

THE HARPY IN MORE'S HOUSEHOLD ¹: WAS IT LADY ALICE ?

Recently scholars have begun to revise the traditional view of Alice Middleton, the second wife of Thomas More, as a shrew. Ruth Norrington in her biography, and Conal Condren, Albert J. Geritz, and I in articles have challenged this interpretation of her character. ² One of the problems in overturning this view is that some of the evidence for it can be found in the correspondence of Erasmus. As Condren has lamented in *Moreana*, « ... even if a rehabilitation were achieved, it would ... leave anomalies ; Erasmus, for example, seems to have got on well enough with More's first wife. » While this comment has validity, it is also true that, when all of the references of Erasmus to Alice are read in association with each other and not selectively taken out of context, they give, on the whole, as Germain Marc'hadour has asserted, « a good impression of her » as the wife of Thomas. They could be interpreted in a still more positive way if two translations from the Erasmus correspondence, which have been used to buttress the traditional view of her as a loquacious woman, are recognized as incorrect and are no longer used as evidence for her character.

One of these translations has already been discussed in my *Rendezvous* article. I shall briefly review it here and then turn to the second translation, which is the subject of this paper. In his 1519 letter to Ulrich von Hutten, Erasmus echoes More's description of Alice as *nec bella admodum nec puella*. Literally translated as « neither a very pretty nor young woman, » the phrase is absolutely correct ; indisputably, Alice close to forty years of age at the time of their marriage, was not young and pretty. Although unflattering, this unvarnished and straightforward admission should not be taken out of its context and interpreted as a husbandly slur or even as evidence that she was ugly. ³

Unfortunately, it has frequently been translated as « neither a pearl nor a girl. » This version forces a vulgar rhyme by rendering the adjective *bella* into colloquial or slang English as « pearl ». Because Erasmus, in addition to quoting her husband, went on to credit Alice with good housekeeping, it can reasonably be argued that he, himself, might have thought of her as a « pearl » of a housekeeper. In the context of this letter at least, he would not have made the broader generalization suggested by this faulty version of his words. ⁴

The second misleading translation and its subsequent interpretation as an allusion to Alice is in a letter of Andreas Ammonius. An Italian friend of Erasmus, Ammonius, who had royal and papal employment, had been lodging with the More family for some time. On October 27, 1511 he wrote Erasmus, then at Cambridge University, that his recent move from the More household meant he no longer had to look at *tes harpuias to ankylon rhomphon* (a transliteration of the words he wrote in Greek). This phrase, surviving only in a printed version, is in garbled Greek. While indisputably, the genitive, *tes harpuias*, must be rendered « of the harpy, » the translation of *rhomphon* as « crooked beak » is forced, for there is no such Greek noun. The translation of *rhomphon* as beak is based upon the hypothesis that what Ammonius really intended was the neuter *rhamphos*, which means « crooked beak. » Since the adjective, *ankylon*, means crooked, it is reasonable to speculate that Ammonius could have mistakenly written *rhomphon*.

The suggestion that he was referring to the nose of Lady Alice More, even though she was not specifically named in the letter, ⁵ is far less plausible. First, even if the clause could be read in the traditional way, Alice did not have a hooked nose, as even a cursory glance at Holbein's famous sketch of the More family quickly shows. ⁶ Secondly, and more importantly, it is not likely that Ammonius would compare her behavior to that of this mythological beast. To prove that she was not the harpy, it will be necessary to look at the variety of ways that the word has been defined and to establish, on the basis of contemporary evidence, what it probably meant to Erasmus and Ammonius. With its meaning determined, it will be possible to compare and contrast the known attributes of Alice with those of a harpy. Finally, alternative identities for the creature will be proposed.

In identifying Alice as the anonymous harpy, scholars have intended apparently to indicate that she was a talkative person, a shrew. They have suggested that Ammonius made this « ungentlemanly allusion » to her nose because she was unfriendly to him and had not « welcomed her husband's friends » as guests in her home. They have taken for granted that it was her move into the More household as the new bride of Thomas in the autumn of 1511 that caused Ammonius to seek other lodgings. Not only are these interpretations speculative but they are also based on two erroneous assumptions. First, the charge that Alice wanted to prevent Ammonius or any other of her husband's friends from lodging in the household is probably incorrect. Since Ammonius, who had steady employment, had been living with More for several months

at a time when rooms were relatively scarce in London, there is more reason to believe that he was a paying lodger than that he was a free-lodging guest. It was not unusual in Tudor England for single men to lease rooms in the households of urban friends. ⁷

Secondly, this interpretation assumes that, when they used the imagery of the Greek harpy, these humanists had in mind a talkative woman. But this definition is merely a colloquial, modern one. A survey of English dictionaries from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries reveals that there are two words with similar spellings but with totally dissimilar origins and definitions. From the Anglo-Saxon comes the word *harp*, which has, itself, two different meanings. As a noun it is the musical instrument; as a verb it refers to dwelling upon a subject. The person who plays the harp or who speaks frequently about a subject is thus known as a harper. ⁸ The second word, *harpy*, which means snatcher or robber, has Greek roots and has sometimes been confused by scholars with the Anglo-Saxon *harper*. The Greek *harpy* is based on mythology, and to understand it properly requires a smattering knowledge of classical literature.

The works of three Greek authors are particularly relevant. In the *Iliad*, Homer refers to the horses of Achilles as the children of Podarge (swiftfoot), who is usually identified as a harpy. In the *Odyssey*, he has Penelope talk about the stormwinds that snatch away children. The notion of winds, of fast movements, and of snatchers or robbers gave rise to the more clearly defined mythological creatures, the « death-demons » called harpies. In the century after Homer, Hesiod identified two harpies, Okypete (swiftwing) and Aello (stormwind), whose wings kept pace with the blowing winds. The third important reference is in the *Argonautica* of Apollonius Rhodius who characterizes them as ministers of divine vengeance sent by Zeus to punish Phineus. Whenever the poor man tried to eat, these creatures swooped down and snatched away his food, leaving behind only befouled scraps. ⁹

Although several important Roman scholars wrote about the harpies, the description of Virgil was and is the best-known. In the *Aeneid* he synthesizes the information about them, commenting upon their greed, their plundering ways, their foul odor, their movement with the wind, and their association with death. He tells of how Aeneas and his colleagues encountered the winged monsters, who swooped down from their dens, seizing food, and defiling everything with their filth. One, Celaeno (the black one) predicted that Aeneas would reach Italy but only after he had suffered great hunger and starvation. Later, Aeneas found the harpies in hell, sitting beside the gorgons. ¹⁰

These stories have somewhat conflicting statements about the appearance of the creatures. While Hesiōd bestowed upon them lovely hair, Apollonius may have intended to give them « crooked beaks. » Interestingly, instead of *rhamphe*, he employs *gamphelei*, which means simply beak. In his narrative, the beaks clearly imply those of ravenous birds of prey like eagles rather than talkative ones like scolding crows. This description, however, was not in the mainstream of Greek thought. In contemporary artwork, except that the harpy was always depicted as the « winged figure of a woman », there was no other « single distinguishing feature. » It was not until Roman times that the harpies were depicted as birds with the faces of women. By then they were often confused with sirens, who not only lacked crooked beaks but also had rather pleasant faces.¹¹ Moreover, from the middle ages through the Renaissance, the usual depiction is that of Virgil, whose harpies are winged creatures with the countenances of maidens ever pale with hunger : they also have bellies dropping filth and clawed hands. Dante, who places them in the second ring of the seventh circle of his inferno, follows Virgil, his guide through hell, by emphasizing their wings, their talons, and their bellies.¹²

The great Roman poet also influenced Renaissance notions of classical mythology. His work was a model for Torquato Tasso as it had been for Dante. In his brief reference in *Utopia* in 1516, More called these monsters *Celaenos*, a proper name that had been given to one of them in the *Aeneid*. Sir Thomas Elyot's 1538 dictionary, which also accepted Virgil's synthesis of them, was extremely helpful, as it indicated how the qualities of the creatures could be applied to contemporary individuals. Describing them as monstrous birds with maidens' faces and huge talons, he explained : « ... wherfore men that be ravenous and great gatherers of goodes be named sometyme Harpye. » (It is noteworthy that, although the harpies have female faces, their name, according to Elyot, could be applied to the male sex.) In 1556 Vincenzo Cartari added that the harpies, who had beautiful faces, were divine messengers who punished mortals for their sins.¹³

Such, then, is the context in which Ammonius made his comment. It seems likely that the Virgilian one dominated his thinking about harpies, and the way he expected Erasmus to understand his cryptic remark about the creature. As Margaret Mann Phillips has pointed out, in poetry Virgil had the most important influence on Erasmus.¹⁴ While the letter of 1511 may be the only comment of Ammonius about harpies, there are other references to them in the correspondence of Erasmus. In 1500, after the Dutchman had narrowly escaped from some French robbers and murderers, his friend, Jacob

Batt, in a letter about the incident called these evil people harpies. In his adage, *A Mortuo Tributum Exigere*, printed in 1515, Erasmus, when referring to the greed of priests, princes and those who « exact dues from the dead, » labelled the collectors of tithes on wine as harpies. In 1524, he said that creatures who prey upon the goods of the deceased were harpies.¹⁵

To Erasmus and Ammonius the harpies were greedy gatherers of goods, enriching themselves through the death and misfortune of their victims. The actions rather than the personal features of individuals earned them the characterization of harpy. Lady Alice neither behaved like this mythological creature nor even vaguely resembled it in looks. She did not swoop down upon the More household to rob or to plunder and then to disappear again into her den. When, one month after Jane's burial, she moved into the house permanently as Thomas' second wife, she not only added herself and at least one child to the number living there but she also, as a wealthy merchant's widow, enhanced the family's financial standing. Neither was she greedy or ravenous for food -- her new husband was later to show her more interested in religious discussion than in eating dinner. In personal appearance, the Virgilian harpy had a maiden face, wings, talons, and a foul odor. While Alice was clearly not a maiden in 1511, and, of course, had no wings, no one has ever suggested that she had talons or was filthy. If, in fact, Ammonius had meant to refer to her as a shrew, Cerberus, the monster with at least three heads (with, therefore, at least three tongues), who defended the gateway to Hades, was a more obvious choice than a harpy : in 1497, Erasmus himself had characterized a very talkative person as Cerberus.¹⁶

Having determined that her contemporaries would not have thought of Alice as a harpy, it is now necessary to point out the significance of this finding. While many modern scholars, some of whom still maintain that she was a shrew, have doubted that she was a harpy, most have continued to assume that Ammonius did, indeed, intend to libel her as one. A continuing reliance upon this incorrect assumption is convenient and useful, for Ammonius' October 27, 1511 letter to Erasmus is the only extant evidence for dating both the death of Thomas' first wife and his marriage to Alice. If when the letter was written, Thomas was already married to his second wife, identified as the harpy, then it follows that Jane probably died some time in the late summer, 1511. When it is accepted that Ammonius was not referring to Alice, then the present dating system must be revised. Discarding the harpy allusion,

the first extant reference to Alice as the wife of Thomas does not occur until 1516 while the last reference to Jane remains in May, 1511. Those two dates leave More scholars with the conclusion that some time during that five-year period Jane died and Thomas remarried.¹⁷

On the basis of the Renaissance understanding of harpy, it is possible to speculate that in October, 1511 someone in the More household, possibly Jane, died. It could have been her death (or someone's death) that changed the family routine and created the need for Ammonius to seek other lodgings. Often at a time of tragedy, or so contemporaries complained, greedy creatures appeared to carry off the family's goods. If someone had died, then Ammonius' harpy could easily have been an individual normally associated with death, possibly a surgeon, an embalmer, a mourner, or even a priest. A priest is a possible candidate for the harpy for at least two reasons. First, in early modern Europe, as Philippe Ariès has observed, from the moment of death the deceased belonged to the church: all the preparations for the funeral, including the coffining and the celebration of a series of masses, were begun in the home. Secondly, in the already quoted adage « To exact tribute from a dead person » Erasmus was to lament in 1515, only four years after Ammonius' reference to the harpy, that some greedy priests took advantage of death to exact a number of payments from the family of the deceased.¹⁸

While the creature's identification should remain in the realm of surmise, my solution has the advantage of being based solidly on the Renaissance understanding of classical mythology. Even if both Erasmus and Ammonius had believed, as do some modern scholars, that Alice More was a talkative woman, they would not have labelled her a harpy. That word they reserved for robbers and greedy men.

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NOTES

1. A version of this paper was given at the Eighteenth International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, Michigan, May, 1983. I wish to thank the editors of *Moreana* for many helpful suggestions and comments about material in early drafts of this paper.

2. Ruth Norrington, *In the Shadow of a Saint: Lady Alice More* (Waddesdon: The Kylin Press, 1983); Albert J. Geritz, « More's Remarriage: Or, Dame Alice Vindicated, » *Indiana Social Studies Quarterly* XXXVII, 2 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 47-56; Conal Condren, « Dame Alice More and Xanthippe: Sister to Mistress Quickly? » *Moreana*, XVI, 64 (March 1980), 25-37, especially p. 63, n. 5; Retha Warnicke, « The Making of a Shrew: The Legendary History of Alice More, » *Rendezvous*, XV (Spring, 1980), 25-37, » reviewed by G. Marc'hadour in *Moreana*, XIX, 74 (June, 1982), 56.

3. *Opus Epistolarum Des Erasmi Roterodami*, ed. P.S. and H.M. Allen (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906-1958), IV, July 23, 1519 (ep. 999); Warnicke, pp. 25-37; for a new suggestion about Alice's age, see Norrington, p. 17.

4. P.S. Allen and H.M. Allen, *Sir Thomas More. Selections from his English Works and from the Lives by Erasmus and Roper* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), p. 6.

5. Allen I, October, 1511 (ep. 436), p. 476, note 47; those believing this was a reference to Alice may have relied upon the comment of Cresacre More, who in his biography of his ancestor has Thomas say to his children: « Doe you not perceave that your mothers nose standeth somewhat awry? » There is no Tudor source for this story, which was, in any case, probably only a figure of speech. See Cresacre More, *The Life of Sir Thomas More* (Menston, Eng.: Scolar Press, 1971), p. 245; see also R.W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), p. 111. My thanks to Stephen Batalden, History Department, Arizona State University for his assistance in this Greek translation; for English equivalents of the Greek, see the standard *Greek-English Lexicon*, compiled by H.G. Liddell and Robert Scott, ninth edition with supplement (Oxford, 1968).

6. For a copy of the Holbein, see Norrington, frontispiece.

7. Allen, I, 476, note 47; E.E. Reynolds, *The Field is Won: The Life and Death of St. Thomas More* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1968), p. 77; for a comment about lodgers, see Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 28. The idea for this suggestion probably comes from the letter, dated August 14, 1516 (Allen, II ep. 451), in which Erasmus said he thought Alice was tired of him as a guest. Read in conjunction with others he wrote just before and just after, that letter shows Erasmus somewhat disappointed with all of his English friends, even regretting that he had accepted an invitation to visit Bishop Fisher.

8. Edward Phillips, *The New World of English Words, 1658* (Menston, Eng.: Scolar Press, 1969); John Kersey, *A New English Dictionary, 1702* (Menston, Eng.: Scolar Press, 1969); Thomas Dyche and William Pardon, *A New General English Dictionary, 1740* (Verlag: Georg Olms, 1972); *Chambers' Twentieth Century Dictionary*, comp. Thomas Davidson, rev. J. Liddell Geddie (Edinburgh: W. & R. Chambers, 1901); *The Century Dictionary*, rev. (N.Y.: Century Co., 1914); *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1971), I.

9. For a discussion of the references to harpies, see Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1979), pp. 75-76 and 169-170 ; Jane Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cleveland : The World, 1959), pp. 164-179 ; Michael Grant and John Hazel, *Gods and Mortals in Classical Mythology* (Springfield, Mass. : G. & C. Merriam, 1973), pp. 195-196 ; H.J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (N.Y. : Dutton, 1959), pp. 28 and 66 ; *The Complete Works of Homer*, tr. Andrew Lang, et al. (N.Y. : The Modern Library, 1950), I-xix (p. 366) and O-x (p. 313) ; *Hesiod*, tr. Richmond Lattimore (Ann Arbor : University of Michigan Press, 1959), T-267 (p. 139) ; Apollonius Rhodius, *The Argonautica*, tr. R.C. Seaton (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1912), II-188 (p. 115).

10. Rose, pp. 28 and 66 ; *Virgil's Works : The Aeneid, Eclogues, and Georgics*, tr. J.W. Mackail (N.Y. : The Modern Library, 1950), A-III, 187-303 (pp. 49-51) and A-VI, 270-309 (p. 111) ; see also *Valerius Flaccus*, tr. J. Mozley (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1958), 4 : 452-460 (p. 219).

11. *Hesiod*, T-267 (p. 139) ; Apollonius Rhodius, II-188 (p. 115) ; for the quotations see Cecil Smith, « Harpies in Greek Art, » *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, XIII (1892-1893), 103-114 ; the harpies on a bowl from Aegina, c. 620 B.C., for example, both have large noses, one of them hooked, the other straight. For a photograph of the vase, see Karl Schefold, *Myth and Legend in Early Greek Art* (N.Y. : Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1966), Pl. 64a. An example of the confusion of the harpies with sirens is the dispute about whether the creatures on a tomb found in the acropolis of Xanthus, Lycia, late 6th century B.C. are really harpies as they have been identified or are, in fact, sirens. For a picture of the figures, see Joel Schmidt, *Larousse Greek and Roman Mythology*, ed. Seth Benardete (N.Y. : McGraw-Hill, 1980), p. 117.

12. Douglas Bush, « Virgil and Milton, » *Classical Journal* XLVII (1951-1952), 178 ; Gilbert Highet, *The Classical Tradition : Greek and Roman Influences on Western Literature* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 70-78 ; Virgil, A-III, 270-309 (p. 111) ; Alighieri Dante, *Inferno*, tr. Allen Mandelbaum (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1980), XIII, 10-15 (p. 106).

13. For a discussion of Renaissance dictionaries see DeWitt T. Starnes and E.W. Talbert, *Classical Myth and Legend in Renaissance Dictionaries* (Chapel Hill, N.C. : University of North Carolina Press, 1955), pp. 11-18. Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered*, tr. Edward Fairfax, ed. Henry Morley, rev. ed. (N.Y. : Colonial Press, 1901), IV (pp. 62-83) ; *Utopia*, ed. Edward Surtz and J.H. Hexter, *CW4* (1965), p. 53 ; *Celenos* is Englished as « harpies » in the edition of *Utopia* by H.V.S. Ogden, (N.Y. : Appleton-Century Crofts, 1949), p. 4 ; Sir Thomas Elyot, *Dictionary, 1538* (Menston, Eng. : Scolar Press, 1970) ; Vincenzo Cartari, *The fountain of ancient fiction, 1556*, tr. Richard Linche (London : Adam Islip, 1599), pp. 111-112.

14. For information about Ammonius, see *Erasmus and Cambridge*, tr. D.F.S. Thomson, intro. H.C. Porter (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1963), p. 215 ; and E.E. Reynolds, *Thomas More and Erasmus* (N.Y. : Fordham University Press, 1965), p. 89 ; Apollonius' *Argonautica* was printed in Florence in 1496 ; Gilbert Highet, pp. 70-78 and 148 ; Dante, XIII, 10-15 (p. 106) ; *The Adages of Erasmus*, ed. Margaret Mann Phil-

lips (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1964), pp. 92 and 393-403 ; but for mythology Erasmus recommended Homer, Hesiod, and Ovid. See Margaret Mann Phillips, « Erasmus and the Classics, » *Erasmus*, ed. T.A. Dorey (Albuquerque : University of New Mexico Press, 1970), pp. 11, 18-19 and 89-101.

15. Allen, I, Feb. 1500 (ep. 120) and V, April 2 1524 (ep. 1437). As an indication of how the meaning of harpy has changed since the sixteenth century, it is interesting to note that R.A.B. Mynors and D.F.S. Thomson called them « vampires » in *The Correspondence of Erasmus* (Toronto : University of Toronto Press, 1975), I (ep. 119 and 120) ; they may have been aware that Arthur Fairbanks called them « hideous vampires » in *The Mythology of Greece and Rome* (N.Y. : Appleton & Co., 1908), p. 169 ; for the comment about priests, see *The Adages*, pp. 226-227.

16. We know of More's remarrying within a month of Jane's burial through a letter written by the priest who buried her : see James Gairdner, « A Letter Concerning Bishop Fisher and Sir Thomas More, » *English Historical Review*, VII (1892), 713-715 ; for Thomas' comment that Alice enjoyed religious discussions, see *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. Ed. Thomas Lawler, Germain Marc'hadour, and Richard Marius, *CW6* (1981), pp. 185-186 ; Allen, IV, July 23, 1519 (ep. 999) ; to those who might argue that she appeared greedy after the death of Thomas, the response must be that in her old age she suddenly found herself facing poverty and destitution. Her actions should not be described as heaping up riches ; for Erasmus' reference to Cerberus, see Allen I, July, 1497 (ep. 58) ; see also Maurice Bloomfield, *Cerberus, The Dog of Hades* (Chicago : The Open Court Publishing Co., 1905), p. 7.

17. Reynolds, *The Field*, p. 77 did doubt that Alice was a harpy although he conceded that she may have « used her tongue » to get Ammonius out of the house ; for the references to these two wives, see, for example, Chambers, pp. 108-111 ; Allen, I, October 27, 1511 (ep. 236) ; May 19, 1511 (ep. 221) ; and II, August 14, 1516 (ep. 451).

18. *The Adages*, pp. 226-227 and 229 ; for a discussion of the social customs surrounding death in early modern Europe, see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, tr. Helen Weaver (N.Y. : Alfred A. Knopf, 1981), pp. 165-175 ; calling priests vultures, Erasmus ridiculed the traditional mourning and funeral practices of Christendom. See *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, tr. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 368-369.

