
Erring Together: Renaissance Humanists in Certainty's Shadow*

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Everyone makes mistakes. Still, getting things wrong can be a lonely experience. In religious thought as in philosophy or cognitive science, error is equated with imperfection: anyone who wants to be right needs to correct or supersede mistakes.

Indeed, certainty—the need to be sure one is right—has been identified as the obsession that defined the age in Susan Schreiner's powerful recent study of early modern Christianity.¹ In what follows, I suggest first that this argument about the centrality of certainty obscures the importance of making mistakes—of errancy—to religious movements of the sixteenth century. The Reformation era was, as Schreiner maintains, defined by the fear of deception and the need to be sure—of God, of salvation, of scriptural interpretation. However, error can also facilitate camaraderie. This was the counterintuitive conviction voiced by Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More, humanists writing during the time Schreiner surveys, when error was a threat not only to a scholar's status but to life itself—both temporal and eternal. What is remarkable about these two Reformation-era intellectuals is that despite manifest differences in their ecclesiology, both understood error as a source of fragile solidarity, even a sacred bond of charity. In dedicatory letters, devotional treatises, and ironic writings, Erasmus and More portrayed making and correcting mistakes as a communal process that enabled friendship and right religion by disabling pedantic certainty.

This has implications for the study of religion because of the widespread assumption (arguably influenced by the Reformation attitudes Schreiner

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¹ Susan Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise? Debates about Certainty in the Early Modern Era* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). To consider the modern secular legacy of the aversion to error that Schreiner assesses, see Kathryn Shulz's cultural study, *Being Wrong: Adventures in the Margin of Error* (New York: Ecco, 2010).

surveys) that religious adherents are motivated above all by desire for certainty and satisfied either by epistemological arguments (e.g., theology) or communal assent (e.g., ecclesiology). Both options take for granted that error is always seen as a problem to be avoided or solved. By asserting that erring together is a constitutive yet ignored element of Renaissance humanism, I question these assumptions. In this way—and here is my second goal—I make the case for the importance of error to the study of religion, not, as Mark Taylor has done, by making error the source of an alternative philosophy but rather by revealing how making mistakes can catalyze relationships and how community might coalesce around a sympathetic appreciation of the shared predilection to blunder.²

This study is informed by recent work on Renaissance error—work that reveals the relevance of error to that era’s literary creativity, scholarly identity, and soteriological anxiety—and to that same scholarship’s surprising lack of interest in the communal aspect of the phenomenon.³ Elsewhere I have contributed to the recent interest in the new model of community that Erasmus, More, and other humanists created by emphasizing its religiosity.⁴ Here I argue more specifically that when Erasmus and More imagined themselves in relation to others, they did so in ways that were grounded in an appreciation of irony and in a theologically informed emphasis on humility and errancy. Instead of absolute certainty or a fruitless quest for revelatory assurance, what Erasmus and More garnered from shared errancy was the comfort of shared displacement.⁵

² For the theological significance of error, see above all Mark Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), discussed below. G. R. Evans offers a comprehensive survey of interest in error among medieval theologians—and their appeal to *loci* as a solution in *Getting It Wrong: The Medieval Epistemology of Error* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

³ On literary creativity, see François Rigolot, “The Renaissance Fascination with Error: Mannerism and Early Modern Poetry,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2004): 1219–34, as well as his book *L’Erreur de la Renaissance: Perspectives littéraires* (Paris: Champion, 2002), in which he argues also for the relevance of *synkatabasis*, or divine accommodation, to explain humanistic “tolerance” of some heterodox ideas at the time of the Reformation as part of a wide-reaching study of how theological, literary, philosophical, and even visual representations of error offered alternatives to doctrinal absolutism. Error’s relevance to scholarly identity is explored in Seth Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self: The Scholarly Imagination, Medieval to Modern* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). Lerer argues that Renaissance intellectuals established their authority and inaugurated modern academic culture by detecting and correcting error and that the “professionalization of literary studies took shape” through “encounters with the erroneous” (2). Note also that error lurks as certainty’s dark shadow, inspiring soteriological anxiety, in Schreiner, *Are You Alone Wise?*

⁴ Lisa Jardine, *Erasmus: Man of Letters* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Kathy Eden, *Friends Hold All Things in Common: Tradition, Intellectual Property, and the “Adages” of Erasmus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001); and Constance M. Furey, *Erasmus, Contarini, and the Religious Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁵ The relationality that comes into view is not a static ecclesiology or theological truism. Neither is it defined solely by the quest for status or the need for communal assent, as described by historians of science or of the Republic of Letters, for example, Jardine and also Peter N. Miller, *Pierres’s Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000); and Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

The differences between these two men are as important for my purposes as their similarities. Erasmus, a scholar who devoted his life to correcting texts, insisted throughout that this was a communal process, performed best by those who could affirm that friends err together and that the right attitude toward error was in fact a precondition of friendship. This equanimity about error might seem self-serving or unsurprising, given Erasmus's characteristic moderation (the character trait that Martin Luther memorably mocked in his debate with Erasmus about free will). That this understanding of error was affirmed also by Thomas More may be more surprising, for although More the humanist writer delighted in irony and playful claims about errancy, More is known equally well as a zealous heretic hunter, condemning to death those who refused his correction, and a martyr who died rather than affirm what he perceived as Henry VIII's error. And yet in his so-called Tower writings, in the years when the dark drip of prison walls made the deadly consequences of error impossible to ignore, More still equated inerrancy with isolation and affirmed a vision of humans as necessarily errant creatures, bound together by their capacity to make mistakes more than by their ability to perceive inerrant truth.

I. ERRING TOGETHER: ERASMUS ON SCHOLARSHIP AND COMMUNITY

In *Moriae Encomium* (*Praise of Folly*), Erasmus encouraged scholarly humility by mocking the quest for accuracy pursued by scholars like himself. Grammarians, he wrote, cheapen praise through excessive use, yet if one “blunders [*lapsus sit*] over a single syllable” and is caught by “some sharper-eyed fellow,” then, “‘oh thunder and lightning,’ what tragic declamations we get, what caterwaulings, word-wars, and bitter invectives!”⁶ Erasmus elaborated by describing a character who reads like a prototype for George Eliot's dull, punctilious Casaubon, a “certain ‘polymath’” who at sixty years of age “set everything else aside” and then spent more than twenty years “torturing his mind with the problem of deciding (if he should be happy enough to live so long) how the eight parts of speech should be distinguished.” The stakes, Erasmus noted caustically, were high, for “it would practically be a cause for war if somebody made a conjunction out of a word that really belonged among the adverbs.”⁷ The arrogance of those who would not admit the

⁶ “Quod si quis alius verbulo lapsus sit idque forte fortuna hic oculatior deprehenderit, ἤρακλεις, quae protinus tragoediae, quae digladiationes, quae convicia, quae invectivae!” (Desiderius Erasmus, *Moriae encomium id est Stultitiae Laus*, in *Opera omnia* [Amsterdam: North Holland, 1979], 4.3.140; English translation in Robert M. Adams, trans., *The Praise of Folly and Other Writings* [New York: Norton, 1989], 53).

⁷ “iam sexagenarium, qui (caeteris rebus omissis) annis plus viginti se torquet ac disrutiat in grammatica, prorsus felicem se fore ratus, si tam diu liceat vivere, donec certo statuat, quomodo distinguendae sint octo partes orationis, quod hactenus nemo Graecorum aut Latinorum ad plenum praestare valuit. Perinde quasi res sit bello quoque vindicanda, si quis coniunctionem faciat dictionem ad adverbiorum ius pertinentem” (Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, 4.3.140; English in Adams, *Praise of Folly*, 53).

possibility of error was a problem, Erasmus's text proclaims, not just because it might elevate the trivial or justify violence but, more fundamentally, because it hindered good scholarship.

Though Erasmus himself was a careful scholar, *Praise of Folly* insisted that truth is not synonymous with accuracy. Erasmus was fond of noting how ridiculous it is to care if someone says "magister noster" instead of "noster magister," and he indicted those who thought this sort of mistake mattered: "What can be funnier than their habit of doing everything by the book, as if following mathematical rules that it would be a sin to break."⁸ With fastidious attention to grammar and correct syllogisms, these benighted theologians thought they were saving the church from "the dark cave of such grievous errors [*errorum tenebris*];"⁹ instead they were allowing their confidence in worldly wisdom to obstruct recognition of the Christian beliefs and convictions that were truly important.

This is not to say that Erasmus simply accepted mistakes, but that the right attitude toward grammatical and doctrinal errors alike would also ensure corrections made in the right spirit. *Folly* condemns a theologian who misinterpreted a passage from the Pauline letters because he thought *devita* (avoid, reject) was equivalent to *de vita*; the problem highlighted in this example was not the linguistic slip in itself but the conclusion drawn from it, condoning the burning (and not just the shunning) of heretics.¹⁰ In this text—as in other writings—Erasmus equated the aversion to error with a stultifying, alienating conceit.¹¹ As *Folly* explained, "a people could not stand its prince . . . nor a friend a friend nor a wife her husband . . . unless they were mistaken [*errent*], both at the same time or turn and turn about, in each other."¹² Etymologically linked to *wandering*, like Chaucer's ghost that "errest to and fro," *error* can not only alienate and individuate but also enable

⁸ "Quid autem iucundius quam quod omnia faciunt ex praescripto, quasi mathematicis utentes rationibus, quas praeterire piaculum sit" (Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, 4.3.160; English in Adams, *Praise of Folly*, 62).

⁹ "Quis tantis errorum tenebris liberasset ecclesiam" (Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, 4.3:158; English in Adams, *Praise of Folly*, 61).

¹⁰ Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, 4.3:186; Adams, *Praise of Folly*, 80.

¹¹ For a brief but perceptive analysis, along the lines I am pursuing here, that discusses how Erasmus balanced equanimity about error with the fervent desire to correct errant texts, see Johan Huizinga, *Erasmus and the Age of Reformation*, trans. F. Hopman (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001), 111–16. For discussions that focus instead on what Ann Blair aptly called the emergence of "practices of correction" and errata sheet in particular within the context of print culture, see Ann Blair, "Errata Lists and the Reader as Corrector," in *Agent of Change: Print Culture Studies after Elizabeth L. Eisenstein*, ed. Sabrina Alcorn Baron, Eric N. Lindquist, and Eleanor F. Shevlin (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 21–41, quote on 24; Seth Lerer, "Errata: Print, Politics, and Poetry in Early Modern England," in *Reading, Society, and Politics in Early Modern England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 41–71, and *Error and the Academic Self*, 17. See also Lerer's assessment of the discussion of the exchange between Budé and Erasmus, discussed below.

¹² "ut nec populus principem . . . nec amicus amicum nec maritum uxorem . . . nisi vicissim inter sese nunc errent" (Erasmus, *Opera omnia* 4.3.94; English in Adams, *Praise of Folly*, 22).

new connections—a characteristic that recalls *religare* (to bind), a possible source for the word *religion*.¹³ As *Folly* suggests, errancy encourages the humility that makes it possible to live together.

Even in contexts where Erasmus is concerned above all to present himself as a scholar who had dedicated his life to correcting texts, he endorsed rather than denied the value of errant sources by pointing out, for example, that errors abound in the works of the church fathers and in all of the authoritative sources that the didacts invoke. As he explained in a letter to Pope Leo dated August 9, 1516, referring to the work he had done to produce a corrected Latin edition of the New Testament (published together with the Greek text for the first time earlier that year), Erasmus did not presume to transform or to create anew: “For by this labour of mine the ancient and commonly accepted text is not pulled up by the roots; here and there I correct it where it is corrupt.” These corrections, he explained, were based on evidence and learned consensus.¹⁴ Erasmus avoided blind arrogance by being “always ready either modestly to defend my view where I am right” or to amend and correct any mistakes—exactly as should be expected from one who knows that humans are imperfect or “fallen [*lapsi*].”¹⁵ In a letter he wrote later that same month, again referring to his edition of the New Testament, Erasmus proclaimed that he had the right to “restore” the sources so that they might “henceforward [be] read more accurately and [understood] more correctly.” He insisted that this work was valuable not just because correction was a self-evident improvement but also because he himself was modest rather than presumptuous. When a “slip [*lapsum*]” is made by a great theologian—he lists Hilary, Augustine, and Thomas—he corrected “with great respect” and “with no personal attacks.” This ensured, he said, that “were they themselves alive today, they would be grateful even to a humble creature like myself for the way in which I put them right.” The bond created was one forged through imperfection; the modest corrector and the great theologian were both “only men after

¹³ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde*, bk. 4, verse 44. For this etymology, from Lactantius, see, e.g., Mark Taylor, “Introduction,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 8; for a discussion of the alternative, *relegere*, from Cicero, see J. Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹⁴ “Nec enim hoc labore veterem ac vulgo receptam aeditionem convellimus, sed alicubi depravatam emendamus, aliquot locis obscuram illustramus” (letter 446, in P. S. Allen, *Opus epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami*, vol. 2 [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906], 290; English translation in R. A. B. Mynors and D. F. S. Thomson, trans., *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, 15 vols. [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977], 4:5). On the nature of this and subsequent editions, see Henk-Jan de Jonge, “‘Novum Testamentum a nobis versum’: The Essence of Erasmus’ Edition of the New Testament,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 35 (1984): 394–413.

¹⁵ “semper interim parati aut modeste rationem reddere si quid recte docuimus, aut libenter corrigere sicubi imprudentes, ut homines, lapsi sumus” (letter 446, in Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, 324–25; English in Mynors and Thomson, *Correspondence*, 4:46, 48).

all.”¹⁶ Erasmus’s overarching claim here is that scholars should not be afraid of mistakes because they could—and should—establish a bond of generosity and gratitude rather than hostility between corrector and corrected.

“Errare humanum est” (to err is human) was a commonplace in the sixteenth century, and although Erasmus did not include the saying itself in his *Adages*, he frequently reiterated that humans are fallible; and like More he compounded the message by emphasizing the importance of forgiving error. He accused those who critiqued him of impeding the work of correction and affirmed that this correction would necessarily involve further errors: “They do not refute and put right what they regard as errors in my work,” he complained, “but merely condemn me for committing them.” In this way, his critics treat “the man who removes an error” worse than “he who introduces one.”¹⁷ In this way, Erasmus insisted that a scholarly project properly understood requires friends, not critics.

Because mistakes made one vulnerable to attack, they cast into relief the difference between enemies and friends—and Erasmus had many of both. Thomas More, for example, reassured Erasmus about a bishop who objected only to a few word choices in his New Testament but also warned about others who “have formed a conspiracy in our midst to read what you write in a very different frame of mind.” The problem, in other words, was not in the mistakes themselves but in how they were viewed. This was a cause for concern, and More asked Erasmus to defend himself accordingly by “going through and correcting everything, in such a way as to leave the least possible scope for misrepresentation.”¹⁸

This difference of perspective, as much as the mistakes themselves, was the issue at stake in the numerous accounts in Erasmus’s letters that challenged the accuracy of translations and scholarly work. As an early exchange with the great French humanist Guillaume Budé makes clear, Erasmus counted as friends those who imagined that critique and correction could solidify rather than inhibit a relationship. Budé thanked Erasmus for forgiving his misuse of a Greek word in a translation from Luke 1:3: “You gave me the most gentle treatment on that point, leaving me as you did to detect and amend my own error. I was wrong, I admit; I cannot seek to avoid the

¹⁶ “Hanc quam adamant emendatius legent posthac et rectius intelligent. . . . Ostendo locis aliquot lapsum esse Hilarium, lapsum Augustinum, lapsum Thomam; idque facio, sicut oportet, reverenter citraque contumeliam: adeo ut si viverent ipsi, mihi qualicumque sic admonenti gratiam habituri sint. Summi erant homines, sed tamen homines errant” (letter 456, in Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, 324–25; English in Mynors and Thomson, *Correspondence*, 4:46, 48).

¹⁷ “Tam non refellunt et corrigunt quae perperam a nobis scripta censeant, sed hoc ipsum damnant scripsisse. . . . Adeo peiorem volunt esse conditionem mendum submoventis quam invehentis, bene merentis sua industria quam male merentis sua incogitantia” (letter 456, in Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, 322; English in Mynors and Thomson, *Correspondence*, 4:45).

¹⁸ “ut celeriter ita recenseas atque emendes omnia, uti minimum usquam locum relinquo calumniare” (letter 481, in Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, 371; English in Mynors and Thomson, *Correspondence*, 4:115).

blame, only the penalty and the disgrace, and it is normal to let a man off these if he owns up. You had a perfect right to point out my mistake in a critical spirit, while still abstaining from censoriousness.”¹⁹

Seth Lerer assesses this exchange as illustrative of the way scholarly identity in the Renaissance came to be defined by acts of detecting and correcting mistakes. Noting that Budé claimed self-discovery and self-correction and offered his confession to escape sanction, Lerer concludes that Budé hereby presented himself as his “own best corrector” in a tableau modeled on a court of law.²⁰ What Lerer overlooks, however, is that Erasmus responded by affirming that this attentive solicitude should unite them; in this way, the Dutch humanist rendered the terms of his association with his French interlocutor reciprocal rather than judicial. Budé should, Erasmus wrote, satisfy the *quid pro quo* by “correcting and instructing me [monendo docendoque], and not with compliments [non laudando].”²¹ Otherwise, no matter how hard he worked, Erasmus risked being left alone with his mistakes. Later in the same letter, Erasmus recounted the suffering and exhaustion he felt as he was trying to correct Jerome and again begged for help. By presenting both himself and his sources as errant, even as he explained the importance of the way he “put them right,” Erasmus made two key points. First, that the expression of truth—if not truth itself—is necessarily variable, even errant: the truth he sought is apprehended through an ongoing process of interactive assessment. Second, that corrections should be judged not just by accuracy of content but also by the effect they have on relationships. To sustain a good relationship with the author, whether dead or alive, one must offer “right and proper” corrections. Error should open people up to one another rather than close them off.²²

The interlacing of epistemology and community dynamics—the insistence that discernment is inseparable from relationships—is largely assumed rather than assessed in Lerer’s work on scholarly identity, and it remains unexplored in most accounts of what is now regularly described as the social nature of Renaissance authorship.²³ Yet as this initial tracking of perceptions

¹⁹ “Quam molli articulo ibi me tractasti, imo quam mihi me reprehendendum emendandumque reliquisti! Agnosco, fateor, deprecor non culpam sed poenam, sed ignominiam, quae fatenti remitti solet. Potuisti iure tuo . . . ut etiam critica severitate abstineres” (letter 403, in Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, 231; English in Mynors and Thomson, *Correspondence*, 3:278).

²⁰ Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self*, 39–40.

²¹ Letter 421, in Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, 252; English in Mynors and Thomson, *Correspondence*, 3:304.

²² Letter 421, in Allen, *Opus epistolarum*, 254; English in Mynors and Thomson, *Correspondence*, 3:306.

²³ See, e.g., Richard Helgerson, *Self-Crowned Laureates: Spenser, Jonson, Milton and the Literary System* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Wendy Wall, *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Margaret Ezell, *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

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of error in Erasmus makes clear, identity and authorship were not just social but relational, based not just on collaboration but on exchanges about how to collaborate. The focus in Erasmus's text was on the dispositions that made productive collaboration possible, and on the knowledge this collaboration enabled. These same interests are manifest in Thomas More's work as well, for in both writers they are bound up with theological assumptions about the important link between errancy and salvation.

II. THOMAS MORE

A. *Irony and Errancy*

In his early writings in particular, Thomas More used irony much as Erasmus did in *Praise of Folly*, as well as in his earnest appeals to patrons and friends to reproach scholars who deemed errors unforgivable and to admonish those who vehemently defended the importance of accuracy. More's use of irony is evident, for example, in his first published work—a Latin translation of dialogues by the Greek satirist Lucian—that he prefaced with a dedicatory letter asking the recipient, Thomas Ruthall, to seek and forgive errors.²⁴ Describing Ruthall's judgment as "so keen that nobody would more quickly detect any error there may be," More insisted that he valued Ruthall's generosity, for "your nature is so kind that none would more readily condone it."²⁵ Because Ruthall (the king's secretary and later bishop of Durham and lord privy seal) was both learned and humble, he could be trusted both to detect and forgive errors. By describing Ruthall as walking together in the fields of error with him, alert to differences between right and wrong, More linked both of them to Lucian, whom he characterized as an errant writer, "in the same error [in eo fuisse errore]" as many other pagans.²⁶

Lucian's style is significant to More's message, for satire and irony work by appealing to a shared sense of absurdity and thus a sense of community. More hoped that error, rightly handled by people who share a collaborative attitude, might have the same effect.²⁷ The real problem, More maintained,

²⁴ Thomas More, *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 3, pt. 1, *Translations of Lucien*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); see lv–lxvii for a description of editions.

²⁵ "quod & si tam acre tibi iudicium sit, ut quicquid erratum fuerit, nemo penetrantius videat: is tamen est ingenii tui candor, ut nemo libentius conniveat" (ibid., 8–9).

²⁶ Ibid., 5.

²⁷ See, e.g., More's inclusion of Lucian's *Philopseudes* (Lover of lies), about the allure of false claims, in his *Translations of Lucien*. Lies are not the same as errors, of course: the two are differentiated not so much by effect as by intent. Lies are reprehensible because they deceive, whereas error is a mistake that invites consultation and correction. Augustine, one of More's favorite authors, had long ago clarified the distinction by observing that errors invite correction because they are unintended, whereas lies inspire condemnation because they betray the intent to deceive. On this, see Evans, *Getting It Wrong*, 194, citing Augustine, *De mendacio*.

was not errors or even lies themselves, but fear and hubris—the “foolish confidence [inani fiducia]” and “superstitious dread [supersticiosa formidine]”²⁸—that so often caused Christians to trust or believe false stories or mistrust the truth. In his letter to Ruthall, as in his endorsement of Lucian’s style and content, More suggested that they all three share the inclination to pursue insights and accuracy through deviations and byways and the recognition that the perception and correction of error is an act of discernment, rightly performed only by those prepared to recognize that a mistake is not always a problem and that the need for certainty might impede the search for truth.

Like Erasmus, More revealed that he was not exempt from error’s shame when he attacked those who accused him of making mistakes. The most dramatic example of this is More’s vitriolic exchange with Germain de Brie, or “Brixius,” a French priest whose partisan poem about a sea battle between French and English forces provoked More to write several insulting epigrams published in his *Epigrammata* (1518).²⁹ Brixius responded by composing a long, bitter poem he titled *Antimorus* (a punning title that means both “Against More” and “Against the fool”), printed with an appendix detailing over thirty errors of meter and grammar in More’s work. This provoked an onslaught of defensive claims from More: he had not expected his epigrams would be published; he had not had the opportunity to correct the proofs; some of the errors Brixius pointed to had classical precedent; and others were warranted because, ultimately, meaning is more important than strict adherence to meter or grammar. According to More, Brixius had stripped history of its efficacy by distorting the facts and had used the wrong number of syllables himself.³⁰ Here error provokes only a defense of standing—and the need to defend a perceived opponent.

Even in this context, however, More emphasized that errancy should connect rather than divide people. In his final response, More conceded Brixius’s linguistic expertise but argued that Brixius’s scholarship was inadequate because he failed to recognize that the inaccurate syllables signified heart (*cor*) or intelligence (*mens*);³¹ in this way, More maintained that truth should be understood not exclusively in terms of accuracy (represented by Brixius’s interest in counting syllables) but instead in terms of affective and intellectual judgment (matters—as More saw it—of heart and mind). More insisted that

²⁸ More, *Translations of Lucian*, 6.

²⁹ For a good overview of this dispute, see Peter Ackroyd, *The Life of Thomas More* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 205–6.

³⁰ Thomas More, *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 3, pt. 2, *Latin Poems*, ed. Clarence H. Miller, Leicester Bradner, and Charles A. Lynch (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 614, 634.

³¹ See poem 195: “Una opere in toto deest syllaba, mille supersunt. / Plenum opus est, nam quid posset abesse minus? / Una uno haec legitur, sed non legitur tibi, mense, / Et plus quam medium syllaba mensis habet” (*ibid.*, 226); and poem 209: “Chordigera est tibi tota frequens, tibi non tamen usquam est / Cordigerae in toto syllaba prima libro” (*ibid.*, 239).

this lesson is lost on those who attack rather than consult, for they cut themselves off from the exchanges with others who have proven themselves capable of discernment and failed to recognize that it is in and through these exchanges that truth is known.

More himself expressed the kind of attitude he wanted to encourage by using irony rather than aggressive mockery to address the scholarly obsession with error in the letters that presented *Utopia*—and its author—to other scholars in 1516. In his letter to Peter Giles, More emphasized the importance of the collaborative endeavor to detect and correct mistakes. He appealed to his colleague to ensure that his work contained “nothing false” and omitted “nothing true.”³² He asked Giles to help correct his mistakes by seeking assistance from Raphael Hythloday, because, as More insisted, “If I’ve made a mistake, there’s nobody better qualified to correct me.”³³ But Hythloday, the traveler who surveyed *Utopia*, was More’s own creation. As the conjured eyewitness (Hythloday) shadows the serious scholar (Giles), the desire for accuracy itself becomes questionable. What do you want to know? Why are you so intent on getting every detail right? By invoking Hythloday as a corrector, More subtly critiqued those who equated truth with accuracy and celebrated instead what mistakes might signify: that it is impossible for one person alone to get it right. Consultation could transform error from an alienating mistake into the premise of a sustaining relationship.

Embedded in More’s elaborate ironic disclaimers about trying to avoid any mistakes of fact or detail are statements about the pursuit of truth, for truth was, he declared, the “only thing” he sought to inscribe in his book.³⁴ In this way, More suggested that the desire for accuracy may exacerbate the problem it is supposed to solve, and he emphasized this point by observing that error might well coexist with truth: “For, as I’ve taken particular pains to avoid having anything false in the book, so, if anything is in doubt, I’d rather say something untrue than tell a lie. In short, I’d rather be honest than clever.”³⁵ More claimed rights to his own goal of inscribing truth, regardless of what others thought, by embedding it in a circle of counsel. Truth, he thereby implied, might have to stand apart from the judgment of error, at least insofar as that judgment is made by those who insist that error and truth are opposed. At the same time, as More enacted another

³² “aut insit falsi, aut veri desideretur” (Thomas More, *Utopia: Latin Text and English Translation*, ed. George M. Logan, Robert M. Adams, and Clarence H. Miller [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995], 36–37).

³³ “Nam neque alius aequae sufficit si quid est erratum corrigere, neque is ipse aliter hoc praestare potest quam si quae sunt a me scripta perlegerit” (ibid.).

³⁴ “Et mea oratio quanto accederet proprius ad illius neglectam simplicitatem, tanto futura sit proprior veritati, cui hac in re soli curam et debeo et habeo” (ibid., 30–31).

³⁵ “nam ut maxime curabo ne quid sit in libro falsi, ita si quid sit in ambiguo, potius mendacium dicam quam mentiar, quod malim bonus esse quam prudens” (ibid., 34–35).

possibility by explaining that it might be possible to be both inaccurate and right, he appealed not only to the recipients of his letters but also to a wider community to share this conviction.

More proclaimed that his irony had earnest intent. In another letter to Giles, responding to another scholar's critical reviews, More acknowledged that he could not make common cause with someone who believed it possible to clearly differentiate truth from error: "But when he wonders whether *Utopia* is truth or a fiction, then I find *his* judgment in turn sorely at fault." The critic has failed the test of discernment or acceptance of error, subjecting him to More's ironic attack: "Unless I had a historian's devotion to fact, I am not so stupid as to have used those barbarous and senseless names of Utopia, Anyder, Amaurot, and Ademus."³⁶ More initially sustains the ironic appeal to the veracity of this world—a world of invented names—by asserting again that eyewitnesses can confirm his words. Like Erasmus, More appreciated the way that irony suspends judgment even as it presumes the shared assumptions that make this suspension possible. This is why, as the letters to Giles make clear, he endorsed irony as the appropriate attitude for the community to which he appealed. Knowing this community's fragility, More ended defiantly: "Let them get the truth from him—dig it out of him with questions, if they want." If they insist on misunderstanding the work in this way, solitude may be the only recourse, for "I only want them to understand that I'm responsible for my own work, and my own work alone, not for anyone else's credibility."³⁷ Here, in his great work of ironic hopefulness, More gestured toward the kind of isolated position he would assume years later as a prisoner in the Tower of London, when his focus had shifted from cultivating scholarly toleration and counsel alongside Erasmus to questioning whether he erred in refusing to endorse Henry's claim to be supreme head of the church in England.

B. Errancy and Certainty

In 1520, just four years after the publication of *Utopia*, Martin Luther's trifecta of polemical pamphlets appeared.³⁸ More was soon busy attacking Luther in print and heretics in person. Once dialogue became dangerous rather than mutually enlightening and religious polemics swept away the fertile ambiguities of literature, More repudiated some of his

³⁶ "Tam quum dubitet verane res an commenticia sit, hic vero exactum ipsius iudicium require . . . qui nisi me fides coegisset historiae, non sum tam stupidus ut barbaris illis uti nominibus et nihil significantibus, Utopiae, Anydri, Amauroti, Ademi voluissem" (ibid., 268–69).

³⁷ "Exiscitentur ergo ab ipso verum, aut questionibus si libet exsculpant, modo mihi intelligant operam tantum meam, non alienam etiam fidem esse praestandam" (ibid.).

³⁸ *An den christlichen Adel deutscher Nation, De captivitate Babylonica, and Tractatus de libertate Christiana* (Von der Freiheit eines Christenmenschen in German).

earlier work.³⁹ As he put it in a 1532 treatise condemning William Tyndale's English translation of the Bible, More proclaimed that he would burn "not onely" Erasmus's books "but myen owne also, helpe to burne them both with myne owne handes" rather than have them lead readers astray.⁴⁰

Statements like this explain why More—the private ascetic and devoted father praised in Thomas Roper's contemporary biography and the prisoner of conscience celebrated in Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*—is often remembered instead as the fearsome zealot depicted in Hilary Mantel's recent novel *Wolf Hall*. Many standard biographies and studies describe More as one who became, in the words of James Simpson, "an exact replica of his intolerant and literalist opponents."⁴¹ More became almost absurdly defensive, another biographer observes, devoting a long paragraph of a 1533 work, for example, to address the charge that he had "misrehearsed" a detail of a preacher's argument about scripture and to promise that he would mount a full defense in a longer work. The biography concludes that "we are as far away from the reasonable world" of More's earlier works "as it is possible to be."⁴² In keeping with this narrative, Seth Lerer argues that More's antiheresy books, including *Dialogue concerning Heresies* (1529 and 1531) and *Confutation of Tyndale* (1532–33), presented the author "as his own best proofreader," because More's insistence that theological error must be hunted down and rooted out extended to grammatical and typographical mistakes.⁴³ More's conviction that equanimity about error was the basis of right relationships seemed to have disappeared entirely.

Yet More's transformation is often exaggerated. From *Utopia* to the scaffold, as R. W. Chambers long ago observed, More was consistent in valuing the collective more than the individual.⁴⁴ As a communitarian, More differed from his opponents in claiming that textual interpretation is possible only within a context of communal trust. As More saw it, Luther himself clearly demonstrated the dangers of erring alone: there was nothing more appalling, according to More, than Luther's presumptuous claim to interpret scripture for and by himself. Whereas Luther maintained that this exegetical certainty testified to the power of God rather than the individual's capacity to understand the word of God, More contended that

³⁹ Thomas More, *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 8, pt. 1, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, ed. Louis A. Schuster, Richard C. Marius, and James P. Lusardi (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 480, lines 36–37; cf. Alistair Fox, *Thomas More: History and Providence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 135, 166–73, 209–11.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁴¹ James Simpson, *Burning to Read: English Fundamentalism and Its Reformation Opponents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 281. Standard biographies of More often echo this judgment. See, e.g., Fox, *Thomas More*; Richard Marius, *Thomas More: A Biography* (New York: Knopf, 1984), 281–91; and Ackroyd, *Life of More*, 273–79, 289–304.

⁴² Fox, *Thomas More*, 126.

⁴³ Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self*, 24.

⁴⁴ R. W. Chambers, *Thomas More* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1958), 262–66.

it was always possible to err in one's reading of the Bible: tradition is authoritative because scriptural interpretation is always a questionable business. How was it, More asked, that Luther could be sure that his interpretation was right when so many disagreed? Had God abandoned the church for 1500 years, returning only to grant Luther insight? As an expression of the concern with certainty in early modern Europe—a concern intensified exponentially by the emergence of Protestant movements—More's questions stirred the coals of doubt, fanning the pervasive fear of deception into a conflagration that threatened Protestants and Catholics alike. This is the crucial insight of Susan Schreiner's work on the reformation era. "Are you alone wise?"—the challenge that inspired the title of her book—is a terrifying question when one is making claims about truth and reality.⁴⁵ While Luther contended that the Holy Spirit would reassure the individual believer, More instead equated certainty with community.⁴⁶ Citing John 16:13 ("When the Spirit of Truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth"), More insisted that God had established a visible church so that believers would know where the "Spirit of Truth" could be found. The visible church is the church one could trust to be "without any error," where "the Christian can not be decyued therein."⁴⁷ Consequently James Simpson, who condemns More's zealotry, can also conclude that More was a textual pragmatist who offers an alternative to Protestant fundamentalism by proposing a "consensual, historically grounded account of reading."⁴⁸ Given the problems with scriptural literalism and its historical link to violent religious fervor, Simpson offers More's emphasis on tradition as a compelling and even comforting alternative. While Schreiner does not share Simpson's confidence that a commitment to tradition hampers fanaticism, she too describes More as one who found an answer to uncertainty and his fear of deception in the belief that the Holy Spirit guided the church.

Accurate though they may be, these descriptions of More as a communitarian, like those of More the fanatic, miss the significance of the fact that More's appeal to tradition was prompted by the conviction that by himself, he alone—anyone alone—would err. More was not implacably opposed to mistakes. Nor did he have any illusions about the accuracy of consensus. As he said in his *Apology* (1533), written a year and a half before his imprisonment, after he had resigned his position as lord chancellor,

⁴⁵ See, e.g., More, *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 5, *Responsio ad Lutherum*, ed. John M. Headley (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1969), 182–83; and Susan Schreiner's discussion in *Are You Alone Wise?*, 198–204, 293–97. On the problem of scriptural interpretation, specifically, see also Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 196.

⁴⁶ See *Are You Alone Wise?*, 202–5, for Schreiner's analysis of what was for More and other Catholics the Protestants' most outrageous claim: that believers could be subjectively certain of their own salvation, and that indeed this certainty was a sign of salvation.

⁴⁷ More, *Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, 892, 902, 953, 995.

⁴⁸ Simpson, *Burning to Read*, 259.

“myche people maye sometyme byleue some one mannys lye” and the compulsion to conform can be inspired by “the spyryte of errorr and lyenge” and produce “dyscorde and dyuysyon.”⁴⁹ More understood unerring church consensus as an evolving process, part of history rather than an alternative to it.⁵⁰ As he once said in a letter to a monk, challenging the cloistered man’s right to critique Erasmus, “You have no chance to become proficient in refuting errors and warning the world, since you gave up interest in the world by shutting yourself up in the cloister.”⁵¹ Engagement was essential because each individual is errant, and those who isolate themselves forgo not the inerrancy of consensus but rather the reciprocal or collaborative relationships that make effective correction possible.

What happens, though, when More himself is cloistered as a prisoner in the Tower? What sort of engagement can he endorse when he is severed from the relationships he has affirmed? Even those who have found the arguments persuasive thus far have good reason to wonder how the experience of imprisonment might change More’s understanding of error.⁵² One thing is clear: More put a premium on church teachings and identified ecclesial consensus not just with the papacy but also “the comon knowen catholyke people,” by which he meant “clergy, lay, folk, and all” as a source of certain truth.⁵³ But the following assessment of some of More’s Tower writings suggest also some intriguing continuities with his earlier understanding of error.

C. Errancy and Isolation

Once More was accused of treason in 1534, engagement of the sort that he endorsed had clear and obvious dangers, for his interrogators needed to prove that he had maliciously denied the king’s authority. Without an admission of guilt, only silence or prevarication could save him. More thus enclosed his judgment in this solitary space of his own conscience, foreswearing arguments about content and focusing instead on judgment itself. But his friends and foes questioned his certainty.

⁴⁹ Thomas More, *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 9, *The Apology*, ed. J. B. Trapp (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), 112.

⁵⁰ Fox, *Thomas More*, 212.

⁵¹ “qui de refellendis erroribus admoneas mundum, cuius et curam abdicasti, cum temet in claustrum abderes” (Elizabeth Frances Rogers, ed., *St. Thomas More: Selected Letters* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961], 190). For translation, see *ibid.*, 122.

⁵² A comprehensive introduction to More’s so-called Tower Works—including the “A Treatise upon the Passion,” “Treatise to Receive the Blessed Body of Christ,” and *De tristitia Christi*—is available in *The Complete Works*, vol. 3, pt. 1.

⁵³ More, *Confutation of Tyndale’s Answer*, 922–23; and see *The Complete Works*, vol. 6, pt. 2, *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, ed. Thomas M. C. Lawler, Germain Marchadour, and Richard C. Marius (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 395. On More’s conciliarism, see Fox, *Thomas More*, 159; and Francis Oakley, “Headley, Marius, and the matter of More’s ‘Conciliarism,’” *Moreana* 64 (1980): 82–99.

Despite the clarity of More's repeated claims to conscience during this period, his writings betray his awareness that there was no simple answer to the problem of discernment. When he proudly asserted that he would not follow the crowd, as in the fables discussed below, he disavowed total isolation by invoking a community that would share his judgment. He should not be considered reckless, he concluded, because he trusted in God and took comfort in the counsel of friends, family, and learning: "I have been very gladde of your company and you of mine," he wrote to Margaret from the Tower in 1534, and he hoped "we may rejoyce and enjoy ech others company, with our other kynsefolke, alies and frendes everlastingly in the glorious blysse of heaven."⁵⁴ To trust in his conscience required that he examine it "surely by learning and by good counsaile," seeking always to act in a way that would please God (547). As all this suggests, More needed to claim consensus not just from councils, church fathers, and tradition but from his relationships, however virtual, because his foibles and flaws would otherwise overwhelm him. These same sources reveal, however, that he was comforted less by the prospect of inerrancy than by the conviction that he was not wholly alone.

This conundrum was the main drama of the letters More exchanged during his imprisonment. In a letter to Thomas Cromwell, he acknowledged that he could be deceived by pride because one who stands alone, condemning the errors of others, could rightly be described as "childish" or a "proud arrogant fole [fool]" (468). During his long months of imprisonment, More tried to avoid this danger by insisting that he judged only himself: I cannot "fynd in myn hart otherwise to say," he proclaimed, than as "myne awne conscience geveth me" (500). In one form and another, this proclamation was reiterated several times, in More's own hand and in words attributed to him, in the Tower correspondence. Here is the Thomas More so many subsequent readers have admired, the one who refused to let a tyrant king or threat of death diminish the power of his inner voice.

Yet this interpretation, like the more cynical observation that More's claims of conscience strategically enabled him to avoid explaining himself, gives short shrift to More's own anxiety about isolation. As with his defensive claim in one of *Utopia's* prefatory letters that he could not control what others might believe, More was well aware that asserting that he could only answer "for mine owne self" meant he spoke alone (504). Judging from the surviving letters written during More's imprisonment, the consequences of this self-reliance preoccupied More as well as his accusers and friends. A month after he had been consigned to the Tower, More responded to a letter from his daughter, Margaret Roper, who sought to persuade him to

⁵⁴ Thomas More, *The Correspondence of Sir Thomas More*, ed. Elizabeth Frances Rogers (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947) 545; additional page citations from this work are cited parenthetically in the text.

sign the Act of Supremacy, by proclaiming he would not explain himself, for “I haue sondry tymes shewed you that I will disclose [my reasons] to no man.” Instead of trying to correct or be corrected, More wanted Roper to follow his lead and “holde your self content” (509).

These sort of phrases recur throughout the letters, but always in contexts where the very possibility of self-sufficiency was being challenged. In response to interrogators who said he should have “cause to feare that mine owne minde was erroneous” because it was just his opinion against the state’s judgment, More conceded that he would in fact be “sore afraide” to stand alone or to “lene to mine owne mynde only against so many” if there were “no mo but my self upon my side” (506). His safeguard was not total certainty or an inerrant conscience, but the councils of Christendom and the virtuous and learned men whose good judgment More imagined informed his own. More says in a letter from August 1534, after six months in the Tower, that it “maketh me little matter” what others thought because he looked “only unto God”; nevertheless, it is telling that in a letter from the same month, Roper reports that he said every individual should be guided by ecclesial consensus as expressed by a “general council” or by “a general faith grown by the working of God universally through all Christian nations” and only in a parenthetical addition added that truth might be conveyed directly from God (as “special revelation” and “express commandment from God”). This fits More’s message as an ardent defender of the Roman Catholic Church who potently accused Luther and other reformers of abrogating authority to themselves, but it also speaks to his concerns about the possibility of acquiring knowledge without reference to others. It is not that councils and learned men necessarily all agreed at every point, or that any one of them could be or was error free (More acknowledged, for example, the possibility of change and development in canon law when he talked of those that “by a nother law . . . may nede to be reformed”). Rather, it was that More saw the need to assess his own claims in relation to theirs because assessing claims relationally safeguarded the individual from solipsistic error (524–25).

Without the counsel of others, one must depend solely on one’s own powers of discernment. The complexity of this issue, for both More and his interlocutors, is evident in More’s response to two fables conveyed in a letter from More’s stepdaughter, Alice Alington, who explained that they had been told to her by the lord chancellor, Thomas Audley, without explanation, seemingly to critique More’s hubris. The first was a story about men who fancied themselves wise because they took shelter from a storm while everyone else was getting drenched. For Audley and, by implication, Alington (as the one who chose to pass the tale along) the moral of the story was that these wise men erred because they cut themselves off from the community by hiding from the storm that afflicted everyone else. It did not matter that they were right or justified in trying to protect themselves, because their isolation denied them influence over anyone else. According to Margaret Roper, in a

letter to Alington describing More's response, More replied by addressing explicitly what Audley had left implicit: the tale was really about rulers and power and was frequently invoked at court, for example, as Henry VIII's advisors tried to decide whether England should intervene in the war between Charles V and Francis I.⁵⁵ In that context, the moral was that rulers should not leave fools to scheme among themselves, lest the fools unite to overthrow the wise men who want to rule them. In this way, More exposed that Audley was less interested in counsel and consultation—in knowledge measured and assessed in some sort of communal context—than in power. More repudiated any comparison between himself and those who count themselves wise in these terms. "Non sum Oedipus, sed *Morus*" (I am not Oedipus, but *Morus*), he concluded, using the familiar pun on his name and the Greek word for fool to distance himself from those who claim knowledge akin to the ability to solve riddles—the kind of knowledge he imputes to putative wise men as envisioned by Audley and other royal counselors.⁵⁶ Whereas they considered those who set themselves apart as necessarily in the wrong, More suggested the errant might constitute a community upholding an alternative truth.

The second fable was explicitly about counsel, describing a confessor who offered widely varying and ineffective responses to the confessed misdeeds of a lion, a wolf, and an ass. For Audley, the message was that one of the transgressors—the ass—had been overly conscientious and the counselor had failed to alleviate his worries. More acknowledged the implied accusation that he might be like the ass, for what he judged "a great perilous thing towarde my soule" might be nothing but a "trifle." In this version of the story, More maintained that no one's counsel could influence his actions; he could "never entend (God being my good lorde) to pynne my soule at a nother mans backe." More proclaimed that there were no exceptions to this principle: there is no one "of whom while he liveth, I may make myself sure" and he would not be dependent even on the "best man that I know this day living."⁵⁷

However, these explicit statements, intended—as other scholars have pointed out—to confirm that More was not colluding with his fellow prisoner, John Fisher, should not overshadow what I here argue is More's interest in using both fables to address questions of counsel and community.⁵⁸ What

⁵⁵ On disputes about whether the letter was written by More, or Roper, or both, see Elizabeth McCutcheon, "Introduction to Margaret More Roper," in *Women Writers of the Renaissance and Reformation*, ed. Katharina M. Wilson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987); and Jonathan Goldberg, *Desiring Women Writing: English Renaissance Examples* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 106–7.

⁵⁶ More, *Correspondence*, 519.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 520–21.

⁵⁸ For the standard interpretation that it was about the problem of collusion, see J. Duncan M. Derrett, "The Trial of Sir Thomas More," in *Essential Articles for the Study of Thomas More*, ed. Richard S. Sylvester and Germain P. Marc'hadour (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1977), 55–78.

More consistently rejected was conformity and the implication that claims of absolute certainty (to “make myself sure”) might replace the interactive work of discernment and counsel his early work endorsed. This is all the more apparent when he retells the second fable in *A Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, which he wrote in the months after the conversation recorded in Margaret Roper’s letter. In this version, the lion, the wolf, and the ass were all enjoined to fast during Lent, and each failed in his own way. The lion ignored the strictures and ate according to his nature; the ass was overly scrupulous; and the wolf shamelessly reinterpreted his directives so he could do what he wanted. More concluded that the story illustrates the temptation posed by a conscience that has too much faith in itself. It is difficult, if not impossible, to judge alone: “let them,” he advised, “that are in the troubelouse feare of their own scripelouse conscience, submit the rule of their own conscience to the counsayle of some other good man.” The insight of other “good men” can be an invaluable aid, for “after the varietie & the nature of the scriples [they] may temper the advise.”⁵⁹ Getting things wrong is not in itself the problem, and correction is not necessarily a solution: what is needed are people who can err together and set themselves right through counsel and consultation.

In this context, More ended by affirming the value of the sacrament of penance, “for there is god specially present,” but he presents confession as one example of how one might be guided by those who are “well lernid & vertuouse.”⁶⁰ This alternative treatment of the story thereby reveals a More who wanted to convey that the lack of certainty one confronts in relation to others cannot be rectified in isolation. If More the prisoner asserted that his commitment to truth requires him to stand alone, resisting the errors that others make, he nevertheless did so in ways that highlight what More the scholar—ironic and otherwise—often insisted upon: that the inevitability of error proves the need for community and that this community was defined less by its ability to be absolutely certain than its willingness to forgo absolute certainty and rectitude in favor of an open engagement with mistakes.

For More the scholar, a community of friends guaranteed that the search for truth was not impeded by inaccuracy. For More the heretic hunter, mistaken doctrine was a problem because it entailed a rejection of community; heresy was not false belief per se but rather the obstinate refusal to accept correction and amend one’s beliefs. In his late works, then, as More faced the possibility of death, certainty for More became less about standing apart,

⁵⁹ Thomas More, *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 12, *Dialogue of Comfort against Tribulation*, ed. Frank Manley and Louis Lohr Martz (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 120.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

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confident in his own exceptional judgment, than about claiming the succor of other errant souls from the transhistorical community.⁶¹

It is then possible to see that the late More reaffirmed what the early More had maintained: error exposes the need for and creates the possibility of a relational understanding of truth. This is, as noted above, recognized in readings of *Utopia*. Alistair Fox, for example, remarks that in it the “imperfection of human nature” is mitigated by “creative effort, social as well as individual.” What I contend here is that this same interest in engaging others over just appealing to the collectivism of tradition or ecclesial authority animates More’s later works as well.⁶² The focus on error, then, reveals a strand of continuity that others have not considered: writing as a prisoner in his fifties just as when he wrote as a self-confident scholar in his thirties, More contended not only that mistakes were inevitable but also that errancy could bring people together. Martyrdom may seem—and may even usually be—implacably opposed to acceptance of error. Indeed, martyrs are commonly understood to be those who sacrifice their lives rather than entertain the possibility of their own error. But *martyr* is a word that originally meant witness (*OED*), a definition that shifts the focus from certainty to communication and that better represents the emphasis in More’s own writings. In his prison writings as in his early ironic texts, More affirmed that unwavering opposition to error might isolate one from truth—for truth included acceptance of the inevitability of error and the need for collectively assessed corrections.

III. THE CATHOLICISM OF ERROR IN MORE AND ERASMUS

For More and Erasmus alike, this conviction about the significance of error was rooted in Christian theology. When his defense of free will was challenged by an exasperated Luther, for example, Erasmus essentially declared that nothing human is wholly exempt from error.⁶³ When it comes to knowing God, Erasmus maintained, people often grope in darkness and so ought to abandon the fruitless quest for absolutely certain and wholly accurate answers to complicated theological questions. It is true that the choices More made during these same years when Erasmus was counseling calm suggest a different attitude about the importance of certainty. Yet like Erasmus, he continued to link devotion to errancy, for the errant were those

⁶¹ On More’s aversion to singularity, see Jonathan Crewe, *Trials of Authorship: Anterior Forms and Poetic Reconstruction from Wyatt to Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 87; see, e.g., how More affirmed his trust in God by communicating it to his daughter in *Correspondence*, 546–47.

⁶² Fox, *Thomas More*, 71.

⁶³ Huizinga, *Erasmus*, 164. See Evans, *Getting It Wrong*, for a discussion of how this Augustinian teaching was received by medieval theologians.

who relinquished a sense of pride and self-satisfaction in favor of devotion to something other than themselves.

For example, in More's *Dialogue of Comfort*, written in the Tower between 1534 and 1535, the only way out of the spiraling fear of self-deception is an appeal to the all-encompassing shield provided by the Holy Spirit, "which inwardly may tech [the reader] in hart, without whome litle availeth all that all the mowths of the world were able to tech in mens eares."⁶⁴ More makes much of the biblical reference to a shield or pavis, which he gets from Psalm 91 ("The truth of God shall compass thee about with a shield"), but does not suggest that this defense against outward foes renders inner weakness irrelevant. In More's earlier writing, as in Erasmus's *Praise of Folly*, irony both exposed and ameliorated this weakness: by poking fun at arrogance of overweening certainty, irony curtailed pride and exposed the hubris of self-reliance. In the Tower writings, the comfort More once took from appealing to others to correct his mistakes or share his appreciation of errancy was now gleaned from meditating on the way Christ's passion similarly exposed the importance of accepting rather than defending against weakness.

More as well as Erasmus emphasized the importance of frailty rather than self-possession or self-defense in treatises each wrote about Christ's suffering. More's work *De tristitia Christi* (*On the Sadness of Christ*) lingers on the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before the Crucifixion, describing how the apostles fell asleep even though Christ had asked them to stay awake. Christ, however, is presented not as their faultless counterpart but instead as one who erred with them, lamenting and sharing their faults. "Having made Himself weak for the sake of the weak," More concluded, "He might take care of other weak men by means of His own weakness."⁶⁵ This tableau of friends failing and aiding one another is the setting for the treatise's theological conclusion about Christ's salvific power: redemption was equated not with strength, integrity, or the ability to do for others what they could not do for themselves but instead with shared vulnerability and loss of self-containment. Redemption was in this sense errant and suffering, like error, important because of the way it enabled communication and community.⁶⁶

In *Disputatiuncula de taedio, pavore, tristitia Iesu* (*The distress of Jesus*), Erasmus focused on a similar message, describing Christ as one who "dreaded and desired, welcomed and rejected, the same thing, and experienced the

⁶⁴ More, *Dialogue of Comfort*, 320.

⁶⁵ "quo videlicet infirmis infirmus factus infirmitate curaret" (Thomas More, *The Complete Works of Thomas More*, vol. 14, pt. 1, *De tristitia Christi*, ed. Clarence H. Miller [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976], 107, 109).

⁶⁶ This aligns with Ariel Glucklich's argument—contra Elaine Scarry—that not only is pain communicable but also, and even more significantly, that it enables empathy and communication; see *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 43–51.

extremes of both joy and suffering during his ordeal.⁶⁷ The message at the heart of the work was that Christ was “at once willing and unwilling” to die; this double movement, as Erasmus put it, should inspire one “to love him in return, since they all flow down together from the same source, love.”⁶⁸ Christ shared human weakness, in other words, and became a source and object of love precisely because he was not a model of static perfection. Like More’s depiction of Christ and the apostles erring together, Erasmus’s emphasis on the vagaries of Christ’s will and emotions linked redemption to vulnerability and errancy.

Erasmus hoped to ensure vulnerability and errancy would become the terms of discussion by claiming them as such. Furthermore, the attitude he imputed to Christ is akin to that which he identifies with good scholars. “In a scholarly battle, the wise soldier would rather be defeated than win,” Erasmus observed, envisioning the battlefield as a classroom, for the wise soldier “prefers learning to teaching.” Erasmus characteristically insists on the affective dimensions of learning, even in this martial context: “If I am overthrown I come away instructed, while if I prevail over you, I shall not have your affection.”⁶⁹ A scholar who prefers learning to teaching, like Christ who shared human emotions rather than transcended them, demonstrates that error and even defeat enable connection.

More, of course, was different, and it is tempting to interpret More’s own martyrdom as his insistence on a binary that Erasmus resisted: right against wrong, certainty against doubt. Yet what More suggested in his late writings was the necessity of errancy, the fact that true certainty necessarily coexists with uncertainty, that the seeming inerrancy of his own martyrdom was in fact a rejection of an autonomous self, a self sustained by the conviction of rectitude, in favor of a broken self, a self defined by shared suffering. In a position that threatened total isolation, More reestablished relationality by dying *without* claiming total certainty for himself.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ “eodem tempore extreme reformadisse, et appetisse, voluisse et noluisse, cum summo gaudio, et cum summo cruciate pertulisse” (Erasmus, *Opera omnia*, 10 vols., ed. J. Leclerc [1703–6; Hildesheim: Olms, 1961–62], 5:1286C; English translation from Erasmus, “De taedio Iesu,” in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 5, *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, ed. John W. O’Malley [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998], 58).

⁶⁸ “Voluit, non voluit: reformidavit, non reformidavit: doluit, gavisus est. Omnia pariter accendunt ad redamandum, cum omnia simul eodem e fonte scateant, puta, caritatis” (Leclerc, *Opera omnia*, 5:1289D; English in O’Malley, *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, 64).

⁶⁹ “In litteraria pugna, qui sapit, non tam vincere cupiat, quam vinci: hoc est, non tam docere, quam discere. . . . Si succumbo, discedo doctior: sin supero, tibi nihilo iniucundior” (Leclerc, *Opera omnia*, 5:1265E; English in O’Malley, *Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, 14).

⁷⁰ To reiterate: it is this attention to relationships that is rendered invisible in studies that focus instead on More’s scholarly and theological understanding of certainty. Fox observes, for example, that in the Tower Works and the *Treatise upon the Passion* in particular, More “allows for the same kind of speculative disagreement” about specific doctrinal issues “that he had depicted earlier in *Utopia*” (*Thomas More*, 215); and Schreiner (*Are You Alone Wise?*) emphasizes that More disavowed certainty for himself but attributed it instead to the church. My focus here on error, however, invites the reader to consider that More assessed certainty first and foremost in terms of its effects on relationships.

IV. CONCLUSION: THE RELATIONSHIP OF ACCURACY TO LIFE

More's alternative understanding of martyrdom is suggested by the text of his last prayer, quoting Gal. 6:14 and written in the four days between his condemnation and beheading: "The world is crucified to me, and I to the world. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. I wish to be dissolved and be with Christ."⁷¹ Self-dissolution rather than self-containment was the goal. Instead of fixed boundaries differentiating right from wrong, More emphasized the end of isolation. To clarify the significance of this stance, it may help to contrast it with the way a contemporary might equate martyrdom with certitude. For example, Reginald Pole, who would become Archbishop of Canterbury under Mary Tudor, wrote that believers could learn from the teachings that More and other learned men executed by Henry VIII inscribed through their deaths. "These books," Pole wrote, "written in the blood of martyrs are to be preferred to all others. These were the original books in which the finger of God appeared." Pole contrasted this to works composed by human beings, "written with ink on paper." In this formulation, Pole both acknowledges and denies errancy, for although "the hand" of the author followed "the hand of God" and "would not err," the book written in ink is nevertheless "subject to more accidents" and can be "distorted by the perverse reasoning and interpretation of men."⁷² According to Pole, martyrs ameliorated this errancy.

More's sense of errancy differs from a religious perspective that interprets martyrdom as the "finger of God," inscribing a fixed and indelible message.⁷³ The alternative I have traced throughout this paper is not usually associated with religion, humanism, or martyrdom, for all are more readily linked to a tireless quest to uphold a truth cleansed of textual, rhetorical, or theological error. Religion—especially a monotheistic religion such as Christianity—seems to offer nothing if not certainty, offering a divine being as a transcendent escape from the errancy that afflicts humanity, with martyrdom as the visceral enactment of this commitment to absolute rectitude. And humanism, in turn, seems to offer an escape from the need to posit this certainty in something outside ourselves. Although the Christian commitments of Renaissance humanists are well known, there is a sense still that these scholars spawned secular humanism by affirming that humans can replace God as their own source of perfection and that the most enduring faith should be in the ineluctable course of moral and philosophical progress.

⁷¹ "Mundus mihi crucifixus est, et ego mundo. Mihi vivere Christus est et mori lucrum. Cupio dissolvi et esse cum Christo" (Thomas More, *The Tower Works: Devotional Writings*, ed. Garry E. Haupt [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980], 306).

⁷² Reginald Pole, *Pole's Defense of the Unity of the Church*, ed. and trans. J. G. Dwyer (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1965), 235.

⁷³ So too, as Hall Bjørnstad has pointed out to me, it goes unseen in the academic regime of knowledge dedicated to detecting and correcting mistakes.

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It seems, then, that anyone who is interested in exploring rather than overcoming error—those, in other words, who might be interested in the generative power of mistakes, detours, or misguided journeys—should look elsewhere than to Christian martyrs and humanists. The sophisticated studies of error by Seth Lerer and Mark Taylor suggest as much. Lerer, for example, includes More and Erasmus in his study of how error shapes scholarly identity. Yet because Lerer identifies religion with a misguided and defensive quest for certitude, he treats these two Renaissance humanists first and foremost as scholars rather than religious thinkers. According to Lerer, More and Erasmus reveal the value of errancy by affirming that scholarly integrity is ensured through a process of acknowledging and correcting mistakes. For his part, Mark Taylor hails religion and errancy alike in *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, but only insofar as both are deconstructive. Taylor's foe is secular humanism, which he equates with the notion of individual autonomy and perfectibility that his study of errancy seeks to challenge. And yet with More and Erasmus we can see that the humanism Taylor repudiates in fact promoted an alternative that neither Taylor nor Lerer consider. This humanist alternative was neither mockery nor dogmatism but instead—and here is what Christians and secular scholars alike have often overlooked—an understanding of errancy attentive to the collective dynamics of discernment.⁷⁴ Citing Nietzsche, Lerer concludes that we study error not to fix or avoid mistakes but for a more illuminating reason: to understand “the relationships of accuracy to life.”⁷⁵ This is an appealing ambition. For More and Erasmus, accuracy impedes life insofar as it hinders relationships. And errancy, according to these humanists, represents not just an imperfection that needs to be corrected but an orientation—a recognition of fallibility, humility, and the impossibility of getting it right on your own—that animates life insofar as it enables relationships.

⁷⁴ On this see Constance Furey, “Discernment and Critique in Erasmus and Teresa of Ávila,” *Exemplaria: Medieval/Early Modern/Theory* 26, nos. 2–3 (2014): 254–72.

⁷⁵ Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self*, 13–14.