls for the recreation of what R. W. Connell, in another context, dubbed “the agency of the oppressed.”¹²

Of the few who have answered that call and who have tried to recover strategies of resistance from early Tudor literature and the life that surrounds it, Elaine Beilin, I believe, is the most successful. She capably repossesses “the tradition of women’s writing” which commended as paramount theological virtues the very virtues that “circumscribed” women’s secondary and subordinate status. Beilin saw that her *litteratae* were both conservative and subversive. They accepted that obedient, chaste, and humble women were exemplary daughters and wives, but they also specified that the cultivation of feminine virtues made exemplary daughters and wives model Christians, superior to their fathers and husbands mired in the corruption of public life. Beilin has her authors virtually censure their exclusion from the world of affairs, aromatically disguising it as transcendence.¹³

Beilin starts her study with a brief account of Margaret Roper’s literary career. But she presents it as a specimen from the period before other women writers began “to capitalize on their circumscriptions,” as if Roper were just another figure in the frieze of conventionally submissive daughters and wives. When Beilin turns to the Alington dialogue, she makes much of absolute Margaret’s “tentativeness and humble self-consciousness.” She underscores Roper’s difficulties with legal terminology and Thomas More’s characterization of his daughter as a second Eve, sent to tempt him to conformity.¹⁴ I have already disputed Roper’s “tentativeness.” As for More, he is a wobbly witness. It is often hard to tell whether his epithets were serious or playful. Although his games and rhetoric soared, they were quickly caught by the gravitational pull of some traditional ideas, including patriarchy’s central assumptions. He goaded his

Doctrine for the Lady of the Renaissance (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 58–77; Linda T. Fitz, “What Says the Married Woman?: Marriage Theory and Feminism in the English Renaissance,” *Mosaic* 13 (1980): 1–22; and Katherine Usher Henderson and Barbara F. McManus, *Half Humankind: Contexts and Texts of the Controversy about Women in England, 1540–1640* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 87–92, 107–9. For reservations, quite unlike those we discuss here, see David Herlihy, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?: A Reconsideration,” *Medievalia et Humanistica* 13 (1985): 1–22; and Judith C. Brown, “A Woman’s Place was in the Home: Women’s Work in Renaissance Tuscany,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 206–24.

¹²R. W. Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 149.

¹³Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, xv–xxiv.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 24–28, 46.

daughters to outperform their male tutors, but he warned Margaret, the most gifted, not to surpass her husband (except in the study of the stars).¹⁵ In More's Utopia, men and women seem to enjoy equal opportunities for labor, leisure, and learning.¹⁶ As if to mock the treatment of women and wives as chattel, the Utopians ridiculed European bachelors for spending less time and care on the selection of spouses than on the purchase of horses. But More's male supremacy surfaces elsewhere. Utopia's priests have the right to chose the republic's most desirable women for wives (*uxores selectissimae*), much as though they were shopping for trophies.¹⁷ By More's decree, women were spared the most onerous chores associated with communal meals, yet the reprieve is suspicious because More also stipulated that women alone prepare and cook the food.¹⁸ Margaret More Roper was the ideal daughter of the age's most idealized man, some of whose prejudices, however, were quite ordinary. Her opposition to her father in the Alington conversation—though not what Beilin and others expect—was rather extraordinary.¹⁹

If that opposition is to be explained, and not explained away, we must briefly attend to the connections between the Mores and Erasmus of Rotterdam, because absolute Margaret's appeal to good and learned men, while not an appeal to Erasmus, extended his faith in the consensus of the learned into the realm of English politics. Neither Erasmus nor Roper repudiated the idea that "fathers" know best. (Roper, recall, appealed to the consensus of good and learned *men*.) But Roper's father had taken a position on Tudor prerogatives that she could not exactly comprehend, an enormously costly position that would leave the Mores stranded, without their patriarch. Margaret Roper could never have stranded More; she was affectionate and solicitous to the very end. What she scuttled, apparently without much premeditation or regret, was the pattern of deference and dominance, so critical, we are told, to the maintenance of late medieval patriarchy.

Erasmus was unmarried. Unlike More, he was never surrounded by children. Nevertheless, Erasmus was something of a *paterfamilias*, obsessed with packing friends into a network or surrogate family, friends whose

¹⁵*Corresp.*, 255. Also see More's letter to William Gonnell, one of Margaret's tutors, who apparently recommended that she be congratulated more often on her accomplishments. More replied (123) that scratching a child's itch for distinction (*gloriae pruritus*) was less an incentive than a disservice. The battle against immodesty was waged more avidly, it seems, by another tutor in the More household, Richard Hyrde. See Hyrde's "A Plea for Learned Women," reprinted in *Moreana* 13 (1967): 14–16. ¹⁶*CWTM* 4: 186–89.

¹⁷*CWTM* 4: 228–29. On rare occasions, women were named to the priesthood, but only widows. Also see Warnicke, *Women*, 20–21. ¹⁸*CWTM* 4: 140–41.

¹⁹For More's abusive statements about women (set, for the most part, in his later polemical works), see Judith P. Jones and Sherianne Sellers Seibel, "Thomas More's Feminism: To Reform and Re-Form," in *Quincentennial Essays on St. Thomas More*, ed. Michael J. Moore (Boone, N.C.: Albion, 1978), 67–77. For Margaret More, "nearest her father, as well in wit, vertue and learning, as also in merye and pleasaunt talke," see Harpsfield, *Life and Death*, 77–83.

learned correspondence and conversation he could encourage and enjoy. “Love of learning,” he declared, “has the greatest power of knitting up friendships. Indeed neither family connections nor blood relationship bind souls together in closer or firmer bond of friendship than does a shared enthusiasm for noble studies.” But Erasmus was wrong. His learned friends were often opinionated and obstreperous. Some proved poor hosts, others unreliable correspondents, and the mail was always too slow. During the darker and lonelier periods of Erasmus’s career, his dazzling descriptions of the bonds of friendship must have seemed like overnight lights illuminating an empty classroom. Still, he ceaselessly campaigned for a *consensio studiorum*, nagging friends to write or to read and approve authors of his choice. To inspire correspondents he created a siege mentality. The truly learned, he said, were beset by barbarians. He promised a belletristic revival, but that must depend on scholars’ solidarity. They should exchange letters of encouragement, circulate narrative assaults on barbarous educators, advertise each other’s treatises and translations, share patrons, and fasten the friendship network with friendly dedications and favorable reviews.²⁰

Margaret Roper was part of the network by 1524, when she published her translation of Erasmus’s *Precatio dominica*. It might be stretching a point to say that she joined it years earlier, when she and her sisters sent letters to Erasmus at Thomas More’s prompting, but Erasmus referred to that exercise in glowing terms. He wrote to Guillaume Budé about the sisters’ astounding talents, proclaiming that More’s accomplished daughters disproved the old saw that learning and women were best kept apart. He touted More for having turned his household into an academy. While others’ daughters were idle, Margaret and her sisters were avidly reading and discussing Livy.²¹

Erasmus’s letter to Budé is a rich document. It affords a glimpse of Thomas More’s experiments with education and argues at some length for women’s tuition, revealing that Erasmus once entertained the conventional bias against it. The letter repays careful attention on those counts, yet it can also be mined for indications that Erasmus in 1521 was slightly apprehensive about More’s membership in his humanist community. Erasmus told Budé that More was addicted to marriage; the death of his first wife liberated him, but he swiftly sought a second. Erasmus laments that

²⁰See Yvonne Charlier, *Erasmé et l’amitié d’après sa correspondance* (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1977); and for “knitting up friendships,” see Erasmus’s adage, *Dulce bellum inexpertis*, translated in Margaret Mann Phillips, *Erasmus on His Times* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 109.

²¹*Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmus Roterodami*, 12 vols., ed. P. S. Allen, H. M. Allen, and H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906–58) 4:577. Erasmus’s remarks can be instructively compared with those cited by Screech to illustrate Rabelais’s “hesitant feminism.” See M. A. Screech, *The Rabelaisian Marriage: Aspects of Rabelais’s Religion, Ethics, and Comic Philosophy* (London: Edward Arnold, 1958), 26. Also consult Erasmus’s *Antronius, Magdalia*, translated in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 219–23.

princes prefer bachelors in their service, but his real concern is not for More's career in public service. His mild reprimand reflects his conviction that marriage and family, as well as public office, distracted friends from scholarly responsibilities. Indirectly here and directly elsewhere, Erasmus reminded Thomas More that the humanist network required and expected his contributions. The two collaborated closely before. Erasmus wrote his *Praise of Folly* (*Moriae encomium* or "Praise of More") under More's roof in 1509. He helped More give the *Utopia* its final form and he solicited letters of commendation to accompany the first editions as prefaces and post-scripts. The letters cleverly lowered More's fictional republic into reality, pretending that his knight-errant narrator, Hythloday, had an honored place in the humanist network. The endorsements leave the distinct impression that the community of correspondents seldom had as much fun. Ironically, however, the *Utopia* suggests that More had some misgivings about humanist causes and commitments.²² More averred that humanists' ideals were incompatible: consensus about learning and virtue led to conformity and restricted the very independence of judgment that humanists prized. Moreover, the consensus of the learned could easily be manipulated by powerful patrons. In 1516, then, the *Utopia* exhibited the first signs of More's estrangement. Erasmus never read them clearly; he reckoned that distractions rather than disagreement later kept More from his company.

The incorruptible consensus Thomas More finally extolled was not the one Erasmus was trying to build. In the Alington letter, More referred instead to the Catholic *consensus fidelium*. He made it a monument to Christians, living and dead, whose loyalty to Rome condemned Tudor usurpations and the conformity of those "many so good men and so well learned," on whose compliance his daughter's argument hinged.

Absolute Margaret did not question the nature or existence of her father's diffuse consensus. Her principal part in the dialogue was to cast light on the consensus closer at hand and on the inconsistency of More's initial position; she scolded him for conceding the wisdom and virtue of learned colleagues and then opposing their judgment and shunning their counsel. To what extent did she really believe that scholars' solidarity signaled the strength of their cause? We will never know with confidence. But for Erasmus, humanists' patrons, clients, and friends outside the circle or network of the learned had every reason to be encouraged on that count by the constant communication, reciprocal commendation, and harmony (or conformity) within. By the time absolute Margaret and absolute More debated conformity, she was inside but he had apparently stepped out.

²²I have argued this at length in Kaufman, "Humanist Spirituality and Ecclesial Reaction: Thomas More's *Monstra*," *Church History* 56 (1987): 25–38; but also see Dermont Fenlon, "England and Europe: *Utopia* and its Aftermath," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 25 (1975): 121–27; and George Logan, *The Meaning of More's 'Utopia'* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 254–58.

Margaret Roper's appeal to the consensus of "good men and so well learned" was consonant with Erasmus's appeals and arguments, the implications of which cracked the Aristotelian infrastructure of late medieval learning, specifically on the issue of gendered identity. As noted, Aristotle and his heirs insisted on the inferiority of women's intelligence. The series of injunctions that followed from their premise distinguished between masculine and feminine virtues and gave binary gender representation what Joan Scott called "the appearance of timeless permanence."²³ The premise and distinctions also guaranteed the prestige and ideological power of patriarchy. Admittedly, Erasmus was no less a male supremacist than Thomas More. His letter to Budé, for instance, underscored the compatibility of learning with the traditional feminine virtues of modesty and obedience. But Erasmus so stressed the superiority of learned company and the *consensio studiorum* to any other coalition that a new binary representation nearly eclipsed familiar sexual stereotypes. When absolute Margaret's opposition to her father is set in the context of Erasmus's concerns, the story of Tudor patriarchy seems to beg for a paragraph on Roper and Renaissance humanism.

The problem is what to write. To concede that the More household was atypical virtually commits us to a disclaimer. Absolute Margaret may be a startlingly fresh voice, but she may tell us only that one woman on one occasion scaled otherwise formidable barriers, namely, the politics of Tudor patriarchy as presently conceived and the prejudices that barred women from the learned conversations of the Renaissance. It would be regrettable and irresponsible, however, to dismiss the exception without rechecking the status of the rule. The present conception of patriarchy, for example, is less formidable than we might have expected. Declines in clandestine marriages and in marital litigation could signify increasing acceptance of parental or paternal authority, yet they could also mean that couples increasingly agreed to have the church solemnize nuptial arrangements and thus place certain questions beyond dispute.²⁴ Lawrence Stone's summation of patriarchal patterns of family life is still arresting, but it is not incontestable. Alan Macfarlane acidly observed that Stone imported "concrete symbols of patriarchy" from as far afield as nineteenth-century France. Lately, Lynda Boose quarrelled with Stone's generalizations which seemed to her more relevant to political regimes than to domestic routines. Boose was little less than mortified by the eclipse of the Tudor household,

²³Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *The American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 1068: "The point of the new historical investigation is to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation."

²⁴See Ralph Houlbrooke, "The Making of Marriage in Mid-Tudor England: Evidence from the Records of Matrimonial Contract Litigation," *Journal of Family History* 10 (1985): 340, 350-51.

just when family history appeared to be prospering: “the [Tudor] ‘family’ . . . has thus been repositioned as a metaphor for the Elizabethan-Jacobean state, and scholarly focus shifted away from literal families . . . back to the patriarchal state and its self-generating modes.”²⁵

The Mores and Ropers furnish family historians with an exceptional “literal family,” which was arguably the most literate family in early Tudor England. I have argued that this literal and literate family left direct, epistolary evidence of filial dissent as well as eloquent evidence of filial affection and that Margaret More Roper must no longer be paraded as “living proof that education made women more dedicated to feminine virtue.”²⁶ If I am correct, absolute Margaret offers us an alternative reading of some of those texts commonly used to reinforce reigning ideas about patriarchal authority and women’s exclusion from the Renaissance. Although long recognized as prescriptive rather than descriptive, the remarks of Erasmus, Vives, Elyot, and other theorists have been taken to illustrate what they promised, that daughters’ tuition was consistent with daughters’ and wives’ tractability. Perhaps those remarks illustrate only the theorists’ insecurity. With absolute Margaret, we may have found an example of what some renaissance humanists dimly perceived or feared, an indication that inadvertently they had “established the themes of education and emancipation, which were to be crucial demands of feminism.”²⁷

²⁵Lynda A. Boose, “The Family in Shakespeare Studies; or—Studies in the Family of Shakespeareans; or—The Politics of Politics,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 40 (1986): 731. Macfarlane’s review appeared in *History and Theory* 18 (1979): 103–26. Nothing in the treasure of Tudor documents compares with the *ricordanze* or family memoirs used liberally and creatively in writing Tuscan family history. See Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

²⁶Beilin, *Redeeming Eve*, 28.

²⁷Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance, and Revolution* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 20. Exactly how should we take the criticism of an unlearned abbot which Erasmus scripted for Magdalia (*Antronius, Magdalia*, 223)? “In England there are the More girls, in Germany the Pirkheimer and Blaurer girls. If you’re not careful, the net result will be that we’ll preside in the theological schools, preach in the churches, and wear your miters.”