A Study of the Relationship between the Text and Its Reader:

*The Imitation of Christ* in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern England

by

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Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam

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## Abstract

This paper presents some possible explanations for the extraordinary popularity of *The Imitation of Christ* in the late Middle Ages and in Early Modern England, presupposing First, I place *The Imitation*'s historical context of the late 14th century and the 15th century. *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis, an Augustinian monk, emerged from the Devotio Moderna, a movement which encouraged lay religious devotion, in the 1370s. I show how the historical moment of Devotio Moderna and the concern at this time with the particulars of spiritual reading. Two forms of spiritual reading, *lectio divina* and *lectio spiritualis,* had an impact on the composition of Thomas's text.

Second, I discuss the popularity as a question which arises from the text itself as well. I discuss some of the major themes I find in the text: intimacy with Jesus, the motives of actions, and humanity's sinful nature always in need of grace.

Finally, I take as an instance of *The Imitation's* popularity the volume's wide appeal in Early Modern England. I study select Early Modern English printed editions of the *Imitation.* I perceive these editions as the reader responses of some Early Modern English individuals who found in Thomas's text comfort and guidance in the midst of religious and political tensions. I conclude that that some of the reasons for *The Imitation's* popularity in Early Modern England are connected to the reasons for the book's popularity in the late Middle Ages.

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Introduction

From the point of view of the student of literature…private prayer has special claims to

attention, precisely at those points where it most differs from public. The very

individuality of private prayer gives it a personal color that is always of peculiar interest

to the student of literature. For those differences of emphasis and focus in the universals

of human nature that constitute the wonder of personality are in themselves of perennial

fascination to the literary mind. The fullness of revelation of the inward life, implicit in

private prayer, offers fresh material for the exploration of the human consciousness.

-Helen C. White[1]

Last fall, I imagined a prism pierced by a single beam of light. On the other side

of the prism emerged many different colors which had been at one time a part of the one

beam of light. Belief in Christ is the light; the prism is the Reformation; the rainbow

which results is the variety of traditions that emerges from the Reformation. Each

color—that is, each tradition—is different from the others and does not emphasize all that

the others do. I found it to be true that, as first suggested to me by Catherine Sanok, the

translation and editorial histories of *The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis in Early

Modern England would also serve as effective prisms through which to view Early

Modern English society, with each edition showing a different hue in the "rainbow" of

Christianity, both the kind of variety among late Medieval Christians and that of

Christianity following the Reformation.

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[1] Helen C. White, "Introduction," *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion,* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1951, 7.

As I studied the reception of Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* from within its historical context as a Catholic text and particularly when I studied the text in Early Modern England, I found that the book was still very popular amongst both the "Papists" and the Protestants, who did not seem put off by the Catholic-ness of the book, or at least not enough to ever ignore the book. I marveled at how all Christians, it seemed, no matter what was going on in history, even the Reformation itself, found in the pages of this book, which contained the words of the Scriptures and Christ himself, the God who offers refuge to all who seek Him, the God who has always on the reader's side, the God who has always loved the reader. I imagined that the reader, either Protestant or Catholic, found Christ's gentle voice, murmuring such things as, "Come to me, all you who are burdened, and I will give you rest," at the beginning of Book IV, in *The Imitation* an attractive invitation that offered twofold freedom: first, that to define one's interior self before God in private and second, permission to form and share outward expressions of such interiority with others.

My two main arguments then are the following: first, *The Imitation* was popular because of its theological and cultural capital and perhaps less so for any eloquence and originality one might attribute to it. As Jennifer Bryan has successfully argued, there was any number of Passion texts available in the moment of *The Imitation* text's composition.[2] *The Imitation* text's close association with cultural practices that are clearly monastic and thus imbued with Catholic theological significance is noteworthy. Such practices could include the constant recitation and memorization of Biblical texts, the

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[2] Jennifer Bryan, "Introduction," *Looking Inward: Devotional Reading and the Private Self in Late Medieval England (The Middle Ages Series)*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007, 3.

celebration of the Mass (the subject of the fourth Book of *The Imitation* is the Catholic Eucharist), and the emphases in *The Imitation* on sacraments such as Holy Orders and Confession. As we shall see, Thomas Rogers, our example of a firmly Protestant editor of *The Imitation,* does indeed make edits in order to Protestantize the text, he finds attractive in it many of those aspects which an editor with a divergent theological view, such as Anthony Hoskins, S.J., an Early Modern Catholic editor of *The Imitation*, does.

My second argument is that *The Imitation* text's popularity in Early Modern England reveals what theological cultural capitals were popular in Early Modern England and that in-depth study of such editions helps us to define these categories.

Finally, though such an argument definitely merits much further research, I lightly insinuate that the theology the Early Modern English found attractive in *The Imitation* is actually an amalgamation of classical and Christian ideals and that some Protestants' attraction to *Imitatio* theology may indicate residual leanings toward certain aspects of late medieval Catholicism, particularly those associated with monasticism. The preservation of the spiritual, monastic reading methods which were somewhat ritualistic in nature, such as *lectio divina* and *lectio spiritualis*, two practices which came to be associated closely with monasticism in the Middle Ages, is intriguing. These practices are saved from the label of "papacy," and this observation is definitely worthy of further study and is not directly addressed in this thesis.

To address the two central arguments defined above, we will in this thesis explore three subjects. First, we will look at some contexts which will be helpful to our study of the *Imitation* text. Some of these contexts will be the life of Thomas a Kempis, the community he at one time belonged to, the Brethren of the Common Life, the Devotio

Moderna, the impact of Augustine of Hippo and spiritual reading practices such as *lectio divina,* and the reception of the text in the Netherlands, the location in which it was first circulated.

The second part of this thesis discusses some of the theological themes of *The Imitation.* For my primary textual analyses, I choose Dennis J. Billy's edition of *de Imitatio Christi.* There are two reasons why I am not working with the Latin *Imitatio.* The first is practical: I may not have, at the moment, enough training in Latin in order to work with the 1441 Latin autograph. Second, the 1441 Brussels autograph manuscript was made available to me at too late a stage in this project to be substantively considered here. Thus, I am choosing to wrestle with the theological questions and issues that arise from Thomas a Kempis's text rather than with the precise words with which he expresses them. I have chosen to use Billy's edition because it is a more recent edition that builds upon the work of William C. Creasy who carefully translated into modern English the 1441 autograph in 1989. While a study of Thomas's precise Latinate syntax would be indeed a rich study and, I am sure, significantly enliven my own present work, a study of the Latin syntax is not the *primary* means through which I examine *The Imitation of Christ.* For a study of this magnitude and nature, please see Kenneth Michael Becker, *From The Treasure-House of Scripture: An Analysis of Scriptural Sources in* de Imitatione Christi.[3] Even a glance at this piece of scholarship indicates just how breathtaking any substantial study of the relationship between *The Imitation* and the Bible can be. I also might have used the 1504 Atkinson/Beaufort English translation of *The Imitation* which is widely accepted as the earliest printed English translation of *The*

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[3] Kenneth Michael Becker, *From the Treasure-House of Scripture: An Analysis of Scriptural Sources in de Imitatione Christi*, Brepolis: Turnhout, 2002.

*Imitation.* Again, a scholarly edition of this text became available to me at too late a stage to be dealt with in this thesis.[4] One more methodological note: when citing *The Imitation* text from Dennis J. Billy's edition, I first cite the Book number and then the Chapter number.

My primary concern, then, is not with *The Imitation*'s language per se but the relationship between this text's theology and reader response to this theology. I will use Early Modern English editions of the *Imitation* as instances of reader response.[5] I will explore in greater detail the text's popularity by discussing Early Modern England's fascination with this text. I use several Early Modern English editions of the *Imitation* to illustrate the colorful yet constant attention which the *Imitation* was given between 1500 and 1700 in England. It is this colorfulness which I want to distill and present under the lens of a "microscope." To use an English edition printed in the late sixteenth or especially the early seventeenth century for my primary analysis of the *Imitation* I think would be to look through the "slide" rather than the "microscope." The early English editions can be quite misleading and cut off from us ways in which we can think about the *Imitation*, even if we wish to discuss it only as it exists in Early Modern England. For example, Protestant editors regularly cut Book IV, which is now known to be a part of the *Imitation* beyond doubt. Yet at the same time, illegal editions containing Book IV are printed and distributed in Early Modern England. I am not arguing that Billy's is somehow an ahistorical edition of the *Imitation*, but I am claiming that Billy's edition

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[4] B.J. H. Biggs, *The Imitation of Christ: the First English Translation of the `Imitatio Christi' (Early English Text Society Original Series)*,
[5] Nandra Perry, "Imitatio *and Identity: Thomas Rogers, Philip Sidney, and the Protestant Self*," *English Literary Renaissance*, Oxford and Malden: Blackwell, 2005. I am indebted partially to Perry for the ability to define this thesis as a study of the impact of Thomas a Kempis's theology on readers of *The Imitation*.

presents us with a distant point of departure, a lens through which can gaze back at early English editions with contemporary eyes.

Finally, we shall consider the *Imitation*'s popularity in more vivid terms by looking at concrete responses to it, that is, Early Modern English editions. One major motivation for studying in particular Early Modern English *Imitatio* texts is articulated by Nandra Perry:

> ...to critique Renaissance humanist secularism through a classic work of late
> medieval piety points up a secular bias implicit in our own approach to early
> modern representations of the self. The popularity of Rogers' work is a reminder
> that the 'self-fashionings' of Raleigh, Marlowe, and Shakespeare coexisted with
> more traditional, less readily secularized models of subjectivity in which religious
> discourse figures as the primary language of self-representation and self-analysis.[6]

One area which has yet to be fully researched in scholarship on Early Modern England is the "self-fashioning," the nature of that subjectivity, apparent in the editorial practices of those who dealt with devotional texts in this period. I hope that this thesis more than hints at the fruitfulness of such research. While Perry argues that "traditional" texts are "less readily secularized models of subjectivity," by the end of this thesis, we will see that such models, what I will call expressions of self, do exist and are no less intriguing and complex than those found written by some of the authors Perry highlights—Raleigh, Marlowe, and Shakespeare.

We shall see that some Catholics and some Protestants, two famous emergent expressions of selfhood in this period, advanced political agendas through their

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[6] Perry, 367.

"packaging" of editions of *The Imitation*. In taking a text which was very popular and leaving a unique mark on it, these editors engaged in the editorial "self-fashioning" that both I and Perry argue existed.[7] The usefulness of *The Imitation* may have been universally acknowledged, yet the definition of this usefulness was allowed to vary, something that, we shall see, was promoted during and by the Devotio Moderna. The absolute Christological focus of the *Imitation,* albeit fluid and somewhat hermeneutic, is one reason why the *Imitation* in some form remains popular in the Early Modern England among both Catholics and Protestants, that is, among the majority of Christians.[8] While the goal was to imitate Christ in this period, the variant "self-fashionings" make it clear that for the Early Modern English there were many ways to work toward this goal. *The Imitation* happens to be a text through which a variety and number of Early Modern English Christians passed in their path to holiness. What makes the "self-fashioning" work that Early Modern editors undertake in editing *The Imitation* is that such a text, or rather, the relationship between a text and its reader, can be used as a special kind of distiller through which one can begin to clarify and reconstruct facets of social history.

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[7] Perry, 366. Perry picks up on this same notion when she also uses "self-fashioning" with reference to Early Modern English editing, specifically in the case of Thomas Rogers's 1580 translation of *The Imitation.*

[8] Elizabeth K. Hudson, "English Protestants and the imitatio Christi, 1580-1620" in *The Sixteenth Century Journal,* 19.4 (Winter, 1988), 541-558. Hudson argues that Puritans in fact did not like the *Imitation.*

Part I: Historical Context

The *Devotio Moderna* and Its Historical Antecedents

The relevance of this subsection might be attributed to Helen White's observation: "[the] interaction of monastic and lay devotion is so important for the history of private devotion that it is necessary to [one's] understand[ing] [of] the corresponding development of popular private devotion."[9] Alongside White's context of devotional practices, Kenneth Becker gives us a historical context for the late Medieval interest in private devotion: "At the end of the fourteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth, a general feeling of calamity and perpetual danger, and a somber melancholy, hangs over all; indeed, 'there was a tendency to identify all serious occupation of the mind with sadness.'"[10] Overall then the period leading up to the New Devotion "was a period of intellectual and spiritual turmoil in the Western Church."[11] There were theological debates between Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, and William of Occam which were all "leading up to an over-intellectualization that undercut, rather than supported, authentic piety."[12] The importance of personal Scriptural interpretation in the New Devotion was prefaced by "a striving for 'scientific' methods in theology [which] often meant the loss of a living, experimental contact with Scripture."[13] Within the Catholic Church, the Great Schism of 1378 which would last for the next forty years also played a profound role as part of the backdrop to the Modern Devotion and in turn *The Imitation*. The Great Schism, in brief, was a dispute as to who was the true pope after

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[9] White, "The Medieval Inheritance," 14.
[10] Becker, "Background," 36.
[11] Becker, "Background," 37.
[12] Becker, "Background," 37.
[13] Becker, "Background," 37.

Bartolommeo Prignano was elected and took the name Pope Urban VI, but later, a second

pope was elected, Robert of Geneva, who took the name Clement VII.[14] *The Catholic*

*Encyclopedia* summarizes the Schism well:

> It was a terrible and distressing problem which lasted forty years and tormented
>
> two generations of Christians; a schism in the course of which there was no
>
> schismatic intention, unless exception perhaps be made of some exalted persons
>
> who should have considered the interests of the Church before all else. Exception
>
> should also be made of some doctors of the period whose extraordinary opinions
>
> show what was the general disorder of minds during the schism (N. Valois, I, 351;
>
> IV, 501). Apart from these exceptions no one had the intention of dividing the
>
> seamless robe, no one formally desired schism; those concerned were ignorant or
>
> misled, but not culpable. In behalf of the great majority of clergy and people must
>
> be pleaded the good faith which excludes all errors and the wellnigh impossibility
>
> for the simple faithful to reach the truth. This is the conclusion reached by a study
>
> of the facts and contemporary documents. This King Charles V, the Count of
>
> Flanders, the Duke of Brittany, and Jean Gerson, the great chancellor of the
>
> university, vie with one another in declaring.[15]

Also interesting to note is that, in this split within the Church, founder of the Modern

Devotion Jean Gerson, was on the side of Pope Urban while Gerard Groote, founder of

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[14] "Western Schism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* accessed at: newadvent.org/
cathen/13539a.htm.
[15] "Western Schism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* accessed at:
newadvent.org/cathen/13539a.htm.

the Brethren of the Common Life, supported Pope Clement VII.[16] So it was against this tenuous backdrop that the Modern Devotion was conceived and that *The Imitation* was written.

But the period was not all about the disintegration of structure in the Church either at this time. Becker quotes R. W. Southern on the subject of religious life, which we can see as another facet of the intense anxiety over the structure within the Church at this time:

> The drive towards increasingly well-defined and universal forms of organization and effort was suddenly relaxed, and Europe began, from one point of view, to fall apart, and from another to experience a new richness and variety of emotional life.[17]

Jean Gerson, founder of the Devotio Moderna, complains that "The people do not know how to steer a middle course between overt unbelief and the foolish credulity of which the clergy themselves set the example."[18] Overall then, we can see how the Modern Devotion was a reaction again overintellectualism within the Church and a movement which sought to bring healing to Christian divisions and a fresh focus on the cruxes of Christianity rather than its politics. As Becker notes, "The period [leading up to the Modern Devotion] was characterized by a revival of popular preaching, giving rise to 'vehement outbursts of fervour and penitence,' and by a 'general abuse of priests and monks' that went 'hand in hand with a profound veneration for their sacred function."[19]

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[16] "Western Schism," *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* accessed at: newadvent.org/cathen/13539a.htm.
[17] Becker, "Background," 38.
[18] Becker, "Background," 38.
[19] Becker, "Background," 38.

According to Becker, there are more factors which set the stage for the Modern Devotion other than the political and intellectual strife within the Catholic Church. Though, this strife, he argues, led to "a desire among many faithful to deepen their inner lives and lead authentic Christian lives despite the shortcomings of the Church."[20] The second factor which Becker notes is public health conditions, specifically fear of the Black Death. Becker argues that "hysteria" about the Death may have motivated a preoccupation with one's inward self, if one saw all around the wasting away of human flesh.[21] The third factor offered is "socio-economic development," that is, the cities of Deventer and Kampen were "growing centres of trade with a high concentration of commercial wealth," something which could have led to a focus, as life became more urbanized, on the interior self.[22]

The *Imitation of Christ* came out of the *Devotio Moderna*, the Modern Devotion, a movement which began in the 14th century and thus, as we have seen, was a reaction against the intellectual elitism and political strife within the Catholic Church late in the 13th century.[23] The New Devotion sound to create Christian community "as it was believed to have existed in the New Testament times, as recovered from Scripture and the early Fathers."[24] The movement's main goal "was to renew piety among monks, nuns, and the clergy, and critically, among ordinary people as well...."[25] Becker points out that "*The Imitation* is imbued with the theology and terminology of the New Devotion. This

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[20] Becker, "Background," 39.
[21] Becker, "Background," 39.
[22] Becker, "Background," 40.
[23] Dan Keating, conversation, November 24, 2008.
[24] Becker, "Background," 41.
[25] Becker, "Background," 41.

provenance for the work is also supported by the fact that it contains Dutch idioms."[26]

Thomas a Kempis was a member of a lay brotherhood known for being at the heart of the *Devotio Moderna.* This movement is characterized by the thinking of Augustine of Hippo and Erasmus, along with Thomas a Kempis. The movement's thrust is well-encapsulated by John H. Van Engen:

> ...the movement had its common thrust in the search for a new meditation technique for the working classes, directed toward the reformation of the soul and the rejuvenation of the spirit as the basis for renewal of the common life, whether within or outside monastic walls.[27]

Van Engen says later on that we should not begin our study of the *Imitation of Christ* without taking hand-in-hand the context in which the book was written, the *Devotio Moderna.* The Brethren of the Common Life, a lay brotherhood which began in the Netherlands in the 14th century, was founded by Geert Groote (d. 1384).[28] Groote was known for beginning this modern devotion, this "new devotion" as it has been referred to in writings.[29] After his death, the movement spread about a hundred miles outside his hometown and caught on quickly. The prior of Windesheim, a town just twenty miles north of Grote's, described Grote's movement for some of the Devotio's earliest followers in a document read sometime between 1430-1450 and contained the subtitle "On the new devotion in our lands."[30] Around the same time that the prior of Windesheim was writing, Thomas of Kempen, living just north of Zwolle nearby

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[26] Becker, "Background," 24.
[27] Van Engen, 2.
[28] Van Engen, 1.
[29] Van Engen, 7.
[30] Van Engen, 7.

Windesheim, encouraged his novices to study the lives of the "modern fathers," those who were involved in the *Devotio Moderna.*[31] John Busch is known for coining the term when he first in the 1460s refers "without explanation to congregations about the 'new' [modern] devotion."[32]

There were two main entities within the New Devotion, the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life and the Windesheim Congregation of Canons Regular.[33] The lay brotherhood, the Brethren of the Common Life, was not a Catholic religious order and was, in fact, founded in reaction to and against structured religious orders. While it was regulated by Augustine later, from its very inception, the brotherhood meant to put an emphasis on anti-intellectualism and to be anti-clerical.[34] Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life communities did not take religious vows and did not formally subscribe to official monastic rules which were outlined by cannon law.[35] Like monastic communities, the participants of the New Devotion gave much attention to Scripture. Becker notes "The communal life of the New Devout" was characterized by study of Scripture.[36] This is something that, we shall see, is very apparent in Thomas's text.

This flexibility, to not have to be tied down to any specific set of regulations which a religious order would be accountable to, is what helped the Brotherhood to thrive and survive. The "antimonastic" characteristic of the Brethren is what characterizes them as being a part of the *Devotio Moderna* which has been characterized repeatedly as being

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[31] Van Engen, 7.
[32] Van Engen, 7.
[33] Becker, "Background," 43.
[34] Van Engen even goes so far as to call the Brethren of the Common Life "antimonastic" on pp. 2-3.
[35] Van Engen, 2.
[36] Becker, "Scripture in the spirituality of the New Devotion," 51.

the proto-Reformation movement, the forerunner of the Reformation and the English

Renaissance.[37] There has been debate though as to whether the New Devotion was anti-

Catholic and proto-Protestant, or if the New Devotion simply, comfortably resituated

Roman Catholicism and gave birth to a more modern devotion within Roman

Catholicism that can be seen today in the religion.[38] Because both camps could claim the

*Devotio Moderna* as being their springboard, and because the *Imitation of Christ* is the

keynote text of the *Devotio Moderna,* we can see how the book was relatively

"popularity"—signaled by its fast translation from Latin to Dutch, Dutch to French and

Italian and then to English—or at least how and perhaps why interest in the text

continued through the early fifteenth century through the late middle ages and through

the early modern era.[39] The questions which the *Devotio Moderna* raised were

fundamentally the set of questions every medieval Catholic had to ask him/herself: Why

am I going to Church? Why am I making a pilgrimage to see this Saint's relics? Why

am I going to Confession?

Coincidentally, one example of reform which the Brethren of the Common Life

taught was the ideological importance of the confessing of sins, and the Brethren's

version is what Van Engen calls "fraternal correction." The Brothers regularly heard the

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[37] Van Engen, 1.

[38] Richard Kieckhefer's "Review: The Land of Discontent: Classics of Late Medieval Spirituality" points out how the Devotio Moderna can be seen "to anticipate the brooding scrupulosity of Puritanism" as well as how "the Late Middle Ages were the breeding ground of modern Catholicism," 86-7.

[39] See Roger Lovatt, "The *Imitation of Christ* in Late Medieval England: The Alexander Prize Essay" in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society,* Fifth series, Vol. 18, 1968, 97-121 for more in-depth explanation.

confessions of one another, the Sisters, and other laypersons around them in order to cultivate "mutual aid and encouragement" within their circles.[40]

These are the two main components to the Sacrament of Reconciliation in Roman Catholicism, the confession and the firm resolve to do better in the future. But Thomas does not speak of confession with a priest; he speaks of confession itself. Later, institutionalized confession would be questioned because it required, in the Catholic Church, the role of the priest. Catholic doctrine states that the priest stands in for Christ and actually it is Christ who is truly present in confession. Either way, Thomas emphasizes that confession is about an interaction between Christ and the Disciple, a way of thinking about confession which Thomas would have acquired from his education with the Brethren. As Van Engen points out, to some their take on confession "looked very much like a substitute for the canonically required confessional—and it probably functioned partially in that way."[41] But "so long as [the local curate] knew that the standard obligations were fulfilled," these extra measures of religious devotion were not problematic to late medieval Catholics' standing in the Church.

But the suggestion which exists today, that the Devotio Moderna was the proto-Reformation, remains controversial to this day. Van Engen says in his Introduction that personally, he sees the movement as being very "Catholic."[42] He even goes so far as to connect the Devotio Moderna to St. Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order. This current scholarly controversy proves that in the late middle ages, the lines separating all sorts of audiences—orthodox "Catholic" from those seeking reform; the clerical and

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[40] Van Engen, "Introduction," 17.
[41] Van Engen, 17.
[42] Van Engen, 61.

monastic living versus those within actually religious communities—as well as certain theological principles were becoming blurry to some degree. Helen White has reminded us that "there was in monasticism itself a very considerable social element."[43] She goes on to argue that "The desire of the lay world to participate in the devotional observances of the monasteries manifested itself in many ways as monasticism grew and expanded."[44] Though White does not connect her argument explicitly with the Devotio Moderna, her observation helps us to understand the place of the Devotio Moderna and monasticism, two important contexts for understanding *The Imitation* within the history of Western Christianity.

## Biography of Thomas a Kempis

The *Imitation of Christ* was written by Thomas of Kempen, an Augustinian monk. Thomas was born in 1379 in the diocese of Cologne.[45] His family name was Hemerken and received his elementary education at Kempen where his mother Gertrud Kunt ran a school; Thomas's father was a metalworker.[46] When he was thirteen, Thomas left home in order to join his older brother John who had already been with the Brethren of the Common Life for twelve years. While staying with the Brethren, Thomas became "a good Latin and Scripture scholar" at the academy in Deventer.[47] Becker writes, "In 1399, with the approval of florens Radewijns [his spiritual director and mentor], Thomas travelled to Zwolle and sought admission to the new monastery at Mt. St. Agnes, where

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[43] White, "The Medieval Inheritance," 13.
[44] White, "The Medieval Inheritance," 13.
[45] Becker, "Background," 45.
[46] Becker, "Background," 45.
[47] Becker, "Background," 46.

his brother John had become its first prior."[48] He made his profession in 1407, was

ordained in 1413/14, and spent the rest of his life at this monastery. It was from here that

Thomas wrote *The Imitation*.[49] Thomas probably compiled the volume from 1410-20.[50]

After going into self-exile with his community, Thomas returned to care for his dying

brother. Then, in 1471, Thomas died from dropsy and was buried at Mt. St. Agnes.[51]

Over the course of his career, Thomas wrote a sizeable corpus of works. He

composed three dozen texts.[52] These were biographies, ascetic works like *The Imitation*,

and other kinds of texts. Thomas was well-known for his preaching and was a popular

spiritual director.

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### *The Imitation of Christ*

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As previously stated, the trademark text of the Modern Devotion was Thomas of

Kempen's *de Imitatio Christi*.[53] With regards to *The Imitation*, Thomas was editing and

adding more material to the volume even as it was being circulated, for Book I was

circulating before the rest of the volume was completed, and we can begin to understand

how flux and confusing the original reception of Thomas's text was.[54] Van Engen writes,

"Manuscript and other evidence demonstrates…that this book [*The Imitation of Christ*]

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[48] Becker, "Background," 46.
[49] Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ,* trans. William C. Creasy, ed. Dennis J. Billy, Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press 2005, 6.
[50] Becker, "Background," 46.
[51] Becker, "Background," 47.
[52] Becker, "Background," 48.
[53] In most studies of the *Imitation of Christ*, it is the issue of authorship which is the primary subject. There has, in the past, been much debate as to who wrote the *Imitation.* This thesis will not address this debate but has found recent scholarship's arguments conclusive; Thomas a Kempis did write the *Imitation.* In *Imitation* scholarship, there has been a question about whether Thomas actually wrote the *Imitation.* One reason why there has been this confusion is that Thomas, according to Van Engen, copied his work at least three times without ever claiming authorship (VE 9).
[54]Lovatt, 101.

was frequently copied and read in the circles of the New Devout" (Van Engen 8).

Initially, the *Imitation* was circulated anonymously and travelled to Italy and France

within the first half of the 15th century.[55] It makes sense that Thomas's text was popular

with the New Devout because he himself, during his teenage years, was raised by men,

the lay brothers, in this movement.[56] The four Books that comprise *The Imitation* were

originally four separate treatises originally written for novices. The volume "enjoyed

much influence among both 'religious' and lay people within and beyond the Christian

tradition."[57] Becker writes, "Several hundred Latin manuscripts of *The Imitation* survive

at locations throughout Western Europe" and that "the earliest manuscripts were

anonymous."[58] While there is a "range of dates [ ] given for the period of composition

of the four Books of *The Imitation*," the years of composition generally accepted are

1410-1425.[59] We know that "All four books are contained in a manuscript dated 1427."[60]

Van Engen agrees that the oldest *Imitation* manuscript containing all four books is dated

1427.[61] Many copies of the *Imitation* circulated between 1424 and 1441. What is known

as the 1441 autograph manuscript of *The Imitation* is generally seen as the most

authoritative Latin manuscript because it is "The earliest date manuscript containing

Thomas a Kempis's name" and is in his handwriting.[62] In this 1441 manuscript, it is also

worth noting that "The order [of the Books] is 1, 2, 4, 3."[63] It was not until after 1450

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[55] Van Engen, 8.
[56] Van Engen, 8.
[57] Becker, "Background," 15.
[58] Becker, "Background," 22.
[59] Becker, "Background," 23.
[60] Becker, "Background," 23.
[61] Van Engen, 9.
[62] Becker, "Background," 25.
[63] Becker, "Background," 25.

that the order of the Books was established as 1-4.[64] "The first printed edition of *The Imitation* was published by G. Zainer at Augburg c. 1471/2" Becker tells us.[65] The popularity of *The Imitation* cannot be disputed; according to Becker and Steinberg, "the work spread rapidly and before the close of the [fifteenth] century 99 editions had left the presses."[66] The *Short Title Catalogue Netherlands* (STCN) contains a printed, type face Gothic text of Thomas's *Soliloquium Animae* dated as early as 1474.[67] The printers, Nycolaus Ketelaer and Gherardus Leempt of Utrecht, Holland, print other religious materials and books of learning on the subjects such as history. The book was written originally in Latin, albeit a simpler kind of Latin than was available, the language of the well-educated and privileged lay and the language of the religious. Dennis Billy says that the text was "written in a simple yet attractive Latin style...steer[ing] clear of needless speculation so characteristic of the intellectual climate of the day" so that it might "mend the rift between learning and devotion that had entrenched itself in the mindset of late medieval Catholicism."[68] And Thomas's own biography is representative of this erasure, a man having been raised and educated by the Brethren of the Common Life who later joined a monastic order.

But more at the heart of our inquiry is this: How does the book itself define "audience"? How do we read this book that emerged from the *Devotio Moderna,* a movement that redefined societal roles of the religious? While Roger Lovatt does not believe that the *Imitation* was read in England because of its *Devotio Moderna*

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[64] Van Engen, 9.
[65] Becker, "Background," 29.
[66] Becker, "Background," 31.
[67] Short Title Catalogue Netherlands. http://www.kb.nl/stcn/index-en.html.
[68] Billy, "Introduction," 7.

characteristics, I disagree. He says that "an analysis of the annotations made to the English manuscripts of the *Imitatio* shows that the chapters with a traditional, monastic flavour attracted most attention."[69] Just before this quote, Lovatt writes: "The [*Imitation*] seems to have been valued in England for its teaching on the monastic and contemplative vocation, for its affinities with an existing devotional tradition, rather than for its novel implications as a product of the *Devotio Moderna.*" The distinctions which Lovatt draws show us his definition of the *Devotio Moderna*, that it was a movement which "modernized" Catholic practice in the late Middle Ages by emphasizing that "monastic and contemplative" lifestyles could be accessible to the laity as well as those under religious vows.

What Lovatt does not note is that the New Devotion did not discard "an existing devotional tradition" but renovated and reshaped it. I argue here that the *Imitation of Christ* was a part of this reshaping movement taking place within devotional practice. The book's placement in history must have an impact on how we read the text. The historical context, a mixture of tradition and reform, is the context which gave birth to the kind of spiritual book that we have in front of us. Van Engen argues that the *Devotio Moderna* did not cut out monastic living, thinking, and learning; the movement made all three more accessible to the laity.

While scholars, like Lovatt, may debate as to why the *Imitation* was popular, the book's popularity is fairly indisputable, though its popularity becomes even more certain over the next several centuries, particularly in Early Modern England, as we shall later see. The text emphasizes things which any monk would have found valuable: how to

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[69] Lovatt, 116.

renounce worldly possessions, how to purify one's soul, how to meditate properly on the Eucharist. But these same subjects could be productively discussed for the benefit of a lay audience. The majority of this thesis will address the question of "audience" by beginning with the text itself and the questions of audience it itself raises. As Billy points out, while:

> Thomas a Kempis…was a professed religious and [probably, I argue] wrote *The Imitation* with an audience of professed religious in mind…the book [had] relevance for a specifically lay readership [and] its insights into growth in the spiritual life have [ ] validity beyond the walls of the religious cloister….the reason for [the book's] great success…over the years lay precisely in its ability to cultivate a reading audience from all states of life within the church—priestly, religious, as well as lay.[70]

This is one of the main arguments of this thesis. Now, having studied Thomas's life and how he himself, being first a layperson living in the late Middle Ages, then a member of the Brethren of the Common Life, and finally a monk, probably wrote his text with these multiple audiences in mind.

<div align="center">Looking Forward and Outward</div>

In this chapter, we have seen that an understanding of the Devotio Moderna, the Brethren of the Common Life, Thomas's life, and the place of devotional literature in the late Middle Ages all help us to understand the theology of *The Imitation of Christ*. In the following chapter, we will make a closer examination of this theology.

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[70] Billy, "Introduction," 12.

Eamon Duffy points out that in late fifteenth century and early sixteenth century England, a period in which the *Imitation* was read, some devotional texts contained surprisingly practical and sundry pieces, such as a recipe for how to make beer or a cause for the common cold.[71] The range of subjects covered in late medieval devotional texts would have allowed for writers, such as Thomas, to not have to write for a specific audience but many audiences. *The Imitation* was written in the late Middle Ages and was one amongst a litany of books, treatises, pamphlets, and poems centering on the Passion of Christ.[72] As Jennifer Bryan convincingly argues, the number of Passion texts in existence at this time was great.

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[71] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, "How the Plowman Learned His Paternoster," *Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005, 76.

[72] See Jennifer Bryan, "Private Passions," *Looking Inward* p. 111 for a sampling of such works.

Part II: The Text and Its Audience

Introduction

The argument of this thesis is that *The Imitation of Christ* appealed to a wide audience for a number of reasons, even though it has been argued that "*The Imitation* was clearly written for religious."[73] First, the emotional language of the text was attractive. The emotional intensity in the text focused on key themes, such as the paradoxical closeness and distance between Jesus Christ and the Disciple and God's perfect nature in comparison with the Disciple's fallen nature. The second reason for wide appeal is that *The Imitation* addresses principles more than it does manifestations of these principles. For example, Thomas discusses priesthood and religious life, though his main argument in discussing these occupations is not their details but what these occupations mean for any Christian. While monks may be required to be obedient to their superiors, Thomas argues that obedience to one's superiors is something that all Christians should practice. A third reason for the wide appeal of *The Imitation* is its emphasis on the interior self. This emphasis can be observed through *The Imitation*'s concern with the motives which drive one's actions. A fourth reason for *The Imitation*'s wide appeal is the book's substantial use of Biblical passages. Finally, *The Imitation* contains Augustinian theology and ideas which, as Brian Stock has argued, were popular in the Middle Ages. It has also been argued that Augustinian ideas remained popular after the Middle Ages and in Early Modern England by Stock, Helen C. White, and others. Threads of Augustine which appear in *The Imitation* include an emphasis on motives, the need for grace because of original sin, the importance of the Bible above any other book, frequent

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[73] Becker, "Background," 27.

in-text Biblical citation, a focus on the interior self, and the dialogue format which is that

of the last two books of *The Imitation*. For all of these reasons, *The Imitation of Christ*

must have been an appealing book in the late Middle Ages. In this chapter, I address

these reasons in due order.


Emotions in *The Imitation*: Closeness and Distance, Humanity and Divinity, Sin and

Grace

The emotional tiffs between the reader and Christ and the reader with himself

represent the struggle to answer this question: Is it possible to imitate the Christ? The

answer comes to be that imitation is possible in degrees but not in completion.[74] The

emotional rises and falls of the Disciple represent these degrees of imitation that are

achievable. The Disciple will never be Jesus Christ himself, but the Disciple will come

to look more and more Christ-like in character over time by striving to be Christ-like.

But concrete spiritual achievement is rarely the focus of *The Imitation*. It is the

fluctuation between worry and relief, a sense of closeness with God and then distance,

even nearly total abandonment, which we see throughout the volume dramatized. It is

this emotional drama, the emotional and psychological "cost of discipleship" which is the

utmost concern to Thomas. Thomas works to show us that the demands of the Christian

life are high for anyone called "Christian," not just for those who are monastic or those

who are priests. These high demands, as outlined in *The Imitation*, force the Disciple to

question whether he indeed is capable of achieving such a life, even as he works toward

such an end.

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[74] Perry's phrasing for this notion is "varying degrees of cooperation," 379.

We see the demands of the Christian life outlined in the very structure of the volume. The first Book, "Useful Reminders for the Spiritual Life," contains twenty-five short chapters which offer spiritual as well as practical advice on how to turn away from worldly pleasures and temptations the outward self must face. Some of the chapters' titles are "Of Thinking before You Act," "Of Avoiding Unnecessary Talk," "Of Avoiding Hasty Judgments" (1.4, 1.10, 1.14). Book Two, "Suggestions Drawing One Toward the Inner Life," is the shortest of the four books containing twelve short chapters. The "Disciple," having begun to separate himself from the world, can now begin to move toward an inner life with Jesus Christ. In this book, we begin to see a deeper personal relationship between the Disciple and Jesus Christ. Some of the chapters in this book are: "Of God Speaking Within You," "Of Loving Jesus Above All Else," and "Of Gratitude for God's Grace" (2.1, 2.7, 2.10). The third book "Of Inner Comfort," is structured as a dialogue between "Jesus Christ" and the "Disciple." The content is focused on the subjects covered in the first two Books but is presented within the context of a conversation between two characters, "Jesus Christ" and the "Disciple." This dialogue format suggests that, now that the Disciple has "dropped his nets" in Book One and has begun to follow Jesus in Book Two, he is now ready, just as Jesus Christ's closest disciples in the Gospels were, to be taught in the context of that intimate relationship between a teacher and his disciple. Book Three is the longest book at fifty-nine chapters, but, like the Gospels, seems to contain the bulk of Jesus's teachings. Some of the subjects include: "Of Seeing All Worldly Honor as Nothing," "Of Gaining a Free Heart through Total Self-Surrender," and "Of Growing Beyond Self" (3.41, 3.37, 3.32). The fourth book, also in a dialogue format, is entitled "The Book on the Sacrament" and

contains eighteen short chapters. Some of the titles include: "How It Is Helpful to Receive Communion Often," "Of the Dignity of the Sacrament and of the Priesthood," and "That Receiving Christ in Holy Communion Requires Preparation" (4.3, 4.5, 4.12).

One passage in which we see the emotional tension wrought by the ethical question of imitation is in _____. This tension is expressed through the Disciple's sense of Jesus being close yet distant:

> Hence, we should feel great sorrow and regret because of our coolness and negligence toward the Body of Christ; we should feel great sadness and disappointment for not being drawn with greater love to receive our Lord, in whom rests all the hope and merit of salvation. He himself is our path to holiness, our way to salvation; it is he who comforts us on our journey and who is the eternal happiness of the saints. (4.1)

The language is emotional, focusing on what the Disciple should feel—"great sorrow and regret." But at the same time these feelings of "sorrow," "regret," "sadness," and "disappointment" result from falling short of spiritual perfection. There is the acknowledgement of a definite distance between Christ and the Disciple, even as they speak to one another in an intimate way. Here in the language of Thomas's text, we find a deep emphasis on each Christ's humanity and his divinity.

This acknowledgement of Christ's humanity and divinity, his closeness and distance from the Disciple is also emphasized in the example that follows:

> Disciple: Lord, what is man that you are mindful of him or the son of man that you visit him? What have we done that you should give us your grace? Lord how can I complain if you leave me or what can I say if you fail to do what I ask?

> Surely I may truly think and say this: Lord, without you, I am nothing; I can do nothing; I have nothing of myself that is good. I am flawed in all things, and I always tend to nothing, unless I am helped and instructed by you in the depths of my being, I become cool and lax.[75]

The excerpt begins with Psalm 8:4: "What is man that you are mindful of him, / the son of man that you care for him?" and seamlessly continues into the Disciple's own words to Christ, bringing us into an intimate one-on-one conversation between Jesus and the Disciple.

This intimacy is not diminished by the dialogue form of the book but intensified. The dialogue format of Books III and IV enables the reader to "listen in" on the conversation between Jesus and the Disciple. While it may seem obvious that the reader is always the "Disciple" in Books III and IV, it becomes unclear at least one time in the volume whether it is Jesus or the Disciple who is speaking. The Disciple becomes increasingly Christ-like as the volume progresses:

> O just and ever-praiseworthy Father, the hour has come for your servant to be tested. Beloved Father, it is fitting that at this hour your servant should suffer something for you. O Father, ever-worshipped, the hour has come, which from all eternity you knew would arrive, when for a short time your servant would break down and be overwhelmed, though in his heart he would be with you through it all. For a little while he will be ridiculed, humiliated and brought to nothing in the eyes of other people; he will be crushed with sufferings and

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[75] Billy, 3.40.

weariness. All this will happen so that he may arise with you again in the dawn of a new day and be glorified in heaven (3.50).

The Disciple addresses the Father rather than the Son, which is a new development in the dialogic relationship between the Disciple and Son that we have been tracing from the beginning of Book III.[76] To this point in Book III, the Disciple has been trying to become more like Christ—and that is all. But, as it has been observed, Jesus Christ did not come to earth just so that we may know him; he came so that God's sons and daughters would know Him as their Father.[77] The text of the above excerpt is very similar to the text of Jesus Christ words, particularly in the Garden of Gethsemane. In imitating the Son's address to his Father, the Disciple does more than imitate Christ. The Disciple does what Jesus Christ repeatedly instructs his disciples to do: turn to the Father. I do not think that Jesus, in the *Imitation,* ever instructs the Disciple to turn to the Father, though in Scripture, Jesus says that he came "that [we] might know the Father."

The distance between the Disciple and Jesus seems to close instantaneously with this chapter primarily addressed to the Father rather than Jesus. For the majority of Book III and in the two previous Books, it is the distance between Jesus Christ and the Disciple which is emphasized. No achievement of spiritual progress is marked out in the *Imitation.* In the above excerpt though, we see that, to some significant degree, the Disciple has indeed achieved the imitation of Christ. It is not the Disciple's Christ-like actions but the Disciple's prayer of surrender, in imitation of the Son's, which makes the Disciple successfully Christ-like. In this prayer of the Disciple's is a peace that has

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[76] Though Billy writes in his "Introduction" to the chapter that "the disciple opens his heart to Jesus," the first words of the chapter are: "Lord God, holy Father…."
[77] Stephen B. Clark, "Through the Son." From the annual Sword of the Spirit Pastoral Teaching Institute. 19-22 June, 2008.

escaped him/her throughout the volume thus far. The Disciple finds his/her identity, this

passage says, through surrender to the One Father whom the Disciple and the Son share.

Thomas's subtle work here to show that the imitation of Christ is achieved

through total surrender to the Father is significant. To be like Jesus Christ is to follow his

example of being an obedient child of God, "obedient even to the point of death, death on

a cross."[78] Henri J. Nouwen meditates on the idea that imitating Christ means imitating

Christ's obedience to the Father: "Jesus is the prodigal son of my prodigal Father who

gave away everything the Father entrusted to him so that I could become like him and

return with him to the Father's home."[79] When we do not place the idea of imitating

Christ within the context of his motive for coming to earth, we lose the reason for why

we should imitate him in the first place. In the sheer effort of imitating Christ, one draws

closer to him. Thus, the sustained distance which we have seen in the *Imitation* between

Jesus and the Disciple, for a moment, is erased. Thomas practically illustrates this

complex tenet of Christianity by attributing some of Jesus's *Passio* words to the

"Disciple."

This tenet of Christianity, that "we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a

mirror of glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to

glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit," is a theme that is played out repeatedly in the

*Imitatio.*[80] In this particular chapter "That We Should Turn from Ourselves and Imitate

Christ by Way of the Cross" Jesus repeatedly says that he is "the Way, the Truth, and the

Life" and invites the Disciple to take up his "cross." The excerpt from the *Imitatio*, once

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[78] Philippians 2: 8.

[79] Henri J. Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son,* "The True Prodigal," 56.

[80] 2 Corinthians 3: 18.

again, is very closely tied to Jesus's words in the Gospels, particularly John 14: 6: "Jesus

answered: 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except

through me." There are other passages, such as Luke 14: 25-33 and Mark 8: 34, which

are combined in the *Imitatio* excerpt. In the verse from Mark, Jesus says, "If anyone

would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."

Thomas makes it clear that outward signs of piety should grow from inward holiness:

> Disciple: Lord Jesus, let it be as you have said and promised. Oh, that I may
>
> deserve [salvation]! I have shouldered the weight of your cross. I have taken it
>
> from your hands. You have placed it upon me, and I shall bear it, yes, even unto
>
> death. Truly, the life of a good monk—or of any good Christian—is a cross, but
>
> it is also his compass to paradise. Now that we have begun the journey, we must
>
> not go backward or give up. (3.56).

The audience addressed in this excerpt shifts at various points. First, we begin

with the narrow, textual context; the above excerpt is in response to Jesus's invitation in

the text to "hear[ ] [his] commands—and keep[ ] them" that the Disciple may "sit with

[Jesus] in his Father's kingdom" (3.56, 215). At the surface, the Disciple's response is a

part of the plot of this chapter in Book III of the *Imitatio,* but the Disciple's response is

also the reader's response. Thus, the reader becomes the Disciple who is becoming

Christ-like through his imitation of Christ. The reader, then, while he may be skeptical

as to whether imitation of Christ is possible is slowly convinced that it is indeed possible.

But this focus on the individual should not be seen as something divisive, that is,

the focus on the self should not be seen as something which leads toward egotism and

pride. The focus on the self in the *Imitatio* takes its cue and shape from Jesus Christ's

all-consuming love for the individual Christian. The Son's capacity to love the individual

Christian is infinitely greater than the Christian's capacity to love the Son; for this reason,

the Christian looks to Christ as a model to imitate and One worthy of worship. The

desire to imitate Christ is a desire which Thomas encourages to be the fruit of a love for

Christ rather than the product of a pragmatic spirit of servitude toward Him. In the

excerpt below, we can see how the Disciple's sense of unworthiness is in relation to

Jesus's perfect love and example:

> Jesus: My dear friend, I came down from heaven to save you. I took your
>
> troubles upon myself not because I had to, but because I was drawn by love. I did
>
> so in order that you might learn patience and bear life's miseries without
>
> complaint. From the hour of my birth until my death on the cross I was never
>
> without sorrow...
>
> Disciple: Lord, because you were patient during your lifetime, in this perfectly
>
> fulfilling your Father's command, it is right that I, a poor sinner, should patiently
>
> put up with myself according to your will. As long as it pleases you, I should
>
> bear the burdens of this life for my salvation, for although this present life feels
>
> heavy, it already has been made deeply worthwhile through your grace. By your
>
> example and the footsteps of your saints, life has become more bearable and
>
> understandable...Oh, how many thanks must I give to you for kindly stooping to
>
> show to me and to all the faithful the straight and good road into your eternal
>
> kingdom!...(3.19).

First, Jesus says that He "came down from heaven to save [the Disciple]" and that he

"took [the Disciple's] troubles upon [him]self not because [He] had to, but because [he]

was drawn by love." Thomas's book is focused on the Christian's motives for doing good works, and here, we see Jesus revealing *his* motives for doing the ultimate good work, his life on earth and death on the cross. Here we are presented with a model of perfect motivation. It is important, this excerpt shows, not only that the Christian does good works but that the Christian does them out of love and in imitation of the love which Jesus Christ first showed toward his disciples. Thomas continues to emphasize this point when Jesus says, "I did so in order that you might *learn* patience" (italics mine). "Patience" is something to be "learn[ed]," and Thomas's book teaches us this repeatedly teaches us this lesson, which is, according to Thomas, first learned and refined in one's heart. The products of this lesson are the good works we are able to perform. Thomas, of course, is always writing with Scripture in mind; one can find many places in the Bible where it is made clear that Jesus Christ came to earth to be an example. In fact, Jesus's words and approach toward the subject of Himself-as-example in the above *Imitation* excerpt sound close to 1 Peter 2: 21-4:

> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you
>
> an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither
>
> was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return.
>
> When he suffered, he did not threaten but continued entrusting himself to Him
>
> who judges justly...By his wounds you have been healed.[81]

In this passage, we see that Peter emphasizes Christ's role as Savior and his important role not only as Savior but as "example."[82] This theme of Jesus-as-example shows up in other places: 1.1, 2.1, 2.12, 3.50, 3.56, 4.8, just to cite a few, and is the premise of the

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[81] 1 Peter 2: 21-4.

[82] Daniel J. Keating, from a lecture in Summer 2008.

entire volume entitled, of course, *The Imitation of Christ*. If we do not imitate Christ,

perhaps even read this volume, without being motivated by a love for Christ then we miss

Thomas's point, I would argue. Thus, even a reading of this volume requires us to

question our motivations (and throughout the volume, Thomas does ask us to question

our motivations for learning and reading!—like in 1.5, 3.26, 3.43). In the end, the

imitation of Christ requires an act of surrender to Christ and a confession that He is Lord

and the Disciple is not.

Thomas reiterates the motive for imitating Christ and the key to imitating Christ,

that is, love of Christ, at other points throughout the volume. One early example in the

volume is 1.15, "Of Works Done Out of Love":

> Without love good works are worthless, but with love they become wholly
>
> rewarding no matter how small and insignificant they may seem. Indeed, God
>
> places more importance on the reason you work than on how much work you
>
> actually do. A person does much who loves much; he does much who does it
>
> well; he does well who serves the common good rather than himself. (1.15)

Here we see Thomas making it clear early on in the volume that his own intention is to

help us examine our motivations and to re-situate them as being at least, if not more,

important than the works we do.

Alongside a focus on questioning our motives behind our actions, Thomas also

invites the reader to question his/her relationship challenges beyond our control. Yet, as

we will see in the passage below, Thomas cannot move beyond a few words without

bring the focus back to the self:

> Disciple: Lord, I am in great distress even as we speak, and my heart is
> distraught. My present suffering overwhelms me....Save me from this hour!...I
> have certainly deserved to be troubled and burdened. I must bear it at all costs,
> and may it be with patience until the storm passes over and things get
> better....Yet your almighty hand has the power to remove this temptation from
> me and to lessen its force lest I sink under it...The harder it is for me to fight off
> these temptations, the easier it is for the right hand of the Most High to turn in the
> proper direction (3.29)

Between "Save me from this hour!" and "I have certainly deserved to be troubled and

burdened," there is a shift in focus. Thomas seems to say that the Disciple is the one

responsible for his own suffering, that he gets what he deserves. And this is the harsh

trope which runs throughout the *Imitation*, that an individual's suffering is the result of

his/her own sinfulness. Thomas's answer to the "problem of pain" is a circular and

straightforward one: the problem is fallen human nature, the Disciple constantly in need

of grace. The Disciple, throughout this passage and the whole of the volume experiences

Hosea's prophecy: "Come, and let us return unto the Lord: for he hath torn, and he will

heal us; he hath smitten, and he will bind us up."[83] The paradox presented in this verse is

a loving God who deliberately wounds and then heals. Repeatedly, in being shown by

God his/her own weakness, the Disciple is being shown his/her need for a savior. It hurts

one's pride to realize his/her weaknesses—this is what Thomas is getting at—the sin of

pride. Once again, at the heart of Thomas's text, is an emphasis on motives of the heart.

Thomas's Disciple explains this at the end of the chapter: "The harder it is for me to

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[83] Hosea 6: 1.

fight off these temptations, the easier it is for the right hand of the Most High to turn

things in the proper direction." Thomas's logic is dense and may seem elliptical, but it is

based on Biblical arguments. Another which it recalls, especially at the end of the

chapter, is Paul's paradoxical statement about being strong when weak: "Therefore I take

pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for

Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong."[84] Like Paul, Thomas claims that

God is most powerful when the Disciple invites Him into his weakness. God can only

take control and "turn things in the proper direction" when the Disciple lets go of his own

prideful control of his existence. We could even relate Thomas's argument to the Gospel

story in which Peter, walking on water, only begins to sink because he lacks faith. Jesus,

on a shore, invites Peter to walk on the sea to the shore. Halfway there, Peter looks down

at his feet and begins to sink in the water. He cries out, "Lord, save me!"[85] Jesus saves

him but then says to him, "O you of little faith!" Here, we see that Peter's suffering was

his own fault.

Today even, when we talk about fear and anxiety as stormy things we speak of

"waves of anxiety" sweeping over us. For some, the "storm" is not caused by overturned

morals but by uncontrollable circumstances. But Thomas wants none of this; the goal is

to be at peace, and this peace comes from surrendering to God who is unchanging,

loving, and peaceful in His very nature. Thomas emphasizes that God indeed tests His

Disciple:

> Even if you expose me to temptations and hardships, you, who are given to testing
>
> your loved ones in a thousand ways, shape it all to my benefit. In testing me this

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[84] 2 Corinthians 12: 10.
[85] Matthew 14: 30.

way you should be loved and praised no less than if you had filled me with heavenly consolations. So in you, Lord God, I place all my hope and seek all my shelter. (3.59)

Let us recall the epigraph to Book IV: "Come to me, all you who are weary, and I shall give you rest." Jesus Christ, who is "the same yesterday, today, and forever."[86] He offers his Disciple rest. This emphasis on Jesus Christ's unchanging nature appears in Thomas's text throughout the *Imitation,* like in 3.59 when the Disciple exclaims:

Lord what can I rely on in this life?...There is no one in whom I can fully confide for help in times of need except you alone, my God. You are my hope, my assurance, my comforter. You are faithful in all things. (3.59, 223).

God's faithfulness alone, then, is extolled in this passage, and the list of God's good qualities continues; He is "the object of all good, the apex of life, the depth of wisdom" (3.59). This excerpt sounds like Psalm 62 in which the Psalmist proclaims: "My soul finds rest in God alone / ...He alone is my rock / ...Unimportant people are empty and void / ...to you, Lord, belongs gracious love." Once again, the language is dramatic, emotionally charged, and speaks of reliance on God alone. The excerpt above presumes that "There is no one" for the Disciple to trust—other than God.

## Principles Rather than Occupational Circumstances

But it isn't just the ethics of reading which Thomas comments upon. He also discusses the ethics behind other practices within late Medieval Christianity. In 3.20, "Of

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[86] Hebrews 13: 8.

Admitting Our Own Weakness," Thomas, as the "Disciple," discusses the importance of acknowledging sins directly to Jesus:

> I shall acknowledge my sinfulness to you, Lord; to you I shall confess my weakness. It is often a small thing which troubles and depresses me. I resolve to act bravely, but when a small temptation comes by way I find myself in great anxiety…Most might God of Israel…look upon the toil and sorrow of your servant, and help in all he tries to do. Reinforce me with heavenly strength, lest my darker side get the upper hand and take control…(3.20)

Here, we see Thomas encouraging confession on principle: acknowledgement of sin and a firm resolve to do better, by the grace of God.

By the grace of God only is one able to confess well and to live well. In Chapters 17-19 in Book One, Thomas discusses issues pertaining to, but not exclusively to, those who have taken religious vows. 1.17, entitled, "Of the Monastic Life," clearly refers to monastic life:

> You should learn to discipline yourself in many things if you wish to keep peace and harmony with others. It is no small thing to live in a monastery or a religious community and to remain there without complaining and to persevere faithfully until death….If you wish to act as you should, and if you wish to make progress, think of yourself as a stranger on earth, as a pilgrim. You should become a fool for Christ if you wish to lead a religious life…changing your ways and refocusing all of your energies toward the spiritual life will make you a true religious…

I agree with Dennis Billy when he argues that "The chapter can helps us to understand what it means to foster a certain 'monasticism of the heart,' which seeks to foster a

contemplative attitude toward life in all circumstances."[87] Thomas then is able to speak to a non-monastic audience and a monastic audience, of ecclesiastical and non-ecclesiastical, simultaneously in this discussion of motives and mindsets. His work of bringing the two together by speaking to each community in the presence of the other is one reason why this book was popular, insofar as it reached a wide spectrum of kinds of readers, beyond the monastic and to the lay. Thomas chose to use specific terms such as "monk" and "every good Christian" in order to show how ultimately unimportant it is what one's occupation is. Thomas's book repeatedly fixates on interior spirituality and the motives behind one's actions.

Thomas speaks to one audience in the presence of another, in order to prove that what he had to say was important for all Christians, is achieved again in the following chapter, "Of the Example of the Holy Fathers." In 1.18, Thomas highlights the virtues of the early Church fathers:

> They labored throughout the day and at night they were free for long hours of prayer, although during work they did not cease at all from mental prayer. They spent all their time profitably…Outwardly they were in want, but inwardly they were refreshed with God's grace and comfort…

While the first clause highlights something that only monks would do—pray for long hours—the following clause emphasizes the message that Thomas wants the laity to consider: "although during work they did not cease at all from mental prayer." While the laity cannot pray for hours each day because they are engaged in "work," the laity can engage in mental prayer at all times. Once again, Thomas is after, in his readers, a

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[87] Billy, 47.

monastic mindset which either helps one to live more fruitfully as a monk or as a layperson.

Again, when Thomas addresses priests in 4.5 that Thomas, in referring to institutionalized priesthood, he again appeals to a lay audience as well:

Awesome is the ministry and great is the dignity of the priests. Priests do what even angels cannot do! Only priests, duly ordained by the church, are able to celebrate Mass and consecrate the Body of Christ. The priest is truly the minister of God, using the word of God at his command and institution, but God is present as the principle author and the invisible worker. All is subject to God as he wills; all obey as he commands…

While most of this paragraph is about institutionalized priesthood, toward the end of it, Thomas turns back to the subject of God being "principle Author and invisible Worker" to whom even priests are obedient. This chapter, at a glance, seems exclusive and geared toward just an ecclesiastical audience, perhaps just one more text among many which had already addressed such priest-exclusive issues such as how to respond to someone who confesses their sins and how to give pastoral counsel.[88] The very title of Thomas's chapter encourages exclusivity: "Of the Dignity of this Sacrament, and of the Office of the Priest." This chapter would have been important and interesting for priests to read, and so we could argue that Thomas was writing to his brothers in his Augustinian community and to the wider but still limited audience comprised of religious and priests.[89] Yet the chapter would also be insightful for the laity to read because the

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[88] Eamon Duffy, "How the Plowman Learned His Paternoster," 56-7.
[89] Though Lovatt argues that this book did not appeal to religious communities because it was written from within the Devotio Moderna, a reaction against religious communitites,

contents explain the role of the priest. And in turning back to God as sovereign over all at the end of the chapter, Thomas is able to re-situate institutionalized priesthood within the broader spectrum of institutionalized religion; while priesthood may be exclusive and elevate certain individual men above all other people, God is ruler over all people, even over priests, and alone is worthy of praise. Here then, in this passage, we can see Thomas working to balance out his defense and explanation of institutionalized priesthood so that he won't alienate other readers of his text. He does so by writing a salutation toward God which would be relevant for anyone. In Thomas's very diction and syntax, we can see how he lays out in a more simplified diction the concept of obedience, which is highly applicable to laypersons under the direction of a parish priest, bishop, and pope, as well as monks who have taken a vow of obedience. Thomas demonstrates how "the Disciple" is to think about institutionalized priesthood, that is, he acknowledges its merits without placing it above worship of God.

The last part of the chapter again illustrates that the chapter is not applicable for just priests:

> A priest clad in holy garments taketh Christ's place that he may pray unto God with all supplication and humility for himself and for the whole people. He must always remember the Passion of Christ. He must diligently look upon Christ's footsteps and fervently endeavour himself to follow them. He must bear meekly for God whatsoever ills are brought upon him by others. He must mourn for his own sins, and for the sins committed by others, and may not grow careless

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and Billy that these are the chapters which were appealing, that is, those which discussed monastic concerns. Technically, Billy does not say for whom these chapters were appealing.

of prayer and holy oblation, until he prevail to obtain grace and mercy. When the priest celebrateth, he honoureth God, giveth joy to the Angels, buildeth up the Church, helpeth the living, hath communion with the departed, and maketh himself a partaker of all good things.

While the first part of this excerpt is particularly directed toward the ordained Catholic priest, there are moments, concepts, phrases scattered throughout the chapter which make it accessible to people other than the priest. The sentence "He must diligently look upon Christ's footsteps and fervently endeavour himself to follow them" is in no way exclusively meant for priests and elite scholars; this sentence is a simple, one-sentence summary of the entire *Imitation:* in order to imitate Christ, one must "look upon [his] footsteps" and "follow them." This is just one more instance of the deeply integrated mixture of exclusivity and inclusivity within a small passage, demonstrating Thomas's ability and desire to reach a broad audience.

Interiority, *Lectio Spiritualis*, and Intentions

The reader, like a spectator, watches the Disciple interact with Christ and steps into the role of Disciple. While one primary subject of *The Imitation* may be Jesus Christ, nearly just as important is the Disciple, the reader. The volume's title helps us to understand that, above all, the book is not about Christ but about the reader's imitation *of* Christ; the book is about the reader and his inward journey toward Christ. While the actual layout of *The Imitation* suggests that the Disciple does make spiritual progress, there is very little evidence in the words of the text themselves to support this. At the outset of most chapters, the reader begins by being in some way far off from Christ—

with a lesson to learn, a desire to surrender, a wound to allow Christ to heal, etc. Each

short chapter carries the specter of the Medieval Romance in which union is deferred.

But this routine deferral's payoff usually rests on how satisfying the union between what

has been separated—in this case, the Disciple and Christ—is. And we see this "payoff"

in the Disciple's responses to "Jesus" in Book Three repeatedly: "Speak, Lord, your

servant is listening" (3.2); "Blessed is that person whom you instruct, O Lord" (3.3); "O

Lord, my God, you are all the good I have" (3.3); "…I shall walk with you in great

freedom of heart" (3.4); "O Lord God, my holy lover, when you enter my heart

everything rejoices within me" (3.5); "Stretch wide my love that I may learn how to taste

how sweet it is to love, to dissolve in love, to swim in it" (3.5). Here, actually is a larger

portion even of 3.5:

> Let me be gripped by love, soaring beyond myself through boundless passion and
>
> wonder. Let me sing love's song. Let me follow you, my beloved, on high. Let
>
> my soul, exalting in love, lose itself in your praise. Let me love you more than
>
> myself, and let me love myself only for love of you. Let me love you in all others
>
> who truly love you, as the law of love, which shines from you, commands.

This is lyrical, emotional, and passionate. This kind of language shows us that the

disciple, time again, does not exult in spiritual "achievement" but in undeserved union

with God. Thomas shows us that the way to Christian perfection is two-fold: first, we

must let go of the worldly things we hold too tightly to, and second, we must "hold fast to

Christ" and pledge devotion to him.

  *The Imitation of Christ* makes the Disciple's personal response to Christ relevant

in Christianity's narrative of salvation. While throughout the volume, the necessity of

God's grace is emphasized, so also is the Disciple's reception of this grace. The Disciple, and therein the reader, is an important person in the book. In *The Imitation of Christ,* the reader's own interpretations are very important, and this argument is reinforced by the book's roots in the spiritual reading practice called *lectio spiritualis.* The practice known as *lectio spiritualis* is a "subdivision" of *lectio divina.* The term *lectio spiritualis* was not used in a "technical manner before the fourteenth century."[90] Some of Brian Stock's observations on the practice are helpful for our navigation of *The Imitation:* "in *lectio spiritualis,* [time] was measured by what Edmund Husserl called internal time-consciousness, whose ebb and flow was entirely determined by the subject."[91] When we read *The Imitation,* we are given a great sense of control over what we encounter when we read it. While the book, as we have it now, can be read from beginning to end with a sense of continuity, we can also pick and choose what chapters to read without "misreading" it. For example, if we felt that we were becoming too attached to worldly possessions, we could simply look at the Table of Contents and read one or more chapters, chapters scattered across the four books, on the subject. As we will later see, Thomas Rogers in his early English edition of *The Imitation* offers us multiple suggestions on how to read the volume through the markings he makes on the Table of Contents pages. This is one way in which he makes *The Imitation* text his own. All of this reaffirms that *"Lectio spiritualis* was thus an inner discipline that could involve self-exploration on the part of the subject as an aspect of his or her spiritual progress."[92] And all of this was to encourage, particularly in the late Middle Ages, the role of one's

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[90] Brian Stock, *"Lectio Spiritualis,"* 104-5.
[91] Stock, *"Lectio Spiritualis,"* 106.
[92] Stock, *"Lectio Spiritualis,"* 106.

emotions and personality in spiritual matters. As Stock notes, "*lectio spiritualis* was a

way of experiencing emotions and of creating an awareness of emotional experience as it

was taking place."[93] *The Imitation of Christ* has succeeded in being popular because

there never was just one "correct" reading. The *de Imitatio Christi* was not a book which

sought to draw attention to its own language; the volume was, as far as language

itself can be considered, meant to be a tool, an accessory to a devout individual's personal

relationship with God, something much more important and infinite than language

and the study of literature, which the volume itself says upon many occasions, like the

one above, is secondary to a relationship with God. The volume is more like a linguistic

intermediary between the human and the Divine, and so, from a reader's standpoint, the

volume can seem overly repetitive and intense, dramatic and oversimplified.[94] Much of

the language, as previously argued, is citation from Scripture. The text wants us to

engage it however we see fit. The text, like Pauline charity, does not insist on its own

way; the text is here for us, to serve *our* purpose, so that we might be drawn closer to

God.

What *lectio spiritualis* did was to increase the amount of focus there was on the

individual without decreasing the focus on God; in the spiritual "cocktail," the "amount"

of individual was increased, even as the "amount" of God was highest and remained the

most important.

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[93] Stock, "*Lectio Spiritualis*," 107.
[94] Perry also argues that *The Imitation* was a tool: "…the Word remains inert without an audience. It works its 'magic' not on the page or in the material world, but inside the believer, where it cooperates with the Holy Spirit to move the 'naturally' hardened hearts of the elect to imitate (or at least desire to imitate) scriptural models of piety," 380.

## Classical and Augustinian Thinking

This is the ethically complex question we must ask ourselves: Is *The Imitation of Christ* the epitome of humble devotion, or is it the epitome of arrogant presumption?[95] This type of question is an old one, resting on queries into the meaning of *mimesis* itself. *The Imitation of Christ* argues that through reading this book and imitating Christ, one will draw deeper and deeper into an interior life with Christ and will look like Christ. *The Imitation of Christ*, Brian Stock would argue, demonstrates the popularity of Augustinian and other late antique modes of learning, even pagan and in particular Neoplatonic. Others have argued for other ancient philosophical elements in *The Imitation*, too. Nandra Perry has, for example, argued that *The Imitation* owes a great deal of its conceptualization to "Stoic models of virtue."[96] She writes:

> Like its classical predecessors, the *Imitatio Christi* idealizes an intensely
>
> introspective brand of subjectivity, withdrawn from the world that 'passeth
>
> awaie'...and focuses instead on the cultivation of tranquility and constancy. Like
>
> the Stoics, [Thomas a] Kempis understands the key to virtue as the elimination of
>
> disordered desires.[97]

*The Imitation* then is a text which looks both forward and backward, thus demonstrating more than a renascent popularity of late medieval ideals in early modern English minds. *The Imitation*, in light of argument such as Stock's and Perry's, can be thought of as a container of fragmented classical, pre-Medieval ideals which remain popular in Early Modern England. Alongside Stock's and Perry's arguments, we can consider Helen

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[95] Michael Schoenfeldt's phrasing.
[96] Perry, 385.
[97] Perry, 386.

White's that "From the very beginning the Christian community had encouraged private prayer, not only of a formal and set pattern but also of a very personal and immediate character with every consideration for individual circumstances and occasion."[98] White goes on to point out that Christ has always been considered the model of imitation on the subject of prayer; the Gospels emphasize that He had both public and private prayer lives.[99]

In *After Augustine,* Brian Stock mainly argues that the questions surrounding the relationship between a text and its reader that become popular in the Middle Ages have their roots in late antiquity, particularly in Augustinian philosophy and spirituality. This argument has implications on our study of *The Imitation* because the book is written in the late Middle Ages and by an Augustinian canon regular; the book is also one of the texts to which Stock applies his main argument as well as important, subsidiary ones. Stock, for example, argues that there exists a "tradition of thinking on the problem of self-knowledge in ancient and medieval thought, but no single literary genre for dealing with representations of the self, the person, or the individual before the early modern period."[100] Stock's argument that "The growth in interest in the self [in the Middle Ages] was supported by the increasing interesting in the linguistic philosophy of intentions" is a partial explanation for why Thomas's book is very concerned with intentions. But, perhaps even more provocative is Stock's observation that this emphasis on intentions does not begin in the Middle Ages but in late antiquity, particularly in St. Augustine's

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[98] White, "The Medieval Inheritance," 12.
[99] White, "The Medieval Inheritance," 12.
[100] Stock, "Introduction," 9.

*The Confessions* and in the Pauline epistles.[101] In some places Thomas cites the

*Confessions* and St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, which is known for its discussions of

the inward and outward selves, mainly the battle between having good intentions and

being hindered from acting upon them because of the sinful flesh in chapter 7.

    *Romans* is only one of several Biblical books that Thomas cites in *The Imitation.*

As in St. Augustine's *Confessions,* Biblical references are copiously scattered throughout

the pages of Thomas's work. Stock argues, and rightly so, that "in the *Confessions*…the

personal memory of one's own past in replaced by the artificial memory of written

records through the study of the Bible."[102] The same can be said of Thomas's work. For

example, from the very beginning of *The Confessions of St. Augustine,* we see that this is

going to be a narrative told from a Biblical and particular point-of-view:

> *Great art thou, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is thy power, and thy*
> *wisdom is infinite.* And man wants to praise you, man who is only a small portion
> of what you have created and who goes about carrying with him his own
> mortality, the evidence of his own sin and evidence that *Thou resistest the proud.*
> Yet you, You stimulate him to take pleasure in praising you, because you have
> made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they can find peace in
> you.[103]

What we learn from this opening passage of *The Confessions* is very similar to what we

learn when we open *The Imitation.* Here is the beginning of *The Imitation:*

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[101] Stock, "The Problem of Self-Representation," 59.
[102] Stock, "Introduction," 6.
[103] Augustine of Hippo, Book One, Chapter One, *The Confessions of St. Augustine,* edited by Rex Warner, New York: Penguin Books, 17.

"Anyone who follows me shall not walk in darkness" says the Lord, and by them

we are reminded that we must imitate his life and his ways if we are to be truly

enlightened and set free from the darkness of our own hearts. (*Imitation,* 1.1)

The openings of the *Confessions* and *Imitation* both use excerpts from the Bible before

transitioning into their own narratives. Stock has argued that the narrative St. Augustine

weaves is one "through which emotions like charity...become a part of an individual's

lived narrative."[104] This is the same case for *The Imitation*: the book is a narrative

woven together by two main threads. The first is meditation on the Bible. The second is

emotions—charity versus selfishness; peace versus inner frustration.

But the Disciple is not even to trust other objects, particularly heady, secular,

intellectual books for comfort and knowledge. For example, in 1.5, entitled "Of Reading

of Holy Writings," Thomas exhorts:

Search for truth in holy writings, not eloquence. All holy writing should be read

in the same spirit with which it was written. We should look for profit in the

writings rather than for subtle expression. We should read devout and simple

books as willingly as we read those that are lofty and profound. Do not let the

writer's authority or learning influence you, be it little or great, but let the love of

pure truth attract you to read. Do not ask "Who said this?" but pay attention to

what is said. People pass away, but the truth of the Lord endures forever. God

speaks to us many ways without considering a person's status....If you wish to

profit from your reading, read with humility, simplicity and faith and do not try to

impress others with your great learning. Feel free to question, listen in silence to

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[104] Stock, "Introduction," 6.

the words of the saints, and do not scoff at what the ancient writers have to say,

for it is not offered without cause.

Here we see the mind of an Augustinian at work again. Just as St. Augustine in the

*Confessions* does, Thomas encourages us to seek truth not eloquence in what we read.

The kind of "learning" Thomas refers to is academic, intellectual. We are to bypass the

kind of road that Augustine took toward conversion, that is, through many books and

pagan philosophies, and move directly and simply to God by means of simple books and

people who are already regarded as holy, the saints and early Church fathers.

## Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter how Thomas worked to make the question of

imitation relevant for every Christian in very specific yet all-inclusive ways. Thomas's

text reaches a broad audience, multiple audiences. I have not worked in-depth to define

these multiple audiences, other than to note that some chapters of *The Imitation* explicitly

discuss Roman Catholic priesthood and religious life and thus might have seemed

irrelevant or exclusive for a lay reader. Through emotional, dramatic rhetoric which

borrows heavily from Scripture, a focus on motives behind actions rather than actions

themselves, and by addressing individuals in ecclesial roles while still making such

addresses useful reading for the laity, Thomas was able to address the heart of every

Christian. He participated in the tradition of *lectio spiritualis* and thus gave his reader

license to focus on the self and a personal relationship with Christ.

In the next chapter, we will see how a few Early Modern English editors

responded to Thomas's invitation to study the interior self. I have chosen editions edited

by Protestants and Catholics, in order to make more explicit my argument that Thomas's work was popular across multiple audiences. Through editorial decisions, we will see interpretations of *The Imitation* emerge. Through these interpretations, we will see the editors themselves emerge.

Part III: A Glance at Some Early Modern English Responses to *The Imitation of Christ*

Thomas's subject of imitation of Christ is specific and broad, focused and ridiculously open-ended, concrete yet abstract: all very characteristic of Devotio Moderna literature. *The Imitation*'s exclusive focus in its content on "Christ alone" was a response to over intellectualism and exclusivity in Roman Catholicism, but *The Imitation* also suggested that at the heart of Christian doctrines were very simple truths, the main truth being that a personal devotion to Christ is the foundation and source of a Christian's life.[105] While it has been argued that in *The Imitation* "the Servant's [the Disciple's] rhapsodic paraphrases of Scripture and the Church Fathers do not translate readily from [monastic] cell and sanctuary to court and stage," I disagree.[106] Jessica Brantley's work, for example, with late Medieval English devotional texts, for example, persuasively argues for the performative agency of a text.[107] Perry, and perhaps others, forget that while the Devotio Moderna context definitely emphasized many aspects of ritual and cultural Catholic practice, particular those associated with monasticism, this era, as we have seen, was also season of change and reform. It is the public quality of these "rhapsodic paraphrases" which makes, I would argue, *The Imitation* a popular text. The removal of these from cell in the Modern Devotion and into a public space in the 16th and 17th centuries is something that makes *The Imitation* attractive. The issue may not have been these "paraphrases" attractiveness but where they were exercised and who was

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[105] See I.M. Green's "Best-Sellers and Steady Sellers III: The Inner Life of Faith, Godly Living, and Godly Dying" in *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England,* 305-7.
[106] Perry, 389.
[107] Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

allowed to engage in them.[108] The "rhapsod[y]" must definitely hold at least a part of the volume's appeal, particularly when we consider the popularity of the theme of interiority in Early Modern England.

The "Christ alone" mantra which comes out of the pages of *The Imitation* was for Thomas a means by which he could tie various practices of Christianity together, and that tie was Christ himself. *The Imitation* registers the "strains on *imitation* early modern England as a strategy for bridging the increasingly troublesome gap between past and present, natural and supernatural, words (even sacred ones) and things."[109] Some would find in Thomas's "Christ alone" volume sympathy and encouragement. The content of *The Imitation,* while it did at points cause dispute among Early Modern English editors, was also was a point of theological unification among Christians. As Robert Persons famously did with his *The First Booke of the Christian Exercise,* so, too do individuals do, I claim, with various editions of *The Imitation of Christ.* Following the example of Robert McNulty in his study of Persons's work, I will examine various editions of *The Imitation of Christ.*[110] I respond in this chapter to Nandra Perry's observation and request, with reference to one particular Early Modern English *Imitatio* editor: "[Thomas] Rogers' ability here [in his 1580 edition of *The Imitation*] not just to assert the current utility of a pre-Reformation text, but also to appropriate it as an instrument against 'Popish' idolatry, marks his act of translation as a locus of cultural meaning that merits further attention."[111] In this chapter, I offer that "further attention" and discuss

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[108] From a conversation with Michael MacDonald, 11 March 2009.
[109] Perry, 375.
[110] Robert McNulty, "The Protestant Version of Robert Parsons' 'The First Booke of Christian Exercise,'" *The Huntington Library Quarterly,* 22.4, 1959, 271-300.
[111] Perry, 366.

Rogers' *Imitatio* and other Early Modern English editions. This chapter will consider

various Early Modern English responses to *The Imitation.* First, we will look at the

dedicatory address of an edition of *The Imitation* edited by William Page, a Laudian in

the early 17th century. Next, we will look at an edition of Thomas Rogers's translation of

*The Imitation,* a translation that became very popular among Early Modern English

Protestants also in the early 17th century. Then, we will look at a 1633 edition of *The*

*Imitation* that is clearly an illegal, Catholic edition. Capping this chapter will be a

comparative textual analysis of select chapters of *The Imitation* in these latter two

editions.

Indeed, many of Perry's reasons for studying *The Imitation* in Early Modern

England are also mine. She, too, notes, as I do, that an individual's, in her instance,

Rogers's, "elaborate argument for the continued relevance of 'Catholic' texts to English

devotional life" is well worth consideration.[112] While Perry reads *The Imitation* with a

deconstructionist eye, discussing what she calls Thomas a Kempis's paradoxical

argument that the relationship between "signs" and their "signifiers" is both meaningful

and meaningless, my concern is with the undisputable popularity of the book in Early

Modern England and what that might signify. Whatever the theoretical viewpoint of the

learned clergyman Rogers on *The Imitation,* we must consider what the value of *The*

*Imitation* might have been for his lay readers, or rather, what merits he attempted to

attribute to *The Imitation* for the sake of his audience. Thus, a consideration of Thomas

Rogers's personal remarks on *The Imitation* must be tempered with a consideration of

the impact of Rogers's own desire to sell his particular edition, a task which both I and

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[112] Perry, 366.

Perry point out Rogers is bent on achieving. Even if Thomas a Kempis and his original late Medieval audience considered language ultimately irrelevant, at best a means through which union with God is achieved, Thomas Rogers's and other Early Modern English reading *The Imitation* may or may not have. I do not claim in this thesis to present an exhaustive discussion of this tenuous relationship between any editor and audience, but I do raise the problem here before entering into a discussion of Rogers's and other Early Modern English editors' remarks on *The Imitation* text.

While the most intriguing aspect of scholarship surrounding the *Imitatio* in Early Modern England may be the differences in editions' "packaging," including but not limited to front matter, capitals, marginalia, and woodcuts, I do mean to offer in this chapter a brief discussion of textual similarities between Rogers's edition and 1633 English Catholic edition. At the very least, we can consider such similiarities as just one more factor which we should temper against our observations on the frameworks of various editions. The conclusion that we would draw, then, is that the letter and spirit of the actual *Imitation* text did not undergo dramatic shifts from the end of the late Middle Ages through the early to mid 17th century. The "packaging" of the editions may have been propagandistic, though the spirit of the text is preserved, even down to the specific wordings within the text, and this observation is significant. What this suggest is that there came to be a disjunct between the significance of the actual *Imitation* text containing Thomas's theology and the status of *The Imitation* as a late Medieval book of Catholic piety. A text is more than its framework. While it is true that because *The Imitation* was so popular from its late Medieval reception forward and that this popularity meant that any *Imitatio* edition's packaging became a distinctive feature and signifier for

the text's meaning, such appendages were not the only loci of meaning. What remained the same about the text is just as noteworthy as what changed.

Yet difference is a most effective way of making sense of the past and a text, and *The Imitation*'s encouragement toward the production of individualism through its emphasis on one's personal encounter with and imitation of Christ to successful piety makes study of *The Imitation* ripe for research. Individuals' notions of who Christ is emerge in variety, in "multivocality," as Theresa Tinkle has said, because of the Reformation, and this multivocality is clearly illuminated through the ways in which the *De Imitatione Christi* is treated, as we shall see when we compare the "packaging" and textual content of editions.[113] *The Imitation*'s popularity in Early Modern England serves as one piece of this fixation on knowing and affirming oneself.

Editors, as readers of this text, engage in what I call emotional editing.[114] The range of individuals who found themselves caught up in editing *Imitation* itself, writing a tract centering on the phrase "imitation of Christ," or found themselves the subject of a tract about the "imitation of Christ"—John Wesley, King Charles I, Elizabeth Rowe, George Stanhope, and John Newton, just to name a few—is fascinating. Editing (and thus interpreting, for editing is itself interpretive work) *De Imitatione Christi* was one alternative to writing a completely new treatise on the imitatio Christi theme. John Norden's *A Mirror for the Multitude,* and other devotional works in Early Modern England illustrate what I would call an obsession at this time to understand God for the purpose of understanding oneself.

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[113] Theresa Tinkle, Michigan Medieval Seminar, Fall 2009.
[114] Perry also notes the "almost irresistible emotional appeal of *imitatio*" on 375-6.

Through their perceptions of Christ, these individuals themselves are revealed. Propagandistic motives are distilled—motives, ironically, are exposed. n this chapter, we will not only gain a better picture of who Christ was to certain individuals in Early Modern England, but a better picture of these individuals themselves. What I imply, though do not wish to overstate in this thesis, is an argument much in-line with that of Arthur Marotti, who has theorized the significance of what he calls the late Medieval "print culture relic," that is, the Catholic text, in Early Modern England. Mainly, that the circulation of, albeit, a late Medieval text in Early Modern England, such as *The Imitation,* signifies an enduring relevance of Catholic ideology and cultural practice in Early Modern England. And in gaining insight into both Christ and the Disciple, one might just gain a better understanding of the relationship between the two and how this relationship affected Early Modern ideology and culture.

## William Page, Laudianism, and *The Imitation*

"plainnesse and the pythinesse…so well fitted to the capacity of the ignorant, and yet not unworthy the perusal of the learned"

"I have profited more in the course of Christianity, by the perusal of this one small book of devotion, then by turning over many volumes of controversies. For I found in it great motives to selfe-deniall, humility, obedience and devotion, to humility in our selves, to obedience towards superiors, to devotion towards God."

"…because the Author thereof was too much addicted to one side, I made bold to leave out that which might offend any Christian palate, and have endeavoured that it should look with an equall and unpartiall eye upon all good Christians…men now adaies are immoderately wedded to their own opinions, they labour to dispute well, not to live well, and delight more in books of controversy to strengthen them on that side they are, then in books of devotion to teach them what each good Christian should be."

-William Page, 1639[115]

This edition of *The Imitation* was printed in 1639, just three years before the beginning of the English Civil War. From the above phrases in the beginning pages of William Page's edition, we can see just a few of the ways in which *The Imitation of* has been received over the past century and earlier, the impact of the Devotio Moderna on the Early Modern reception of the book, and the impact of growing political tensions on the eve of the Civil War. Even at this time, perhaps especially at this time, Page found comfort in *The Imitation*'s simplistic language and contemplative style.

Let us begin with the beginning of William Page's dedicatory address to his patron:

Setting aside more serious studies, and being desirous to recreate my selfe with some books of med[i]tation…

First, the *Imitatio* is not a book of "serious studies" but a "book of meditation" through which Page is able to "recreate himself." Page, it seems, has chosen this book from among many, which means that he is well read, particularly in devotional literature. The

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[115] Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ,* ed. William Page, 1639, accessed at *Early English Books Online* (EEBO).

fact that the book is not one of "serious" scholastic pursuit shows that indeed, over time, the book has been accessible to people and has marked itself as different from other devotional literature of the era in which it was originally written and in the Early Modern era. It is intriguing and fitting that Page sees the book as one for "meditation" and not for "serious study." A differentiation between the two sorts of literature is, as we have seen, something which was synthesized during the Devotio Moderna. Several places in *The Imitation* an emphasis not on study of books but study of God himself through books, mainly the Bible and the lives of the early Church Fathers and the saints, is encouraged.

The next comments from Page, that *The Imitation*'s "plainnesse and pythinesse" and that the book is readable for the "ignorant" as well as the "learned," are compelling responses to *The Imitation*'s invitation to a contemplative life with Christ even from within society. It is intriguing to see how the book over time and in the wake of religious ideological disputes actually came to become a place of rest and repose ("Come to me, all you who labour, and I will give you rest" says Christ at the beginning of Book IV) because of the volume's simplistic, perhaps overly simplistic, approach to the practice of Christianity. The freshness of *The Imitation* was its holistic approach to Christianity, its repetitiveness, its circularity, its phenomenological way of presenting worship of the Christ. Page obviously found a certain kind of intellectual "rest" in reading *The Imitation* because of its relentless focus on Christ, the key to what Peter Kreeft calls "ecumenism without compromise."[116]

It is the empathy and accessibility that Page finds in *The Imitation* which allows him to boldly claim that "the Author thereof was too much addicted to one side," the

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[116] Peter Kreeft, "Ecumenism without Compromise," transcript accessed online at http://www.peterkreeft.com/audio/03_ecumenism/ecumenism_transcription.htm.

Catholic side. Page is clearly uncomfortable with a text which emphasizes one side, an

emphasis which, for him, emphasizes Christian disunity. Page expresses this concern

through his edition of *The Imitation* when he discusses how living out a Christ-centered

life, rather than a Catholic or a Protestant life, is the way to peace. In his "To the

Christian Reader," Page speaks of peace in the wake of Christian disunity and war. He

writes, "Why can wee not consider one another as united in this blessed name of *Christia,*

and set aside for a time those names of faction and division why should wee not rejoice

awhile in those things wherein wee agree, and not always be wrangling about those

things wherein wee differ?" In Thomas's era, those who carried this "blessed name" were

all Catholic Christians. The divides which Thomas bridged in the late Middle Ages

through *The Imitation* were intellectual versus practical and clerical versus lay. In Page's

era, a more prominent and primary divide to be bridges is that of Catholic versus

Protestant, as well as divides created through various Protestant denominations, such as

that between Calvinists and at this time the Laudians and Puritans. As Christopher

Durston, and others note, "By the late 1630s many people in England were unable to

distinguish Laudianism from the popery [Catholicism] they had been brought up to both

despise and dread, and it was as a crypto-papist fifth column within the English

Protestant Church that Laud and his supporters were so widely hated and feared."[117]

Laudianism did have some similarities to Catholicism, though, as Durston and Duran

note, to closely equate the two as the Early Modern English did is to misunderstand

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[117]Susan Doran and Christopher Durston, "Theology and liturgy," *Princes, Pastors, and People: The Church and Religion in England, 1500-1700,* 2nd ed., Routledge: New York, 2003, 31.

Laudianism's aims.[118]  These shifting audiences are what Page and other Early Modern

English editors grapple with as the book circulates.  In the editing of the *Imitation,* we

can see how one's personal religious beliefs do indeed and must have consequences on

editorial decisions.


## Book IV

*The Imitation* is comprised of four sections called "Books," and in the wake of the

Protestant Reformation in England, it becomes convention to cut Book IV because the

book's subject is the Catholic Eucharist.  In this section, I would like to take a quick look

at the inclusion or exclusion of Book IV in one Early Modern English edition of *The*

*Imitation.*  In discussing the treatment of Book IV, we can see one particular way in

which *The Imitation* encouraged a variety of reader responses.  The first edition we will

discuss is the earliest English printed edition—the 1504 text edited by William Atkinson

and Margaret Beaufort, mother to King Henry VIII.[119]

Book IV draws attention to itself in this edition for a number of reasons.  First—

and we do not know why—William Atkinson edited the first three books, while Margaret

Beaufort requested to edit the fourth herself.  One complete, four-book edition of the

Beaufort/Atkinson translation, listed as having been printed in 1502, even carries the

variant title "Here beginethe the forthe boke."[120]

This early editorial division of the *Imitatio* into two parts, the first three books and

fourth book, is also reiterated through the 1504 text itself.  In between the third and fourth

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[118] Doran and Durston, 31.
[119] I will use STC 2$^{nd}$ ed. 23954.7 / ESTC (citation no.) S124900 as an example.
[120] ESTC, (citation number), 126304.  I was not able to access this edition in the course of my research.

books, there is a clear division. Prefacing Book IV and not any of the other books, except

Book I of course, are several woodcuts. In fact, there are more woodcuts at the front of

Book IV than there are at the beginning of the volume. The first two woodcuts are

completely new, and the third is a reprint of the one which begins the volume.

Why we do not know for sure why there is special attention given to Book IV in the 1504

Atkinson/Beaufort edition, we can make some guesses at why this book was set apart

from the others. Perhaps the subject of the Eucharist, for the editors, warrants special

attention. I would argue that perhaps Book IV is presented as a textual temple. The

reader enters Book I through a woodcut and exits the third Book with an identical

woodcut. Perhaps Book IV, that which contains the Blessed Sacrament, acts as a printed

tabernacle, a sacred space, which one entered into after renouncing worldly pleasures

(Book I), building an interior life with Christ (Book II), and beginning interior

conversation with Christ (Book III). After doing these three things, the "Disciple" was fit

to enter into the Holy of Holies, Book IV.

Thomas Rogers, after cutting Book IV from his edition, claims that a different

treatise, "The Soule-Talk of the Soule," which was also written by Thomas is the

authentic Book IV. This is one tidy way of disposing of a doctrine which he and others

did not believe while maintaining the standard four book structure of the *Imitation* which
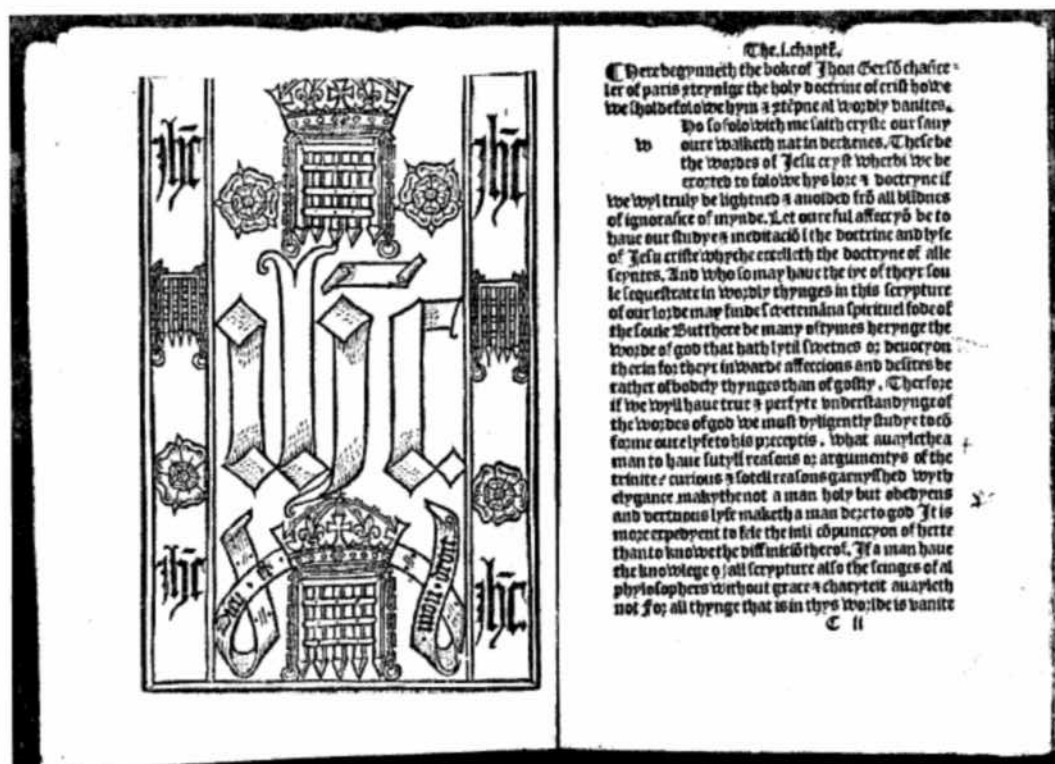
was established by this point.

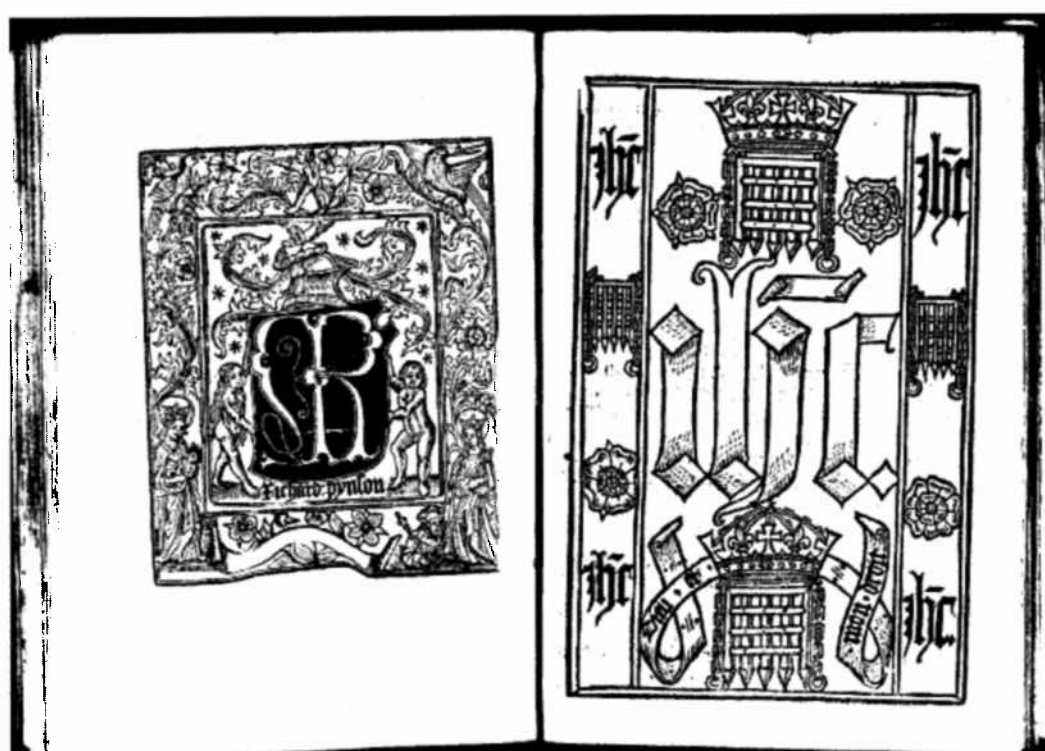Figure 1: Second woodcut at the beginning of the 1504 Atkinson/Beaufort edition



Figure 2: Woodcuts at the end of Book III in the 1504 Atkinson/Beaufort edition

Figure 3: First pages of Book IV in the 1504 English Atkinson/Beaufort edition

Protestantism, Thomas Rogers and *The Imitation*

While "many English Protestants were pessimistic about the possibility of

imitating Christ and deeply ambivalent about the propriety of even attempting to do so,"

Thomas a Kempis's *De Imitation Christi* remains popular amongst Protestants in Early

Modern England.[121] I would like to now turn to a Protestant edition of the *Imitation*

printed in England in 1629.[122] According to Perry, his career "defies easy

categorization," and he seemed fixated by Catholic texts, such as those of Augustine and

Thomas a Kempis's *de Imitatio Christi*.[123] Rogers was chaplain to Archbishop Bancroft

in the 1590s and "actively entered the campaign against Presbyterianism."[124] Thomas

Rogers, the translator, first published his Protestant translation of the *Imitation* in 1580.[125]

Rogers' edition was, as Elizabeth Hudson notes, "being reprinted on an average of every

other year down to 1609."[126] Hudson notes David Crane's suggestion that Rogers's

scrupulous marginal Biblical citations in his edition "may be the feature which made the

Rogers translation attractive to Protestant readers."[127] Attractive, indeed; between

Rogers' first printed edition in 1580 and 1636, at least sixteen, though Perry says thirteen

from 1500-1700, editions based on Rogers's translation were printed in England.[128]

But statistics are not the only means through which we can learn of the *Imitation*'s

popularity. We can believe Rogers when he says right in his very long title:

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[121] Perry, 380.
[122] English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC), 1759: 04.
[123] Perry, 365.
[124] Hudson, 544.
[125] ESTC, 2nd ed., 23973.
[126] Hudson, 543.
[127] Hudson, 544.
[128] ESTC, 2nd ed.

Of the Imitation of Christ. Three, both for wisedome, and godliness, most

excellent books, made 170. yeers since by one Thomas of Kempis and for the

worthinesse thereof oft since translated out of Latine into sundrie languages by

diuers, godly and learned men. Now newly corrected, translated, and with most

ample texts, and sentences of holy Scripture illustrated by Thomas Rogers.

First, let us note that the one-hundred-seventy years from 1580 would be the year 1410.

As we have seen, the *Imitation* was being read in piecemeal as early as the 1380s. It is

worth wondering how it is that Rogers thinks that the book was complete by 1410,

especially since the Latin autograph of the *Imitation* is established as circulating by 1441.

But Rogers does confirm the *Imitation*'s popularity when he says that the book has "oft

since [been] translated out of Latine into sundrie languages." Finally, let us observe that

Rogers's title claims that the *Imitation* is composed of "Three" books not four. While he

speaks at length in his epistles about many of some obvious and more detailed editorial

decisions, he remains silent as to why he cut Book IV entirely, not even acknowledging

its existence and his decision to cut it. Hudson explains Rogers's silence on the subject:

"The omission of Book IV altogether, which is a treatise on the sacrament of the altar,

obviously did not need explanation."[129] This is just one of the ways in which Rogers

attempts to "adapt his quasi-monastic, sacramentalist source to the expectations of a

bibliocentric lay readership."[130]

While Rogers does not discuss the omission of Book IV, he does helpfully and

insightfully explain to us why he makes some of the other editorial decisions that he does

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[129] Hudson, 544.
[130] Perry, 377.

in the two "Epistles" which preface the *Imitation* text.[131] The first epistle, entitled, "The first Epistle of the Translator touching Christian imitation in generall, to the faithfull imitators of our Sauiour Christ in England, S.," is a treatise on the subject of imitation itself. In studying these two epistles, we gain the lens through which we are to read his translation and we learn how he himself reads the *Imitation*. In this first epistle, Rogers' overall aim seems to simultaneously endorse the idea of imitation someone's actions yet at the same time warn us against imitating others before worshipping and imitating Jesus Christ. He writes:

> Secondly, that, seeing our nature is such, we are to take speciall heed whom we follow or imitate. For euery one may not be followed, neither shall the ungodly behavior of others excuse us before God.[132]

Rogers is adamant about our worship of God and God alone throughout the first epistle. His exhortation to admire and imitate other good Christians but not to esteem them more than God echoes, as we have seen, Thomas a Kempis's project. While Thomas does say that we should look to the early Church Fathers, the martyrs, and the Virgins, he does so seldom. Most of the time, Thomas a Kempis would have us looking at Christ only.

Yet Rogers cannot but help address in his own words his own audience which he defines for us right at the beginning of the first epistle. He begins the epistle by speaking about imitation and how we "should liue by lawes not by examples, that examples doe more mooue, than doe lawes..."[133] Rogers goes on, and here we learn of the multiple audiences he perhaps sees the *Imitation* addressing:

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[131] See Hudson 544 and Perry 375-81 for remarks on these two Epistles.
[132] ESTC, 1759: 04, A4.
[133] ESTC, 1759: 04, A3.

...Seruants in a family, Souldiers in an army, Subiects in a Common-weale may

confirme what I say. For seruvants will imitate their masters, souldiers their

captaines, subiects their Gouernours a, be they good, be they bad, yea get ther

praise or get they infamy, profit or b_ _t thereby, thinking their liues to bee al_ _,

and that to bee well done, which is done after their example...[134]

Rogers's reference to these various groups of people is symptomatic perhaps of his desire

to reach a broad audience through *his* edition. Perry also argues that "Rogers's audience

is an invisible, widely dispersed community of 'the godly'...."[135] The *Imitation*'s

popularity is something we have attempted to define all along, and Thomas a Kempis's

theology as encapsulated by *The Imitation* was the source Rogers found to be effect in

reaching multiple audiences. Hudson and Kenneth Parker, whom she references, have

considered Rogers "an ambitious careerist who was not above smearing his clerical

neighbors in his pursuit of advancement in the church."[136]

It looks as though Rogers, if he was an "ambitious careerist," did not heed some

of Thomas a Kempis's advice. And now I raise a set of questions, but for the purposes of

this paper, do essentially bracket them, to some degree. Thomas Rogers would have us

look outside of ourselves and at relationships other than just a personal relationship with

Jesus Christ even as he refers us to only look at the Bible for true wisdom.[137] Rogers

calls to our minds practical and concrete persons whom he thinks we should imitate. His

way of thinking about the theme of imitation is spiritual but less aesthetic than might be

expected in the late Middle Ages. While it may be true that "According to Rogers, true

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[134] ESTC, 1759: 04, A3.
[135] Perry, 389.
[136] Hudson, footnote 9, 544.
[137] Perry, 377.

Christian *imitatio* is mindful of the distance between human subject and divine object," a theme which we have seen is important in *The Imitation*, one has to wonder whether this realization, for Rogers, came about through the emotional texture of *The Imitation*. While it is true that Rogers eventually brings our attention to Christ-as-model, his point-of-view is definitely that of someone "in the world." While Thomas a Kempis, relatively speaking, rarely suggests literally imitating Christ's actions as illustrated in the Gospels, Thomas Rogers, in his first epistle, gives a lengthy summary of Christ's earthly ministry.[138]

One does indeed get a feel for Rogers's healthy sense of self through various aspects of his two epistles. The first very obvious thing to note is Rogers' audacious notation of his epistles as well as the *Imitation* text. Nearly every page has one or many more marginal citations, and their content depends on whether they occur in the *Imitation* text or the prefatory materials. While it *seems* that Rogers's marginalia in the *Imitation* itself are only Biblical, his references in the two epistles range from Cicero to Augustine to the Bible.[139] What is interesting to note is that he does not quote from the *Imitation* itself. He relies closely on the Bible and confidently writes this about his methodology of Scriptural annotations in "A Second Epistle, concerning the translation and correction of this booke":

> ...and also I haue taken the translation thereof vpon me, not so much to translate,
> as [to?] illustrate the same with places of Scripture. For doubtlesse great pittie
> was it, that a booke so plentifully, or altogether rather straighted with sentences of
> the Scripture, was either not whit (as in forme) or no better (as in the best

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[138] A5.
[139] A4-A6.

> impressions) quoted. Besides I haue not onely shewed the Chapters, but the verie
>
> sentence also of euery Chapter, where what is written may be found. A thing
>
> which (that heare of) none afore me hath done. The bringing of which to passe,
>
> how painfull it hath been to me, he alone can best report, who either hath doneor
>
> doth goe about the like, how no[t?] comfortable onely, but profitable besides it
>
> will be to others, they shall find, that zealously do read the same.[140]

What we see is that Thomas Rogers does not like the *lectio spiritualis* methodology that

Thomas a Kempis had applied when writing his text, eliding Scripture here and there,

sifting the Bible's words right into his own and therein make them his own, his own

personal prayer to Jesus. While Rogers does not change the actual syntax of the book, he

does what he can to give order to all of the "rather straighted…sentences of the

Scripture…quoted" in Thomas a Kempis's text. As he does this, Thomas Rogers also

wants us to observe that "none afore [him] hath" shown us the insurmountable places in

Thomas's text which draw and quote from Scripture. Whether this claim is true, I do not

know. Rogers also does something, I believe, ironic and interesting to grab our attention:

he tries to gain our sympathy: "The bringing of which to passé, how painfull it hath been

to me, he alone can best report…." In saying this, I think that Rogers actually wants us to

take pity on him, the translator, because his labor is his cross, the cross that Thomas

exhorts us to pick up and carry again and again. Rogers goes on: "…but how profitable

besides it will be to others, they shall find…." The work that Rogers does is for our

"profit[ ]." The word "profit" appears with frequency throughout these early English

editions of the *Imitation,* and so perhaps it is no coincidence that we see this language of

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[140] A8.

the well-worn Biblical paradox that in order to gain one's life, one must lose one's life

for Christ's sake. Thomas Rogers then, I argue, is sounding just a bit like the counterpart

to God, the "Seruant," as the character is called in Rogers' text, perhaps is even

ventriloquizing Thomas a Kempis, too. Rogers, I am tempted to argue, performs the role

of the Servant here in this epistle and rehearses his own private response to "Christ" in

our presence, making public to his readers his own personal piety. Yet, let us not forget

that Rogers', if indeed he is showing off his holiness to us in public, that he does the very

thing which Thomas a Kempis warns against, that of doing public works of piety before

others.

While we cannot be sure why Rogers confesses and complains about the "cross"

of being a translator, we can be sure that he wants our attention and approval. What

follows now is some discussion of his reasons for cutting some parts of the *Imitation* and

for adding some sentences to the text. On the first page of the second epistle, Rogers

defends his re-translation of *The Imitation*:

> Therefore am I to yield some reasons, both why I haue translated this booke into
>
> English, being in English already: and why so haue I translated it, leauing
>
> somewhat out, as I haue done.
>
> For the first I say, that neither is my doing of noueltie strange, nor am I (as
>
> I trust) to bee reproued therefore. For both I haue examples of good men in all
>
> sciences and professions, who to their great commendation haue done the like [?}
>
> as may witnesse the sundrie and diuers interpretations of the Work of Aristotle
>
> and Plato for phylosophie...[141]

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[141] A7-A8.

The fact that Rogers is defending his re-translation is significant, I think. The English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) shows that there already had been between 1504-1580 at least twenty-two different editions of the *Imitation* printed.[142] Maybe Rogers, perhaps realizing that this book was extremely popular, perhaps felt that some would question the precedence for yet another English edition of the *Imitation*. Yet while Rogers does indeed claim to "haue followed the sence of the Author," he admits that he does make some "correction":

> For I haue left nothing out but what might bee offensiue to the godly. Yet it is neither for quantitie much, nor for number above foure sentences. The first when is this *a...*[143]

And Rogers gives us the Latin and then mentions Casetellio's English translation of it in which is mentioned "the signe of the crosse," a Catholic ritual, something to be left out because it is "offensiue to the godly." Rogers removes his second sentence also because it mentions the sign of the cross:

> In the English translation...'marked with the crosse of Jesus'...What needes these words, 'A[ ] marked with the crosse of Jesus'? I haue therefore not mentioned them.

The third sentence is removed because it emphasizes "merite." Rogers explains that "the Scripture is cleane against our meriting, and the Author too, in manny places...[he] condemnes" it.[144] The final sentence removed because, in an English translation by "Hakes," it speaks of those who, in the Old Testament, according to Catholicism, "were

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[142] ESTC.
[143] A9.
[144] A10.

justified, and in the state of salvation, [who] could not enter the kingdome [of] heauen before thy passion, and the merits of thy pretious death." Rogers says to the reader:

> Where then were they? In hell? I think none will say it. In Abrahams b some, as some *f*, in *Limbo patrum* [ ] other papists *g* do say: but that wa[s] not carefully proued. Wherefore that which otherwise might offend the godly, I haue cleane omitted and left out that sentence.

Then Rogers goes on to argue that the sentences he's added to the volume take the place of those he's removed:

> And as I haue over-past without mentioning these [the omitted sentences]...so haue I added some godly sentences, which haue beene omitted both by Castellio and such as followed him, as may appeare both in the 47 [th chapter]...[and] the 48 chap. Within three sentences of the beginning and also in the 63 [rd] as in mine the [ ] chapter, somewhat after the middle thereof.

When Rogers says immediate following that he "maruell[s], both why these were omitted, and the rest not ammended by such as haue taken the translation of this booke upon them," he reveals to us his strategic effort to legitimatize his edition of the *Imitation*. Rogers is trying to build his reputation through his edition of the *Imitation*. Rogers' selection of the *Imitation* as the text he edits and then also affixes lengthy editorial, spiritual treatises to, I might argue, hints at the important place that the book already might have already held within a rapidly growing and shifting cannon of devotional literature being circulated in England at this time. Whatever his motives and personal beliefs, Rogers found it worthwhile to take up editing the *Imitation* text and tells us that, in doing so, he participates in and, as I have already mentioned, imitates the

retranslation and re-editing efforts of those who have treated the works of Aristotle and

Plato. In mentioning the *Imitation*, Rogers suggests that the *Imitation* is to be counted

among these works. While it might be a stretch and perhaps tells us more about Rogers'

reading tastes and ambitions than it does the *Imitation*'s reception, it could be argued that

Rogers' grouping of the *Imitation* with works by Aristotle and Plato demonstrates that the

book was being read and had become, at least by the early 17th century, a work that was

appreciated by a broader audience than that of the late middle ages. And of course, I

recognize that the wider reception of the *Imitation* also is not necessarily necessitated by

rising interest in what the content of the book actually holds; rather, the book, I argue,

became valuable for what could be read into it, for its malleable content. And I have

taken effort to demonstrate that Rogers certainly felt quite free to add, cut, and past what

he wished to the *Imitation*. For Rogers, the *Imitation,* to some degree, was that mirror in

which he saw himself and his own ambitions reflected. And because, I would perhaps

romantically argue, Rogers saw the capacity the *Imitation* held for self-definition, he did

indeed use it to such an end. Thus, we see the "Renaissance self-fashioning" of an Early

Modern editor as he sees Christ face-to-face in a text that is ideologically interesting to

laypersons and a clerical audience.[145]

Thomas Rogers first, it seems, got caught up in the *Imitation* "hype" and so did a

number of individuals, who proved their interest in choosing to translate, edit, or

comment on the work. Why Thomas's particular edition became so popular and why his

absurd suggestion that the authentic Book IV of the *Imitation* was really *Soliloquium*

*animae* seemed to fly are questions that I cannot begin to answer intelligently in the space

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[145] Reference to Stephen Greenblatt's book with this title.

of this thesis. I believe that the answers lie in deeper study of the Protestant Reformation and in the findings of those such as Arthur Marotti, who has recently argued that anti-Catholicism solidified English Protestant nationalism.[146]

For whatever reason, Thomas Rogers's translation of the *Imitation* became very popular in Early Modern England. It was the translation used by the Stationers Company. The Stationers Company had control over what was printed and officially approved of in England. There is value in studying this government-mediated edition—its woodcuts, title page, its numerous Biblical annotations—because it can reveal how the government at this time wanted the *Imitatio* to be read. Thomas Rogers is a Protestant cleric whose edition of the *Imitatio* is published multiple times in the Early Modern era, and he is the one who is the "illustrator"—the editor—of this Stationers Company edition.

### Anthony Hoskins, Early Modern English Catholicism, and *The Imitation of Christ*

But it was not just Protestants who mediate what goes into the *Imitation of Christ*. Catholics, too, used the *Imitatio Christi* for their own political purposes.[147] For example, Catholic editions of the *de Imitatio Christi* were printed in Rouen, France, a place famous for printing Catholic literature and secretly circulating it in England. One edition of the *Imitation* was first printed in 1613 and translated by Anthony Hoskins, S.J. who dedicated to the work to Elizabeth Vaux, the mother of Edward Vaux, 4th Lord of

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[146] Arthur F. Marotti, "The Intolerability of Catholics in Early Modern England," at the University of Michigan Early Modern Colloquium's conference "The Religious Turn in Late Medieval and Early Modern Studies," 6 February 2009.
[147] ESTC (2nd ed.) 23991.

Harrowden.[148] This explains why the STC 23991 edition's dedicatory address reads,

"F.B., January 1620" rather than 1633. There had already been printed previously three

times—that is, there were already three previous editions of—the Hoskins translation, so

altogether, an edition of the Hoskins translation circulated from at least 1613 at least

through 1633. Perry quotes Crane when noting that, at the arrival of the Civil War,

Thomas Rogers's translation "was replaced as the standard English translation by

Anthony Hoskins' version."[149] What she does not address is why a Jesuit translation

became so popular. This edition then, coming off of a recusant printer, known as the

"English secret press," was founded by the infamous Robert Parsons, S.J. The printer,

Jean Cousturier, was known for printing a good deal of Catholic (recusant) material.

Cousturier, in addition to printing this particular edition of the *Imitation,* printed other

such recusant books, like the English Jesuit Henry Hawkins's (1577-1646) two books

*Partheniea sacra* (1633) and *The Devout Heart* (1634).[150] Hoskins's dedication to

Elizabeth Vaux is, quiet literally, explosive, the Vaux family having been implicated to

some degree in the Gunpowder Plot of 1604-5. Elizabeth Vaux was born Elizabeth

Roper, and both the Roper and Vaux families were notoriously Catholic. The Vaux

family had for generations been closely associated with Jesuit priests and specifically,

with Robert Parsons, S.J. Mary Blackstone writes about the family Vaux:

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[148] A.F. Allison and D.M. Rogers (eds.), The Contemporary Printed Literature of the English Counter-Reformation between 1558 and 1640, Vol. 1 & 2, Hants: Scolar Press, 1994, 89.

[149] Perry, 375.

[150] Karl Joseph Holtgen, eds. John W. O'Malley, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Steven Harris, T. Frank Kennedy, "Henry Hawkins: A Jesuit Writer and Emblematist in Early Stuart England" in *The Jesuits: Cultures, Sciences, and The Arts, 1540-1773,* University of Toronto Press, 1999, 600.

> ...one of the most staunchly recusant families in England, a family that had been
>
> associated with the Gunpowder Plot in 1605....Elizabeth Roper Vaux was
>
> instrumental in maintaining and developing an underground Jesuit network in
>
> Jacobean England. Her new husband had been educated at the Jesuit college at
>
> Douay and knighted by the Franciscans in the Holy Land.[151]

Clearly then, Anthony Hoskins' dedication to Elizabeth Roper Vaux is significant. It is

bold and rebellious, and it is put at the front of *The Imitation of Christ*, the very same

book which is being concurrently read and favored by English Protestants.

Yet this is not the exact same book that is being read by Protestants; one of the

ways in which this 1633 Rouen edition declared itself "Catholic" was through its

inclusion of Book IV and its inclusion of the language about Catholic subjects such as the

priesthood, subjects which we see in modern editions which have been closely translated

from the 1441 autograph. In the 1629 Stationers Company edition, for example,

This edition is also different from the 1629 edition because of its lack of woodcuts and

lack of flourish, dedicatory addresses, and lack of Biblical marginalia. Yet there is a

provocative dedicatory address to Elizabeth Vaux. The first sentence of the address

reads:

> Honourable and right worthy, The publike demonstration which you have lately
>
> giuen of your true desire to follow the foot-steps of our Lord, undergoing so
>
> heauy a Crosse for his sake, with so ready & resoued a mind, hath moued me to
>
> dedicate this little Booke, of the Imitation of Christ, unto You: assuring my selfe

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[151] Mary Blackstone, "The Star Chamber Deposition of Lady Elizabeth Vaux (1622)," *Reading Early Modern Women: An Anthology of Texts in Manuscript and Print, 1550-1700*, eds. Helen Ostovich and Elizabeth Sauer, asst. by Melissa Smith, London: Routledge, 2004, 35.

that it wil be no lesse grateful to You, to see it appeare in light, purged from many

mistaken sentences which were in the former Translations, then the reading and

practice therof wil be profitable to others: it being so diuine and excellent a

worke...[152]

What is the "publike demonstration" that Hoskins refers to? One would understand it to

be the Gunpowder Plot. Hoskins suggests that Vaux's association with the Gunpowder

Plot and her place as a Catholic in Early Modern England, her "heauy Crosse," is a part

of her holy effort to "follow the foot-steps of our Lord." The claim to have removed

"many mistaken sentences which were in the former Translations" is not exceptional in

its implications. Of course an editor is free—and editors in Early Modern England did so

with ease—to remove sentences which they did not see as "correct." But Hoskins's

insinuation that his editorial undertaking is also a part of his effort to "follow the foot-

steps of our Lord" is noteworthy. He implies that his work as an editor has a moral,

ethical, and religious relevance. We see then that the claim of doing something for the

sake of imitating Christ allows for a range of actions. The accepted nobleness of *imitatio*

theme, with its emphasis on the importance of motives that emerged from antiquity, then

becoming especially Christianized in the Middle Ages, and finally emerging as the

*imitato Christi* theme, is the foundation upon which William Page, Thomas Rogers, and

also Anthony Hoskins are able to establish relevance for their translations and editions of

*The Imitation.*

But of course, we cannot know how actually sincere Hoskins's claim that he is

editing for the sake of Christ is. What I argue is that the emphasis on emotions and

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[152] A2-A3.

motives of *The Imitation* creates a plausible gap in any skepticism we might quickly

establish against Hoskins's sincerity, though whatever one concludes about this gap such

a gap obviously does not inhibit his boldness in pursuing a recusant, propagandistic

agenda. Michael Questier's observation that in scholarship "The topic of catholicism's

conflict with the Tudor and early Stuart state has suffered, in fact, from being, on the one

hand, the virtually sole concern of catholic historians' accounts of the period, and, on the

other, an essentially minor detail for other historians who regard catholicism's political

characteristics as largely irrelevant," indicates that any exploration of this gap I note

would be a part of the present, growing attention that is being given to the relationship of

Catholicism and Protestantism in Early Modern England, particularly through the study

of Catholicism in Early Modern England.[153]  Of course, another intriguing question is

whether and to what degree the Early Modern English readers of Hoskins's edition

understood Hoskins to be sincere, or for that matter, Rogers and other editors of *The

Imitation.*  But this is a question which I cannot answer, mainly due to the time

constraints and focused aims of this project, which consider mainly the roles of particular

editors as readers and how these editors politically and publicly align themselves in

relation to *The Imitation.*

In his dedicatory epistle, Hoskins makes it clear, then, that he aligns *The Imitation*

with Catholicism. After his citation of the Gunpowder Plot on the first page, the

language of the address is less politically charged and more in-line with the sense of *The

Imitation* text itself. His tone is, in contrast to that of Rogers's epistles, is lyrical,

emotional, and shows signs of being that of an orthodox Catholic. The fact that Hoskins

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[153] Michael Questier, "Catholic Loyalism in Early Stuart England," *The English
Historical Review,* Vol. CXXIII No. 504. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 1134.

was a Jesuit priest confirms this final point. Like those *Imitatio* readers who have come

before him, like Thomas Rogers and William Page, Hoskins highly extols *The Imitation*

for its Scriptural foundation:

> [*The Imitation*] being so diuine and excellent a worke, as in the opinion of such as
>
> can best iudge of this matter, of al the Books which are written, that the treate (?)
>
> of spirit and Christian Perfection (the holie Scripture excepted) it is inferiour to
>
> none, if it excelleth not al.[154]

What Hoskins says next though is at the heart of this thesis's argument, and its amazing

to observe that Hoskins can see how "No book hath been more approued by general

consent, none more often printed and translated into diuers languages, none more

esteemed, commended...."[155] But this statement of Hoskins could also be read as

nothing more than an translator trying to sell his product. Nevertheless, as we have seen,

it is a true statement, whatever Hoskins actually knew of *The Imitation*'s translation and

circulation histories. The latter half of this statement of praise "...yea commanded also

by the chiefe Maisters of Spirit of Some Religious Orders, to be often read by euerie one

in priuate, and once a week publikely to al," is something that Rogers does not

mention.[156] While Rogers does, as we have seen, discuss and point to Biblical

personages as models of imitation (though we are to be cautious because even these were

humans who made mistakes) and the Bible itself as the ultimate source for guidance in

Christian piety, and even lets chapters on the early Church Fathers and the virgin martyrs

remain in his edition (though let us remember he saw no problem in cutting the entire

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[154] A4.

[155] A4-A5.

[156] A5.

fourth Book of *The Imitation* in order to Protestantize the edition), he does not cite

members of "Religious Orders," one of the main and primary audiences of *The Imitation,*

in his prefatory epistles as acceptable models. Hoskins, in the next few pages, calls *The*

*Imitation* manna with lyrical, emotional language:

> …and like another Manna affoardeth to euerie one that delightful tast which best
>
> agreeth with the palate of his soule: and none can loath it, but they whose lustes
>
> doe carry them to Egyptian slauery. A true Israelite may feed upon it fourty
>
> yeares together, and euer find such pleasing tast, and increasing strength by use
>
> therof, as wil sustaine him in the desert of this world, & enable him to goe on
>
> without fainting, til he arriue at his promised inheritance of eternal rest.[157]

First, Hoskins's comparison of *The Imitation* to manna is striking and creative because,

by Biblical tradition, the manna given to the Israelites was literally, mystically supposed

to satisfy every person, though each person consumed identical manna. *The Imitation,*

like manna, is of one substance, is one book. But somehow, Hoskins argues, the book

appeals to nearly every Christian palate. Next, Hoskins's comparison of *The Imitation* to

manna rings of Catholic theology, particularly that relationship between Word and

Sacrament which is emphasized in the Mass and in the Eucharist. In typology, manna is

the antitype of the Eucharist, the body of Christ. Just as the manna fed the Israelites forty

years in the wilderness, the body of Christ, the Eucharistic bread, will feed God's people.

Though, Christ's body will feed all people for all eternity, Jews and Gentiles. Jesus

Christ in the Gospel of John presents us with this typological understanding of manna and

the Eucharist: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of

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[157] A6.

this bread, he shall live for ever; and the bread that I will give, is my flesh, for the life of the world."[158] Thus, Hoskins, in associating *The Imitation* with manna, also associates it with the Catholic Eucharist. Yet Hoskins also does similar work as Rogers in this dedicatory address, insofar that Hoskins, too, reveals his response to *The Imitation.* Like Rogers, we can see how Hoskins does indeed see and value in *The Imitation* its rich Biblical roots. Hoskins, unlike Rogers, chooses the theology of the Eucharist. The Eucharist is, we can recall, the subject of *The Imitation*'s fourth Book. While Hoskins does not explicitly praise the fourth Book in his dedicatory address, it would be assumed that, in light of its inclusion in his edition and in light of the strong Eucharistic language found in this address, that Hoskins did value *The Imitation* for its attention on the Blessed Sacrament.

Yet Hoskins's lyrical, Catholic piety does not mean that, as argued earlier, that he did not also see *The Imitation* in somewhat similar terms as Rogers. The comparison of *The Imitation* to manna and Hoskins's imaginative reading of *The Imitation* as a book fitted for a time of worldly wilderness is not a notion with which Rogers would disagree. Hoskins's comparison of *The Imitation* to manna, insofar as manna was sustenance for a wandering, suffering people, can be understood as his view of the corpus of devotional literature in early 17th century England: this literature is important, is intellectual

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[158] John 6: 51, Douay-Rheims Bible. I choose this translation of the Bible because it "is the foundation on which nearly all English Catholic versions are still based, owed its existence to the religious controversies of the sixteenth century." Additionally, "The Reims [New] Testament was reprinted twice at Antwerp -- in 1600 and 1621 -- and a fourth edition was issued at Rouen in 1633." Rouen and the year 1633 are the publication date place and date of the Hoskins *Imitatio* considered in this thesis. "Douay Bible," newadvent.org/cathen/05140a.htm).

sustenance for those who are literally and spiritually hungry. Hoskins confirms this

opinion in the close of the dedicatory address:

> Accept therefore, I beseech you, this little Present, presented by him who wisheth
>
> you much more temporal happines then your present state affoardeth; & that
>
> endless glory, wherof your preset suffering is no uncertaine pledge. This first of
>
> Ianuary. 1620. Yours euer assured, F.B."[159]

At the beginning of the address, we see a bold, political statement. By the end, we see a

compassionate, personal address, and the editorial job has been undertaken in order to

alleviate Elizabeth Vaux's "present suffering." This then, points to one possible and very

probable reason for the popularity of *The Imitation:* its emotional, compassionate

approach to the subject of suffering and Christianity.


### Comparative Readings of Rogers's and Hoskins's Translations

The differences between Protestant and Catholic editions can be illustrated

through a discussion of the chapters in *The Imitation* which focus exclusively on Catholic

topics. Overall, the two chapters (1.17) are very similar to one another, yet their differing

presentations of *The Imitation* text and Rogers' omission of Catholic language in the title

and in the chapter's text represent a difference as well as his copious Biblical citations

represent the main differences between the two chapters. In the Rogers edition, 1.17 is

entitled "The way to quietnesse, both temporal and eternall," while in the Rouen edition

1.17 is entitled "Of Religious Life." In Billy's edition, Creasy has titled 1.17 "Of the

Monastic Life." The thrust of the chapter is preserved in both editions, that holiness is

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[159] A8.

not to be found in one's outer garments, that the disciple is to be the servant of all, and that silence is where one encounters God. There are a few differences between the English editions' chapters. First, the chapter in Rogers edition is shorter than Rouen edition's. At the top of the page on the left is "The first booke" and on the facing page, "of the Imitation of Christ." In the upper left and right corners of the page, "M_____ affections" is printed. Rogers wants us to know exactly what book we are reading and the subject of the book. The margins in the Rogers edition are filled with Biblical citations. The chapter in the Rogers edition has about one-hundred-eighty words contained in pithy sentences, and there are nineteen Biblical references. The chapter is about a page and a half, if that, in length. Yet, Rogers finds in this very short chapter allusion to Psalms 120, 119 and 1, 1 Corinthians, Ephesians, Romans, the Gospel of Matthew, Philippians, the Gospel of Luke, Genesis, and Job. But, it seems that in this particular chapter, Thomas is not citing the Bible in any explicit way as he does in other chapters. Either Rogers is complementing Thomas a Kempis for his ability to fold into a short chapter all of these Scriptural passages or Rogers himself is arguing that one can find in this chapter all of these allusions. Either way, we see that Rogers encourages us to read *The Imitation* with a Bible in-hand and that, for him, *The Imitation*'s value is proportional, or perhaps even superseded by, the text's Biblical foundation. In contrast to the Rogers edition, the margins of the Rouen edition are empty, and the chapter is longer than Rogers' at two-hundred-sixty words. The only structure the editor has imposed is paragraph numbering. At the top of the left page in the Rouen edition, the text "The Following" and on the right page, "of Christ. Lib. I." We are told, then, that we are reading Book 1, but we are told so in Latin; the editor wants us to note that *The Imitation*

is a Latin book. But there is no other text at the top of the page, except pagination. While Rogers' edition truly looks like a manual with equipment to help us read *The Imitation,* the Rouen edition is more hands-off in its presentation. The text also contains specific Catholic terms, such as "community," "congregation," and "religious life." It is amazing though how similar, to the word, the Rogers and the Rouen can be. Rogers' edition says, "A hood or a shorne head maketh not a religious man; but an alteration from vice to virtue, and a mortification of the lusts." The Rouen says, "The wearing of a religious habit, & shauing of the Crowne doe little profit; but change of manners, and perfect moritifcation of passios make a true religious man." Rogers implies that a "hood" and a "shorne head," that is, a monk, do not make someone "religious," that is, someone in good-standing with God; someone truly religious will mortify themselves. The Rouen says essentially the same thing: a "habit" and a monk's "Crowne" do not necessarily make one religious; it is one's inward disposition which makes them a true "religious." The Rogers edition leaves out any reference to "community" and "congregation" as well as the Rouen's reference to "the schoole of Christ," which Creasy translates as "monastery."

The contents of the following chapter 1.18 are very similar in each edition, but the subtle differences between them are contained in terminology. In this chapter, we see another difference between the two editions. Rogers' is less emotional than the Rouen. While Rogers' is more instructive and pragmatic, the Rouen is apostrophic ("O How strait and poore a life led the holy Fathers in the wilderness!") and conversational. The differences between the two editions are encountered again in their titles. Rogers's title, "The virtuous life of the holie Fathers," and the Rouen title, "Of the examples of the holy

Fathers," differ. Rogers' is very much an English title and takes more interpretive liberty

than the Rouen's does. Creasy's title for this chapter is the same as the Rouen, "Of the

Examples of the Holy Fathers." The text of the Creasy and the Rouen are closer to

Thomas's own Latin language—the "Of" and the "examples" point to a translation of

word-for-word Latin, "De Exemplis Sanctorum Patrum."[160] Yet the spirit of the chapter

is the same in each edition, even though this chapter is one that focuses on a subject that

could be considered as exclusive and Catholic, suggesting that this may indeed well be

the case for both editions.

While a detailed, comparative analysis of Page's, Rogers's, and Hoskins's

editions' "theologies" in comparison to Thomas's has not been possible in the course of

this project due to time constraints, it is my hope that even a brief consideration of this

kind of work demonstrates how illuminating such study would be.

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[160] Becker, "De Imitatione Christi 1.18-1-3," 315.

Conclusion

*The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas a Kempis was popular in its earliest reception,

between the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century. While this has

been a disputed claim, the dispute has been refuted by a number of other scholars and this

thesis. "Popularity" is defined by piecemeal literacy and accessibility, of course, but we

know that the text was "in-demand," as proven by its rapid translation into various

languages from its original Dutch to Italian, French, and eventually English, as well as by

the circulation numbers we have which are offered in the first chapter. We can also infer

that *The Imitation* was popular because it was written in the midst and was a hallmark of

the Devotio Moderna, a movement which began in the Low Countries but then moved

across Western Europe, a movement which made contemplative life accessible to a

Christian laity and emphasized the importance of such a life to those already under

religious vows.

In addition to historical facts about the book itself, the book's ideological capital,

we know, was also in "high demand." The *Imitation* was a representative text for the

movement known as the Modern Devotion. One theme promoted by this movement was

the personal relationship with God over mindless, outward acts of devotion. In order to

emphasize the relationship and internal spirituality over outward, one's personal

interpretation of Scripture and God became significant. The spiritual reading practices

*lectio divina* and *lectio spiritualis* gain prominence, as they are the loosely formulaic

means through which one reads a spiritual text. The practitioner of such spiritual reading

has the freedom to interpret Scripture not for the sake of correctness primarily but as a

means to draw closer to God. These reading practices and the Modern Devotion, closely

aligned with Christian humanism, promote the idea that true piety comes from the inside out.[161] One *is* reading the Bible correctly if his/her reading is bringing him/her closer to God. And while I overstate the point, I think it is necessary: One *is* living a good Christian life if they act out of the Christian charity in their heart.

Thomas's mind was formed and his work clearly informed by the aforementioned ideological capital—the Modern Devotion, individualized interpretation of God in spiritual literature, and Christian humanism. *The Imitation* addresses a wide audience because it addresses foundational questions of humanity through the rhetoric of Christian piety. The portions of the book which explicitly discuss Catholic topics such as religious life, sacramental confession, and the Mass, are relatively few and subsidiary within a larger framework that exhorts the reader to primarily contemplate one's motives and Jesus Christ—and then everything else, such as the veneration of relics or religious life— in the context of this framework. The exception to the aforementioned argument is Book IV of *The Imitation,* whose subject matter is the Catholic Eucharist. As we have seen, this is not a part of *The Imitation* for Early Modern English Protestants, and so in our conceptualization of *The Imitation* from their perspective, we must leave out Book IV.

The core modes of thinking which Thomas's book offers—a skeptical attitude toward people and the material world, a more liberal attitude within Christianity than had been present in the Middle Ages, and contemplation of one's "interior self"—only increase in popularity across Western Europe over time and are preserved across editions which one might suspect as being quite different from one another in some thematic

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[161] Perry comes to precisely the same conclusion, even with the same words: "In other words, true Christian *imitation* is a miracle that happens from the inside out, an intangible 'union between him [Christ] and us [the elect]' (sig. B7)," 379.

elements. For example, in Early Modern England, one of the last places to translate the *Imitation* out of Latin in 1504, the *Imitation* is, following a trend, popular. The *Short Title Catalogue* lists forty-six different texts as Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* as having been printed from 1504-1700.[162] Editors rave about how the text is second in quality only to the Bible; how it is accessible and valuable to both laypersons lacking in education and well-educated individuals.[163] At least one editor, William Page, in 1639, uses the book as a platform to promote an ecumenical agenda on the eve of the English Civil War which took place from 1642-1651. Page engages in what I call "emotional editing," a response which I see as fitting to the *Imitation* text because the language of the *Imitation* is emotional and intimate. Page's editorial response is his response as a "Disciple," the counterpart to the "Jesus" who speaks gently throughout the *Imitation* text.

But the intimate dialogic tone and structure of the text is not the only reason why it is popular in Early Modern England. Editors are continually praising the book for its elucidation of Scripture. While this thesis has not expanded greatly upon the thought that the printing press and the Reformation's promotion of the widespread reading of Scriptures as a possible reason for the *Imitation*'s popularity, I think such a study would be rich indeed.[164]

In Early Modern England, the *Imitation,* then was valued not only for its own content, Thomas's actual words, but for what appendages could be added to it. These consisted in a wide range of materials; we have looked at some of them—a treatise on

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[164] For a detailed study of Scripture and *The Imitation,* Kenneth Becker's book is superb.

Christian unity, a reformulation of the Bible through rigorous Biblical citation, and a

bold, propagandistic promotion of Catholicism at a time when Catholicism is illegal.

Why this book, then? Why choose the *Imitation of Christ* for appendages such as these?

This question has been the invisible one, the invisible thread from which this entire thesis

hangs. It is an unanswerable question and the question one must ask, the question I have

attempted to make important, throughout the body of this work.

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