# The "secret of his heart": What Was Thomas More's?

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This article studies the background and meaning of More's last words to his daughter Margaret: that "she had long known the secret of his heart." Close attention is paid to their last letters of 1534-1535 where More uses similar expressions.
**Keywords: Margaret Roper, final meeting, More's mind, final letters, Paris Newsletter, Reginald Pole, Harpsfield, Ro: Ba:, Stapleton, joy**

*Cet article étudie le contexte et le sens des dernières paroles de More à sa fille Margaret qui affirment qu' « elle connaît depuis longtemps le secret de son cœur. » Une étude précise des dernières lettres de 1534-1535 met en lumière les passages où More utilise des expressions similaires.*
***Mots-clés : Margaret Roper, dernière rencontre, l'esprit de More, dernières lettres, Lettre de Paris, Reginald Pole, Harpsfield, Ro: Ba:, Stapleton, joie***

Este artículo estudia el contexto y significado de las últimas palabras de More a su hija Margaret según las cuales "ella hacía tiempo conocía el secreto de su corazón". Se prestará especial atención a las cartas de ambos en 1534-1535, pues More usa expresiones similares,
**Palabras clave: Margaret Roper, último encuentro, la mente de More, últimas cartas, Paris Newsletter, Reginald Pole, Harpsfield, Ro: Ba:, Stapleton, gozo**

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Five days before his death,[1] after Meg broke through the guards to embrace her father, Thomas More "bade her have patience, for it was God's will and she had long known the secret of his heart" (*TMSB* 354/36–37). What was that secret? It was not political; it was not the point of conscience that he revealed to no one before his trial on July 1. But what was it? And how long had Margaret known it?

For sure, Meg knew this "secret" at least eight months earlier. In Letter 210, written between late August and 3 November 1534,[2] More wrote to Margaret that he had "disclosed unto you the very secret bottom of my mind."[3] It is unlikely that Meg knew this secret prior to the soul-searching, late-August 1534 conversation, recorded in Letter 205, when she for at least the third time[4] played "mistress Eve" to persuade her father to "swear against his conscience" (Letter 205/50–51, 54; or *TMSB* 320/5–13). During and after that

[1] More's execution was 6 July 1535 and his trial was July 1; his daughter broke through the guards just before More's entry to the Tower after the trial.

[2] Because Letter 210 refers to the upcoming Parliament that convened on 3 November 1534, its date is generally considered to be September/October 1534. Letter 205, which opens *A Dialogue on Conscience*, is dated August 1534.

[3] Letter 210/133–134. Here and throughout this essay, the letter and line numbers refer to Roger's 1947 edition of More's *Correspondence* and to the version that appears in *A Thomas More Source Book* (*TMSB*). An online version with standardized spelling following Roger's numbering can be found at www.thomasmorestudies.org.

"Secret" is used here in the sense of "inmost" as seen by More's characteristic use of the doublet "bottom" meaning what More expresses elsewhere as the "ground and foundation" or "sure ground" of his thinking (e.g. *A Dialogue of Comfort*, *CW* 12/12, 75/8.

[4] For evidence of Margaret's "repeated attempts" to so persuade her father, see *A Dialogue on Conscience* 320/10–13 or Letter 205/26–29. Rastell states that her first appeal was a ruse (Letter 202, editor's headnote added by Rastell)—a position John Guy seems to accept (2008, 235–6). In contrast, Stapleton describes Margaret's all-too-serious persuasions as "More's greatest trial" (156).

conversation of August 1534, however, she came to know the "secret bottom" of her father's mind—or so this essay proposes.

## More's words to Margaret on 1 July 1535 about the "secret of his heart"

We have several early reports of More's final meeting with Margaret. The best-known and most authoritative report is the simplest: the version given above, from the Paris Newsletter, which was the earliest account based on actual witnesses and published within days or weeks of More's execution.[5]

The next account, chronologically, is given by Reginald Pole, who was not present; as a close relative to Henry VIII, and as one with a Lancastrian claim to the English throne, Pole had decided to stay in Europe during these politically dangerous years. Given his position and his connections, however, he had access to the best available firsthand information. He reports in his *Defense of the Unity of the Church* that More told Meg "that she knew the secrets of his heart" and "that he should truly be congratulated that God had considered him worthy to suffer on behalf of devotion and religion" (229). The addition of this seeming boast that he should be congratulated might seem uncharacteristic of More, who in his Tower writings wrote about the dangers of pride and the foolhardy presumption of seeking martyrdom.[6] Yet it might be explained as More's attempt to alleviate the emotionally distraught condition of his sensitive daughter; rather than boasting, he may simply have been

[5] This French newsletter "was widely and immediately circulated in Paris" (Harpsfield 254). Translations into other languages were dated as early as "July 23, seventeen days, therefore, after More's execution" (Harpsfield 254). For the best account and original French version, see Appendix II of the 1932 critical edition of Harpsfield (Oxford UP).

[6] See *CW* 14, 67, 217, 251, as well as the addition More cancelled as noted on pages 882–883.

reporting to her what he saw God asking him to do now that despite all his efforts he was condemned to death.

Such an interpretation of the "boast" is indeed what other early biographers seem to have given. Nicholas Harpsfield, Cardinal Pole's English archdeacon and the professional biographer commissioned by Meg's husband, William Roper, uses the Paris Newsletter account but augments it with additions from Pole and other sources. Harpsfield reports More as saying to Margaret:

> Ye knowe … the very bottome and secretes of my heart; and ye haue rather cause to congratulate and to *reioyce* for me that God hath aduaunced me to this high honour, and vouchsafed to make me woorthie to spende my life for the defence and vpholding of vertue, iustice and religion, then to be dismaide and to be discomforted. (199, emphasis added)

Harpsfield here adds what is uniquely characteristic of More's writings, not only in the Tower but even in his earliest books, as well as in the advice he frequently gave to Margaret after his imprisonment: i.e., that she should "reioyce" in the face of adversity.

In More's first book published in English, he gave similar advice, advice that he would maintain in theory throughout his life: the importance of embracing trials being "glad and joyful of this fight."[7] This characteristic emphasis on gladness or joy is seen throughout his early work, as expressed in the heroic couplet "Thou shalt no pleasure comparable find / To th' inward *gladness* of a virtuous mind" (62/3–4, emphasis added).[8]

More's "mind" of accepting God's will with joy was demonstrated at other critical moments in his life. When, for

[7] More adds the phrase "glad and joyful" to the text of Pico that he expands and puts into rhyme-royal poetry. See the CTMS 500th anniversary edition of *The Life of Pico* at http://www.thomasmorestudies.org/docs/Life%20of%20John%20Picus.pdf, 51/15; see also 51/5, 18.

[8] See also 48/30–49/25, 56/20–25, 64/23–65/1, 65/28, 66/8–17, 69–70.

example, the fire at Chelsea in 1529 promised financial ruin, More's first reaction is recorded in the letter written as his son-in-law waited for an immediate reply. More wrote to his wife that "since it has pleased Him to send us such a chance, we must, and are bound, not only to be content, but also to be *glad* of His visitation." Why? "[F]or His wisdom better seeth what is good for us than we do ourselves. Therefore, I pray you, be of *good cheer*…" (*TMSB* 180, or Letter 174/29–30; emphases added).

Old Antony gives similar advice to terrified young Vincent when, after explaining the liberty of mind that a pagan like Seneca achieved, Antony challenges Vincent: "[I]f we will be good Christian men, we shall have great cause *gladly* to be content … while we remember that in the patient and *glad* doing of our service … for God's sake, … we shall have our thanks and our reward of God" (254/15–20; emphases added).[9] Elsewhere Antony likewise reminds Vincent that "in His love … we shall find ourselves not only content but also *glad* and desirous to suffer" for God's sake (313/4–6; emphasis added).

## Later Tudor reports of 1 July 1535

Margaret's husband, William Roper, is surprisingly silent about what was said in this final meeting, reporting only that More "gave her his fatherly blessing and many goodly words of comfort besides" (*TMSB* 62). Yet Roper is writing from memory some fifty years after More's execution, and his account does what Thomas Stapleton's important early biography will also do: both explain the *intent* of More's "many goodly words" during this last meeting.

[9] See 198/11–12 for another statement on the "necessity for every man and woman to be always of this mind" and then a summary of what must be done to acquire a truly Christian mind. See also Antony's summary statement in the last chapter of book 1: *CW* 12, 75–76.

According to Roper's account, More's intent was "comfort." Stapleton agrees:

> He [More] said gravely to his daughter that although he was innocent, yet his sufferings were permitted by God, who knew the secrets of his heart. He had her submit her natural affection to the will of God and be patient in their common affliction. (181)

Although Stapleton's report excludes any reference to joy or to Meg's knowing More's secrets, it explains More's intent: his words were designed to help Margaret "submit her natural affection to the will of God and be patient." As indicated below,[10] this interpretation is in line with the emphasis that More placed throughout his Tower writings on patience and conformity with God's will.

"Ro: Ba:," another Tudor biographer who writes after Harpsfield and Stapleton, gives a largely derivative account of this last meeting but confirms the early family consensus on More's characteristic emphasis on joy:

> that whatever he suffered, though he suffered as an innocent, yet did he not suffer it without Godes holy will and pleasure: "For thou knowest, Megg, my deare daughter, thou knowest the very botome and secretes of my hart. So thou hast cause rather to congratulate and *reioice* with me, and for me that God hath thus gratiouslie advaunced me to this high honour, and hath made me worthie to spend my life for the defence and vpholding of virtue, iustice and religion, then to be dismaide or discomforted. Therefore be of good comfort. (249, emphasis added)

No doubt really exists that More told Meg in this last meeting that she knew the "very bottom and secret of my heart"; but if doubt did exist, we know from More's Letter 210 <Sept/Oct 1534> that he had revealed this "secret" to her months before. But what was it?

[10] See notes 24 and 25.

## First the context: Letters 202 and 206 <May and August 1534>

Their exchange of letters of May 1534 and most of their conversation of late August 1534 indicate that Margaret did not yet share the secret of More's heart. Margaret's "lamentable letter"[11] (as More describes it) no longer exists, but the contents can be easily inferred from More's response in Letter 202 <May 1534>: Margaret tried to persuade More to take the oath, knowing that it would be against his conscience. More writes that her "lamentable letter" would have "not a little abashed me" if "I had not been … at a firm and fast point (I trust in God's great mercy), this good great while before." Then he gives his reasons for Margaret not to "labour me again to follow your mind" in taking the oath, and he urges her both to "leave off such labour" and "with my former answers to hold yourself content" (Letter 202/1–18). Margaret does neither, however, as evidenced by the long and intense Letter 206 of August 1534 (i.e., *A Dialogue on Conscience*: *TMSB* 318–35).

In that *Dialogue* More responds seriously but with good humor to Margaret's "mind" by discussing the important issues of grace, self-government, the danger of framing one's conscience according to desire rather than truth, the meaning of true fellowship, and the relationship of law and conscience—all culminating in the first recorded appearance of that famous good-humored riddle of his: the statement that situations can exist in which "a man may lose his head and not be harmed" (333). After then recounting the long nights he spent studying—studying "so far that I am sure there can come nothing more than what I thought of"—he concludes his main argument saying: "And in thinking this through, daughter, I did have

[11] Letter 202/203.

a very heavy [sad, grieved][12] heart. But yet, I thank our Lord, for all that, I never thought of changing my mind, even should the very worst happen to me that my fear ran upon" (334). As More will explain in Letter 210, that "very heavy heart" surprised and disappointed him,[13] but it seems that very heaviness or profound sadness became a strong motive to work harder and to pray more ardently to rule himself—with joy—to be more in accord with what his conscience knew to be his duty in truth. All this, we will see, formed part of the "very secret bottom" of his "mind."[14]

When Margaret emotionally cries out in Letter 206 that "it might be too late" if her father persists, More calms her fears while pointing out the dangers posed if one allows the mind to focus on fear and pain. After affirming the importance of grace, he then concludes with his convictions that a loving God governs everything and that, accepting this, one can and should be joyful:

> And therefore, my own good daughter, never let your mind be troubled over anything that ever shall happen to me in this world. Nothing can come but what God wills. And I make myself very sure that whatever that may be, no matter how bad it seems, it will indeed be the best…. And with all my

[12] More regularly uses "heaviness" to mean "sadness" or "grief"; Mary Basset frequently translates *tristitia* as "heaviness" or "grief."

[13] What I call here surprise and disappointment is an interpretation of Letter 210/93–99, where More reports that his reaction before his imprisonment was not fitting for a "faithful Christian." The "surprise" did not last long, as More's reference to "play[ing] Saint Peter…fall[ing] flat on my face" indicates (*TMSB* 335/8-9). For More's own use of "surprise" at the sudden rise of emotional "storms," see *CW* 14, 49-53.

[14] More's choice of "mind" in Letter 210 is consistent with the word choice in his final prayers and instructions, as seen in *CW* 13, 226/6; 227/12, 23; 228/26; 229/25, 32, in the frequent use of *mens* and *animus* in *CW* 14, and in over 200 uses of "mind" in *CW* 12.

> heart I beg … you … to serve God and *be merry and rejoice*[15] in him. (*TMSB* 335 or *Corr* #206/660–72; emphasis added)

Although More acquired the above-stated convictions in his youth and cultivated them throughout his life, he repeatedly points out the ever-present danger of not living in accord with them; after temporary victories, the danger can be even greater on account of a lack of vigilance that leads to forgetting that anyone could still, like St. Peter, be attacked by fears and so fall.[16] That More worked and prayed not to forget but to stay true to his "mind" of good cheer right up to the last moments of his life, can be seen in the last prayers he wrote: those written in the margins of his prayer book and the ones written between July 1 and July 6.[17]

That Margaret comes to understand and accept at least part[18] of her father's "mind" is seen in her next letter to More, Letter 209. She ends that letter promising her daily prayers for what she sees is most important to her father, signing off with the promise to "daily and hourly" pray "that our Lord of his infinite mercy give you of his heavenly comfort, and so assist you with his special grace, that ye never in anything decline from his blessed will, but live and die his true obedient servant" (Letter 209/34–38).

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[15] "Rejoice" is the same term Harpsfield uses to report More's words to Meg on July 1—a term also seen in More's early works.

[16] See the same danger clearly portrayed in his first published book in English. The Sixth Rule of "Spiritual Combat" warns: "One sin vanquished, look thou not tarry, / But lie in await for another very hour…. / Thou must … stand and keep watch." The solution is vigilance: always to "stand and keep watch," even after victory.

[17] See especially the final sentence of his final written prayer: "The thynges good lorde that I praye for, giue me the grace to labour for" (*CW* 13, 231/24–25).

[18] Margaret will accept the need for obedience, but no evidence seems to exist to show she achieved joy in that obedience.

## The Importance of Letter 210

Responding in Letter 210, More thanks God that "the clearness of my conscience hath made my heart hop for joy"—regardless of how the world might interpret his actions (210/25–26). He reports that he has heard that Parliament might pass an "unlawful law" against him,[19] but he tells Meg that "reason with help of faith" allows him to see again that "a man may lose his head and have no harm" (210/88–89, 100); in fact, he thanks God again for having given him the grace of "mastery" over his fear to such an extent that "since I am come hither [to prison] I set by death every day less than other" (210/100, 108–109). Despite the great fear he had experienced in the previous weeks and months, he can now tell Margaret that painful and shameful death "at this day grieveth me nothing" (210/125). Although More twice reports definite spiritual progress in himself,[20] he immediately includes this important "yet":

> And yet I know well, for all this, mine own frailty, and that Saint Peter which feared it much less than I, fell in such fear soon after, that at the word of a simple girl he forsook and

[19] As it did in its sixth session, opening 3 November 1534.

[20] Although More argues that any progress is due primarily to God's grace, he goes to great lengths to show in these last letters and in his final two books how much human beings must work to cooperate with that grace. His progress is explicitly stated by Stapleton and Roper. As Stapleton puts it, giving his overall assessment of More's writings and conversations with Meg: "In short, he said to his daughter Margaret, on his faith, that never had he received a greater benefit from the King than his imprisonment in the Tower, on account of the incredibly great *spiritual progress that, as he hoped, he was there making*" (163, emphasis added). Roper seems to give a similar interpretation after quoting this statement to Margaret: "'For me thinketh God maketh me a wanton, and setteth me on His lap and dandleth me.' Thus by his gracious demeanor in tribulation appeared it that all the troubles that ever chanced unto him, by his patient sufferance thereof, *were to him* no painful punishments, but *of his patience, profitable exercises*" (*TMSB* 52, emphases added). The emphasis on patience is the same as that mentioned later in this paper and in Stapleton's report of More's last meeting with Meg.

> foreswore our Savior. And therefore am I not, Meg, so mad as to warrant myself to stand. But I shall pray, and I pray thee mine own good daughter to pray with me, that it may please God that hath given me this mind, to give me the grace to keep it. (210/125-32)

Here, More's "mind" refers to a knowledge of those things outlined earlier in the letter and especially in this paragraph: a knowledge (1) of "mine own conscience" after studying for years the issues involved, (2) of his own frailty, (3) of the power and necessity of grace, (4) of the fleeting character of life, and (5) of thanksgiving owed to God.

At precisely this point, after enumerating what "I know well," comes "the very secret bottom of my mind":

> And thus have I, mine own good daughter, disclosed unto you the very secret bottom of my mind, referring the order thereof only to the goodness of God and that so *fully* that I assure you Margaret on my faith I *never* have prayed God to bring me hence nor deliver me from death, but referring *all* thing *whole* unto his only pleasure, as to him that seeth better what is best for me than myself doth. Nor *never* longed I since I came hither to set my foot in mine own house, for any desire of or pleasure of my house, but gladly would I sometime somewhat talk with my friends, and specially my wife and you that pertain to my charge. But sith [since] that God otherwise disposeth, I commit *all wholly* to his goodness. (210/133–144, emphasis added)

The "And thus" is a link from the detailed account of his "mind" to what is perhaps the clearest formulation of the "mind" that More had over decades both crafted through labor and received through grace by means of "reason with help of faith": a mind that has since his imprisonment "referr[ed] the order thereof *only* to the goodness of God and that so *fully* that I assure you, Margaret, on my faith I *never* have prayed God to bring me hence nor deliver me from death, but referring *all* thing *whole* unto his only pleasure, as to him that seeth

better what is best for me than myself doth" (210/34–39; emphasis added). Because "reason with help of faith" has allowed him to see the truth of his situation, he can conclude this letter urging Meg to "be merry in God" and "take no thought for me whatsoever you shall hap to hear" (210/164–165).

"So fully" do faith and reason, nature and grace, now intermingle that More's characteristic good humor and calm would continue even to "his last, graceful remarks on the scaffold," proving that the disconcerting mirth of old and suffering Antony in *A Dialogue of Comfort* is the "unique and most characteristic quality" of More himself—that "most mysterious" quality of the man, "overwhelmingly easy to enjoy, but difficult to understand and fully comprehend."[21]

An objection to this conclusion, however, is More's admission in the same Letter 210 that he was surprised at his own fear and reluctance when faced with the thought of pain and death: "I found myself (I cry God mercy) very sensual and my flesh much more shrinking from pain and from death than methought it the part of a faithful Christian man, in such a case, as my conscience gave me, that in the saving of my body should stand with the loss of my soul" (210/94–98). This forceful experience of his own fear and "shrinking from pain" helps explain his keen attention to Christ's own forceful experience of fear and sadness in Gethsemane; like Christ, More with the help of grace was also able to win continuous conquests over his own weariness, fear, and grief. More explains in

[21] So Frank Manley concludes in this introduction to *A Dialogue of Comfort,* at *CW* 12 xcvii–xcviii. What we witness may well be a fullness of humanity that reflects an image of God as a "very tender loving father" whose peace and happiness is a model for human being created in that image. See More's many comments about God as a loving father Who inspires "glad hope" and unshakeable joy in those who love Him.

the same letter that this prolonged "attack" of fear eventually passed and gave way to his usual good humor:

> I thank our Lord, that in that conflict [with his "shrinking from pain and from death"] the Spirit had in conclusion the mastery, and reason with help of faith finally concluded that for to be put to death wrongfully for doing well (as I am very sure I do, in refusing to swear against mine own conscience, being such as I am not upon peril of my soul bounden to change where my death should come without law, or by color of a law), it is a case in which a man may lose his head and yet have none harm, but instead of harm inestimable good at the hand of God. (210/98–107)

Yet even with this conquest, More is careful to explain both that he knows that devilish fears could attack again, even greater than before, and that he could fall through his own negligence. Nonetheless, More's letters reveal a growth in the strength of More's own mind and a renewed[22] clarity about how that strength must be sustained: with fervent prayer and with unceasing labor to forge and fashion[23] an integrity of action in accord with his deepest convictions. These letters reveal that Thomas More has both the calm,[24] humorous mind of old Antony and the weak flesh and faint heart of a "Vincent" whose conquest in this life can never be final or assured and whose faith must be shown in works united to prayer and—for More—done with joy.

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[22] See notes 7, 15, and 16 showing that More saw and expressed the same principles clearly in his first published works.

[23] See Cicero's use of this expression, *conflatur et efficitur,* in his important explanation of forming the soul in *De Officiis,* especially 1.14.

[24] See the emphasis that More places on acquiring a "calm mind" (*aequo animo*) in his first published book (*CW* 3.1, 2/10–11, 8/1, 21/7) and in his Letter to Gonell (*CTMS* 199/36, 198/15–16, 10–12). This same emphasis is seen in the more than fifty references to *patience* in *A Dialogue of Comfort* and in *The Sadness of Christ* and in the many references to the importance of acquiring a "quiet, peaceable, patient … mind"—including the last prayer he wrote, between 1 and 6 July 1535 (*CW* 13, 229/32–32 or Scepter's *Sadness* 153).

Yet, as More admits himself, this is not how he responded in the months before his imprisonment. Through his unceasing work[25] in the Tower, however, his fearful response changed, so much so that he reveals this change as part of the "very secret bottom" of his "mind": a change that came about by the means of grace along with a conscious and continuous training—with "bridle and spur"[26]—of mind, imagination, memory, and eventually emotions. These are the very means old Antony recommends in *A Dialogue of Comfort*.

To summarize[27]: Thomas More revealed to Margaret that, after bouts of agonizing fear, he regained his characteristic calm and joy but based on a stronger conviction of God's will and a more active reliance on God's grace while employing all the means to maintain that calm and joy. The "secret of his heart," "the very secret bottom of my mind," consisted of the same principles expressed by More in his earliest published works about the spiritual combat; those youthful convictions, however, after being tried and tested, and after a lifetime of practice, he continued to reaffirm and work to strengthen to the very last moments of his life. What was

[25] This "work" included his various forms of prayer (esp. the increased petition for grace), meditation, penance (he wore his hair shirt to the end), and the extensive writing that included *A Dialogue of Comfort* and *The Sadness of Christ*.

[26] More uses this classical image of horsemanship (see especially Plato's *Phaedrus* 246a, 253d) throughout his life: *CW* 1, 41/270, 84/17; *CW* 2, 10/12, 14/7; *CW* 4, 60/16, 70/1, 96/6, 242/4; *CW* 12, 282/23–24; *CW* 13, 172/9, 192/26 & 29, 229/12–13; *CW* 14, 263/11, 265, 1.

[27] Two alternate formulations are these: Alison Scott writes in *A Companion to Thomas More* that "from the very secret bottom of … his mind," More consciously revealed in the last letters that he never prayed to be delivered from death—he was not a fugitive from Christ—but he did not seek death ('I put not myself forward but draw back')" (Cousins 69). John Guy concludes, based on Clarence Miller's analysis in *CW* 14, esp. 774-6, that the "very secret bottom of [More's] mind" is best expressed in the "O faint of heart …trust in me" speech in *A Sadness of Christ* (at *CW* 14, 101/10–105/2; or at Scepter 17 (250). Both formulations are compatible with the interpretation given in this essay.

that secret? That through grace and work he had a settled mind to "commit all wholly to His goodness"—in joy.[28]

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[28] More expresses this same idea in "A summary comfort of tribulation," the last chapter of book 1 in *A Dialogue of Comfort*: "If we lay first for a sewer [sure] grownd a very fast faith … than shall we consider tribulacion as a graciouse gyfte of god…. Who so these thynges thynketh on, & remembreth well, shall in his tribulacion neyther murmur nor gruge / but first by pacience take his payne in worth / and than shall he grow in goodnes & thynke hymselfe well worthy / than shall he consider that god sendith it for his well / and therby shall he be movid to give god thanke therfor…. [L]et vs be glad thereof…" (*CW* 12, 75-76).

The "mystery" that Frank Manley speaks of at footnote 21 is explained in part by More's secret or inmost conviction that human beings are created to find happiness and peace in a God who is loveable and trustworthy.

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