SAMUEL FRENCH SAMPLE PERUSAL

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SF PERUSALS

Samuel French Acting Edition

Meg

by Paula A. Vogel

Presented at the Ninth Annual American College Theatre Festival in Washington, D.C., as winner in the national competition for the Festival's Student Playwriting Award.

SAMUEL FRENCH

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Descriptive Story of the Play

The background to *Meg,* based on the life of Margaret More Roper, is Tudor England, with its political and ruthless male hierarchies of Henry VIII and the Catholic Church. These are the offstage forces imprisoning Meg, a unique woman isolated from her time and environment through the gift and curse of her developed intellect. As a play, *Meg* invites directors and casts with strong theatrical imaginations to tackle the blend of direct-audience address, character transformations, intense two-person scenes and lyrical language. The play intertwines several themes and levels: on one level we see the story of Sir Thomas More at a 180° perspective through his daughter's eyes. It is also a story of a young female scholar's education in the restraints of her roles of wife and mother. It is, as well, an exploration of the father-daughter relationship at that painful transition "when father and daughter turn round and see each other as man and woman." And, Meg Roper discovers, "Both diminish in size." *Meg* is not a history play; it is a play about history—which has been a history of omission as far as women are concerned. In this play, interwoven with kings, popes and matters of state are marriages, miscarriages, knittings before the fire, and childhood reveries. Five characters, in three acts.

DESCRIPTION OF CHARACTERS
(in order of appearance)

MEG—a young woman of 18, of ordinary appearance —but mischievous, at times lively, at times reflective. Her costume is modest, but graceful.

SIR THOMAS MORE—middle-aged, slight of stature, scrawny in build, with thin pathetic legs in stockings which bag—and a look of mild embarrassment on his face. Rather shabbily dressed, his clothes usually sport the crumbs from his last meal.

CROMWELL—a pleasant looking middle aged man, also slight in stature; perhaps a bit portly. Dressed in expensive cloth of dark blues and violets.

WILLIAM ROPER—a young, juvenilely attractive "Village Idiot," age 18–22. He has a slight stammer, which improves by Act III. In Acts I and II, he wears rustic peasant clothes and boots, hat, and jacket. His court clothes (Acts II and III) are brilliant in hue, flashy and slightly foppish.

ALICE MORE—a plump, middle-aged housewife, dressed in practical gown with an apron containing ample folds and pockets, in which are tucked her constant companions—knitting and a rosary.

Meg

ACT ONE

The stage consists of slightly raised platforms in a variety of geometrical shapes and angles. In the center of the stage, at a lower level than surrounding platforms, there is a rough wooden table, and two chairs. Downstage left is a low, sawed-off spherical monkey bar. On the top level are three suggested locales—the Tower, stage right, suggested by a suspended arch and textures of iron and chain; the chapel, stage left, with a metal cross suspended beneath a gothic arch, and finally, center, the More household, suggested by white, rough plaster textures and heavy beams. In front of the More house, there is a bench, and upon the bench we see Alice More, a plump middle aged housewife, who energetically "plucks" a chicken—we see feathers fly from her apron.

Downstage, enmeshed in the monkey bars, we see WILLIAM ROPER, *a young, juvenilely attractive "Village Idiot." Entangled in the structure, he "moons" in the direction of the* MORE *household.*

Mid-stage, seated at the table, scratching his legs and simultaneously munching a muffin, is SIR THOMAS MORE, *entranced in the reading of a book.*

And stage right, in front of the Tower a pleasant looking middle aged CROMWELL *sits upon the block,*

his hand absently fondling an axe handle which stands upright in the wood. Swinging his foot, he casually cleans his nails with a pen knife.

MARGARET MORE, *a young woman of 18, stands by the table holding aloft an enormous leather-bound book, a mock-solemn look upon her face. She gazes at the audience, and waits for our undivided attention. Then she begins to read:*

MEG. "Margaret More Roper was born in 1508, the beloved daughter of the reverent Saint Thomas More, martyr of the true Church—and died the obedient wife of William Roper, Esquire. Her renown as a scholar of Greek and Latin under her father's tutelage, unusual then as now to the female condition, was restrained and surpassed by a greater modesty becoming to her sex. She submitted her brilliance in all things to her father and husband, thereby increasing her lustre; and remains an example among women—as befits the daughter of a saint—saintly in compassion, humility, and obedience." (MEG *beams modestly at the audience as she slams the book shut.*) That's me—"saintly in compassion, humility, and obedience." Why, I've been saintly for over 400 years— Brigades of Catholic historians have rhapsodized over the remains of my reputation. Four hundred years of sermonizing and reproach to wives, mistresses, mothers, and school girls. (*Airily.*) Margaret the Modest, Margaret the Meek, Margaret the Mild. . . . (*Cynically.*) Margaret the Masochist— (MEG *stops herself. Then, continuing.*) There's not much else written about my life's story—but then, you have probably heard or read the other story—yes, you know the one—the story

of my father's life. (MEG *turns towards him; seeing him occupied, she says gently:*) We'd best not disturb him right now. You know him as Sir Thomas More, the great writer of *Utopia,* and martyr to the Catholic Church. As chancellor to King Henry the VIII, he refused to acknowledge England's separation from Rome, and so was beheaded in . . . (MEG *searches her memory.*) 1535. (*Simply.*) A most regretable incident in English history. (MEG *glances over her shoulder at* CROMWELL.) Over there is the man who neatly engineered my father's decapitation—That is Master Thomas Cromwell, a man who replaced my father as chancellor to the king . . . one instance in which the rat followed the sinking ship— (MEG'S *glance rests on* WILL; *smiling.*) And down there is my future husband William Roper. The world remembers him as a pious, earnest man, who passed on the story of Thomas More's martyrdom—that is how the world remembers him. (MEG *pauses.*) Perhaps, as unwilling schoolchildren, captive in a sunny classroom, you have heard or read of these three men—father, husband, and politician. Book upon book are filled with words about their aspirations, their frustrations, their deaths. But all of that is another story—and not the story I tell to you tonight. (MEG *replaces the book on the table. The lights come up on* WILLIAM ROPER, *crouched in the downstage area; he urgently whispers:*)

WILL. Meg! *Meg!*

MEG. (*Startled, she looks about.*) Will? Where are you?

WILL. Over here. In the bushes. Come!

MEG. (*Laughing and crossing to him.*) You lunatic.

(*In a flash,* WILL *disentangles himself and lunges at* MARGARET. *He is "aflame" with passion. In a*

frenzy, he kisses MEG, *embraces her, throws off a boot, tears his belt buckle undone, rips at his shirt, and tugs at her to join him.*)

WILL. Oh, Meg, oh Meg, meg, meg, meg, meg . . .

MEG. (*With growing command.*) Will. *Will.* WILL. (*He stops, red faced and imploring. She is imperious.*) The vow. First the vow, Will.

WILL. (*Groaning.*) Oh, but Meg, I l-love you. . . . (WILL *is on his knees, his face pressed in her skirts, laboring to find the breath to vow.*)

MEG. "I, William Roper" . . . (*Pats* WILL'S *head.*) Come, come, Willie— "I, William Roper" . . .

WILL. "I, William Roper" . . . I don't remember anymore.

MEG. (*Patiently.*) "Vow to be guided by my wife, Margaret More" . . .

WILL. "Vow to be guided by my wife, Margaret More"—oh, Meg, can't we—

MEG. —"in all matters civil, religious, and domestic" . . .

WILL. —"in all matters civil, religious, and domestic" . . .

MEG. "to abide by her council,"

WILL. "to abide by her council,"

MEG. "to acknowledge her supremacy,"

WILL. "to acknowledge her supremacy,"

MEG. "and complete authority in the upbringing of our offspring"

WILL. "and-complete-authority-in-the-upbringing-of-our-offspring" (*The words are rushed in his eagerness: he is very horny.*)

MEG. "for all our married life."

WILL. "for all our married life." (*Pause.*) Now, Meg, now?

MEG. (*She looks down upon his upturned moronic face, and is pensively touched.*) You really are an idiot, William—oh, but I do love you. . . . (MEG *bends, kisses his hair perfunctorily, and abruptly begins to pace, forgetting or ignoring his frustration.*)

WILL. (*Disappointed and crouched.*) Oh, Meg, oh Meg . . .

MEG. (*Stopping in thought.*) William: I may have you convert back to Catholicism again. (WILL *hastily starts to cross himself*—MEG *halts his arm.*) —but not until I tell you.

WILL. I understand, Meg: not until you tell me.

MEG. (*Bursting out, pleased with herself.*) You see, it's all a matter of strategy, Will. Oh, you wouldn't understand . . . (*With patience.*) Papa would never consent to my marrying the village idiot—so I engage myself to a Protestant—that's ten times worse than any idiot in father's eyes—and when you do convert, he'll embrace you with relief—his future son-in-law, the Catholic . . . village idiot! So stupid, but oh, so orthodox!! You see? (*But* WILL *obviously does not.* WILL *continues to gaze up at* MEG *with blank, but total devotion.*)

WILL. (*Eagerly.*) I see, Meg, I see.

MEG. (*Suddenly remembering. With reproach.*) But Will, when I told you to be Protestant, I meant you to be . . . somewhat theologically subtle.

WILL. Thea . . . subl—sus—?

MEG. —What is this I hear about the Inn last week?

WILL. The Inn? (WILL *remembers; evading* MEG'S *inquiry with shame.*) I didn't mean anything. . . .

MEG. Didn't mean anything! Did you, or did you not, publicly state that the Pope "pisses in the Eucharist"?

WILL. (*Sullenly.*) He does so p-piss in the Eucharist.

MEG. He does not.

WILL. Allright: he does not.

MEG. Oh, Will! (*To herself.*) That's not reformation, that's heresy! (*To* WILL.) You can only get away with so much before they'll burn your little Saxon body to purify your little Saxon soul—never taking into account your little Saxon mind—and then, where would I find another such congenial moron to marry me? (MEG *embraces* WILL *to soothe him.*) Hey, now Will . . . (*They kiss;* ALICE MORE *stands up stage left, and calls out.*)

ALICE. Margaret!

(MEG *and* WILL *freeze in their embrace.*)

MEG. Oh, Jesus.

ALICE. (*Shrill.*) Margaret! Where are you! Aha—there you are . . . (ALICE'S *mouth pops open in dismay and disbelief.*) Who is that with you? Is that William Roper?! Stay right where you are! I'm coming out this instant—

(ALICE *goes in search of a willow switch;* WILLIAM, *who has been paralyzed with fear, suddenly becomes active.* WILL *rushes to his cast off boot, struggles with it, while pulling up his half-fallen down breeches with one hand.*)

WILL. Oh, migod, Meg. I'm off.

MEG. Don't leave, Will. (*Impishly.*) Stay with me, Lover— (MEG *starts to embrace* WILL.)

WILL. She'll horsewhip me: that's what she said. Stop it, Meg—I can't stay. She's going to—Meg, let go—I'm scared of Mrs. More—last time she said—

MEG. Be brave! I won't let her hurt you. (WILL'S

back is turned to MEG; WILL *struggles to run off; her arms are locked around his waist. Full of the devil at* ALICE'S *approach,* MEG *becomes passionate and attacks* WILL.) Oh, Will, oh, Will, Will, Will. (MEG *kisses his neck, and bites into* WILL'S *jacket.*)

WILL. Meg! Meg, for the love of Christ, let go! Meg!! (*At the sight of* MRS. MORE *coming with a willow switch,* WILL *shrieks and tears loose, leaving his jacket behind.* MEG *nonchalantly faces* ALICE'S *puffed and infuriated face.*)

MEG. Ah, Spring. It's the molting season, you know.

ALICE. You're not funny. Where did that village idiot, that William Roper go? I'll beat some sense into him—

MEG. Into William Roper?

ALICE. (*Attempting to be reasonable.*) I don't know why you insist on shaming your family, Meg. You have already called public attention to yourself by reading and writing pamphlets—proclaiming your freak nature to the world—but now, now you have to diddle about with Protestants and Bedlamites! (MEG *starts to say something, but is silent.*) I will not have that drooling monkey set foot in my house! Do you hear? (*Again,* MEG *starts to say something, but is silent.*) I don't know what you can possibly see in him—

MEG. Well, to be truthful—

ALICE. —don't tell me! You have no shame. That comes from your Greek lessons . . . such brazenness! I have married into a family of maniacs. Had you been mine, you'd be learning to cook, and clean, and care for a decent, honest, intelligent husband. But I've submitted to your father, and watched him warp and twist your mind into some medical curio! But *this* I will not submit to!! Not in my family!! If William Roper so much as comes near, he'll be missing more

than common sense on his own wedding day!!! (ALICE *huffs her retreat.* MEG *smiles at the audience.*)

MEG. That, dear ladies and gentlemen, was my beloved stepmother, Alice More. Ah, but I know what you're thinking. There's more than fate that drives a man to martyrdom, yes? Sometimes—tho' perhaps he'll never admit it—sometimes I feel that my father understands exactly why I shall marry Will Roper—and envies me my domestic peace. (MEG *pauses, fondly.*) Well, I suppose you're anxious to meet the great Sir Thomas More? My father. Some standard words of caution before I introduce you to him—Great men never look like great men—at least, not in the beginning; they only transform into those heroic busts and monuments near the end. So be gentle in your first impressions—he's very great, and very dear, and . . . slightly ridiculous.

(*Lights up on* SIR THOMAS MORE, *seated at the table at center, vigorously scratching away in the book, and at his legs. He is slight of stature, scrawny in build, with thin pathetic legs in stockings which bag—and a look of mild embarrassment on his face. Rather shabbily dressed, his clothes usually sport the crumbs from his last meal.* MEG *tiptoes to the area behind him, unseen and quiet, so as not to disturb him. He immediately puts down his pen and smiles, without turning.*)

MORE. Good morning, Meg.

MEG. (*Throwing her arms around his shoulders and kissing him extravagantly.*) Good morning, Papa!

MORE. (*Looking amused.*) No, now don't tell me. Let me guess. William Roper's been here this morning.

MEG. (*Grinning.*) How ever did you guess?

MORE. Your mother's been fussing her confidences to the chickens; all my morning eggs were addled. (*They smile warmly at one another.*)

MEG. Well, it's better to have her fussing at the chickens. . . .

MORE. Well, well. It's only her way, Meg—she's concerned. We're all concerned. She doesn't want an i— (MORE *does not finish the "diot."*) . . . a man of dubious intellect for a son, and I don't wish to have a Protestant for a son-in-law.

MEG. Is that your sole objection, Papa?

MORE. (*Evasively.*) I have every faith in your ability to pick and choose for yourself among suitors.

MEG. (*Firmly.*) There have been none.

MORE. Well, well. (*Awkward silence.*) I'm sure you have your reasons for selecting Will. . . . (MORE *trails off; then brightly.*) And I'm sure he has sterling qualities. . . .

MEG. Papa . . .

MORE. Yes?

MEG. Kindly name one.

MORE. One?

MEG. One sterling quality of Will's that you've noticed during our furtive courtship behind the chicken barn.

MORE. Oh. Uhm . . . he has such a nice, vacant smile.

MEG. (*Refusing to let* MORE *evade her.*) Papa, you know why I'll marry Will, don't you?

MORE. (*Gently.*) I know I want to be grandfather to your children, no matter what the reasons.

MEG. (*Raptly.*) Yes, children! We'll make an entire army of scholars, marching against the dark, just ripe for our indoctrination—

MORE. —Well, before that happens, I ask you to

observe the rituals of marriage. I'm a believer in forms, Meg. I do not ask you or your husband to share my convictions; but do observe my conventions. (*Rhetorically.*) Within the politically tense atmosphere in which we live, it is folly to be non-conformist, whether in appearance or opinion. No man's heart will be examined as long as he mumbles his pater noster.

MEG. And if Will should come back to the fold?

MORE. (*With difficulty.*) I will embrace him as one of the family. But until then, I must invoke a paternal veto against this marriage never before used. Meg, I cannot turn you out into a hostile world without protection. It is foolhardy to marry a dissenter. All the security I have tried to build—

MEG. —Papa, I know. (MEG *slips her arms around* MORE.) I won't displease you in this one thing. Until Will converts, confesses and communes again with Mother Church, I'll not marry. But what is this nonsense of my being "turned out into a hostile world"?

MORE. Well, I meant—

MEG. —Married or not, here I'll remain with you. Isn't that what we've planned? How would you write without me? Or run the school? (MEG *spies crumbs on the front of his clothes.*) Who would brush the crumbs from your clothes, for that matter? (MEG *laughs and brushes* MORE *clean with a critical eye.*) There. William Roper will make no difference to our relationship, Papa. I'd give the world up first. As it is, I'll be the happiest of all women— (*To the audience.*) On the one hand, I'll have intercourse with Will, and on the other hand, I'll hold intercourse with my father. (*To* MORE.) My life will be neatly compartmentalized, eh, Papa?

MORE. (*Placated, he has turned out the last.*) What, my dear? Yes, yes, I dare say. Let's have no more of

this now, Meg; we'll discuss it later . . . (*Embarrassed and pleased,* MORE *sits back down and picks up his pen.* MEG *is left to her own revery.* MORE *scribbles a bit, but watches* MEG *critically from the corner of his eye. Then with a meek air, knowing that* MEG *will soon be displeased:*) Oh, by the way, Meg. I expect I'll be leaving home for a few days soon. I'll want you to take care of the school—

MEG. (*Alarmed.*) Leaving? Why?

MORE. It's an instinct I have for trouble. I expect the King will call a council shortly, and I shall be wanted . . . for how long, heaven knows.

MEG. Have you received word?

MORE. No—but Cromwell's coming; I can sniff him a mile away. The smell of political aspiration is heavy on the air. Take my word for it; Henry, like a spoiled child, won't take no for an answer from the Pope. He'll have his Anne, even if all the Cardinal Woolsey's must first go hang. I don't wish to become involved. . . . I have enough difficulty with my own marital affairs than to presume to advise. . . .

MEG. Then why do you become involved? Can't you resign from the King's council for reasons of health? It's nothing but interference with our life here! And it's becoming more frequent, Papa, really it is. . . .

MORE. (*Sighing poetically.*) If only I could stay here and talk with you. . . .

MEG. You can! What do you care for politics? Your great Utopian mind is wasted on such . . . trivia! You've called it that yourself, Papa. And haven't you told me a man's first duty is to his family? Before his "civic responsibilities"? Why, that's revolutionary, Papa! It takes greatness and nobility to renounce the world and to fashion utopia from one's family . . . (*Here* MEG *can't resist a joke.*) —Besides, no man be-

fore you has dare—with pen quill in hand—to face the "great hooked beak of the harpy"!

MORE. Meg! (MORE *is slightly shocked.*) That is no way to talk about . . . (MORE *hides a smile with difficulty, turning a laugh into a cough.*) your mother.

MEG. They're Erasmus' words, dear father, not mine. I often think you run to London only to escape her—oh, don't protest, I know all you're going to say: how she loves me as her own, how she takes care of me, how grateful we should both be. . . . (*Exasperated.*) Well, that may well be true, but you can't take me with you to your councils! Papa, I have no one to talk to. And who will teach me Latin while you are gone?

MORE. That tactic won't work; you don't need my help any longer, it's no use pretending. You're teaching your tutor now. I've sent your letters to Erasmus before, and he couldn't tell the difference between your style and mine—except for a slight superiority in your letters. (MORE *is obviously very proud.*) As a matter of fact, while I'm gone, I'd like you to take over writing the family history which I promised to complete for him—

MEG. (*Delighted.*) The family history! (MEG *eagerly rushes to the table.*) Could I? How far have you come?

MORE. (*With mischief.*) Let's see—we're up to ancient times now. . . . (MORE *snatches the quill, and scribbles while* MEG *reads over his shoulder.*)

MEG. "The dominant force in the More household, around which the house revolved, was Mistress Margaret More, age eight and ten, a "petulans muliercula"— (*translating.*) a . . . saucy snippet! Ah, but Papa! You are leaving out the most important part— (MEG *giggles and pushes* MORE *back; seizing the pen,* MEG *writes while her father reads over her shoulder.*)

MORE. "This saucy snippet was the result of the erudite training of the saintly Sir More, a curious "valgus vir doctus fama" . . . (*Translating.*) bow-legged scholar of renown. . . . (*They both laugh,* MEG *merrily, and* MORE *a bit ruefully . . . then he asks, self-consciously.*) Am I really . . . ah, bow-legged? (MORE *is anxious to appear casual, but waits for re-assurance.*)

MEG. Papa, it's your most endearing trait, I assure you. (MORE *is crestfallen;* MEG *smiles fondly.*) When I see those poor orphan legs of yours, I smile and laugh and cry inside, all at once. . . . (MORE *has walked away behind her, and tries to glance backwards at the back of his legs;* MEG *turns and catches* MORE *in his contortion—and realizes she has struck his ego.* MORE *flushes,* MEG *quickly changes the subject.*) Why are you writing our family history for Erasmus?

MORE. It all came about as an extension of our discussion of words—words which in the attempt to capture truth inevitably become fabrications—and particularly offensive as history. So rather than having others fabricate our lives, we shall do it ourselves.

MEG. Do you think we will be so important that others would want to write about us?

MORE. (*Insincerely.*) Perhaps not. Actually, the real reason for writing family histories is for the flattery and nostalgia of one's family.

MEG. Ah, no, father—I am not to be so easily fooled. Somewhere in that gentle head of yours there have been dangerous dreams lurking—dreams of political success and fame; have there not? (*Sadly.*) You must want to go to London very badly.

MORE. I never want to leave you, Meg. I don't think my life can be better spent than here, talking and

writing with you. Your education will always be my proudest accomplishment. Sometimes I feel . . . no, you'll laugh at me—

MEG. I won't laugh at you.

MORE. I often feel maternal about you. (MORE *is shy, and glances at* MEG.) Do you understand? (*Moved and mute,* MEG *nods her head.*) You have made me much more than a father; and I feel strong because I feel gentle. It's easy to be gentle with you. But often I think that it's not enough to be gentle with you alone; it's a gift that should be shared with others outside the family—others, in the world of men, that should be treated as family, too. (MEG's *back is turned;* MORE *cannot see her face.*) Am I being ridiculous?

MEG. (*Turning quickly and coming to him.*) No, Papa, no—not ridiculous to me. But—forgive me—terribly, terribly naive. (MEG *ruffles* MORE's *hair.*) It makes me feel maternal toward you.

(ALICE MORE, *the personification of the "hooked beak of the harpy," has crept up behind them, and watches* MEG *ruffle her husband's hair.*)

ALICE. Husband. (MORE *and* MEG *start.*) Master Cromwell has arrived and waits outside. If you ask me, he acts more like a fishmonger's apprentice dressed in his master's suit—than a messenger from the King! Ha! (MORE *exchanges an "I told you so" glance with* MEG.)

MORE. He may indeed act like a fishmonger, but I assure you Master Cromwell will be a political power to reckon with—so be gentle. I hope you have been polite?

ALICE. (*Ignoring the plea.*) . . . that may well be. I will tell him to come in immediately—but mind you, Thomas, he will not be staying to lunch.

MORE. Yes, love. I know I can count on your hospitable grace to company. . . . (*This last is said because* ALICE *is already out of earshot.*)

MEG. Cromwell— Well! (*Admiringly.*) You are a prophet.

MORE. (*Mock-modestly and grinning.*) It's nothing.

MEG. I always wanted to meet him. What an absurd little man he must be!

(CROMWELL, *the absurd little man, has entered and stands on the platform above. He watches and overhears the following:*)

MORE. (*Cautiously.*) Watch him well, Meg. He's climbing so fast your nose will bleed watching his ascent.

MEG. Surely you don't like him?

MORE. (*Hastily.*) No—but I must admire his mind —he's certainly acute. (*Jumps.*) I'd better go meet him. Your mother may be . . . entertaining him. (MORE *scurries to meet* CROMWELL, *and is startled to see him.*) Oh. (*Then heartily:*) Welcome, Master Cromwell!

CROMWELL. I received your message, Sir Thomas (MORE *motions him to speak softly.*) and came as immediately as I received necessary notification for the council's meeting. I hope I'm not too tardy?

MORE. Not at all. You are very prompt and courteous. (*Low.*) I'm sure you must be aware that I need a business excuse to go to London; it was kind indeed of His Majesty to furnish one.

CROMWELL. (*Discreetly.*) I understand. (*They smile, and approach the area where* MEG *patiently waits.*)

MORE. Master Cromwell, this is my daughter Meg. (MEG *smiles coldly while* CROMWELL *bows.*)

CROMWELL. (*Gallantly and pompously.*) I am pleasantly surprised to find your beauty surpasses reports of your intelligence. . . .

MEG. (*Not pleased, colder still.*) Thank you, sir. I, too, am surprised to find your intelligence surpasses reports of your beauty. . . . (CROMWELL'S *face blankly stares,* MORE *is aghast.*)

MORE. Meg! I'm sure, that, um, my daughter means—

MEG. —Oh, Master Cromwell will understand and forgive. I can never pass an opportunity for quipping; it is nothing at all personal.

CROMWELL. (*Blandly smiling.*) I assure you I am flattered by the ready intimacy with which you tease me, Mistress More.

MEG. You are kind—isn't he kind, father? (MORE *nervously paces behind* MEG; *getting no response,* MEG *turns to* CROMWELL.) Do you know, Master Cromwell, that father intuitively knew of your coming here? Not but ten minutes ago, he foretold it to me— (MORE *behind her back, pantomimes urgently to* CROMWELL *to play along.*) Is not that amazing?

CROMWELL. Ah, Miss More, that intuition is the secret of a successful politician—

MEG. My father is not a politician.

CROMWELL. Indeed, he has a politician's instinct combined with a nobleman's integrity—which makes him a statesman. . . .

MORE. (*Trying to hide his pleasure.*) We scholars can never match the consummate skill in words of one well-read in a king's looks. But come, we waste your time, sir.

CROMWELL. Very well, then, sir. To business. (CROMWELL *bows to* MEG *and waits.*)

MORE. (*After waiting for* CROMWELL *to continue.*) Well, sir, what is the business at hand? (*A pause again.*)

CROMWELL. (*Who has been waiting for* MEG *to leave.*) —Uh, I beg your pardon, Sir Thomas. I did not wish to show disrespect to the young lady by discussing such mundane matters of state in front of her.

MORE. (*While* MEG *smiles to herself ironically.*) Pray continue, Master Cromwell. Meg is my bookkeeper, theologian, daughter-confessor, and council member in one. There is nothing I feel competent to act upon without her advice. (*To* MEG.) Without you, I think I'd do no more business at all— (*Smiles.*) "no mundane matters of state"— (*To* CROMWELL.) So please, let us all continue.

CROMWELL. (*With a look of repressed disapproval, he rummages under his cloak for various papers.*) Very good, sir.

MORE. I gather such notions about daughters discomfort you, Master Cromwell?

CROMWELL. (*Glibly.*) Not at all, Sir Thomas. It takes a remarkable man to raise a remarkable daughter. . . .

MORE. Aha, Meg—you see the epitome of modern day diplomacy in action before you.

MEG. (*Bemused.*) I do indeed, father.

(MORE *moves to the table and sits;* MEG *stands to his left, while* CROMWELL *presents the papers to* MORE'S *right—as he lays the papers on the table,* MEG *curiously presses closer—and exchanges a rapid glance with* CROMWELL.)

CROMWELL. Tomorrow's meeting is primarily a discussion of strategy for the petition to His Holiness to

annul Henry's union with Queen Catherine. All of this has been previously considered. Cardinal Woolsey has drafted a preliminary paper—here is a copy—listing all the causes and facts for Henry's annulment to the Queen; the prior committment between Catherine and his deceased brother Arthur; the need for a male heir to the throne—nothing particularly new here; but kindly glance through the paper and make suggestions freely. The Cardinal— (*Confidently.*) and I might say, the King himself—hold your opinion in esteem.

MORE. How much time is allotted for ratification of the petition by the Council?

CROMWELL. His Majesty is impatient. (CROMWELL *winks to* MORE.) So is Mistress Boleyn. . . . (CROMWELL *sniggers; his joke falling short,* CROMWELL *clears his throat.*) Within the week. . . .

MORE. Within the week!

MEG. (*Quickly.*) I can easily run the school, Papa.

MORE. Yes, thank you, my dear. Well, we shall soon see if your speculation is accurate—

CROMWELL. —speculation, Sir Thomas?

MORE. My daughter wages that the Pope will refuse annulment due to the difficulties in both Spanish and French relations with Rome—

CROMWELL. That's very interesting, I'm sure. The abstractions of academicians are always interesting to consider. But I can assure that the whole petition is a mere formality, with the dispensation already granted. Such is the prediction of Lord Chancellor Woolsey, at any rate.

MEG. (*To* MORE.) But the question is being examined only in isolation—which is political fallacy. . . .

CROMWELL. (*Pompously.*) It is a pity that the Coun-

cil can not hear your "speculations" directly, Mistress More; they are very illuminating, I'm sure. . . .

MORE. Oh, they'll hear her speculations indirectly as long as I'm a member of the Council. Will any other matters be discussed?

CROMWELL. No; I think that sums it up neatly, Sir Thomas. We await you at Whitehall early in the morning for your good counsel. Farewell, sir.

MORE. I hear that there's a report circulating that my wife's culinary skill surpasses Meg's intelligence. May I counsel you to stay to dine with us?

CROMWELL. (*He hesitates, and then:*) I should be delighted to stay and dine—

MEG. (*Coldly polite.*) We should all be delighted by your company, Master Cromwell. . . . (*They look at one another.*)

CROMWELL. You will both pardon me for refusing your kind invitation, I hope. I have the king's business to attend to.

MORE. Yes, of course. Good day, sir.

CROMWELL. (*Bowing.*) Sir Thomas. Mistress More. (MEG *silently inclines her head.* CROMWELL *quickly leaves.*)

MEG. What an odious little man! With such men in the state, it is no wonder you prefer to stay here with us. Don't you father?

MORE. You know I do. I must confess I feel peculiar in the first place being on the Council, and passing judgement on such a matter as this. No man can or should legislate on a man's relation to his wife, king or no. It's a private matter, and I don't feel presumptuous enough to advise the king at all . . . though of course, Henry doesn't want advice, but rather assent.

I'll give him what he wants, nod my head, and return here quickly to Chelsea.

MEG. This will be your last year on the Council, Papa? Won't it be?

MORE. If I can resign gracefully, I will.

MEG. Good. There is no way you can serve Henry and me at the same time. I'm afraid Master Cromwell did not appreciate my "speculations" . . .

MORE. Particularly when you may very well be right.

MEG. Good! I will sabotage all your political "friendships" with such men as he; you must bring all your acquaintances to meet me once; and then I will never have to part with you again. An end to these weeks on the king's business! Then we can finish our writing together, Papa, without interference.

MORE. (*Bemused.*) Just think, Meg—no doubt if you were Cromwell's daughter, right this moment you'd be squinting your eyes over some piece of plain sewing by the fire—pricking your finger on the needle each time your mind wanders to that handsome innkeeper's son, and superstitiously tossing salt over your shoulder. How would you like that? Buzzing with the charmaids, and praying to St. Anne? (*Pause.*) Though I wonder to what extent my blind lunacy has harmed you. Perhaps you would be a happier woman, eh?

MEG. (*Holding* MORE *briefly.*) Oh, Papa—I'm not unhappy now. A bit lonely from time to time—especially when you occupy yourself away from home with such trivia as popes and kings and matters of state! But surely it's worth all the charmaid's gossip in the world to share Plato with you. . . . I do wonder, tho', Papa—if my brother John had been born the eldest, would you not have nurtured his mind at my expense?

MORE. John has not your wit. And have not your

sisters already received an education which makes the townspeople gawk at them in the streets? But it's true, you have a gift far beyond plain sewing and embroidery—that typical ignorance that passes for "breeding" among English gentlewomen. . . .

MEG. I'm not denying that I'm different from the others. But even so, why did you give me so much? Why did you decide to teach me Latin and Greek? I'm not complaining, because I'm ever so grateful to you—if you've separated me from kin and kind, you have also opened up an entire world of solace past my sisters' fantasies. It's rather thrilling, Papa. I sometimes stay transfixed over a page in a book, and the words lose meaning. Because I think—I am very likely the only woman in the world right now poring over these words—there is no other woman. I am unique. It's uncharted territory that together, you and I, are exploring. But Papa, does that make me a freak of nature?

MORE. No, not a freak—a mystery unraveling. When I first married your mother—I was so young and awed by women, then, and though several years older than Jane, and a rising barrister—still, I stopped mute in the face of her mystery. I, Thomas More, marry a woman! Become a familiar with this alien force, and live from day to day never penetrating the distance between man and woman! You may well smile at my naivete. (*The repressed laugh within* MEG *breaks forth, and* MORE *smiles sheepishly.*) Yes, well—I am still awed. Men live their lives out never realizing that there are dark continents waiting to be discovered, whole new worlds of experience—a foot away from them, in the minds of their wives. What, I wondered, does she think, this Jane Colt, when she stares into the fire? Where does her soul retreat at night, when her

rib cage rises and falls beside me? So I determined to uncover the secret of your sex. But your mother—she was sparkling, by God, and as awed by Greek as I by her—

MEG. —never revealed the mystery.

MORE. Exactly. She died first before I discovered her.

MEG. Poor Papa.

MORE. Ah, but God sent me a consolation. I turned around the day of her funeral, and caught sight of you—a mere moppet of ten still, Meg—with clumsy chubby legs and stringy hair that refused the rationality of comb and water—and I saw it.

MEG. You saw . . . ?

MORE. In your eyes. I saw the Eve-laughter peeping out of your eyes, taunting me with the mystery again.

MEG. But I was a child!

MORE. You were born wise— (*Sighing.*) you were born female. And so the great experiment and devotion of my life began.

MEG. (*To herself.*) —the "medical curio"—

MORE. What?

MEG. Well, Papa? Are you on the right track? Are you uncovering the mystery of woman?

MORE. (*Smiling down at her.*) —It's too early to tell. I need another forty years or so. . . .

MEG. (*To herself.*) An experiment. . . . (*Smiling sadly, and then not smiling at all,* MEG *paces away from* MORE.)

MORE. Is something wrong, pet?

MEG. (*Shrugging.*) I'm not sure. It's nothing, I suppose. I just suddenly feel totally alone.

MORE. Because of something I—?

(*We hear and see* ALICE MORE *huffing across the stage, with a limp and stunned* WILL ROPER *dangling from her grip. As she talks,* WILL *babbles.*)

ALICE. Now we'll just see, Master Roper, the result of your defiance! We'll just see! You've pushed me once too often! Chicken-barn loitering! You were warned this very morning! Once too often! Well, we'll just see . . .

WILL. (*In shock.*) Na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na-na

(ALICE *deposits* WILL *on the floor in front of* MORE; WILL *becomes a puddle on the floor.* MEG *struggles to keep a straight face.*)

ALICE. Husband. I demand retribution. I won't have my authority flouted by this village snipe! This vacancy! He's been warned and now he's deliberately defied me! Defied me!! Either you immediately stand up and support me, or—or— Either Will Roper goes— or you can prepare your own meals around here! I mean what I say!

MORE. Now, Angel, don't be angry. I'll try to. . . .

ALICE. He's never going to show his face here again! If horsewhipping was good enough for my father, it's good enough for. . . . (ALICE *stops to realize what she has said;* MEG *sputters.*)

MORE. Meg! This is a grave business!

MEG. I know it is. I'm sorry. (*Kneeling to the puddle on the floor; gently:*) Uh, Will. I don't know quite how to put this. . . . Is . . . um . . . anything . . . "missing"?

ALICE. No more than he was born without.

MEG. (*Relieved.*) Oh. That's all right, then.

MORE. I want to talk with Will alone.

WILL. (*Softly.*) Na-na-na-na-na

MEG. —Shhh! It's okay, Will. No one will hurt you.

ALICE. Husband! A horsewhipping!

MORE. (*Standing impressively erect and flaring.*) Wife! I will take care of this! (MORE *withstands* ALICE'S *glare;* ALICE *leaves indignantly. The three of them immediately exhale and relax. Pause. Then* MORE, *timidly:*) Meg? I really should speak to Will alone.

MEG. I know, father. But please, may we first exchange a few words privately? (MORE *nods and walks upstage.*) All right, now, William, everything will be just fine. Father will help us. How do you feel?

WILL. (*He feels himself.*) A-a-ll right. (*He is still shaken.*)

MEG. Good. How do you feel spiritually?

WILL. (*Starts to feel himself; then vacantly:*) Huh?

MEG. Oh, Will—don't you feel different? Changed? Are you not burning with the glow inside? A fervor and fear shaking your frame? (WILL *stares at her.*) Listen! Do you not hear? (WILL *strains to listen.*) Will! The celestial voices! (WILL *still listens . . .* MEG *regards his upturned gullible face with disdainful amusement.*)

WILL. (*Eagerly.*) I don't hear anything, Meg. I'm-m trying.

MEG. Never mind, Will. Allow me to translate: the voices are calling you back to Mother Church. It's Conversion-time. When father comes back, you're to tell him that you've had a change of heart—you've heard the voices, seen the light, etc.

WILL. (*Dawning.*) Oh, I see, Meg. (WILL *starts to cross himself.*)

MEG. That's right. Whatever father asks, just say "Yes, sir." Understand?

WILL. "Yes, sir."

MEG. That's my love. (MEG *kisses* WILL.) Tomorrow we'll have the banns read out in the parish church. . . .

WILL. Meg—

MEG. What's the matter, Will?

WILL. Are you sure you wanta marry me? You c'n change your mind now, if you wanta.

MEG. That's very sweet, Will. I love you.

WILL. 'Cause marriage is forever.

MEG. Not if King Henry gets his way, and the Council supports his petition for divorce: Who knows? Kings set the trend; it might become fashionable—

WILL. (*Aghast.*) Meg! Your father would never permit it!!

MEG. Permit?? Permit what?

WILL. The King's divorce—breaking holy wedlock! "Whom God hath t-tied together—"

MEG. —My God, Will! You sound Catholic already!! Besides, my father doesn't split theological hairs—he's told me so. This is politics, not ethics. You wouldn't understand. Father observes the forms of religion; but underneath he's a free-thinker. He doesn't presume to judge the faith of others—we must "observe his conventions, not his convictions." He's a very subtle man, Will. Perhaps you'll get to understand him better in time.

WILL. Your father's not a f-free-thinker. He's a deeply religious man.

MEG. How would you know?

WILL. 'Cause it takes a religious man to have a—a —non-believer for a daughter.

MEG. (*She is stopped.*) Heavens. "From out the

mouths of morons—" Do you know what, Will? There's a very thin line in you separating idiocy from profundity. . . . Well, anyway, let us observe the conventions. We have the rest of our lives to discuss conviction. Now, then, when father comes back, you're to say, "Sir Thomas, I have seen the light. I wish to convert." Okay? (WILL *starts to mouth the words to memorize*—"Sir-Thomas-I-Have . . .) My father will take it from there. (*Calling* MORE.) Father . . . (MORE *comes downstage.*) There's something Will wishes to tell you— (MEG *nudges* WILL.) Will?

WILL. "S-s-sir Thomas . . . I-have-seen-the-light. I-wish-to-convert." (*Looking at* MEG.) Is that right? (MORE *regards them both suspiciously.*)

MORE. I think you had better leave Will and I alone for a bit, Meg. Please wait outside.

MEG. (*She leaves, and faces the audience:*) And I waited outside— (MEG *smiles.*) But I listened.

MORE. So, um, Will—you wish to convert, is that it?

WILL. (*Stupidly.*) "Yes, sir."

MORE. You realize the errors of your ways?

WILL. Yes, sir.

MORE. That only the one and universal Church can redeem man from eternal torment? That the Pope is the true representative of Peter and Paul? That the wine and the bread transubstantiate into the blood and body of Christ who died to save our sins? Do you understand all this, Will?

WILL. (*Faltering.*) "Yes, sir."

MORE. (*Skeptically.*) Well, that's fine, Will. Perhaps one of these days you'll explain it all to me.

WILL. Yes, sir.

MORE. Do you convert of your own free will?

WILL. Yes, sir.

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