Other Details of the Life and Death of Thomas More

So exemplary was the life of Thomas More, and so illustrious his martyrdom, that I decided I ought to supplement what I said in the previous chapter with some things from the many that Thomas Stapleton, an Englishman and a doctor in theology, has compiled in the life of the man that he published after our history saw the light of day. Now, two advantages may be derived from this. The first, that lawyers, judges, ministers, the favorites of princes, and the governors of commonwealths will have a perfect model to imitate; the other, to teach us that the life of this exceptional man made him worthy to die shedding his unspotted blood for that Lord he had served so marvelously, and that it is no wonder that King Henry strove by so many means to win him over and bend him to his will, since the eyes of the entire kingdom were upon him, nor that one so firmly rooted in God should resist so many bitter blows with such valor.

So, Thomas More was born, as we said, in London, of noble stock, although not of the most exalted or influential. His father was named John More, a serious and even-tempered gentleman who had received honorable posts from the king and who raised his son in the fear of our Lord with such diligence that he thought of nothing but the exercises of his studies and of virtue, and this with such great obedience and respect for his father, that he never afforded him displeasure nor disgrace—to the contrary, even when he was an adult, and chancellor of the realm, whenever they met in public he begged his blessing on his knees, so great was the reverence he felt for him. While yet a child, More sought to combine his studies of eloquence with devotion and piety, and he worked harder to be a good Christian than to be a good scholar: he often

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1 This entire chapter was added in the 1595 edition. Rather than flood the reader with Latin and/or English quotations from Stapleton’s *Tres Thomae*, I will place the relevant page references in footnotes at the end of each passage.

2 The Sussex-born and Oxford-educated Thomas Stapleton received his doctorate in theology from Douai University in 1571. His *Tres Thomae* was the first printed biography of More. Highley, *Catholics Writing the Nation*, 26–27. Sheils, “Polemic as Piety,” 81.

3 John More (c.1451–1530) had received several judicial appointments from both Henry VII and Henry VIII, as well as a knighthood in 1520. Eric Ives, “More, Sir John (c.1451–1530),” in *ODNB*, 39:51–53, here 52.

mortified his flesh with a hairshirt, or slept on the floor with a piece of wood for a pillow, and his longest slumbers were four or five hours. He fasted and watched frequently, and this with such discretion that as much as possible he kept hidden anything that might win him praise or a good reputation. At this time, he wrote a pious and scholarly treatise on the four last things. He eagerly heard sermons from preachers who spoke from the heart and moved their audience with deeds and words to a holy fear of the Lord. After having been trained in the Latin and Greek languages and achieving true distinction in both, he gave himself up to the study of the other liberal arts, in all of which he excelled. Then he dedicated himself to the study of law, especially the common law unique to the kingdom of England, by which cases are generally decided and judged in that realm. This he read and applied as a lawyer with great integrity. The first thing he advised parties who came to him was to reconcile, and when he could not achieve this, he requested them to explain the matter in detail, and if it seemed unjust to him, he urged them to abandon it, and if they absolutely refused to do so, he would not put his hand to something that he deemed baseless or wicked. But if he thought the suit just, he strove to conclude it with the greatest speed and the least harm to all parties possible.

From his youth More had a strong inclination to join the Franciscan Order, but after considering it at length he decided that though the religious state was more perfect and sound in and of itself, and our Lord does a great kindness to those he calls to it and gives perseverance in it, yet for him (moved by private reasons), that of marriage was more suitable and apt. It may be that by this path God chose to set him up as a mirror for married persons and to teach us through More’s life and death that there can be martyrs in, and his majesty possesses surpassing servants in, every walk of life. So it was that he first married a most virtuous maiden, by whom he had three daughters and a son, whom he raised in the true fear of God and to whom he taught the liberal arts. When his wife died, he married for a second time, more to have some to look after his children and household than for any other reason. In marriage, More’s vigilance and piety was miraculous, governing his house and clan with a gentle Christianity and a Christian gentleness. In his house there was neither

5 Stapleton, Tres Thomae, 18; Stapleton, Thomas More, 9.
6 For More’s unfinished treatise The Four Last Things (1522), see More, Complete Works, 1:128–82.
7 Stapleton, Tres Thomae, 20; Stapleton, Thomas More, 10–11.
8 Stapleton, Tres Thomae, 25–26; Stapleton, Thomas More, 15–16.
9 Stapleton, Tres Thomae, 26–27; Stapleton, Thomas More, 17.
10 Stapleton, Tres Thomae, 18–19; Stapleton, Thomas More, 9–10.