

# SCENES OF SPEAKING AND TECHNOLOGIES OF WRITING IN MORE'S TOWER LETTERS

Stephen Merriam Foley  
Department of English  
Brown University  
Providence, Rhode Island 02912, U.S.A

The claim that More wrote several letters from the Tower with a coal may be taken literally, or as an image of powerlessness, or as a reference to Isaiah's lips touched with a coal by an angel. The coal is an index of how technologies of writing and reports of speaking inform the Tower letters and those surrounding them. The letter to Frith plays upon the difference between heretical textuality and the simple truth of a Christian woman at prayer, as does the letter to Cromwell concerning More's knowledge of Elizabeth Barton and the exploration of the difference between evidence and hearsay. The scandal of authorship in Margaret Roper's letter to Alice Alington likewise concerns the play between male and female voices in the text. More's explication of the fables recited to Lady Alington by Audley empties out the notion of the author in favor of the voices, male and female, of conscience and love that play out across the written text of the letters the drama of More's last days.

**Key words:** correspondence, voices, textuality, writing

\*\*\*

*On peut entendre littéralement le fait que plusieurs lettres de la Torre ont été écrites par More avec un charbon; mais on peut aussi prétendre que le charbon figure l'impuissance de More ou que le charbon nous renvoie au charbon ardent avec lequel les lèvres d'Isaïe furent touchées par un ange. Le charbon suggère comment les technologies d'écriture et les comptes de paroles animent les lettres de la Torre and et plusieurs autres écrits de More. Sa lettre contre Frith établit une relation entre la textualité hérétique et la vérité simple d'une chrétienne faisant sa prière. La lettre à Cromwell s'occupe également de la différence entre le témoignage et le oui-dire dans l'affaire d'Elizabeth Barton. Le problème de l'auteur dans la lettre de Margaret Roper à Alice Alington implique également le jeu des voix masculines et féminines dans le texte. L'explication de texte des fables recitées à Alice par Audley occulte la notion d'auteur au profit des voix masculines and féminines, les voix de conscience et d'amour qui joue à travers le texte écrit, le drame des derniers jours de More.*

**Mots-clés:** correspondance, voix, textualité, écriture

\*\*\*

Se puede coger literalmente la reclamación que More escribió varias cartas de la Torre con un carbón, o se puede coger como una imagen de impotencia, o como una referencia a los labios de Isaiah tocados por un carbón por un ángel. El carbón es un índice de cómo tecnologías de escritura e informes de hablar informan las cartas de la Torre y esos que las rodean. La carta contra Frith juega entre textualidad herética y la verdad sencilla de una mujer cristiana en oración como hace la carta a Cromwell acerca del conocimiento de More de Elizabeth Barton en su exploración de la diferencia entre pruebas y rumores. El escándalo de autoría en la carta de Margaret More a Alice Alington asimismo versa sobre el juego entre macho y hembra expresada en el texto. La explicación de More de las fábulas que se le recitan a Alington por Audley vacía la noción del autor a favor de las voces, macho y hembra, de conciencia y amor que juegan fuera en el texto escrito de las cartas el drama de los días últimos de More.

**Palabras claves:** cartas, voce, textualidad, escritura

### I. Writing without a pen

In a brief letter written to his daughter Margaret Roper shortly after his imprisonment in the Tower in 1534, Thomas More invokes the image of a writer deprived of his familiar means of production. The letter was "writen with a cole by your tender loving father," and it closes abruptly "for lacke of paper," followed by a brief prayer, as if an addendum inscribed on the foldover, words addressed through Meg to God the Father after a father has done the best he could to comfort and instruct his beloved daughter in a time of danger and certain loss: "Our Lorde kepe me continually true faithful and plaine, to the contrary wherof I beseche hym hartely neuer to suffre me lyue."<sup>1</sup> The letter survives only in copies retained by the state or preserved by friends and family after More's papers were removed in the act of attainder. And there is no original manuscript to confirm or deny the passing reference in this letter and others to a scene of writing without a pen.

The biographical tradition has long accepted More's words as literal evidence of the primitive working conditions of the prisoner in the Tower, at least in his early days there. More is supposed to have written the letter with a coal or a pencil or perhaps a stick of charcoal for want of pen and ink. *Tres Thomae* and the *English Workes* of 1557, already inscribing the saintly martyrdom of More, allude to the coal in their introduction to the letter, "writen with a cole by Sir Thomas More to his doughter Maistres Margaret Roper within a while after he was prisoner in the Tower" (Rogers 507). And the same scenario of privation is inscribed in the introduction to a letter that More "wrote with a cole to all his frendes" later in the year, imploring them to accept Margaret's word as if it were his own as she comes to them on his behalf, endorsing her by letter as his spokeswoman outside the Tower walls (Rogers 511). The last letter that More wrote in the hours before his execution on Tuesday the sixth of July in the year of our Lord 1535 is likewise said by its early editors to have been written with a coal: "he wrote with a cole a letter to his doughter Maystresse Roper, and sente it to her, (whiche was the laste thyng that euer he wrote). The cople wherof here foloweth" (Rogers 563). Despite the pen and ink copies of the letters written with a coal, a twentieth-century editor of the *Dialogue of Comfort* (Leland Miles) once in good faith surmised that it too had been written with a coal.

---

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Frances Rogers, *The Correspondence of Thomas More*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 507.

But it is the Valencia manuscript of the *De Tristitia* (unknown to that earlier editor), edited by Clarence H. Miller in the Yale series that he has seen to completion, that provides the most compelling counter-evidence to the strict materiality of the coal as More's instrument of composition in the Tower.<sup>2</sup> As Miller proves, the lines of the manuscript are amply spaced, the margins generous, and the text neatly inscribed in More's own lucid italic hand, a hand more even than his slightly sprawling secretary hand, the strokes sure, level, and clean, the rich darkness of the ink standing out starkly on the whiteness of the paper. The unusual gatherings of the manuscript suggest that it was smuggled out of More's rooms quire by quire or perhaps carried out openly in small quantities by his visitors. But the manuscript was clearly *not* composed in secret or without a pen. Like so many other elements of the stories written in More's last letters, from the initial appeals to Cromwell and reports to Margaret of recent events, to the protracted platonic dialogue of Margaret's letter to Alice Alington and the algorithm stone that More pathetically returns to Mrs. Clement in his last letter as a calculus of love and memory against betrayal and despair, the letters written with a coal rest on the edges of facts and images, history and fable, what was once said and what is written down for as long as text lasts on paper...or in memory...or is repeated.

The coal stands for the deprivation and disempowerment of the prisoner. The lawyer, humanist, and statesman whose hands in the Holbein portrait lightly clasp the scroll of working letters that secure the power symbolically bestowed by the golden chain is now in effect writing without a pen, his words no longer secured by his position, his goods seized, his life itself at risk of being taken by the crown—unless he utters the words prescribed by the letters of statute, giving voice to the written word of the law.

But More's Tower letters also inscribe words that come from one whose mouth has been touched with a coal by an angel, as Isaiah was at his moment of danger in beholding the Lord face to face in the company of his train:

Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from off the altar. And he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. (Isaiah 6.6-8)

---

<sup>2</sup> Clarence H. Miller, ed., *De Tristitia Christi*, Volume 14, Yale Edition of the Complete Works of St. Thomas More, New Haven, 1976, p. 695-745.

If the Tower letters are *written* with difficulty by one disempowered in this life, they aspire to *speak*—through the slant reference of the coal—words filled with the holy fire of faith and hope at the moment when their writer prepares to meet his Lord face to face: *Here am I; send me*. As More continues in his prayer voiced through Margaret in the first letter written with a coal: “For as for longe lyfe (as I haue often tolde the Megge) I neither loke for, nor longe for, but am well content to goe, if God call me hence to morrowe” (Rogers 507-08). Margaret picks up upon the metaphor of the coal of purification in commenting that More’s letters are to her as prized as the golden words of revelation: “Father, if all the worlde had ben geuen to me...it hadde ben a small pleasure, in comparison of the pleasure I conceyued on the treasure of your letter, which though it were written with a cole, is worthy in mine opinion to be written in letters of golde” (539). And More will ironically return the compliment in insisting that he is actually writing with a coal: “If I wolde with my writing, (mine owne good daughter) declare how much pleasure and comfort, your daughterlye louing letters wer vnto me a pecke of coles wolde not suffice to make me the pennes. And other pennes haue I (good Margaret) none here: and therefore can I wryte you no long processe, nor dare aduenture, good daughter, to wryte often” (540).

Let the coal for the moment stand as a reminder of how technologies of writing and reports of speaking fill the Tower letters—the summaries of suspect conversations by the lawyerly defendant, the reports of reading and discussing the written text of the unspoken oath, the unsigned copies of the letters of the man who declines, orally, to sign, the man of faith who speaks that faith through the words of common women, the father who speaks through and with his daughter, the last words that can be uttered to friends and family only through the medium of script. This essay, then, will reexamine the Tower letters and their contexts to the end of teasing out the shifting relations between scenes of speaking and technologies of writing.

## II. Writing to the Tower: Frith

In the months that precede and surround More’s arrest, imprisonment, and death, his own trials are eerily transfigured by accounts of the rumors and processes embroiling More himself and others in controversies of conscience and power. One such case is that of John Frith, the young man whom More attacked for his protestant eucharistic theology. Another case to which the rhetoric and pleading of the Tower letters is connected is the scandal of Elizabeth Barton, the so-called maid or nun of Kent, a serving-woman later professed in a nunnery and ultimately executed at Paul’s Cross, from whose

possibly treasonous prophecies More sought to distance himself (conscientiously) as he summoned his own defense. All these cases deal fundamentally with the edges of speaking and writing—the normal operating ground of the lawyer and *orator*.

In dealing with the eucharistic doctrines of John Frith as with the other heretics whose cases arose during his chancellorship, More displayed a canny will to repress by state power the threat of the heretical text. But More also displays in the hindsight of his letter a shrewd respect for the difficulty of wrestling with the protean discursive monster of bad belief. His efforts both to suppress and to rebutt heresy proved self-defeating. While in the Tower, the young John Frith had composed a short treatise on the eucharist at the request of a friend. More surreptitiously obtained a copy of this document and composed in rebuttal his *Letter against Frith*, withholding it from publication until learning of the forthcoming release of the reply to More that Frith had composed, having glimpsed a copy of More's book at his examination and later reading the text in a smuggled manuscript.

The figure of textuality—as opposed to the truth of the word—enters again and again into the fabric of More's argument in the *Letter*. As More purports to send his reply back to Frith along with a copy of Frith's own treatise, writing becomes an image of the virulent copy and copiousness of falsehood:

In my moste hartly wyse I recommend me to you, and sende you by this brynger the wrytynge agayne whyche I receyued from you, wherof I haue been offred synnys a couple of copyes mo in the meane whyle, as late, as ye wote it was, wherby men maye se how gredyly that these newe named brethren wryte it out, and secretly sprede it abrode.  
(Rogers 440)

The technology of print as an instrument of heretical copy and the subsequent banning of all heretical printed books, More charges, has resulted in the deflection of heretical poison back into manuscript circulation, copy once again replicating copy:

The deuyll hath taught now hys dysciples, the dyuysers of these heresyas, to make many shorte treatyses, whereof theyr scolers may shortly write out copyes, but in theyr treatysyes to put as much poyson in one wryten lefe, as they prented before in fyftene, as it well appeareth in thys one wrytynge of thys yong mannes makynge...(Rogers 441)

More's own end, in contrast, is simply to establish (in *writing*) what Christ said once and forever:

For he denyeth nat nor can nat say nay, but that our sauour sayed hym self. My flesh is veryly mete, and my blode is verily drynke...(Rogers 442)

He denyeth nat also that Chryste hym selfe at hys laste sowper takyng the bred into hys blessed handes, after that he had blessed hit sayde vnto his disciples, "Take you this and eate it, this is my body that shalbe gyuen for you"....(442-43)

Yet the copious power of untruth infects even More's own prose, as he admits ironically that his letter has swollen to the length of a treatise: "Lo in stede of a letter haue you almost a boke, longer than I truste good Chrysten folke shall nede in so clere an article of the fayth, and to all fast faythfull peple so farre out of all dowl, sauyng that in sendyng you your copy agayne, me thoughte I muste nedes wryte you somewhat what I my selfe thoughte of his wrytyng" (462).

Thus in his conclusion even More's own written word as well as the infectious "copy" of Frith is displaced necessarily by quotation of a validating oral performance, the words of a good Christian woman in prayer, her access to the truth as direct as the words of Christ proclaiming "Hoc est corpus meum" or "I am the vine":

How be it, hys prayour there is such deuysed, and penned, and paynted with laysour and studye, that I truste euery good Chrysten woman maketh a mych better prayour at the tyme of her howsell, by faythfull affeccyon and Goddes good inspyracyon sodaynly. For she besyde Goddes other goodnes, thanketh him, I thynke, for hys hyghe syngulare benefyte there presentely gyuen her, in that it lyketh him to receyue her so symple and so farre vnworthy of her self, to syt at his owne blessed borde...(463)

To More, this kind of prayer escapes the duplicitous copy, penned and painted, of the written words smuggled out by Frith— "Thys lo in effecte though not in wordes, can Chrysten women praye." The pen is supplanted in More's own written trope (the kind of trope he had denied Frith) by the mouths of women and babes:

For God can as the prophete sayth, make not onely women that haue age, faith, and wit, but the mouthes also of infauntes and yong soukyng chydren, to pronounce his laude and prayse, so that we need not this yong man now to come teche vs how and what we shall pray, as Cryste taught his disciples the Paternoster. (463)

The Word written in scripture as the Lord said thus guarantees the truth spoken by women and babes, the mouth sucking at the breast and the mouth of the mere woman incapable of false reasoning both images of truth “spoken” as directly as the transmission of the words of the Lord’s own prayer. And More’s own truth as sometime Lord Chancellor is validated by his quotation from the mouth of a woman, his own words as if sucked from the breast.

### III. Quoting, Hearsay, and the Mouth of a Woman

The lawyer’s trained ability to record, to recall, to recount, all in the best interest of a cause—and to exclude evidence in the interest of that same cause—is an underlying element of all of More’s correspondence and indeed of his oeuvre as a whole. The rhetoric of law reports, cases pleaded, and letters from client to patron and patron to client overlap as More, in danger, makes written appeals to Cromwell and others to forestall his liabilities in the case of Elizabeth Barton and her trances and in the many other matters that circulate dangerously around the risk he undertook in refusing the oath. What is at issue is what he had said and what others had said, particularly what others had said he had said.

More’s goal in his letter to Cromwell about Barton,<sup>1</sup> as about Frith and other matters, is to inscribe in these documents of the prisoner in the Tower what he had said before (outside the Tower) or what he had written or what had been written about what he had said and she had said—or what he had merely heard and had been heard (perhaps) by others. More’s letter to Cromwell is then referenced in quotation in a generalizing letter of appeal to the king, the letter of deposition, and the letter from client to patron overlapping in the royal mail.

In the letters of deposition, fact, and appeal that More sends from the Tower, the principal operative category is quotation, the normal mode of the lawyer, and the defective category is hearsay, what might have been said but cannot be proven by quotation. But let us remember the lawyer’s mode of quotation is always echoed by the written record, so that the professional deposition that More provides in letters pleading his case and potentially in all of the Tower letters he reads (writes) into the record words refracting the memory and thus creating the memorial of what may or may not have been uttered or heard or recalled. Quotation turns the authority of the spoken into the authority of the written just as it guarantees that one has written the text as it was spoken. Or does not.

The forensic heart of the letter to Cromwell of March 1534 (Rogers no. 197, 480-88) is the report of a conversation More had with Barton and the transcript of a letter that More had written to her. This complex deposition, in combination with the letters surrounding it, succeeded finally in proving More's innocence (at least in that case) and in so doing also shifting the source of corruption in the Barton case from the nun to those who misrepresented her, the written quotation and the copied letter validating a position taken and an accusation ungrounded.

For the defendant-author of a pleading letter, quotation from manuscript or from memory can, if credit is established in the minds of his correspondents, be the guarantee of the truth that is sworn, heard and believed by judge or jury. Indeed the narrative More inscribes in his lengthy letter of deposition to Cromwell begins with and is overloaded with the writing of quoted words. It was some eight or nine years ago, he recounts, that the archbishop of Canterbury "that then was"—an elegiac formula from More at the time of his own fall from power—sent to the king's grace:

a roll of paper in which were wrytten certaine wordes of hers, that she had, as report was, then made, at sundrye tymes spoken in her traunses; whervppon it pleased the Kinges Grace to delyuer me the roll, commandinge me to loke thereon and afterwarde shew hym what I thoughte therein. (481)

The explanation that More here reports having made to the king after having been asked about the interpretation of Barton's trances is that the simple rhymes quoted make this report credible as the innocent oral utterance of a simple woman, in whom God might speak, but which no reasonable man might be asked to make the basis for a judgment of treason:

when his Highnes asked me, I tolde hyme, that in good faithe I founde nothinge in these wordes that I coulde eny thinge regarde or esteme, ffor sauinge that some parte fell in rime, and that, God wotte, full rude, els for any reason, God wott, that I saw therein, a righte simple woman mighte in my mynde speake it of her owne witt well ynoughe, how be it, I saide, that because it was constantlie reported for a trothe, that God wroughte in her, and that a myracle was shewed vppon her, I durste not nor woulde not be bolde in iudginge the matter. And the Kinges Grace, as me thoughte, esteemed the matter as lyghte as yt after proved lewde. (481)

The words of the simple quotation are thus potentially innocent of any treasonable possibility as merely "rhymed" by a powerless woman. But they are also affirmed as coming from God through the voice of one of his innocent creatures, woman or babe, albeit not worthy of a Lord Chancellor's legal judgment. Nor of the king's who made the mistake, as More did not, of esteeming the matter "as lyghte as yt after proved lewde" (481).

What surrounds this ambiguous appeal to the spoken word, moreover, is a case built by quotation and against quotation by lawyer More, who had heard that Cromwell had spoken to William Roper about the case:

yt liked your Mastership to breake with my son Roper of that, that I had had comunicacion, not onely with dyvers that were of acquaintance with the lewde Nonne of Caunterburye, but also with herself; and had, over that, by my wrytinge, declaringe favour towarde her, gyuen her aduice and counsell; of which my demeaner, that it likethe you to be content to take the labour and the payne, to heare, by myne owne wrytinge, the trothe, I verye hartely thanke you, and reckon myself righte deeply beholden to you" (Rogers 480-81).

The strategy here shifts from quotation itself to the problem of embedded quotation—the hearsay of customary law—quotations of quotation that fail to meet the burden of proof More now wishes to establish in order to maintain that the canons of the written can exclude the very truth of the spoken he might otherwise argue for, matters of law and reason being far different from those of Christian truth and faith.

More is particularly anxious to dispel any hearsay about his knowledge of any treasonable comments or miraculous claims that Barton made or others might have made of her:

Frome that tyme tyll abowte Christmas was tweluemonethe, albeit that contynuallie, ther was much talkinge of her, and of her holynes, yet never harde I anye talke rehearsed, ether of revelacion of hers, or miracle, saving I had hearde some tymes in my Lorde Cardinalles dayes, that she had ben bothe with his Lordship and with the Kinges Grace, but what she saide either to the ton or to tother, vppon my faithe, I had never harde any one worde.(481)

More is especially concerned about some conversations he has had with others about Barton: it is onto the figures of those who promoted the cause of the nun of Kent that More will project the blame for her downfall and for any treason that may have been committed.

More had been visited at Chelsea by one Father Resbye, an observant Franciscan from Canterbury, as later by another friar named Rich. Their goal was clearly to entrap More into admitting that he had knowledge of and would sanction some of the more dangerous statements made to or about the maid. Shortly after supper and before retiring, Friar Resbye "fell in comunicacion with me of the Nonne" (483). Resbye marvelled at the nun's holiness and the works God wrought in her, and More professed himself glad to hear it. But when Resbye communicates (as More records in detail) a vision of three swords she had confessed to the lord Cardinal, a sword symbolizing the power of the Pope, a sword indicating Wolsey's temporal power as Chancellor, and a sword that was "the meddling he was put in trust with by the maid, concerning the great matter of his marriage, More professes, having heard Resbye's rendition, "that any revelation of the King's matters I will not hear of" (483).

The scene virtually repeats itself when More is visited by one Father Rich, when a little before supper they fall into talking of Resby and the Nun. They rehearse More's earlier conversation; Rich inquires about the three swords and More reiterates his response, More once again cutting the discussion off at the third sword. More sees Rich twice again, once at his house and once at the friary, but they talked of "childish" things and the effect in general is to confirm that these after dinner conversations are mere gossip and hearsay that neither compromise Barton nor convict her (or More). All is distanced into tales, and the written record confirms the legal case as well as the potential truth of that spoken and unrecorded: "And in effect I little doubted but that some of these tales that were told of her were untrue; but yet sith I never heard them reported, as spoken by her own mouth, I thought nevertheless that many of them might be true, and she a very virtuous woman too; as some lies written peradventure of some that be saints in heaven, and yet many miracles done by them for all that."

This narrative of quotation heard and refused, dismissed and accepted comes to a climax in More's personal confessional scene with Elizabeth Barton, in which the issues of speaking and writing left suspended in the Resby and Rich conversations are given new direction. More is drawn into an interview with Barton during her stay at Syon House; the monks with whom he is speaking at the grate—border creatures as the letter figures them—are suspicious of her and desire his intervention, which takes place as More makes his way within Syon to the sanctified inner space of the chapel. More prefaces his account of the interview with cautions that come straight out of the Resby and Rich conversations—he is interested in the reports of her virtue and not "of

any curious mind, anything to know of such things as folk talked...that she might have somewhat the more occasion to remember me to God in her devotion and prayers" (484)

Bartons's answer to More's greeting echoes the caution of More's prefatory remarks—she fears what is said on her behalf by false friends—but More embeds in the conversation the story of yet another simple woman, the case of one Helen of Tottenam, who was dissuaded of thinking her visions were divine revelations by a visit to Barton: "you shewed her they were no revelacions but pleyne illusions of the devell." After listening to More's account of Helen, Barton declines credit for the cure; "Forsothe, Sir, ther is in this poynte no prayse vnto me, but the goodnes of God" (Rogers 485). With the matter of the false vision deflected onto Helen, Barton can emerge in More's portrayal as a confirmed innocent, a simple creature far different from the tales that are told about her: "I liked her in good faithe better for this answer, then for manye of those thinges that I had harde reported by her" (485).

She clearly knows how to distinguish truth from illusion. It is a matter of common sense, as she illustrates in the story of one visited by a strange bird:

she told me that of late the devell, in the likenes of a bird, was fleeinge and flickeringe about her in a chambre, and suffered hym selfe to be taken; and being in handes sodenlye changed, in ther sighte that were present, into suche straunge vglie fashioned bird, that they were all affreyde, threwe hym out at a wyndow. (485)

With the false visions of the devil symbolically thrown out the window, More and Barton can engage in an ordinary conversation in the stillness of the chapel:

For conclusion, we talked no worde of the Kinges Grace or anye greate personage ells, nor in effecte, of anye man or woman, but of her selfe, and my selfe, but after no longe communicacion had for or euer we mett, my tyme came to goo home, I gave her a dubble ducate, and prayed her to praye for me and myne, and so departed from her and never spake with her after" (485).

Illusions cast aside, an important officer of the state and a young novice—a man and a woman—talk about themselves and part, the appropriate courtesies extended and accepted, in the hope of prayers said and answered. The heart of More's defense, then, is this image of the ordinary and innocent conversation, where the voice of the man who writes with a pen on the scroll of state and the voice of the woman preaching without license coincide in simple truth.

More's departure from the chapel leaves him once again in the realm of hearsay, where "many righte worshipfull folkes as well men as women vsed to haue muche comunicacion with her...wherby they faule sometyme into suche talkinge as better were to forbear" (485). Fearing the power of hearsay, More recorded his thoughts in a letter to Barton, in which the faith and purity of their momentary conversation is recorded. That letter being lost, More tells Cromwell he "shall inserte the very copie in this present lettre" (485). The copy, which recounts the dangerous atmosphere of hearsay that surrounds Barton, confirms the innocence of their conversation, and records in writing More's "needless" warning to the maid not to speak of princes' affairs or the state of the realm (466), forensic evidence of More's innocence embedded in a conversation recording a defense on larger grounds. In that conversation, not speaking of such affairs, Barton and More, a man and a woman, speak to the continuing succession of the Word among the faithful.

#### IV. Margaret's Letter: The Scandal of Authority

From its early circulation the August 1534 letter of Margaret Roper to Alice Alington has provoked a scandal of authorship. The letter follows Alice Alington's own letter to Margaret, recounting her abortive intervention on More's behalf with Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas Audley. Margaret's letter in effect transcribes and transmits the only response from More to Alice that survives. But the letter is clearly formulated as written by Margaret to Alice. And the question of "who is the author" is instantly attached to the letter. The preface to the letter that appears in the Bodleian manuscript reads, nonsensically: "But whether this answeere were written by Sir Thomas More in his daughter Ropers name, or by hymself it is not certainly knowen" (514). The *English Workes*, attempting to make sense of this illogical opposition, reads: "But whether this answeere were written by Thomas More in his daughter Ropers name, or by her self it is not certainly knowen." I should like to suggest here that the question of authorship and authority, the attachment of a position to a name—as opposed to conscience, the detachment of a position from the practical circumstances of a human being—plays a part in the themes and action of the letter itself, for it is always against authority that conscience must act. The disputed gender of the pronoun "himself" or "herself," let's imagine, is more interesting as a marker for the important role of sexual difference as signifier in the context of conscience and authority than it is as biographical hint of excessive (near incestuous in Jonathan Crewe's reading) love between father and daughter. Like More's account of his dealings with and about Elizabeth Barton, the letter from Margaret to her sister plays with

scenes of speaking and writing and engages the difference and confluence of male and female voices. As Chambers long ago wrote, the genius of the letter is in the stark audibility of the two voices that emerges from the written page: "The speeches of More are absolute More; and the speeches of Margaret are absolute Margaret. And we have to leave it at that."<sup>3</sup> The interchangeability of authorship—More or Margaret—does not undermine the power of the voices of conscience and love that speak from these pages. Indeed, the manifest uncertainty of authorship affirms the unity of divine purpose in this exchange of words between father and his daughters.

Those voices emerge most compellingly as the dialogue rises to a crescendo of debate, loss, and acceptance at its center and close. But the origin of the voices is distinctly linked to the initial circulation of written letters, for the pretext of Margaret's staging of a platonic dialogue with her father is the delivery of a letter from Alice, and Margaret's letter begins by recording the reading and explication of the contents of that earlier letter. Margaret recounts for Alice the conversation she has had with her father about his health, the ache he suffered in his chest that made the act of writing painful, his kidney problems, a cramp in his legs. There has been no improvement, but he seemed, after the joint recital of the seven psalms and the litany, to be out of pain and able to "sit and talke and be mery" and speak of family affairs. The delivery of the letter, then, provides Margaret with the opportunity to sketch out for her absent sister the circumstances, happy and unhappy, of the father that they share. The letter also provides the pretext for Margaret to press More, for the benefit of Alice and the wider audience of the letter, on the question of whether or not what he represented as conscience might be construed as mere scruple. The letter is the temptation that "maistres Eue," as More, inviting scandal, calls Margaret, has brought at the instigation of the serpent Alice, the scene of the first man and woman and their temptation replayed in the drama of a man debating with his two daughters—one present in person and one in writing—the meaning of life and death and evil and good, the scandalous repositioning of sexual and familiar roles inscribing the poverty of choices open to one who must be a poor father in order to be a good man, or to one who must tempt a good man with a practical course of action in order to save her father's life.

---

<sup>3</sup> R.W. Chambers, "The Continuity of English Prose," in Chambers and Elsie Hitchcock eds. Nicholas Harpsfield, *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas Moore Knight*, Early English Text Society, Original Series, vol 186, London 1932, p. clxii.

More reads the letter with great care: "And when he came to the ende, he began it afresh and read it ouer again. And in the reading he made no maner hast, but aduised it laisorly and poynted euery word" (517). Alice's letter had recounted her conversation in the country with Sir Thomas Audley after Audley has enjoyed an afternoon of hunting and had killed his deer on the estate of Alice and her husband. When the next day Alice approaches Audley for advice to convey to her father, the shallow and grasping Lord Chancellor pulls some tired old chestnuts out of his rhetorical bag, laughing hollowly at his own jokes as he tells two fables attributed to Aesop in order to sport with the spectacle of More's foolishness: a fable of a country of the foolish where the wise seek refuge in caves from a folly-inducing rain and a tale of the empty confessions of a murderous lion and a wolf and of an ass who confesses to the theft of a straw. More's response is to conduct an interrogation of Audley's tales to which he joins a third tale of his own. Margaret's long letter begins by recording her father's commentary on these merry tales as he makes them his own in the retelling.

The foundational trope of the tale of the "rain" of folly is interchangeability. The wise men who seek refuge from a rain that makes men fools return to open ground only to find that the fools are in charge and will not yield rule to wisdom as the wise had expected, and the wise find themselves wishing they had been wet and foolish. More seizes upon that interchangeability in his sustained reading of the tale. He will close by focusing upon wisdom, folly, and the will to rule, a desire that remains only among the foolish. But he begins by taking the "authority" of Aesop's fable away from Audley, for it comes not from Audley's own rhetorical cornucopia, but from the days of his and More's deep and crafty predecessor, Wolsey. As More recounts the story, it is suspended between authors, Aesop himself receding into an originary past, displaced by the tale as told by the three chancellors, Wolsey, dead, More about to die, and Audley tenuously in the seat of power.

The scene shifts from the prison cell to Wolsey's court:

It was a tale so often tolde amonge the Kinges Counsaile by my Lorde Cardinal when his Grace was chauncellor, that I cannot lightlye forgette it. For of trouth in tymes past when variance fell betwene the Emperour and the French Kynge...ther were in the Counsaile sometime sondry opinions, in which some were of the minde...that we should sitt still...but euermore against that way, my Lorde vsed this fable...that if we wolde be so wise that we wolde sit in pece while the fooles fought, they woulde not fayle after, to make peace and agree and

fall at length all vpon vs. I wil not dispute vpon his Graces counsaile, and I trust we neuer made warre but as reason wolde. But yet this fable did in his daies helpe the Kyng and the realme to spende many a faire peny. But that geare is passed and his Grace is gone, our Lord assoyle his soule. (518)

Facing his own fall and Audley's callow recital of this old tale, More looks back to the days when Wolsey's power had authorized the tale in arbitrary support of war, as Audley now does in advocating arbitrary compromise to a fallen man. More thus empties Audley's recital of any moral authority—it is not even his story but that of his powerful, calculating, and miscalculating predecessor—and thus prepares the way for More, himself Lord Chancellor once, to mobilize the tale to his own ends, speaking not for war but for the peace that passes all understanding.

In More's own rendition, there is no escaping the rain of folly. The wise and the foolish are entirely interchangeable:

And therfor shal I now come to this Esops fable, as my Lorde full merily laide it forth for me. If those wisemen, Megge, when the raine was gone at their coming abrode, where they founde all men fooles, wished themselues fooles to, because they could not rule them, than semeth it, that the folish rain was so sore a showre, that euen thorowe the grounde it sanke into their caues, and powred downe vpon their heades, and wette them to the skyenne, and made them more nodies than them that stode abrode. (518)

Indeed they were fools before the rain came, for imagining that the wise could ever "rule" the unruly fools. More casts his own lot, as his own name suggests and Erasmus had memorialized in the *Moria*, with the fools. "But I trust my Lorde rekeneth me amonge the foLEs, and so reken I my selfe, as my name is in Greke." Having been once by the King's grace a ruler, as Wolsey once was, and as Audley now is, More is no longer among those who wish to rule, but a fool for Christ's sake.

More's rendition of Wolsey's set piece makes Audley's condescending rehearsal of the tale seem small, a mimic piping his master's tale misunderstood and ill rehearsed. He is not the author and has no authority—a theme that is made explicit in More's critique of the second tale that the inept Audley attributes to Aesop:

The second fable, Marget, semeth not to be Esopes. For by that matter goeth all vpon confession, it semeth to be fayned since Christendome began. For in Grece before Christes daies they vsed not confession, no more the men than, than the beastes nowe. And Esope was a Greke, and died longe ere Christ was borne. But what? who made it, maketh litle mater. Nor I enuy not that Esope hath the name. (520)

More's deft humanist critique of the fable attributed to Aesop both shows his own superior learning and dismisses the name of the author as the source of authority, for it is not the name More, or Aesop, or Audley that validates the story but the content and the understanding, as More demonstrates by summarizing how the tale of the ass who confessed the theft of a straw while the murderous lion and wolf remained silent might apply to his own "scruple." He then raises his own defense of his action—he will not follow the authority of others, nay not of John Fisher himself were he to swear the oath but only the dictates of his own conscience:

And I suppose well, Margarett, as you tolde me right now, that so thinketh many moo beside, as well spiritual as temporall, and that euen of those, that for their learning and their vertue my self not a lytle esteme...But though they did, Daughter, that wolde not make much to me, not though I should see my Lorde of Rochester say the same, and swere the oth hymselfe before me too. (520)

When Margaret recites More's own tale it will come out slightly skewed: "I wene I can skant tell it you againe, because it hangeth vpon some armes and ceremonies of the law" (521). The name of the court (*piéd poudré*) at Bartholomew Fair (for More as for Jonson a site of universal folly) is remembered in Margaret's mind as "a court of pye sir William Pounder," a visitor to More's house. The hero of the tale, a plain country juror who votes his conscience in spite of the threat of ostracism from his fellow jurors, a band of northern men hand-picked by the plaintiff, a northern man himself, is a man without a proper Christian or family name. With his name, the tale-telling that is filtered through the merged voices of Margaret and More passes from the authority of Aesop or of Wolsey into the slant truth of allegory. He is called Company: "therefore must ye pardon me from passinge as you passe for good cumpany. For the passage of my poor soule passeth all good cumpany" (523). Released from "authors," conscience—a voice that needs no name to back it—speaks on its own, suspended in dialogue between the male and female voices of a deep father and a loving daughter, both writing "with a coal."