



Note on the texts and title: Sometimes viewed as a whole, letters 205 and 206 have been called More's *Dialogue of Conscience*. There has been discussion of the authorship of letter 206 as well. Some think the letter co-authored by More and his daughter, Meg; others think that Thomas More is the principal author, although letter 206 is presented as Margaret's writing.

Outline of Letter 205 from Alice Alington to Margaret Roper

- **Overview of the letter:** The letter presents Lord Chancellor Audley's criticisms of Sir Thomas More, and amounts to a "message" from Audley in the form of two pointed "fables."
- **Audley's first criticism of More:** Audley suggests that More is being an obstinate fool himself in desiring to rule—in his own way—other fools.
- **Audley's second criticism of More:** Audley suggests that More is acting as a scrupulous ass in the matter of the oath.

Outline of Letter 206 from Margaret Roper to Alice Alington

- **Introduction:** Margaret's approach and timing are described before she shares Audley's criticism with her father.
- **Opening Exchange between More and Meg**

- **More begins by calling his daughter "mistress Eve."**

Meg summarizes Audley's criticisms; she gives the letter to More, who reads it twice carefully.
More comments on his daughter Alington.

More comments on his "exceptionally good lord" (Thomas Audley) and his "good master" (Thomas Cromwell).

More's Answer to Audley's Fables

- **More responds to Audley's first fable about wise men hoping to rule fools who were soaked in the rain.**

The fable's origin: It was used in the past by Cardinal Wolsey (the Lord Chancellor before Thomas More).
More will not dispute Wolsey's interpretation and use of this fable.

More will dispute the suggestion that the wise were actually wise in this fable.

More cannot guess whom Audley takes for wise in the fable.

More is sure of one thing: he is a fool, and he never desired to rule.

More stresses twice the need to rule oneself, quoting Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*.

- **More responds to the second fable about the scrupulous ass.**

More observes that the fable is not Aesop's.

More finds one thing too subtle for him: determining whom the lion and the wolf represent in the fable.

More argues that he does not rely on his mind alone; he lists reasons why he can't trust anyone living.

[Compare this fable with the "Tale of Mother Maud" in *A Dialogue of Comfort*.]

- **More tells the story of Company.**

More shares the tale with Meg and then applies the story of good Company to his situation.

- **Meg responds to the Company story.**

More should conform his conscience in the matter of the oath, but not for fellowship; he should conform to the consciences of the good, especially since the matter involves a law made by Parliament.

More's Discussion of Conscience and Laws

- More praises Margaret for not doing a bad job in responding to his tale.
- More takes up when and why one should conform one's conscience to laws or truths with which one may disagree.
- More distinguishes the law of one land from the law of the Church "lawfully" gathered in a General Council.
- More gives an example of a law in dispute, other than a law made by a General Council of the Church or by "general faith" grown throughout Christendom.
- More gives an example of a dispute among the learned.
- More discusses the need to conform one's conscience to a "determination" of "a well-assembled General Council" and to "an evident truth appearing by the common faith of Christendom."

More's Discussion of the Oath and His Conscience

- More addresses his refusal of the oath: he will not tell why he refuses to take it.
- More explains why he will not dispute about others' change of mind.
- More explains the opinion he "will not conceive" of those who changed their mind about the oath. [Compare this listing of More's reasons with the earlier list in the letter.]
- More notes the issue of numbers: many are on his side in these matters.
- More states that he is sure of his own conscience, but he will not tell her everything. [Compare this position with his statements at his public trial in July 1535.]

Meg's Response to Her Father

- Meg looks sad.
- More questions "mother Eve."
- Meg explains the "Master Harry argument" in favor of taking the oath and makes it her own.
- More laughs in response and invokes Eve again.
- Meg recalls Cromwell's warning of what Parliament can still do.
- More recounts what "he had not failed to think about" and repeats his riddle, that a man may lose his head and have no harm.
- Meg warns of it being "too late."
- More concludes by saying why he wishes never to change and explains what he would do if he does change.
- The letter ends with More's prayer and hope that all "shall make merry" together in heaven.

Study Questions for Reflection

1. As a literary work, what is the overall effect achieved by these letters?
2. How do you compare the mind or mental outlook of Alington, Meg, and More, as revealed in these letters? How does each desire, see, imagine, think, and judge himself or herself? How might you distinguish the mental outlook of each character?
3. To what emotion(s) does letter 206 most appeal? What is the role or work of reason in the dialogue?
4. How does More's use of the dialogue form here at the end of his life compare with his earlier dialogues, such as *The Dialogue of Sir Thomas More, Knight, Utopia*, or the Lucian translations? Why do you think More prefers this form of writing for serious deliberation and communication?
5. How does More's *Dialogue of Conscience* compare to Plato's *Crito*? How do the figures of More and Socrates compare? What of the treatment of laws and citizenship in both works?
6. As historical documents, what is the importance of these letters?