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# A Message From the Past

by

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In the quiet, inexorable passage of time there are exceptional lives that are nearly forgotten. The life of Margaret Clement speaks profoundly from past centuries to the physician of our own age. Hers is a message worth remembering.

She was born Margaret Giggs in 1508 and orphaned at the age of five in Norfolk. Adopted by her kinsman, Thomas More, and loved as his own child, she was raised in the warm, affectionate family of the most learned layman in England. His peaceful home on the Thames was surrounded by farmland, beautiful gardens, a private chapel, library, and art gallery, even a little zoo, and was frequently visited by scholars, artists, and kings. In that lively household, filled with music, poetry, and laughter, More's daughters were known for "high spirits as characteristic as their piety," an observation made by the great family friend, Erasmus.

More, renowned lawyer and later Henry VIII's Lord Chancellor, assumed the education of his own children and taught each of them the Liberal Arts (Latin, Greek, Philosophy, Theology, Mathematics, and Astronomy), as well as the university trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic/dialectic. When his growing duties prevented this, he engaged a series of tutors to continue their education. Thomas More believed that a husband and father should find deep intellectual companionship among the women of his family. His daughters always received the same rigorous course of study as males.

More was especially drawn to the study of medicine. One of his closest friends was Thomas Linacre, who had studied the New Learning in Florence, Venice, and Padua, where he received a medical degree in 1496. Linacre returned to England to translate much of Galen into Latin and to establish the Royal College of Physicians in London in 1518. More continually urged his family to study both sacred books and books of medicine to have "a healthy mind in a healthy body."

Margaret became especially skilled in mathematics and in medical lore, so skilled that at the age of fourteen she was acclaimed by More as having cured a fever that had defeated the best physicians of that day. One can almost see her walking in the spacious gardens at Chelsea, gathering the herbs that were thought to contain the properties of heat or moisture most suited to cure disease. It is certain that she had deeply studied the treatises of Galen and the doctrine of humours, that she could deftly match the correct herbal remedy with the condition and temperament of each patient. What is more crucial is that Margaret embraced the classical medical principle that the task of the physician was the *maintenance* of health and the prolongation of life. The sixteenth century science of "physic" was primarily the study of how to live in harmony with the natural world to avoid sickness and extend life and included attention to quality and quantity in diet, exercise, habits, and living conditions. The very word "physic" was from the Greek "phusis" or "nature." Margaret studied largely "preventive medicine."

Thomas More's highest value was not upon learning, but upon goodness. He taught this largely by his own gentle, steady example. He assigned charitable works to all of his children. Margaret's was to act as his "almoner;" she dispensed money to poor persons and healed the sick among them, many times in a special home More had built for the old and infirm.

He also wrote countless letters to each child, encouraging them to a life of virtue, cherished letters which, when borrowed by an early biographer soon after More's execution by Henry VIII, were already "in tatters." The true aim of learning, More affirmed, was the reception of wisdom, the intimate consciousness of what is right.

In 1526 Margaret Giggs married John Clement, a learned man who had been her chief tutor. Clement had left the More household to become a lecturer in Greek at Oxford, then studied medicine and received his M.D. in Italy. He became a fellow of the Royal College in 1527, his knowledge highly praised by Linacre, and soon gained favor as one of Henry VIII's trusted court physicians. Together, John and Margaret translated the works of Galen. John claimed that his brilliant wife helped him find the exact idiom for the most difficult Greek passages.

On Sunday, April 12, 1534, while visiting the couple's home in the apothecaries' quarter of London, Thomas More received the summons that would lead to his execution for refusing Henry's Oath of Supremacy. He could not affirm the King's absolute power over the Church in England. In the last letter he wrote to his family from the Tower of London, he returned to Margaret her "algorisme stone," a slate used to make mathematical calculations.

Margaret Clement was the only family member present at the execution of Thomas More in 1535. She remained there to ensure that the decapitated body was given to the family as the king had promised and that More would be buried in the Tower's chapel. Afterward, authorities closely watched the family, but John Clement continued his honorable association with the Royal College of Physicians without penalty.

On May 29, 1537, ten Carthusian monks and brothers refused to take the king's oath and were sent to Newgate Prison. There they were chained to posts, standing with their hands tied behind them, and left to starve.

Margaret then gave the clearest evidence of her training in More's school. Ordinarily very quiet and unassuming in spite of her great abilities, she seemed oblivious to her own material welfare in her heroically compassionate attempt to prolong and preserve human life. She bribed the goaler in charge of the monks to give her access to them. Entering the prison disguised as a milkmaid, Margaret carried a pail of meats on her head. She put bits of food and pure water into the mouths of each prisoner and cleaned the urine and excrement from their bodies. Day after day she returned.

The king, inquiring whether the Carthusians were dead, was shocked and angered to learn they still breathed. He ordered a strict watch on them. The terrified jailer refused to let Margaret enter their cell, but she bribed him with even more money until he agreed that she could have access only by the roof above. She climbed the roof without question, removed the tiles directly over the monks and lowered a basket of food. It was a desperate maneuver. Their hands were tightly bound, their bodies cramped and weak. They could barely reach a few crumbs. Still, she tried again and again. The goaler, so afraid of discovery and punishment, ordered her to stop and never return. All ten Carthusians died.

Various prisoners of the king were interrogated concerning the Clements as late as 1541, but the family seemed protected from harm. In 1544 John even held the office of *President* of the Royal College of Physicians. After Henry's death, however, John Clement was increasingly hated because of his visible loyalty to the "olde faith." In January, 1549, he was not included in King Edward IV's general pardon. Later that year, when the Act of Uniformity prescribed a new liturgy for all churches in the kingdom, Clement took his family and fled across the sea to Louvain, "for the sake of conscience," he said.

Immediately their house and property were confiscated. Margaret had inventoried their possessions, including a library of 302 Greek, Latin, and geometry books she described with the words "grete," or "small," or "olde;" "a payre of balans to waye medycyns;" and "seventy seven glasses and erthen paynted potter with medycyns and salves."

During the reign of Queen Mary, the Clements returned to England, where John practiced medicine in Essex. In Elizabeth's reign, however,

harsh penal laws against Catholics were instituted in England and Ireland. The old religion was outlawed. John Clement once again fled with his family to Flanders, settling now in Mechlin, where he practiced medicine for the rest of his life. The Clement home became a refuge for priests, who were expelled and forbidden to return to England now on pain of being executed for treason. The statutory punishment was savage. The prisoner was hanged, cut down while still alive, disemboweled and at times his heart torn out, then beheaded, and his body cut in four quarters. The victim's head was usually impaled as a warning to other traitors. John and Margaret assisted those who had escaped and cared for anyone seeking comfort in distress.

Margaret died in 1570. She left her husband, five daughters (all of whom she had taught Latin and Greek), and one son. It is chronicled that while very ill with fever, she envisioned the prisoners she had assisted beckoning to her and that she foretold the exact day of her death, the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Margaret Giggis Clement is buried with her husband in a place reserved for the members of the royal house of Burgundy, the high altar of Sint Rumoldus in Mechlin, Belgium. Like Thomas More, she is also a canonized saint. Dedicated to life, she held no dread of any obstacle to this calling, even death.

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