‘Though a temporall man, yet your very spirituall father’: The Roper/Basset Line and the Lives of Thomas More

I

The More family

The first three chapters of this book focus upon the family of Thomas More and the discursive formation that defined the group for over 150 years. The extensive and prolonged influence of More upon his descendants and their writings necessitates a division of the material into cognate areas. Three distinct strands within the overall familial discourse are identifiable: the perpetuation of More’s reputation through a series of ‘lives’, the preservation of More’s writings through publication and the replication of More’s spiritual experience through retreat into a cloistered existence. These separate endeavours were roughly divided between the branches of the More family: the Roper/Bassets focus on biography, the Rastell/Heywoods published More’s works and the More/Cresacres retreated from material and worldly concerns. The following three chapters excavate this overlap between bloodlines and spiritual mission, situating the traces within the successive historical circumstances of the development of the More familial discourse. At the same time, it is essential to understand that the tripartite focus on maintaining and sustaining Thomas More’s influence is evidenced throughout the family’s endeavours, and the conclusion to Chapter 3 brings the various elements and their expressions together.

The focus of the More family is also important for the way in which it reveals the role of women writers within a discursive formation. Thomas More’s pursuance of a humanist agenda that encouraged the education of women is commonly acknowledged, and the works of his female descendants, Margaret Roper and Gertrude More, have been recognised...
by feminist criticism. The Mores provide a particularly interesting site for investigation, since the power structures that are intrinsic to a familial discourse are central to the father–daughter relationship between More and Margaret Roper. This chapter sets out to explore the way in which the initiation of the family’s identity was dependent upon a negating of individual authorship and the implications that this strategy had for Margaret Roper and the other female members of the More family.

II

Margaret Roper

Pre-eminent of place in all More family histories is Thomas More’s daughter, Margaret Roper. Their relationship is defined in the letters Margaret wrote to her father when he was imprisoned in the Tower of London in 1534:

MYNE OWNE MOST ENTIERELIE BELOUUED FATHER.

I thinke my selfe neuer able to geue you sufficient thankes, for the inestimable coumforte my poore heart receyued in the reading of your most louinge and godly letter. Representing to me the cleare shynyng brightenesse of your soule, the pure temple of the Holy Spirite of God ... [and she concludes] Your most louing obedient daughter and bedeswoman Margaret Roper, which dayly and howrelie is bounden to pray for you ...²

Margaret already perceived More’s writing as precious and relic-like, and would have been acutely aware that his execution was almost inevitable. The ‘godly letter’ and the ‘bounden’ prayer, therefore, encode a double message: the warm response of daughter to her father and a spiritual passage promoting the inescapable duty of a member of the Catholic Church. This dual injunction was repeated continually over the next century as Thomas More’s texts were transcribed, translated and reproduced by family members, by those who would pray ‘dayly and howrelie’ in imitation of their ‘spirituall father’. The More family’s evocation of the parallel between earthly and heavenly fathers draws upon a common Christian trope in the Early Modern period and would have been familiar to both Catholic and Protestant families alike. Yet, there are two distinct ways in which this patrilineal pattern is particularly adapted by the Mores to form a specific familial discourse. First, the representation of Thomas More as a God-like figure, with an almost complete exclusion