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**Tudor Catholics:
Catholic Reformation and Devotional Accountability in Henry
VIII's England**

Rebeca Mylena Gouveia de Lima Borges

Research Area: Ideas, Historiography
and Theory
Supervisor: Prof. Dr. André de Melo
Araújo

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Abstract

In this work, I argue that the most definitive and enduring feature of Henrician Catholicism was the printed advertisement of notions of devotional accountability. By examining Catholic devotional publications printed by Thomas Berthelet (d. 1555), who became King's Printer in 1530, I demonstrate how much Henrician Catholics were, even before the establishment of royal supremacy, already engaged in strategic and polemical uses of the printed word, as well as particularly attuned to the devotional implications of the Reformation. Among printed sermons, prayer treatises, and even farming manuals, Catholic writers in early sixteenth-century England were actively encouraging their readers to take responsibility for their own devotional lives. Between the 1510s and the 1520s, English Catholics experienced a particularly creative and transformative period in their history, which modern scholarship has yet to fully acknowledge.

Keywords: Devotion, English Catholics, Catholic Reformation, Henrician Catholicism

Resumo

Neste trabalho, defendo que a característica mais definitiva e duradoura do catolicismo Henriciano foi a propaganda impressa de noções de responsabilidade devocional. Ao examinar as publicações devocionais católicas impressas por Thomas Berthelet (falecido em 1555), que se tornou impressor do rei em 1530, demonstro o quanto os católicos henriquianos já estavam, mesmo antes do estabelecimento da supremacia real, engajados em usos estratégicos e polêmicos da palavra impressa, bem como particularmente sintonizados com as implicações devocionais da Reforma. Entre sermões impressos, tratados de oração e até mesmo manuais agrícolas, os escritores católicos da Inglaterra do início do século XVI encorajavam ativamente seus leitores a assumirem a responsabilidade pelas suas próprias vidas devocionais. Entre as décadas de 1510 e 1520, os católicos ingleses viveram um período particularmente criativo e transformador na sua história, a que os historiadores ainda devem prestar a devida atenção.

Palavras-chave: Devoção, Católicos Ingleses, Reforma Católica, Catolicismo Henriciano

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Resumo expandido

Título: Católicos Tudor: Reforma Católica e Responsabilidade Devocional na Inglaterra de Henrique VIII

Neste trabalho, defendo que a característica mais definitiva e duradoura do catolicismo henriquiano foi a propaganda impressa de noções de responsabilidade devocional. Ao examinar as publicações devocionais católicas impressas por Thomas Berthelet (falecido em 1555), que se tornou impressor do rei em 1530, demonstro o quanto os católicos henriquianos já estavam, mesmo antes do estabelecimento da supremacia real, engajados em usos estratégicos e polêmicos da palavra impressa, bem como particularmente sintonizados com as implicações devocionais da Reforma. Entre sermões impressos, tratados de oração e até mesmo manuais agrícolas, os escritores católicos da Inglaterra do início do século XVI encorajavam ativamente seus leitores a assumirem a responsabilidade pelas suas próprias vidas devocionais. Entre as décadas de 1510 e 1520, os católicos ingleses viveram um período particularmente criativo e transformador na sua história, a que os historiadores ainda devem prestar a devida atenção.

No início do século XVI, o clima era de expectativa e de renovação. Quando John Colet pregou na Convocação de Canterbury de 1512, a Inglaterra parecia desfrutar de estabilidade sob o jovem Henrique VIII (r. 1509-1537). Inspirado por correntes humanistas e por modelos patrísticos, Colet defendia uma reforma eclesiástica baseada na renovação moral e espiritual da Igreja. Ao contrário de interpretações que veem em sua eclesiologia um distanciamento das preocupações leigas, argumento que sua concepção da Igreja como Corpo Místico de Cristo implicava necessariamente uma responsabilidade pastoral ampla. Em uma sociedade corporativa, reformar a Igreja significava transformar também a vida devocional dos leigos.

O final da Idade Média já testemunhara a expansão de uma literatura devocional voltada ao público leigo. Livros de horas, confrarias paroquiais e as determinações pastorais do IV Concílio de Latrão estimularam aquilo que denominei “responsabilidade devocional:” a expectativa de que os fiéis cultivassem ativamente sua vida espiritual. No início do século XVI, essa exigência se intensificou consideravelmente, sobretudo diante das críticas luteranas à primazia papal e ao valor salvífico das boas obras, que transformaram a devoção em questão diretamente ligada à salvação.

Essa responsabilidade devocional não se restringiu aos círculos clericais ou eruditos. O *Book of Husbandry* (1523), embora apresentado como manual agrícola, encerrava-se com uma exposição prática da piedade doméstica católica. Dirigido aos husbandmen (fazendeiros, agricultores ou senhores interessados em agricultura), defendia as práticas da penitência, da esmola, da confissão e da disciplina na oração como elementos essenciais tanto para a prosperidade terrena quanto para a salvação eterna. Em meio às crescentes tensões confessionais do período, oferecia uma defesa vernacular e humanista de práticas devocionais tradicionais.

No plano erudito, apologistas como John Fisher e Thomas More elaboraram respostas sistemáticas ao luteranismo. Os tratados latinos de Fisher e seu sermão de 1526 em St Paul's Churchyard revelam uma estratégia voltada mais à persuasão do que à punição: hereges deveriam ser estrategicamente reconduzidos à verdadeira fé. Já o *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* (1529), de More, orientava leitores ingleses sobre como enfrentar a heterodoxia por meio da conversação informada e persuasiva com hereges, reforçando a centralidade da devoção popular. Ambos mobilizaram expressamente os leigos, lembrando-lhes de seus deveres devocionais em um contexto religioso cada vez mais disputado.

O humanismo católico também desempenhou papel relevante nesse processo. A tradução, por Margaret Roper, do tratado de Erasmo sobre o Pai-Nosso, *Precatio dominica* (1523), materializava uma agenda humanista católica que combinava refinamento linguístico e clareza doutrinal. Ao tornar acessível em inglês um comentário teológico sobre a oração fundamental do cristianismo, Roper contribuiu para consolidar a identidade confessional católica e reforçar a ortodoxia eucarística em língua inglesa.

Este trabalho buscou oferecer uma interpretação mais nuançada do catolicismo inglês nas décadas de 1510 e 1520, entendendo-o como uma religião vibrante e diversificada. Antes que a supremacia real restringisse as possibilidades de pluralidade religiosa, os católicos ingleses viveram um período criativo e decisivo na formação de uma identidade confessional própria. Ao destacar a noção de responsabilidade devocional — presente em sermões, manuais vernaculares, traduções humanistas e tratados apologeticos —, argumentei que o catolicismo inglês do início do século XVI não foi meramente reativo ou destinado ao fracasso, mas sim protagonista na construção de uma identidade religiosa cuja riqueza ainda demanda maior reconhecimento historiográfico.

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Introduction.

English Reformation, Henrician Reformation

On 29 June 1613, a performance at the Globe was drastically interrupted by absolute chaos. Flames ignited by a cannon used in the play struck the theatre's roof. By the time people took notice of what had ensued, smoke and flames were everywhere. The cannons were part of the scenario. During the scene, they were fired to announce a king arriving at a masque at a cardinal's residence. The king was Henry VIII (r. 1509-1547), and the cardinal was Thomas Wolsey (1473-1530), Archbishop of York. The play performed on that day was William Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, but its contemporary attendants would have known it by a different title: *All is True*. The prologue invited hearers to picture the play's characters:

“Therefore, for goodness’ sake, and as you are known
The first and happiest hearers of the town,
Be sad, as we would make you. Think you see
The very persons of our noble story
As they were living. Think you see them great,
And followed with the general throng and sweat
Of a thousand friends. Then, in a moment, see
How soon this mightiness meets misery.
And if you can be merry then, I’ll say
A man may weep upon his wedding day...”¹

Much like Shakespeare's hearers were encouraged to do, historians had endeavoured to bring these “very persons of our noble story as they were living”. Thanks in part to Shakespeare's plays, Henrician England has since captured the popular imagination, turning its protagonists into familiar household names across both academic scholarship and show business. From the passionate and self-aggrandising English monarch Henry VIII to each and every one of his six wives (popularly known by their proportionately tragic ends: divorced,

¹ SHAKESPEARE, William. *Mr. William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*. London: Isaac Iaggard and Edward Blount, 1623. p. 205.

beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived); from the Machiavellian figure of the King's right-hand man, Thomas Cromwell, and his orchestration of the dissolution of the monasteries; from the martyr-like steadfastness of Sir Thomas More, who preferred death instead of defying his conscience — Henrician England has an appealing plethora of protagonists and theatre-worthy drama.

The degree to which popular culture has embedded Henrician England presents a formidable scholarly challenge. Contemporary professional historians focused on this period, particularly in the United Kingdom, have grown accustomed to a myriad of historical novels, TV shows and series, cable documentaries, and, more recently, podcasts and musicals, which bring Henry VIII's England to life much as a Shakespeare play would claim to do in Elizabethan times. Just like the Globe had to be rebuilt after the 1613 fire, contemporary historical research on Henrician England often resembles excavatory work on a burnt-down theatre. And no field seems more convoluted than the Henrician Reformation.

This work focuses on the intricacies of devotional life in Henrician England, particularly in its early years. After examining Catholic printed publications issued in 1520s England, here I argue that, when it comes to religious practice, the greatest development of the Henrician period was the advertisement of Catholic devotional accountability. My argument comes from the acknowledgement that something new was taking place in 1520s England, a novel experience of religious unease concerning key aspects of theology and devotion. As Peter Marshall described it, the English Reformation was marked by “a widespread and novel experience of disconnect, of uncomfortable consciousness that the version of Christian truth approved and promoted by the highest authorities in the land was not one the individual could necessarily recognise or share.”² Notions of devotional accountability were neither new nor exclusive to England, though. The idea that each individual Christian was to be responsible for their own spiritual growth was already influential in fifteenth-century religious literature, to which the increasing number of catechetical and devotional materials is testimony. However, it was not until the early decades of the sixteenth century that such ideas reached their ultimate consequences. The situation was particularly true for English Catholics, who had to reconcile key elements of their theological fabric with the ups and downs of Henrician religious policy, from justifying the annulment of Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon to upholding a peculiar form of religious establishment with the King as supreme head. This particular unfolding of events

² MARSHALL, Peter. *Heretics and Believers: A History of the English Reformation*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017, p. 15.

marked the history of Catholicism in England in more ways than historians have acknowledged.

Henrician Catholics have had their story told by victorious Protestants since, curiously, Shakespeare's time. A year before the Bard was born, a massive book was published "at the sign of the Sun", in Fleet Street. Not only did the size of the book stand out, but also its title page. It depicted the respective origins and destinies of a Catholic and a Protestant church. On the right, a Catholic procession is followed by the moment of the elevation of the Host at Mass, to which is added the unavoidable destiny of all who partake in such an idolatrous and sinful path: eternal damnation. On the right, however, stands what is portrayed as the true and better way of Protestant worship: a Bible-reading meeting guided by a Reformed minister, followed by the bittersweet fate of martyrdom, then followed by Heaven itself. This was John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, which soon became popularly known as *The Book of Martyrs*.³ It saw several reprints and editions until the end of the seventeenth century, becoming a multi-generational English classic. Throughout the early modern period, many parishes in England would have a copy of the *Book of Martyrs* set together with the Bible, in a clear hint of the majestic and sacramental importance of the book.⁴

Foxe's view of a victorious Protestantism triumphing over a moribund and perishing Catholic faith had served as a dominant narrative of the history of the English Reformation for centuries. In energetic and profound ways, the emblematic nature of the 1563 title page and its portrait of the juxtaposition of two rival Churches had moved scholars more than any other sixteenth-century source. The visual appeal of Foxe's woodcuts depicting the Protestant martyrs served as a backdrop to Protestantism's history of victory in England, which seemed undeniable to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers. Foxe's narrative lasted because it worked; it provided the Whig tradition with a visual and rhetorical testimony of Protestantism's steadfastness while also portraying its opponents, the English Catholics, as long-standing enemies of truth and Scripture.⁵

³ FOXE, John. *The Acts and Monuments*. London: John Day, 1563.

⁴ EVENDEN, Elizabeth; FREEMAN, Thomas. Print, Profit and Propaganda: The Elizabethan Privy Council and the 1570 Edition of John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'. *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 119, No. 484, 2004; EVENDEN, Elizabeth. *Patents, Pictures and Patronage. John Day and the Tudor Book Trade*. New York: Routledge, 2008; KING, John N. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and Early Modern Print Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; RUST, Jennifer. Reforming the Mystical Body: From Mass to Martyr in John Foxe's 'Acts and Monuments'. *ELH*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2013.

⁵ BUTTERFIELD, Herbert. *The Whig Interpretation of History*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1965; EVENDEN, Elizabeth; FREEMAN, Thomas. *Religion and the Book in Early Modern England: The Making of John Foxe's 'Book of Martyrs'*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. GREEN, Ian. *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000; GUNTHER, Karl. *Reformation Unbound: Protestant Visions of Reform, 1525-1590*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

The English Reformation, especially its early years, had been defined by later Protestant triumphalism.⁶ Those who inherited Henrician England's complexities long portrayed it as a preamble to a larger narrative of Protestant history. Much like in Shakespeare's play, the characters of this story had been conceived as passionate partisans of a confessional battleground. As Alec Ryrie wisely said, "historians aspire to follow our evidence impartially and fearlessly, over whatever terrain it may lead us; but in practice we often find ourselves being drawn along by our predecessors."⁷ It can be said that, up until the twentieth century, historians had learnt to see Henrician England through Elizabethan eyes.

Royal supremacy was, at the same time, the most controversial and foundational concept of Henrician Catholicism.⁸ The doctrinal challenge of recognising the English King as the supreme head of the church forced English Catholics to decisively redefine their priorities and allegiances. By standing up for royal supremacy, they would no longer be devout members of the Church *in* England but loyal subjects of the Church *of* England. Comprehending what such realignment meant for them is crucial for the study of the English Reformation.

While royal supremacy played a crucial role, it did not define English Catholicism exclusively. In fact, before Henry VIII started his Great Matter in 1527, Catholicism in England was already undergoing its own processes of reform. As church headship emerged as the central theme of 1530s English religious discourse, it was met by pre-existing reforming currents particularly concerned with devotional practice. That is the reason why my focus relies on the years before the establishment of royal supremacy - as signified by the issue of the 1534 Act of Supremacy - in an effort to comprehend how English Catholicism was deeply but not exclusively defined by the ecclesiological debates of the 1530s.

Moreover, my interest in the early years of the English Reformation resonates with the career of a significant name in the English book trade. Thomas Berthelet (d. 1555) became

2014. O'DAY, Rosemary. *op. cit.*, 2014; RIORDAN, Michael; RYRIE, Alec. Stephen Gardiner and the Making of a Protestant Villain. *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2003. ROBINSON, B.S.; 'Darke Speech': Matthew Parker and the Reforming of History. *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, Vol. 29, No. 4, 1998.

⁶ ELTON, G. R.; *Reform and Reformation, 1509-1558*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977; DICKENS, A. G. *The English Reformation*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964. _____. *Thomas Cromwell and the English Reformation*. London: The English Universities press, 1959.

⁷ RYRIE, A. *The Gospel and Henry VIII. Evangelicals in the Early English Reformation*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 13.

⁸ ELTON, Geoffrey R. (ed.); *The New Cambridge Modern History: The Reformation, 1520-1559*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990; POLLARD, Albert Frederick. *The History of England: A Study in Political Evolution*. London: Williams and Norgate, 1914; _____ *Thomas Cranmer and the English Reformation, 1489-1556*. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1906; SCARISBRICK, John J. *The Reformation and the English People*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984.

King's Printer in 1530, and the time span of his professional life coincides with the most important events of Henrician England. Despite his historical relevance, scholars have failed to give him credit.⁹ Although his activities as King's Printer provide an illuminating and rich understanding of Henrician religious policies, I am most concerned with his previous publications from the 1520s. From his apprenticeship years under Richard Pynson until his nomination as royal printer in 1530, Thomas Berthelet was an instrumental figure in the English Catholic printing industry, and this particular aspect of his life has been completely ignored. Although recent studies have been signalling Berthelet's role in the distribution of Greek-written works in England,¹⁰ and the paratextual inventiveness of his printing output,¹¹ this work examines the importance of his devotional and instructional publications to the strengthening of Catholic literature in 1520s England. These works enlighten us about his deep connections with a Catholic humanist network of authors and translators who were fundamental in redefining English Catholicism at the time. Such publications, as well as their printer, also ask for improved scholarly assessment.

That there was an English Catholic printing industry in the 1520s is by itself noteworthy.¹² Throughout the sixteenth century, both Catholics and Protestants acknowledged the power of the printed word and made creative and intensive use of it. Despite that, the understanding and research on early modern Catholics' use of the printing press remain sparse compared to that of Protestants.¹³ Such academic discrepancy is a direct result of the long-lived assumption that sixteenth-century Catholics resisted Protestantism as well as print

⁹ The most recent publication focused on Thomas Berthelet is a chapter by John Colley in his 2025 book *Humanism, English Literature, and the Translation of Greek, 1430–1560*, in which he examines the marketing and advertisement of the Greek works published under Berthelet's imprint. The other few works regarding the printer concern detailed bibliographical examinations of his printing output, such as Cyril Davenport's 1901 book *Thomas Berthelet, Royal Printer and Bookbinder to Henry VIII* and W. W. Gregg's article on the Notes and Types, Borders, Etc, Used by Thomas Berthelet.

¹⁰ COLLEY, John. Marketing Greek at Thomas Berthelet's Press. In: _____. *Humanism, English Literature, and the Translation of Greek, 1430–1560*. Oxford: Oxford English Monographs, 2025.

¹¹ LOWE, Katherine A.. *Problematizing the Preface: Empowering the Reader in Thomas Berthelet's Print Output*. Thesis submitted to The University of Manchester for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Humanities, 2019.

¹² OLIN, Jonathan C. *The Catholic Reformation, op. cit.; Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1987; TRAPP, J. B. *Erasmus, Colet and More: The early Tudor Humanists and their Books*. London: The British Library, 1991; WHITE, Helen Constance. *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1950; WHITING, Robert. *The Blind Devotion of the People: Popular Religion and the English Reformation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991; WOODING, Lucy. *Rethinking Catholicism, op. cit.; _____*. Encountering the Word of God in Early Tudor England. *English Historical Review*. Vol. 136, No. 581, pp. 836-866, 2021.

¹³ The study of Catholic printing in early sixteenth-century England is a relatively recent scholarly phenomenon, since most works aimed at Catholic print culture focus on the late sixteenth and seventeenth century, a period some historians are used to name as post-Reformation.

culture. Fortunately, we live in a time and age when scholars are more attentive to the ways in which Catholics made use of the printing press for both catechetical and polemical ends.¹⁴ As Alexandra Walsham reminds us, “it is increasingly clear that older characterisations of Roman Catholicism as intrinsically hostile to print are themselves untenable.”¹⁵

Walsham is herself an important contributor to contemporary scholarship on English Catholicism. Her 2014 book, *Catholicism and Reformation in Protestant Britain*, provides a detailed and comprehensive account of early modern British Catholicism and how “the Catholics of England, Wales, and, to a lesser extent, Scotland, responded to the Reformation and adapted to the proscription and persecution of their religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.”¹⁶ She is primarily interested in the reactive and responsive movements of post-Reformation Catholicism as both a wider, international movement and a newly proscribed and persecuted religion. The paramount effect of the early modern banishment and restriction of the Catholic religion in England was the emergence of a dissident, oppositional Roman Catholicism. However, it would be wrong to assign this development solely to persecution. By studying Henrician England, a time when Catholicism was far from proscribed, the picture we are given is of a flourishing and creative religion whose practitioners were already beginning to understand themselves as part of a distinctive religious identity.

While we cannot ascribe the same post-Reformation level of confessional distinctiveness to early sixteenth-century Catholicism, we need also to be mindful that such history is particularly vulnerable to later prejudices. According to Lucy Wooding, “England’s post-Reformation experience of variegated Protestantism left historians more closely attuned to the nuances within Protestant opinion, and less likely to appreciate the true nature of Catholicism amidst the snares and delusions of historical parody.”¹⁷ That studies on early sixteenth-century English Catholicism remain a minority is only one hint that Wooding is

¹⁴ Among contemporary scholarship on Catholic printing, the most recent and comprehensive study is KILIANCZYK-ZIEBA, Justyna; KOMOROWSKA, Magdalena. *Early Modern Catholicism and the Printed Book: Agents, Networks, Responses*. Leiden: Brill, 2024. See also DA COSTA, Alexandra. *‘Ryght Profytable Men’: The Literary Community of Syon Abbey Brethren, 1500-1539*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; WOODING, Lucy. Encountering the Word of God in Early Tudor England, op. cit.; _____ Richard Whitford’s Werke for Householdors: Humanism, Monasticism and Tudor Household Piety. *Studies in Church History*, Vol. 50, pp. 161-173, 2014; WIZEMAN, William. *The Theology and Spirituality of Mary Tudor’s Church*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

¹⁵ WALSHAM, A. *Catholic Reformation in Protestant Britain*. New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 240.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁷ WOODING, Lucy. *Rethinking Catholicism in Reformation England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 4.

right. Even among contemporary authors concerned with early modern Catholicism, research interests seem to lie in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The same applies to Protestantism. When discussing Protestant devotional practices, particularly Bible reading, in early modern England, most historians primarily focus on the seventeenth century, but few take the time to explain why.¹⁸ Unlike most, Kate Narveson directly justifies her choice: “By the early seventeenth century, however, we have fuller evidence both in manuscript and print of how layfolk used Scripture.”¹⁹ Her 2012 book, *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England*, provides a valuable examination of what she qualifies as an unintended consequence of the Reformation: the emergence of a scriptural lay writing culture. According to her, most scholarly oversight on the study of early modern Bible reading “is a matter of scarce sources for sixteenth-century practice. The same few anecdotes are repeated – Anne Askew reading in the church, an imprisoned priest witnessing layfolk gathered to read and debate Scripture.”²⁰ Although Narveson correctly acknowledges the greater extent of seventeenth-century sources when compared with the previous century, it is also true that sources are what historians make of them. And when it comes to early sixteenth-century England, I believe there are enough sources and characters from which we can reconstruct a lay-focused religious culture. As Wooding put it, “the start of the sixteenth century was a time of unprecedented possibilities, when the boundaries of human knowledge and experience were opening up in both material and conceptual terms. As the voyages of discovery uncovered uncharted regions of the earth, so the intellectual journey of Renaissance scholars and artists revealed new pathways of knowledge, channels of understanding to both the classical past and the exciting future that was believed to lie ahead.”²¹

Overall, I believe this is also a problem of terminology. The early sixteenth century occupies an ambiguous place in the English-speaking scholarship, being irresolutely termed as either *late medieval* or *early modern*. As pointed out by Araújo *et al*,

“While neo-Latin languages use *Época Moderna*, *Époque Moderne*, *Età Moderna* and *Edad Moderna* to refer to those centuries [fifteenth to eighteenth], in English and

¹⁸ A good example of such methodological omission of the early sixteenth century can be found in RYRIE, Alec. *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹⁹ NARVESON, Kate. *Bible Readers and Lay Writers in Early Modern England: Gender and Self-Definition in an Emergent Writing Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2012. p. 2.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ WOODING, Lucy. *Henry VIII*. New York: Routledge, 2009, p. 2.

German-speaking countries, the term used to designate the period points to the first part of a larger whole. The expressions *Frühe Neuzeit* and *Early Modern* are composed in such a way that the first words in the expressions in German and English qualify as early, initial or first (possible translations of *Frühe* and *Early*), the respective *Neuzeit* (literally, "new time") and *Modern* (literally, "modern"). *Frühe Neuzeit* and *Early Modern* therefore designate the first stage of a broader period. And, as is the case with every proposal for the periodisation of history, these two concepts also respond to a historical problem."²²

It was from the 1970s onwards that English-speaking historians started using the term "early modern" to refer to the time period between the mid-fifteenth and late-eighteenth centuries. Works like Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic*,²³ Natalie Zemon-Davis's *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*,²⁴ and Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*²⁵ inaugurated the academic usage of *early modern* as a "watchword for approaches to the past which emphasise cultural alterity and particularity in the face of implacable social and economic change."²⁶ When commenting on the usefulness of *early modern* as a theoretical tool, Phil Withington affirms that "at best it makes for a weak, incongruous, and confusing label of periodization [...]. At worst, it suggests that modernists are right - early modernists have been pre-modernists all along."²⁷

Does "*early modern*" fit the complexities of the early sixteenth century? What about "*late medieval*"? How to call this peculiarly intense four-decade period in which Western Christianity turned upside down? Was this period the starting point of the whole epoch we call *modern*, or was it, to use Johan Huizinga's poetic concept, the *autumn* of the Middle Ages? Could it have been both? In my opinion, the answer to such questions begins by acknowledging the historical specificity of the early sixteenth century. Narrowing the scope of

²² ARAÚJO, et al. A Época Moderna: Uma introdução. In: _____. *A Época Moderna*. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2024, p. 12.

²³ THOMAS, Keith. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971.

²⁴ DAVIS, Natalie Zemon. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987.

²⁵ BURKE, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1978.

²⁶ WITHINGTON, Phil. *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010, p. 4.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

analysis can allow historians to see the early decades of such a fundamental epoch as the sixteenth century in a clearer, sober light. For the sake of clarity, whenever possible, I make use of *early sixteenth* instead of *early modern* when referring to the time period of my work, not because I entirely reject the term, but because I believe it to be unsettlingly imprecise to characterise the period between the 1510s and 1530s.

My subject is the rise of Catholic concepts of devotional responsibility in early Tudor England, and each part of that phrase demands its own deal of clarification. By devotional accountability, I mean the notion of individual responsibility for one's religious life, spiritual health, and moral behaviour. The Late Middle Ages saw the flourishing of diverse genres of lay-focused literature on spiritual growth, which was matched by a growing number of lay guilds and associations. The idea that each and every Christian, not only the members of religious houses, was obliged to live an unblemished moral life had deep ecclesiological and social implications and was profoundly fostered by the intellectual developments of devotional humanism.²⁸

In the early decades of the sixteenth century, late medieval devotional humanism could be found in many forms. The two greatest proponents of this approach to Christian piety in Northern Europe came from the Low Countries. The *Devotio Moderna* was the name by which contemporaries knew the “groups of women and men who formed households organised as communes and a lifestyle centred on devotion.”²⁹ Since the 1380s, market towns alongside the IJssel River (east-central Netherlands) and in the country of Holland had seen a growing number of self-acclaimed devout communities. They were laymen and women who deliberately opted to have the best of both worlds: a religious life in a secular world. In their communal households, commonly situated in the middle of urban centres, they lived a religiously strict and pious life that was perceived to be the fruit of true conversion. As John Van Engen explains, “the experience of turning inward (*innigheid*, in their tongue) defined for them a social and religious position awkwardly poised between church and society, religious

²⁸ BRANTLEY, Jessica. *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007; CRATTY, Flynn Jamison. *The Soul in Paraphrase. Prayer and the Changing Mental Words of Early Modern France and England*. Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, ProQuest Number: 13809400. 2019; DUFFY, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400-1580*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992; _____. *The Voices of Morebath: Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001; MARSH, Christopher. *Popular Religion in Sixteenth-Century England: Holding their Peace*. Hampshire and London: Macmillan Press, 1998; WHITE, Helen Constance. *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion*. *op. cit.*

²⁹ VAN ENGEN, John. *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008, p. 1.

community and social kin. This awkwardness provoked self-awareness, and that self-awareness expressed itself in writing - a boon to historians, if not always easy for them.”³⁰

The second and most influential branch of Northern devotional humanism can be found in Erasmus (d. 1536). Erasmian spirituality had a definite and enduring impact on English devotional thought. The personal ties between the Dutch scholar and his English friends, especially Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), helped cement English Catholic thought in more ways than expected.³¹ E. J. Devereux profitably summarises the devotional and literary importance of Erasmus when he examines the role of Erasmian translations in the growth of “specifically English forms of Renaissance and Reformation.”³² According to him,

“The clarity of his thought and expression, his devotion to good literature, the sheer reasonableness of his *philosophia Christi*, his bemused derision of superstition and intolerance, his reputation as editor and commentator upon the New Testament, and his immense knowledge of classical and patristic authors all recommended him to humanists, reformers, and lovers of peace and culture, many of whom felt that translated texts for the common reader would do much good.”³³

The importance of Erasmus in the religious history of the sixteenth century cannot be overstated. James McConica, a contemporary specialist on Erasmus’s legacy, is hardly alone in his assessment that “no one, however, could approach the scale of Erasmus’s personal contribution to the restoration of the sources of European learning and religion.”³⁴ Studies over what historians have agreed to call Erasmian humanism or Erasmianism have been

³⁰ VAN ENGEN, John. *op. cit.*, p. 2.

³¹ TRAPP, J. B. *Erasmus, Colet and More: The early Tudor Humanists and their Books*. London: The British Library, 1991; WAKELIN, Daniel. *Humanism, Reading, and English Literature 1430-1530*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

³² DEVEREUX, E.J. *Renaissance English Translations of Erasmus: A Bibliography to 1700*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983, p. 3.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ McCONICA, J. Erasmus. In: THOMAS, K. (ed.). *Renaissance Thinkers*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 108.

among the most common subjects of twentieth-century scholarship.³⁵ As demonstrated by Rui Rodrigues, Erasmus's humanism had deep social ramifications that helped establish it as both philosophically appealing and doctrinally divisive in a context of growing confessional tensions. By maintaining a forceful and wide-reaching network of friends and patrons, "Erasmus elaborated a synthesis between the sociopolitical categories he inherited from his originary context and the elements offered by the Empire's symbolism as a path to preserve the structures of his social and affective universe, the world in which he was born and which he fought to maintain."³⁶ Favourably situated in the structures of the Habsburg Empire and wisely profiting from his Netherlandish associative social life,³⁷ Erasmus also benefited from the commercial acumen of Johann Froben (c. 1460-1527), his personal friend and printer of the majority of his writings. Erika Rummel has successfully demonstrated how Froben's commercial expertise and professional input was crucial to the enduring success of Erasmus's published writings.³⁸

If Erasmus is a cornerstone figure of sixteenth-century religion, English religious history is a formidable example of it. Not only was Erasmus a well-known scholar in early sixteenth-century England, but he nurtured important friendships across the channel, such as Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) and John Colet (1467-1519). Even though Erasmus's reception in England was extremely dependent upon such relationships, I would also like to bring attention to the ways in which the printed translations of his works played a decisive role. Yet again, the figure of the printer Thomas Berthelet comes into the scene, for the vast majority of Erasmian works printed in England at the time came from his press.

Overall, Northern devotional humanism played a decisive role in the history of English religion in the sixteenth century. However, there is still room for debate about how late medieval concepts of devotional responsibility were also creatively employed and circulated in early sixteenth-century English Catholicism, in the sense that Catholic piety was undergoing its own processes of reform and religious renewal before Martin Luther came onto the scene.

³⁵ RODRIGUES, R. Retratos de Erasmo: sobre os enraizamentos sociais do humanismo erasmiano. *Cad.Pesq. Cdhis, Uberlândia*, v.27, n.2, jul./dez. 2014 e v. 28, n.1, jan./jun. 2015.

³⁶ "Todavia, Erasmo elaborou uma síntese entre as categorias sócio-políticas herdadas de seu contexto originário e os elementos oferecidos pela simbólica do Império como caminho para a preservação das estruturas que compunham seu universo social e afetivo, o mundo no qual nasceu e que lutou por conservar." *Idem*, p. 52.

³⁷ "Fica fora de dúvida o quanto significou para a preservação do humanismo erasmiano, em contexto tão delicado, tanto a rede de relações cultivada por Erasmo quanto o fato de que essa rede não permanecia no nível de uma fraternidade letrada, mas introduzia-se nos círculos do poder imperial." *Idem*, p. 56.

³⁸ RUMMEL, E. *Erasmus' Annotations on the New Testament: from Philologist to Theologian*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986.

Considering the emergence of reform movements in the early sixteenth century, Chapter 1 focuses on the available avenues for Catholic reform in England through the career and writings of John Colet, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral from 1505 to 1518. His efforts at institutional reform paint a fruitful picture of the debate over ecclesiastical reform in the early sixteenth-century English Church. Colet's 1512 Convocation Sermon enfolds key points of late medieval ecclesiology and their impact on liturgical and devotional practices. The sermon is also significant as evidence of the intertwining and corporate relationship between clergy and laity, conceived to be parts of the Body of Christ with distinct attributions. Contrary to Jonathan Arnold's view that Colet's sermon confirms his elevated view of the English clergy and proportionate lack of concern for the laity, I argue that both priorities were far from mutually exclusive, and that both the Convocation sermon and the dean's lifelong commitment to the reformation of St Paul's Cathedral highlight his pastoral preoccupations as well as his exalted ecclesiology. Moreover, I argue that the 1530 printing of Colet's sermon by Thomas Berthelet illustrates the extent to which the dean's thought on church reform still had currency among Henrician Catholics almost fifteen years afterwards.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed account of 1520s English Catholic reformist thought and the extent to which devotional accountability could be taken. *The Book of Husbandry*, first published by Thomas Berthelet in 1523,³⁹ was a popular farming manual that underwent several reprints throughout the sixteenth century. Despite its husbandry-related content, the book contains a considerably lengthy section dedicated to devotional teachings, by which I argue that the book can also be read as a testament to household Catholic devotion. Instructions on private prayer, church attendance, penance, and giving of almsdeeds are described and explained as tokens of late medieval religion that should be thoroughly and passionately kept by English laypeople. The *Book of Husbandry* is also distinctive for its explicit claims in favour of lay Bible reading at a time when vernacular Scripture was still a contentious topic in England. Also, the book's targeting of both landed gentry and husbandmen points to the wide social dissemination of religious literature in early sixteenth-century England, and its emphasis on making theology accessible even to the ploughman aligns it with earlier reform currents, such as the printing and catechetical enterprise of Syon Abbey, as well as contemporary evangelical claims for vernacular Bible translation, such as William Tyndale's, whose English New Testament would be published only three years afterwards. Therefore, Chapter 2 demonstrates that the concept of devotional

³⁹ FITZHERBERT, John. *The Book of Husbandry*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1523.

responsibility was, rather than a Protestant invention, an emerging development of late medieval devotion that was particularly enhanced by English Catholics in the 1520s.

In Chapter 3, we are led to the inner circle of English Catholic humanism as headed by two of its greatest representatives. John Fisher (1469-1535), Bishop of Rochester, and Sir Thomas More (1478-1535) were the leading men of English Catholicism during the turbulent and swirling times of Henry VIII's divorce. Both faced the scaffold in 1535, and were canonised by Pope Pius XII exactly 400 years later as a consequence of their martyrdom. Despite their hagiographic status, my aim is to revisit the contributions of both men regarding the Catholic fight against Lutheranism in England, inaugurated with Fisher's sermons at St Paul's 1521 and 1526 book-burning ceremonies. As Lutheran books were caught in flames at Paul's Churchyard, the bishop inflamed his hearers, clergy and laity alike, to "resist these heretics, the which cease not to subvert the church of Christ."⁴⁰ These were his words in 1526, and they indicate a significant, albeit discreet, shift in English anti-heresy policy in the mid-1520s. Even though heretic books were ceremonially and publicly burnt, heretics themselves were to be privately reformed. The mid-1520s were the start of a secret reformation on the part of English church authorities, through which a new kind of heretic, personified by university-trained Lutheran sympathisers, would be counterattacked by the power of scholarly persuasion and homely conversation. Fisher's sermon was an example of how successful such attempts could be.

Sir Thomas More was the most prolific enforcer of this secret reformation. His *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, first published in 1529, provided a guide on how to convince heretics to follow the correct path of Catholic obedience. By inviting the Messenger to "his study at Chelsea", More was teaching his lay learned readers the steps to a true reformation of the English Church. If heresy were a disease in the body of Christendom, dialogue could purge it, and More was glad to deliver the medicine. He was widely regarded as a model of lay piety, and his Chelsea household was known as the More School. The female members of the More household were particularly acknowledged as examples of pious and learned gentlewomen, among whom the protagonist was More's eldest daughter, Margaret Roper. Leading humanists of the time, Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives, praised her linguistic and intellectual achievements. At the age of nineteen, Margaret provided English readers with a treatise on the most fundamental prayer of Christianity. In *A Devout treatise upon the Pater noster*, first published in 1524, Margaret Roper brings a blooming combination of humanistic

⁴⁰ FISHER, John. *A sermon had at Paulis*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1526, p. A2r.

translation procedures and traditional Catholic piety. Translating from Erasmus's *Precatio dominica*, published a year before, Margaret becomes an important character in the history of English Catholicism. Her translation was also a powerful move in defence of Erasmus's orthodoxy in England, as well as a valuable example of reformist tendencies with regards to the practice of prayer.

Overall, considering notions of devotional responsibility in Henrician Catholicism, especially in the years before royal supremacy, provides us with a fruitful opportunity to rethink the English Reformation and the early sixteenth century in general. It demonstrates how much historiography can miss important matters of the past for the sake of privileging the scandalous and obviously disruptive events. It also challenges the usage of traditional theoretical categories, inviting us to look at the early sixteenth century, if not in its own terms, at least with a more attentive eye.

Chapter 1.

***“We desire to read as in lively books”*:⁴¹ John Colet and the Catholic Reformation**

Old St. Paul’s was the beating heart of Tudor London. Merchants, craftsmen, and artisans would daily gather around its churchyard, making it one of the noisiest and busiest sites in the city. A walk around its contemporary version helps to reminisce about its medieval splendour. Souvenir stores and tube stations notwithstanding, the English Baroque building remodelled by Sir Christopher Wren in the late 1600s did not completely erase the sparkle of a medieval city centre. The army of tourists daily marching in and around the cathedral might even work as an involuntary reenactment of the early modern cacophony that once filled the place. But only so far. Unlike what bypassers listen to now when walking around Paul’s Churchyard, medieval and early modern Londoners would hear, most of all, sermons. Among the aural tapestry filling London life, the preaching of holy sermons would be pervasive, turning St Paul’s into what can be considered “the pre-eminent pulpit in early modern England”.⁴²

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, Paul’s Churchyard was also the centre of the English printing trade, the place where sermon hearers could become book buyers.⁴³ Everything started around the year 1500, when Wynkyn de Worde transferred his printing business from Westminster to Fleet Street, “from the shadow of the Abbey to that of the Cathedral.”⁴⁴ De Worde was the successor to William Caxton and expanded his business

⁴¹ COLET, John. *The Sermon of Doctor Colete*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1531, p. B5v.

⁴² WILLIS, Jonathan. Sermons at Paul’s Cross, 1521–1642. *The Journal of Theological Studies*. Vol. 72, No. 2. 2020.

⁴³ BLAYNEY, Peter. The Bookshops in Paul’s Cross Churchyard, *Occasional Papers of the Bibliographical Society*, No. 5, 1990; HENTSCHELL, Roze, *St Paul’s Cathedral Precinct in Early Modern Literature and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020; MORAN, James. *Wynkyn de Worde: Father of Fleet Street*. London: Wynkyn de Worde Society and Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 1960; MYERS, Robin; MANDELBRÖTE, Giles; HARRIS, Michael (eds.). *The London Book Trade, Topographies of Print*. London: British Library, 2003; RAVEN, James. *Bookscape: Geographies of Printing and Publishing in London before 1800*. London: British Library, 2014; RAVEN, James. *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007.

⁴⁴ WILLES, Margaret. *In the Shadow of St Paul’s: The Churchyard that Shaped London*. Cornwall: Yale University Press, 2022, p.37.

model, improving printing methods as "England's first typographer."⁴⁵ De Worde found the appropriate premises for his activity as binder, importer of books and bookseller at the Sign of the Sun, conveniently bigger than his Westminster spot. It did not take long for him to be joined by another printer/bookseller, most probably also Caxton's assistant. Richard Pynson based his printing house at the Sign of the George on Fleet Street, within Temple Bar, in close proximity to the Holy See of London lawyers, who were potential clients for his legal publications. Besides the pioneerism attributed to both figures, it must be remembered that De Worde and Pynson were, like most early printers in England, not English.⁴⁶ Astute businessmen, De Worde and Pynson, along with other foreign booksellers, recognised the potential for a growing customer base in the City of London.⁴⁷ By the time they arrived on Fleet Street, the place was already used by "the craftsmen who had produced books before the arrival of the printing press: scribes and limners (painters or illuminators), booksellers and binders, and suppliers of clasps, parchment, pens, and paper."⁴⁸ Throughout the sixteenth century, the profusion of bookmaking and buying around Paul's Churchyard continued to grow, with religious works serving as the primary source of income for the workers who made these activities possible.

By the early 1520s, Wynkyn de Worde and Richard Pynson had been successful in establishing themselves as printers at St Paul's. They also trained numerous apprentices, who would form a second generation of English-born stationers.⁴⁹ Among them, Thomas Berthelet (d. 1555) stood out. Although his origins are still up for debate, the fact that he was a free member of the Stationers' Company reasonably suggests that he was at least born in England or Wales. Evidence also suggests that he was Pynson's apprentice around the early 1520s. According to Peter Blayney, Berthelet "left Pynson sometime in 1524 to set up his own

⁴⁵ RAUB, Jennifer. *Sarum Liturgical Printing in Tudor London*. Thesis submitted to Royal Holloway College. University of London for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 2011., p. 93.

⁴⁶ According to Peter Blayney, "the fact would not have stopped them importing, publishing, or distributing, all of which non-citizens could legally do. And because they had no native rivals, as printers de Worde and Pynson posed no competitive threat to any citizen. But as non-citizens, inside the City limits they could bind books only with the consent of the Stationers' Company and could not legally retail them at all." BLAYNEY, Peter. *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501-1557. Volume I: 1501-1546*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. p.68.

⁴⁷ WILLES, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ The Company of Stationers had been founded in the early fifteenth century by a petition of three groups of citizens with a common interest: "the Writers of Text Letter, those commonly called Limners, and other good people, citizens of London, who use to bind and sell books." They presented the petition in early July 1403 to the mayor and aldermen of London, with the ultimate goal of being granted a single craft association to collectively represent all their trades. See more in BLAYNEY, Peter. *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, op. cit.*

printing house.”⁵⁰ By the end of the year, he had already established himself at the sign of the Roman Lucrece in Fleet Street (Figure 1). This particular location was near St Bride’s Church, where Berthelet married the widow Agnes Langwyth that same year. It was also close to the sign of the Sun, which made the newly established printer a next-door neighbour to Wynkyn de Worde. For those involved with the printing business, early modern London was a small world.

St Bride’s Church was a short walking distance from St Paul’s Cathedral, where sermons were delivered every Sunday. Churchgoers would encounter a variety of bookshops and printing houses at either precinct while travelling to or from the offices of Mass or morning prayer. However, they would rarely find printed sermons available. Sermon printing in early sixteenth-century England was a minor business. Printing itself was still a modest enterprise on the isle if compared to mainland Europe, and authors like Andrew Pettegree and James Raven have correctly pointed out the outstanding provinciality of the English book market at the time.⁵¹

That is why we should not take for granted the fact that Thomas Berthelet, a thriving stationer who had recently become King’s Printer, had a sermon printed in 1530 and again the following year. The sermon, however, was far from recent. It had been delivered in 1512, “made to the Convocation at Paulis.” The author was the Cathedral’s Dean, John Colet (1467-1519). He was dean of St Paul’s from 1505 to 1518, during which time he engaged in a series of frustrated reform attempts, whose austerity made him noticeable among his contemporaries. His undisputed efforts for ecclesiastical reform, informed by Pauline theology and a strong stamp of Pseudo-Dionysian spirituality, were never entirely fulfilled due to “the inappropriate expression of his idealistic ecclesiology, which demanded perfection”.⁵² According to Jonathan Arnold, “Colet is distinguishable [...] in one important aspect: he was dominated by a vision of Church perfection, and it was the chief motivation for his life’s work.”⁵³ His reform programme, though, never prospered, which allows Arnold to affirm that “as a cleric, John Colet was neither successful nor a reformer.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ BLAYNEY, P. *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁵¹ PETTEGREE, Andrew. Centre and Periphery in the European Book World. *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*. London: Vol. 18, Sixth Series, pp. 101-128, 2008.

⁵² ARNOLD, Jonathan. John Colet, preaching and reform at St Paul’s cathedral, 1505-19. *Institute of Historical Research*. Oxford, Vol. 76, No. 194, pp. 450-468, 2003. p. 450.

⁵³ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean John Colet of St Paul’s: Humanism and Reform in Early Tudor England*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2007, p.1.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.



Figure 1. Thomas Berthelet's printer's device. In: *Regimen sanitatis Salerni*.
London: Thomas Berthelet, 1535. With the kind permission of
Canterbury Cathedral Library.

When, in 1530, Thomas Berthelet first printed the "Sermon of Doctor Colete, made to the convocation at Paulis," the dean had been dead since 1519. The Canterbury Convocation,

during which Doctor Colet delivered the original sermon, took place in 1512. By then, Berthelet's life is unaccounted for, but we know he was already an active independent printer by 1524, after having completed his apprenticeship period under Richard Pynson. It might have been from his early master that Berthelet first had access to a written version of Colet's sermon. Soon after the 1511 Convocation, Pynson published the dean's sermon under the title *Oratio habita a D. Ioanne Colet decano Sancti Pauli ad clerum in convocatione*. So Berthelet's 1530 edition is actually the second printed version of Colet's sermon, although it is the first English one.

In late-medieval England, sermons were rarely printed, and things have seldom changed with the turning of the century. John Mirk's medieval bestseller, *The Festial*, a collection of seventy sermons for *temporale* (moveable feasts) and *sanctorale* (fixed feasts), had wide manuscript circulation throughout the fifteenth century, being the only vernacular sermon series printed in England at the time. Apart from reprintings of the *Festial*, the number of printed sermons for the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries is scarce to the point of making approximate calculations seem impractical. Even John Mirk's popular sermon series requires further caution for its exceptionality, since its successful printing was a direct reflection of its previous manuscript popularity: "Although writing in a neglected part of the country (Shropshire on the Welsh border), his work had become so successful in the Middle Ages that finding manuscripts was no trouble for a printer like Caxton who, as an astute businessman, would have appreciated a tested success."⁵⁵ Veronica O'Mara convincingly illustrates the isolation of the English book market during this period. According to her, "the total numbers of texts produced in England, let alone sermons, was miniscule: if one takes each decade from 1476 to 1536, the number of recorded works (irrespective of the various editions) for these years is as follows: 1476 (5); 1486 (26); 1506 (31); 1516 (37); 1526 (48); and 1536 (48)."⁵⁶ If we look specifically at printed sermons, the numbers are exceedingly scarce even considering England's low population and largely rural society, especially if "compared with regions such as Germany, where huge numbers of sermons have been recorded, albeit a treasure trove in comparison with what exists in Finland and Denmark."⁵⁷

⁵⁵ O'MARA, Veronica. The Early Printed Sermon in England between 1483 and 1532: A Peculiar Phenomenon. In: O'MARA, Veronica; STOOP, Patricia (eds.). *Circulating the Word of God in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Catholic Preaching and Preachers across Manuscript and Print (c. 1450 to c. 1550)*. Belgium: Brepols Publishers, 2022. p. 91.

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ O'MARA, Veronica. *op. cit.*, p. 71.

One can always make educated guesses about the reasons and motives behind printing a book in the early sixteenth century, but the English sermon printing context presents its own set of constraints. O'Mara recently conducted a general assessment of the sermons printed in England from the 1480s to the early 1530s, revealing a few patterns. First, following an overall tendency towards centralisation, all sermons printed in England at the time came from London presses. Secondly, aside from the reprints of John Mirk's *Festial*, the only other published sermons are those by bishops or future bishops, names such as John Alcock (1430-1500), bishop of Ely; Richard Fitzjames (d. 1522), bishop of London; John Fisher (1469-1535), bishop of Rochester; and John Longland (1473-1547), bishop of Lincoln. This attests to the fact that, minor as it was, early sixteenth-century English sermon printing revolved around London, like most of the English book trade, and was overwhelmingly represented by sermons preached by high Church authorities. Third, except for John Alcock, who had two sermons printed posthumously, one year after his death, all of these bishops were in office when their sermons were printed.

John Colet's 1512 sermon then appears to be a singular case in the early English sermon print culture. He was not a bishop, and despite having the Latin version of his sermon issued during his lifetime, he was dead for more than a decade when Thomas Berthelet printed the English edition in 1530. This raises a couple of questions. What prompted the decision to print Colet's sermon in 1530? Who made that decision? Who wrote the English translation, and how did Berthelet gain access to it? Considering the market for printed sermons was still secondary at the time, who was the prospective buying public of Colet's 1530 sermon? Some of these questions are easier to answer than others, and all of them ascribe to the historian a delicate thread of brief mentions and unverified references to follow. In this chapter, I try to answer most of these questions while also acknowledging those that only allow me to hint at some directions. Each will be addressed at their time. For now, let us start with meeting the dean.

John Colet's contributions extend far beyond a series of failed church reform efforts, Despite their institutional failures and controversial criticism, his reform endeavours can be considered an integral part of the Catholic Reformation at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Moreover, in this chapter I advocate that the printing of the 1512 Convocation Sermon by Thomas Berthelet in 1530 is indicative of an enduring interest in Colet's ecclesiological views. Contrary to Arnold's claim that Colet's ecclesiology left no significant room for the laity, I argue that the 1530 printed sermon proves this not to be the case. Given the meagre state of early sixteenth-century sermon printing in England, it is truly remarkable

that Berthelet was able to publish two editions of Colet's sermon in 1530 and 1531. It indicates that the dean's thoughts on church reform had currency among Henrician Catholics, and his ecclesiological programme was considered worthy of revisiting. This printed sermon, I argue, although ignored by most scholars of the English Reformation period, is a daunting example of how much Henrician Catholics could be active users of the printing press. John Archer Gee once stated that Colet's Convocation Sermon "sounded the trumpet of the Reformation."⁵⁸ Considering its 1530 printed version, I dare say, a trumpet was sounded, but of a different Reformation altogether.

1.1. John Colet: Sounding the Reformation

John Colet was born in 1467 into a wealthy London family. His father, Henry Colet (d. 1505), was a renowned Warden of the Mercer's Company and member of Parliament. He had also served as Lord Mayor of the City of London, personally advising Henry VII with diplomatic and administrative matters. Born in Wendover, near Aylesbury in Buckinghamshire, sometime between 1430 and 1440, Henry Colet moved to London as a thriving young man around 1450–55. Some years later he married a wealthy aristocratic lady from Allwelthorp, in Norfolk, Buckinghamshire. Christian Knevet (d. 1523) was the granddaughter of Humphrey Stafford, Duke of Buckenham, and was educated at a Benedictine priory at Carrow, Buckinghamshire. Upon moving to London, she became well acquainted with Erasmus and once, in 1510, hosted the German theologian and physician Agrippa. That same year she was granted letters of fraternity by Christ Church Convent in Canterbury and spent her later years Stepney, in the countryside. She managed to outlive all of her children, including John Colet, the eldest of eleven sons and eleven daughters and the only one who survived to maturity.

Before becoming dean of the most prominent cathedral in England, John Colet was educated at Cambridge, where he obtained his B.A. in 1485 and M.A. in 1488/9. It was there that he became acquainted with humanistic ideas and, most especially, Neoplatonism. According to Erasmus,

⁵⁸ GEE, John Archer. *The Life and Works of Thomas Lupset. With a Critical Text of The Original Treatises and the Letters*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928, p. 31.

“During his younger days, in England, he diligently mastered all the philosophy of the schools, and gained the title expressive of a knowledge of the seven liberal arts. Of these arts there was not one in which he had not been industriously and successfully trained. For he had both eagerly devoured the works of Cicero, and diligently searched into those of Plato and Plotinus; while there was no branch of mathematics that he left untouched.”⁵⁹

Those were Erasmus’s words to his German friend Jodocus Jonas (1493-1555) in a letter from June 1521. Soon after Martin Luther’s (1486-1546) momentous appearance at the imperial Diet of Worms, Jonas’s seemingly growing attachment to Lutheran teachings made Erasmus eager to dissuade him. In a couple of letters he also published in his *Epistolae ad diversos*, printed by Froben that same year, Erasmus shares his concerns over the hopeless situation into which the Lutheran movement seemed to have fallen: “And I greatly wonder, my dear Jonas, what god had stirred up the heart of Luther, in so far as he assails with such licence of pen the Roman pontiff, all the universities, philosophy, and the mendicant orders. Even if all were true, which those who undertake to judge Luther’s writings say is by no means the case, what other outcome could be expected, because of the provocation of so many, than this which we see?”⁶⁰ Although conceding on some topics with Luther’s critique of Catholic devotion, Erasmus was eager to distance himself from the controversial and polarising effects of the Augustinian monk’s latest actions, specifically his latest writing, *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, and his audacious response at Worms: “What purpose did it serve, therefore, to act in a contrary way and to expose certain matters in such a way that at first sight they were even more offensive than when seen at closer and steadier range?”⁶¹

Erasmus’s effort to dissuade Jonas provided us with two letters. The one issued in May focused specifically on critiquing Luther’s recent actions and exhorting Jonas not to follow his recklessness. The second letter, sent a month later, is “a logical continuation of the first

⁵⁹ Letter to Jodocus Jonas on Vitrier and Colet (23 June 1521). In: OLIN, John C. *Christian Humanism and Reformation: Selected Writings of Erasmus*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1987, p. 167.

⁶⁰ Letter to Jodocus Jonas on Luther (May 1521). In: OLIN, John C. *Christian Humanism and Reformation, op. cit.*, p. 147.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.

one.”⁶² Here, Erasmus presents Jonas with a brief, albeit detailed, account of the lives of two friends of his, the French Carthusian Jean Vitrier and John Colet. The opening of the letter explicitly indicates that Colet was the primary subject of the entire correspondence. Erasmus writes, “With your earnest request, my worthy friend, that I would briefly portray for you, as in miniature, the life of John Colet, I will gladly comply.”⁶³ It seems Jonas had previously asked for an accurate depiction of the character of the dean of St Paul’s, which Erasmus was glad to provide. Erasmus also thought it convenient to add another man to the picture, his friend Jean Vitrier: “If I give you two portraits instead of one, you will be the gainer; and to that, I know, you have no objection.”⁶⁴

Considering this letter to be part of a thoughtful admonition to Jonas, persuading him not to follow Luther’s example, it seems Erasmus was trying to provide his friend with better alternatives and more suitable examples of reform-minded men who, in contrast to Luther, remained loyal to the Catholic Church. The later addition of Vitrier seems to point to Erasmus’s attempt to show Jonas how a heartfelt, life-changing meeting with Holy Scripture did not necessarily have to lead to the path Luther had taken. Vitrier, as Erasmus describes, “had so thoroughly learnt by heart the books of Holy Scripture, St Paul’s Epistles more particularly, that he had the words of his favourite, St Paul, completely at his finger ends.”⁶⁵ When preparing to preach, Erasmus says, it was Vitrier’s custom “to take up St Paul, and to spend the time reading him till he felt his heart grow warm.”⁶⁶ Erasmus seems to suggest to Jonas that other passionate Bible readers and preachers could be found outside Wittenberg.

Among his equals, it would be hard to find a more devout Bible reader and preacher than John Colet. Just like Luther and contemporaries of his did, he also had the opportunity to visit Europe. After finishing his studies at Cambridge, Colet followed on a tour of the continent. He travelled to Paris and Orléans, but nothing could have prepared him for Italy. Unlike Luther’s, Colet’s visit to Rome seemed to have reinforced his reverence for the Catholic Church and its history. There, he took residence at the English Hospice, a hospital

⁶² The quotations from both letters are from John C. Olin’s English version of the letters, which comes from ROTERODAMUS, Erasmus. *The Lives of Jehan Vitrier and John Colet*, trans. J.H. Lupton: London, 1883, pp. 1-47. According to Olin, “the Lupton translation was made from *Erasmi opera omnia*, ed. Johannes Clericus (Leyden, 1703–1706), III No. 435, and is the first of the entire Jonas letter to be published. It is accompanied in its original by extensive notes, but these have not been reprinted.” OLIN, John C. *op. cit.*, p. 157.

⁶³ Letter to Jodocus Jonas on Vitrier and Colet (23 June 1521). OLIN, John C. *Christian Humanism and Reformation, op. cit.*, p. 158.

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁵ Letter to Jodocus Jonas on Vitrier and Colet (23 June 1521). In: OLIN, John C. *Christian Humanism, op. cit.*, p. 159.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 169.

suites for Englishmen living in Rome and a temporary housing unit for students and travellers. Daniel T. Lochman correctly observes that:

“Whatever Colet’s experiences in Rome might have been or the length of his stay prior to his return to England (this latter confirmed by a reply to a letter from Desiderius Erasmus during the latter’s visit to England in 1499), he would have had the opportunity to participate in a network of other English *confrateres* of the Hospice who were to figure in his life after his return to England: in addition to Urswick (enrolled 11 June 1486), other registrants at the Hospice dating close to Colet’s enrolment included the future Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham; the future headmaster of Colet’s St Paul’s School, William Lily; and his friend Thomas Linacre (all enrolled 3 May 1490).”⁶⁷

Colet’s stay in Rome provided him with experiences and friendships that would be particularly useful in later epochs of his life. When, in 1513, Bishop of London Richard Fitzjames accused Colet of heresy because of his stance on images, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham, stood by him. When, in 1505, Colet called the great English humanist William Lily to preside over his newly refounded St Paul’s School, Lily gladly accepted. Moreover, the School had the best Latin scholar in England at their disposal, Thomas Linacre, writing Latin manuals and teaching lessons at the bequest of his dear friend, Colet.

Upon returning to England, Colet soon began the studies that led to a Bachelor’s in Divinity at Oxford, being ordained a deacon in 1497 and a priest the following year. It was also at Oxford that Colet and Erasmus had their first meeting, in 1499. As Erasmus later recalled: “He was then about thirty years old, some two or three months younger than myself [...], yet there was no doctor there, of either divinity or law, no abbot or other dignitary but came to hear him and brought his textbooks with him as well.”⁶⁸ Erasmus’s recollection of

⁶⁷ LOCHMAN, Daniel. Introduction: Contexts of Colet and Dionysius. In: LOCHMAN, Daniel; NODES, Daniel Joseph (eds.). *John Colet on the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Dionysius*. Leiden: Brill, 2013. p. 6.

⁶⁸ Letter to Jodocus Jonas on Vitrier and Colet (23 June 1521). In: OLIN, John C. *Christian Humanism, op. cit.*, p. 168.

Colet as having a big and varied audience at his lectures serves as evidence of his capacity. It also did not hurt that those lectures were free of charge. After all, Colet's passion for the Epistles of St Paul motivated him to offer a free set of lectures on the book of Romans. This was a rather unorthodox occurrence, although it was more understandable considering money was no problem for the son of the prosperous Henry Colet.

Afterwards, Erasmus tells us, "from these sacred occupations he was called back to London by the favour of Henry VII and made dean of St Paul's, so as to preside over the cathedral of that Apostle whose Epistles he loved so much."⁶⁹ Colet would spend his most fruitful years at the deanery of St Paul's Cathedral, where he attempted to exercise his own vision of church perfection by reforming the moral and spiritual standards of his minor clergy. His efforts never succeeded, and he died frustrated as he arrived with what he believed to be a deplorable kind of life by his contemporaries. Colet passed away on 16 September 1519, from complications brought on by recurrent bouts of sweating sickness that he had contracted two years prior. His greatest achievement, however, would endure for centuries: the refounded St Paul's School.

Erasmus's 1521 letter is the earliest source about Colet's biography. Together with the later account found in John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments*, these two sources are the most substantial sixteenth-century accounts of the dean's life. Other contemporary sources provide brief mentions of Colet as an avid reader and preacher of St Paul's Epistles and a committed church reformer. In 1529, William Tyndale (1484-1536) wrote that Colet was accused by his superior, Bishop Fitzjames of London (d. 1522), who "would have made the old dean of Paul's a heretic for translating the *Pater Noster* in English, had not the Bishop [sic] of Canterbury helped the dean." Later in the 1540s, John Bale (1495-1563), the Protestant controversialist, wrote that "Colet's offence had been 'reading Paul's Epistles by his life,' presumably referring to the idea that Colet used literal interpretation in his biblical exegesis, influenced by his Italian travels, which was a departure from traditional medieval allegorical exegesis – an argument used for Colet's alleged Protestant attitudes well into the nineteenth century."⁷⁰ Hugh Latimer (1487-1555), the Protestant bishop and martyr, mentioned in 1552 that "Colet would have been burnt as a heretic had it not been for the king's protection."⁷¹ Ten years later, John Jewel, the Protestant Bishop of Salisbury, added Colet to his list of "the forerunners of the Reformation."⁷² The Archbishop of Canterbury of his time, Matthew Parker

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean John Colet*, op. cit., p. 5.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

(1504-1575), added that Colet “was the Oxford divine who imposed ‘the [Protestant] rule of sacred scripture’ at St Paul’s.”⁷³ What did all of these late sixteenth-century voices have in common? With the exception of Tyndale and Latimer, who died in 1536 and 1555, they were all influential Protestant figures in the Elizabethan settlement, deeply committed to their own ardent and nostalgic view of their recent past. The dispute over the Henrician past had begun.

Like much of the history of Henrician England, the circumstances of the Elizabethan settlement help define the main view of who John Colet was. His known reform efforts as dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, along with his unabashed appreciation for preaching, fuelled and, to some extent, confirmed the desire of later Elizabethan Protestants to view him as a forefather. The martyrologist John Foxe (1517-1587) made it even more compelling when, in the 1570 edition of his *Book of Martyrs*, he shared that countryside Lollards would travel to London just to hear the dean of St Paul’s preach. This triumphalist view outlived the Elizabethan period and survived well into the late nineteenth century. Even in the 1950s, there were those who abided by the view of a Protestant Colet. Powell Mills Dawley, when analysing the English Reformation and its heroes, made sure to add Colet to the very beginning of the list. He wrote: “The line of spiritual continuity is clear – from Colet to Cranmer to Jewel to Hooker, and then to the Caroline divines.”⁷⁴ The sources that for so many years based scholars’ belief in a proto-Protestant Colet were far from abundant, though. Jonathan Arnold makes the picture clear when he reminds us that “in the 300 years after Colet’s death, there appeared no significant analysis of his biblical lectures, his Pseudo-Dionysian commentaries, or his treatises; in fact, his thought, except for his Convocation sermon of 1511/12, remained unexamined until 1867.”⁷⁵

The rediscovery of Colet’s Catholicism was made possible when, in 1867, the Victorian antiquarian Frederick Seebohm published *The Oxford Reformers*.⁷⁶ Despite still clinging to the notion of a Protestant Colet, Seebohm “contributed a further invention: the fantasy of a group of Oxford-based humanists consisting of Thomas More, Erasmus and Colet himself.”⁷⁷ Despite there being little to no evidence that the three friends were ever together at Oxford, Seebohm’s accurate portrayal of Colet’s indebtedness to Italian humanism opened the way for more detailed studies of the dean’s intellectual life. However, although Seebohm

⁷³ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁴ DAWLEY, Powell Mills. *John Whitgift and the English Reformation*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1955. p. 194.

⁷⁵ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean John Colet, op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ SEEBOHM, Frederick. *The Oxford Reformers: John Colet, Erasmus, and Thomas More*. London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1867.

⁷⁷ ARNOLD, J. *Dean John Colet, op. cit.*, p. 7.

reinforced Colet's admiration for humanistic modes of biblical exegesis, he failed to perceive how much the dean distanced himself from other aspects of Italian humanism, such as the sometimes undiscerning praise of classical authors and the moral optimism regarding the redeeming potential of a sinful humankind. The other influential nineteenth-century contribution to scholarship on Colet was Joseph Hirst Lupton's *Life of Dean John Colet*, published in 1887. In his preface, Lupton praises "Seebohm's *Oxford Reformers*, which first showed Colet to us in the true greatness of his character."⁷⁸ Because of Seebohm's work in furthering the research on John Colet, Lupton observes that "now, no history of England leaves him unnoticed."⁷⁹ Lupton's work, however, would prove to be even more influential than Seebohm's. Not only did he significantly expand scholarly understanding of Colet's intellectual context and contributions, but he also provided newly researched transcriptions of the dean's written texts, which paved the way for further studies on early sixteenth-century culture and religion. Moreover, I particularly agree with his description of Colet's distinctive importance. When commenting upon the dean's time at the head of St Paul's Cathedral, Lupton remarks:

"In such an office, held at such a critical time, he formed a connecting link between the old and the new. He publicly preached against the worship of images, and was charged with heresy by his diocesan, though acquitted by his archbishop. He was the attached friend and spiritual adviser of Sir Thomas More, who seems now on the road to canonisation, and no less the friend of Erasmus. He sought to end his days with the Carthusians of Sheen, a community that had its martyrs along with Bishop Fisher, and yet he left not a penny to any monastic house or to any chantry priest to say masses for him after death. He died in the communion of the Church of England as it then was; while yet, by his public expositions of Holy Scripture, and by his avowed opinions on the non-exaction of tithes, on community of goods, on the wealth and secular occupations of prelates, on the unlawfulness of war, the misuse of offerings at shrines, and

⁷⁸ LUPTON, Joseph Hirst. *A Life of Dean Colet: Dean of St Paul's, and Founder of St Paul's School*. London: George Bell and Sons, 1887. p. viii.

⁷⁹ LUPTON, Joseph Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

other topics, he was suspected, and not altogether without reason, of sympathising with the followers of Wycliffe.”⁸⁰

Retrospectively, Lupton’s portrait of Colet as a link between the old and the new reads as a promising edict of a time of more accurate studies on the dean’s life and works. In 2007, Jonathan Arnold remarked that “the twentieth century has seen more written about Colet than any other.”⁸¹ It was a time of stripping away “the layers of Protestant glosses that had built up” around Colet’s history and context. Indeed, by the 1950s, research on Colet had reached a new level of scholarship following more thorough studies of his own writings, more literally than not. In 1963, S. Jayne illuminated the material, and not only theoretical, relationship between Colet and his great Florentine inspiration, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), by studying his handwritten *marginalia* annotations on the 1495 copy of Ficino’s *Epistolae* he possessed. From the 1980s onwards, revisionist historians reassessed the origins and impacts of the Reformation, shedding light on a healthier, more burgeoning, more self-aware, and overall more complex, early sixteenth-century Church. Eamon Duffy’s seminal work, *The Stripping of the Altars*, permanently established the standard for historical research on the pre-Reformation English Church. Erasmus’s Catholic Colet finally had more room to shine.

Current scholarship on Colet stands for his faith and work as a fruit of a complex and idiosyncratic attitude towards the Catholicism of his time. Colet was a frustrated church reformer who, in his failed attempt at elevating the standards of life of his subordinates at St Paul’s Cathedral, provided historians with a rich and elaborate portrait of ecclesiastical debate and practice in the early sixteenth century. Jonathan Arnold, the most prolific author of Colet’s life and work, has extensively researched the dean’s peculiar ecclesiology, which combines key elements of Pauline theology, Pseudo-Dionysian spirituality and Italian humanistic exegesis. More recently, Daniel Lochmand and Daniel Nodes have greatly contributed to Colet scholarship with the publishing of a newly revised edition and translation of John Colet’s work on Pseudo-Dionysius’s *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. This chapter points, therefore, to a further contribution to Colet studies by providing a commentary on Colet’s Catholicism as expressed both in his Convocation Sermon and its later 1530 English printing by Thomas Berthelet.

⁸⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁸¹ ARNOLD, J. *Dean John Colet, op. cit.*, p. 8.

Despite the adulatory tone of Erasmus's depiction, the committed and devoted nature of Colet's attachment to the Church stands out. Considering the extent to which the dean's ideas have been stretched to fit into a Protestant framework during centuries of misguided scholarship, it is remarkable to read Erasmus's letter and see how much closer Colet was to being a Carthusian monk than a proto-Protestant reformer. The dean's table was, according to Erasmus, "brought within the bounds of moderation." Colet's known abstinence of supper allowed him to have as few guests as possible, "and all the fewer because the repast, though neat, was frugal, and the sitting at table short, and lastly, the conversation such as to have no charms but for the good and learned."⁸² Erasmus thus summarises a common night meal at the dean's household: "After grace had been said, a servant would read aloud in a clear, distinct voice a chapter from St. Paul's Epistles or the Proverbs of Solomon. He would then usually repeat some passage selected from the part read and draw a topic of conversation from it, inquiring of any scholars present, or even of intelligent laymen, what this or that expression meant."⁸³ Concerning his clothes and furniture, Colet's preference was remarkably frugal and orderly: "All his household furniture, his service at table, his dress, his books he would have neat; as for splendour, he did not trouble himself. He used to wear only dark-coloured robes, though priests and divines in England are usually robed in scarlet. His outer garment was always of woollen cloth, not lined; but if the cold required it, he would protect himself with an inner lining of fur."⁸⁴

It is no surprise that Colet's final months were spent at the Carthusian community at Sheen Priory, south of London. On the other hand, it is equally understandable why later Elizabethan Protestants would claim him as their spiritual predecessor. Colet's reputation as a stern and rigid church reformer made him *persona non grata* among his fellow clergymen. Erasmus mentions how "Colet was no great favourite either with many of his own college, being too strict about canonical discipline; and these were every now and then complaining of being treated as monks."⁸⁵ However, the greatest stumbling block to Colet's reputation was the accusations of his superior, Richard Fitzjames (1440-1522), bishop of London. In 1513, Fitzjames presented a complaint to William Warham, Archbishop of Canterbury, against what he considered signs of heresy in Colet's sermons:

⁸² Letter to Jodocus Jonas on Vitrier and Colet (23 June 1521). In: OLIN, John C. *Christian Humanism, op. cit.*, p. 168.

⁸³ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁵ *Ibidem.*

“One was that he taught that images ought not to be worshipped. Another, that he had done away with the hospitality commended by St Paul, seeing that in expounding the passage from the Gospel with its thrice repeated ‘feed my sheep’, while he was in accordance with other expositors on the first two heads (feed by example of life; feed by the words of doctrine), he had disagreed with them on the third, saying that it was not meet the Apostles, poor as they then were, should be bidden to feed their sheep in the way of any temporal support; and he had substituted some other interpretation in lieu of it. A third article was that, having said in the pulpit that there were some who preached written sermons – the stiff and formal way of many in England – he had indirectly reflected on his bishop, who, from his old age, was in the habit of doing so.”⁸⁶

It is not hard to see how such accusations might have later resonated with men like John Bale and Matthew Parker, both avid Elizabethan Protestant writers and churchmen. Colet had been accused of heresy for holding opinions close to their own about key aspects of pastoral and ecclesiastical office. He was against worshipping images; he prioritised preaching and teaching over traditional hospitality and based his opinion on a committed reading of St. Paul’s text. He was, moreover, critical of the closed-minded nature of sermon delivery at the time, based on the monotonous reading of a previous set text, and favoured instead a more fiery and spontaneous mode of preaching. He seemed like the perfect candidate for a proto-Protestant hero, even earlier than Luther himself.

What most scholars have failed to realise since then is the outcome of Fitzjames’s accusations. Nothing happened to Colet. He was never considered a heretic. Erasmus reminds us that Archbishop Warham, “to whom Colet’s high qualities were perfectly well known, undertook the protection of the innocent, and as Colet himself disdained any reply to these and still more frivolous charges, he became a protector instead of a judge.”⁸⁷ Despite Erasmus’s adulatory tone, we can see how much Fitzjames’s accusations were read at the time

⁸⁶ *Ibidem.*

⁸⁷ *Ibidem.*

as coming from a personal vexation of his against Colet. Fitzjames was known for his habit of reading sermons and supposedly felt particularly offended by Colet's critique of it. More than pointing towards a possible proto-Protestant seed being planted by Colet's opinions, what these accusations prove is how complex and self-conscious the pre-Reformation Church was. Warham opted for protecting Colet on the same personal basis as Fitzjames was moved to accuse him. The only potential heretical element of Colet's opinion was his stance on the worshipping of images, but he was far from alone in that. The early sixteenth century is full of churchmen accusing some of their parishioners of superstitious attachment to their icons and church images, but such critique was always done within the constraints of ecclesiastical and theological debate. Concerning general complaints about the state of the clergy of the time, Lucy Wooding correctly remarks: "On the whole, such criticisms were not meant to condemn the Church: they were expressed by individuals within the institution who were attempting to improve it. Those who complained about their clergy usually wanted them to do a better job, not a different one."⁸⁸ Reassessing the pre-Reformation context of the English Church allows us to see Colet as a thriving and pious Christian thinker who perhaps expected too much of the world around him, which was made officially and publicly clear when he preached at the 1512 Canterbury Convocation.

1.2. Reforming the Church, circa 1512

Lambeth Palace Library holds one of the 1530 editions of Colet's sermon (Figures 2). A brown-leathered binding and a decorated cover enclosed with a metal lock bear a spine (Figure 3) which reads: "COLETE'S SERMON. C. 1530." The sermon is visually introduced by an ornamented woodcut frontispiece that surrounds the title "The sermō of doctor Colete made to the Conuocacion at Paulis" (Figure 4). The following 42 pages are all printed in black-letter type, which constitutes an overall simple printing arrangement.

⁸⁸ WOODING, Lucy. *Tudor England, op. cit.*, p. 97.

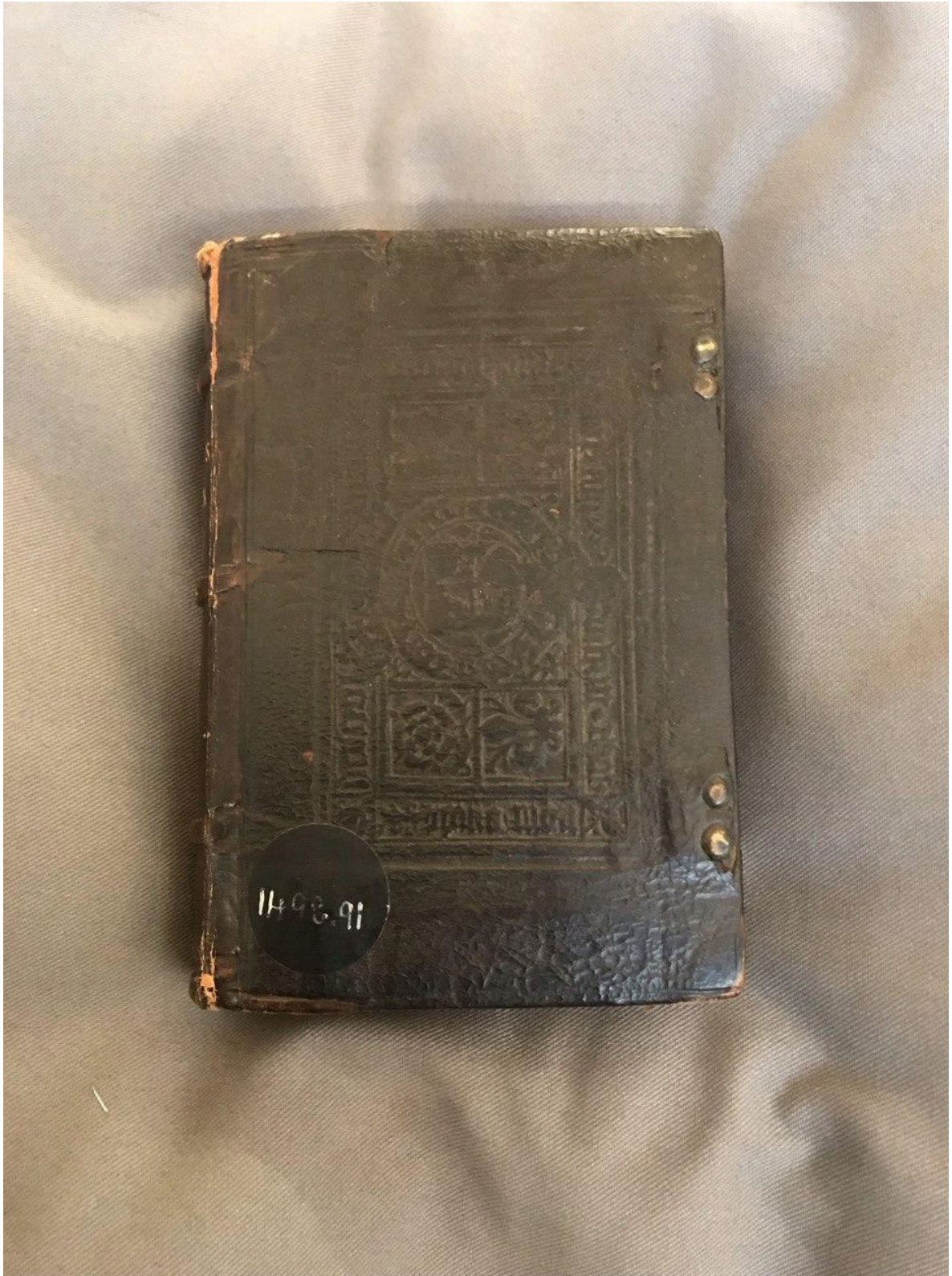


Figure 2. Cover of the 1530 edition of *The Sermon of Doctor Colete*.
With the kind permission of Lambeth Palace Library.

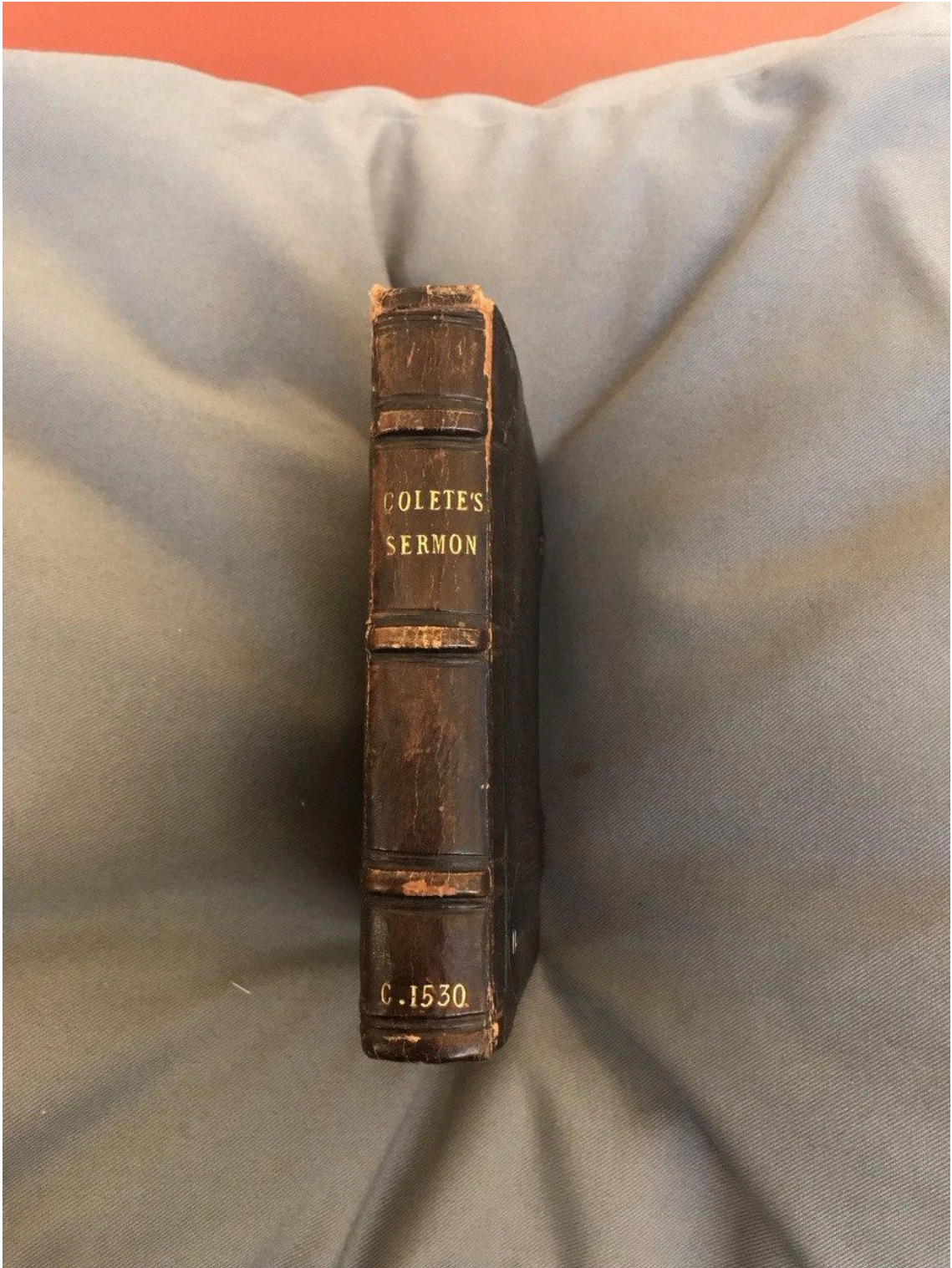


Figure 3. Spine of the 1530 edition of *The Sermon of Doctor Colete*.
With the kind permission of Lambeth Palace Library.

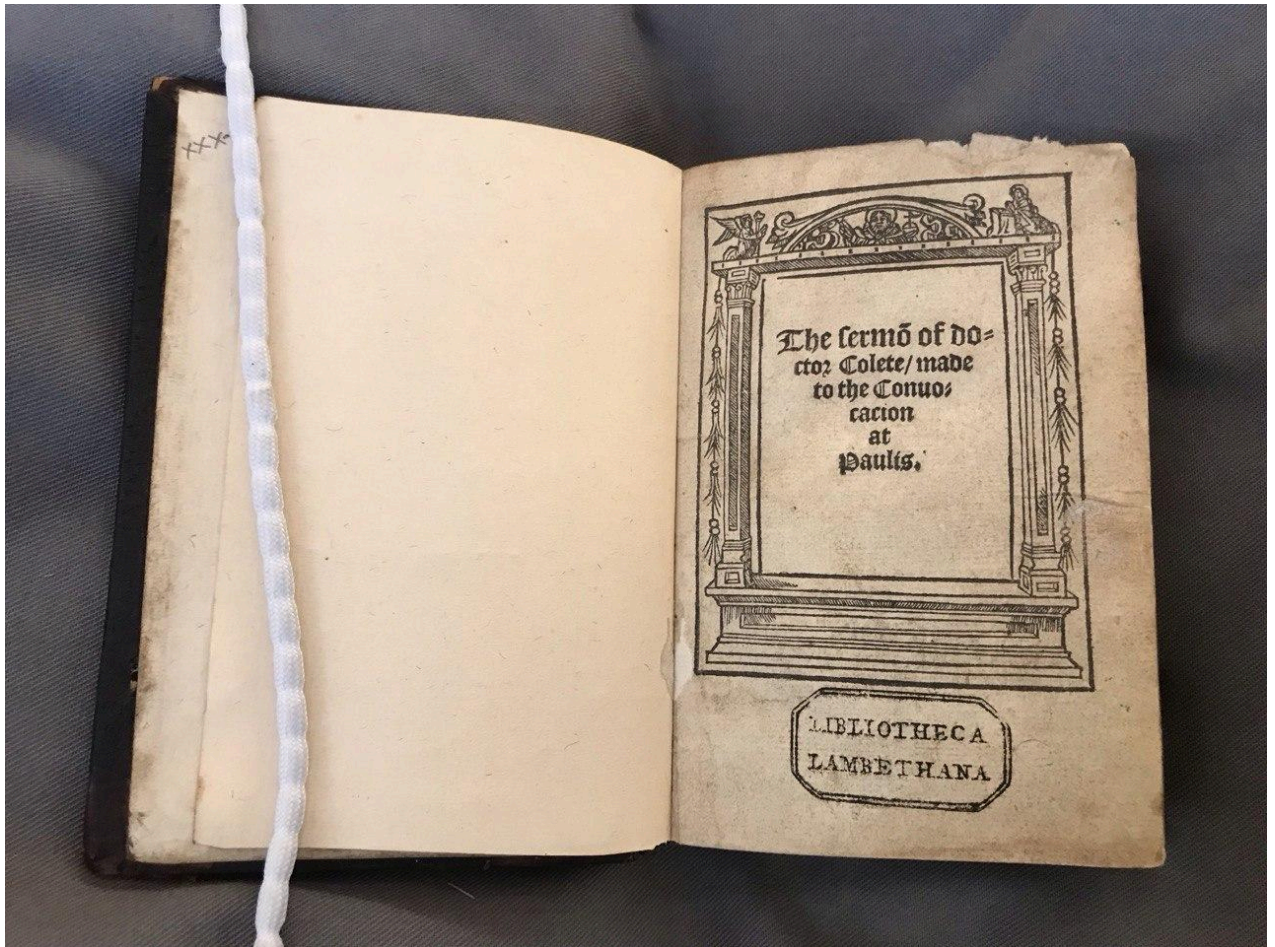


Figure 4. Title page of the 1530 edition of *The Sermon of Doctor Colete*.
With the kind permission of Lambeth Palace Library.

The sermon's pressing issue was "the reformation of the church", to which Colet adds that "it was never more needed." This was far from a bold statement at the time, for in the early sixteenth century a growing sense of the need for ecclesiastical reform was ubiquitous around Europe, as demonstrated by Christopher Harper-Bill⁸⁹, Brad S. Gregory,⁹⁰ and more recently by Veronica O'Mara and Patricia Stoop.⁹¹ Colet addresses the prelates under whose authority he was enabled to proffer his words: "The Pope, head over all spiritual pastors; the Archbishop, president of this council and all bishops; and all the Clergy, and all the people of England."⁹² After the greetings, the whole assembly joined in a Pater noster. Unlike other sermons preached at St Paul's, Colet's 1512 sermon was delivered inside, for bishops and

⁸⁹ HARPER-BILL, Christopher. *The Pre-Reformation Church in England, 1400-1530*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

⁹⁰ GREGORY, Brad S. Christian Reform and its Discontents. In: MARTIN, John Jeffries (ed). *The Renaissance World*. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.

⁹¹ O'MARA, Veronica; STOOP, Patricia (eds), *op. cit.*

⁹² COLET, John. *op. cit.*, p. A2v.

priests only, which adds to the importance of these initial addresses. They were meeting at the Canterbury Convocation, and, being the dean of St Paul's, Colet was an obvious choice for delivering the opening sermon.

Convocations were periodic meetings of the English bishops and clergy with the main purpose of debating and enforcing canonical legislation. The oldest and greatest archdioceses of the English Church, Canterbury and York, dictated ecclesiastical regulation throughout the country. Moreover, there was a different flavour to this 1512 assembly, for it was concomitant with preparations for the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–1517). This made Colet's sermon even more significant. The immediate purpose of the Council was to abrogate the decrees of the illegitimate Council of Pisa convened by Louis XII of France the year before with the clear intention of deposing Pope Julius II. Brad S. Gregory reminds us that the Fifth Lateran Council was "the first such gathering since the implosion of the protracted Council of Basel in the late 1440s and the subsequent reassertion of ecclesiastical monarchy by the Renaissance popes."⁹³ Furthermore, that the previous Lateran Council had been called almost 300 years earlier, in 1215, only adds to the seriousness of the 1512 summoning, highlighting the extent to which the unresolved issues of the 1400s had influenced the early sixteenth-century debate on church reform. By the time Colet preached at Convocation, church reform was the air European clergy breathed.⁹⁴

The issues raised by the Fifth Lateran Council were the starting point for the 1512 Canterbury Convocation. The members of the English Church had to deliberate on what terms their representatives would stand at Rome. However, as Lupton argues, "that was a small matter compared to the growing sense of a need of reform in the Church if the spread of heresy was to go no further."⁹⁵ Only a few months before, in April and May 1511, Archbishop Warham had entreated an active investigation into charges of heresy, and "most of those summoned before him had recanted and had their lives spared, but several had been delivered up to the secular power."⁹⁶ This helps elucidate just how momentous Colet's preaching at the opening of the Convocation was.

Colet justified the need for a "reformation of the church's estate" by stating that "the secular and worldly lives of clerks and priests" had "so disfigured the face of the church," a concern he shared with many others. Concerns over the worldliness of the clergy's life were a

⁹³ GREGORY, Brad S. *op. cit.*, p. 589.

⁹⁴ JENKINS, Allan K.; PRESTON, Patrick. *Biblical Scholarship and the Church: A Sixteenth-Century Crisis of Authority*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

⁹⁵ LUPTON, Joseph Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

conventional theme in late medieval sermon literature and became critical by the 1500s. Giles de Viterbo, the general of the Augustinian Order in Italy, preached the opening sermon of the Fifth Lateran Council, urging for “a true, holy, and proper Council, to eradicate vices, to promote virtues, to capture the foxes who in this age swarm to ruin the holy vineyard, and at last to call fallen religion back to its old purity, its ancient light, its innate splendour, and its sources.”⁹⁷ Just like Colet, Giles was “steeped in humanism as well as neo-Platonism” and proved to be as valiant as his English counterpart when condemning the sins of his contemporaries: “When has ambition been more imprudent? When has greed been more inflamed? When has licentiousness in sinning been more shameless? When has audacity in speaking, arguing, and writing against piety been either safer or more frequent?”⁹⁸

Colet and Giles’s emphasis on the moral reformation of the clergy had deep spiritual implications. In this respect, Giles seemed to have been particularly dramatic: “Unless by this council or some other means we impose moderation on our morals, unless we force our yearning for human things, the source of evils, to give way to a love for divine things, Christendom and religion are finished...and lost.”⁹⁹ It is difficult not to notice the similarity with Colet’s speech: “if priests and bishops that should be as light run in the dark way of the world, how dark then shall the secular people be?” He appeals to St Paul’s teaching: “Wherefore Saint Paul said chiefly unto priests and bishops: Be you not conformable to this world, but be ye reformed.”¹⁰⁰ It is noticeable that the biblical text refers to all Christians instead of solely church authorities, reinforcing Colet’s move towards a targeted criticism of the clergy. In Colet’s interpretation of St Paul, being reformed was a matter of renewing one’s spiritual understanding, which should begin with bishops and priests.

Colet divides his admonition into two separate but complementary parts: “I, intending to follow this order, will speak first of confirmation, then after of reformation.”¹⁰¹ By “confirmation,” he means the continued conforming of priests’ lives to worldly patterns. The world, according to Colet, was what St Paul had acknowledged as “the ways and manner of secular living”¹⁰². Secularity, in this sense, was the greatest fault of English clergymen of the time, expressed by their persistent showcase of “the four evils of this world: that is to say, in

⁹⁷ VITERBO, Giles. In: DOMENICO, Giovan Mansi (ed.). *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*. Vol. 32. Paris: H. Welter, 1901, p. 669.

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰¹ COLET, John. *op. cit.*, p. A4v.

¹⁰² *Ibidem*.

devilish pride, in carnal concupiscence, in worldly covetousness, and in secular business.”¹⁰³ The first is devilish pride, which Colet also calls the "pride of life" and summarises as "greediness and an appetite for honour and dignity."¹⁰⁴ Carnal concupiscence, as it follows, was “a vice so grown as waxen in the church” that “there is nothing looked for more diligently in this most busy time of the most part of priests than that which doth delight and please the senses.”¹⁰⁵ Here, Colet lists several vices attributed to his contemporary clergymen, such as participating in feasts and banquets, playing sports, and hunting. Against those who engage in such activities, Colet brings the Epistle of St Judas:

“Against ye, which kind of men Judas the apostle crieth out in his epistle, saying, ‘Woe unto them which have gone the way of Cain: They are foul and beastly feasting in their meats without fear, feeding themselves; floods of the wild sea foaming out their confusions, unto whom the storm of darkness is reserved for everlasting.’”¹⁰⁶

Following the condemnation of carnal concupiscence, Colet moves to another kind of concupiscence, that of the eyes. Covetousness is the third evil that originated from the secular life of the clergy, to which Colet adds the growing attachment to priestly benefices and promotions: “For what other things do we sell nowadays in the church than fat benefices and high promotions? Yes, and in the same promotions, what other thing do we pass upon than our tithes and rents?”¹⁰⁷ When addressing covetousness, however, Colet specifically points out its institutional implications. As the root of all evil, according to St Paul, covetousness had found its way into the ecclesiastical structure itself:

“O covetousness, of thee cometh these chargeful visitations of bishops; of thee cometh the corruptness of courts and these daily new inventions wherewith the silly

¹⁰³ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. A6r.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibidem*, p. A6v.

¹⁰⁷ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. A7r.

people are so sore vexed. Of thee cometh the beset and wantonness of officials. O, covetousness, mother of all iniquity. Of thee cometh this fervent study of ordinaries to dilate their jurisdictions: Of thee cometh this wood and raging contention in ordinaries/of thee insinuation of the statements: of thee cometh the superstitious observing of all those laws/that sound to any lucre/setting aside and despising those that concern the amendment of manners.”¹⁰⁸

Stressing the deep institutional connotations of his forewarning, Colet dedicates a substantial part of his sermon to the fourth evil: secular occupation. This was Colet’s fundamental concern and the core of his reformation efforts. He highlights this particular failed and misguided state of clergy life as being “the fourth secular evil that spotteth and maketh ill-favoured the face of the church, the continual secular occupation wherein priests and bishops nowadays doth busy themselves, the servants rather of men than of God: the warriors rather of this world than of Christ.”¹⁰⁹ Priests were wasting their time in a fruitless and impractical lifestyle that went against what they were truly charged with. In Colet’s words, the unprofitable life of the clergy was a matter of upholding carnality instead of the true spiritual life, and this was the heart of his institutional critique.

The most sensible topic of Colet’s sermon was his rebuke to pluralism, a practice many priests used in search of better income. His prosperous upbringing, being the son of the London Mayor and closely linked to Tudor aristocracy, was no secret. Moreover, he held many benefices from various ecclesiastical offices, which added substantially to his patrimony. Additionally, the issue of financial centralisation of English Church revenues had the greatest impact on the minor clergy. Christopher Harper-Bill observes that, despite the English Church being a growingly rich institution, “these resources, however, were concentrated in the hands of the monastic, cathedral and collegiate bodies.”¹¹⁰ He also provides some numbers to clarify the situation:

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*, p. A7v.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. A8r.

¹¹⁰ HARPER-BILL, Christopher, *The Pre-Reformation Church in England, op. cit.*, p. 44.

“It has been calculated that around 1500 an income of 15 pounds a year was a necessary minimum for any incumbent who employed an assistant chaplain, and that even if he served to cure himself without any help, 10 pounds a year was required to maintain a barely decent standard of living and to discharge a multitude of obligations. In practice less than a quarter of all English livings were worth 15 pounds, and very many were worth less than 7. In the diocese of Coventry and Lichfield, which was typical of the country as a whole, 79% of benefices were valued at less than 15 pounds, 60% at less than 10 pounds, and 10% at less than 5 pounds.”¹¹¹

Clerical priorities and attributions needed reform, which for Colet meant revisiting clerical pastoral and liturgical responsibilities: “For our warring is to pray, to read and study scripture, to preach the word of God, to minister the sacraments of health, to do sacrifice for the people, and to offer hosts for their sins. For we are mediators and means unto God for men.”¹¹² The emphasis on the mediating role of the priesthood and the centrality of the Mass were the defining themes of late medieval sacramental theology. And this was far from an abstract concept. Most would have agreed with Thomas Crabbe, a parishioner of Axminster in Devon, when he said that “every man needs to have a priest at his coming into the world and a priest at his departing.”¹¹³ Priests and bishops were considered as the Apostles’ direct descendants. They were the link between heaven and earth, between God and Church. They channelled God’s grace through the performance of the sacraments, acting like beacons of light in a dark and forlorn world. Jesus’s words to his disciples, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world... Your light must shine so brightly before men that they can see your good works,” were repeated at ordination rituals in a clear statement of the clergy’s apostolic descendancy. At ordination, priests were also set apart: “they were anointed with oil by a bishop, vested in the priestly robes of stole and chasuble, and presented with bread and a chalice. Through this ritual, “new priests took on a sacramental character, becoming walking icons of Christ.”¹¹⁴ Colet was deeply aware of the importance of

¹¹¹ *Ibidem.*

¹¹² COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. A8v.

¹¹³ MARSHALL, P. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*, p. 41.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

priesthood. In fact, his elevated view of the role of bishops, especially, was the distinctive cornerstone of his ecclesiology.

At the core of Colet's ecclesiological thought reigned the Pseudo-Dionysian maxim of order and beauty. Pseudo-Dionysius was an early sixth-century Greek Christian theologian who would play a momentous role in the dean's theological formation. Colet most probably died believing his favourite author to be The Aeropagite, the first convert to St. Paul, although serious challenges to this idea had already been made since the mid-fifteenth century by men like Lorenzo Valla and Erasmus himself.¹¹⁵ Concerning the early sixteenth-century debate over the apostolicity of Pseudo-Dionysius, Daniel T. Lochman affirms:

“Given the complex motives for attributing or denying authority to Dionysius in the sixteenth century – with Luther opposed to what became a prop for papal governance and Catholics from Josse Clichtove through Robert Bellarmine in favour largely for the same reason, while Valla, Erasmus and others played the role of academic sceptics – it is easy to agree that Trapp that the ‘apostolicity’ of Dionysius had important implications for ‘church government’, with the worrisome problems raised by the ecclesiastical hierarchy taking centre stage unlike the more distant, cerebral, celestial orders that had been the focus of medieval commentators.”¹¹⁶

In this sense, Colet's studies on Pseudo-Dionysius can be seen as integral to the early sixteenth-century English reception of Pseudo-Dionysius. The dean's elevated view of priesthood, together with the strong emphasis on Pseudo-Dionysian hierarchical schemes in his ecclesiology, helps clarify Colet's unique synthesis of Pauline and Neoplatonic theology. Lochman remarks how much Colet's reading of Dionysius, which requires fixing one's mind

¹¹⁵ ROEM, Paul. *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹¹⁶ LOCHMAN, Daniel. *op. cit.*, p. 4.

at once on Christian ideals and on the realities of an earthly church, stands apart from the medieval scholastic, contemplative, and Neoplatonic traditions that preceded it.”¹¹⁷

Overall, the four evils listed by Colet can be interpreted as a strong defence of a fundamental aspect of traditional religion: the dignity of the church itself, which was undermined by the secular lives of priests. Colet reinforces this church-focused critique by connecting the four evils, though not in a sequential manner, to the four consequences of secularity. First, the dignity of the priesthood was dishonoured, as heavenly things and occupations were taken over by worldly ones, disturbing the natural order of the universe. Secondly, the common people were led to despise the priesthood, mirroring the existential and social imbalance that governed the relationship between heaven and earth. Thirdly, the internal order of the church was also confused: “When the highest in the church do meddle with vile and earthly things, and in their stead, vile and abject persons do exercise high and heavenly things.”¹¹⁸ Finally, because of such disorder, laypeople would “have great occasion of evils and cause to fall when those men whose duty is to draw men from the affection of this world by their continual conversation in this world teach men to love this world and, of the love of the world, cast them down heeding into hell.”¹¹⁹

These particular claims about how clerical worldliness impacted the spiritual health of their parishioners deserve further mention. Jonathan Arnold, in his book *Dean John Colet of St Paul's: Humanism and Reform in Early Tudor England*, provides the most relevant contemporary work on Colet's writings and life. His main focus resides on Colet's ecclesiology, and how his vision of a perfect, otherworldly church cannot be overlooked when discussing both his texts and his reform programme. Arnold also discusses how much Colet's ecclesiological thought is constant in the 1512 Convocation Sermon. According to him, Colet “was not principally concerned with a godly laity, but with a godly clergy.”¹²⁰ He identifies the belief that Colet thought clerical reform would lead naturally and straightforwardly to the reformation of the laity as a misconception.

In my opinion, Colet's description of the four evils of secularity and their consequences proves Arnold wrong. Preaching before the higher assembly of the English Church, Colet charged bishops and priests with the responsibility of their parishioners' salvation: “When those men whose duty it is to draw men from the affection of this world by their continual conversation in this world teach men to love this world and, of the love of the

¹¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹¹⁸ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. Bv.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. B2r.

¹²⁰ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean John Colet, op. cit.*, p. 109.

world, cast them down heeding into hell.” This is no light statement. By assigning such an elevated task to his fellow clergymen, Colet emphasises his ecclesiological view of the clergy’s superiority over laypeople. In his deeply hierarchical scheme, Colet placed clergymen above laymen on the scale of perfection. They were closer to God. However, his high view of the priesthood is far from synonymous with indifference towards the laity. By reminding his fellow clergymen of their responsibilities, he emphasises the ecclesiological importance of the clergy in guiding the laity towards perfection. Colet’s ecclesiological view would only come to fruition when everyone, not only the clergy, became perfect.

Unintended or not, Colet’s sermon illustrates how crucial the life of the clergy was for laymen and women. As put by Christopher Harper-Bill, “for the vast majority of the English people, living in isolated rural communities, these men were the only effective representatives of the universal church.”¹²¹ The “Church”, for thousands of people in England, city and countryside, was their parish church. As remarked by Nicholas Orme, “until the Toleration Act of 1689, they were places which every adult was expected to attend for baptism, marriage, and burial, to visit for worship on Sundays and festivals, and to support by helping to maintain the buildings and their furnishings.”¹²²

The most compelling way in which the sermon highlights the life of the clergy is through the comparison of secularity and heresy. The spiritual and moral state of the church, being so deplorable, was made “truly much more than it was in the beginning by the persecution of tyrants, or afterwards by the invasion that followed of heretics. For in the persecution of tyrants, the church, being vexed, was made stronger and brighter: In the invasion of heretics, the church, being once shaken, was made wiser and more cunning in holy writ.”¹²³ According to Colet, heresy and persecution would be even less detrimental to the church than its moral downfall, for the former allowed the church to grow when the latter was a sign of internal, doomed deterioration. This sensitivity to the moral dangers of heresy was characteristic of the writings of St Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), the 12th-century Benedictine reformer whose mystic and ecclesiological views played a significant role in Colet’s clerical education. Given his frequent quotations, we can agree with Jonathan Arnold that “Colet associated himself with St Bernard as a holy father [...] to maximise his own

¹²¹ HARPER-BILL, Christopher, *The Pre-Reformation Church*, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

¹²² ORME, Nicholas. *Going to Church in Medieval England*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2021. p.1.

¹²³ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. B3r.

authoritative status in the eyes of the congregation and to imbue his ecclesiology, which advocated clerical learning and piety, with great authority."¹²⁴

Supported by Clairvaux, Colet claims that secularity was in itself a kind of heresy: "the evil and wicked life of priests, which (if we believe Saint Bernard) is a certain kind of heresy and chief of all and most perilous."¹²⁵ As well as his criticism of the moral degradation of the clergy, Colet's elevated view of the priesthood also had medieval provenance. Moreover, medieval reformers had also taught him how to reform the church. The sermon highlights how 12th-century papal reformist thought influenced Colet's ecclesiology, particularly through his several references to St Bernard of Clairvaux, "the only authority later than Pope Gregory the Great to whom he refers in the sermon."¹²⁶ Colet's emphasis on a renewed spiritual understanding echoes not only St Paul, the most cited author in the sermon, but also this long tradition of medieval reformist writings. By denouncing his contemporary clergymen for their morally deteriorated lives, Colet was following a long path of condemning the sin of covetousness in the church, a topical theme of medieval sermonic literature since at least the eleventh century.

The medieval provenance of Colet's reformist thought illuminates but one part of the rich and varied universe of church reform debate at the beginning of the sixteenth century. In those times, the emphasis on the moral renovation of the clergy was accompanied by a call for the Church's return to its old and original purity. In scholarly terms, these changes meant a new assessment of ancient texts, the Bible and the Fathers. This was the elaborated and organised claim of the humanists, for whom the Church would only be renewed by patient reform through Christian scholarship.¹²⁷ David Carlson's succinct definition of humanism seems appropriate: "Humanism was a committed interest in antiquity, in ancient literature, Latin or Greek, and in ancient culture more generally, in the sense that it was polemical, arguing in favour of a revival of ancient standards and canons of taste."¹²⁸

Restoring the church to its primitive glory was, in the first years of the sixteenth century, a fashionable idea, so that, by the time Colet preached at Convocation, English humanism was starting to become an institutional affair. Throughout the 1510s, "the methods of humanist reading were becoming institutionally endorsed and remunerated" in England,

¹²⁴ ARNOLD, J. *Dean John Colet, op. cit.*, p. 115.

¹²⁵ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. B3v.

¹²⁶ HARPER-BILL, Christopher. *Dean Colet's Convocation Sermon and the Pre-Reformation Church in England. Wiley*, Vol. 73. No. 238. pp. 191-210, 1988. p.192.

¹²⁷ GREGORY, Brad S. *op. cit.*

¹²⁸ CARLSON, David R. *English Humanist Books: Writers and Patrons, Manuscript and Print, 1475-1525*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 1993, p. 5.

and, as David Wakelin reminds us, “throughout the universities of northern Europe at this time, people rehearsed the debate between scholastics and humanists, and they rehearsed it more urgently than in the past because there were now curricula, jobs, money, and influence for the humanists to seize.”¹²⁹ Church reform did not take long to be seized by the humanist zeal for ancient purity and accuracy. What was most peculiar about this humanist undertone of early sixteenth-century debate was that it advertised itself as a novelty while claiming ancient credentials. This “self-consciousness of being new”, as noted by Wakelin, served to reinforce the humanists’ claim that their methods were a continuation of ancient practices and an actualisation of antiquity. It was new because it was the continuation of an ancient tradition that had been forgotten. When it came to Church reform, the biblical model provided by the New Testament church became the ideal that scholars aimed for. For churchmen like Colet, reformation could only mean a call back to St Paul’s ideals.¹³⁰

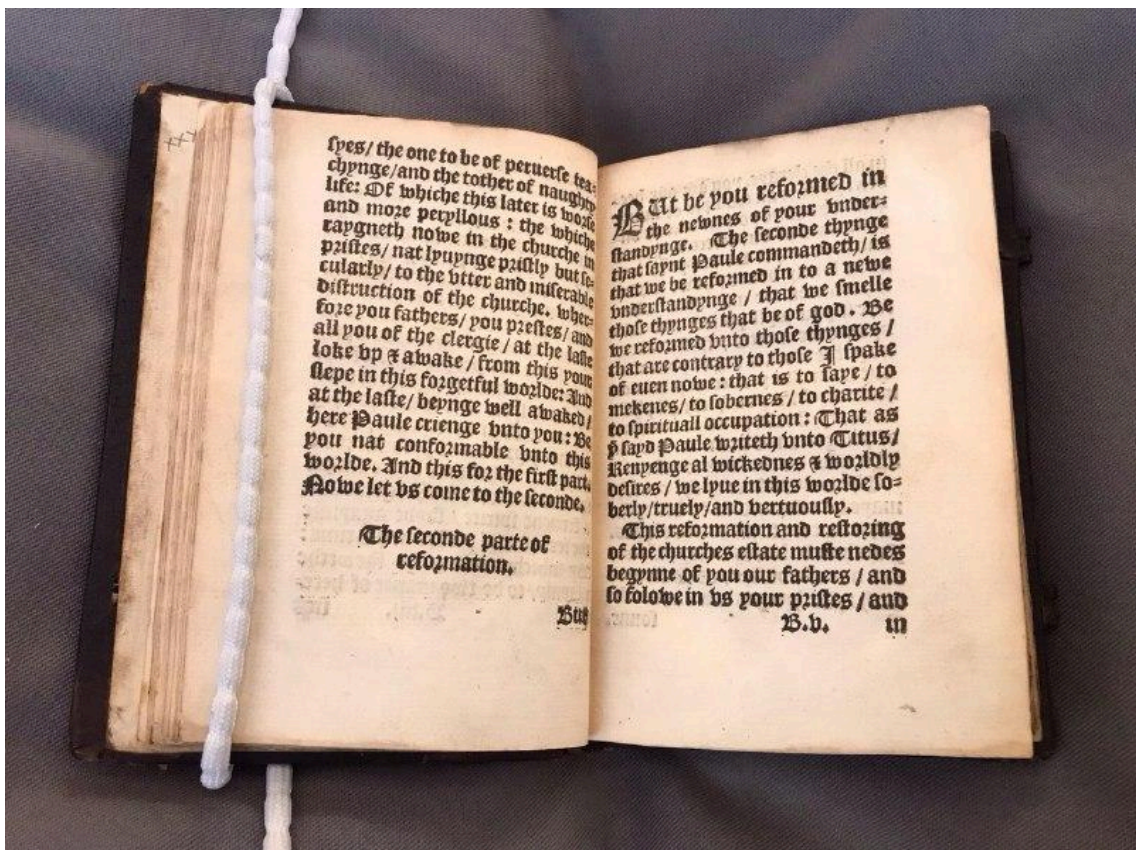


Figure 5. *The seconde parte of reformation* in the 1530 edition of *The Sermon of Doctor Colet*. With the kind permission of Lambeth Palace Library

¹²⁹ WAKELIN, David. *Humanism, Reading & English Literature, 1430-1530*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 191.

¹³⁰ WAKELIN, Daniel, op. cit., RUNDLE, David. *Of Republics and Tyrants: Aspects of quattrocento Humanist Writings and their Reception in England, c. 1400-c. 1460*; WEISS, Robert. *Humanism in England during the Fifteenth Century*. Oxford: Wiley and Sons, 1957.

A further title indicates the second section of the sermon (Figure 5): “The second part of reformation.” Once again, Colet highlights the Pauline concept of a renewed understanding: “The second thing that Saint Paul commandeth is that we be reformed into a new understanding, that we smell those things that be of God. Be we reformed unto those I spoke of even now; that is to say, to meekness, to soberness, to charity, and to spiritual occupation.”¹³¹

Colet's contemporaries should appreciate canon law, just as they read and follow clergymen's lives like books. According to him, “The evils that are now in the church were before in time past, and there is no fault but that fathers have provided very good remedies for it. There are no trespasses, but there are laws against them in the body of the Canon law.”¹³² The purgation of manners, as previously quoted by him, had already been scripted by church authorities of the past, the task now being to rehearse it. In this sense, Colet stresses that new laws were unnecessary: “Therefore, there is no need that new laws and constitutions be made, but that those that are made already be kept. Wherefore, in this your assembly, let those laws that are made be called before you and rehearsed. Those laws (I say) that restrain vice and those that further virtue.”¹³³ Indeed, Colet's claims about church reform emphasise a committed rehearsal of canon law rather than an avant-garde attempt to reformulate it. Such laws should be put into practice, not remade.

Headlining his devoted compromise with canon law, Colet introduces a list of laws and principles to be followed and practices to be corrected in church organisation and priestly formation, the first being a rebuke on the insufficiency of rhetoric. Concerning the state of admission into holy orders during his time, Colet comments that “It is not enough for a priest (after my judgement) to construct a collect, to put forth a question, or to answer to a sopheme: but much more a good, a pure, and a holy life; approved manners; merely learning of holy scripture; and some knowledge of the sacraments.”¹³⁴ Regarding priesthood, displaying rhetorical prowess could only lead one so far. More than intellectual competence, a good clergyman should also demonstrate, “chiefly and above all things, the fear of God and love of the heavenly life.”¹³⁵

The second topic Colet raises refers to church benefits. According to him, canon law commands “that benefices of the church be given to those that are worthy and that promotions

¹³¹ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. B5r.

¹³² COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. B6r.

¹³³ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁴ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. B6v.

¹³⁵ *Ibidem.*

be made in the church by the right balance of virtue, not by carnal affection.”¹³⁶ Colet combines the emphasis on a merit-orientated distribution of benefits and promotions with the virtuous pursuit of balanced compensation for commendable service. According to him, this was supposed to be the proper order of ecclesiastical benefices: “not by the acception of persons, whereby it happens nowadays that boys for old men, fools for wise men, and evil for good do reign and rule.”¹³⁷ This was a particularly sensible topic since Colet himself was known for collecting benefices from his several ecclesiastical occupations. His apparent tone-deafness might have come into his audiences’ ears as deeply hypocritical.

The “spot of simony” is the third topic brought out by Colet. Closely related to the distribution of church promotions, 'simony' is the name attributed to the selling or buying of ecclesiastical benefices, as conceived in the narrative of Simon, the magician, who would have proposed to the apostles the buying of their Christ-given gifts and authority, according to the Book of Acts. “The which corruption, the which infection, the which cruel and odious pestilence”, according to Colet, had “so crept now abroad as the canker evil in the minds of priests”¹³⁸ of his time, to the extent that prayer and service had been abandoned and replaced by the pursuit of “rewards and promises to get them great dignities”.¹³⁹ Simony was, therefore, a spot, a pestilence to be fought against.

Colet also adds the laws “that command the personal residence of curates in their churches.” His complaint stems from the “many evils that grow” from such non-residence: “all things nowadays are done by vicars and parish priests, ye and those foolish also, and unmeet and oftentimes wicked, that seek none other thing in the people than foul lucre, whereof cometh occasion of evil heresies and ill Christendom in the people.”¹⁴⁰ By failing to maintain permanent residence in their churches, curates—church officials specifically designated for the "cure of souls"—allowed their parishes to be taken over by the kind of "foolish, unfit, and sometimes wicked" priests involved in simony and heresy, which posed a significant threat to the health of the church. Curates' non-residence caused an imbalance of unfit officers performing duties outside their assignments, which exposed the church to heresy and simony.

Concerning clerics, Colet asserts their need for sobriety and temperance in “the laws and holy rules given by fathers of the life and honesty of clerks.” Participation in mercantile

¹³⁶ *Ibidem.*

¹³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. B7r.

¹³⁸ COLET, John, *op. cit.* p. B7r.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. B7r-B7v.

endeavours, practising usury, hunting, playing, bearing weapons, frequenting taverns, and having familiarity with women were all activities forbidden for clerks by force of church statute. Furthermore, “the laws that command soberness and measurableness in apparel, and temperance in adorning the body”¹⁴¹ would warrant that clerics remain honest. Such prohibitions were also understood to put “monks, canons, and religious men” in “the straight way that leads to heaven,”¹⁴² as recorded by Christ’s saying in the Gospel of St. Matthew: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.”¹⁴³ Colet concludes from this phrasing that clergymen in general should abstain from secular occupation, “leaving the broad way of the world that commands them not to turmoil in business, secular or otherwise.”¹⁴⁴ Following such reasoning, “monks, canons and religious men” should also not “sew in princes’ courts for earthly things.”¹⁴⁵ Colet also remarks on the 5th-century Council of Chalcedon and its express order “that monks ought only to give themselves to prayer and fasting, and to chastening of their flesh and observing of their rules.”¹⁴⁶ The strict sanction proposed by Colet to his fellow clergymen was then presented as bearing authoritative credentials.

Mentioning the Council of Chalcedon allows Colet to move to yet another set of laws “that pertain and concern you, my reverent fathers and lords, bishops, laws of your just and canonical election, in the chapters of your churches with the calling of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁴⁷ Canonical election should take place under the orientation of God himself, following heavenly criteria and not earthly interests. Colet reports that “because that is not done nowadays, and because prelates are chosen oftentimes more by favour of men than by the grace of God, therefore truly we have not a few times bishops full little spiritual men, rather worldly than heavenly, savouring more the spirit of Christ.”¹⁴⁸ Canonical election was not the only issue concerning prelates. The next law discussed by Colet pertains to “the residence of bishops in their dioceses, which commands them to look diligently and take heed of the health of souls.”¹⁴⁹ What precisely could be achieved by bishops residing in their dioceses was, in general terms, the fulfilment of their episcopal attributions: “That they sow the word of God.

¹⁴¹ *Ibidem*, p. B7r.

¹⁴² *Ibidem*.

¹⁴³ *KJV*, Matthew 7. 13-14.

¹⁴⁴ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. B8r.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. B8v.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

That they show themselves in their churches, at least on great holidays. That they do sacrifice for their people. That they hear the causes and matters of poor men. That they sustain fatherless children and widows. That they exercise themselves in works of virtue.”¹⁵⁰

Colet’s interpretation of bishopric duties adds to his predominantly moralistic view of the clergy. Notwithstanding, episcopal residence was far from a pressing issue for most of his contemporaries. As put by Harper-Bill, “Colet’s charge of non-residence can in very many cases be disproved, but it might be thought almost irrelevant.”¹⁵¹ Especially in great cities, even sporadic residence posed a logistical challenge, not to say an impossibility. Additionally, there were efficient enough systems to counterbalance bishops’ continual absences, such as temporary supervision by other prelates and sacramental performance entrusted to suffragans. Among the many grievances raised by Colet in his sermon, the issue of episcopal residence appeared to be especially important to him, even though it was not a widespread concern.

Church patrimony was also a pressing concern of Colet’s. He brings forth “the laws that command that the goods of the church be spent not in costly building, not in sumptuous apparel and pomp, not in feasting and banqueting, not in excess and wantonness, not in keeping of dogs, but in things profitable and necessary to the church.”¹⁵² His call for a thorough revision of church finances is also shown to bear authoritative persuasion:

“For when Saint Augustine, sometime bishop of England, did ask the pope Gregory, how the bishops and prelates of England should spend their goods, that were offerings of faithful people. The said pope answered (and his answer is put in the decrees, in the xii. chap. and the second question) that the goods of bishops ought to be divided into .iiij. parts, whereof one part ought to be the bishop and his household. Another to his clerks: The third to repair and uphold his tenements: The fourth to the poor people.”¹⁵³

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵¹ HARPER-BILL, Christopher. *Dean Colet’s Convocation Sermon, op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹⁵² COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. Cr.

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. Cr-Cv.

Purifying the church, both morally and financially, was a matter of urgency for Colet. His morally guided programme of church reform openly advocated economic welfare and episcopal residency as topics of spiritual and social importance. Finally, Colet closes his comments on canon law, arguing for "provincial councils to be often used for the reformation of the church." These are the last "laws and constitutions of fathers" discussed in the sermon. In both general and provincial character, he qualifies the lack of counselling to be "hurtful to the church of Christ."¹⁵⁴ The section's closing argument is a restatement of the adequacy of existing laws and the irrelevance of new ones: "When these laws and such others are rehearsed that are for you and that concern the correction of manners; there lacketh nothing but that the same be put in execution with all authority and power."¹⁵⁵

Colet's extensive defence of the keeping of established laws had its roots in his Pseudo-Dionysian opinion that order equalled beauty. God's gifts were to be bestowed in a downwards movement, from God to the angels, from the angels to bishops, from bishops to priests, and from priests to everyone else. Pseudo-Dionysius's writing gained political significance from the mid-thirteenth century, following key developments of late-medieval theology such as the rise of the vicariously intermediary role of priesthood. Colet's distinctive interpretation of the Pseudo-Dionysian corpus resided in his emphasis on the part played by episcopacy in the process of Church purification. It was only through the bishops that the church could perfectly conform to God's loving will.

Colet's specific high view of the episcopacy is patent throughout his sermon. However, one instance exemplifies it even further. When introducing "the second part of reformation", the section dedicated to his proposal for church reform, he reinforces that "this reformation and restoring of the church's estate must needs begin with you, our fathers, and so follow in us, your priests, and in all the clergy; you are heads; you are an example of living unto us. Unto you we look as unto marks of our direction. In you and in your life, we desire to read, as in lively books, how and after what fashion we may live."¹⁵⁶ By summoning the English bishops to hold morally commendable lives that can be read as lively books, Colet emphasises his own elevated view of the episcopal office, a particularly strong element of his ecclesiology. In Colet's ecclesiastical scheme, bishops held the highest position on earth, closest to God and especially commissioned to diffuse his light downwards into the other members of the Mystical Body.

¹⁵⁴ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. C2r.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibidem*, p. B5v.

The role of bishops in Colet's ecclesiological scheme can not be overstated. He even explained it in sacramental terms:

“Every hierarchy is a system and summary of things sacred. In the Christian hierarchy the office and duty of the Bishop is to comprise in himself and possess all sacred things. For the Bishop is a veritable sacrament, and a summary of all that follows after him in the Church. He apprehends and represents fully and clearly in himself the whole priesthood, so that there is nothing in any inferior minister given by God that exists not in Christ our Bishop more substantially, and clearly, and in a yet more perfect manner.”¹⁵⁷

Here, Colet encapsulates key concepts of late-medieval sacramental theology into his particular ecclesiological framework. The vicarious character of Christian episcopacy is elevated as bishops both apprehend and represent Christ's atoning ministry on earth. Colet's sacramental characterisation of episcopacy was a step further from his Pseudo-Dionysian-inspired ecclesiastical scheme. As much as Pseudo-Dionysius might have informed and inspired his ecclesiology, Colet would always claim to be a true follower of St Paul. His interpretation of the Pauline letters, particularly Romans, on which he had lectured at Oxford, played a decisive role in his sacramental view of episcopacy. When commenting on Romans 8:3-4 and St. Paul's description of Christ, Colet combines Pauline terminology with Pseudo-Dionysian implications:

“This was the eternal Son of God, whom the Father 'sending in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh; that the righteousness of the law

¹⁵⁷ COLET, John. *Two Treatises on the Hierarchies of Dionysius*. In LUPTON, Joseph Hirst. *Joannes Coletus Super Opera Dionysii: Two Treatises on the Hierarchies of Dionysius, by John Colet D.D.* London: Bell and Sons, 1869, p. 53.

might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the spirit' in the acknowledgement and worship of the true God. His office on earth the Bishops everywhere discharge, and in Him act as He acted, and with zeal strive for the purification and illumination and salvation of mankind, by constant preaching of the truth, and the diffusion of gospel light, even as He strove."¹⁵⁸

Following Colet's reasoning, bishops were the ultimate holders and diffusers of God's light on earth. Their office paralleled Christ's ministry at the vicarious performance of his sacrifice at Mass, but that was not all. Bishops were also commissioned to follow and mirror Christ in preaching. Colet paid particular attention to preaching in his own attempted reform at St Paul's Cathedral, moved by the same sacramental undertone. According to him, "the office of the Bishop is, like Christ, to preach constantly and diligently the truth he has received. For he is, as it were, a messenger midway between God and men, to announce to men heavenly things, as Christ did."¹⁵⁹ Colet frequently employed the metaphor of light when referring to both aspects of episcopacy. Whether by offering sacrifice at Mass or by preaching to their congregations, bishops were exercising their divine role of shining God's light on the lower members of the church. For this reason, the pulpit is given a special status in the church interior, being the setting of "an almost ecstatic state through which the bishop travelled in order to illumine others":

"The Bishop, who is illuminated by Christ, like the sun, shines from the pulpit with the light of truth and makes the word of the gospel stream forth alike on all. He cries, 'Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.' His words are 'pure words, even as the silver, which is tried, and purified seven times in the fire.' The Bishop himself is made fire by God; he has the light of truth, the warmth of goodness; in loving-kindness he teaches all."¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁵⁹ COLET, John. *Two Treatises on the Hierarchies of Dionysius*, *op. cit.*, pp. 70-71.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

Such concepts are particularly important if we aim to comprehend what Colet might have meant when, in his 1512 sermon, he commanded the English bishops in his audience to be as “lively books” to their fellow priests. Following his ecclesiological plan, bishops were to be thought of as the ultimate earthly bearers of God’s light, and it is such emphasis that informs his admonition. As important as the bishop's office was, its occupants had the highest standards to maintain: “For in truth if he were wanting in anything proceeding from God that is found in any inferior person, such as holiness, wisdom, justice, he assuredly is not the one to occupy the seat of the Bishop.”¹⁶¹ By exhorting the English episcopacy to behave as lively books, Colet mainly insisted that, given their providential authority and obligation, they play the role correctly: “He that attains this [Holy Spirit] in the highest degree is the bishop, and rightly holds the first place in the ministry, to the end that he should transmit that which he has received.”¹⁶² By informing bishops of their hierarchical and ministerial importance, Colet was also reminding them of their duties.

As Jonathan Arnold points out, “Colet’s method was to convince bishops of the seriousness of their responsibility as intermediaries of God’s love to the lower parts of the Mystical Body of Christ.”¹⁶³ Therefore, throughout his 1512 Convocation sermon, Colet leads his audience in the presentation of a practical programme of church reform based on the enforcement of canon law. In doing so, he had a privileged opportunity to reinforce his own ecclesiological agenda at a public gathering of the highest authorities of the English Church. As passionate and strong-willed as Colet was when it came to reforming the church, it is no wonder he gladly seized his chance. When he took the pulpit at that Convocation opening ceremony, Colet was also furnished with some years of failed attempts at restoring and uplifting the standards of living of his St Paul’s minor clergy. A significant step of his previously attempted reform programme was the printing and distribution of little books containing copies of the statutes and injunctions to be set in the choir. It would have been reasonable to consider Colet’s specific mention of lively books as mere rhetorical usage, were it not for his unsuccessful experience with book printing at St Paul’s. By mentioning lively books as a means through which priests could learn from their superiors, Colet was being more literal than not.

In 1505, a recently arrived lecturer from Oxford, John Colet assumed the deanery of St Paul’s Cathedral under suspicious circumstances. Arnold reminds us that in 1496, the new

¹⁶¹ COLET, John. *Two Treatises on the Hierarchies of Dionysius*, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

¹⁶² *Ibidem.*

¹⁶³ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet of St Paul’s*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

dean's father, Henry Colet, "had pledged his entire fortune to King Henry VII, 'for the faithful observance of the treaty' with the Low Countries, which was known as the *Magnus Intercursus*." ¹⁶⁴ Among other things, Henry Colet acted as City Mayor of London for most of the 1490s and was an instrumental figure in Henry VII's containment of "a rebellion from Cornwall, reaching as far as Blackheath, and from Perkin Warbeck arriving at Deal." Because of their support for Warbeck, England had ceased commercial dealings with the country of Flanders. Henry Colet was perhaps the paramount force behind the restoration of both countries' commercial negotiations. He gave his personal seal to enable the treaty, a move that held him enduringly dear to the king. Jonathan Arnold, although not properly justifying it, attributes Colet's nomination to St Paul's deanery to his father's commendable gesture and the king's appreciation for it: "we can therefore conjecture that Colet was promoted to the deanery in grateful recognition of his father's help to the king and that such an appointment would probably have been unpopular with the cathedral clergy." ¹⁶⁵

The high status of his father in Henry VII's administration was a key that opened many doors for the young Colet. As early as the 1480s and 1490s, he was already collecting rectorships in Suffolk, Norfolk, Huntingdonshire and Berkshire. In 1499 he became canon of both York Minster and Salisbury Cathedral. His hypocritical rebuke of pluralism must not have gone unnoticed by his contemporaries. Indeed, the minor clergy at St Paul's might have feared for their state upon hearing their new dean's opinion on hospitality. As Kleineke and Hovland remind us, "by the end of the fifteenth century, the splendid hospitality on offer at the dean's table was widely renowned, but within a few years the tradition was discontinued by the more austere John Colet."¹⁶⁶ The economic circumstances of the early sixteenth century provided a more than adverse scenario for urban minor clergymen, since "inequality of distribution was more pronounced in the Church than in the secular world."¹⁶⁷ The lower classes of the English secular clergy — chaplains, minor canons, and vicar choirs — could rely solely on their stipends. The need for decanal control and regulation of their chantry foundations only reinforced their economic restraint. In this scenario, regular decanal hospitality was a social necessity; it "provided financial support for the poorer members of the Church and was a basic function of all medieval households, however humble."¹⁶⁸ Secular

¹⁶⁴ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet of St Paul's, op. cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶⁶ KLEINEKE, H; HOVLAND, S. The Household and Daily Life of the Dean in the Fifteenth Century. In: BURNS, Arthur; KEENE, Derek; SAINT, Andrew (eds.). *St. Paul's: The Cathedral Church of London, 604-2004*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004, p. 168.

¹⁶⁷ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet of St Paul's, op. cit.*, p. 83.

¹⁶⁸ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet of St Paul's, op. cit.*, p. 84.

cathedrals traditionally offered hospitality to their staff or flock, while monastic regular communities would provide food and shelter for strangers and the local poor.

When he took the deanery at St. Paul's Cathedral, Colet stepped into one of the most prosperous secular cathedrals of England, whose deans and bishops were known for their liberality. In the 1480s, "Dean Wolsey would spend 40 pounds a year on food for his household; sometimes the figure was 60. This was a large sum if compared to late fifteenth-century lay households, where an esquire was expected to spend around 24 a year on food and fuel."¹⁶⁹ Colet's unashamed parsimony must have caused widespread dissatisfaction among St Paul's minor clergy, who grew more and more unwilling to receive his ideas with empty bellies.

More than his privileged upbringing, it was the dean's seemingly affected and dishonest exaggeration of his clergymen's faults that made him loathsome. His perfectionist agenda for church reform, which he attempted to impose immediately upon arriving in St. Paul's, did little to improve his situation. Colet embodied an unfortunate combination of upper-class privilege, intellectual superiority, and spiritual legalism that, when added to the administrative authority of his position as dean, directly impacted the lives of those around and beneath him. Jonathan Arnold rightly qualifies Colet's legacy: "From Oxford scholar to London dean, Colet's ecclesiology never wavered from the unrealistically idealistic. It was this perfectionism that led him to ask the impossible and ignore the meritorious. Thus, at the end of 1518, it was St Paul's School for which Colet could justly be proud. As for statute reform, his ideals for the Church remained an unrealised vision of perfection."¹⁷⁰

Colet's attempt at statute reform while he was dean of St. Paul's is a compelling example of this unrealised vision of perfection. His first documented act as dean was the visitation manuscripts he had to put forth as soon as he arrived at the cathedral. Visitation reports were mandatory for every newly appointed bishop or dean, but Colet's is now considered lost. What we do have is a late nineteenth-century printed transcription of it, published by W. S. Simpson in 1890.¹⁷¹ Because of it, we know that Colet's text was a two-fold document, with part one containing extracts from existing cathedral statutes and part two presenting his own proposed injunctions. However, "although we have Simpson's

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 177.

¹⁷¹ SIMPSON, W. Sparrow. 'A Newly Discovered Manuscript Containing Statutes Compiled by Dean Colet for the Government of Chantry Priests and Other Clergy in St. Paul's Cathedral. *Archaeologia*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 145-174., 1890.

purportedly full Latin transcription of the manuscript, the issue of whether or not these injunctions were ever accepted and implemented by the chapter remains a mystery.”¹⁷²

A quick reading of Colet’s sermon and a brief reassessment of his failed reforming attempts may help paint a dramatic picture of pre-Reformation England. His strong denunciation of the secularity into which English clergy have fallen and the increasing moral and institutional deterioration of English episcopacy may provide a familiar and powerful argument for the emergence of Protestantism in England, expressly manifested in the rise of anticlerical tendencies. It has been commonly assumed that, by the turn of the sixteenth century, the Western Church faced a multifaceted institutional and doctrinal decline. Traditional religion was under attack by new trends of intellectual reformism, both within and outside of the ecclesiastical establishment. Waves of heresy and heterodoxy had been crashing against the surface of the ever-powerful medieval church. But it seemed that the Western Church was also crumbling from within, as the moral decay of its representatives matched its doctrine’s growing irrelevance.

The concept of a declining Christendom in the early sixteenth-century is as old as the Reformation. It is, in fact, the most noticeable intellectual product of the Reformation. The one thing in common between the various strands of Protestantism that swept Europe throughout the century—Lutherans, Zwinglians, Calvinists, and Anabaptists—was the profound conviction that Roman Catholicism was the wrong path. Even though a stark renunciation of Rome was not on the table in the immediate years after Luther’s controversy in Wittenberg, it did not take long for it to become something of a Protestant dogma. Extravagant as most of Luther’s statements regarding the Church of Rome were, the fact is that, some years into the Reformation, not many Protestants would disagree with him on that “the kingdom of the pope really signifies the terrible wrath of God, namely, the abomination of desolation standing in the holy place.”¹⁷³ If a complete rebuke of the Roman Church seemed preposterous in 1517, by the mid-1520s it had become Protestant common sense.

The urgency with which the Reformation happened was due to the pressing concerns of its contemporaries. Even Luther’s outspokenness gains new light when we consider the profound and urgent nature of late medieval apocalyptic literature, according to which the Last Days were more than near. After all, “like everyone else in central Europe, he [Luther] was desperately conscious of the coming of the Turks, who threatened the very existence of

¹⁷² ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet of St Paul’s, op. cit.*, p. 66.

¹⁷³ LUTHER, Martin. *Martin Luther’s Table Talks. Abridged Edition*. Edited by Henry F. French. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017, p. 201.

Christendom, and now bitter experience had also taught him that the Pope too was a manifestation on earth of Antichrist.”¹⁷⁴ The image of the crumbling edifice of Christendom being shaken by a horde of external threats fails to capture the intense feelings early Protestants felt towards Rome. Due to the immediate troubles in Germany after Luther, it became clear to many that the only solution was to tear the edifice down.

However, things were different on the other side of the Channel, and the Reformation in England followed a peculiar, slower path. During the twentieth century, historians extensively debated the direction and speed of the English Reformation, and discussions have been centred around challenging Henry VIII's role in fostering religious settlement, in a remarkable shift of emphasis from political to social history. Especially since the 1950s, as Rosemary O’Day has remarked, “it became important to flesh the abstractions and to determine what changes occurred in the lifestyle of ordinary people. When political events were studied, it was now necessary to gauge the extent to which various social groups participated in and influenced them, reacted to them or ignored them.”¹⁷⁵ By attentively assessing a wider array of primary sources and sharpening their methodological and theoretical lenses, twentieth-century historians discovered that the pre-Reformation English Church was not a crumbling edifice. Early sixteenth-century texts, like Colet’s sermon, which was ultimately critical of the state of the church at the time, had been easily mobilised as examples of proto-Protestant tendencies. Ever since John Foxe, author of the *Acts and Monuments*, portrayed the dean of St Paul’s as a Reformation hero, the label stuck. It was only in the nineteenth century that a Catholic Colet became scholarly consensus, mostly due to the influence of Frederick Seebohm’s 1867 *The Oxford Reformers* and Thomas Lupton’s 1887 *A Life of John Colet*. Respectively, both works established Colet's early sixteenth-century humanist connections and provided a more profound understanding of his intellectual and philosophical background.¹⁷⁶ Furthermore, the twentieth century witnessed a growing and better-informed interest in Colet’s pre-Reformation theological and historical context. The rise of revisionist historiography in the 1980s and 1990s played a decisive role in reviving Colet’s Catholicism. Eamon Duffy’s *The Stripping of the Altars* and Christopher

¹⁷⁴ MACCULLOCH, Diarmaid. *The Reformation: A History*. Penguin Books, 2005. p.133.

¹⁷⁵ O’DAY, Rosemary. *The Debate on the English Reformation*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2014, p. 129.

¹⁷⁶ Seebohm even argued that “the awakening of a rational Christianity, whether in England, or in the Teutonic world at large, begins with the Florentine studies of John Colet.” SEEBOHM, Frederick. *The Oxford Reformers: John Colet, Erasmus, and Thomas More*. London, New York and Bombay: Longmans, Green, and Co. 1896.

Harper-Bill's *The Pre-Reformation Church in England* have successfully contributed to a more realistic review of the state of the *ecclesia Anglicana* in the early Tudor period.

Given the contemporary impact of revisionist scholarship, Colet's claims for church reform must be examined without the clouds of later confessional strife. The early years of the sixteenth century, in which most of his clerical and intellectual activities took place, were a time of crisis, not decline. As Harper-Bill positively affirmed, "that in the early sixteenth century the English Church was subject to fierce criticism from within may be seen as a symptom of health rather than of terminal disease."¹⁷⁷ Despite Colet's dramatic depiction, the English clergy and episcopacy remained important tokens of the universal Church to the vast majority of people in England. After all, "for most English people, from the royal court circle to the inhabitants of rural hamlets who might benefit from an indulgence obtained for a local church, the Papacy was part of the traditional order of things, as much in Yorkist and early Tudor England as three centuries before."¹⁷⁸ Far from a frontal attack on the validity of the ecclesiastical body, Colet's critique is actually a reinforcement of its importance. It was precisely because priests and bishops were fundamental in bringing laypeople closer to God that they needed reform. Most early sixteenth-century ardent cries for church reform came from pious, committed priests like Colet. As Harper-Bill concludes, "there were, indeed, constant impassioned pleas for reform in England as on the Continent, but these should not be accepted uncritically as an indictment. They may be seen, rather, as a reflection of rising demands and expectations of performance which were clothed in conventional rhetoric, and as a sign of the vigour of the Roman church in its provinces which survived the crisis of authority at the centre."¹⁷⁹

Considering Colet's known reputation as a self-righteous upper-class cleric who allegedly got a free ride to the position of power he was in, it is curious to wonder how his Convocation sermon might have resonated with his audience, composed of both high and low English clergy. As Lupton good-humouredly conjectured: "with what feelings the congregation would depart, threading their way amid the clustering pillars of the old cathedral, we cannot tell, but certainly one in that assembly had delivered his soul."¹⁸⁰ Reactions to Colet's hard-line expectations and propositions make a compelling case for the complexities of the pre-Reformation English Church. His legacy was complex and uniquely ambiguous. Archbishop Warham made his defence of Colet public when he invited him to

¹⁷⁷ HARPER-BILL, Christopher. *The Pre-Reformation Church in England*, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 23.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁸⁰ LUPTON, Joseph Hirst. *op. cit.*, p. 188.

preach at the opening of the 1512 Canterbury Convocation. Erasmus expressed his praise for his friend in his 1521 letter, commending him as a virtuous example of a Catholic church reformer. Generations of later Protestants would look at him as a precursor of evangelical preaching and church administration. However, many of his contemporaries and subordinates loathed him. His church reform programme was considered too strict, unattainable, and perfectionist. What he attempted to impose as reforming statutes at his time as dean of St Paul's Cathedral never came to fruition. That is why Thomas Berthelet's 1530 publication of Colet's Sermon, now translated to English, deserves further attention.

1.3. Colet's Sermon, a Lively Book

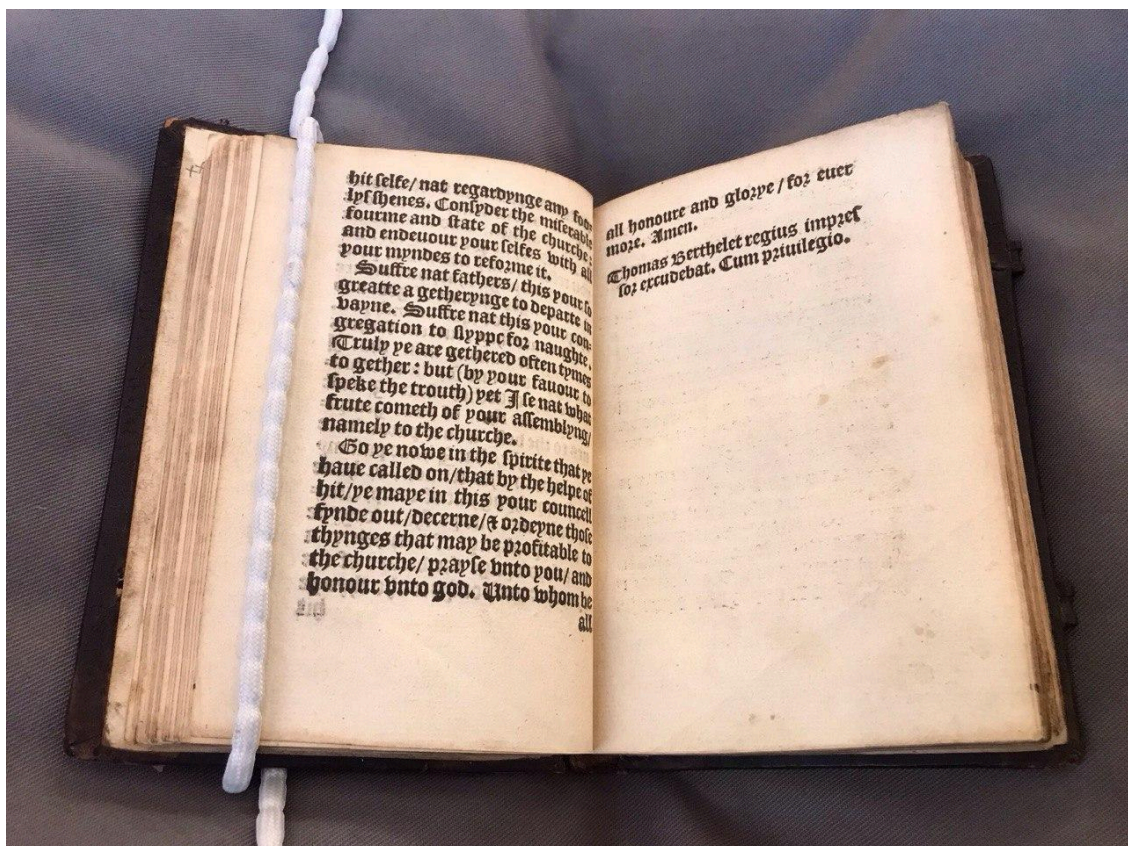


Figure 6. Colophon of the 1530 edition of *The Sermon of Doctor Colet* (right).
With the kind permission of Lambeth Palace Library.

As he closed his sermon at the Convocation, John Colet thus dispersed his audience: “Go ye now in the spirit that you have called on, that by the help of it ye may in this our council find out, discern, and ordain those things that may be profitable to the Church, praise

unto you, and honour unto God. Unto whom be all honour and glory, forevermore. Amen.”¹⁸¹ In the printed copy held at Lambeth Library, these words are followed by the register of who put them into print: “*Thomas Berthelet regius impressor excudebat. Cum priuilegio*” (Figure 6).

Since its original delivery, Colet’s was a sermon to hear and read. We can conclude this from the rapid rendering of the sermon into print. In 1512 Richard Pynson published the *Oratio habita a D. Ioanne Colet decano Sancti Pauli ad clerum in conuocatione*, but this raises more questions than answers. Overall, early English sermon printing culture leaves us with a set of important unanswerable questions: “What happened between the delivery of the sermon and the publication? Were the original sermons written in Latin or English? Did preachers go into the pulpit with a prepared script in hand, a memorised text or merely notes? Were the sermons written out afterwards for posterity, and if so, what sort of poetic licence was taken in terms of improvement or expansion?”¹⁸² As Veronica O’Mara reminds us, “most of these questions are unanswerable.”¹⁸³ On the other hand, educated inferences are an integral part of any historian’s assignment. To conjecture about the publication circumstances of both Latin and English editions of Colet’s sermon, it might be worthwhile to begin by addressing books that were probably never printed: Colet’s 1506 *libelli*.

As soon as he became dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral, John Colet endeavoured to actively reform it. As Simpson’s nineteenth-century printed transcription of the dean’s visitation manuscript makes clear, Colet wished to make his minor clergy aware of the existing Cathedral statutes by providing them with *libelli* (little books), placed in convenient locations. Unfortunately, none of these books are extant. Moreover, as Arnold reminds us, “Colet’s 1506 visitation expenses include no entry relating to the copying of the injunctions into the prescribed little books, or even into one book.”¹⁸⁴ However, Arnold also mentions a quotation from a 1559 document that suggests these *libelli* may have been produced. The document reads: “Books and other Writings appertaining to the Cathedral Church of Saint Paul in London and to the Dean only and the Dean and Chapter of the said cathedral church. Delivered by Mr Henry Cole, late Dean of the same Church, to Doctor May, now dean this the xxth Day of September A [nno] 1559.”¹⁸⁵ The items mentioned are “a book entitled statutes

¹⁸¹ COLET, John, *op. cit.*, p. C6v.

¹⁸² O’MARA, Veronica, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

¹⁸³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸⁴ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet’s of St Paul’s*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁸⁵ As indicated by Arnold, the document is GL, MS 25184, a single parchment roll brought to him by Dr David Crankshaw. In: ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet’s of St Paul’s*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

used in Dean Colet's days; a book entitled *Liber visita[ti]o[n]es Joa[nn]is Collett, Decani ecc[les]ia Sancti Pauli London sub A[nno] D[omi]n[i] 1506*; a book written in parchment of certayne statute[s] collected by Dean Colet, being bound and covered with black leather."¹⁸⁶ The items described serve as evidence that Colet made use of a specific book of statutes during his time as dean, that his visitation manuscript was made into a whole book, and that he also compiled at least one book of statutes. The core issue is to ascertain whether or not this final item corresponded to one of Colet's *libelli*. On the whole, we can agree with Arnold's conjecture that, "whilst it cannot be proved that this item was an example of Colet's 'little books', the evidence suggests the possibility that he successfully commissioned the manufacture of at least one of the *libelli*."¹⁸⁷ However, only further research on the internal documents of St Paul's Cathedral might help solve this question.

What we can conclude from this newly found evidence, though, is of enormous importance. It suggests that Colet's writings, those resulting from his visitation at St Paul's, were published. Moreover, considering that they were intended for internal consumption by the St Paul's Cathedral clergy, it would be accurate to estimate the texts existed in manuscript form. Although we cannot be entirely sure whether they were ever printed, they seem to confirm Colet's acknowledged intent to publicise his reform proposals.¹⁸⁸ Colet was deeply interested in making his ideas of church reform public, which suggests he might have been involved with the printing of his 1511-12 Convocation Sermon. Printed sermons were a relatively new phenomenon and represented a minuscule portion of the English book trade, being almost entirely restricted to the importance of the preacher. In the early sixteenth century, English bishops were the most likely candidates to have their sermons printed, as previously mentioned in this chapter. Colet was an avid and eminent preacher, and his Sunday sermons at St Paul's Cathedral would attract the elite of Tudor London, including sometimes King Henry VIII himself. His sermon was also most likely printed because it was given at the Canterbury Convocation, where all the southern provinces of the English Church gathered.

¹⁸⁶ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean Colet's of St Paul's*, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

¹⁸⁸ In the early sixteenth century, manuscript modes of publishing were concomitant with the new development of printing. Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham point out the strength of pre-print mass communication in the Middle Ages, commonly discredited when compared with the invention of the printing press. Their analogy between print and gunpowder is worth revisiting: "The invention of printing can be compared with the invention of gunpowder. Over a long period of time, printing transformed communication, just as gunpowder transformed war—both transformations were gradual. One would laugh at the historian of warfare who thought that all fighting was hand-to-hand before guns were invented. Mendicant books and even the books of heretics were the longbows of medieval communication." CRICK, Julia; WALSHAM, Alexandra (eds.). *Uses of Script and Print, 1300-1700*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, pp. 68-69.

Overall, when it comes to the decision process over the printing, we can only rely on educated conjectures. Similar to most evidence from early print culture, we lack information on costs, circulation, or reception indicators. Considering the text was a Latin sermon advertised as having been delivered at Convocation in St Paul's, we can safely conclude it was targeted at a specific group of literate and learnt readers who would be somewhat familiar with ecclesiastical history and literature. The sermon was printed right after the Convocation took place, which suggests it was intended to be read as soon as possible. It was issued, therefore, as a means to distribute Colet's sermon to those who were absent from the Convocation ceremony, making the dean's ecclesiological programme circulate to a wider audience.

We cannot be sure of how Colet's Latin sermon was received. Fortunately, the English version printed by Thomas Berthelet in 1530 provides us with a little more to ponder. Being an English translation, it begs the question: Who translated it, and why? The most probable candidate for that is Thomas Lupset (1495-1530). He was John Colet's most eminent student, having been enrolled at St Paul's School and later becoming a resident of the dean's household. Given his prolific humanist writing, it is reasonable to assume he would have engaged in translating his headmaster's sermon into English. John Archer Gee provided a list of all the works written or attributed to Lupset in his 1928 biography, *The Life and Works of Thomas Lupset*. According to Gee:

“There is no good reason to reject the conclusion [...] that Lupset made this translation. The version is a faithful one, carefully done. Its style is as similar to that of the works we know to be of Lupset as, we should imagine, that of a translation by him of another's work would be. Furthermore, it is easy to believe, because so very fitting, that Lupset, rather than anyone else, was the translator of his benefactor's writings. We may, therefore, though conclusive proof is lacking, consider it probable that this translation was his.”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁹ GEE, John Archer. *The Life and Works of Thomas Lupset*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1928, p 170.

There is yet another element to corroborate Gee's claim. All of the extant printed copies of Lupset's writings, issued during Henry VIII's time, were published by Thomas Berthelet. They were also printed after Lupset's death, in 1530. Therefore, if we assume that Lupset translated Colet's sermon, this translation might have been the first in a series of posthumous publications issued by Berthelet during the 1530s and 1540s.

The status of Colet's sermon as a translation also adds yet another layer of complexity to its authorial attribution. According to A. E. B. Coldiron, the early print culture in England was a "phase of literary history in the West when translators were anything but invisible."¹⁹⁰ The translator's visibility, following his argument, operated in early modern printed texts in distinctive ways compared to how it did in late medieval manuscripts, especially through the addition of engraved or woodcut images. However, Colet's English sermon points in the opposite direction. Its translator is never mentioned or hinted at, which does not necessarily discard Thomas Lupset, since other works attributed to him were also published without his name at the time, like the *Exhortation to young men* (1535).¹⁹¹

Reassessing Thomas Berthelet's printing of the works written by Thomas Lupset helps illuminate possible reasons for the publication of Colet's English sermon in 1530. That same year, Berthelet was appointed King's Printer, succeeding his early master Richard Pynson. This qualifies Colet's English sermon not only as the earliest of Lupset's works that Berthelet printed but also as one of his earliest publications after becoming King's Printer. In 1546, Berthelet published a collection of Lupset's writings, entitled *Thomas Lupset's Works*, a year before the end of Henry VIII's reign and his own time as the King's Printer; this collection is now held at the British Library in two copies. This is evidence of the overall commercial success of Lupset's writings among Henrician readers, as well as a testimony to the author's posthumously acclaimed reputation.

John Archer Gee has described Thomas Lupset as the lecturer "who did much to keep burning the torch of English scholarship his elders had lighted."¹⁹² The metaphor really suits the young man who was charged with bearing John Colet's legacy in a manner resembling the dean's ecclesiological scheme of light diffusion from the higher to the lower classes. Like his master before him, Lupset's brief life did little to overshadow his literary and intellectual

¹⁹⁰ COLDIRON, A. E. B.; The Translator's Visibility in Early Printed Portrait-Images and the Ambiguous Example of Margaret More Roper. In: BELLE, Marie-Alice.; HOSINGTON, Brenda M. (eds.). *Thresholds of Translation: Paratexts, Print, and Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Britain (1473-1660)*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 52.

¹⁹¹ LUPSET, Thomas. *An exhortacion to young men, perswadyng them to walke in the pathe way that leadeth to hoestie and goodness: written to a frende of his by Thomas Lupsete Londoner*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1535.

¹⁹² GEE, John Archer. *op. cit.*, p. 10.

contributions to English humanism. According to Gee, Lupset's prose style was more well-developed than Tyndale's and more lucid than More's: "More was the first to write modern English prose before 1530. The best English prose written before that date was by Lupset."¹⁹³

Overall, if we acknowledge Lupset as the translator of Colet's sermon, as most evidence suggests, we have a compelling case for the importance of the dean's thought in the late 1520s and early 1530s. What also contributes to the picture is Berthelet's commercial decision-making. Having just been nominated as King's Printer, he would not have risked his business enterprise with the printing of a reproachable or unimportant author. Added to that the complicated scene of sermon printing at the time, there is more reason to believe this was a calculated decision from a shrewd businessman who, just like Lupset himself, had learnt everything his master had to teach him.

Moreover, the English version of Colet's 1512 Sermon helped advance the dean's ecclesiological thought to a wider English-speaking audience. It also supported the growing expansion of vernacular texts in the 1530s, including both translations and original works. It is remarkable to conjecture on how Colet's ideas might have resonated with this newly established reading public for English humanistic texts. Moreover, it is worth considering how those Catholics might have perceived Colet's view on adhering to traditionally established laws faced with the turmoil of the King's Great Matter and his pledge for divorce.

In his 1887 *Life of Dean John Colet*,¹⁹⁴ Lupton quoted a contemporary, Bishop John Henry Burnet, who once intended to write about Colet's Convocation Sermon:

"When I wrote my history of the Reformation,' he says, 'I had Dr Colet's sermon in my hands, and once I intended to have published it, as a piece that might serve to open the scene, and to show the state of things at the first beginnings of the Reformation. But I was diverted from it,' he adds, 'by those under whose direction I put that work. They thought it might have been judged that I had inserted it on

¹⁹³ GEE, John Archer. *op. cit.* p. 197.

¹⁹⁴ LUPTON, Joseph Hirst. *A Life of Dean Colet: Dean of St Paul's, and Founder of St Paul's School*. London: George Bell and Sons, 1887.

design to reflect on the present, as well as on the past state of things.”¹⁹⁵

Thankfully we are not as constrained as Bishop Burnet. Colet’s Convocation Sermon can provide us with a glimpse of what the pre-Reformation Church in England was like, especially considering the renewed understanding of its institutional structure. The early sixteenth-century English Church was not Colet’s exaggerated portrait of corrupt and covetous clerics, nor was it his idealised scheme of angelic bishops diffusing God’s light into an otherwise lost and disoriented laity. When it comes to the pre-Reformation Church, it seems easier to identify its anomalies and contradictions than it is to acknowledge its powerful adaptability to all of them. I strongly agree with Lucy Wooding’s description of what early modern religion meant. She argues:

“Religion in the early Tudor period, however, was not about institutional structures or intellectual propositions; it was the very fabric of life. Above all else, it was a body of believers. Authority structures, clerical hierarchies, canon law and doctrinal disputes were on the periphery of religious life, not at its centre. It is no accident that the most positive assessments of pre-Reformation religion have come from historians who focus on the life of the parish, the loyalties of ordinary people and the rhythms of the ritual year.”¹⁹⁶

The 1530 printed translation of Colet’s Sermon proves Wooding right. The dean of St Paul’s Cathedral did not live to see any of his reforming efforts implemented. He never fulfilled his ecclesiological project. Nonetheless, his distorted expectations of the world around him, as well as his failed attempts to transform it, provide us with a conducive and rewarding glimpse of that same world. The later printing of his sermon allows us to perceive how much that world had changed after the dean’s death. By the 1530s, the English Church Colet dedicated his life to reform was facing the most decisive and creative moment of its

¹⁹⁵ BLUNT, John Henry. *Reflections*, p. 5. apud. LUPTON, Joseph Hirst, *op. cit.*, p. 179.

¹⁹⁶ WOODING, Lucy. *Tudor England, op. cit.*, p. 89.

history. Much has been written about the English Reformation and its winning and losing sides. However, as the next chapter will demonstrate, history has a way of making us revisit and retell old tales.

Chapter 2.

Holding the Ploughman Devotionally Accountable: The *Book of Husbandry* and Catholic Devotion

Prayer was the bread and butter of early modern devotional life. Every day was supposed to begin and end with a prayer, and there were specific prayers for a wide range of life activities and stages. To Juan Luis Vives, the Spanish humanist, the work of prayer was “greater than and superior to all others in life.”¹⁹⁷ Right by the cock’s crow, it was imperative to have the mind elevated to heavenly things, so the following sentence reads: “First in the morning when thou art woken and purpose to rise, lift up thy hand and bless it, and make a sign of the holy cross, *In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen.* In the name of the Father, the Son, and of the holy ghost. And if thou sayest a Pater noster, and Ave, and a Crede, and rememberest thy maker, thou shalt speed much the better.”¹⁹⁸

Instructions such as the one mentioned above reveal the radically practical undertone of early modern prayer.¹⁹⁹ The rhythm of prayer orchestrated the early rising of the day, which should begin with a willingness to pray. Such inclination was to be signalled by the body itself. First, the hands should be lifted to heaven and signal the cross, following the Latin trinitarian blessing: “*In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen.*” Afterwards, the lips should proclaim “a Pater noster, Ave, and the Creed.” Like reading, prayer was a body-implicated practice.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of prayer for any study on devotional history. In 1950, Helen C. White denounced how obscure the history of private devotion still was at her time. According to her, ‘the large and dramatic part played in the history of religion by controversies over liturgy and public prayer has tended to obscure and do something less

¹⁹⁷ “Quiescant omnia, et cedant operi, quo maius nullum esse potest in vita, nec praestabilius.” VIVES, Juan Luis. *Joannis Ludovici Vivis Valentini Opera Omnia*, ed. MAYANS Y SISCAR, G. (Valentiae Edetanorum, 1782). p. 62.

¹⁹⁸ FITZHERBERT, John. *The Book of Husbandry*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1533, p. K2v.

¹⁹⁹ DUFFY, Eamon. *Marking the Hours. English People and their Prayers*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. DUFFY, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars, op. cit.*; ERLER, Mary C. *Women Reading and Piety in Late Medieval England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002; SARGENT, Michael G. *De Cella in Seculum: Religion and Secular Life and Devotion in Late Medieval England*. Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1989; WHITE, Helen Constance. *The Tudor Books of Private Devotion*. The University of Wisconsin Press: 1950.

than justice to the relative importance of private prayer.”²⁰⁰ She was tragically right, and her *Tudor Books of Private Devotion* remains an indisputable reference to contemporary scholarship on the history of devotion in sixteenth-century England.

It is impossible to discuss late medieval devotion without considering the importance of books of hours. A quick look at an illuminated manuscript suffices for anyone to agree with Eamon Duffy when he called them ‘one of the most glamorous and most familiar artefacts of the Middle Ages.’²⁰¹ Originally constrained to the use of monastic communities since the thirteenth century, throughout the Late Middle Ages *books of hours* rapidly grew to become popular objects among wealthy lay people. In the early sixteenth century, they were already an established commercial and devotional commodity, offering its readers and owners an elaborate system of variable prayers to be said throughout the day. From guides to the monastic life to familiar relics, *books of hours* “flourished in the same era that witnessed a significant expansion of literacy and schooling, and the growth of the printing industry.”²⁰² In his book *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers*,²⁰³ Eamon Duffy provides a detailed study of this fundamentally medieval object that embodied “a remarkable medieval laicisation of clerical forms of prayer, the adaptation of the Church’s complex liturgy for use by men and women from many walks of life, and of many levels of education.”²⁰⁴

Given the undeniable relevance of *books of hours* for the study of devotional history, it might surprise the reader that the present chapter is not dedicated to them. Rather, the initial prayer advice quoted at the beginning comes from a farming manual, not a prayer book. *The Book of Husbandry* has become an English bestseller on agriculture since its first edition, published in 1523. Advice on ploughing, planting, animal handling, and other general agricultural expertise had gained the book considerable popularity, and several editions were printed throughout the sixteenth century. Notwithstanding its specific husbandry-related content, the book contains a lengthy final section dedicated to prayer and other devotional teachings. Surprisingly, this section accounts for almost 30% of the total number of pages in what constitutes an overall farming manual. Also startling is that such a page disposition has remained relatively unaltered ever since. That speaks volumes about the importance of prayer for early modern people.

²⁰⁰ WHITE, Helen Constance. *op. cit.*, p. 4.

²⁰¹ DUFFY, Eamon. *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers, 1240-1570*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017. p. 3.

²⁰² REINBURG, Virginia. *French Books of Hours: Making an Archive of Prayer, 1400-1600*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, p. 2.

²⁰³ DUFFY, Eamon. *Marking the Hours, op. cit.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

The *Book of Husbandry* was more than a farming manual. Beyond its agricultural content, I argue that it was an eloquent manifesto for Catholic household devotion. By the time the book was published, in 1523, English Catholics were just starting to realise the stretch of the abyss between their current situation and their shared goals of ecclesiastical reform. By the beginning of the decade, the defining events that would forever change the face of religion in England – the break with Rome and the establishment of royal supremacy – still remained an unforeseen sight on the horizon. From 1527 onwards, however, Catholics in England were faced with the ultimate challenge: to follow either King or Pope. The vast majority of Henrician Catholics chose the former.²⁰⁵

In the early 1520s, however, this choice remained distant and unpredictable, but the challenges faced by English Catholics prior to that period offered them unique opportunities to shape their visions of church reform. The *Book of Husbandry*, written by John Fitzherbert and first published by Thomas Berthelet in 1523, gives access to a world where even the lowest ploughman was held devotionally accountable. Being a farming manual, the book provided detailed English-written agricultural information mixed with Latin quotations and translations by ancient doctors. In its final section, the reader would have a devotional treatise in which basic Catholic theology was explained and discussed. At a time when Lutheranism was spreading throughout England, the *Book of Husbandry* offered its readers a strong defence of Catholic piety. The reformist nature of this devotional section is evidence of how much early sixteenth-century English Catholicism had assimilated notions of devotional responsibility, which empowered Catholic laymen and women – from high to low origins, from literate to illiterate backgrounds – to roll up their sleeves in matters of salvation. If, by the early 1520s, Lutheranism could more generally appeal to university-trained men from Cambridge and Oxford and still seemed like an imported fashion from abroad, some Catholic authors opted for innovative ways to dialogue with common Englishmen and women through the medium of print.

In this chapter I will demonstrate how the final section of the *Book of Husbandry* sheds light on concepts of Catholic devotional responsibility, being particularly informed by late-medieval devotional humanism.²⁰⁶ First, the *Book of Husbandry* requires a further

²⁰⁵ WOODING, Lucy. *Rethinking Catholicism*, *op. cit.*

²⁰⁶ POST, R.R. *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism*. Leiden: Brill, 1968. ENGEN, John Van. (ed.). *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*. New York: Paulist Press, 1988; ENGEN, John Van. *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008; HABSBURG, Michael (ed.) *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi, 1425-1650: From Late Medieval Classic to Early Modern Bestseller*. London

comment on early modern farming manuals and on the ways in which it was distinctive among other European, especially French, agricultural treatises such as the 1490s *Calendrier et Compost des Bergers*, translated into English as the Shepherds' Calendar, and the 1560s *L'Agriculture et la Maison Rustique*, by the French physician and printer Charles Estienne. Moreover, the first section of the chapter will provide a discussion on the various possibilities of reading and getting access to a volume like the *Book of Husbandry* in the sixteenth century. Despite their lower literacy rates, husbandmen and women were far from excluded from reading or hearing the *Book of Husbandry*, which was particularly aimed at country gentlemen to read aloud to their servants. Moreover, the early sixteenth century witnessed the emergence of what authors like Ian Green have referred to as the middling class, who would also benefit from reading the *Book of Husbandry*. Small shopkeepers, craftsmen and merchants were more and more becoming a reading public of their own, and instructional literature both interested and pleased them. That considered, there is enough evidence to believe that the *Book of Husbandry* would have been read, or heard, by more people than scholars have acknowledged.

Moreover, conceiving of the *Book of Husbandry* as a fluid, dynamic, and more widely accessible book allows us to better understand the appeal of its final chapters. Devotional themes such as prayer and almsgiving are given a whole section in which Catholic piety is briefly but profoundly explained. At first glance, it may seem strange to encounter such a lengthy devotional section added to a farming manual. However, in the early sixteenth century, agriculture and devotion had more in common than we seem to appreciate in modern times. Moreover, when we consider the circumstances of early 1520s England and the religious turmoil caused by the spread of Lutheranism, it is more than reasonable to suggest that Fitzherbert was also envisaging his agricultural treatise as a powerful and polemical intervention in a theological debate. I will dedicate the second section of this chapter to demonstrating just that. Finally, I will discuss how much the type of Catholic theology presented in the *Book of Husbandry* differs from other devotional materials targeted at the laymen, such as Richard Whitford's *Werke for Householders*, first published in 1527. The degree to which Fitzherbert's theological intervention has been neglected by scholarship points to the necessity of further research on the connections between early sixteenth-century household piety, print culture, and social history. Overall, the main goal of this chapter is to offer a renewed understanding of *Book of Husbandry* as more than a popular farming manual

and New York: Routledge, 2016; SARGENT, Michael G. (ed.). *De Cella in Seculum: Religious and Secular Life and Devotion in Late Medieval England*. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer: 1989.

but as a sharpened tool of Catholic religious indoctrination. In the 1520s, the battle for the ploughman's heart was at full speed, and English Catholics did not fail to show up.

2.1. The Book of Husbandry and Early Sixteenth-Century Reading Culture

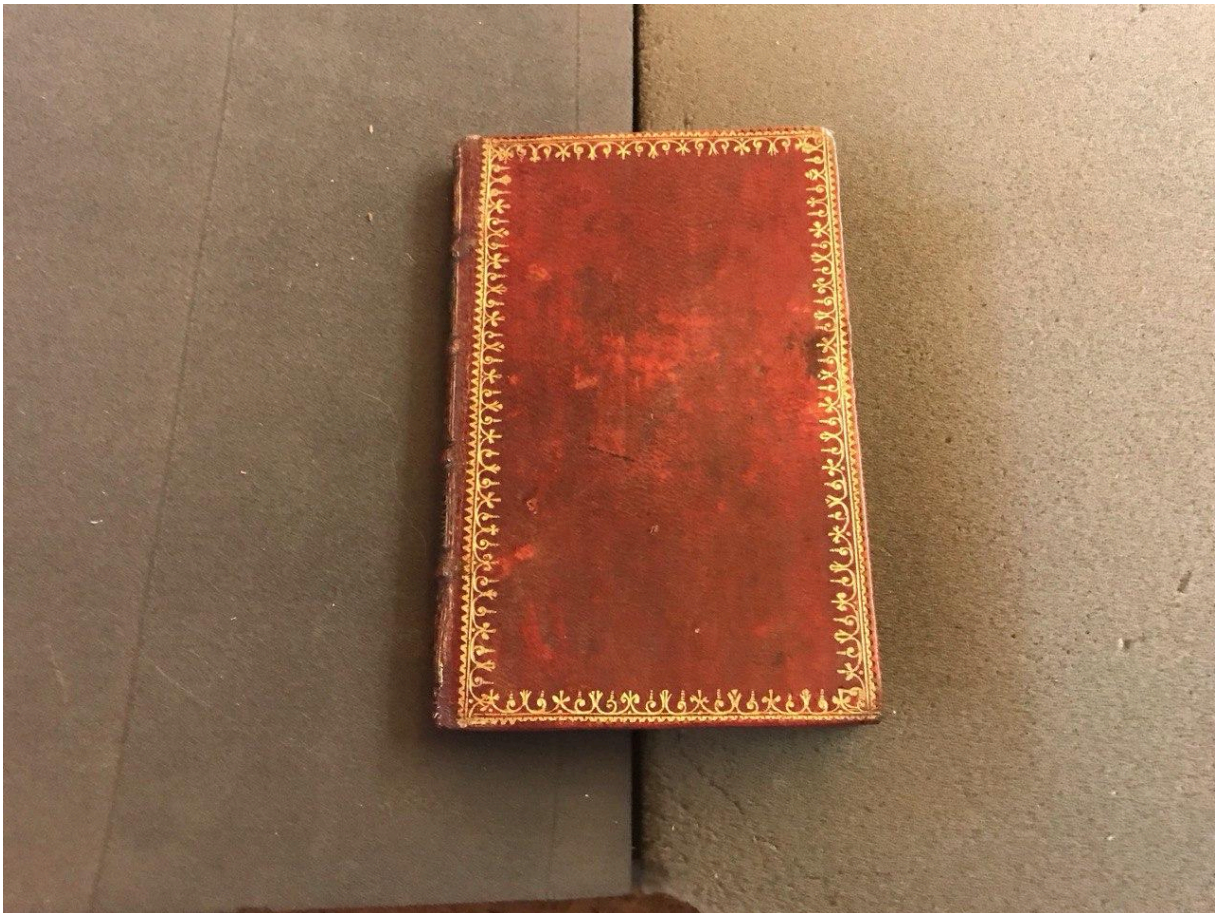


Figure 7. Cover of the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*.
With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

Of the many reprints of *The Book of Husbandry*, one of the earliest copies is a 1534 volume now held by the Bodleian Library. It is a strikingly small *octavo* with a dark red leather cover ornamented with decorating gilded motifs (Figure 7) and a skilfully detailed spine (Figure 8). The volume opens up onto a heavily annotated title page filled with penmanship exercises and a verse at the centre: “Time shall try my faith” (Figure 9). Following the title page (Figure 9), there follows “The author’s prologue” (Figure 10) and the table of contents (Figure 11), the end of which was also annotated by a 16th-century reader on

“the 27th day of April Anno Domini 1579” (Figure 12). The first subject on the table is presented as a short paragraph under the title: “Here beginneth the book of husbandry, and first whereby husbandmen do live.” After a 6-line initial letter, the text reads: “The most general living that husbands can have is by ploughing and sowing of their corn and rearing or breeding of their cattle and not the one without the other. Then is the plough the most necessary instrument that a husband can occupy, wherefore it is convenient to be known, how a plough should be made.”²⁰⁷

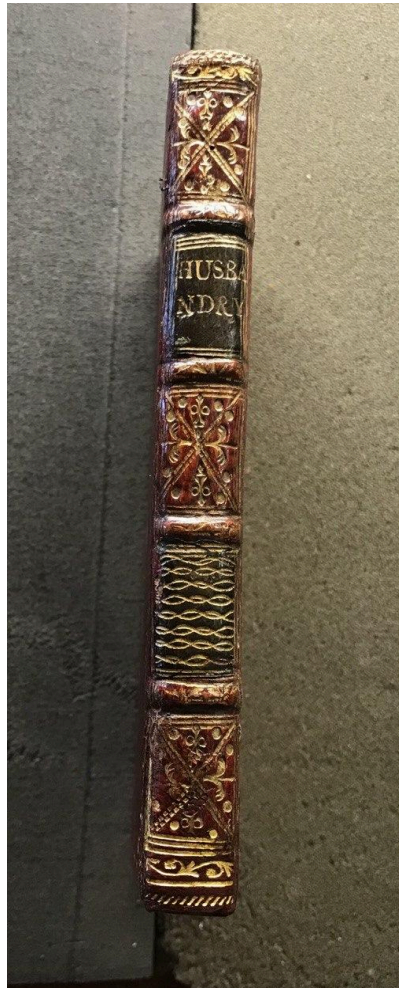


Figure 8. Spine of the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*.
With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

²⁰⁷ FITZHERBERT, John. *op. cit.*, p. 1.

The didactic nature of the *Book of Husbandry* announces itself even before we open it. The pocket size and striking thinness of the volume suggest it was to be carried around and easily manoeuvred, a lightweight and portable companion for the interested husbandman. The 9-page table of contents (Figure 11) is meticulously divided, and its subjects and chapters are easily and effortlessly spotted by the eye, which provides the reader with a useful and effective navigational tool to peruse what claims to be a practical manual. Throughout the book, the titles of each section are also clearly set and identified by either a manicule or a paragraph symbol. Overall, the typographical design is sober, straightforward, and effective enough to provide an equally profitable and pleasurable reading experience.

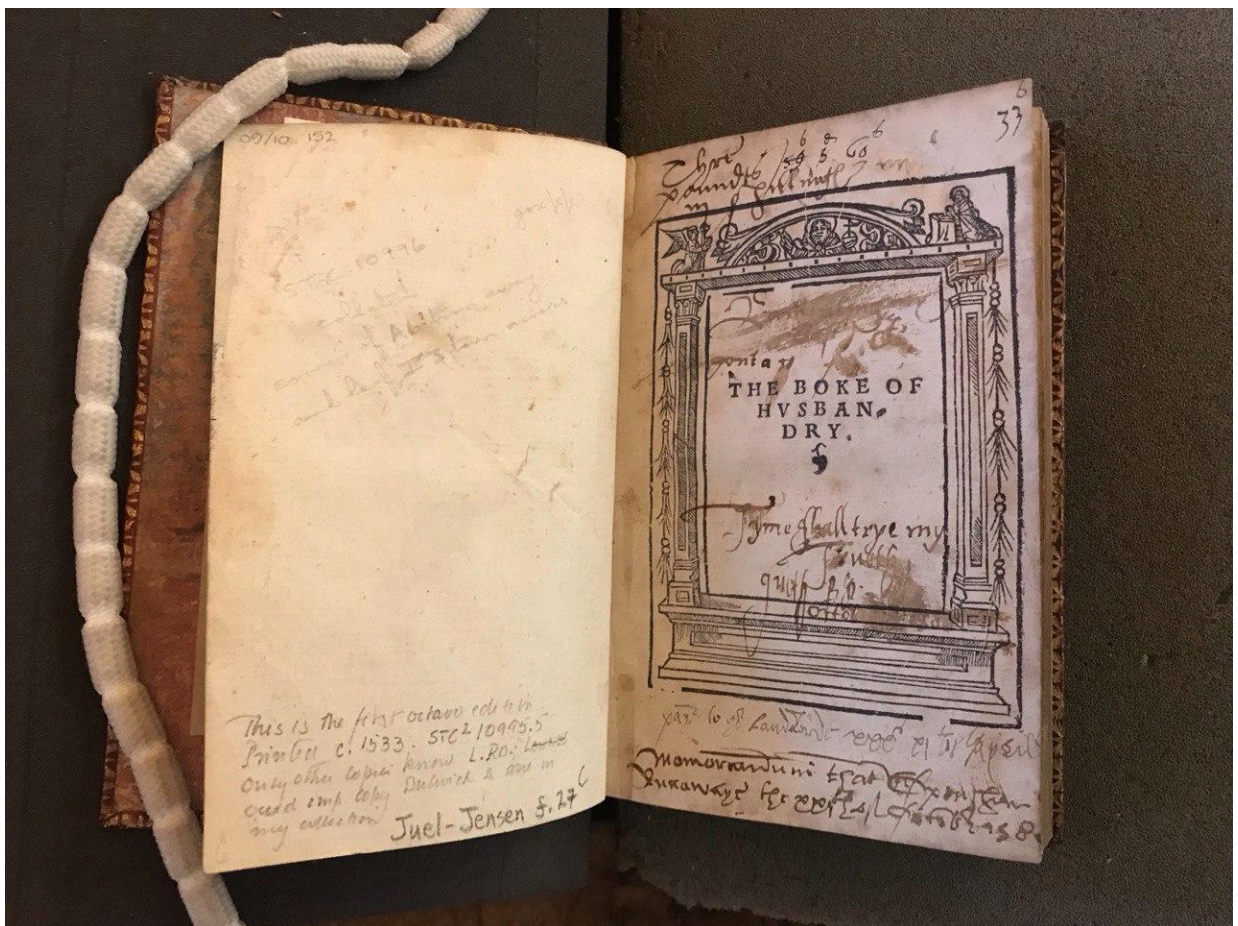


Figure 9. Title page of the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*.
With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

The handwritten annotations added to this particular volume also provide a formidable introduction to the book. They give us a glimpse of how such books were used and handled by some sixteenth-century readers, as well as how they were preserved and catalogued by

later librarians and antiquarians. As a farming manual, the *Book of Husbandry* would have been read aloud to servants, carried out through the open fields and crops, and also potentially annotated and marked upon. In many rural villages, it might have been one of the only printed books available, besides Bibles and books of hours. As is the case with the majority of early modern printed books, we do not have accurate numerical estimates of how many copies of the *Book of Husbandry* were produced or bought during the sixteenth century, although the high number of reprints suffices for us to qualify it as a popular book.

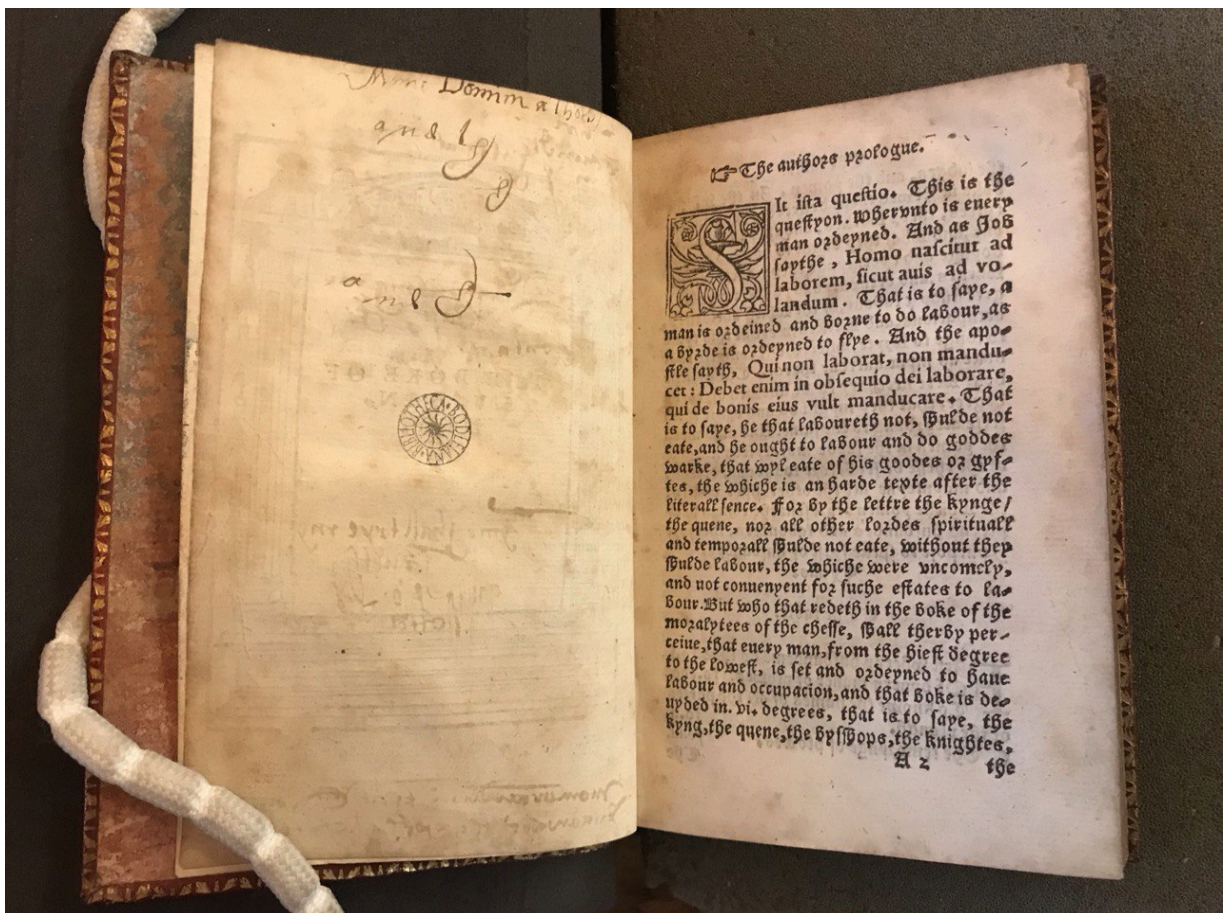


Figure 10. *The author's prologue* in the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*.
With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

Farming manuals were a growingly popular early modern genre. As Corinne Beutler affirmed, they “constituted the first manifestation of an European-scale scientific, economic and technical interest upon agriculture in modern times.”²⁰⁸ Instruction on ploughing and

²⁰⁸ BEUTLER, Corinne. Un chapitre de la sensibilité collective: la littérature agricole en Europe continentale au XVIe siècle. *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, No. 5 1973, p. 1280.

farming was indisputably useful in a society that heavily depended on agriculture and its revenues. Nevertheless, the sixteenth century saw the rise of a new understanding of agriculture, which advertised its technical specificity. In this sense, printing played a huge role in standardising agricultural knowledge and procedures throughout Europe. Jean Liebault (1535–1596), writing in 1565, voiced a particularly optimistic view of his times by noting that, “among all other sciences that men can contemplate and exercise, none is more appealing to the human spirit, more delightful to the senses, more pleasurable, or more necessary and profitable to men’s lives, than Agriculture.”²⁰⁹ These were the words with which Liebault introduced his dedication letter to Charles Estienne’s *L’Agriculture et Maison Rustique*, the most iconic and recognisable French farming manual of the period.²¹⁰

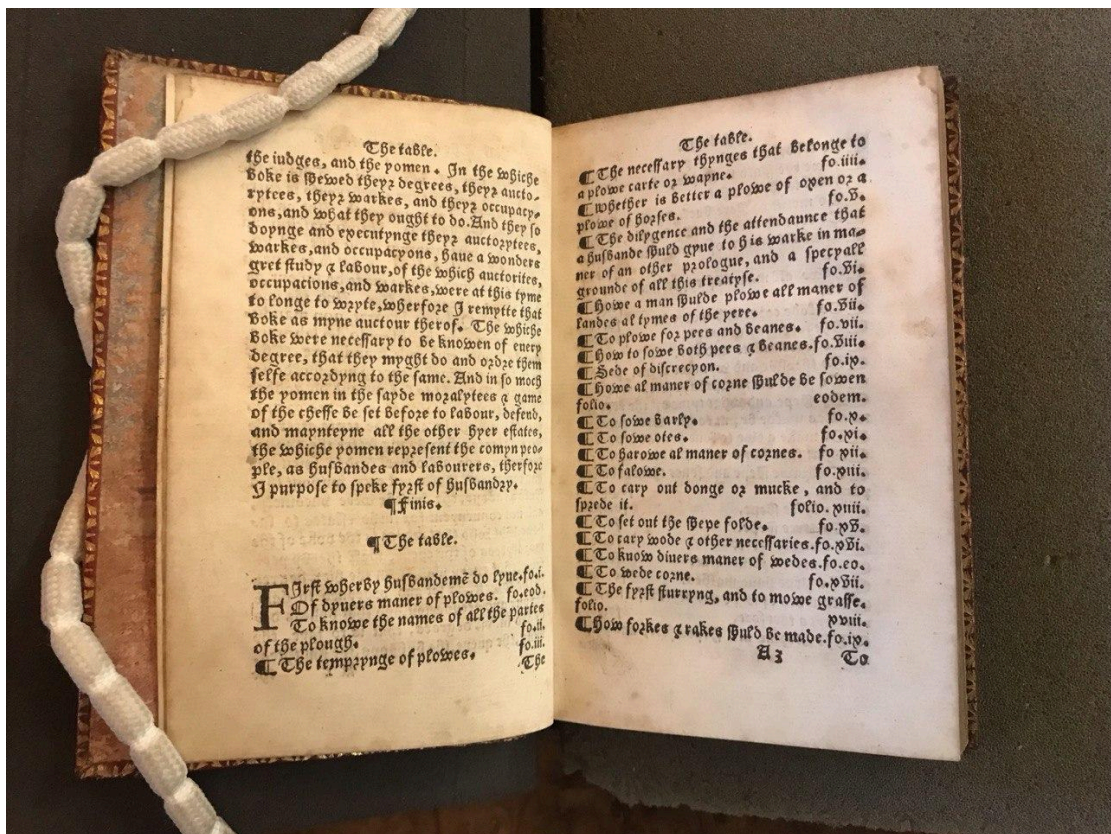


Figure 11. Table of contents of the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*.
With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

²⁰⁹ LIEBAULT, Jean. Epistre Dedicatoire. In: ESTIENNE, Charles. *L’Agriculture et Maison Rustique*. Paris: Jacques Du-Puys, 1570, p. A2.

²¹⁰ ESTIENNE, Charles. *L’Agriculture et Maison Rustique*. Paris: Jacques Du-Puys, 1570. See also AMERT, Kay. *The Scythe and the Rabbit. Simon de Colines and the Culture of the Book in Renaissance Paris*. New York: Cary Graphic Arts Press, 2012.

Charles Estienne (1504-1564) was Liebault's father-in-law and a prolific physician and anatomist, whose writings appear as icons of pre-Vesalian anatomy, and his background was no accident. Late medieval and early modern agricultural literature belonged to a vast patchwork of astronomical, astrological, medicinal and dietetic knowledge. This miscellaneous information was usually compiled and presented in almanacks, among which the most iconic and popular throughout early modern Europe was the *Calendrier et Compost de Bergers* (Figure 13).²¹¹ First published in 1491 by Guy Marchant, a renowned Paris printer, the *Calendrier* saw ten reprints during the 1490s and almost thirty from the sixteenth century up until the French Revolution, let alone its numerous translations. In each of its many editions, the *Calendrier* provided readers with notions of astronomy, astrology, medicine and dietetics, and it was published as a refurbished and improved version of earlier manuals, such as Jean de Brie's *Bon berger* and *Vray regime et gouvernement des bergers et bergeres*, issued in the 1370s. Most of all, the *Calendrier* was an "emblematic best-seller in print history".²¹²

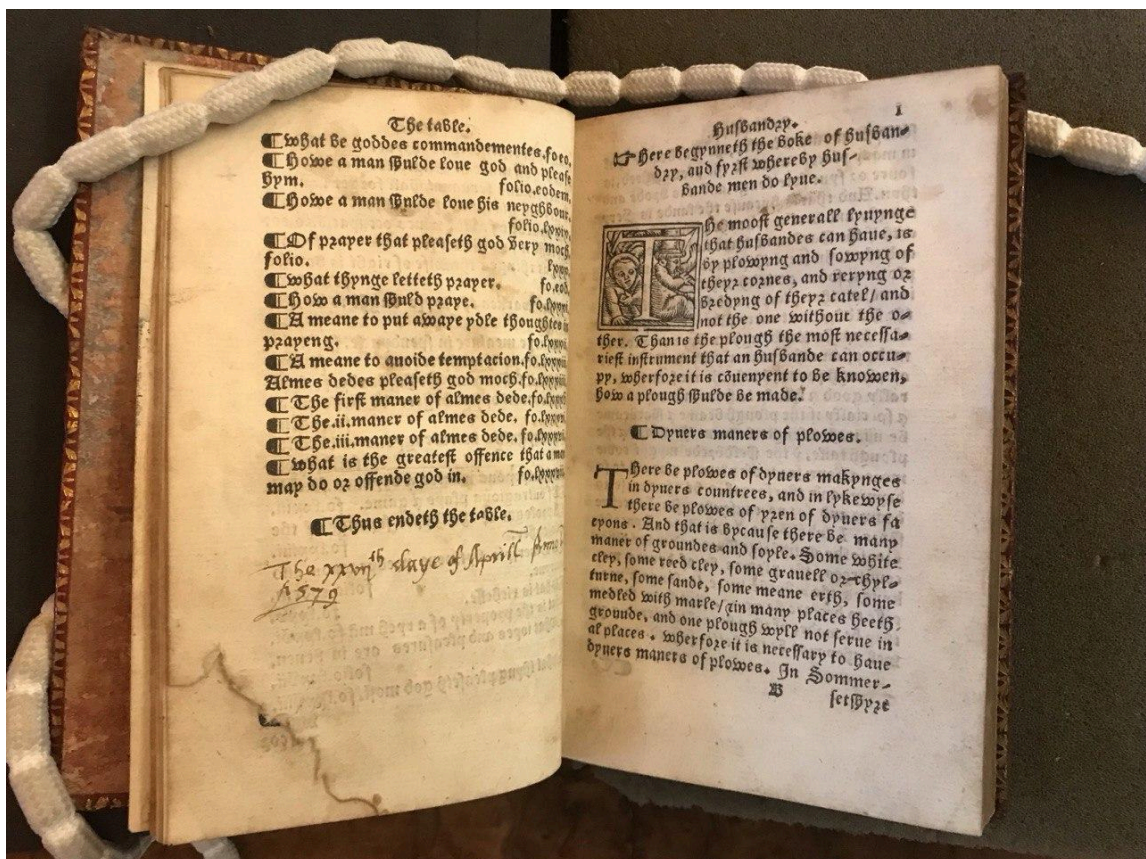


Figure 12. The end of the table of contents, followed by the 16th-century handwritten date in the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*. With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

²¹¹ *Calendrier et Compost de Bergers*. Paris: Guy Marchant, 1491.

²¹² BOUDET, Jean-Patrice. Une astrologie rurale et populaire? Le Calendrier des bergers et celui bergères. *Ruralités. Des terres, des dieux et des hommes. Mélange en l'honneur de Jean Tricard*, Limoges. 2015, p. 2.

By the late Middle Ages, French literature most especially was growingly enthusiastic of the pastoral life. According to the account in the Gospel of St Luke, shepherds were particularly praised as having been the first men to see and worship the Jesus child in person. After being told by a choir of holy angels of the Saviour's birth, the story goes, "the shepherds said one to another, 'Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.'²¹³ In the same manner that the biblical shepherds duly obeyed heaven's commands, the *Calendrier's* readers were expected to diligently observe the behaviour of planets and stars in order to have a long and profitable life on earth. Almanacks and manuals such as the *Calendrier* contained instructions on how to execute such a marvellous and necessary task. As the frontispiece of the 1491 first edition of the *Calendrier* says:

"Here is the *Calendrier des bergers*, containing three main things. The first is the knowledge shepherds ought to have of the sky, the signs, the stars, the planets, and their movements and properties. The second is of the immovable and movable feasts, the golden ratio, the new moons and entirely of everything that concerns compost science. The third is about the almanack and the four complexions, and governing ourselves according to what the seasons require for a healthy, joyful and long life."²¹⁴

This knowledge was of both cosmic and practical importance, for understanding nature had a direct impact on people's lives. Bountiful crops depended on good use of the soil and the correct management of climate adversities. Galenic medicine taught that a healthy body was built on the appropriate types and measures of food and sleep; otherwise, sickness would take over. Most especially, almanacks and calendars also instructed people on measuring time. The contents were divided according to the twelve months of the year, and the four seasons corresponded to the four stages of a man's life: Infancy (Spring), Strength (Summer), Wisdom (Autumn), and Elderliness (Winter). Peasants and shepherds had their own way of computing their lifetime: "We shepherds say that the age of a man of seventy-two

²¹³ Gospel of St Luke 2:15b. King James Version.

²¹⁴ Paris, Bibl. Mazarine, Inc. 584 (2), fol. a1. BOUDET (2015) quotes this passage on page 2. My translation.

is like one alone: always comprising six years for each month of the year.”²¹⁵ Like the seasons of the year and the movements of the stars, nature also dictated men’s life and death.

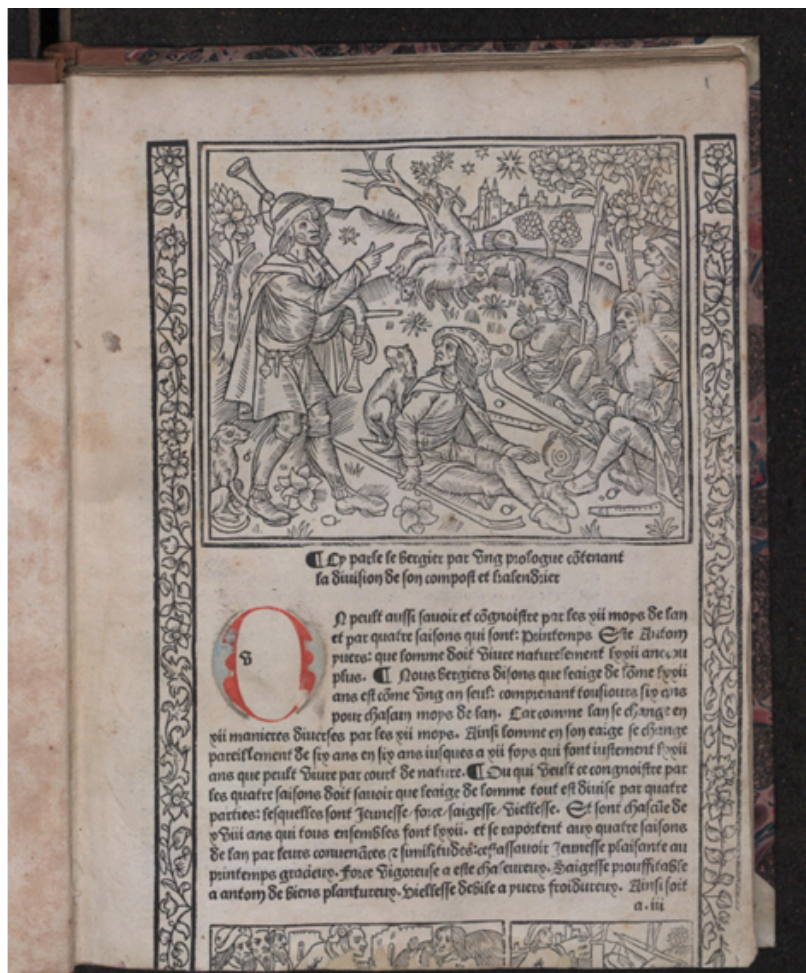


Figure 13. *Calendrier et Compost des Bergers*. Paris: Guy Marchant, 1496. Currently held at the *Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze*. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/ita-bnc-in2-00001137-001>

In this sense, agriculture was as much a part of life as faith and piety. So the second edition of the *Calendrier*, published by Marchant in late 1491, introduced a series of devotional themes and lessons that were particularly reflective of late medieval Catholic religion. Currently held at the *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze*, the small folio volume's first part is dedicated to astronomical and astrological instructions, given as mnemonic verses to memorise the months of the year, along with calendars and other tables and charts depicting the moons and seasons. The same accuracy in visual representation

²¹⁵ *Calendrier et Compost des Berger*, *op. cit.*

applies to the second section, dedicated to the tree of vices and the pains of hell. Each of the seven deadly sins – Pride, Envy, Ire, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony and Luxury – gives way to other branches, whose multitude attests to the spiritual urgency of moral vigilance (Figure 14). The schematic trees are followed by visual depictions of the pains of hell ascribed to each category of sin and vice, with illustrations as vivid as they could have been – demons afflicting and torturing the souls and bodies of sinners with fire, sticks and serpents. The hideousness of hell is soon followed by the third section, dedicated to the science of wisdom and the tree or field of virtues: “Since we have been commenting about vices, how quickly and lightly shall we not consider virtues in this third part of the book? They will be like a little garden filled with flowers and trees, where the contemplative soul might find rest.” The country metaphor perfectly suited both the agricultural nature of the manual as well as its devotional, salvific content.

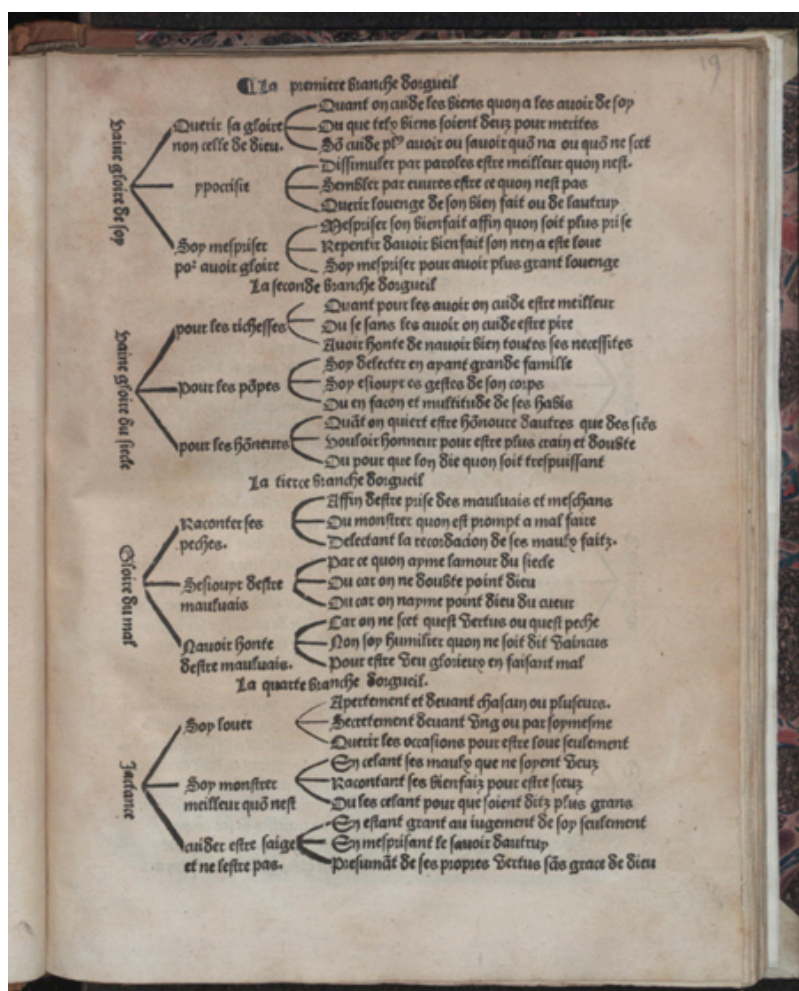


Figure 14. *La premiere branche d'orgueil*. *Calendrier et Compost des Bergers*. Paris: Guy Marchant, 1496. Currently held at the Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/ita-bnc-in2-00001137-001>

Any attempt to understand the *Book of Husbandry* without closely examining the *Calendrier et Compost de Bergers* would be fruitless. This is not due to their similarities but rather to the stark differences between them. The *Book of Husbandry* is a smaller and simpler printed object, lacking the typographical complexity of its French counterpart. Whereas the 1491 *Calendrier* displays elaborate tables and charts, let alone the large and sophisticated woodcuts carefully added to text-filled pages, the only image constant in the 1534 *Book of Husbandry* is a small illustrated capital T. The typographical discrepancy that sets both books apart might be explained by the technological and material superiority of the French presses, which in the 1490s could produce books whose sophistication the provincial and insulated English market would take decades to imitate. But that is not all. The *Book of Husbandry* was written for different reasons than the *Calendrier* and by a different kind of author.

On the Bodleian copy of 1533, a further handwritten inscription offers some editorial insight into who the author of the *Book of Husbandry* might have been (Figure 15). On the very last page of the book, a fellow antiquarian registered that

“The author of the *Boke of Husbandry* was Sir Anthony Fitzherbert and it is the earliest English work on Husbandry... It was first printed in 1523 and passed [...] many editions, [...] of which printed by Thomas Berthelet: one in 1534 another in 1548 and this one without date - As the author says (p.90) that he had practised husbandry for 40 before composing his Book, his experience [...] the year 1483, in the reign of Richard III. [...] 59 for absent [...] travelling equipment.”

The antiquarian was wrong about one fundamental fact: Anthony Fitzherbert was not the author of the *Book of Husbandry*; his brother was. John Fitzherbert was the eldest son of a wealthy country gentleman from Derbyshire, from whom he inherited the landed estate where he lived for nearly 50 years. Anthony, the younger brother, studied in London and soon became a lawyer and judge, succeeding to his brother's property afterwards while also continuing his judicial work at the Court of Common Pleas. Despite the long debate over who

wrote the *Book of Husbandry*, John's proven and acknowledged husbandry expertise justifies contemporary scholarship's consensus over his authorship.

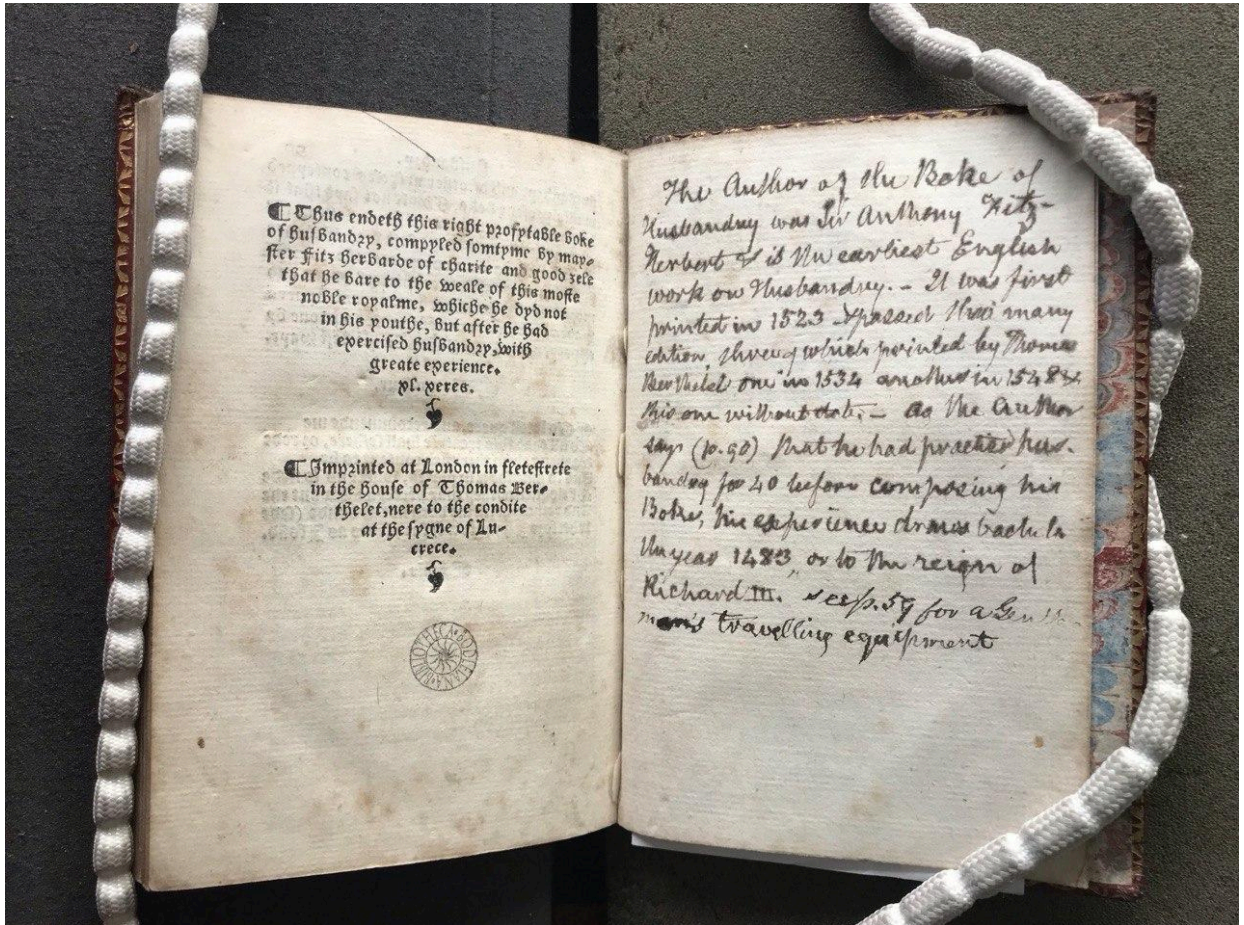


Figure 15. Colophon of the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry* (left). Annotated page (right).
With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

Like many debates about sixteenth-century books, the controversy surrounding the authorship of the *Book of Husbandry* was much discussed by Victorian writers. The matter had already undergone frequent debate when, in 1882, Reverend Walter Skeat (1835-1912), Cambridge philologist and Anglican deacon, published a reprint from *The Book of Husbandry*'s 1534 edition. The authorship of the book is the first topic of mention in the Introduction of Skeat's version, according to whom both criticism and evidence pointed to Anthony's authorship: "As far as I have been able to discover, the more usual verdict of the

critics is in favour of the supposed identity; and certainly all the evidence tends very strongly in that direction."²¹⁶

Skeat's arguments underwent heavy criticism from Reginald H. C. Fitzherbert in his 1897 article published in the *English Historical Review*. Much water had passed since Skeat's 1882 reprint, and the *Journal of Derbyshire Archaeological Society* had published "an abstract, with copious *literatim* extracts of 'the long and remarkable will of John Fitzherbert'." According to Reginald Fitzherbert, "had Professor Skeat seen this document before he wrote his introduction, it is probable that the arguments therein contained might have been modified."²¹⁷ Despite mentioning newly published evidence, Fitzherbert mostly based his argument on a bibliographical examination of the *Book of Husbandry* and the editorial clues in favour of John's, rather than Anthony's, authorship.

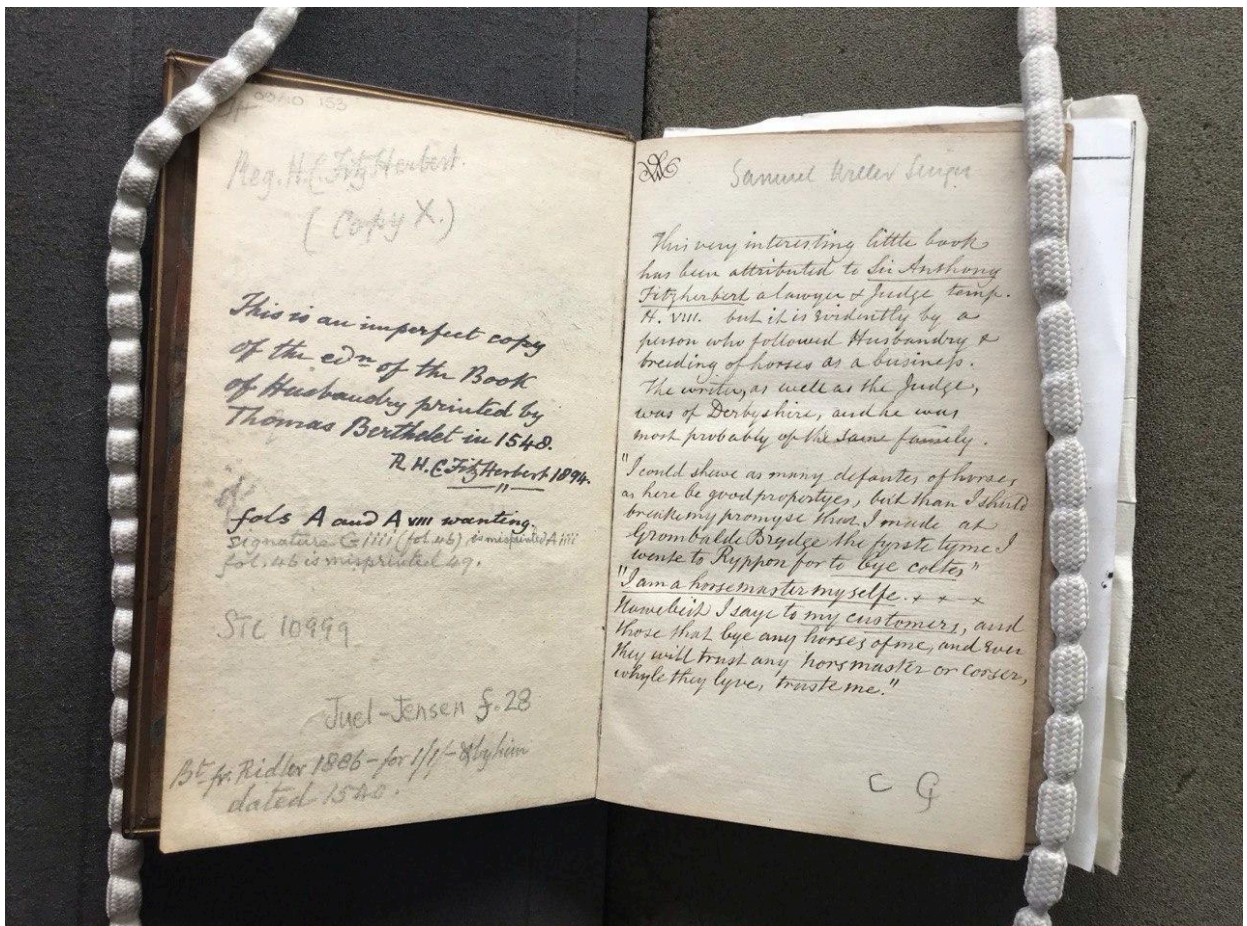


Figure 16. Reginald Fitzherbert's 1548 copy of *The Book of Husbandry*: his handwritten comment on its authorship (left). With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

²¹⁶ SKEAT, W. *The Book of Husbandry, by Master Fitzherbert. Reprinted from the Edition of 1534, and Edited with an Introduction, Notes, and Glossarial Index*. London: The English Dialect Society, 1882. p. vii.

²¹⁷ FITZHERBERT, R. H. C. The Authorship of the 'Book of Husbandry' and the 'Book of Surveying'. *The English Historical Review*. Vol. 12., 1897, p. 225.

The Bodleian Library also holds a copy of *The Book of Husbandry* that once belonged to Reginald Fitzherbert himself. Besides his personal *ex-libris* at the end, the book also bears a note in his handwriting at the front inner back, which follows: “This is an imperfect copy of the ed[ition] of the Book of Husbandry printed by Thomas Berthelet in 1548. R.H.C. Fitzherbert 1894” (Figures 16 and 17). Just like the 1533 copy, this edition was also noted with a nineteenth-century hand commentary on the authorship of the *Book of Husbandry*: “This very interesting little book has been attributed to Sir Anthony Fitzherbert, a lawyer and judge [...] H[enry] VIII but it is evidently by a person who followed Husbandry and breeding of horses as a business. The writer, as well as the judge, was of Derbyshire, and he was most probably of the same family.”²¹⁸

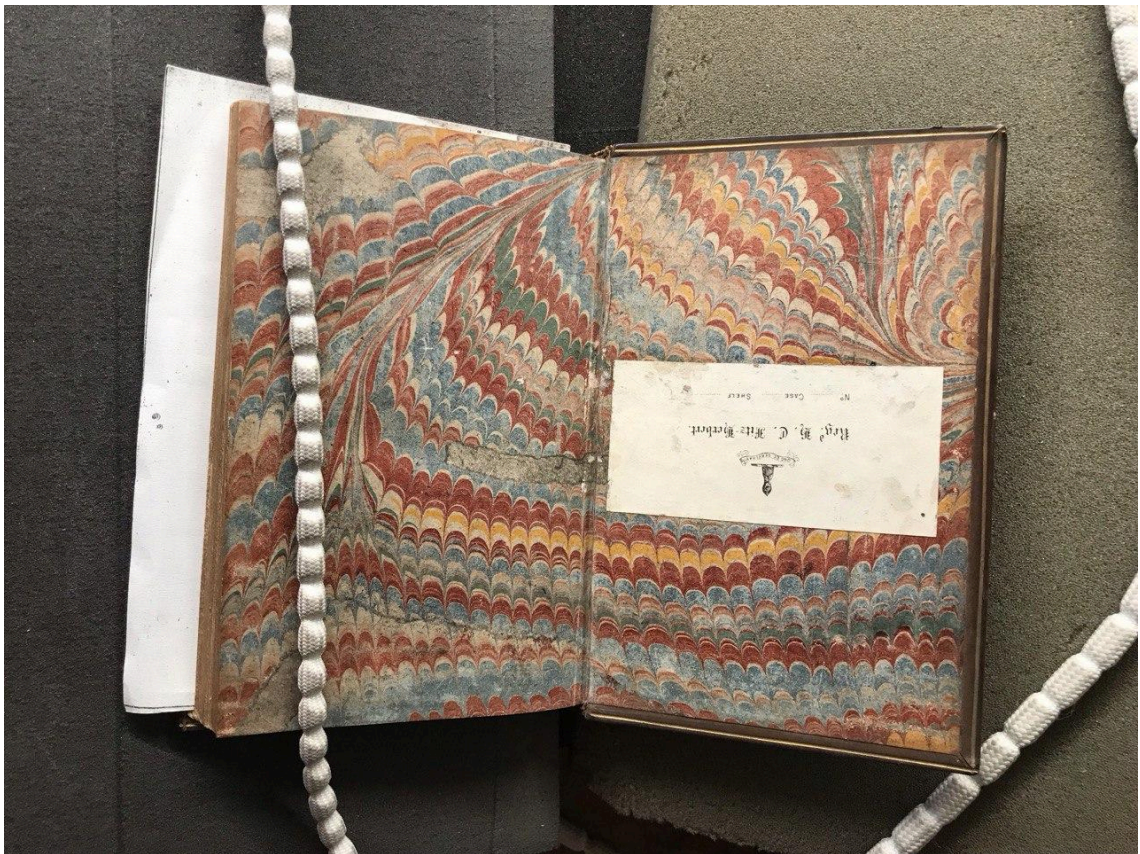


Figure 17. Reginald Fitzherbert's 1548 copy of *The Book of Husbandry*: his *ex libris* (right).
With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

In retrospect, modern scholarship has supported Reginald Fitzherbert's position. John's long and acknowledged experience with husbandry, gained from overseeing family property for almost 50 years, made him a stronger candidate to have written the book. Overall, defining

²¹⁸ Handwritten note constant in Reginald Fitzherbert's 1548 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*.

who wrote the *Book of Husbandry* is more important than it may seem. The fact that this has been such a lengthy and controversial matter informs us of the flexible notions of authorship in the early modern period. Moreover, if compared to the case of Charles Estienne's *L'Agriculture et Maison Rustique*, for example, it also points out the editorial differences between English and French printing cultures when it came to advertising authorship.

Reflecting upon who may have written the *Book of Husbandry* begs the immediate question of who would have read it. Assigning the contemporary readership of a sixteenth-century printed farming manual allows us to access key features of early modern reading, such as literacy, book ownership, and the relationship between printed and oral culture. According to Jasper Ridley, "the book was evidently not written for the husbandman and labourer, most of whom were almost illiterate."²¹⁹ I partially concur with his assertion. Like the *Calendrier des Bergers* before and Charles Estienne's *L'Agriculture* afterwards, the *Book of Husbandry* was not directly aimed at a husbandman readership. Especially in the sixteenth century, practical manuals such as these were compiled and written by gentlemen, learned and well-connected laymen or committed clergymen interested in the ways and customs of the lower classes. Charles Estienne was a prolific physician and botanist who inherited his father's printing house, becoming King's Printer in 1551. John Fitzherbert was a country gentleman whose husbandry experience came from working on his inherited estate for decades. King François I had a copy of the *Calendrier* in his royal collection. After all, the romanticised country life of the medieval shepherd said more about the courtly and elite literature in which it emerged than about real-life peasants.

However, we should be careful not to add such a narrow line to the ways that printed books like the *Book of Husbandry* could reach illiterate people at the time. In the early sixteenth century, printed books were far from being the cheap, affordable items they would become decades or centuries later. The countryside, in particular, was "a world that saw letters infrequently, whether written or printed."²²⁰ In *Society and Change in Early Modern France*, Natalie Zemon Davis posed the definitive question for any historian interested in the reading habits of the early modern peasantry: "Could printing have mattered that much to the people in a period when literacy was still so low?"²²¹ The answer Davis and other historians have given to such a question is a careful yes. Labourers' general illiteracy did not exclude them from participating in and accessing print culture. The *Book of Husbandry*, most particularly,

²¹⁹ RIDLEY, Jasper. *A Brief History of The Tudor Age*. London: Constable and Robinson, 2002, p. 164.

²²⁰ DAVIS, Natalie Zemon. *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, p. 194.

²²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 190.

was not necessarily supposed to stand at study desks and be the object of polite conversation but to be daily handled and sometimes carried into the fields. It was meant to be read to servants, and some of its parts were to be memorised. Even though poor husbandmen and common labourers were mostly illiterate in the early sixteenth century, they were not completely excluded from other forms of book reading. They were mostly book *hearers*, and that was the most popular and widespread way of *reading* in the period.

As Adam Fox correctly stated, "there is no more powerful demonstration of the basic divisions – of wealth, rank and gender – that characterised the early modern period than the extent to which people had access to education and its fruits."²²² In this sense, literacy levels reflected early modern social inequalities and their implications, as well as the dynamic and productive ways in which both print and manuscript culture affected everyday life. In statistical terms, signing ability has been used as the surest measurement of literacy in the early modern period. In most cases, the ability to sign their name, not just make a mark upon the paper, would mean that the person had received enough education to be familiar with reading. For statistical purposes, such a pattern allows for some confident estimates. However, complications arise when we examine the specific intricacies of reading and writing levels that were unequally distributed among different groups, which makes defining and measuring literacy in the early modern period an even harder task. Not only did reading and writing skills vary widely, but also the letters and material to be read or written. Fox provides some examples:

‘Being able to sound out a simple printed text in English represented the lowest threshold of attainment, although even here the gothic, or black letter, typeface of simple didactic and devotional texts remained easier for most people to manage than the roman, or white letter, font of other works. Furthermore, the majority of those contemporaries who understood ‘print hand’ still struggled to fathom ‘written hand’. And handwriting itself came in a variety of forms, some of which were less intelligible than others: from the widespread but very difficult secretary hand, through a

²²² FOX, Adam. Words, Words, Words: Education, Literacy and Print. In: WRIGHTSON, Keith (ed.) *A Social History of England, 1500-1750*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 216.

variety of arcane legal styles, to the somewhat more recognisable italic script.”²²³

Early modern literacy existed at varying levels, and printing had a differentiated impact among different groups. David Cressy’s statistical study, *Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530–1730*, illuminated the path towards a more conscientious assessment of the social dimensions of early modern illiteracy. As Cressy explains, “limited educational opportunity in a hierarchically organised society, together with the scant need of literacy in many occupations, may adequately explain the social distribution of illiteracy.”²²⁴ Between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, England witnessed a pattern of widespread but unevenly distributed illiteracy. While social structure remained relatively unchanged throughout the period, literacy followed a more volatile movement, with selective impact upon distinct sectors.

Overall, Ridley’s reluctance to believe the *Book of Husbandry* was truly dedicated to common peasants and labourers reveals a common and misguided assumption about early modern reading cultures. Jean-Patrice Boudet echoed the same scepticism in his assessment of the bilingual pages of the *Calendrier*, in which Latin and French verses appear juxtaposed. According to him, the *Calendrier*, “far from reflecting a hypothetical popular culture, is a work of clerical origins, which aimed at the vulgarisation and edification of a wealthy lay public, rich enough to purchase an illustrated book and to know at least the rudiments of Latin.”²²⁵ Indeed, the idealised voice of rural peasants and shepherds found in the *Calendrier* belongs more to a circuit of court literature and clerical teaching than it does to the tales and songs of real-life peasants and shepherds, who could not have afforded to purchase a richly illustrated copy of the *Calendrier et Compost des Bergers*. However, purchasing was far from the only major way to access books in the early modern period, and almanacks and calendars were not as inaccessible as Boudet’s claim might seem to suggest.

A single copy of a printed book could be read aloud to as many people as could hear it. Books could also be borrowed, copied, commented upon, and known by heart. The mnemonic verses that opened the *Calendrier* were there to be recited and memorised, just like the *Pater noster* and the Creed, which points to a second misinterpretation. Since the 1215 Fourth Lateran Council, late medieval Christians—from the poorer country workers to the

²²³ FOX, Adam, *op. cit.*, pp. 225-226.

²²⁴ CRESSY, David. Levels of Illiteracy in England, 1530-1730. *The Historical Journal*, Cambridge: Vol. 20. No. 1. pp. 1-23, 1977.

²²⁵ BOUDET, Jean-Patrice, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

king himself—were to be trained and expected to perform an annual recitation of the Latin *Pater Noster* and Creed to receive communion during Lent. Latin was the sacred language that made God accessible to humans in liturgy. As Virginia Reinburg correctly reminds us, “Latin—at least in fragments—had a broader currency in this religious world than is generally acknowledged.”²²⁶ This is a world where church attendance concerned everyone. From the labourer to the nobleman, all were commanded to attend church at least once a week, where the priest would read portions of the Vulgate Bible and conduct them in set moments of prayer and responses. Since the Middle Ages, common people habitually participated in rites and sacraments that allowed them to have Latin as more than a foreign, inscrutable language.

Recognising how much oral and written cultures influenced and informed each other in the early modern era might save us from misleading starting points. In his inspiring study of the reading habits of Menocchio²²⁷—a sixteenth-century Italian miller who could not only read and write but also held enough polemic opinions to grant him thorough persecution from the Roman Inquisition—Carlo Ginzburg dives into the muddled and miscellaneous list of books read by his character, only to find out that the true object of his inquiry relied not on the books themselves but on the interpretative networks through which Menocchio read them. Reconstructing such networks is as hard a task as it is encouraging.

The idea that the early modern poor were irreversibly excluded from access to print due to their illiteracy stems from nothing more than methodological naïvety. And so does the opposite. Turning a blind eye to the widespread and almost unchanged levels of illiteracy among common labourers in the period from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century can be equally misleading. Despite having access to printed books in manifold ways—hearing and seeing them—the vast majority of shepherds, husbandmen, and other farm labourers would have to wait until the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to be able to actually read them.

At the end of the *Book of Husbandry*, a poem by *The auctour* exemplifies how much the book itself comments on its intended readership (Figure 18). The verses employ the humility trope while also establishing collective modes of reception to the book. The author’s feigned lack of both eloquence and rhetoric invite those who would see, hear or read the book to eventually correct it and amend it:

²²⁶ REINBURG, Virginia. *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²²⁷ GINZBURG, Carlo. *O queijo e os vermes: O cotidiano e as ideias de um moleiro perseguido pela Inquisição*. transl. Maria Betânia Amoroso. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2006.

“Go little quire, and recommend me
 To all that this treatise shall see, hear, or read
 Praying them therewith content to be
 And to amend it in places, where as is need
 Of eloquence they may perceive I want thee
 And rhetoric, in me doth not abound
 Wherefore I have sown, such seeds as I found.”²²⁸

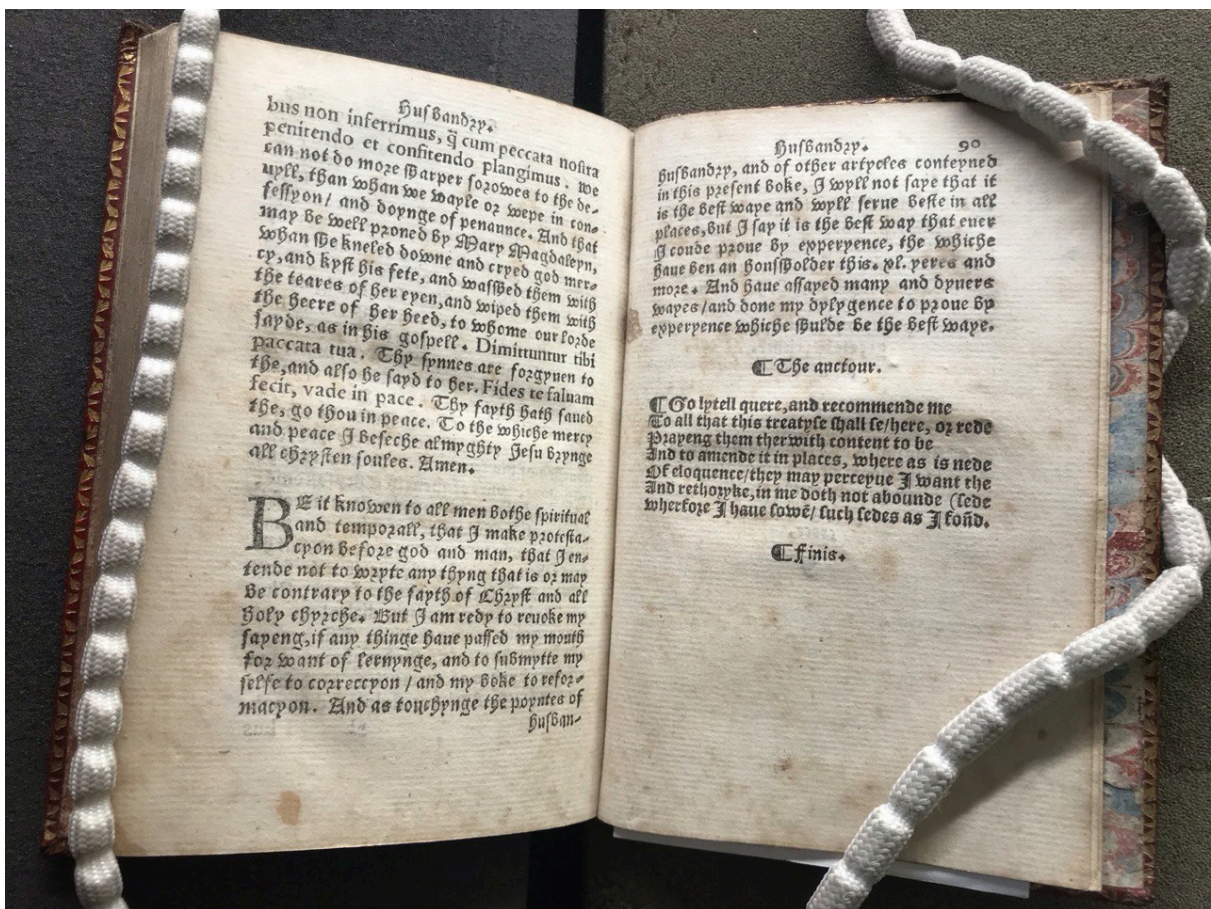


Figure 18. *The auctor* in the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry* (right).
 With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

A farming manual like the *Book of Husbandry*, although written by a country gentleman, was still a farming manual. A landowner and learned reader, or a country gentleman like Fitzherbert himself, who would most probably buy a copy of the book, would do so primarily to share it with his servants, to read it aloud to them and instruct them on their

²²⁸ FITZHERBERT, John. *op. cit.*, p. 90.

daily tasks. If acquired by a yeoman or husbandman, it would soon become a family possession, together with a copy of the Bible or a book of hours. However, people often borrowed rather than bought early modern printed books, and copies of the *Book of Husbandry* must have been passed from one literate yeoman to the other as a useful guide that deserved to be shared. As Davis points out, “theirs was a world in which ‘secrets’ – the secrets of craft, the secrets of women – had never been private possessions but corporate ones, shared, told, passed on so they would not be forgotten. What happens when scarce printed books enter such a world? They flow through the literate segments of the *menu peuple* rather than remain hoarded on an artisan’s shelf.”²²⁹ Envisaging the *Book of Husbandry* as a flowing, dynamic book, whose contents were to be heard as well as read by more people than expected, provides us a fuller picture of early modern reading practices than what the scarce quantitative data would ever allow.

Most of all, we should not forget how much early modern reading was a collective and corporate exercise. In rural or urban *milieus*, common people would have access to the printed word almost always accompanied by friends, family and fellow parishioners. However, countryside and city offered its inhabitants distinctive modes of reading. In a rural parish, people would mostly hear the words of the Bible sung and recited at Sunday service by their local priest. Itinerant scribes and notaries would often visit to collect signatures or marks or to announce the news. More affluent rural families could afford to send their sons to become apprentices in the city or to become priests, who would return to their hometowns with a few printed volumes in their bags. In the cities, though, books were overwhelmingly more present and accessible. They were more needed, too. The rise of literacy in urban centres was followed by a widespread supply of writing materials and printed books for an ever-growing reading public composed of literate merchants, craftsmen, and students. For the most part of the sixteenth century, printed books remained a characteristically urban commodity.

Ian Green provides a useful scheme to comprehend the societal distinctions of early modern readerships. In *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England*, he remarks on a large and representative group of readers and consumers of print culture in the early modern period, the middling sort of people. According to him, “it was men and women like these – lesser gentry, yeomen, and prosperous husbandmen in the country, and professionals, larger entrepreneurs, master craftsmen, and shopkeepers in the towns – who constituted a large and

²²⁹ DAVIS, Natalie Zemon. *op. cit.*, pp. 212-213.

rapidly expanding pool of readers.”²³⁰ Overall, while the nobility and upper gentry would more generally consume classical authors, the vast array of instructional literature would be targeted to and consumed by these middling sorts. A lower section of this middle class – small shopkeepers, artisans, apprentices, freeholders, literate labourers – with less buying power and familiarity with reading, would generally consume books either by borrowing from a neighbour or minister, inheriting them, or being given a cheap bible or edifying work by an employer or charity movement.²³¹ Accordingly, farming manuals such as the *Book of Husbandry* would have been accessed by a wide number of readers and hearers, since the practice of husbandry concerned a fairly considerable number of people in the early modern period, in either city or countryside.

The preface of the book itself attests to this widespread intended readership. By mentioning “the book of the moralities of chess”, most probably Jacobus de Cessolis’ fifteenth-century *Book of Chess*, John Fitzherbert acknowledges that “every man, from the highest degree to the lowest, is set and ordained to have labour and occupation.”²³² Chess both informed and exemplified the structures and hierarchies of society at large. A book on chess, therefore, was a useful instrument of social cohesion, for it showed the distinct occupations of the six degrees, “that is to say, the king, the queen, the bishops, the knights, the judges, and the yeomen.”²³³ By knowing “their degrees, their authorities, their works, and their occupations”, people would be sufficiently equipped to know “what they ought to do”. Just as in a chessboard, society was orderly maintained by the thorough observation of each degree’s position, which was why the said book was “necessary to be known by every degree, that they might do and order themselves according to the same.”²³⁴ After all, the conclusion is that kings, noblemen, and clergymen were already well informed of their respective duties, whereas husbandmen still lacked a proper account of theirs: “And inasmuch as the yeomen in the said moralities and game of the chess be set before to labour, defend, and maintain all the other estates, the which yeomen represent the common people, as husbands and labourers, therefore I purpose to speak first of husbandry.”²³⁵

The preface to the *Book of Husbandry* illustrates the degree to which husbandmen and other generally illiterate social groups could form a reading community in the early sixteenth

²³⁰ GREEN, I. *Print and Protestantism in Early Modern England*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 35.

²³¹ *Ibidem*.

²³² FITZHERBERT, John. *The Book of Husbandry*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1533, p. A2r.

²³³ *Ibidem*.

²³⁴ FITZHERBERT, John. *The Book of Husbandry*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1533, p. A2v.

²³⁵ *Ibidem*.

century. It does so mainly by making us reflect upon the concept of reading in that period. As this chapter makes clear, the *Book of Husbandry* announces in itself different and complementary modes of reading—private and collective, continuous and discontinuous—and stands out for being unapologetically targeted at an illiterate audience. With the publication of the *Book of Husbandry*, as noted in the preface, the common people, "as husbands and labourers," would now have a special book dedicated to them. They were now members of a distinct reading public.

Not only were husbandmen not excluded from reading practices, but also some gentlemen would exercise husbandry, beginning with the author himself. John Fitzherbert was a wealthy country gentleman known for his almost 50 years of experience in administering his inherited landed estate. Indeed, the *Book of Husbandry* was precisely advertised as being the utmost result of such experience, and there was an available reading public who would be interested in taking advice from Fitzherbert's expertise. Fitzherbert makes sure to address them in the final section of the book, providing "a short information for a young gentleman that intends to thrive."

The first lesson the book gives to a "young gentleman who intends to thrive" is engagingly material: "I advise him to get a copy of this present book." By reading the book thoroughly from beginning to end, such a gentleman would "perceive the chapters and contents in the same, and by reason of reading he may wax perfectly what should be done at all seasons."²³⁶ A continuous reading of the book would, therefore, provide its readers with an overall understanding of their tasks throughout the year. But the ultimate goal of such a reading was to perceive the "chapters and contents"—a discontinuous system that would allow for the day-to-day usefulness of the book. However, more important than how to read the book was the act of reading it often, for "a drop of water penetrates a stone, not only by its own strength, but by its often falling. Right, so a man shall be made wise, not only by himself, but by his often reading."²³⁷

The author further advises the gentleman to walk around and take notes. After an early rise in the morning, he was to "go about his closes, pastures, fields, and especially by the hedges, and to have in his purse a pair of tables, and when he sees anything that would be amended, to write it in his tables."²³⁸ It was vital to take notes right away: "and as soon as he sees any such defaults, then let him take out his tables and write the defaults."²³⁹ While

²³⁶ FITZHERBERT, John. *The Book of Husbandry*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1533, p. 17r.

²³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 18r.

²³⁸ *Ibidem*.

²³⁹ *Ibidem*.

walking around his possessions, the thriving gentleman would be looking for any “horses, mares, beasts, sheep, swine, or geese in his pastures that be not his own.”²⁴⁰ He was to check if there were no “sherd in his hedge, or any water standing in his pastures upon his grass, whereby he may take double hurt, both loss of his grass and rotting of his sheep and calves.”²⁴¹ By daily and diligently walking around his property, he would be in charge of how his fields and animals were being treated and that his corn would be “weeded and shorn, or his cattle shifted out of one pasture into another, and to look at what ditching, quicksetting, or plashing is necessary to be had, and to oversee his shepherd, how he handles and orders his sheep, and his servants how they plough and do their work.”²⁴²

The advice for the thriving gentleman suggests that writing was to be an integral part of the husbandry activity. Note-taking was essential for a well-run household because it allowed for systematic control of the tasks and errors that should be amended. The continuing practice of daily noting down the issues of one’s property would make for a long-standing and successful household. Such remarks are arguably imbued with a notion of moral and material progress that in part resembles Paul Slack’s “idea of improvement” as developed in the seventeenth century. According to Slack, “there was something wholly novel about the way in which they [aspirations of improvement] evolved in England during the seventeenth century.”²⁴³

The notion of improvement, as a form of “gradual, piecemeal, but cumulative betterment”, is a fundamentally early modern development. The seventeenth century, following Slack’s argument, was the starting point of a peculiarly English notion of improvement, emerging “into a particularly powerful and coherent narrative about the country’s betterment and how it could be prolonged.”²⁴⁴ Although Slack’s portrayal of such English particularity could be exaggerated, the *Book of Husbandry* might require his description of the idea of improvement to be stretched back into the 1520s. I believe historians cannot afford to neglect the sixteenth century when discussing early modern agricultural literature, and so did Corine Beutler, whose studies on French rural society contributed to a more detailed assessment of sixteenth-century scientific developments. When

²⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

²⁴¹ *Ibidem.*

²⁴² *Ibidem.*

²⁴³ SLACK, Paul. *The Idea of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. p. 1.

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*, p. 2.

discussing early modern farming manuals of the time, she concludes that their literary value did not suppress their scientific and experimental character:

“Were they aimed at distracting readers or transforming nature? The insistence with which the authors put forward their personal practice and direct observation of agriculture, the minuteness with which they characterise the nature of their soil and the climate of their country, and their concern with rehabilitating the art of agriculture in the eyes of their contemporaries by appealing to the example of Greeks and Latins constitute more than enough reason to discard the idea that theirs was a case of a simple literary game.”²⁴⁵

A mindful and diligent gentleman was the key to a well-run household, especially if he was literate. However, full literacy remained a luxury in the early sixteenth century, and most lower husbandmen would not be able to fully adhere to the author’s advice on keeping notes about their properties’ needs. They were not overlooked. The author recommends that the gentleman who could not write “nick the defaults upon a stick and show his bailey, as I said before.”²⁴⁶ Literate or not, the thriving gentleman would be no one without his servant. That is why Fitzherbert provided “a lesson made in English verses to teach a gentleman’s servant to say at every time when he takes his horse for his remembrance that he shall not forget his gear in his inn behind him.”²⁴⁷ The verses were a mnemonic device to help the servant keep track of all the items his lord might need during his daily wanderings. Among “purse, dagger, clock, nightcap, kerchief [...], bow, arrows, sword, buckler, horn, leash [...], and string”, the servant could not forget to take “pen, paper, ink, parchment, red wax, pomes, books.”²⁴⁸ A stronger statement for the emergence of a widespread writing culture in the early modern period, especially before the seventeenth century, would be difficult to find.

²⁴⁵ “S’agit-il de distraire ses lecteurs, ou de transformer la nature? L’insistance avec laquelle les auteurs mettent en avant leur pratique personnelle ou leur observation directe de l’agriculture, la minutie qu’ils apportent à caractériser la nature des sols et du climat de chez eux, leur souci de réhabiliter l’art d’agriculture aux yeux de leurs contemporains, en faisant appel à l’exemple des Grecs et des Latins, constituent autant de raisons pour écarter l’idée qu’on pourrait avoir affaire dans leur cas à un simple jeu littéraire.” BEUTLER, Corinne. *op. cit.*, p. 1291.

²⁴⁶ FITZHERBERT, John. *The Book of Husbandry*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1533, p. I8r.

²⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. Kr.

²⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

Early modern reading was seldom a solitary activity, and the *Book of Husbandry* was also expected to be read aloud to the gentleman's servants. This meant that clear instructions needed clear presentation, so the *Book of Husbandry* did justice to its didactic nature by providing its readers with a complete and easily navigable table of contents, with both paginated and foliated leaves, and efficiently laid out running titles. These reading aids promoted communal recitation, which made printed books particularly suitable for collective modes of reading. The *Book of Husbandry* was also expected to provide its readers with profitable learning. More than that, it was supposed to complement and sometimes even substitute the experience of husbandry itself: "And so may this young gentleman, according to the season of the year, read to his servants what chapter he will. And also for any other manner of profit contained in the same, which is necessary for a young husband that hath not the experience of husbandry, nor other things contained in this present book, to take good remembrance and credence thereunto."²⁴⁹ By reading the book aloud to his servants, according to the seasons, the inexperienced gentleman would eventually acquire husbandry proficiency. His success was guaranteed because of the author's certified experience: "For there is nothing touching husbandry and other profits contained in this present book, but I have had the experience thereof and proved the same."²⁵⁰ The author's husbandry expertise was also skilfully advertised at the end of the volume (Figures 19 and 20), which was perhaps the book's best-selling point: "Thus endeth this right profitable book of husbandry, compiled sometime by Master Fitzherbert of charity and good zeal that he bore to the wealth of this most noble realm, which he did not in his youth, but after he had exercised husbandry, with great experience. XL years."²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ FITZHERBERT, John. *The Book of Husbandry* (1533), op. cit., p. I7v.

²⁵⁰ *Ibidem.*

²⁵¹ FITZHERBERT, J. *The Book of Husbandry* (1533). op. cit., p. Nv.

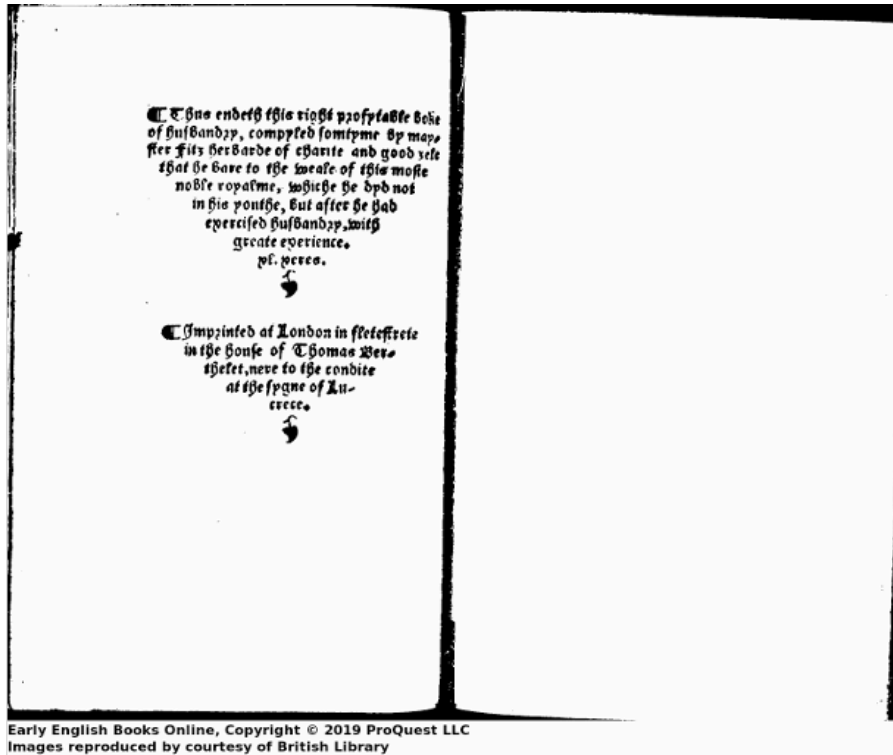


Figure 19. Colophon of the British Library 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry*. *Early Modern English Books (EEOB)*.

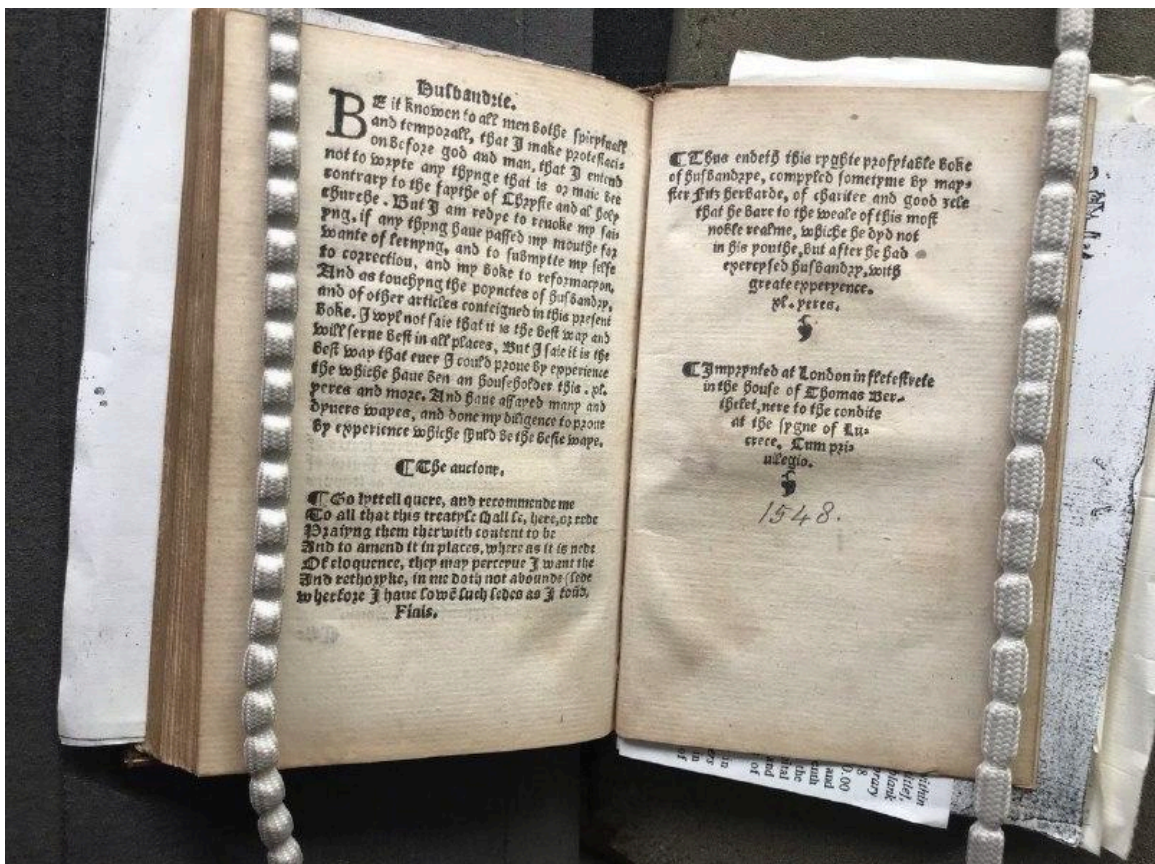


Figure 20. Colophon of the 1548 edition of *The Book of Husbandry* (right). With the kind permission of the Bodleian Libraries.

Sixteenth-century farming manuals vigorously advertised their authors' experience. For the most part, the inclination to write an agricultural treatise stemmed from years of practical experience with the subject, as was the case of John Fitzherbert himself. In other cases, it was more of a learned pursuit. Charles Estienne wrote his *L'Agriculture et Maison Rustique* after having "familiarly conversed with all sorts of people well-known and experienced in agriculture and having carefully researched the most ancient books about the subject."²⁵² Unlike Fitzherbert, Estienne had a large list of published works under his name. He was educated in medicine at the University of Paris, and his interests in agriculture seemed to have followed this same scientific and intellectual drive. He was also appointed as royal printer. More than a practical farming manual, his tract was a learned defence of the specificity of French agriculture in opposition to the importation of foreign methods that did not take into account the geography and climate of the region. Liebault, presenting the book in the dedication letter, complained that "the French, among all, had proved to be the most negligent and reluctant in such regard, for instead of describing a type of agriculture befitting to their country, they content themselves with merely translating Columelle, Constantine Caesar, and Pierre de Crescent, without considering that such authors have dealt with a kind of agriculture specific to their region and country."²⁵³ Moved by the innovative research undertaken by his late father-in-law, Liebault endeavoured to publicise the book so that "the good farmer may know that his land produces everything necessary to nourish, sustain, and foster human life."²⁵⁴

When compared to Charles Estienne's *L'Agriculture et Maison Rustique*, the *Book of Husbandry* sounds and looks like a simpler book. The French manual was dedicated to a nobleman and presented as a detailed agricultural survey of France's land and soil. Scientific inquiry and experimental concerns, which drove Estienne to compile his treatise, particularly aimed at modernising French agriculture, seem somewhat secondary to Fitzherbert's book. Rather, the *Book of Husbandry* mainly focuses on instructing husbandmen and women, high and low at the social scale, on their duties and obligations. It is a formidable example of what Ian Green considers to be "the most striking use of the printing press in early modern England."²⁵⁵ the steady and intermediate types of edifying, instructional literature. Even though it is a farming book, and the major part of its contents deals with agricultural advice,

²⁵² LIEBAULT, Jean. *Epistre Dedicatoire*, op. cit., p. A4v.

²⁵³ LIEBAULT, Jean. *Epistre Dedicatoire*, op. cit., p. A4r.

²⁵⁴ *Ibidem*, p. A5r.

²⁵⁵ "In terms of sheer numbers these didactic, edifying, and devotional works may have constituted much the most striking use of the printing press in early modern England." GREEN, Ian. *op. cit.*, p. vii.

the relatively lengthy devotional section at the end discloses the deep interconnection between devotion and household economy in the early modern period.

Margaret Spufford once said that historians of literacy had been far too conservative in their estimates of the spread of reading ability among the poorer groups of English society. Her research on the reading and religious habits of the English peasantry suggested “there had already been direct access by the relatively humble to religious ideas expressed not only in the Bible, but also in a multiplicity of printed tracts, from at least the beginning of the seventeenth century.”²⁵⁶ By examining seventeenth-century cheap print, such as almanacks and calendars, Spufford assessed “the degree to which the non-gente parishioner was open, in the century and a half after the Reformation, to suggestions and religious influences brought to bear on him, or her, apart from the obvious pressures stemming from the pulpit.”²⁵⁷ The *Book of Husbandry*, first published by Thomas Berthelet almost a hundred years before the sources examined by Spufford, ends with a lengthy devotional section which challenges its readers - country gentlemen and husbandmen and women alike - to bear responsibility on their own salvation as well as they diligently pasture the open fields surrounding them. At the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation, the *Book of Husbandry* encouraged its readers to remain loyal to their Catholic faith and abide by the Holy Church's established practices and teachings concerning prayer, church attendance, and almsgiving. As will be discussed in the next section, the *Book of Husbandry* suggests that Spufford herself might have been too conservative in her estimates.

2.2. Purchasing Heaven: Catholic Household Devotion

The *Book of Husbandry* offered its readers something richer than agricultural advice. In its final pages, the book becomes a devotional treatise aimed at elevating and instructing its readers on prayer, almsgiving, and salvation. It summarises and explains key themes of late medieval Catholic theology and encourages the reader to participate in his or her duties as a genuine Christian. Overall, this particular section of the *Book of Husbandry* bears witness to the rise of Catholic devotional responsibility in Tudor England precisely because it was a passionate defence of Catholic piety at a time when Lutheran theology was starting to be more

²⁵⁶ SPUFFORD, Margaret. *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. xviii.

²⁵⁷ *Ibidem*, p. xvii.

than a distant foreign threat, reaching university-trained men in the cities and spreading throughout old Lollard routes of book distribution in the countryside. A lengthy devotional section at the end of the most popular sixteenth-century English farming manual demonstrates how much English Catholicism could be creatively reimagined and enforced at a time of crisis.

The *Book of Husbandry*, in its devotional section, perfectly illustrates the early modern interplay between personal devotion, communal piety, and household economy. It also shows how much, by the early sixteenth century, lay interiority had developed as a commonplace topic of Catholic piety. More profoundly still, it illustrates the degree to which laypeople could be held accountable for their own spiritual lives, with even the lowest of husbandmen being instructed on matters of faith and salvation. With the *Book of Husbandry*, common labourers were given a book of their own. But ploughing and farming were not all they should learn. Like their masters and upper-class counterparts, they should also know how to pray and what to believe.

If early modern devotion and household economy were closely intertwined, women were mainly responsible for keeping it that way. It was a woman's job to run her household and "love her husband above father and mother and above all other men."²⁵⁸ This is what Fitzherbert explains in a further section of the *Book of Husbandry*, "A lesson for the wife." The idleness trope was often used when women were mentioned, and once again, he quotes St Jerome: "always be doing some good works, that the devil may find thee always occupied. For as standing water is engendered by worms, right so in an idle body is engendered by idle thoughts."²⁵⁹ A good wife should always be with her hands full, and that was her biggest proof of devotion. But women's occupations were also an economic matter. The husband's "diligence and labour" being properly executed, there was still plenty of work to do, "things that must be done, or else thou shalt not thrive."²⁶⁰ These would be the housewife's responsibilities, "for there is an old common saying that seldom doth the husband thrive without the leave of his wife."²⁶¹ Early modern husbands and wives were to be a prosperous match made in heaven.

The *Book of Husbandry* provides a long and detailed inventory of a sixteenth-century housewife's chores (Figure 21). First, she was to wake up early in the morning and pray: "lift

²⁵⁸ FITZHERBERT, John, *op. cit.*, p. K2r.

²⁵⁹ *Ibidem*, p. K2r.

²⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. Kv.

²⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. K2v.

up thy hand and bless thee, and make the sign of the holy cross.”²⁶² She was to repeat the trinitarian blessing in Latin, “In nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti. Amen,” which is also followed by its English translation in the book. The sign of the holy cross would give way to the Pater Noster, the Ave, and the Creed. Finally, she is advised, “Remember thy maker; thou shalt speed much the better.”²⁶³ A similar instruction can be found in Hugh Rhodes’s 1577 *Boke of Nurture*: “At five of the clock, without delay/ Use commonly to rise:/ And give God thanks for thy good rest/ When thou openest thine eyes./ Pray him also to prosper thee,/ And thine affairs in deed/ The better shalt thou speed.”²⁶⁴ After waking up, housework would soon follow. The house should be swept and kept in excellent order. Cows needed milking, and children were to be up for breakfast. The wife was to “ordain corn and malt to the mill, to bake and brew.” After visiting the miller, there was butter and cheese to make and different animals to feed and take care of. Swine needed to be fed both morning and evening, and hens, ducks, and geese had to be checked for eggs and protected from other animals. There were also seasonal activities, like gardening and sowing, which were better suited for March or “a little before”.

Pious wives were busy and business-minded. Indeed, in early modern times, “a woman with a good head for business was certainly an asset to her family.”²⁶⁵ In the sixteenth century, and for much time afterwards, work revolved around the home, and there was almost endless work to be done. So, besides partaking in heavy manual domestic labour, a competent housewife would also need to be a good accountant, manager and trader. She would spend part of her busy day at the market, selling and buying homemade products. In addition to clothmaking, trading had long been a viable alternative for women to achieve a convenient living. Silk women, for example, formed a burgeoning work trade during the fifteenth century, and in some parts of Europe they were even afforded guild status. Although this was not the case in England, English silk women still enjoyed a considerable level of respectability, particularly in London.²⁶⁶

²⁶² *Ibidem.*

²⁶³ *Ibidem*, p. K3r.

²⁶⁴ GOODMAN, Ruth. *How to Be a Tudor: A Dawn-To-Dusk Guide to Tudor Life*. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2016: p. 15.

²⁶⁵ SIM, Alison. *The Tudor Housewife*. Gloucestershire: The History Press, 2010, p. 84.

²⁶⁶ “In 1482 the preamble of a petition they sent to the king talks of ‘the hole craft of Silkewerk of the Cite of London and all other Cities, Townes, Boroghues and Vilages of this Realme of England.’” SIM, Alison, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

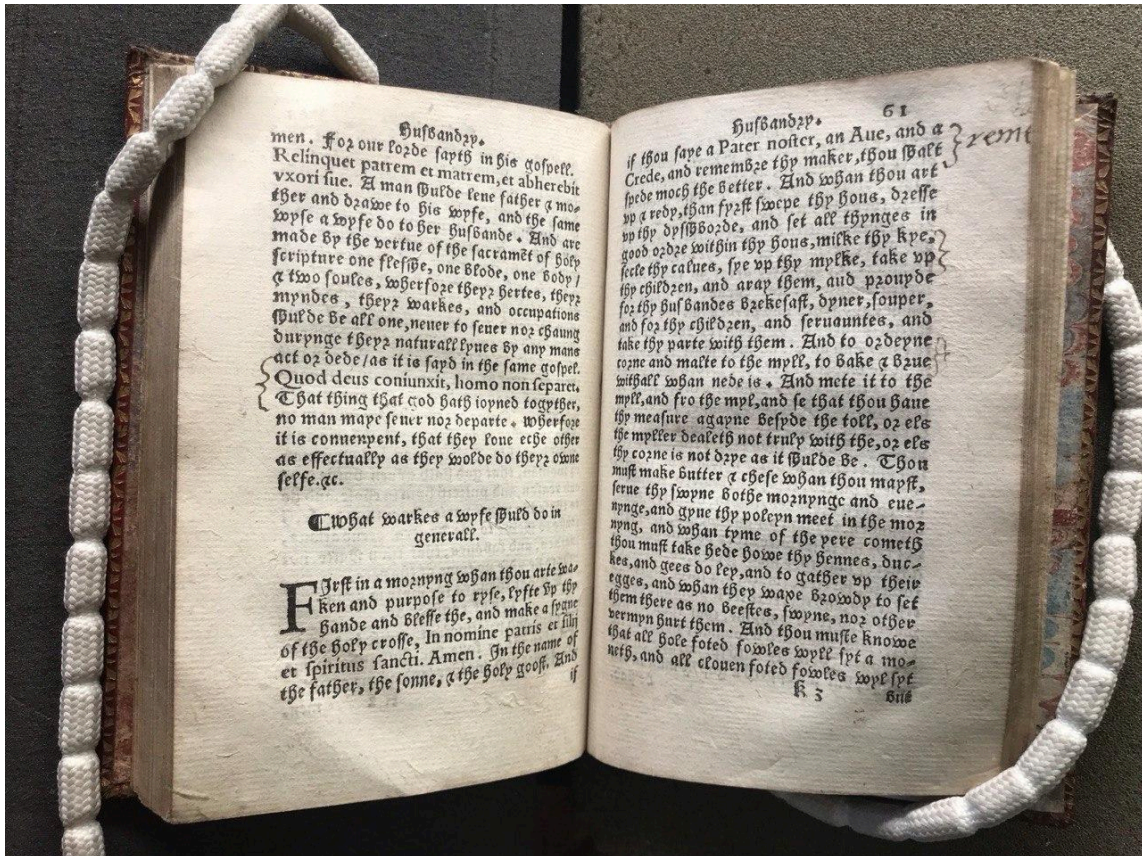


Figure 21. *What workes a wife should do in general*, in the 1533 edition of *The Book of Husbandry* (left). With the kind permission of the Bodleian Library.

Measurement was the secret to any successful early modern household. It was imperative to keep a balance of means and expenses, which required a tremendous amount of resourcefulness. The *Book of Husbandry* also offered its readers a lesson on the importance of spending wisely, with numerous examples of how not to fall short on necessary goods and avoid extravagant indulgence in costly arrays, meats and drinks, as well as plays and games. A particular exercise concerned the keeping of candlelight, especially during winter: “When thou shalt sitteth by the fire and hast souped, consider in thy mind whether the works that thou, thy wife, and thy servants shall do be more advantageous to thee than fire and candlelight, meat and drink that they shall spend, and if it be more advantageous, then sit still, and if it be not, then go to thy bed and sleep, and be up betimes and break thy fast before day.”²⁶⁷ The mention of a daily nighttime reflection would be far from foreign to early modern readers, who would have grown up with the set practice of evening prayer, “a good time to set your spirits in order, to beg forgiveness, to put aside arguments and bad feelings, and to clear the slate ready for a new beginning, rather like balancing the books daily, before the big audit

²⁶⁷ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, *The Book of Husbandry*, 1533. p. K7v.

at the end of the year.”²⁶⁸ The thriving gentleman should grow used to daily pausing and pondering, making rational decisions about how to spend his household resources and optimise his production.

The spending advice is followed by a “prologue of the third saying of the philosopher”, dedicated to both husband and wife. Even though Aristotle was famously known as “The Philosopher” since the rediscovery of his texts in the thirteenth century, the most probable source Fitzherbert refers to belongs to another work. The *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers* is the English version of an eleventh-century Arabic compendium of wisdom literature, which was translated by Sir Anthony Woodville and published by William Caxton in 1477, being one of the earliest books printed in the English language. The book enjoyed considerable popularity in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, with several reprints exposing “the persistence in Britain of a certain taste for sentential literature, which was well rooted in medieval English literature since the Anglo-Saxon period.”²⁶⁹

The three sayings of the philosopher alluded to by Fitzherbert compose a call for general watchfulness and its payoff: *Adhibe curam* (pay attention), *Tene mensuram* (be moderate), and *Et eris dives* (and you will be rich). What Fitzherbert had to add, however, was even more valuable to the reader: “Now I have showed thee the saying of the philosopher, whereby thou hast got much worldly possession; methinks it were necessary to show you how thou may get heavenly possessions.”²⁷⁰ After lessons on how to profit on earth, the author moved on to teach how to purchase heaven. This is how he classifies a genuinely rich man: “In my opinion, the property of a rich man is to be a purchaser, and if he will purchase, I confess him to purchase heaven.”²⁷¹

However, before elevating the discussion onto heavenly terrain, some explanation was needed. After all, was he authorised to do it? Could “a temporal man take upon him to show or teach any such spiritual matters”? It all came down to terminology, for there was “a great diversity between predication and doctrine.”²⁷² It is from St Jerome that he learns of such distinction, although without any quotation this time. He makes the case that “a sermon is where a convocation or a gathering of people on holy days or other days in churches or other places, and times set and ordained for the same. And it belongeth to them that be ordained

²⁶⁸ GOODMAN, Ruth, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

²⁶⁹ KHALAF, O. *Dicts and Sayings of the Philosophers*. *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain*: 2017, p. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118396957.wbemlb348>

²⁷⁰ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L4v.

²⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

²⁷² *Ibidem*, p. L2v.

thereunto, and have jurisdiction and authority, and to none other.”²⁷³ In the early 1520s, this was no neutral claim. By emphasising the need for jurisdiction and authority for ordained preaching, Fitzherbert was signalling his allegiance to traditional Catholic preaching practice in fair opposition to the spread of radical sermons filling England. Preaching was a particularly contentious topic of English religious life at the time, and unlicensed sermons had grown to be an important concern for episcopal authorities, especially for their long-established association with the Lollardy heresy.

Lollardy was an old and enduring problem for English authorities. When John Colet preached at the 1512 Convocation, heresy was a pressing issue. The dean commented on the lamentable spread of heresy throughout England and qualified the evil lives of priests as worse than heretical opinions. Colet’s assessment of contemporary heresy was well informed by the visitations conducted by William Warham, archbishop of Canterbury and Colet’s personal friend, throughout the Kentish Weald. After visiting Tenterden, a market town close to Canterbury and a major Lollard centre in the fifteenth century, Warham registered that a certain “Johan Frank with diverse other evilly disposed persons used in the time of divine service to be in the churchyard communing & walking, and many others used to sit still in the church at procession time.”²⁷⁴ These church-perambulating heretics were, by walking or sitting at the wrong time during services, making an audacious statement “about the ways in which collective religious ritual and practice should or should not be conducted.”²⁷⁵ Robert Lutton reminds us that “the heresy trials were well under way by September 1511 and five suspects who were judged to be long-standing ringleaders and who failed to make adequate recantations had been handed over to the secular authorities and in all probability had already been burnt for their heresies.”²⁷⁶ Those subtle yet deeply public gestures of liturgical defiance were the most common manifestations of Lollard sympathies in the early sixteenth century. However, despite their subtlety, these gestures occasionally caught the attention of a fellow parishioner who was willing to denounce them. For example, “John and Cicely Eaton of Speen in Buckinghamshire did attend mass, but during the elevation of the host other parishioners noticed how they would ‘hold down their heads, and would not look upon the sacrament.’”²⁷⁷

²⁷³ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L5.

²⁷⁴ LUTTON, Robert. *Lollardy and Orthodox Religion in Pre-Reformation England*. Suffolk and New York: The Royal Historical Society, The Boydell Press. 2006, p. 2.

²⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

²⁷⁷ MARSHALL, Peter. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*, p. 111.

Given the spread of heresy at the time, even if official preaching belonged to the ordained, laypeople were still charged with some sort of instructional commitment: “But every man may lawfully inform and teach his brother or any other, at every time and place behovable, if it seems expedient to him, for that is an almsdeed, to the which every man is hold and bound to do.”²⁷⁸ Layfolk instructing one another was a form of almsdeed, for “as every man hath taken or received grace, he ought to minister and show it forth to others.”²⁷⁹ This was Fitzherbert's undertaking of the First Epistle of St Peter. The other ancient authority quoted in favour of such a claim was John Chrysostom, according to whom “great merit is to him, and a great reward he shall have in time to come, the which writeth or causeth to be written holy doctrine, for that intent that he may see in it how he may live in a holy manner, and that others may have it.”²⁸⁰ Beyond the altruistic sharing of holy doctrine, John Chrysostom also added a quantifying element which would be particularly suitable for late medieval religion: “know thou that how many souls be saved by thee, so many rewards thou shalt have for either.”²⁸¹ This is particularly reflective of late medieval devotional patterns such as the rise of instrumental and quantifying approaches to devotion, especially prayer. The praying of the rosary, for example, was intended to be contemplative while also allowing for a measurable and computable practice. Flynn Cratty rightly notes that “within this system, prayers could be *counted* and they could *count for* you or a loved one [...] Late medieval prayer involved more than counting, but the arithmetic of merit was central.”²⁸²

Sharing grace was also a sign of what St Gregory had classified as the utmost proof of love of God: “There is no sacrifice that pleaseth God so much as the love of souls.”²⁸³ Laypeople were then thrice authorised to teach their brothers; this is what Fitzherbert associates with the acquisition of heavenly possessions. Different from heretics, who would defiantly challenge the established order with their public preaching, private meetings – or even their subtle ceremonial impudence, as the Tenterden heretics in 1511, - true Catholics were encouraged to preach as a sign of their love for God himself. In the quantifiable and measurable world of late medieval piety, lay preaching could become a useful currency in the purchase of heaven.

²⁷⁸ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L3r.

²⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*

²⁸⁰ *Ibidem.*

²⁸¹ *Ibidem.*

²⁸² CRATTY, Flynn Jamison. *The Soul in Paraphrase. Prayer and the Changing Mental Words of Early Modern France and England*. Dissertation Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Yale University in Candidacy for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, ProQuest Number: 13809400. 2019, pp. 13-14.

²⁸³ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L3r.

Purchasing heaven was a familiar concept for the readers of the *Book of Husbandry*. Indeed, early modern religion was deeply indebted to previous developments of medieval theology, which established new patterns of solidarity between the living and the dead. According to French historian Jacques Le Goff, the twelfth century saw the birth of Purgatory as a doctrine that incorporated the medieval advancements of both cartography and arithmetic. Eternity was now a divisible space, where sinful time spent on earth could be both counted and atoned for. The spatialisation of the afterlife, according to Le Goff, “is inscribed in a larger mental attitude originating from a concern for justice, which results in a true accounting of the afterlife.”²⁸⁴

Overall, the possibility of compartmentalising eternity opened the door to new patterns of devotion, but it would prove to be more contentious than expected. The invention of an intermediary place, for the “not so bad” or “not so good”²⁸⁵, was a huge theological undertaking whose legitimacy would be severely challenged by sixteenth-century Protestants. However, it would be a mistake to assume that such attacks were directed at a doomed and moribund doctrine. Purgatory was the most crucial doctrinal bulwark of late medieval religion. Peter Marshall explains why: “The doctrine mattered, as it determined how ordinary people should remember their dead kinsfolk, and determined whether they should themselves at the end of life allocate valuable resources to investing in suffrages.”²⁸⁶ Purgatory was heavily attacked by the Protestant reformers precisely because it mattered so much, because of its presence in everyday life and its power to define what would happen afterwards. That was the reason behind the growing number of chantries in the fifteenth century, when “people were careful to leave money by will so that a priest might be hired to say mass for their souls daily.”²⁸⁷ The best-case scenario for any Christian would be to guarantee a perpetual offering of intercessory prayers, and when that was not possible, there were always less expensive alternatives. Even still, as H.S. Bennett reminds us, “sometimes sufficient money was left to ensure this being done in perpetuity, and the growth of chantries all over England is evidence of the prevalence of this custom.”²⁸⁸ That was what Margaret Paston opted for in her will,

²⁸⁴ LE GOFF, Jacques. *O nascimento do purgatório*. Petropolis. Editora Vozes: 2017. p. 345. My translation.

²⁸⁵ The debate regarding the final destination of these categories of people was a burgeoning theological matter in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. BOERSMA, H. *The Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*; LE GOFF, J. *O nascimento do purgatório*; MCGRATH, A. *Iustitia Dei*; MICHEL, A. *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique*; JARITZ, G. *God's Time? Purgatory and Temporality in Late Medieval Art*.

²⁸⁶ MARSHALL, P. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*, p. 239.

²⁸⁷ BENNETT, Henry Stanley. *The Pastons and their England: Studies in an Age of Transition*. Cambridge, New York, and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press: 1922, p. 200.

²⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

which she made in 1510, leaving her chaplain ten marks a year for five years to pray for her soul and requiring “an honest secular priest to sing and pray [in Mauteby Church] for my soul, the souls of my father and mother, the soul of the said John Paston late my husband, and for the souls of his ancestors and mine, during the term of seven years next after my decease.”²⁸⁹ By the beginning of the sixteenth century, lay people were skilfully aware of the importance of Purgatory and of the mechanisms for avoiding too prolonged a stay in it.

The *Book of Husbandry*, in this devotional section, provides a strong defence of late medieval religion and its paramount doctrinal themes. After establishing the difference between predication and doctrine, Fitzherbert moves on to explain what constitutes heavenly possessions, the true manner of richness: “that thing that is of goodness, and can not be taken away from the owner, neither in his temporal life, nor in the life everlasting.”²⁹⁰ St Austin reminds the reader that “he that gathered in worldly things, and thinketh not upon everlasting things, shall want both in time to come.”²⁹¹ St Ambrose affirms that “they are not the goods of man, the which he can not bear with him.”²⁹² St Bernard’s sayings complement the latter: “If they be yours, take them with you, then it is to be understood what goods a man shall take with him.”²⁹³ There was a way, therefore, to avoid getting into heaven empty-handed, “and these be the good deeds and works that thou doest here in this temporal life.”²⁹⁴ By endeavouring in good deeds here on earth, Christians would be making sure to provide for a fortunate existence in the afterlife, but also in this world. Quoting John Chrysostome, Fitzherbert adds the double perk of being a good Catholic: “Do well and work righteously, that thou may have trust in God, and that thou be not in despair in this world.”²⁹⁵

The purchase of heaven also had a biblical explanation. The example of Job is brought forth to remind readers of the transient nature of earthly possessions, which are “no richness, for they are but flowers of the world.”²⁹⁶ Job’s story is that of a humble and faithful man who eventually saw everything taken from him and was still able to say, “Our lord hath given it, our lord hath taken it away, and as it pleaseth our lord, so be it; blessed be the name of our lord.”²⁹⁷ His forbearance deserved imitation, for he was “an example to every true Christian

²⁸⁹ *Paston Letters*, No. 153, note 2 and No. 555. *apud*. BENNETT, Henry Stanley, *op. cit.*

²⁹⁰ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L3v.

²⁹¹ *Ibidem.*

²⁹² *Ibidem.*

²⁹³ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L4r.

²⁹⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁹⁵ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.* p. L4r.

²⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. L3v.

²⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. L4r.

man of his patience and good living in tribulation, as appeared in his story, who that lift to read therein.”²⁹⁸

If heaven should be purchased, there was a price for it. Following St Austin, “the kingdom of heaven is to no man closed, but to him that will put out himself.”²⁹⁹ Every man was bound to purchase heaven, “for God had set on it a price.”³⁰⁰ He had also given men “days of payment”, and “the price is all one, and that is to keep his commandments during their lives.”³⁰¹ There was a time and a place for the purchase, and it was all about seizing the opportunity: “the good man keeps his commandments and fulfils their promise, and has heaven for the same at their decease. The ill man breaks his promise and keeps not his commandments, wherefore at their decease they are put in prison, that is to say, in purgatory, there to abide the mercy of God, or in hell, there to abide his righteousness.”³⁰² The idea of Purgatory as a prison is reminiscent of the spatialisation of the afterlife defined by Le Goff and points to a particular view of it as a temporary hell.³⁰³ Paradoxically, the doctrinal definition of purgatory heightened the importance of life before death. Time was of the essence. It was necessary to prepare oneself for death as soon as possible to avoid too prolonged a stay in purgatory. A well-lived life on earth, with as few sins as possible, was everything an ordinary Christian could strive for.

But the early modern afterlife could not be just sorrow. In fact, following the explanation of purgatory, Fitzherbert expounds to his readers “what joys and pleasures are in heaven.” Quoting once again from St Austin, he advertises heaven as a place full of “everything that any man desireth; there is life, health, plenty of joy, honour, peace, and all manner of goodness.”³⁰⁴ St Paul also mentions it as the final reward that God has prepared for those who love Him. The quote goes: “That is to say, the eye hath not seen, nor the ears hath heard, nor the heart of a man hath thought of so goodly things that God hath ordained for them that love him.”³⁰⁵ Fitzherbert adds that it would be “a noble act [...] for a husband or a wife to purchase such a royal place in heaven, to that which is no comparison.”³⁰⁶ Early modern heaven was as inscrutable as it was accessible.

²⁹⁸ *Ibidem.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibidem.* p. L4v.

³⁰⁰ *Ibidem.* p. L5r.

³⁰¹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰² *Ibidem.* p. L5r - L5v.

³⁰³ LE GOFF, Jacques. *op. cit.*

³⁰⁴ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L5v.

³⁰⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁰⁶ *Ibidem.* p. L6r.

In purchasing heaven, love could be a useful currency. But this was no simple negotiation. St Paul had said that “love pleaseth God above all things,” and Christ himself had already asked for men’s hearts: “Give me thy heart, and that is sufficient for me, for he that hath a man’s heart, hath all his other goods.”³⁰⁷ Fitzherbert explains that “this man’s heart is nothing else but very true love.”³⁰⁸ The idea of the heart as the ultimate expression of love and interiority was a topical theme of medieval literature, and there was a consensus that “of all the different emotions to which the heart might align, love was its predominant and most forceful domain.”³⁰⁹ But the Middle Ages had also provided early modern Christians with a new kind of love. Courtly love emerged from the eleventh-century European literate circles as “a highly conventionalised amorousness which over the later Middle Ages rose to widespread popularity.”³¹⁰ However, the period also reinforced an older, holier, superior form of love. Charity was the utmost form of pious love, for it emanated from God himself.

The idea that true knowledge of God was a burning love for Him is entirely Augustinian, but it was Bernard of Clairvaux who made it Gospel truth for medieval audiences. By fusing charity with the image of the heart, Clairvaux “was the first to suggest that prayers might be addressed directly to Christ’s heart itself rather than his person more generally.”³¹¹ The suggestion was appealing enough to take root in popular devotion, coming to be known as the Cult of the Sacred Heart. Bernard of Clairvaux also inspired John Colet’s spirituality and ecclesiology, which illuminates how much connected popular devotion and theological thought could be in the period.

As Lucy Wooding accurately puts it, “no understanding of life in Tudor England is complete without an understanding of the intricacies, the wonders, the imperatives and the energies of religious life.”³¹² The devotional section of the *Book of Husbandry* provides only a glimpse of the entangled world of church liturgy, household economy and personal devotion that characterised England at the early sixteenth century. In this sense, the Reformation was a long thread unfolding from a tapestry of church doctrine and popular piety which covered the lives of everyday men and women.

³⁰⁷ *Ibidem.*

³⁰⁸ *Ibidem.*

³⁰⁹ HARTNELL, Jack. *Medieval Bodies: Life, Death and Art in the Middle Ages*. London: Wellcome Collection, 2019, p. 139.

³¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 140.

³¹¹ HARTNELL, Jack, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

³¹² WOODING, Lucy. *Tudor England, op. cit.*, p. 87.

2.3. Every man is captain of his own soul

Love was only the second-place topic of contention in early modern theological debate. Faith was the first. Everything started with an anxious Augustinian monk in a tower. Luther would later recall his 1517 tower experience (*Turmerlebnis*) as “a turning point which hammered home to him the key role of faith in salvation.”³¹³ By scrutinising St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Luther was presented with a new light on the doctrine of justification — a new understanding of what it meant to be saved. As Diarmaid MacCulloch explains:

“His realisation centred predictably on seeing in a new light a text from Romans 1:17, which itself contains a quotation from the Hebrew scripture Habakkuk 2:4: ‘the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith, as it is written, he through faith is righteous shall live.’ In this sentence, the words ‘righteousness/righteous’ could equally be rendered as they were in the Latin of the Vulgate, ‘justitia/justus’. Hence the word ‘justification’, which in Latin literally means the making of someone to be righteous. In Luther’s understanding, it rather meant the declaring of someone to be righteous: God imputes the merits of the crucified and risen Christ through grace to a fallen human being, who remains without inherent merit and who, without this ‘imputation’, would remain unrighteous.”³¹⁴

In the recollection of his *Turmerlebnis*, Luther also remembered how such revelation made him feel “straight away born afresh and to have entered through the open gates into paradise myself.”³¹⁵ There were alternative routes to Paradise other than practising good deeds. With Lutheran theology, entering into heaven would no longer be a matter of purchasing it but of being given it. But the *Book of Husbandry* could not be farther from Lutheran soteriology. Following a quotation from the fourth-century bishop Athanasius,

³¹³ MACCULLOCH, Diarmaid. *The Reformation, op. cit.*, p. 119.

³¹⁴ MACCULLOCH, Diarmaid. *The Reformation, op. cit.*, p. 119.

³¹⁵ *Ibidem.*

Fitzherbert makes sure to establish his Catholic orthodoxy in matters of salvation: “Whosoever is saved, above all things, he must needs be steadfast in the faith of the holy church.”³¹⁶ Faith was of the utmost importance, but even more serious was where such faith was directed to. If love was one way to please God, without faith that was impossible, “And according to that, said St Paul. *Sine fide impossibile est placere deo.*”³¹⁷ Seneca had also argued for the requirement of faith: “There abideth no goodness in him that hath lost his faith.”³¹⁸ Despite being indispensable, faith should not be “studied or argued by reason.” To prove his point, Fitzherbert quotes from St Gregory: “Faith hath no merit, whereas man’s reason proveth the same.”³¹⁹ That was the perfect faith that would please God: true and undisputed by human presumption. But faith could not be enough: “Also thy good deeds and thy works are a good sign that thou lovest God.”³²⁰ In every theological sense, deeds spoke louder than words.

If good deeds were effective ways to love one’s neighbour, prayer was “honour and laud to God, and a special thing that pleaseth him much.”³²¹ It was also a great sign of one’s commitment to the Holy Church and its conventions, and it may be qualified as “the great unifying theme of late medieval religion.”³²² But legitimate prayer had set rules, beginning with the importance of a convenient venue. Late medieval people were particularly aware of the sacredness of space. Throughout the Middle Ages, churches were holy settings dedicated to prayer and worship. They were no ordinary places. Inside them, the miracle of the Eucharist would take place regularly, uniting heaven and earth. Nicholas Orme provides a vivid depiction of how medieval churches had been generally consecrated since Anglo-Saxon times:

“Every church when new was required to be consecrated by a bishop in an elaborate ceremony. He and his entourage circled the buildings three times, singing prayers. Then they came inside, after sand had been sprinkled on the floor in the form of a saltire cross linking the church’s four

³¹⁶ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L7r.

³¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

³¹⁸ *Ibidem.*

³¹⁹ *Ibidem.*

³²⁰ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L7r.

³²¹ *Ibidem.*, p. L8r.

³²² MACCULLOCH, Diarmaid. *The Reformation, op. cit.*, p. 16.

corners. The bishop used his staff to write the alphabet in Greek letters along one diagonal and Roman letters along the other, so that the church was founded on the written Word of God. The interior space was sanctified with aspersions of holy water, and crosses of chrism (a mixture of oil and balm) were painted in twelve places. The high altar in the chancel was solemnly blessed, and holy relics placed within it.”³²³

Churches were places of communion with God and others, and parish membership was a great token of both spiritual and social belonging. That is why Fitzherbert, when discussing what kind of prayer would “please God very much,” makes a detailed reference to traditional cornerstones of late medieval prayer: “our fore fathers hath for the love and honour of God made churches, abbeys, freer houses, and daily ordained and made chantries and hospitals, and in them have ordained and put persons, vicars, men and women of diverse religions, and priests to sing and pray for them and all Christian souls.”³²⁴ Proper public prayer should be performed in the right place, by the right people. However, when it comes to late medieval religion, the mention of ordained clergy and their importance as vicars of the people enhanced rather than diminished lay participation in prayer. Together with churches and abbeys, the organised late medieval system of communications with God was also composed of laity-run associations. Guilds, brotherhoods, sisterhoods and confraternities were voluntary organisations ruled by laypeople, who paid the clergy for prayers for their respective members, as well as holding commercial connections. In the opposite direction of what later Protestants would suggest, the laity was far from voiceless in late medieval religion. Indeed, they were cornerstones of what Eamon Duffy characterised as “a Christianity resolutely and enthusiastically orientated towards the public and the corporate.”³²⁵ In such a society, the laity were definitely embedded in a notion of collective responsibility and corporate awareness, by which they were held accountable for their role in the maintenance of their parish church, moved by “a continuing sense of the value of cooperation and mutuality in seeking salvation.”³²⁶

³²³ ORME, Nicholas. *op. cit.*, p. 85.

³²⁴ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L8r.

³²⁵ DUFFY, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars. op. cit.*, p. 131.

³²⁶ *Ibidem.*

In this sense, the *Book of Husbandry* is a formidable example of how late-medieval lay activism could be adapted into the sixteenth century. Laypeople were not only called to take part in supporting and maintaining religious houses; they were to roll up their sleeves too. Church maintenance was a mainstay of lay devotional responsibility, but far from the only one. Private and corporate prayer were also expected of laymen and women. In concert with monastic conventions, they were commissioned to fill their everyday lives with prayer: “And though a man may have ordained and made such houses of religion or chantries, yet it is not enough for him but he must daily at some convenient times exercise and use prayer himself, as he is bound to do.”³²⁷ The initial recommendation of saying a Paternoster right after waking up is given a theological justification, following a quote from St Ambrose: “If thou leavest that thing undone that thou art bound to do, it is not acceptable to God, whatsoever thou doest else.”³²⁸

But prayers were not always heard, and one reason for it was wicked disobedience. The Prophet Isaiah had already signalled to it: “Because your hands are full of blood, that is to say, full of sin, therefore our lord doth not graciously hear you.” The Book of Proverbs confirmed it: “Our lord is far from wicked men, and the prayers of righteous men he graciously heareth.”³²⁹ Another reason for unheard prayers was internal sorrow and hate. As Athanasius had said, a lack of forgiveness could even summon God’s wrath: “If thou forgive not the wrong done unto thee, thou doest not pray for thyself, but thou endurest God’s curse to fall upon thee.”³³⁰ Forgiveness, then, was a crucial currency in the prayer market.

As practical as the *Book of Husbandry* was, it ensured that its readers received comprehensive instructions on how to pray. First, they were to know the difference between open and private prayer: “Prayer openly must be done in the church by the ministers of the same people. For it is done for all the community, and therefore the people in that ought to conform themselves to the said ministrations, and there to be present to pray unto God after a due manner.”³³¹ Public prayer had a right time and place and should be performed by the ordained ministers, to whose sayings people should conform themselves. But private prayer also had its rules: it should occur “in a privy place and separate from the multitude of people.”¹¹⁹ There were two reasons for such a condition. First, prayer was a state of mental elevation to God, and the human mind was better suited for such activity in private: “prayer

³²⁷ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. L8r.

³²⁸ *Ibidem.*

³²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. L8v.

³³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. Mr.

³³¹ *Ibidem*, p. Mr-Mv.

elevateth and lifteth up a man's mind to God, and the mind of man is sooner and better lifted up when he is in a privy place and separate from the multitude of people."³³² Secondly, privacy was important for a moral reason: "to avoid vainglory that might lightly ensue or rise thereupon when it is done openly."³³³ The advice was from Christ himself, "when he said [...] when you pray, be not you as hypocrites, who love to stand in their synagogues and corners of highways to pray."³³⁴ This type of loud-spoken, outdoor prayer was also harmful due to its insincerity. A famous passage on the prophet Isaiah brings out God's rebuke on those who "honour me with their mouth, and their hearts are far from me."³³⁵

We can get a glimpse of how such notions unfolded throughout the sixteenth century, and how the appreciation of sincerity in private prayer would be commonplace for Protestant devotional culture, by reading some sections of the official Elizabethan prayer book, *A Book of Christian Prayers*. Canterbury Cathedral Library holds an exquisite copy of this Elizabethan classic in a red-leathered octavo of beautifully ornamented pages (Figure 22). In the preface, Richard Day, the publisher, admonishes his readers: "Pray not [as] the Pharisee, but pray as the Publican."³³⁶ It is a statement to the complexity of sixteenth-century devotional history that such a recognisibly Protestant emphasis can be rather found in an earlier Catholic manual.

But teaching an early modern audience how to pray was far from an unbiased endeavour. After utilising traditional biblical verses that condemn the insincerity of vain and empty prayers, Fitzherbert presents a set of quotations emphasising the importance of a perfect mental state. When it came to prayer, occupying one's mind with earthly business was a serious problem. "His soul is far from God, that in his prayer his mind is occupied in works of the world," said Isidore, and St John in one of his epistles qualified that "the true prayers will worship the Father in heaven in spirit and with truth."³³⁷ The relationship between keeping the mind away from worldly business and performing a truthful, heartfelt prayer is reinstated at the end of this section, again from quoting Isidorus: "The hotter prayer is with the heart than with the lips, rather pray with thy heart than with thy mouth."³³⁸

³³² *Ibidem*, p. Mv.

³³³ *Ibidem*.

³³⁴ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. Mv.

³³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³³⁶ *A Book of Christian Prayers*. London: John Day, 1590.

³³⁷ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. M2r.

³³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. M2r-M2v.

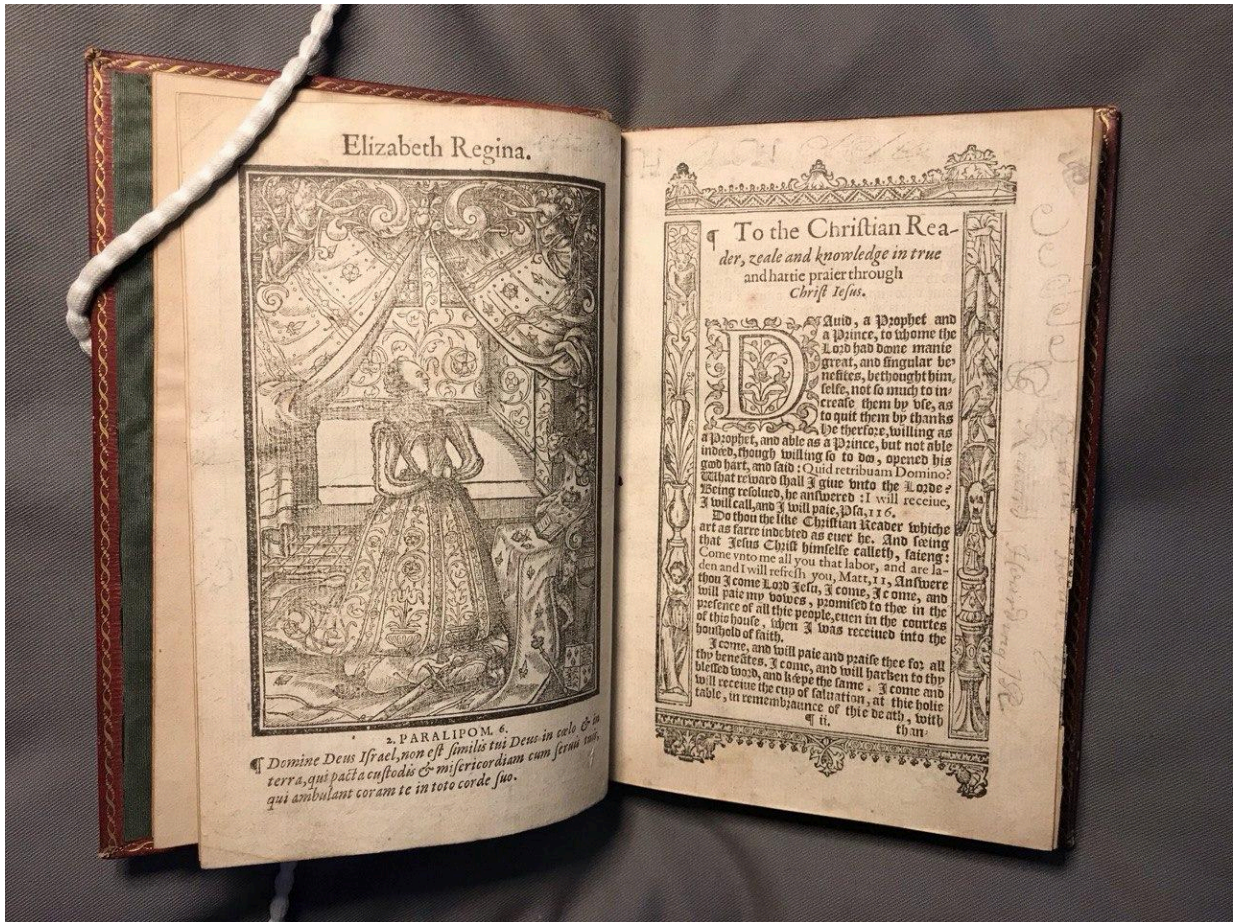


Figure 22. Preface of *A Book of Christian Prayers* (1590).
With the kind permission of the Canterbury Cathedral Library.

The *Book of Husbandry* makes the compelling case that people struggled with prayer before the Puritans came onto the scene. It is commonly acknowledged that a general anxiety over prayer, especially over insincere prayer, was “a peculiarly puritan concern.”³³⁹ Although surely, Puritans were particularly uptight with their devotional lives, it would be an act of historical unfairness and academic negligence to deny such eagerness to earlier generations. The late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century rise of printed devotional literature was not a novel insurgency but a thorough continuation of cultural trends of which the *Book of Husbandry* can be taken as an object. The pressure for sincere prayers was an older and wider sea which Puritans learned to navigate. Puritans did not invent the necessity of heartfelt prayers; they were the best advertisers of it.

Alec Ryrie makes a detailed examination of Puritan devotional culture in his book *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*. He dates the turn of the 17th century as a moment of

³³⁹ RYRIE, Alec. *Being Protestant in Reformation Britain*. *op. cit.*, p. 102.

growing doctrinal precision in English Protestantism, when a distinctively Reformed Protestant doctrine of prayer, composed of the Calvinist emphasis on the prescriptive will of God and the necessity of heartfelt intention, was “moved to the devotional foreground”.³⁴⁰ Although Ryrrie himself does not explore such an argument further, the idea that the seventeenth century was a flourishing time for Protestant devotional literature is hard to refute. And it is often associated with an emphasis on the accentuated levels of literacy and the growing development of print culture, typically observed from the 1580s onwards.³⁴¹ However, the story is only half told if we omit the burgeoning forms of both Protestant and Catholic devotional culture that were developing during the crucial years of the English Reformation. Decades before the Puritans came into the scene, struggles over the practice of private prayer were already a common concern, to which there was already a vast array of alternative solutions.

Inability to pray was a serious problem. But if distraction and forgetfulness seemed to be a minor problem for Puritans, they were central for early sixteenth-century readers. Fitzherbert adds to his devotional lesson “a means to put away idle thoughts in praying,” for wandering minds were a concurrent problem. Worldly occupations were always in the way of honest and sincere prayer, and even though other body parts were set to pray, the mind could easily become a battlefield. In this case, Fitzherbert says, Latin could help: “He that can read and understand Latin, let him take his book in his hand and look steadfastly upon the same thing that he readeth and seeth, that is no trouble to him, and remember the English of the same, wherein he shall find great sweetness, and shall cause his mind to follow the same, and to leave other worldly thoughts.”¹²⁹ Fitzherbert’s learned prophylactic measure for a troubled devotional routine is an epitome of early modern devotional humanism. Latin could improve one’s prayers by freeing the mind from idleness, and the process could even be a cause for “great sweetness”. Praying and translating could be complementary activities. And it would be wrong to assume Fitzherbert is exclusively referring to a learned Latin-speaking elite. The knowledge he is pointing to is that of the Pater noster, Ave Maria and the Creed, which had become mandatory for layfolk since the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. But by the 1520s, not everyone in England had been reached by such reforming efforts, and there were a great number of people who could not keep up with the translating exercise. For those, Fitzherbert’s advice reinforces the brightness and visual appeal of late medieval devotion:

³⁴⁰ *Ibidem.*

³⁴¹ GREEN, Ian. *Print and Protestantism, op. cit.*; CRESSY, David, *op. cit.*

“And he that can not read nor understand his Pater noster. Ave, nor Creed, he must remember the passion of Christ, what pain he suffered for him and all mankind, for redeeming their souls. And also the miracles and wonders that God hath done, and first what wonders were done the night of his nativity and birth. And how he turned water into wine, and made the blind to see, the dumb to speak, the deaf to hear, the lame to walk, the sick to be whole. And how he fed 5 thousand with two fishes and five barley loaves, whereof was left 12 coffins or skips of fragments. And how he raised Lazarus from death to life, with many more miracles that are innumerable to be rehearsed. And also to remember the special points of his passion, how he was sold and betrayed by Judas, and taken by the Jews, and brought before Pilate, then to King Herodes, and to bishop Caiphaz, and then to Pilate again, that judged him to death, and how he was bound to a pillar and scourged and bobbed him, mocked him, spit in his face, crowned with thorns, and caused him to bear the cross to the mount of Calvary, whereupon he was nailed both hands and feet, and wounded to the heart with a sharp sphere, and so suffered death. And how he set out the souls of our forefathers forth of hell. How he rose from death to life, and how often he appeared to his disciples, and others. And what miracles he wrought afterwards, and especially the power he gave to his disciples that were no clerks to teach and preach his faith, and work many miracles, and especially when he preached before men of diverse nations and languages, and every man understood them in their own language, the which if a sign that God would have every man saved, and to know his laws, the which was a miracle able to convert all the infidels, heretics, and lollers in the world.”³⁴²

By comprehensively listing the points of Christ’s Passion, Fitzherbert was advising his readers on the importance of the topic while also providing them with a complementary

³⁴² FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, pp. M3r-M3v.

sample of what they would already have available in their books of hours. But some of them could not dispose of a printed or manuscript book, rather knowing such points by heart from hearing them at church or home, so here the *Book of Husbandry* becomes an even more useful book by supplementing devotional material.

The humanist undertone of Fitzherbert's writing is made clear by his defence of the importance of translation, and especially devotionally themed translation. By presenting the points of Christ's Passion as a mnemonic alternative for the illiterate, he sets forth a quintessential element of late medieval piety and devotional literature. Still, he also points to the necessity of a modern, vernacular and lay-focused undertaking of it. By adding the appearance of Christ to the Apostles and his giving to "his disciples that were no clerks to teach and preach his faith and work many miracles," Fitzherbert hints at the kind of institutional simplicity advocated by Erasmus and his supporters. By adding the participation of those non-clergy Apostles as a new culminating point in the history of Christ's passion, Fitzherbert discreetly proposes his redacted version of church history, in which illiterate laymen, like the Apostles themselves, could be defining protagonists.

Even more ingenious than presenting the Apostles as laity is Fitzherbert's emphasis on their preaching to other ordinary layfolk "in their own language." Not only were the Apostles laymen, but they were also divinely commissioned to call for others of "diverse nations and languages". The international and vernacular nature of Christ's commission to the Church, represented by the Twelve Apostles, was therefore "a sign that God would have every man saved, and to know his laws." Translation had salvific purposes; that was a humanist anthem. Indeed, according to Fitzherbert's final claim, the redeeming potential of the vernacular word had already proved itself, for it "was a miracle able to convert all the infidels, heretics, and lollards in the world."³⁴³

It is fascinating to note how close Fitzherbert's claims get to the sayings of the heretics of his time. Emphasis on lay-centered forms of devotion and liturgy, a passionate defence of interiorised genuine prayers against affected demonstrations of piety, an overall Christocentric and simplified devotional framework – any Lollard would gladly accept all of it. However, Fitzherbert takes every care not to risk being misinterpreted. Despite praising the salvific nature of translation as a tool for conversion, he never extends it to what the Catholic orthodoxy of his time would render heretical — Bible translation. His praise of the vernacular is entirely orthodox. The mention of the Apostles' preaching being understood by every man

³⁴³ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. M3v.

in their own language is not a defence of Bible translation, but rather an exposition of the apologetical power of the Church. The event mentioned is the Pentecost, narrated in the Acts of the Apostles as the moment when God's spirit empowered the disciples to pray in different languages, being miraculously understood by people around them. It is easy to miss Fitzherbert's argument since the Pentecost was a common reference for those arguing in favour of Bible translation. In fact, in Fitzherbert's words, the Pentecost would work as a way to convert Lollards, not confirm them.

Despite the distinct stance on Bible translation, there is a reason why Fitzherbert's devotional manifesto seems to bear so many similarities to Lollard ideas. In pre-Reformation England, 'the boundaries between orthodoxy and dissent, though at times vigilantly guarded, were also profoundly permeable.'³⁴⁴ Fitzherbert's *Book of Husbandry* proves these words are true. He brings the example:

“As a lord had a castle, and delivered it to a captain to keep, if there come enemies to the castle, and call to the captain and bid him deliver them this castle. The captain cometh and openeth them the gates, and delivereth the keys. Now is this castle soon won, and the captain is a false traitor to the lord. But let the captain arm himself and stake the gates, and stand stiffly upon the walls, and to command them to avoid at their peril, they will not tarry to make any assault. Right so every man is captain of his own soul, and if thy ghostly enemy come and tempt thee, and thou that art captain of thine own soul will open the gates and deliver him the keys and let him in, thy soul is soon taken prisoner, and thou a false traitor to thy soul, and worthy to be punished in prison for ever.”³⁴⁵

The statement could not have been clearer. Every man is captain of his own soul. That is Fitzherbert's main contribution to the debate, made in a deeply humanistic claim. By emphasising every man's responsibility for their soul, Fitzherbert was introducing a crucial,

³⁴⁴ MARSHALL, P. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*, p. 119.

³⁴⁵ FITZHERBERT, John (1533), *op. cit.*, p. M4r-M4v.

albeit unarticulated, theme of early modern piety: its growing attachment to notions of what I call devotional responsibility. Church statutes and councils since the thirteenth century had been pointing to renewed understandings of lay participation in liturgy. Genuine Christians were expected to know their prayers, to regularly attend their local churches and take part on the communion of heaven and earth. They were to be active members of the Body of Christ, supporting their local parishes in church maintenance and almsdeeds. Their faith would shine brighter through the good works they performed on earth, and a flourishing body of literature developed to instruct them on how to do it. The *Book of Husbandry*, being a mixture of farming manual and devotional treatise, was as part of this world as were bibles and *books of hours*.

Overall, the *Book of Husbandry* was a manifesto for homemade Catholic devotion. With its detailed farming advice followed by devotional lessons, it provided its sixteenth-century readers with everything they needed to know to thrive materially and spiritually. It taught them how to purchase heaven while on earth, and in doing so supplied them with renewed notions of their own devotional duties. It held them accountable for their spiritual lives without diminishing their dependence on the Church.³⁴⁶ In retrospect, it can even be seen as an involuntary answer to a wish Erasmus had expressed in his *Paraclesis*, the introduction to his 1516 translated New Testament. His enthusiastic call for the vernacular Bible to be available to any sort of Christian found its highest note in his claim that “as a result, the farmer sings some portion of them at the plough, the weaver hum some parts of them to the movement of his shuttle, the traveler lightens the weariness of the journey with stories of this kind!”³⁴⁷ The idea of a singing ploughman illuminated by God’s Word was also crystallised by the saying later attributed to William Tyndale: “If God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy who drives a plough to know more of the scriptures than you do.” But Tyndale’s ploughman could not fit the criteria of devotional performance aimed at in the *Book of Husbandry*. This would be a conscientious and unapologetic Catholic ploughman.

³⁴⁶ In the final sections of the book, Fitzherbert made sure to secure his Catholic orthodoxy (Figure 18): “Be it known to all men both spiritual and temporal, that I make protestation before God and man, that I intend not to write anything that is or may be contrary to the faith of Christ and all holy Church. But I am ready to revoke my saying, if anything ave passed my mouth or want of learning, and to submit myself to correction, and my book to reformation.” FITZHERBERT, John, (1533) *op. cit.*, p. Nv.

³⁴⁷ OLIN, John C. (ed). *Christian Humanism and the Reformation. op. cit.*, p. 101.

Chapter 3.

How to Restore a Heretic: Bishops, Lawyers and Gentlewomen Unite

More than a decade after John Colet preached his Convocation sermon at St. Paul's Cathedral, the place became the setting of a bonfire spectacle. Boisterous noises from the crowded multitude and the smell of burning paper filled the air. It was February 11, 1526, Quinquagesima Sunday. The stars of the show were four foreign merchants and one Cambridge theologian. Their crime was clear-cut: heresy. But there would be nothing burning at St Paul's Cross that day except for books. The London Steelyard merchants and Robert Barnes were there to perform their abjuration, bearing faggots to the Cathedral's churchyard. The sensation of seeing heretics recant seemingly surpassed the awe of watching their forbidden books come to ashes. This was England's first Lutheran abjuration.

That abjuring heretics could cause such a stir is symptomatic of the religious temperature of 1520s England. Whether they were merchants or scholars, the sight of repentant sinners carrying their faggots in public was a particularly positive sign that, whatever the methods employed by authorities to contain heresy, they were working. By 1526, Lutheranism was no longer a hot-off-the-press heresy. It had been surrounding Henry VIII's England through a well-connected network of theologians, booksellers, and merchants. The route of Lutheran ideas into England followed a clandestine distribution chain of suspicious books already familiar to English authorities since the fourteenth century. After all, Lollardy had provided Lutheranism with useful and convenient book-smuggling routes. Attacking this distribution network was the immediate goal of English authorities in containing the spread of Luther's heresy. However, this would prove to be a more challenging task than imagined.

The increased influx of Lutheran books and tracts in England was of grave concern to the bishops. And no one seemed more aggrieved by it than John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. He had been active in counterattacking what he called the "black cloud of heresy" raised by Martin Luther from the start, engaging in an eager writing campaign against it. He was also the speaker on that February night at St. Paul's, and the sermon he preached on such an occasion highlights a decisive moment of the English Reformation, when religious identities

and distinctions became clearer than ever before. During his sermon that night, John Fisher became one of the earliest users of the noun *Catholic* to designate a distinctive confessional identity, even though such usage would only be established throughout the second half of the sixteenth century. Moreover, Fisher's 1526 sermon is also significant because it sheds light on a peculiar strategy employed by English authorities in dealing with heresy. By the time he preached at the abjuration ceremony at St Paul's, a secret reformation was in course behind the scenes, according to which Lutheran heretics were to be privately convinced of their sins, and later publicly recant their wrongful opinions. The faggot-bearing and book-burning at St Paul's that night was, after all, a demonstration that the strategy had been fruitful.

If John Fisher was the public face of this secret reformation, Sir Thomas More was its most expert practitioner. His household at Chelsea, already internationally renowned as a centre of humanist learning, would also become an important site of heresy interrogation in the late 1520s. More's reputation definitely preceded him, and by 1529, he seemed Henry VIII's best alternative to occupy the position of Lord Chancellor, bringing to the table his personal mixture of moral strictness and legal proficiency. During the two years in which he acted as Lord Chancellor, More is said to have "embodied the law of England."³⁴⁸ His activities presiding over the courts of Chancery and Star Chamber were remarkable acts of legal reform. But it was on the capacity of a devout lay Christian that he most effectively proved his commitment to the king.

Despite the importance of Thomas More's writings and activities at the service of the Crown, his family seemed to be his ultimate priority. By the late 1520s, he was already known throughout Europe for his thorough programme of humanist education that unapologetically included women. The More women were internationally praised for their intellectual pursuits, and their leading figure was More's eldest and favourite daughter, Margaret, whose accomplishments were praised by Juan Luis Vives and Erasmus himself. In fact, her English translation of one of Erasmus's prayer treatises is a remarkable piece of humanist erudition and Catholic theology. It was an exposition on the Lord's Prayer, the Christian prayer par excellence, and it elucidates the complexities of humanist translation and pious devotion in Henrician England.

In this chapter, I argue that a powerful feature of Catholic devotional responsibility emerged in the late 1520s and would be taken to extremes in the 1530s: the fight against heresy. English Catholics were now called to take their stances against what they took to be

³⁴⁸ ACKROYD, Peter. *The Life of Thomas More*. London: Vintage, 1999, p. 287.

the ultimate threat to true Christianity, a new kind of heretic personified by university-trained theologians just like William Tyndale, Robert Barnes and Thomas Bilney. John Fisher and Thomas More were active participants in this kind of fight and would pay the ultimate price for it with their own lives in 1535. Exactly 400 years later, both would be canonised for their martyrdom, with such an event being the culmination of a centuries-long process of memorialising their lives and works. However, this is not a comment on their hagiographic story. Rather, I aim to demonstrate how John Fisher and Thomas More were fundamental figures of Catholic renewal in their own ways, precisely by their acknowledged emphasis on lay commitment to the fight against heresy. Fisher's 1526 sermon embodies the confessional divisions that, if not clear at the beginning of the decade, were already making themselves known in the late 1520s, while also commissioning its hearers and readers to take part in the battle. More, on the other hand, established the model of the devout layman committed to defending Catholic orthodoxy, while also helping to define it in the process. His 1529 *Dialogue concerning Heresies* provided its readers with a vivid depiction of how to restore a heretic, with homely and witty conversation being a solid first step.

Despite its persuasive and polemical impulse, the fight against heresy was also an opportunity to refresh one's devotional standards. Most strands of Catholic humanism in England were especially concerned with making theology accessible, and Margaret Roper's *Devout treatise upon the Pater noster* was a remarkable enterprise of such intent. Being a translation of Erasmus's 1523 *Precatio dominica*, her treatise was, I argue, the English extension of a wider 1520s European trend of prayer translation and exposition. Although recently revived by scholars such as William Gentrup and Elizabeth McCutcheon,³⁴⁹ studies about Margaret Roper still lack a proper account of how her translation would fit a broader debate about the devotional and spiritual importance of the *Pater noster*. Also, I aim to contribute with a special consideration of how Margaret's translation enhanced the domestic and homely flavour of the *Pater noster* and the theological implications of her Englishing of such a foundational prayer.

Overall, what most notably unites the three authors is their steadfast commitment to the defence of Catholic orthodoxy against Lutheranism. Most of all, defending true Christianity was more and more commented upon as being a shared responsibility of all English Christians, who were now more than ever being held accountable for their public and private devotional lives. By polemically defending, in his book-burning sermon, the assent to

³⁴⁹ GENTRUP, William.; MCCUTCHEON, Elizabeth. (eds.) *A Companion to Margaret More Roper Studies: Life Records, Essential Texts, and Critical Essays*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2022.

the Holy Church's doctrine and statements, Fisher was teaching his hearers and readers that joining the path of salvation was a matter of choice. When inviting his not-so-hypothetical heretic (for he was known to be a direct reference to William Tyndale) to his "study at Chelsea" in his *Dialogue*, Thomas More was providing his lay learned readers with a method of lay reformation through homely conversation. Finally, his daughter Margaret and her skilfully translated treatise on the Lord's Prayer furnished English readers with an exposition upon the foundational prayer of their faith, in their native tongue. Overall, this was an invitation for ordinary men and women to think deeply about issues of conscience and belief, preparing them for "the paradox at the very heart of the Reformation story - a story of how shared visions of faith produced deep and lasting divisions in religion."³⁵⁰

3.1. Instructing the Catholic Reader: John Fisher, Thomas More and the Secret Reformation

If in 1518 the "quarrel among friars" in Germany did not create a special commotion in England, things were soon to take a dramatic turn. In 1520, Pope Leo X condemned Martin Luther by issuing his official excommunication and commanding that his books be burnt, to which the outspoken monk responded by burning the papal bull at Wittenberg. Leo X's bull condemned "the said books with his preachings in what tongue soever they are found – willing and commanding [...] that no one – read, hold, print, publish or defend (the said books and errors) but straightway after the publishing hereof, they do burn or cause to be burnt the said errors, by their ordinaries being diligently searched out, and solemnly presented in the sight of the whole clergy and people (under the penalty of the greater excommunication)."³⁵¹ The dramatic events that unfolded in 1521 had their origins in the previous year, when Luther published three pamphlets whose contents felt like dynamite to the Catholic sacramental system. In August 1520, he urged the temporal powers to lead their communities far from Roman jurisdiction in *An Appeal to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation*. Written in German, it was a decisive blow against Roman authority by defending the priesthood of all believers. Only two months later, he published *De Captivitate Babylonica*,³⁵² in which he affirmed that the sacraments were limited to three (baptism,

³⁵⁰ MARSHALL, P. *Heretics and Believers. op. cit.*, p. 119.

³⁵¹ REED, Arthur W. The Regulation of the Book Trade before the Proclamation of 1538. *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society*. Vol. 15. No. 1. 1917. pp. 162-163.

³⁵² LUTHER, Martin. *De Captivitate Babylonica Ecclesiae Praeludium*. Wittenberg: Johann Pruss, 1520.

penance, and the Eucharist) and that the Pope was the Antichrist. However, the truly polemical argument Luther made in his book concerned the doctrine of transubstantiation. According to him, the mass was no sacrifice, and the substance of bread and wine remained on the altar alongside the body of Christ. The year closed with a German and a Latin version of *De Libertate Christiana*,³⁵³ *On the Liberty of a Christian Man*. Here, Luther advocated for justification by faith alone. The Reformation had reached its point of no return.

News of Luther's latest book reached Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London. "I pray God keep that book out of England,"³⁵⁴ he prayed. However, Bishop Tunstall's prayer fell on deaf ears, for Lutheran books would flow into English soil like a mighty river. But in 1520, every effort was made to keep them out of the realm, although not immediately. It can be said that Cardinal Wolsey, the man in charge of English diplomatic relations, took his time to act. One way to look at his delayed response is to consider it a product of political caution. Peter Marshall argues that he "was unsure his legatine authority allowed it – perhaps the only occasion when Wolsey modestly downplayed his own jurisdictional powers."³⁵⁵ Regardless of Wolsey's hesitancy, April 1521 saw a conference of leading English theologians whose conclusion was to publicly burn Luther's books by the 12th of May that year. The chosen site was St Paul's Cross, the same place where John Colet had encouraged his clergymen to behave as lively books for the laity in 1512.

Another possible stumbling block for Wolsey's decision on the burning of Luther's books was Erasmus. He had advised Wolsey before to refrain from it, based on the argument that such an act would stir unwanted disorder among the English populace. After all, before 1520, Luther was still a minor problem as far as the English clergy was concerned, and a public burning of his books could easily backfire on the bishops' intention of keeping it low. Additionally, Erasmus had been vocal in putting Luther's theology in perspective, interceding for his good intentions while also reinforcing that they could be "more courteously and moderately expressed."³⁵⁶

By 1521, however, Henrician England had declared war on Lutheranism, and there was no place for doubt. At least that was the intended goal. But burning Luther's books would not be enough; they needed to be answered. Overall, no one seemed more willing to refute Luther than the King himself. In 1521, Henry VIII set forth his *Assertio Septem*

³⁵³ LUTHER, Martin. *De Libertate Christiana*. Wittenberg: Johann Pruss, 1520.

³⁵⁴ DOWLING, Maria. *Humanism in the Age of Henry VIII*. Beckenham, 1986, p. 41.

³⁵⁵ MARSHALL, Peter. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*, p. 125.

³⁵⁶ MARSHALL, Peter. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*

Sacramentorum (Defence of the Seven Sacraments),³⁵⁷ “the first book ever written for the press by an English monarch.”³⁵⁸ It was a reply to Luther’s *De Captivitate Babylonica*, published a year before, and was actually the work of many hands, since it was corrected and scrutinised by the leading English theologians of the time, like John Fisher and Stephen Gardiner. Even though the idea was to have it finished by the time of the book-burning of May 1521, it was printed in July, and copies were soon sent to Rome. The Pope responded by giving Henry the title of *Fidei Defensor*, in yet another paradox of the English Reformation.³⁵⁹

The King had made the first move in answering Luther by publishing his *Assertio*, and English clergy soon followed. John Fisher (1469-1535), bishop of Rochester, was the ultimate English warrior against the German heretic. In 1523, he published the *Assertionis Lutheranae Confutatio*,³⁶⁰ against Luther’s scholarly response to Pope Leo X’s excommunication bull. Fisher’s 1523 *Assertionis* had nineteen editions printed up to 1564, and a German translation was reprinted four times before 1536. It helped to establish the Bishop of Rochester as a leading theologian and scholar in the fight against heresy. Fisher’s theological blows against Luther were presented to a wider European audience, as his Latin polemic writings had all been primarily published at the heart of the European book market – Antwerp and Cologne. Fisher seemed eager not to let any of Luther’s writings go unanswered. His *Sacri Sacerdotii Defensio contra Lutherum* was published in 1525 as an answer to Luther’s *De abroganda missa privata*. Later that year, he published, in support of Henry VIII’s *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, a learned *Defensio Regiae Assertionis* (Defence of the King’s Argument). In 1527, Fisher published one of his most prominent pieces of theological commentary, *De veritate corporis et sanguinis Christi in Eucharistam*, in response to the Basel reformer Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531) and his symbolic interpretation of the Eucharist. This particular work would help cement Fisher’s European reputation even further when it was extensively added to the final Eucharistic doctrine at the Council of Trent.

The importance of John Fisher to the early sixteenth-century theological scene cannot be overstated. Born in 1469, he belonged to a pious family from Yorkshire. His graduation from Cambridge in 1483 soon gave rise to a meteoric career in ecclesiastical and administrative affairs. By 1504, he was already Chancellor of Cambridge University, which paved the way for even higher positions. That same year, he was made Bishop of Rochester

³⁵⁷ TUDOR, Henry. *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*. London: Richard Pynson, 1521.

³⁵⁸ MARSHALL, Peter. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*, p. 126.

³⁵⁹ It was mainly based upon his title of *Fidei Defensor* that Henry and his councillors would articulate the concept of royal supremacy. See REX, Richard, *op. cit.*

³⁶⁰ FISHER, John. *Assertionis Lutheranae Confutatio*. Cologne: 1523.

and a member of Henry VII's Council. Fisher's talent had also caught the eye of the king's mother, Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509), who promptly invited him to be her chaplain and confessor. The partnership between the bishop and the queen was the most fruitful mainspring of spiritual and educational reform that early Tudor England had ever seen. As both Lady Margaret's adviser and Cambridge chancellor, Fisher had more than enough room to implement institutional and administrative reforms in English universities. He particularly favoured preaching, which was an acknowledged feature of his pastoral and ecclesiastical ministries throughout his life. He was the architect behind the 1503 institution of readerships at Oxford and Cambridge by Lady Margaret. Fisher's commitment to preaching was made even more noticeable the following year, when Lady Margaret founded and endowed a chantry in the University of Cambridge for the maintenance of a preacher, who "had to preach six sermons annually at Paul's Cross or at St Margaret's, Westminster, and once during the two years of his appointment at each of the churches of Ware and Chesnut in Hertfordshire, Bassingbourn, Orwell, and Babraham in Cambridgeshire, Maxey, St James Deeping, St John Deeping, Bourn, Boston and Swineshead in Lincolnshire."³⁶¹ These were not random parishes, as E.E. Reynolds reminds us. They were all 'associated with the Lady Margaret; some were her manors, of others she owned the advowsons, and some were near monasteries of which she was the benefactress.'³⁶² The careful selection of parishes and the frequency of visits by the nominated preachers highlight how important Fisher and Margaret considered preaching. It also illuminates how the world around them was welcoming of such a pursuit.

During August and September 1504, Fisher preached a series of ten sermons on the Penitential Psalms to Lady Margaret's household, which would become the first sermon sequence to be printed in English. Wynkyn de Worde published them in 1508 as "*This treatise concerning the fruitful sayings of David the king and prophet in the seven penitential psalms.*"³⁶³ The queen herself had commissioned Fisher to write and publish the sermons, as he points out in the prologue of the printed edition: "I of late, before the most excellent princess Margaret Countess of Richmond and Derby and mother unto our sovereign lord King Henry VII, published the sayings of the holy king and prophet David of the vii penitential psalms, in the which my said good and singular lady much delighted, at whose commandment and gracious exhortation I have put the said sermons in writing for to be impressed."³⁶⁴ Their

³⁶¹ REYNOLDS, Ernest Edwin. *St John Fisher: Humanist, Reformer, Martyr*. Mediatix Press: 1955, pp. 28-29.

³⁶² *Ibidem*.

³⁶³ FISHER, John. *This treatise concerning the fruitful sayings of David the king and prophet in the seven penitential psalms*. London: Wynkyn de Worde, 1508.

³⁶⁴ FISHER, John. *This treatise concerning the fruitful sayings of David*, *op. cit.*

endeavour to print a series of sermons deserves special attention (Figures 23 and 24). As discussed in Chapter 1, sermon printing was a minor and almost insignificant business in England at the beginning of the sixteenth century. This was a world in which sermons were primarily heard, not read. But this was also a world of renewed piety, where new technologies allowed devotional practices to be presented and broadcast in new formats. John Fisher and Margaret Beaufort were illustrious inhabitants of such a world and highly appreciative of its new possibilities. With the benefit of hindsight, we can agree that their effort surely paid off, for Fisher's Penitential Psalms became an immediate sixteenth-century bestseller and would still be printed up until the eighteenth century. Fisher and Margaret's confidence in the printing press also rendered the first book written by an Englishwoman to be printed. The *Mirror of Gold to the Synfull Soule* was first printed by Richard Pynson in 1506, as the published version of Margaret's private exercise on translating the fourth book of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*, a cornerstone of late medieval devotional literature. Fisher had guided her in the exercise and also fostered the printing of the volume.

In more ways than one, John Fisher challenges the usual labels attached to early sixteenth-century religion, by which most historians have attempted to identify and distinguish between 'medieval' and "humanist" tendencies. Overall, his lifelong efforts for educational reform at the University of Cambridge, his unapologetic and pioneering interest in sermon printing, and the pragmatic and fruitful ways he benefited from the approval and patronage of the highest members of the early Tudor hierarchy did not overshadow his deeply conservative theological leanings. As elastic a term as "humanist" can be, it fits Fisher's career in ways that defy categorisation. As a bishop, he fostered preaching and clergy instruction in his see at Rochester, the poorest diocese in England, while also defying contemporary expectations by remaining there throughout his life. As Brendan Bradshaw remarks, Fisher's "example in this regard shines all the more brightly in an age more notorious than most for prelatical careerism."³⁶⁵ When, in 1512, John Colet rebuked English bishops for their failure to reside in their dioceses, there is every reason to assume he was referring to someone other than Fisher. Early sixteenth-century Rochester had a resident and dutiful bishop, distinct among his kind by his personal austerity as well as by his willingness to broadcast conventional Catholic piety in innovative ways. Accordingly, the same Fisher who pioneered English sermon printing and committed himself to elevating preaching

³⁶⁵ BRADSHAW, Brendan. Bishop John Fisher: the man and his work. In: BRADSHAW, Brendan; DUFFY, Eamon (eds). *Humanism, Reform and the Reformation: The Career of Bishop John Fisher*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1989. p. 5.

standards throughout England was the same man who held, in his private offertory, a locked coffer with “a shirt of hair, and two or three whips, wherewith he used full often to punish himself.” In the early sixteenth century, a humanist bishop could also be a penitent sinner.

John Fisher’s commitment to reforming the Catholic Church stemmed not from a special desire for innovation but from a deep commitment to conventional devotion that, if compared to some of his contemporaries, might even seem old-fashioned. It was his personal piety, particularly influenced by late-medieval ascetic and penitential practices, that moved his efforts towards ecclesiastical renovation. His sermons were primarily soteriological and penitential in nature, and allowed for dramatic connotations that resembled late medieval theatre, especially in their vivid evocation of purgatory, “a purgatory conceived not as a place of hope and renewal, as in Dante, but as a torture-house designed to exact retribution from a sinful humanity.”³⁶⁶ Notwithstanding, he provides a conducive illustration of how dynamic early sixteenth-century Catholic humanism could be. His transcendental penitential religion was as much a part of it as Erasmus’s *philosophia Christi* or John Colet’s pseudo-Dionysian ecclesiology. Fisher’s ‘intense preoccupations’, as characterised by Brendan Bradshaw, contextualise his religious consciousness “within a wider thought world, that of the reforming impulse of the pre-Reformation Church.”³⁶⁷

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³⁶⁶ DUFFY, Eamon. The spirituality of John Fisher. In: BRADSHAW, Brendan; DUFFY, Eamon, (eds.). *op. cit.*, p. 207.

³⁶⁷ BRADSHAW, Brendan. *op. cit.*, p. 5.

³⁶⁸ DUFFY, Eamon. The spirituality of John Fisher. In: BRADSHAW, Brendan; DUFFY, Eamon, (eds.). *op. cit.*, p. 207.

contextualise his religious consciousness “within a wider thought world, that of the reforming impulse of the pre-Reformation Church.”³⁶⁹

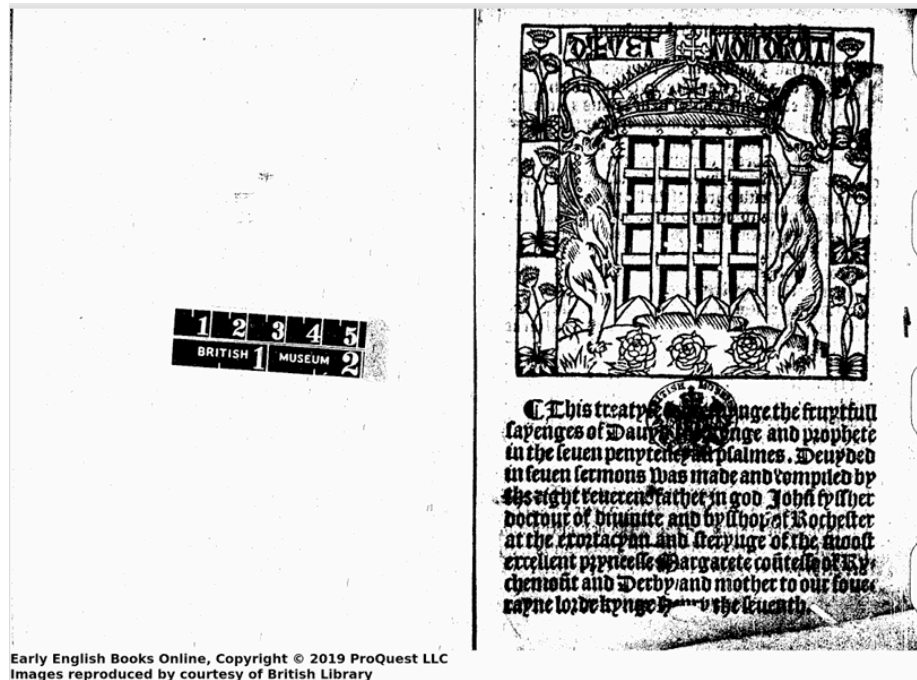


Figure 23. Title page of John Fisher’s *Treatise concerning the fruitful sayings of David* (1508). Early Modern English Books (EEBO).

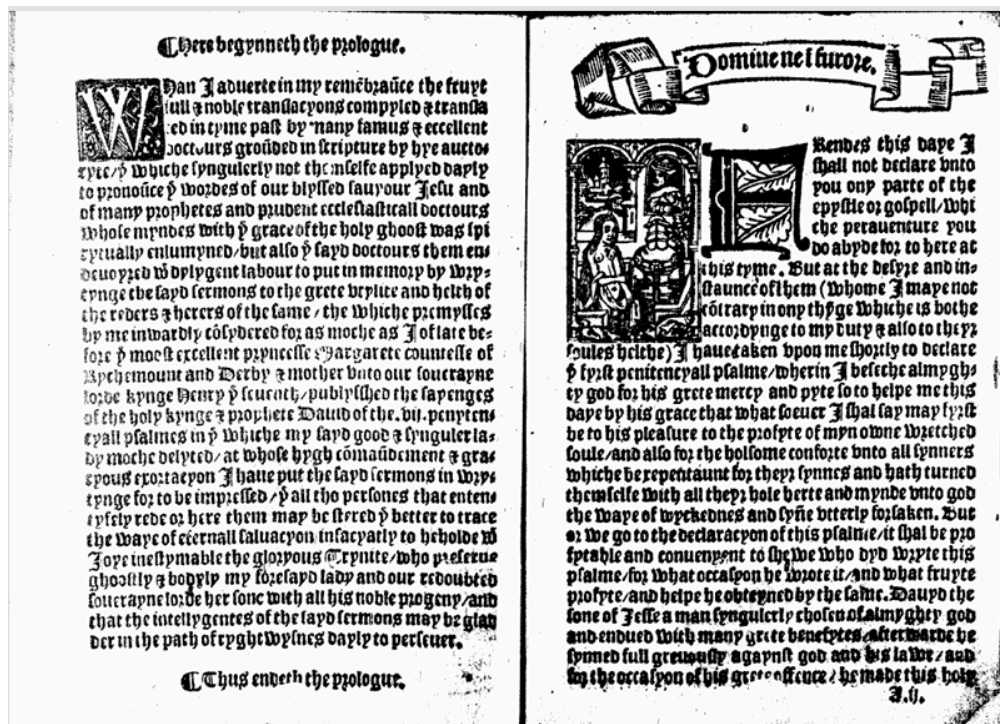


Figure 24. Prologue of John Fisher’s *Treatise concerning the fruitful sayings of David* (1508). Early Modern English Books (EEBO).

³⁶⁹ BRADSHAW, Brendan. *op. cit.*, p. 5.

Appreciating the creative ways in which these Catholic authors were distinct from one another paints a more vivid picture of the early sixteenth century than the hide-and-seek exercise of spotting what was “medieval” or “humanist” about their ideas. Even when compared to ‘the prince of the humanists’, Erasmus, and his outstanding influence, Fisher’s humanism remained his own. The bishop did not share Erasmus’s unashamed distaste for monasticism nor his anthropocentric philosophy. In fact, Fisher’s humanistic affinities found more resonance in Johann Reuchlin’s (1455-1522) Hebrew Cabbalist scholarship than in Erasmianism. Overall, “to distance Fisher from the thought-world of Erasmian Christian humanism, therefore, is not to push him back into the mould of conservative, medieval churchmanship. It is rather to place him within the ambit of a Renaissance world in which his career as a penitential preacher and as reforming University chancellor achieves ideological coherence.”³⁷⁰

That is why, when Martin Luther came out denouncing the Pope and publicly burning his excommunication bull in 1521, John Fisher became a theological pugilist. He was instrumental in securing a special place for England in European Christendom’s fight against heresy. By the beginning of the 1520s, with the English king, bishops, and scholars committed to fighting heresy, England was readily perceived as a beacon of orthodoxy. Cardinal Wolsey’s effective campaign against heretical books surely played a significant role in such an impression. To portray England as a haven against Lutheran heresy required the search and destruction of heretical books that continued to flood the English market. On that note, Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London, with Wolsey’s blessing, set forth a monition for all booksellers based in England. On 12 October 1524, they were warned against “importing into England books printed in Germany or any other books whatever containing Lutheran heresies, or to sell or part with any such books already imported under pain of the law.”³⁷¹ Concerning other imported works, “so far as the books were newly composed and made, they were not to sell or part with them unless first they showed them either to the Lord Cardinal, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London or the Bishop of Rochester.”³⁷²

In March 1526, Thomas Berthelet, like so many London printers and booksellers, was investigated for publishing unapproved works: Margaret Roper’s *Devout treatise*; his own translation of Erasmus’s *Dicta sapientum*; Gentian Hervet’s translation of *De immensa dei misericordia* (all three by Erasmus); and a sermon by John Fisher. According to James

³⁷⁰ BRADSHAW, Brendan, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁷¹ REED, Arthur W. *op. cit.*, p. 162.

³⁷² *Ibidem*, pp. 162-163.

Goodrich, “a close look at these unlicensed publications suggests that Berthelet was interested in cementing Erasmus’s reputation as a scholar and in publishing humanist texts that opposed Luther.”³⁷³ Besides being instruments in the defence of Erasmus’s orthodoxy, however, translations of his works had already proved to be early modern bestsellers, a fact to which Berthelet would be consciously attuned. But why would Erasmus need a defence? In the mid-1520s, many of his theological statements would render him a dubious reputation by providing possible links to Luther’s ideas. His call for widespread access to vernacular Bibles, his emphasis on interiorised forms of devotion, and his personal contempt for the monastic life would all seem Lutheran to many conservatives at the time. There seemed to be enough reason for the diehard conservative Vicar-General to the Bishop of London, like Richard Foxford, to be suspicious of Erasmian books circulating in London, and as the leading authority over the English book market, he had the power to put the law into practice by seizing the volumes and calling out their printers, which he did.

However, that Berthelet’s Erasmian translations could be considered suspicious in the late 1520s is an expedient testament to the difficulties faced by “a system that had been set up originally to deal with Lollardy and was now being applied unsuccessfully to the problems of the Lutheran heresy.”³⁷⁴ In other words, the current English book regulations were not equipped to deal with the intricacies of Lutheranism and its spread into sixteenth-century England. After all, when it came to book distribution, Lutheranism spread throughout England following Lollard routes. Peter Marshall offers a powerful insight into the complex relationship between heterodox and orthodox books, particularly with regards to the circulation of Wycliffite bibles around a circle of orthodox practice: “over a third of them contain lectionaries, or more properly speaking, capitularia: tables enabling readers to identify the texts to be recited at mass each Sunday or feast day, and allowing them to read them in advance or even follow along during the service.” As Marshall concludes, “in all likelihood, the manuscript production of Wycliffite bibles was from an early stage geared to the needs of an orthodox clientele.”³⁷⁵ Overall, spotting the differences between a heretical or orthodox book was far from a straightforward task.

Arthur W. Reed and James McConica agree that Berthelet’s fault was mainly a technical one, with him having solely failed to exhibit the copies to the bishops’ scrutiny before printing them. For James Goodrich, however, “the preponderance of Erasmian texts

³⁷³ GOODRICH, James. *Faithful Translators: Authorship, Gender, and Religion in Early Modern England*. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2014. p. 39.

³⁷⁴ REED, Arthur W. *op. cit.* p. 165.

³⁷⁵ MARSHALL, P. *Heretics and Believers, op. cit.*, p. 118.

here seems too marked to be a coincidence.”³⁷⁶ According to him, Erasmus’s reputation in England was sufficiently damaged and mixed with Lutheranism to justify a theologically driven investigation on Foxford’s part, who would be concerned with “Erasmian humanism itself, which remained a possible source of quasi-Lutheran ideas despite Erasmus’s own refutation of Luther.”³⁷⁷

Although Goodrich’s explanation of Foxford’s hidden agenda against Erasmian theology as a driving factor of his investigation may sound appealing, it is a stretch. Evidence points to a simpler and more legally based case against Berthelet than to a concealed attempt to censor Erasmus’s works. There are two main reasons to support this belief. First, the case against Berthelet was not an extraordinary incident but a customary development of existing laws against unlicensed books. The original purpose behind licensing religious works had always been the conservation of orthodoxy by restraining anyone who would “make or write any book contrary to the Catholic faith and determination of the Holy Church.”³⁷⁸ Those were the words of the 1410 Act of Parliament that set up the foundations of English book regulation, incorporating Archbishop Thomas Arundel’s *Provincial Constitutions*. The crucial point of the Act concerned the problem of existing suspicious books: “and that all persons having any of the said books, writings or schedules containing the said wicked doctrines and opinions shall within 40 days deliver them to the ordinary of the same place.”³⁷⁹ In an ideal world, no one would “hereafter do, make or write any book contrary to the Catholic faith,” but, even in the early fifteenth century, heretical books were already a force to be dealt with. In legal terms, therefore, unlicensed publications were automatically classified as suspicious regardless of their content, so there is every reason to assume Foxford was mainly doing his job when he summoned Berthelet in October 1526. Secondly, Goodrich’s emphasis on the Vicar-General’s personal distaste for Erasmian humanism as a hidden motivation for his investigation of Berthelet holds little water when we consider that all the books Berthelet was investigated for would be licensed and published soon afterwards. Indeed, Foxford himself “enjoined him that he should not hereafter sell any copies of the above works, and that he should not print any works unless he first exhibited them before the aforesaid Bishops.”³⁸⁰ If Foxford were truly committed to erasing Erasmian books from England, he would not have left the door open for Berthelet to present further copies to such “aforesaid Bishops”, all of

³⁷⁶ GOODRICH, James. *op. cit.* p. 40.

³⁷⁷ GOODRICH, James. *op. cit.*, p.40.

³⁷⁸ REED, Arthur W. *op. cit.* p.158.

³⁷⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁸⁰ *Ibidem.* p.167.

whom were enthusiastic friends of Erasmus and unapologetic supporters of his ideas. Add to that the fact that such translations were published with a clear mention of Erasmus as their author, and we have even fewer reasons to assume Foxford was particularly committed to stripping England of Erasmianism.

However, the Dutchman did not lack enemies in England. Edward Lee (1482-1544) was a young, prominent clergyman who met Erasmus at the University of Louvain in 1518, while studying Greek. From such an encounter, a long polemical battle ensued regarding Erasmus's recent translation of the New Testament, published in 1516, which was unfavourably received by Lee and other theologians of a more traditionalist tendency. For many, the revision of the Vulgate was an impious endeavour, and Erasmus had already made known some unorthodox beliefs about the Church's devotional programme. Lee also attacked Erasmus's earlier work, *Moriae encomium*, or *The Praise of Folly*, highlighting its potentially heretical contents.

Despite falling to some conservative criticisms, Erasmus's orthodoxy in England had a competent advocate in the figure of Thomas More (1478-1535). A native Londoner, More was the son of the prominent lawyer Sir John More, and, from his birth, he took advantage of the best the City of London had to offer him. As a boy, he studied in one of London's best schools, St Anthony's, and soon started working as a page at the Lambeth household of the Archbishop of Canterbury, John Morton (1420-1500), where he was first introduced to the new learning. The same year Columbus set foot on the New World, Thomas More entered Oxford University and started studying under the great names of his time, Thomas Linacre and William Grocyn. Under their influence, he also became proficient in Latin and Greek. However, More's scholarly pursuits were soon interrupted when he left Oxford to continue the family's tradition and start his legal training at the Inns of Chancery. More's biographers agree that his decision to leave Oxford and follow the family's business, at the request of his father, was a strong indication of his personal sense of duty and appreciation for tradition. It was also a sign of his acute pragmatism. More was known throughout his life for "a consistent doubleness or ambiguity of mind"³⁸¹ that particularly complemented his taste for dialogue and disputation. His general affability and aptitude to play both sides in every debate, which pointed to a form of calculated detachment, rendered the most famous description of his character as a man "*omnium horarum*," a man for all seasons. The compliment came from Erasmus, with whom More maintained a personal friendship since their first meeting in

³⁸¹ ACKROYD, Peter. *op. cit.* p. 90.

London in 1499, when the Dutchman visited England at the invitation of William Blount, Lord Mountjoy.

Erasmus and More shared a passionate interest in the new learning and its potential to renew Catholic spirituality. This shared interest shines more brightly if we consider that both men came from strikingly different backgrounds. Soon before More started pursuing his legal career at Lincoln's Inn, Erasmus was ordained an Augustinian canon, a position he held for almost 10 years. His clerical experience was enough for him to develop an entire distaste for the excesses of monasticism, a relatively different perspective than that of his friend More, who held some monastic practices dearly throughout his life. During his student years at Lincoln's Inn, More had frequented the London Charterhouse, where he followed the Carthusian regimen of seclusion, labour and prayer. Among the risks and temptations of London city life, "the great oak doorways into the courtyard of the Charterhouse admitted him to a world of discipline and devotion that affected him profoundly."³⁸² Despite their formal education having different starting points, both men ended up meeting each other on common ground of renewed intellectual curiosity and a witty sense of humour. Their lifelong friendship moved More to stand for Erasmus when criticism of his writings began circulating around England. He had just started at the royal service of Henry VIII when he wrote two letters in defence of his Dutch friend. One was addressed to John Batmanson, an acquaintance from the Charterhouse; the other was to Edward Lee, Erasmus's English nemesis. In both letters he lamented that the precepts of the new learning, encapsulated by Erasmus's scholarship, had failed to convince such prominent young men. This would be the kindest his letter-writing could get, for More would spare all niceties in his writing campaign against what he and his countrymen were soon to consider a bigger problem than Erasmus.

When Henry VIII set forth his *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* in early 1521, Thomas More was the one who perused and edited the text. He was given the unfinished manuscript by the King himself as 'a sorter-out and placer of the principal matters contained therein.' In the realm of disputation and rhetoric, More was an acknowledged specialist. Henry's book was also scrutinised by John Fisher, Stephen Gardiner and Edward Lee, who, together with More himself, formed a special scholarly army at the service of the King. Pope Leo X so approved of the book that rewarded Henry with the title of *Fidei Defensor*, proclaiming in solemn oration that there was "no nation which more impugns this monster, and the heresies broached by him." The alleged monster also expressed his opinion. Luther did not take long

³⁸² ACKROYD, Peter. *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95.

to publish a direct response to Henry, describing him as “a pig, dolt and liar who deserved, among other things, to be covered in excrement.”³⁸³ While John Fisher was already developing his lengthy theological treatises against Luther, More responded to the German monk in kind. He began writing his *Responsio ad Lutherum* in February 1523, defending the edifice of Catholic Christendom by displaying a lengthy repertoire of Latin swear words.

But Thomas More was also responding to Luther in other capacities. As he accumulated administrative offices in Henry VIII’s government, he considerably expanded his possibilities. From 1519 he started working as secretary to the King, managing his correspondence with Thomas Wolsey, archbishop of York, while also receiving foreign post and hosting foreign courts and ambassadors. For the longest time, epistolary access to the King was at the hands of Thomas More. Literally. As royal secretary, More was in charge of the King’s signet seal, the uncontested token of royal authority. He was also elected Speaker for the House of Commons when Parliament met in 1523, and one year later, was appointed High Steward of Oxford University, being given the same post at Cambridge the year after that. In a world of physical displays of authority, his real power relied on his close proximity to the King: “while other courtiers waited in galleries and passages, hoping to catch the attention of the monarch as he passed, More was always beside him.”³⁸⁴ It was in this privileged capacity that More would leave no stone unturned in his personal and official fight against Lutheranism.

On a Friday evening in the early weeks of 1526, a group of merchants sat together for dinner at the Steelyard. They were the Hanseatic merchants, a known commercial presence in the City of London since the thirteenth century. A stone gate facing Cousin Lane, north of the Thames, was the place where they lived and kept their stocks of grain, wax, linen, and, according to Thomas More, heretical books. The merchants’ dinner that Friday evening was severely interrupted when More, together with councillors and armed retainers, burst inside the building. The accusation was that the Hanseatic merchants not only possessed books by Martin Luther but also helped import and distribute them among English subjects. Three of them were arrested that same night. On the following day, eight more were taken to Westminster and brought before Thomas Wolsey, who forbade them to leave England in the next twenty days. By February, four of them would be present at the abjuration ceremony at St Paul’s Cathedral. More’s raid at the Steelyard was done in compliance with Cuthbert

³⁸³ ACKROYD, Peter. *op. cit.*, p. 223.

³⁸⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 237.

Tunstall's monition, issued months before, forbidding the production or importation of any book containing Lutheran doctrines.

Coincidentally, soon after the raid and the abjuration ceremony at St Paul's, Thomas Berthelet was brought before Richard Foxford, the Vicar-General. As argued before, I do not believe Berthelet was indicted under Tunstall's anti-Lutheran monition, but rather under the older 1410 Act forbidding unlicensed publications. There is room to conjecture about his failure at exhibiting the works before publication – three Erasmian translations and the sermon by John Fisher – but I render implausible that the case against him was theologically driven. Moreover, it is hard to believe that a sermon by John Fisher, an internationally celebrated Catholic scholar, would raise suspicions of it containing Lutheran doctrines. If Fisher's name was not enough to attest the sermon's legitimacy, in terms of Catholic orthodoxy, a brief reading of its preface would suffice for any censor to be convinced that this was an anti-Lutheran text.

The available extant copies of Fisher's sermon correspond to the licensed editions published by Berthelet after his investigation, a fact directly advertised on their title page (Figure 25), which reads: "A sermon had at Paul's by the commandment of the most reverent father in God, my lord legate, and said by John the bishop of Rochester, upon the fiftieth Sunday, concerning certain heretics who then were abjured for holding the heresies of Martin Luther, that famous heretic, and for the keeping and retaining of his books against the ordinance of the bull of Pope Leo the X. Cum privilegio a rede indulto."³⁸⁵

The printed version of Fisher's 1526 sermon was notably exhibited as such. It was added with "an Epistle unto the reader by the same bishop", in which Fisher addressed his "brother or sister in our saviour Christ Jesus, whosoever you are that shall fortune to read this quire."³⁸⁶ His first comment concerned the reason for printing the sermon, "for verily my will and mind is that some fruit might rise by the same unto the Christian people, which are the spouse of Christ."³⁸⁷ Fisher's responsibility as a leading bishop would have bound him to serve the Christian people, "unto whom (though unworthy) I am ordained a minister for my little portion."³⁸⁸ He was charged with the arduous task of "resisting heretics, the which cease not to subvert the Church of Christ."³⁸⁹ It was only a bishop's duty to provide a wider

³⁸⁵ FISHER, John. *A sermon had at Paulis*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1526, p. Ar.

³⁸⁶ FISHER, John, *op. cit.*, , p. A2r.

³⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

audience for his words. The emphasis on “whosoever you are that shall fortune to read this quire” reinforces the urgency of the message and the widespread nature of its reach.

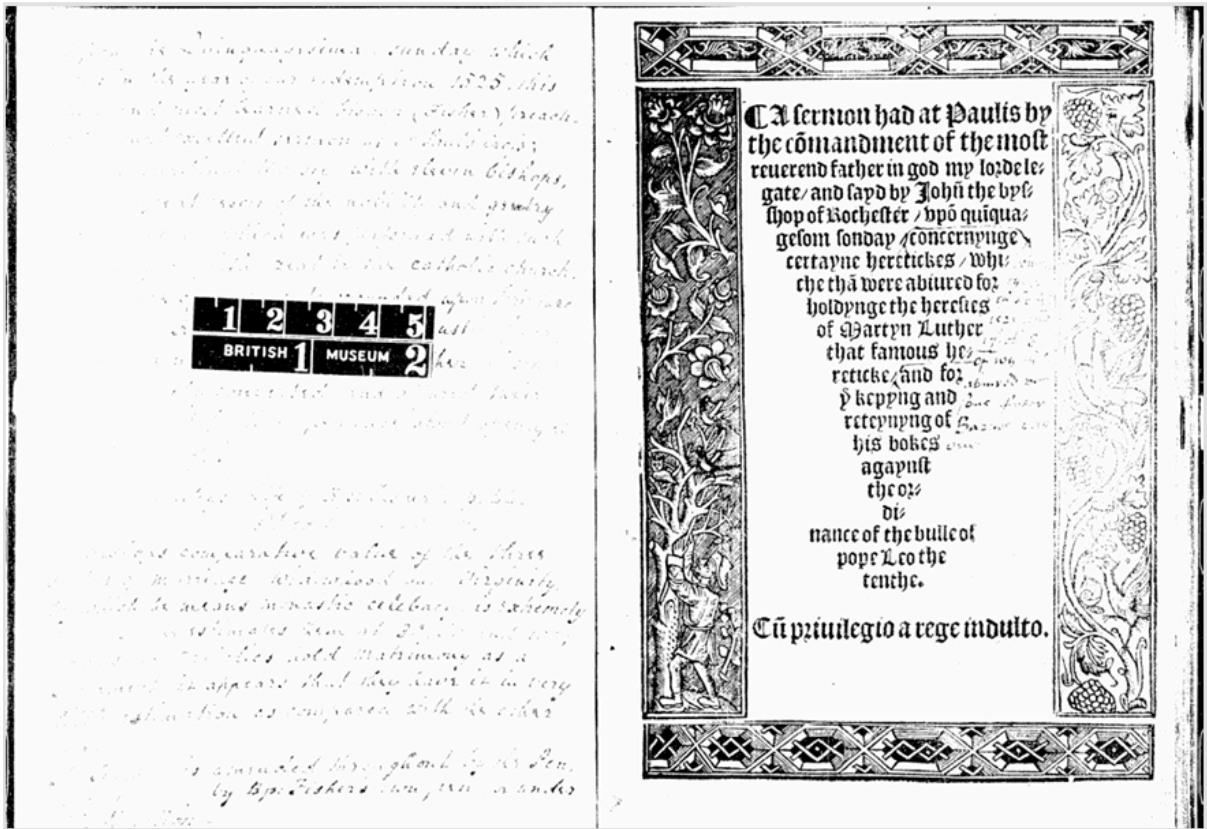


Figure 25. Title page of *A sermon had at Paulis* (1526).
Early English Books Online (EEBO).

A second, more practical, reason for printing the sermon was to make it comprehensible. When the sermon was delivered, on 11 February 1526, St Paul’s was all noise and blasts, which significantly interfered with the preaching. As Fisher reminisces, “I have put forth this sermon to be read, which, for the great noise of the people within the church of Paul’s, when it was said, might not be heard.”³⁹⁰ Fisher also remarks on the immediate circumstances of the sermon’s delivery as something a disciple of Luther should bear in mind if they attempt to argue “that my arguments and reasons against his master be not sufficient”; “Let him consider that I did shape them to be spoken to a multitude of people who were not brought up in subtle disputations of the school.”³⁹¹ The curtailed education of

³⁹⁰ FISHER, John, *op. cit.*, , p. A4r.

³⁹¹ *Ibidem.*

Fisher's immediate audience is doubly mobilised as an excuse for any perceived error, as well as a noble justification for its widespread distribution. Fisher's pastoral concern points to a different kind of theological debate, not anymore restrained to scholarly disputation but publicly delivered to the "multitude of people" who would have listened to the sermon delivered and also read the printed version.

For these and other reasons, Fisher's epistle to the reader is unique in early sixteenth-century sermonistic culture, since printed sermons were rarely provided with a preface or dedication. It is even more significant for giving us a glimpse of the contingencies of sermon delivery and how it affected a sermon's reception. Issues with audibility, ambient noise and crowded gatherings were frequent in the sixteenth century, and addressing them is a valuable exercise in the social history of liturgy. By examining the immediate circumstances of sermon delivery at the time of Fisher's preaching, we are reminded that, overall, sermons were given and received as aural and sensible experiences. As John N. Walls comments, "printed sermons come to us as highly organised and structured theological essays; rather than unfolding, word by word, as aural experiences in real time, they hold still, inviting us to experience them in the quiet and solitude of our studies, where we are able to read and reread, to go forward and backward with them, to trace the organisational patterns and structures and follow the arguments with care."³⁹² To fully comprehend the importance of Fisher's printed sermon in its context, we need to remember that the epistle to the reader functions as a bridge between the pulpit and the press, uniting hearers and readers of the sermon as part of a double and unified audience. This is a unique development in the history of English preaching that points to the innovative ways in which Catholic theology was mobilised in England.

But Fisher's sermon, and the epistle more specifically, also illuminates the editorial boldness apparent in Fisher's publications as a humanist Catholic bishop. By addressing a non-specified audience of hearers and readers, he was signalling the widespread reach he expected of his message. In a sense, he was trying to beat Luther at his own game. Fisher's relentless writing and printing campaign, coupled with his innovative paratextual effort expressed in the epistle, makes it difficult for the close-minded conservative label to stick to him. As Eamon Duffy almost poetically states:

³⁹² WALLS, John N. *Virtual Paul's Cross: The Experience of Public Preaching after the Reformation*. In: KIRBY, Torrance; STANWOOD, P.G. (eds.). *Paul's Cross and the Culture of Persuasion in England 1520-1640*. Leiden: Brill, 2014, p. 68.

“It does not seem very useful to characterise any one figure as representative of so complex a reality as late-medieval English religion. To do so in Fisher’s case in particular is to risk missing what is distinctive about his use of the resources of the religious tradition he inherited [...] His choice of genre and theme, and his distinctive range of imagery reveal a sensibility resolutely his own even when apparently at its most conventional. We must not be mesmerised into thinking that in Tudor England the devil had all the best tunes, that only the revolutionaries possessed individuality.”³⁹³

Fisher’s epistle to the reader also serves as a powerful lesson on the object of English anti-heresy policy. By 1526, the weapons against heresy had shifted from burning books to convincing heretics. Craig D’Alton correctly pointed out the year 1526 as a turning point in English policies towards heresy.³⁹⁴ The previous book-burning spectacle of 1521, although carefully delayed by Wolsey, proved to be a signal of England’s commitment to the Catholic faith, enhanced even further by the publication of Henry VIII’s *Assertio* and the Latin works by Fisher himself. At that time, the goal was to properly answer Luther while also portraying England to a wider European audience as a citadel of orthodoxy. By 1526, however, priorities had changed. And all because of yet another sermon.

Christmas Eve 1525 in the Cambridge church of St Edward’s saw a sudden change of preachers. The scheduled preacher, Hugh Latimer, was moved to preach at the Austin friars in London, while the Cambridge pulpit would be given to the homegrown Doctor Robert Barnes. Although his evangelical leanings were not explicit at the time, his Christmas sermon definitely set him “on to the stage of the reformation drama.”³⁹⁵ Barnes was a regular frequenter at the White Horse Tavern, the place where the Cambridge “godly learned” consorted together, located at present-day King’s Lane and currently advertised as “a birthplace of the Reformation in England.” If contemporary tourists can go there and walk the steps of the earliest of the English Protestants in what their contemporaries would call “Little

³⁹³ DUFFY, Eamon. The spirituality of John Fisher. *op. cit.*, 205.

³⁹⁴ D’ALTON, Craig. The Suppression of Lutheran Heretics in England, 1526-1529. *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*. No. 2. pp. 228-253, 2003.

³⁹⁵ MAAS, Korey D.. *The Reformation and Robert Barnes: History, Theology and Polemic in Early Modern England*. Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2010, p. 9.

Germany”, it is only because the 1525 Christmas switch of preachers went terribly wrong for Barnes and his friends.

Barnes's Christmas sermon served as the official justification for his persecution as a heretic. A list of twenty-five offensive opinions was discharged as having been found in his sermon. However, his connections spoke louder than his words. He, along with his friends Hugh Latimer and Thomas Bilney, were all Cambridge men with Lutheran sympathies, and they were all set to face the consequences for their beliefs. The ups and downs of English religious policies would bring tragic ends to each of the three, although not immediately. Latimer would live to see England become a Reformed Protestant country under Edward VI (1547-1553), only to see it revert to Catholicism again under Mary I's reign (1553-1558), when he would ultimately face death by fire in 1555. Bilney, also known as Little Bilney for his little stature and slender body, accompanied Barnes in the abjuration ceremony at St Paul's in 1526. But he did not wait to relapse into heretical opinions and again saw himself at the hands of ecclesiastical authorities in 1531, when he was burnt at the Lollards' Pit, outside Norwich. Rumour had it that he had recanted again before the flames reached him.

Robert Barnes and his Cambridge friends encapsulated the new kind of heretic English authorities were faced with during the mid-1520s: young and impressionable university graduates with a deep interest in religion; heretics who begged convincing, not punishing. If in 1521, Fisher and other churchmen were primarily concerned with suppressing heresy by force, in 1526 the goal was to restore heretics to the true Catholic faith through learned persuasion and, better yet, convince those curious about entering the path of heresy to avoid taking the first step altogether. No longer was Lutheranism a foreign threat, concealed from the English brethren by their authorities' skilful suppression of heretical books. The disease had now reached the body from within and demanded a different, more subtle extraction procedure.

Since the first polemical treatises by Luther reached English soil, authorities had been facing it as a foreign threat to be contained. However, the outspread distribution of heretical books inside England and the realisation that young men like Robert Barnes and his Cambridge friends posed the real possibility of an English rooted seed of Lutheranism, moved Cardinal Thomas Wolsey to take further action. His plan relied on a skilful combination of secrecy and spectacle. In secret, heretics would be searched and persuaded. In public, they would abjure. As Lutheran books flooded England and young theologians preached suspicious sermons, a secret reformation was taking place behind closed doors. Wolsey's plan involved the confiscation and destruction of such books, followed by the kind of invitation

Fisher proposed in his sermon, a private, confidential conversation: “If it may like the same disciple to come unto me secretly, and break his mind at more length, I bind me by these presents both to keep his secrecy and also spare a leisure for him to hear the bottom of his mind, and he shall hear mine again, if it so please him.”³⁹⁶ Fisher was also sure that his invitation could only lead to either result: “and I trust in our Lord that finally we shall so agree that either he shall make me a Lutheran or else I shall induce him to be a Catholic and to follow the doctrine of Christ’s church.”³⁹⁷ Historians agree that this is the first recorded mention of the word Catholic being used to define a distinctive religious group, apart from Lutherans.³⁹⁸

In this sense, Fisher’s sermon was not only a summary of the new anti-heresy policy but also the ultimate proof that it worked. While the bishop delivered his sermon at St Paul’s Cathedral, people could watch the heretics carrying their faggots as a clear sign that their recantation spared them from the actual fire reserved for the impenitent. Robert Barnes, most especially, was the utmost proof that taking heretics out of their blindness was more effective than burning them. Added to the abjuration spectacle, Fisher’s sermon was less a polemical, theological attack on Luther than a direct attempt at persuading young educated Englishmen who might have been in contact with his ideas, and who might still have an opportunity to return to the orthodox faith.

That day in February was Quinquagesima Sunday, which marks the fifty days before Easter, and the Gospel reading for the day was St Luke 18.31-43, the story of the blind man near Jericho. Upon hearing that Jesus was around, the blind man tirelessly begs: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” Jesus hears his claim and heals him on the following words: *Respice, fides tua te salvum fecit* (Receive thy sight, thy faith hath saved thee).³⁹⁹ The parallel was clear: the blind man represented heretics - far from Christ’s path - but not so much they cannot be heard and healed. In this scenario, having their sight restored would mean that heretics would become Catholics again. Following Fisher’s argument, the way to restore a heretic began with the heretic himself. As the blind man cried and was heard by Christ, so the heretic, “by hearing and inquiring the very truth,” should cry for mercy and be brought to Christ:

³⁹⁶ FISHER, John, *op. cit.*, , p. A4r.

³⁹⁷ FISHER, John, *op. cit.*, , p. A4r.

³⁹⁸ BOSSY, John. *The English Catholic Community, 1570-1850*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976; KELLY, James E.; ROYAL, Susan. *Early Modern English Catholicism: Identity, Memory and Counter-Reformation*. Leiden: Brill, 2017.

³⁹⁹ *KJV*, Luke 18. 42.

“Our saviour did command that this blind man should be brought unto him; and so must the heretics be reduced unto the ways of the church. But by whom commandeth our saviour that thus they shall be reduced? Truly by them that be set in spiritual authority; as now the most reverend father in God my lord legate, having the most sovereign authority, hath endeavoured himself for these men here present and other, which were out of the way, to reduce them in to the ways of the church. The heretics contend that it shall not be lawful thus to do, but they would have every man left unto their liberty. But doubtless it may not be so, for the nature of man is more prone to all naughtiness rather than to any goodness. And therefore many must be compelled, according as the Gospel saith in another place, Compellite eos intrare. If every man should have liberty to say what he would, we should have a marvelous world. No man should stir anywhere for heresies.”⁴⁰⁰

The mention of Thomas Wolsey’s conversation with the abjuring heretics was one more powerful instrument of persuasion on Fisher’s part. His hearers were witnessing the positive outcome of private persuasion in restoring heretics. The secret reformation, after all, was a collaborative work among English authorities. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, Archbishop of York, was constantly receiving heretics for examination. John Fisher did the same, besides being occupied with an extraordinary writing campaign against Lutheran doctrines. Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London, reinforced the legal and commercial boundaries that would safeguard England from heretical books from abroad. Finally, Thomas More, besides accumulating legal and administrative offices, worked day and night to destroy what he called these “foolish frantic books.” Him and Fisher had been granted a special license to read and peruse such books in order to refute them, More chose his favourite genre to do so.

In 1526 John Fisher invited the English layfolk to fight Lutheran heretics; three years later, Thomas More taught them how to do it. First published in 1529, More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* can be considered the first exercise in the secret reformation Fisher advertised in his sermon. Through the dialogue between the Author and the Messenger, More

⁴⁰⁰ REYNOLDS, E.E. *St John Fisher, op. cit.*, p. 160-161.

guides his reader in what ultimately constitutes an anatomy of heresy. The book opens with a letter-exchange between More and a friend, who is said to have been approached by a young scholar, the Messenger, interested in a private conference with More on matters of faith. The Messenger was said to have heard some of Tyndale's books commented upon and was now leaning towards the doctrines of Martin Luther. He was careful enough not to mention where he heard it, nor whether he had any material contact with heretical books whatsoever. Overall, More writes the Messenger as a character representing existing English young men with whom he had lengthy real debates, and whose example those same young men were compelled to follow. As Thomas Lawler commented, "in the *Dialogue*, More is dramatizing the common man's religious enthusiasms and the painfully slow process by which dialogue, reflection and rational analysis temper the new wine of inspiration."⁴⁰¹

The *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* was the first book More published in the vernacular. It was also his first general and comprehensive defence of the Church's devotional and liturgical practice. Lambeth Palace Library holds an exquisite copy of its 1530 edition, bound with other vernacular works by More, such as *The Supplication of Souls* (1530) and *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer* (1532).⁴⁰² The latter work was More's response to William Tyndale's *Answer to Sir Thomas More's Dialogue*, published right after the *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. The Lambeth volume (Figure 26) is a remarkable piece of collection of More's most influential writings. More's debates with Tyndale illuminate the importance of devotional practices for the confessional strife which was developing in the 1520s. In matters of faith and salvation, what people believed mattered as much as what they did. In fact, doctrine and devotion have always been mutually dependent. Lollards were first spotted by what they did or did not do in church, by whether or not they looked to the consecrated host at the moment of elevation, by whether or not they attended Mass in the first place. "By their fruits they shall be known",⁴⁰³ said the Gospels, and in sixteenth-century England it was devotion that attested orthodoxy.

The devotional emphasis of the book can be read in the title (Figure 27): "A dialogue of Sir Thomas More knight: one of the councillor of our sovereign lord the King and chancellor of his Duchy of Lancaster. Wherein be treated divers matters, as of the veneration

⁴⁰¹ LAWLER, T. A General View of the Dialogue: An Anatomy of Heresy. In: LAWLER, Thomas M. C.; MARC'HADOUR, Germain.; MARIUS, Richard C. (eds.). *The Complete Works of Thomas More: A Dialogue Concerning Heresies. Volume 6. Part II*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963, p. 445. (Henceforth, *CW*).

⁴⁰² MORE, Thomas. *The confutacyon of Tyndales answeere made by Syr Thomas More knyght lorde chauncellour of Englande*. London: William Rastell, 1532.

⁴⁰³ *KJV*, Matthew 7.16.

and worship of images and relics, praying to saints, and going on pilgrimage. With many other things touching the pestilent sect of Luther and Tyndale, by the time begone in Saxony and by the other laboured to be brought into England.”⁴⁰⁴ Another element to highlight the importance of the theme is the table of contents (Figure 28). The four books that compose the Dialogue are expanded into chapters, which are briefly described in paragraphs. The table thus works as an abridged version of the book, summarising its main contents and allowing the volume to be easily skimmed. The detailed table of contents point to More’s eagerness to publicise and share the issues discussed with the Messenger in their private conversation. In the first book, he comments how “one business begeth another” when telling how, after dispatching the Messenger, he was met with a feeling of unfinished task: “But after that the messenger was departed and I felt my stomach well eased, in yet I reckoned all my labour done by thinking myself a little while thereon, my business that I took finished I found very far from that point, and little more than bygone.”⁴⁰⁵ The seriousness of the matters discussed begged a written register and further publication:

“For when I considered what the matters were and how many great things had been treated between the messenger and me, and in what manner fashion, albeit I mistrusted not his good will, and very well trusted his wit, his learning well serving him to the perceiving and reporting of our communication, yet finding our treaty so diverse and so long, and sometime such wise intricate, that myself could not without labour call it orderly to mind, me thought I had not well done without writing to trust his only memory, namely since parts of the matter be such of themselves, as rather need to be attentively read and advised, than hoverly heard and passed over.”⁴⁰⁶

So important were the issues debated with the Messenger that More could not afford to let them be forgotten or wrongly transmitted. They deserved to be written down and

⁴⁰⁴ MORE, Thomas. . *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*. London: William Rastell, 1530.

⁴⁰⁵ *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 21.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibidem*.

properly registered, and not “hoverly heard and passed over.” Later in the *Dialogue*, More presents a parallel between the words *heresy* and *hearsay*, pointing out how misguided and unsound was the process by which heresy installed itself among Christians. Different from heresy, More’s *Dialogue* would be properly written down and presented in a way that fostered accurate readings, hence the detailed table of contents. But the decision to have the *Dialogue* printed was an afterthought on More’s part. He explains:

“Now when I had upon this deliberation taken with myself, written all the matter and sent it to my friend, than had I me thought all done and ny mind full set at rest. But that rest rested not long, for soon after it was showed me that of all my writings were written diverse copies and one also carried over the sea. Where when I remembered what a shrewd sort of our apostatas are assembled part run out of religion, and all run out of the right faith, me thought great peril might arise if some of that company (which are confedered and conspired together in the sowing and setting forth of Luther’s pestilent heresies in this realm) should maliciously change my words to the worse, and so put in print my book, framed after their fantasies which when I would afterwards reprove and show the difference, I might peradventure seem for the colour of my cause to have amended my own upon the sight of theirs.”⁴⁰⁷

It was a matter of precedence for More to have his *Dialogue* printed before the heretics could get access to it and “maliciously change his words to the worse.” This hints at the complex intricacies of the circulation of knowledge at the period, and the complex relationship between the written and printed word. By printing his text first, More would be assuring his authorship and bearing some level of control over the reception of his words. Lutherans would have his text “framed after their fantasies” if he allowed them to get a hold of his manuscript version of the *Dialogue*. Setting the book into print is here seen as a

⁴⁰⁷ *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 22.

fundamental part of the writing process, as well as of the polemical gesture. In the sixteenth-century theological scene, printed books were a distinctive kind of weaponry.



Figure 26. Cover of the 1530 edition of Thomas More's *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.
With the kind permission of the Lambeth Palace Library.

The *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* summarised early sixteenth-century England's main themes of devotional controversy. It was modelled upon real-life interrogations More had conducted as a prosecutor of heretics, and even the dialogue's structure encompasses the stages of heretical conversion. The first book expounds upon the main devotional practices being attacked by heretics, such as going on pilgrimages, venerating saints, images, and relics, lighting candles before images. Here More offers a rational defence of such practices against what heretics would characterise as superstition. According to him, God is pleased by men going into pilgrimage, in the same manner as he commands Christians to frequent churches, for it is his pleasure "to be specially sought and worshipped in some place before another."⁴⁰⁸ More's argument is entirely based upon demonstrating the authority of the Church's

⁴⁰⁸ *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 60.

devotional teachings as emanating from Jesus himself, either by his own sayings registered in the Gospels, or by his Apostles throughout the New Testament. Accordingly, he is particularly interested in sharing biblical evidence for as many practices as possible, in order to bring the Messenger to a common ground. Where Church and Scripture disagree, however, More explains that it is more reasonable to stick to the Church, for it is the institution established by God to interpret Scripture.

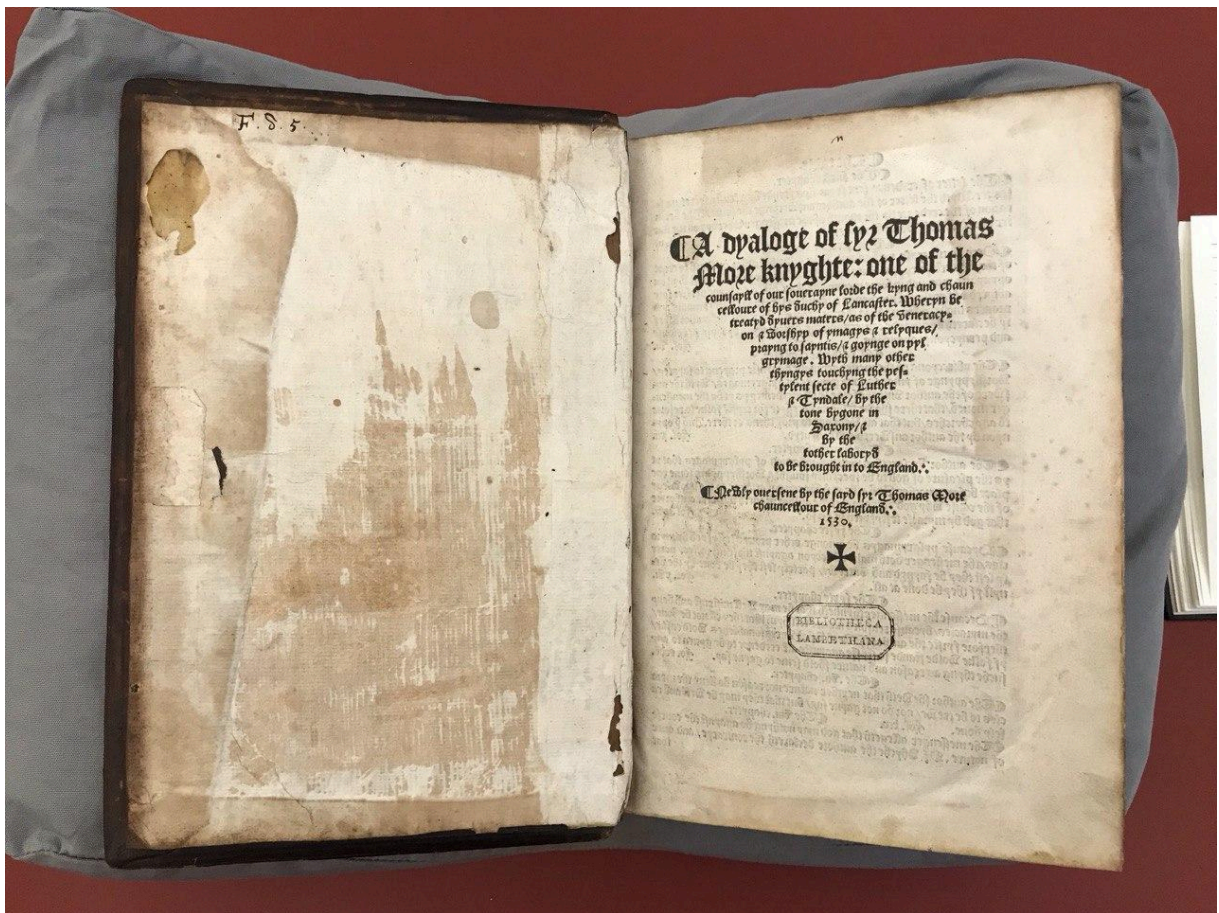


Figure 27. Title page of the 1530 edition of Thomas More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.
With the kind permission of the Lambeth Palace Library.

In the second book, More justifies the authoritative precedence of Church over Scripture in his attempt to define which was “the very Church of Christ.”⁴⁰⁹ Against the heretics’ claim that the church was a “secret unknown sort of such only as be predestinated to be saved,”⁴¹⁰ so that heretics could indeed be part of it, More argues that precisely the opposite is true. According to him, it is “this common known multitude of Christian nations

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

not cut off nor fallen off by heresies be the very church of Christ, good men and bad together.”⁴¹¹

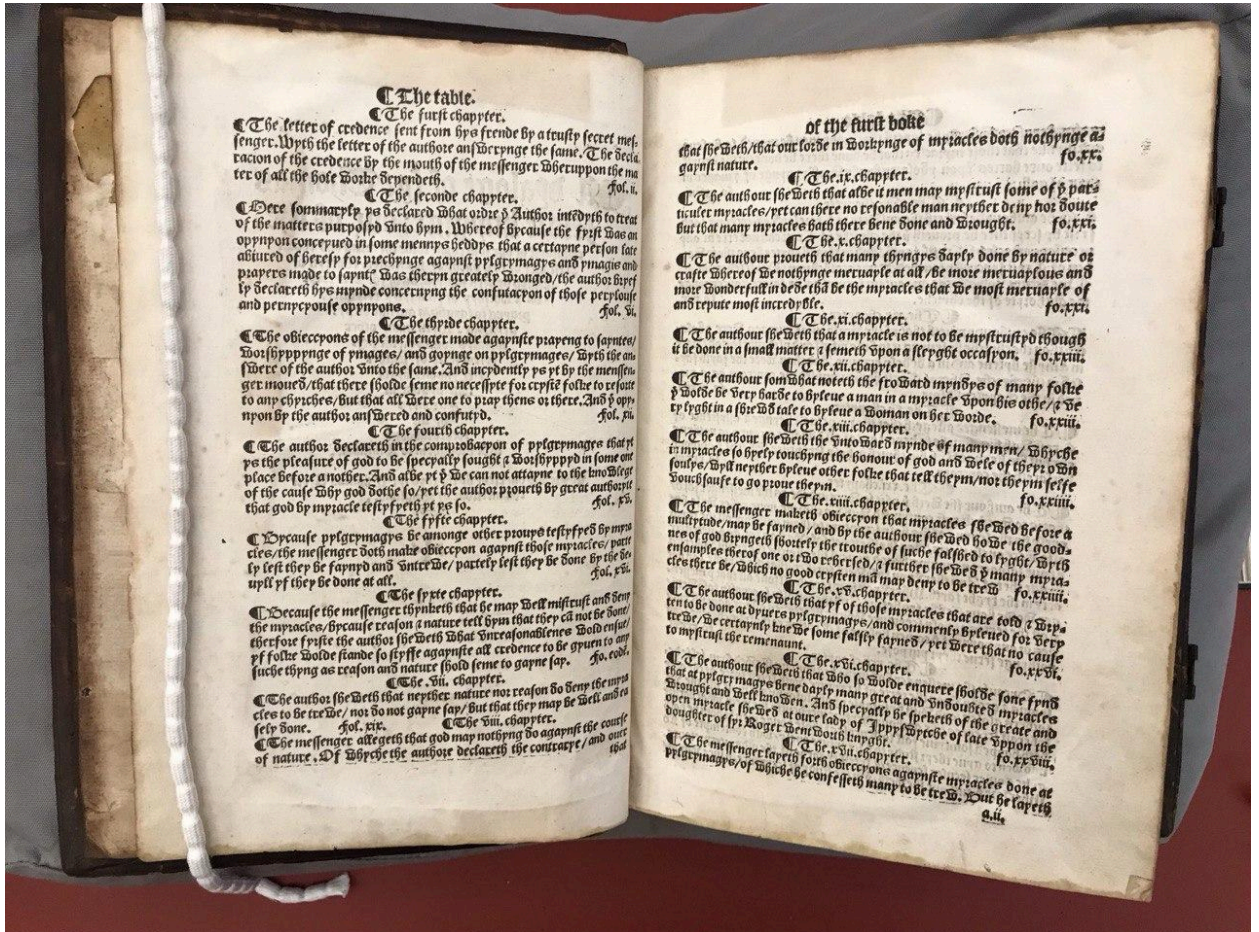


Figure 28. Table of contents of the 1530 edition of Thomas More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*.
With the kind permission of the Lambeth Palace Library.

The third book establishes More’s understanding of the relationship between Church and Scripture, while also offering commentary upon contemporary events, such as the burning of Tyndale’s New Testament, in 1526. In the fourth book, the immediate context of the *Dialogue* is seen even more brightly, for the Author seems successful in explaining to the Messenger why is it that Luther’s doctrines are actual heresies, and why both ecclesiastical and secular authorities must handle it accordingly. This was a particularly contentious topic for More himself since by that time he had acquired a reputation for his strictness in dealing with heretics. Overall, “he admitted that he did imprison heretics in his house - ‘their sure

⁴¹¹ *Ibidem*.

keeping' he called it - but he utterly rejected claims of torture and whipping."⁴¹² Torture allegations were commonly made, especially years after More's death. John Foxe's *Book of Martyrs* helped established an overall vilified image of Thomas More in the late sixteenth century, with claims that he used to tie heretics to a tree in his Chelsea garden and whipped them, that he used to sit and watch while they were put to the rack in the Tower and confessed out of torture. The accuracy of such claims is less important than what they reveal about the divisive ways in which More's figure could be depicted after his death.

Closer testimonies regarding More's household in Chelsea give account of a calmer and more peaceful environment than his Protestant critics would give him credit for. Indeed, the Chelsea household where his family lived since approximately 1525 was a recognised place of study and familial piety. Household devotion revolved around morning and evening prayers based on the penitential psalms and the litanies of the saints. In every meal, a member of the family would read a passage of Scripture to be the object of general conversation. In the grounds of the house More had set a library and a private chapel, fulfilling a monastic longing for daily solitude and reflection. But the More household was far from being a monastery. It was a domestic centre for letter-writing, verse composition and disputation training. It was also filled with music, since More and his wife Alice practised the lute together. It was also a school, where More children had grown used to read and write in Latin and Greek from a young age. Overall, it was a harbour of Catholic humanism a few miles from the City of London, where European scholars like Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives visited regularly.

Overall, this was the world of the *Dialogue*. More's experiences as a heresy prosecutor informed the depiction of the Messenger as a young man in conflict over his faith and wondering if Lutheranism could give him some answers. The Author, as a portrait of More himself - devout but not unaware of the excesses and issues of his own time - provides the reader a useful guide into the world of scholarly disputation. When his own son-in-law, William Roper (1496-1578), fellow lawyer and his earliest biographer, gave signs of being 'filled with Luther's new broached religion,' More entered in the same type of debate he registered in his *Dialogue*. Roper had even gone so far as to indulge in 'open talk and company with divers of his own sect,' after which he was summoned before Wolsey himself. But Roper, being More's son-in-law, was spared the same fate as the Steelyard merchants and was soon discharged with Wolsey's "friendly warning."⁴¹³ Roper apparently remained in heresy, as More confessed to his daughter, Margaret: "Megge, I have born a long time with

⁴¹² ACKROYD, Peter. *op. cit.*, p. 291.

⁴¹³ *CW*, Vol. 8, p. 900.

thy husband...and still given to him my poor fatherly counsel; but I perceive none of all this able to call him home; and therefore Megge, I will no longer argue nor dispute with him, but will clean give him over and get me to God and pray for him”⁴¹⁴ In Roper’s case, dialogue did not purge heresy out of him, but prayer did. More and Margaret’s prayers were later said to have been the divine instrument that finally brought Roper home. He eventually turned into a fervent Catholic, and would act as an MP during Mary I’s reign (r. 1553-1558).⁴¹⁵

William Roper’s case illustrates the manifold ways in which confessional disagreements could easily become domestic conflicts. It also exposes how strongly both Catholics and Lutherans felt about their beliefs, as well as how much familial tenderness could temper religious animosity. Ultimately, it challenges us to reconsider the early sixteenth-century religious scene in England as less of a confessional battlefield. This was the beginning of the Reformation in England, and although distinctive religious identities were already forming, 1520s Catholics and heretics were still like wheat and chaff, not as easily recognisable as their Elizabethan descendants would have liked to believe. As St John the Baptist proclaimed in the Gospel of St Matthew, Christ himself would separate wheat and chaff: “Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”⁴¹⁶ In his work as heresy prosecutor, More was particularly captured by the weight of such phrasing.

In this world of committed devotion, More’s *Dialogue Concerning Heresies* functioned as a manual for either Author or Messenger. Lay learned readers found in it a comprehensive account of Catholic doctrine and devotional practice, as well as the tools to defend it. However, those same lay readers might have been in the same position as the Messenger - hearing from neighbours or relatives about this new faith, about being closer to God without the need of a priest, about the possibility of knowing Christ without the Church’s arbitration in between. In his effort to know more about Lutheranism and embracing it, William Roper represented many of his kind. In the same way, his testimony from Lutheran to committed Catholic could also play its part. In the *Dialogue*, his father-in-law made him a Messenger - an apostle who bore witness to the truth. However, it was More’s daughter, Margaret, who truly embodied the devotional power of English Catholicism.

⁴¹⁴ BRIDGETT, Thomas Edwards. *Life and Writings of Sir Thomas More*. Burns & Oates: 1891, p. 190.

⁴¹⁵ STAPLETON, Thomas; HALLETT, Philip Edward. *The Life and Illustrious Martyrdom of Sir Thomas More*. London: Burns and Oates, 1966.

⁴¹⁶ *KJV*, Matthew 3.12.

3.2. Reading the *Pater Noster*: Margaret Roper's *A Devout Treatise* and the Catholic Reformation of Prayer

The More household was immortalised by Hans Holbein (d.1543). A preliminary sketch of the family at Chelsea still survives (Figure 29), which was completed by an English artist at the end of the sixteenth century. Holbein was likely a guest at the More household in late 1526, recommended by their mutual friend Erasmus. After being shown the portrait by Holbein, Erasmus wrote a letter to Margaret Roper, Thomas More's eldest daughter:

“I cannot find words, Margaret Roper, ornament of Britain, to express the delight I felt when Holbein's picture showed me your whole family almost as faithfully as if I had been among you. I often wish that, before my last day, I may look even once more on that most dear company to which I owe a great part of whatever fortune or glory I possess, and to none could I be more willingly indebted. The gifted hand of the painter has given me no small portion of my wish. I recognise you all, but no one better than yourself. I seem to behold through all your beautiful household a spirit shining that is still more beautiful. I congratulate you all in that family happiness, and most of all your excellent father...I am writing in the midst of overwhelming work and in poor health, therefore I must leave it to your skill to convince all your sisters that this is a fair letter and is written to each one of them no less than to yourself. Convey my respectful and affectionate salutations to the honoured Lady Alice, your mother' since I cannot kiss her, I kiss her picture. To my godson John More, I wish every happiness, and you will give a special greeting on my part to your most worthy husband Roper, so rightly dear to you.”⁴¹⁷

⁴¹⁷ Letter from Erasmus to Margaret Roper quoted in REYNOLDS, E.E. *Margaret Roper: Eldest Daughter of St Thomas More*. London: Burns and Oates, 1960. pp. 53-54.



Figure 29. *Study for a portrait of Thomas More's family, c. 1527*, by Hans Holbein the Younger (Kunstmuseum Basel).

Erasmus's words illustrate the affectionate relationship there was between him and the More family. It also bears evidence to Margaret's protagonism as the eldest and most accomplished daughter in the household. Erasmus asks her to dictate the letter to her siblings because it was written in Latin, the language of scholarly correspondence of the time, with which some family members were not acquainted. Moreover, Erasmus's request that she have his greetings translated to the rest of the family resembles the work she did in translating his Latin treatise on the Lord's Prayer, *Precatio dominica*, into English.

The first edition of Margaret's *A devout treatise* was printed in 1524 and is now considered lost. The surviving copies now held at the British Library are exemplars of the second version, published in 1526. Just like John Fisher's sermon, the 1524 edition of *A devout treatise* was part of the unlicensed publications for which Thomas Berthelet was investigated in 1526. After the case was settled, Berthelet was given license to print the works again that same year, and the version of *A devout treatise* was even published with Thomas Wolsey's coat of arms, which authenticates it even further (Figure 30).



Figure 30. Wolsey's coat of arms in the 1526 edition of Margaret Roper's *A devout treatise concerning the Pater noster*. Early English Books Online (EEBO).

Margaret was nineteen when the book was first published. Erasmus's Latin treatise was published in 1523 in Basle, and it is likely that her translation stemmed from a domestic exercise she grew used to practice upon the guidance of her father. In fact, besides a few letters exchanged with her father during his imprisonment, Margaret's translation of Erasmus's *Precatio Dominica* (1523) is the only surviving written record of her penmanship. It is easy to miss the historical significance of this translation, considering it now exists in only three copies. However, what makes Margaret's translation especially unique is its timing. It was one of the first translations of Erasmus's works into English, and it was done at a time when female publishing was negatively targeted.

Another reason for the pioneer character of *A devout treatise* is made clear when we consider that there were few precedents for it. Before Margaret's time, the most notable example of female publishing was a Tudor queen. Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509) was

known for her pious learning and committed patronage of humanist authors.⁴¹⁸ Indeed, Bishop John Fisher was her confessor. In 1504, she ventured to translate the fourth book of Thomas à Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*, the first printed English work written by a woman. After all, the standards were surely high for the young nineteen-year-old Margaret Roper to have her translation published.

John Archer Gee correctly theorised about Margaret's probable reluctance to have her translation published. After all, there were so few examples of published Englishwomen to rely on. More than that, despite some humanist enthusiasm for women's education, female publishing was still a great hill to climb. Margaret likely had many reasons to hesitate at the prospect of becoming a published female author, so she may have been completely opposed to the idea. Regardless of her reluctance, the book was published in 1524, becoming "the first piece by a non-royal woman to be printed and widely distributed in England."⁴¹⁹

As we see in the title page of the 1526 edition, the book is advertised as being "a devout treatise upon the Pater noster, made first in Latin by the most famous doctor master Erasmus Roterodamus, and turned into English by a young, virtuous and well-learned gentlewoman of 19 years of age." In the context of the English-speaking learned readership to which *A devout treatise* was directed, it would take a very uninformed reader not to recognise who the "young, virtuous and learned gentlewoman" was. At least, only a few learned readers would have been unaware of Thomas More's family agenda of humanist education, which unapologetically included female literacy. Margaret Roper, being More's eldest daughter, was not as anonymous as one may believe at first glance. After all, Erasmus and Juan Luis Vives had already noticed and mentioned her intellectual achievements by the time the book came out.

However, even the most well-informed reader would have to look into the book's preface to dispose of all the evidence of Margaret's authorship. Richard Hyrde (d. 1528) wrote the preface as a dedicatory letter "unto the studious and virtuous young maid Frances S."⁴²⁰ That was Francis Staverton, More's niece and Margaret's cousin, with whom Hyrde was also acquainted. In fact, Richard Hyrde had acted as a tutor in the More household, and his personal enthusiasm for female education might have made things even brighter for the young

⁴¹⁸ POWELL, Susan (ed.). *The Household Accounts of Lady Margaret Beaufort (1443-1509): From the Archives of St John's College, Cambridge*. British Academy, 2022; TALLIS, Nicola. *Uncrowned Queen: The Life of Margaret Beaufort, Mother of the Tudors*. New York: Basic Books, 2020.

⁴¹⁹ FLEMING, Aimee. *The Female Tudor Scholar and Writer: The Life and Times of Margaret More Roper*. Pen and Sword Books Ltd.: 2024. p. 58.

⁴²⁰ HYRDE, Richard. Preface. In: ROPER, Margaret. *A devout treatise upon the Paternoster*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1526, p. B3r.

Oxford bachelor while dwelling in the Chelsea house. It might even be said that Hyrde's preface to Margaret's treatise served as a fortunate rehearsal for his translation of Juan Luis Vives' *De institutione feminae Christianae* into English, published by Berthelet in 1529 as the *Instruction of a Christian Woman*.⁴²¹ By then, Hyrde would already be dead, "having suffered a bad drenching in fording a swollen river just outside of Orvieto when accompanying Gardiner and Fox on their journey to Rome to advance the Divorce."⁴²²

The most pressing issue in Hyrde's preface was the unapologetic advertisement of the woman translator behind the book. According to him, "many men put great doubt on whether it should be expedient and requisite for a woman to have learning in books of Latin and Greek."⁴²³ The point of the debate was the appropriateness of women's learning in light of the traditional conceptions of male and female inherent differences. There was an apparent moral danger implicated in allowing women to access Latin and Greek knowledge, and Hyrde briefly mentions the core arguments of those who thought it so:

"Alleging for their opinion that the frail kind of women, being inclined of their own courage into vice and mutable at every novelty, if they should have skill in many things that are written in the Latin and Greek tongue, compiled and made with great craft and eloquence, where the matter is happily sometimes more sweet unto the ear than wholesome for the mind, it would of likelihood both inflame their stomachs a great deal more to that vice that men say they are much given unto of their own nature already."⁴²⁴

According to such reasoning, exposure to Latin and Greek would only aggravate the natural inclination to vice with which women were already cursed. It was literally a curse, for such proneness to vice, shared by all women, was thought to be the ultimate legacy of their mother, Eve. Tertullian's charge against her as "the devil's gateway" had cemented medieval thinking on women for centuries. Eve was "the unsealer of that [forbidden] fruit, the first

⁴²¹ VIVES, Juan Luis. *Instruction of a Christian Woman*. London: Thomas Berthelet, 1529.

⁴²² GEE, John Archer. Margaret Roper's English Version of Erasmus' *Precatio Dominica* and the Apprenticeship behind Early Tudor Translation. *The Review of English Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 51: 1937, p. 262.

⁴²³ HYRDE, Richard. Preface. In: ROPER, Margaret. *op. cit.*, p. A2r.

⁴²⁴ *Ibidem*.

deserter of divine law, she who persuaded him [Adam] whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.”⁴²⁵ Her evident susceptibility to infernal operations particularly suited the Pythagorean scheme of matter and form, in which “form is associated with the positive and higher pole ‘male’, leaving matter allied with the negative and lower ‘female’.”⁴²⁶ In this sense, religious translation seemed like the most appropriate, if any, intellectual exercise for women, since it was perceived as less authorial or creative.

Hyrde’s answer to the detractors of women’s learning was that they did so out of envy and jealousy. According to him, these men “either regard but little what they speak in this matter, or else, as they are for the most part unlearned, they envy it and take it to heart that others should have that precious jewel, which they don’t have themselves.”⁴²⁷ If they were willing to look at the matter “with one even eye and consider it equally, they should find and well perceive that women are not only of no less constancy and discretion than men but also more steadfast and sure to trust unto than they.”⁴²⁸ Standing for women’s inherent trustworthiness was a resolute move on the part of Hyrde, by which he challenged the prevailing belief about their intrinsic corruption. He goes even further by claiming that “if both their vices were all open and showed, the man should have much more that he ought to be ashamed of, saying that he is also in that point worse than the woman, inasmuch as she is ashamed of her fault, be it never so small, and he is so far from that virtue that when he hath done nought he rejoices in it and advances himself as though it were well done.”⁴²⁹ Following Hyrde’s claim, women were more humble than men in accepting their own fallibility, which gave them the higher moral ground.

According to Hyrde, it was not only nature that proved women to be suitable for learning the classics, but also their own living conditions and behaviour. “And women abide most at home, occupied ever with some good or necessary business.”⁴³⁰ Their domesticity morally authorised them to endeavour in reading Latin and Greek, which were by themselves taken to be superior languages, for “commodities are far better handled in Latin and Greek than any other language, and in them are many holy doctors’ writings, so devout and efficacious that whosoever reads them must need to be either much better or less evil, which

⁴²⁵ As quoted in JACOBS, F. *Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa: Women Artists and the Language of Art History and Criticism*. Cambridge University Press: 1997. p. 34.

⁴²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁴²⁷ HYRDE, Richard. Preface. In: ROPER, Margaret. *op. cit*, p. A2r.

⁴²⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. A3v.

⁴³⁰ HYRDE, Richard. Preface. In: ROPER, Margaret. *op. cit*, p. A3v.

every good body, both man and woman, will read and follow, rather than others.”⁴³¹ Besides giving them access to the writings of holy doctors, Latin and Greek would also keep women away from second-rate and ill-intentioned clergymen. Hyrde mentions the common argument according to which “if their wives could speak Latin or Greek, then might they talk more boldly with priests and friars, as who says there were no better means (if they were ill-disposed) to execute their purposes than by speaking Latin or Greek.”⁴³²



Figure 31. Title page of the 1526 edition of Margaret Roper’s *A devout treatise upon the Pater noster*. Early Modern English Books (EEBO).

⁴³¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴³² *Ibidem*.

The figure of a learned and holy woman is strategically portrayed in the book's title page (Figure 31). The woodcut depicts a gentlewoman seated at a reading desk, leafing through the pages of a folio. Except this is no ordinary reading desk. The type of furniture the gentlewoman is sitting upon is a recognisably monastic *scriptoria*, typically used in monastic settings. It might be a subtle touch, but it helps establish a visual connection between a scholarly and monastic environment that could suit a female body. It is hard to deny the almost immediate sensation of sighting and interrupting a studying or devotional moment supposed to be taking place quietly and privately. Surrounded by other folio books disposed at the desk and at a bookshelf behind her, the lady in the picture seems almost embarrassed from having been caught during her private study or praying time. That was the exact image Richard Hyrde tried to create.

Considering that “paratextual architectures of this era were in the exciting phase of developing their affiliations and conventions,”⁴³³ both the title page of *A devout treatise* and Hyrde's preface can be seen as strategic editorial interventions to the book's reception. The woodcut's clerical style, derived from medieval manuscript miniatures, exemplifies learned and sanctified authority. It was important for the readers of Margaret's treatise to know this was a work of Erasmus, the great Dutch scholar, now translated into their own language by a devout woman. In this sense, Margaret's domesticity and privacy needed to be at the same time protected and advertised. As thresholds of interpretation, as Gerard Genette would have it, these paratextual devices expose the level of editorial mediation a translated devotional treatise might have needed in early sixteenth-century England.⁴³⁴

Beyond Margaret's learned reputation as the accomplished eldest daughter of Thomas More, most readers would approach her book because of its theme. As religious transformation affected the majority of people, especially in urban centres like London, a treatise on the Pater noster was an interesting reading for many. After all, the Pater Noster was the fundamental Christian prayer. First, it had been taught by Christ himself. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus straightforwardly instructed his disciples: “This is how you should pray.”⁴³⁵ The prescriptive nature of the prayer was only less clear than its simplicity. A simple, brief

⁴³³ COLDIRON, A. E. B.; The Translator's Visibility in Early Printed Portrait-Images and the Ambiguous Example of Margaret More Roper. In: BELLE, Marie-Alice.; HOSINGTON, Brenda M. (eds.). *Thresholds of Translation: Paratexts, Print, and Cultural Exchange in Early Modern Britain (1473-1660)*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 53.

⁴³⁴ GENETTE, Gerard. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. by J. E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997.

⁴³⁵ KJV, Matthew 6. 9-13.

and comprehensive prayer had been, since Christ's times, the fundamental way of talking to God. Indeed, New Testament scholars overall agree on the foundational nature of the Lord's Prayer as a token of unity among the first Christian communities.⁴³⁶ It was to be thoroughly recited and also used as a model for any other prayer. Indeed, Erasmus argued that "we should ask God for nothing that is not in harmony with one of the seven parts of the Lord's Prayer."⁴³⁷ However, the seven petitions of the Pater Noster were not a unanimous model. St Augustine had advocated for the division of the prayer into six parts, since the last two petitions form one single concept. Furthermore, the seven-part structure corresponded perfectly with the seven Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount, expounded in the previous chapter of the Gospel of St Matthew, which helps explain its wider appeal.

In fact, Erasmus mentioned such a division in his dedicatory letter to Justus Ludovicus, which was printed into his *Precatio dominica*, published in Basle in 1523. The treatise was written at the request of Ludovicus, who allegedly asked him for a paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer in seven petitions, which was a common practice: "For the moment, I offer you the Lord's Prayer, which I have divided into seven parts as you asked me to do and as I see others have done."⁴³⁸ Erasmus himself was unsure about the division, thinking it "wrong to separate the last two clauses."⁴³⁹ Despite his uncertainty about the numerical division, he advises Ludovicus on a numerically based model for reading the book: "If your devotion is not satisfied by taking seven days to go through the whole work, you can divide each day into seven times for prayer, as I see our predecessors have also done."⁴⁴⁰ This statement is a clear suggestion that the book was intended for daily use. Be it throughout seven days, reading each petition a day, or reading the whole seven petitions during the course of each day of the week, the book was to be devotionally and daily read.

The first petition (Figure 32) is the foundational claim of the whole prayer: *Pater noster qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum*. In the 1526 edition, this section is introduced by the biggest woodcut initial of the whole book. In a rather typographically simple book, this bigger and more detailed initial certainly catches the eye. The first petition

⁴³⁶ See CLARK, D. *On Earth as in Heaven: The Lord's Prayer from Jewish Prayer to Christian Ritual*. Fortress Press: 2017; _____. *The Lord's Prayer: Origins and Early Interpretations*. Brepols Publishers: 2016; M'BWANGI, F. *The Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13: A Socio Rhetorical Analysis of Identity Politics of the Matthean Community*. Pickwick Publications: 2022; STEVENSON, K. *The Lord's Prayer: A Text in Tradition*. Fortress Press: 2004.

⁴³⁷ *Collected Works of Erasmus: Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, Vol. 69, p. 205.

⁴³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

⁴³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴⁰ *Collected Works of Erasmus: Spiritualia and Pastoralia*, Vol. 69, p. 58.

is also the largest in terms of pages, with its 10-page length doubling the size of every other. Here are laid out the main topics to be developed throughout the other petitions, which all point to the cornerstone of Christian prayer: calling God Father. Throughout the Church's history, addressing God as a heavenly father was the primary gift Christians were given. Margaret's translation of the comment on the first petition captures the importance of God's paternal affinity:

“We acknowledge thine excellency, O maker, saviour, and governor of all things contained in heaven and in earth. And again we acknowledge and confess our own vileness, and in no way we durst be so bold to call thee father (whiche are far unworthy to be thy bondmen) ne take upon us the most honourable name of thy children [...] except thy mere goodness had, by adoption received us into the great honour of this name.”⁴⁴¹

Calling God father had deep ecclesiological connotations. It was the prerogative of those who had received the sacrament of baptism. For centuries, Western Christians had been baptised, within a week of their birth, at their local parishes. By the sacrament of baptism, they were made from “servants of the fiend” into “sons of joy.” Although there was plenty of room for liturgical variance, the sacrament of baptism was generally conceived as being the official entrance of every human being into the Holy Church. Being a member of the Church allowed one to become a child of God. The salvific work of Christ was enacted at the baptismal rite, in which the element of water worked as a conduit of God's grace by cleansing sin. Erasmus's understanding of baptism as a ritual of adoption is effectively brought up by Margaret's translation: “But that thou of thy infinite mercy, by thine only begotten son Jesus, made us free from the thralldom of sin and delivered us from the devil our father, and by violence riddest us from the inheritance of eternal fire, and at last thou vouchsafest to adopt us by faith and baptism, as members in the most holy body of thy son.”⁴⁴²

⁴⁴¹ ROPER, Margaret, *op. cit.*, p. B4v.

⁴⁴² *Ibidem.*

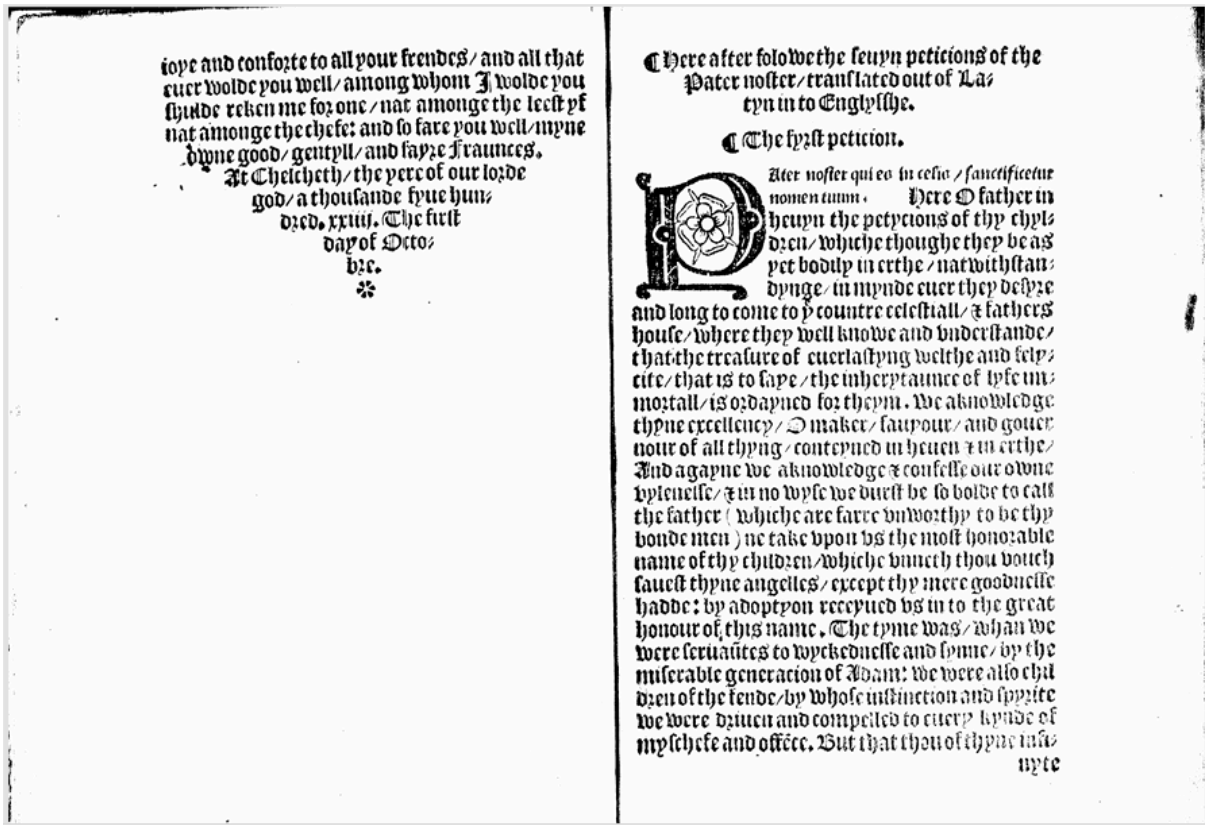


Figure 32. Hereafter followeth the seuyne petitions in the 1526 edition of Margaret Roper's *A devout treatise upon the Pater noster*. Early Modern English Books (EEBO)

The second petition (*thy kingdom come, thy will be done*) acquired a particularly soteriological character in Erasmus' treatise. Against the "tyrannous handling of the fend, which in time past reigned as prince in the world," Christians were promised "a certain spiritual realm which should bring into liberty those that were thine and born anew."⁴⁴³ The "getting and obtaining of this realm" was a crucial question of devotional literature. As in John Fitzherbert's *Book of Husbandry*, published in the same year as Erasmus's treatise, purchasing heaven was all a genuine Christian should aim at. However, in this section, we can see how Erasmus's evangelical emphasis would distinguish him from the kind of devotional piety advocated by Fitzherbert. Erasmus associates the acquisition of the heavenly kingdom with God's own salvific enterprise of adoption, vividly expressed in Christ's ministry. As Margaret translates him: "And to the getting and obtaining of this realm, thou vouchsafest to send from heaven down into the earth thy only son who, with the loss of his own life, redeeming us, where we were afore servants of the devil, should make us the children of God."⁴⁴⁴ Moving from his adoption theology, Erasmus stresses the christological nature of the

⁴⁴³ ROPER, Margaret, *op. cit.*, p. B4v.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibidem.*

heavenly kingdom by equating the Gospel with the realm of God: “and verily thy son, while he lived here in earth, was wont to call his gospel the heavenly kingdom or the realm of God.”⁴⁴⁵ This was the perfect fitting of Erasmus’s ecclesiological and humanist quests. The kingdom of God was Christ’s Gospel, a divine call for scriptural knowledge that had been “hidden and kept secret from us.”⁴⁴⁶

By the time Erasmus published his *Precatio dominica*, however, things were already changing. He had published his translation of the New Testament in 1516, paving the way for humanist-based biblical translation and commentary. His prayer then was that “this realm, which our Lord Jesus challenged for thee, might daily more and more be disclosed and opened here in earth, until that time come, in which that same thy son shall restore and render it up to the full and whole, when all those have subdued themselves, whom thy goodness or the beginning of the world hath appointed to dwell in this realm.”⁴⁴⁷ Bible access, then, had eschatological implications. The way Margaret uses the doublet “disclose and open” when referring to God’s kingdom allows it to be applied to the Gospel, as one opens a book. This is particularly in tune with Erasmus’s own emphasis on the materiality of books in his *Paraclesis*, the preface to his 1516 New Testament, in which he emphatically stresses the vividness of Scripture in depicting Christ himself:

“But why do we not venerate instead the living and breathing likeness of Him in these books? If anyone displays the tunic of Christ, to what corner of the earth shall we not hasten so that we may kiss it? Yet were you to bring forth His entire wardrobe, it would not manifest Christ more clearly and truly than the Gospel writings. We embellish a wooden or stone statue with gems and gold for the love of Christ. Why not, rather, mark with gold and gems and with ornaments of greater value than these, if such there be, these writings which bring Christ to us so much more effectively than any paltry image? The latter represents only the form of the body – if indeed it represents anything of Him – but these writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ Himself, and thus they

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

render Him so fully present that you would see less if you gazed upon Him with your very eyes.”⁴⁴⁸

The rhetorical device of *ecfrasis* (description) is applied to the Scripture’s potential of delivering a lively vision of Christ, even more than “any paltry image.” The Bible, and specifically the Gospels, was more persuasive than relics and images because “the latter represents only the form of the body – if indeed it represents anything of Him – but these writings bring you the living image of His holy mind and the speaking, healing, dying, rising Christ Himself.”⁴⁴⁹ Erasmus even raises the argument that relics and images could not even be considered to represent Christ, by which he substantiates his acknowledged disdain for the excesses of traditional piety. He also emphasises the epistemological superiority of historical and doctrinal knowledge over the bodily-focused practices of kissing and ornamenting relics and images. Although Erasmus does not straightforwardly condemn such practices, he is clearly making the point of their uselessness when compared to the value of Scripture, “which brings Christ to us so much more effectively.”⁴⁵⁰

Margaret Roper would have been greatly familiarised with Erasmus’s *Paraclesis*. In fact, we can speculate that she had the *Novum Instrumentum* as a main source for her own translation of *Precatio dominica*. Being an English subject, she was forbidden to translate the Bible into the vernacular, following a 1409 decree against unauthorised translations of the Latin Bible, contemporary to the same anti-Lollardy law that got Thomas Berthelet into trouble for printing her book without a license. Interestingly, in 1519, only a few years before Margaret had finished her translation of Erasmus, seven Lollards were burnt in Coventry “for teaching their children and family the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English.”⁴⁵¹ Being a paraphrase of the Lord’s Prayer, however, Margaret’s work would fail to fit the category of Bible translation. Despite that, measures were taken for her not to be suspected of a similar infraction, which only adds to the complexities and risks implicated in her publication. In the *Devout treatise*, each of the seven petitions is introduced with a title and an initial, from which follows the Latin quotation of the biblical text without translation.

⁴⁴⁸ ROTERODAMUS, Erasmus. *Paraclesis*. In: OLIN, John C. (ed). *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*. *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵⁰ ROTERODAMUS, Erasmus. *Paraclesis*. In: OLIN, John C. (ed). *Christian Humanism and the Reformation*. *op. cit.*, p. 108.

⁴⁵¹ According to Anne O’Donnell, “the first edition of Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* claims that teaching their children the ‘Our Father’ in English was the ‘only cause’ of the arrest of these Lollards (1563, book 3, p. 472).” O’DONNELL, A. Erasmus and Margaret Roper on the *Pater Noster*: Patristic and Linguistic Sources. In: GENTRUP, William; MCCUTCHEON, Elizabeth. (eds). *op. cit.*, p. 195.

Margaret's readers would have grown used to hearing and reciting each petition at every Sunday mass, and most especially at Lenten confession. Since the resolutions of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, English parishioners were required to attend annual confession to their respective parish priests, which "placed enormous demands on both confessor and penitent."⁴⁵² Priests were to assess parishioners' knowledge of Catholic doctrine by hearing them confess and repeat both the Creed and the Lord's Prayer in Latin. The receiving of communion was thus conditioned on the keeping of annual confession, which brightly illuminates the devotional link between the *Pater noster* and the Eucharist. The fourth petition of the prayer made such a link particularly evident: *Panem nostrum quotidianum da nobis hodie*. Erasmus followed St Augustine's threefold model of exposition, in which the bread could be understood as a reference to material needs (*quae huic uitae sunt necessaria*), the Eucharist (*de sacramento autem corporis domini*), or Scripture (*praecepta scilicet diuina*). The daily bread for which Christians could ask God would acquire a peculiarly sacred meaning when referred to the miracle of the altar.

Canterbury Cathedral Library holds a particularly intriguing copy of Erasmus's 1516 New Testament (Figure 33).⁴⁵³ A huge bound folio enclosed with metal locks is identified in its spine as "Novum Instrumentum, Erasmi, Graece, Basilae, 1516" (Figure 34). The title page bears a handwritten dedication in Latin (Figure 35): "*Qui hoc libro raro et valiosissimo usurus es, memento ad Aram*" (You who are going to make use of this rare and most precious book, remember the altar). It is especially intriguing to read such a quotation in light of the known association between Scripture and Host in Erasmus's *Precatio dominica*. For Erasmus, Bible translation and Eucharistic doctrine belonged together in a way English authorities of the 1520s were still reluctant to accept.

Despite the careful avoidance of biblical translation in her work, there is enough reason to believe Margaret held vernacular Scripture in high regard. Perhaps she was of her father's opinion that the Bible should be made accessible to the laity in a piecemeal manner. In his 1529 *Dialogue concerning Heresies*, Thomas More advocated for an orderly distribution of Scripture throughout English parishes. Among the many topics of religious controversies discussed in the dialogue, More provides an extended discussion of how the Bible could be made available in both linguistic and material terms. According to him, Scripture "might be with diligence well and truly translated by some good Catholic and well-learned men, or by divers dividing the labour among them, and after conferring their

⁴⁵² DUFFY, Eamon. *The Stripping of the Altars*, op. cit., p. 54.

⁴⁵³ ROTERODAMUS, Erasmus. *Novum Instrumentum omnie*. Basle: Johan Froben, 1516.

several parts together with each other.”⁴⁵⁴ As long as it was collectively made by good Catholic and well learnt men, the Bible could be translated and further “approved by the ordinaries and by their authority so put unto print, as all the copies should come whole unto the bishops’ hand.”⁴⁵⁵ Authorised printed Bibles should, therefore, be subject to episcopal control to avoid any interpretative abuse. Following More’s recommendation, each bishop should, with “discretion and wisdom, deliver to such as he perceives honest, sad and virtuous, with a good monition and fatherly counsel to use it reverently with humble heart and lowly mind, rather seeking therein occasion of devotion than of dispersion.”⁴⁵⁶ The willingness to conform should be the main criteria for bishops to decide who would be granted access to the vernacular Bible, which would only be available “but of the ordinary’s hand.”⁴⁵⁷



Figure 33. Cover of Erasmus’s 1516 *Novum Instrumentum*.
With the kind permission of the Canterbury Cathedral Library.

⁴⁵⁴ *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 341.

⁴⁵⁵ *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 341.

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibidem*.



Figure 34. Spine of Erasmus's 1516 *Novum Instrumentum*.
With the kind permission of the Canterbury Cathedral Library.

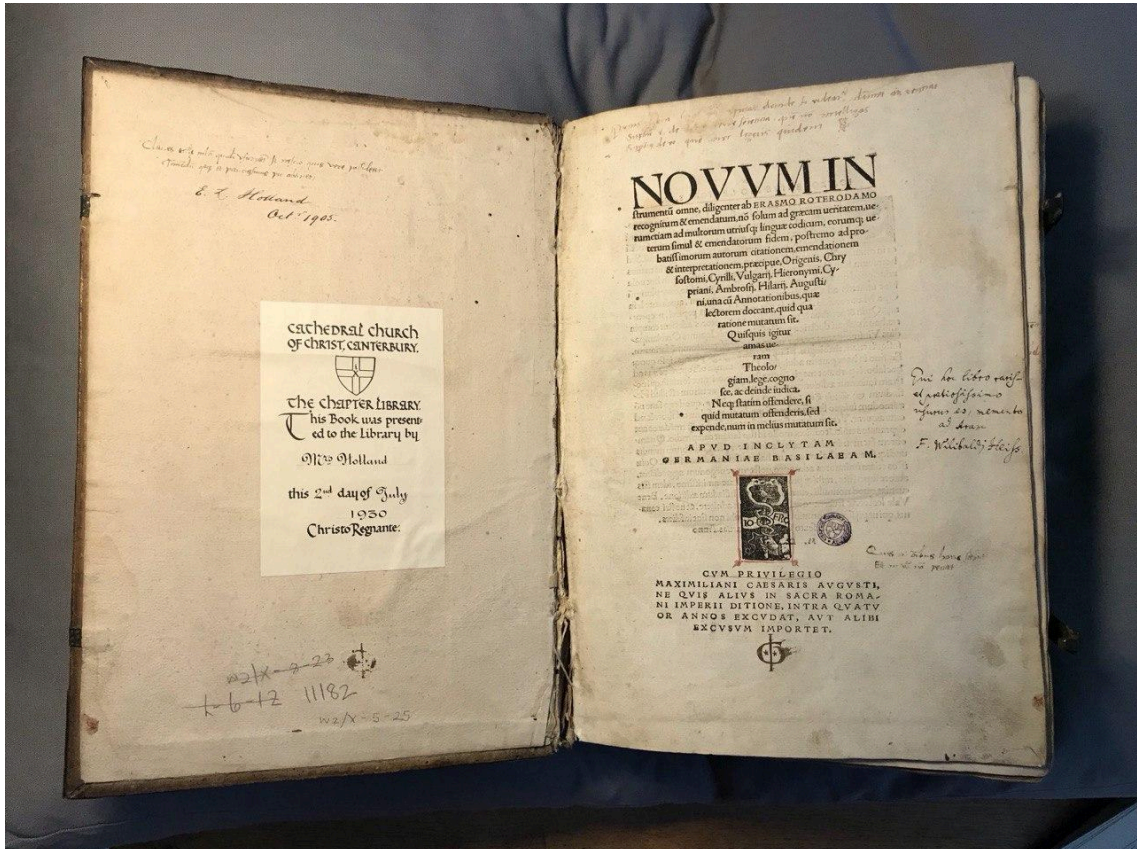


Figure 35. Title page of Erasmus's 1516 *Novum Instrumentum*.
With the kind permission of the Canterbury Cathedral Library.

More seems concerned with the laity's general lack of reverence when handling the Bible, and he meant it literally: "Ye spoke right now of the Jews, among whom the whole people have ye say the scripture in their hands. And ye thought it no reason that we should reckon Christian men less worthy thereunto than them. Wherein I am as ye see of your own opinion. But yet would God we had the like reverence to the Scripture of God that they have."⁴⁵⁸ He addresses a Jew's custom of taking Scripture "with great reverence in hand when he will read, and reverently laying it up again when he hath done. Where as we God forgive us take little regard to sit down on our Bible with the Old Testament and the New too."⁴⁵⁹ Against the Jewish meticulous opening and laying up of the Bible, the English way of reading Scripture "procedeth of little reverence, so dothe it more and more engender in the mind a negligence and contempt of God's holy words."⁴⁶⁰ These irreverent reading habits were the main reason why the Bible should not be indiscreetly distributed for every layman. If people could not *handle* the Bible properly, they would pay little respect to its authority. The way people handled their books was, in this sense, a special way to diagnose the value with which they esteemed learning.

Thomas More was not alone in his worries about the proper handling of the Bible. Indeed, most of them were discussed during the meetings of the 1530 episcopal commission appointed by Henry VIII to examine English-written books and their contents. As Lord Chancellor, More also attended the discussions, and his restrictive view on Bible distribution was shared by the majority of bishops. The commission was to decide on the necessity of Bible reading for the laity, and "finally it appeared that the having of the whole Scripture in English was not necessary to Christian men."⁴⁶¹ Hearing the Bible during Mass was enough. After all, it seemed reasonable that the common people should be protected from "imperfect translations."⁴⁶² Such protective zeal also took shape in a list of heretical books which were henceforth forbidden, including books by William Tyndale and any other existing Old Testament or New Testament vernacular translations, which were to be surrendered to the local bishops within 15 days. Access to such books was only allowed to the learned minority of those appointed by the King to correct Tyndale's translation. For even though heretical books and vernacular Bibles were being prohibited, a promise was made of a new and

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 342.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶¹ WABUDA, Susan. "A day after doomsday: Cranmer and the Bible Translations of the 1530s." In: KILEEN, Kevin; SMITH, Helen. (eds). *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Early Modern England, c. 1530-1700*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 2015, p. 32.

⁴⁶² *CW*, Vol. 6, p. 345.

corrected New Testament translation, which would replace the corrupt version being forbidden.

If we were to choose a defining moment of the English Reformation, the announcement of an officially authorised English Bible would make for a strong candidate. But in the mid-1520s, when Margaret published her *Devout treatise*, Bible translation was yet to become such a thing. There is enough evidence to suggest that her version of Erasmus's paraphrase, although not officially qualified as an exercise in Bible translation, did much to enhance biblical literacy among her English readers. Margaret's Englishing of Erasmus provided lay readers with a detailed, albeit accessible, rendering of the most fundamental and biblically-rooted prayer of Christianity. Elizabeth McCutcheon had praised her "well-bred, but colloquial, idiomatic, and obviously chosen with an eye to context" vocabulary, and in no way does Margaret's translation contradict Thomas More's reluctance to widespread and unlimited Bible distribution. Indeed, by providing such an accessible and relatable rendering of the Lord's Prayer in their mother tongue, Margaret was echoing her father's pastoral concern with the laity. In his *Dialogue*, More begs the point that, even though Scripture worked as "a medicine for him that is sick and food for him that is whole,"⁴⁶³ every care should be taken for it not to become a poison: "that after the affection and state of sundry stomachs one may take harm by the self same that shall do another good, and sick folk often have such a corrupt tallage in their taste that they most likely meet that which is most unwholesome for them."⁴⁶⁴ According to More, different texts of the Scripture should be allowed to different readers, and the task of discerning it belonged to "the ordinary whom God hath in the diocese appointed for the chief physician."⁴⁶⁵

Being a translation of Erasmus, Margaret's treatise formidably fits the context that E. J. Devereux paints of Erasmian works in England:

"The wider context of Erasmus's learning and developing thought was set aside or taken for granted, and the name of 'the most excellent clerke Erasmus' or 'the most famous learned man, doctour Erasmus' was used to give authority and weight to what were almost always small

⁴⁶³ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁶⁴ *CW, Vol. 6*, p. 342.

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibidem.*

books, intended to influence the common reader on one side or another of a controversy or issue.”⁴⁶⁶

Her small book was definitely advertised and complimented by its Erasmian pedigree. But the novelty in her work was its exegetical accessibility. Conceived as a supplementary devotional material, a learned albeit accessible treatise on the Pater noster, with its Catholic humanist undertones clearly established, could work wonders in the fight against Lutheranism. Erasmus’s Latin exposition of the text is given by Margaret in a “simple, straightforward, and unpretentious”⁴⁶⁷ vocabulary that suited the popularity of the prayer. By translating Erasmus *Precatio dominica*, she was, indeed, bringing the *Pater Noster* home.

⁴⁶⁶ DEVEREUX, E.J. *op cit.*, p. 3.

⁴⁶⁷ VERBRUGGE, Rita M. Margaret More Roper’s Personal Expression in the Devout Treatise Upon the Pater Noster. In: HANNAY, Margaret Patterson (ed.). *Silent But for the Word: Tudor Women as Patrons, Translators, and Writers of Religious Works*. Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1985, p. 240.

Conclusion.

The Fate of Catholic England

At Easter 1525, a young female servant in Aldington, a few miles from Canterbury, fell dangerously ill: “touched with a great infirmitie in her bodie, which did ascend at diverse times up into her throat, and swelled greatly: during the time wherof, she seemed to be in grievous pain, in so much as a man would have thought that she had suffered the pangs of death itself, until the disease descended, and fell down into the body again.”⁴⁶⁸ Her illness would come in fits and starts, and she ‘often times trifled and spoke such words as she remembered not herself when she came to good advisement.’⁴⁶⁹ While in delirium, she would speak in rhyming prophecies about the Seven Deadly Sins and the Ten Commandments. Her name was Elizabeth Barton (1506-1534), and she would soon become the most famous woman in Henrician England.⁴⁷⁰

After being notified about Elizabeth’s visions, the Archbishop of Canterbury, William Warham (d.1532), sent monks from the monastery of Christ Church, Canterbury, to investigate the matter. False prophetesses were a common late medieval phenomenon, and there was no particular reason to disregard that case as one more farce. However, news of Elizabeth’s visions soon began to spread throughout Aldington and its surroundings, and the young girl was already being revered as a local prophetess. Hundreds of people watched her seven-day trance in a nearby chapel at Court-at-Street, prostrate at the feet of the Virgin’s statue. After coming to her senses, Elizabeth declared herself healed from her illness and

⁴⁶⁸ LAMBARDE, William. *A Perambulation of Kent: Conteyning the description, Hystorie, and Customes of the Shyre. Written in the year 1570, By William Lambarde, of Lincolnes Inne, Gent : First published in the Year 1576, And now increased and altered from the Author's owne last Copie.* London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1826, p. 171.

⁴⁶⁹ WHATMORE, E. L.; The Sermon against the Holy Maid of Kent and Her Adherents, Delivered at Paul's Cross, November the 23rd, 1533, and at Canterbury, December the 7th. *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 58, No. 232, pp. 463-475, 1943, p. 464.

⁴⁷⁰ As Elizabeth Norton reminds us, “writing any account of Elizabeth Barton’s life is fraught with difficulty due to the paucity of reliable sources. After her arrest, she was heavily censored with most sources favourable to her destroyed. Instead, we are heavily reliant on four difficult sources. Two were directly produced at the government’s behest: the Act of Attainder against Elizabeth and her supporters, and the sermon preached at her public penance. Additionally, Archbishop Cranmer, who considered her a fraud, wrote an account in a private letter. The final source is a paraphrase of a pamphlet produced by Edward Thwaites in her lifetime, which exists in the work of William Lambarde, a late-sixteenth-century antiquary hostile to Barton. All copies of the original pamphlet (which had been a bestseller) were destroyed.” NORTON, Elizabeth. *The Hidden Lives of Tudor Women: A Social History.* New York and London: Pegasus Books, 2017, p. 353.

announced that she would henceforth become a nun, ‘for such was Our Lady’s pleasure.’⁴⁷¹ The miracle of the ‘Holy Maid of Kent’ soon became local news, and the archbishop immediately informed the King.

Upon reading Warham’s report, Henry VIII asked for his secretary’s opinion. Sir Thomas More acted with typical caution when he considered the matter not sufficiently developed for him to judge, ‘because it was constantly reported for a truth, that God wrought in her, and that a miracle was showed upon her, I durst not nor would not be bold in judging the matter.’⁴⁷² But More’s initial precaution did not represent the popular devotion to the Nun. She was indeed admitted as a nun in Christ Church, where she lived a quiet life, with occasional visits to the chapel of Court-at-Street. The little chapel had become a place of pilgrimage, where people would continue gathering to watch Elizabeth’s trances and miracles, which occurred by ‘lighting candles without fire, moistening women’s breasts that before were dry and wanted milk, restoring all sorts of sick to perfect health, reducing the dead to life again, and finally doing all good, to all such as were measured and vowed.’⁴⁷³

But Elizabeth Barton would enter history not by her miracles, but by her boldness. She prophesied Henry VIII’s death, possibly to his face. Rumour had it that, as the King and his retinue stopped at Canterbury, on their way to Calais in 1532, the strangest meeting happened in the garden of St Augustine’s monastery. The Holy Maid of Kent is said to have met Henry and Anne Boleyn and warned ‘that in case he desisted not from his proceedings in the said divorce and separation but pursued the same and married again, that then within one month after such marriage he should no longer be king of this realm, and in the reputation of God should not be a king one day nor one hour, and that he would die a villain’s death.’⁴⁷⁴ The story is most probably apocryphal, but it provides a colourful illustration of the growing strife that was already cementing on the English religious scene.

As religious turmoil evolved in England during the 1530s, English Catholicism faced a completely new set of challenges. Already in 1527, Henry VIII started signalling his interest in having his marriage to Catherine of Aragon dissolved, putting Catholic theologians and scholars between a rock and a hard place. The King’s Great Matter ignited a series of discussions about royal prerogative and papal primacy in courts and pulpits throughout the country. This was the scenario in which Elizabeth Barton emerged as a controversial figure,

⁴⁷¹ WHATMORE, E. L. *op cit.*, p. 466.

⁴⁷² ROGERS, E. F. *The Correspondence of Thomas More*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 197.

⁴⁷³ Letter from Thomas Cranmer to Archbishop Hawkyns, p. 272.

⁴⁷⁴ NEAME, Alan. *The Holy Maid of Kent: The Life of Elizabeth Barton, 1506-1534*. Hodder and Stoughton, 1970, p. 174.

bringing to light the disputes and contradictions of early sixteenth-century devotional culture. The story of the Maid of Kent, or the Mad Nun (the name her contemporary adversaries gave her), is but a thread in the manifold tapestry of popular devotion, official proclamations, and courtly games that turned Henrician England into such a paradigmatic period.

When John Colet (1467-1519) delivered his sermon at Convocation in 1512, English theologians and authorities saw their homeland as a land of milk and honey.⁴⁷⁵ A reliable and authoritative king had given place to his promising and charming young son. Henry VII had provided the realm the political stability it lacked after a century of dynastic bloodshed. Henry VIII, his younger son, ascended to the throne with the promise of bringing England into a new golden age. Not much older than the century itself, the young king encapsulated the general yearnings for renewed government, piety and scholarship.⁴⁷⁶ The Church, most especially, needed renovation. Preachers throughout Europe warned against the dangers of unrepentance and the urgent need to restore the Body of Christ to its health and purity. John Colet was passionate about reforming the Church by recovering the old truths of canon law and putting them into practice. He was moved by a particular vision of the Church, inspired by both medieval and ancient authors, in which God's light would shine down on its members through the pious living of its bishops and clergy. Contrary to Jonathan Arnold,⁴⁷⁷ I argued that Colet's elevated ecclesiology did not belittle his pastoral concern with the laity. In a corporate society, in which the Church was conceived as the Mystical Body of Christ, reforming the devotional lives of common men and women was of the utmost importance.

The late Middle Ages saw the rise of a rich body of devotional literature aimed at instructing and empowering lay people to face their daily lives as genuine believers. Books of hours, which monks used to follow the canonical hours of the day, were soon becoming best sellers of both manuscript and print cultures, aimed at a lay readership.⁴⁷⁸ Local guilds existed in every parish, with committed members working together, raising funds for church maintenance and poor relief. Since the 1215 Lateran Council, lay Christians were commanded to recite the Lord's Prayer and the Creed as a condition for Eucharistic communion. When it came to their devotional lives, people were more and more expected to make an effort and be responsible. These are examples of what I termed as notions of devotional responsibility,

⁴⁷⁵ ACKROYD, Peter. *The Life of Thomas More*, *op. cit.*, MARSHALL, Peter. *Heretics and Believers*, *op. cit.*; WOODING, Lucy. *Tudor England*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷⁶ WOODING, Lucy. *Henry VIII*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷⁷ ARNOLD, Jonathan. *Dean John Colet*, *op. cit.*

⁴⁷⁸ DUFFY, Eamon. *Marking the Hours*, *op. cit.*; WHITE, Helen Constance. *Tudor Books of Private Devotion*, *op. cit.*; REINBURG, Virginia. *French Books of Hours*, *op. cit.*

which started to spread in the late medieval period and were particularly intensified in the early sixteenth century. When, in the late 1510s, Martin Luther started challenging the cornerstones of late medieval religion, especially the primacy of the Pope and the role of good works on salvation, devotion became a matter of salvific interest.

In the 1520s, even husbandmen were to be devotionally accountable. Published in 1523, the *Book of Husbandry* was a popular farming manual, similar to older agricultural treatises and almanacks. It instructed husbandmen, a miscellaneous social class in the period, on how to thrive on the land. It also advised them on matters of faith. The book's final section resembles a little devotional treatise which discusses the need to purchase heaven, to obtain forgiveness and salvation as a fellow sinner. It was a manifesto of Catholic household piety, with its mentions of penitence, almsgiving, and confession. It teaches its readers how to pray, how to avoid wandering thoughts at prayer, and how to live a life that would ultimately please God. Considering the confessional conflicts of the period, as discussed in Chapter 2, the *Book of Husbandry* provided a heartfelt defence and explanation of Catholic piety and devotional practices.

As the 1520s evolved, Catholic devotion grew to need learned defences. In this case, Chapter 3 offered an insight into England's greatest Catholic apologists of the time: John Fisher and Thomas More. Fisher was the leading figure in the European fight against Lutheranism, publishing several Latin treatises against Luther's doctrines. In England, he was one of the men behind a Catholic secret reformation, according to which heretics were better convinced than killed. In his sermon at a book-burning ceremony at St Paul's Churchyard in 1526, Fisher invited Lutherans to secretly come to him and let themselves be persuaded back into the true faith. Sir Thomas More, King's secretary and leading London lawyer, later provided English readers with a lesson on how to conduct a conversation with a heretic. His *Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, published in 1529, was a fictional recollection of his own investigative experiences, and summarised the confessional debate over Catholics and Lutherans for an English audience. It also illuminated the utmost importance of popular devotion. On Fisher's sermon and on More's dialogue, English readers were respectively commissioned and instructed on their devotional and polemical duties as true Catholics.

Even before Fisher and More published their writings, English readers were already provided with rich vernacular devotional literature. Margaret Roper's *A devout treatise*, first published in 1524, was an English translation of Erasmus's 1523 *Precatio dominica*, a treatise on the Pater noster. Margaret was the eldest daughter of Thomas More and would become a fundamental figure in the preservation of his legacy after his death. But at the age of 19, she

was already recognised as a humanist prodigy. Her translation provided a useful and comprehensive treatise on the most fundamental prayer of Christian faith, while also opening new linguistic possibilities for the English prose. In the English fight against heresy, Margaret's translation also helped establish a Catholic humanist agenda in matters of devotion, bringing the Pater noster closer to the Catholic Eucharistic doctrine.

So when Elizabeth Barton, the young countryside prophetess, was condemned for treason in 1533, she became one of the last stars of Catholic England to shine on the Henrician sky. The Holy Maid of Kent and the other priests who had supported her were executed in April 1535. She was the first to be hanged, confessing herself to be “a poor wench without learning” who “fell into a certain pride and foolish fantasy.”⁴⁷⁹ She was accused of maliciously opposing Henry VIII's reign and conspiring against him by prophesying his death. A similar charge was brought against John Fisher for his relentless opposition to the King's divorce. Fisher was accused of maliciously denying Henry's kingship, and his execution was hastened when the pope nominated him a cardinal while he was imprisoned. He died on 22 June 1535, the day of St John the Baptist. A few weeks later, Thomas More had the same fate. He had refused to sign the oath of succession that Henry VIII put forth a year before. Both men were also accused of having believed the visions of the Maid of Kent and even supported her actions. Their devotion proved fatal, after all.

In early sixteenth-century England, being devotionally accountable had a price. Among other topics, the tragic deaths of Fisher and More have contributed to an either vilified or canonised history of Catholic England. Elizabethan Protestants, in particular, helped cement the reputation of Fisher as a close-minded conservative⁴⁸⁰ and of More as a cynical hunter of heretics.⁴⁸¹ On the other hand, especially after their canonisation in 1935, Catholic scholars have portrayed both men as martyrs in a hagiographic narrative. Fisher and More encapsulate the overall fate of Henrician Catholic England, either proscribed or victorious.

If in my Introduction I presented Henrician England as a burnt-down theatre, my final words have to mention a final, fundamental, character. Thomas Berthelet, the printer who published Colet's Convocation sermon, Fitzherbert's farming manual, Fisher's anti-Lutheran sermons and Margaret Roper's prayer treatise, was even more crucial than his published authors to the history of sixteenth-century Catholicism. He outlived them all, in more ways than one. His commercial acumen and expertise granted him, sometime around 1530, the

⁴⁷⁹ WHATMORE, E. L. *op cit.*, p. 471.

⁴⁸⁰ HATT, Cecilia (ed.). *English Works of John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. Sermons and other Writings, 1520-1535*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁴⁸¹ ACKROYD, Peter. *op. cit.*

position of King's Printer, a post he would occupy until the end of Henry VIII's reign. As a printer, Berthelet encapsulated the ambiguities and complexities of Henrician England as few men of his time could have done. Sixteenth-century English Catholicism would not have been the same without him.

In the present work, I aimed at providing a more nuanced picture of Catholicism in Henrician England as a vivid and diversified religion. My goal was to assess the formative years of English Catholicism as a distinctive confessional identity, before the developments of royal supremacy shrunk the possibilities of religious variegation. Between the 1510s and the 1520s, English Catholics enjoyed a peculiarly creative and irreversible period of their history, which modern scholarship has yet to properly acknowledge.

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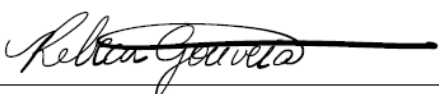
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