Sir Thomas More as Paterfamilias*

by Richard L. DeMolen

“For I assure you that, rather than allow my children to be idle and slothful, I would make a sacrifice of wealth, and bid adieu to other cares and business, to attend to my children and my family, amongst whom none is more dear to me than yourself, my beloved daughter.” Thomas More to Margaret More [Roper], 1518.

“The husband and wife of a household constitute a senate, as it were, children the nobles, servants the common people.” Erasmus of Rotterdam, 1526.

“Therefore he [a child] is no different from a slave so long as the time of his imprisonment and captivity lasts, that is, so long as he is under his taskmasters and superintendents.” Martin Luther, 1535.1

Although these three quotations by prominent sixteenth-century spokesmen represent divergent views, they reflect a common interest in the role of children in society. Sir Thomas More penned his letter to Margaret More [Roper] while he served as royal councillor to Henry VIII. More’s concern for his family’s welfare is reinforced by his authorship of a meditational fragment for their consideration which he began about 1520, titled “Treatise on the Four Last Things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, and Hell.” More’s declared willingness to divest himself of his wealth and position in government attests to the importance he placed on his role as paterfamilias, even though such recent critics as Sir Geoffrey Elton and Richard Marius have underscored More’s politically ambitious nature.2 It was at Chelsea that More established a hermetically sealed cocoon in which to cultivate Christian virtues among his offspring and charges.

* I wish to thank Professor Albert Rabil, Jr., for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.


2 See Yoshinori Suzuki’s article, “Thomas More on the Statesman and His Own Choice,” in The Keizai Gaku: Annual Report of the Economic Society, Tohoku University, 50-3 (February 1989), p. 103, where he concludes: “Thus More neither entered into Henry’s service unwillingly, nor willingly in order to make a career, but did so to try to bring his special talents to the creation of the ideal statesman urged by his sense of duty.”
In contrast to More's view of children as a parental responsibility to be treated with affection, Erasmus of Rotterdam turned to Roman models of the past to understand the pivotal role of parents as the law-making body within the family and servants as domestic aids in the upbringing of children. It was the child—as the personification of innocence—who enjoyed a special status in the Renaissance household. Erasmus insisted that the child had to be the central figure in the development of family life in the sixteenth century. The child's physical, mental, and moral growth must be the principal concern of responsible parents. The prince of humanists wanted children enticed to learning and virtue by presenting information in an attractive format and by taking into consideration individual differences in the learner. Writing to his six-year-old godson, Johann Erasmius Froben, son of the Basel printer, on 28 February 1522 in the form of a preface to his revised *Familiarium colloquiorum formulae* (Basel, 1522), Erasmus noted:

> For I have taken it into my head to become a child again for some days for your benefit, as I schooled my pen and my matter to suit your tender years.

Erasmus declared that all parents must know the art of raising children, an art far more difficult than that proudly professed by trainers of mules and horses. Erasmus used the model of the Christ child teaching in the temple as his ideal and enjoined his readers to imitate the characteristics associated with the figure of the twelve-year-old boy who was subject to his parents but not when it came to his own divine mission in the world. He also penned this prayer for grammar-school boys:

> O Jesus Christ, as a boy of 12 years, you sat in the temple teaching the very teachers. The Father's voice came from heaven and gave you the authority to teach mankind when he said: "This is my Beloved Son in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him."

Relying on divine providence, Erasmus firmly believed that children must not be forced into some predetermined cast by authoritarian parents, but must be given rein to develop their individual abilities.

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