

THOMAS A KEMPIS, *Libellus Spiritualis Exercitii* (*Little Book on Spiritual Exercise*), *Libellus de recognitione proprie fragilitatis* (*The Little Book on the Examination of One's Own Frailty*), excerpts from *Imitatio Christi* (*The Imitation of Christ*); excerpt from CONRAD OF SAXONY, *Speculum beatae Mariae virginis* (*Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*); *Epistole Ignacii Martiris et Beate Virginis Marie* (*Letters of Ignatius the Martyr and the Blessed Virgin Mary*), Latin translation attributed to ROBERT GROSSETESTE; several short, devotional treatises; collection of spiritual sayings excerpted from the writings of THOMAS A KEMPIS, early Church Fathers, and others

In Latin, decorated manuscript on parchment

Germany (Rhineland) or Southeastern Netherlands, c. 1425-1475

Three volumes: I. i (parchment) + 77 + i (parchment) folios on parchment, II. i (parchment) + 38 + i (parchment) folios on parchment, III. i (parchment) + 48 + i (parchment) folios on parchment, modern foliation in pencil, upper outer rectos, 1-77, 1-38, 1-18, incomplete: vol. II lacks at least one quire (and likely more) from the beginning and vol. III lacks at least one leaf near the end of q. ii (collation I. i⁸ ii⁸ [+9] iii⁸ [-7; canceled with no loss of text] iv⁸ [+9] v¹⁰ [+ a leaf added before 1] vi⁸ vii⁸ [-1 and 2; canceled with no loss of text] viii⁸ [+ a leaf added before 1] ix¹⁰; II. i¹⁰ ii⁶ iii¹⁰ iv¹⁰ [-1 and 2; canceled with no loss of text] v⁴, III. i⁶ ii¹²), traces of quire signatures, mostly cropped, in vol. I, layout varies, I. ff. 1-77v, ruled in ink with full-length vertical and horizontal bounding lines, prickings in outer margins (justification 50-53 x 33-36 mm.), written in four hands on fourteen long lines: (i) ff. 1-17v, 26-34v, 46-67v, in a neat, well-spaced gothic bookhand, (ii) ff. 18-22, 35-45v, in a gothic bookhand with some hybrida features, (iii) ff. 22-25v, in a neat gothic hybrida, (iv) ff. 68-77v, in a more compressed gothic bookhand, guide letters for initials, capitals highlighted in red, underlining in red, red rubrics, red and blue line fillers, one-line red paraphs, one- to two-line initials in red or blue, two-line purple initial with red pen decoration (f. 1), three- to seven-line initials in blue or red with contrasting pen decoration (ff. 2, 22v, 24v, 25v, 50), some damp-staining on the upper and lower edges and in the gutter, some rubbing of text with no loss of legibility, II. ff. 1-38, ruled very faintly in lead (justification 51 x 34 mm.), written in black ink in a carefully formed gothic hand on fifteen long lines, capitals touched in red, red rubrics, one-line red paraphs, one- to two-line initials in red or blue, some damp-staining in the gutter, III. ff. 1-18v, ruled in ink with full-length vertical and horizontal bounding lines, prickings in outer margins (justification 48-52 x 33-34 mm.), written in two hands: (i) ff. 1-6, 18v, same as hand iii in volume I on fourteen long lines, (ii) ff. 6v-17v, in a heavy gothic bookhand similar to hand i in volume I on thirteen long lines, capitals highlighted in red, underlining in red, red rubrics, red and blue line fillers, one-line red paraphs, one- to four-line initials in red or blue, some damp-staining in the gutter, in good condition. All three volumes bound in modern burgundy velvet, each in a fitted, silk-lined, blue buckram box signed by "J & S Brockman / Binders Wheatley / Oxford England," with a leather title-piece on the spine of the second box lettered in gilt capitals, "DE / IMITATIONE / CHRISTI." Dimensions 73-75 x 53-55 mm.

This is an unusually personal manuscript that includes an array of texts chosen as guides to the religious life, including several by Thomas a Kempis, author of the *Imitation of Christ* (and likely dating from his lifetime). The texts and the extracts speak directly of one soul's spiritual journey. The emphasis on personal spirituality and religious reading was fundamental to the late medieval reform movement known as the *Devotio moderna*. Now divided into three volumes, this was originally one volume, a very tiny book that could easily be slipped into a pocket always handy for prayer and meditation

PROVENANCE

1. Evidence of script and decoration points to these miniature volumes having been produced in western Germany or the southeastern Netherlands in the middle of the fifteenth century, c. 1425-1475. The three volumes were once bound together in a single volume; one text is now spread between Volumes I and III (see below). All three volumes bear witness to textual rearrangement (and some textual losses) that occurred at some point during or prior to rebinding. It has proven particularly difficult to reconstruct accurately the arrangement of the text in Volumes I and III; further study is called for.

Given the texts' shared focus on Christ and the Virgin, as well as the cultivation of a rich spiritual life, it seems quite likely that this collection of texts was gathered in the milieu of the *Devotio moderna* movement, perhaps by a lay devotee of the movement or within a religious house associated with it.

2. Rebound in three volumes in the last century. This may have been the point at which the text was disarranged.

TEXT

Volume I:

ff. 1-17v, *Capitula cuiusdam tractatus deuotorum exercitorum [sic] de interiorum renouacione ...*, incipit, "REnouamini autem spiritu mentis uestre ait beatus paulus apostolus. Solent boni religiosi habere deuota exercitia ... in loco sancto temere quicquam agere inpune non cedit ///";

The *Libellus spiritualis exercitii* (*Little Book on Spiritual Exercise*) of Thomas a Kempis, ending imperfectly in the middle of chapter five. The text is complete in this volume, but no longer presented continuously. The next portion of the text begins on f. 26. *Spiritual Exercise* has been edited in Pohl (1904, pp. 331-355). We know of only one other copy of this text on the market in the last century, though the text's brevity means that it is hard to say in how many manuscripts it circulates unremarked.

ff. 18-22, beginning imperfectly, "/// dignius est celum seruare quam terram tantam integritatem merito incorruptibilitas non putredinis ulla resolutio sequitur. Sic ergo maria eo modo quo dictum est ... Omnesque oremus ut ipsa propter dulcissimum aue nos oret liberari ab omni ve per dominum nostrum ihesum christum filium suum qui cum patre et spiritu sancto uiuit et regna deus per omnia secula seculorum. Amen";

Chapter two of the *Speculum beatae Mariae virginis* [*Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*] of Conrad of Saxony, beginning imperfectly. The chapter, which focuses on the freedom of Mary from sin and eternal punishment, is complete in this volume, but no longer presented continuously. The preceding portion of the text can be found on ff. 38v-45v.

Mirror saw a very wide circulation in the Middle Ages. In his modern critical edition (1975), Petrus de Alcántara Martínez lists 247 manuscripts in which the text survives, more than half of which are housed in German and Austrian repositories. It was first printed in Augsburg, 1476 (Hain 3566; GW 04817), and circulated in at least two additional editions before 1500 (Hain 3567; GW 04818-19).

ff. 22-25v, *Incipit epistola sancti ignacij ad sanctum Johannem de beata virgine maria*, incipit, "JOhanni sancto seniori Ignacius et qui cum eo sunt fratres. De tua mora dolemus grauitur allocucionibus et a collocucionibus [sic] tuis roborandi ... Tu autem diligenti modo disponas cum desiderio nostro et valeas. Amen"; f. 24v, incipit, "ITem Johanni sancto seniori suus Ignacius. Si licitum est apud te ad iherosolime partes volo ascendere ... bone preceptor properare me iubeas et valeas. Amen"; f. 25v, incipit, "CHRistifere marie suus Ignacius. Me neophitum *Johannis* et tui discipulum confortare et consolare debueras ... Scripsi tibi et etiam alias et ro//";

Three of the four letters known collectively as *Epistole Ignacii Martiris et Beate Virginis Marie* (*Letters of Ignatius the Martyr and the Blessed Virgin Mary*). These three letters are spuriously attributed to Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-c. 108), an early Christian writer from whom seven authentic letters do survive. Another manuscript copy (Tours, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 247) attributes the translation of these spurious letters from Greek to Latin to Robert Grosseteste (1175-1253), philosopher, theologian, and Bishop of Lincoln, though the absence of any Greek original has cast doubt on whether this was a translation rather than an original Latin composition (Thomson, 1940, pp. 58-61). The first two of these three letters are addressed to St. John the Apostle and the third is addressed to the Virgin Mary. The third letter is no longer presented continuously in this volume, though it is complete. It resumes on f. 18 of Volume III.

The epistles were edited by Lightfoot (1889, pp. 69-72) and translated into English by Roberts and Donaldson (1903, pp. 124-126). They appear to have circulated widely during the Middle Ages, noting that such a brief text may have gone unremarked in many additional manuscripts, Thomson (1940, pp. 61-62) provides an incomplete list of fifty-five other manuscripts in which these epistles are preserved.

ff. 26-34v, beginning imperfectly, "// In presentia dei et angelorum frequentia nichil preter diuina cogitare licet ... quam uelox tibi instat exitus mortis";

The Little Book on Spiritual Exercise, beginning where the text breaks off on f. 17v (see above) and breaking off at the end of chapter nine. The next portion of the text begins on f. 53.

ff. 35-38v, *Hic incipiunt virtutes misse*, incipit, "BERnardus loquitur. *Prima virtus misse est homini audienti eam deuote ... glorificatque in eterna patria per gloriam. AMEN*";

Treatise on the Twelve Virtues of the Mass, followed by verses on the mass and priests. We have not been able to find any other copies of this text.

ff. 38v-45v, incipit, "CONsiderandum est quod est triplex ue a quo immunissima fuit ista cui dictum est ... Ideoque bene ait *augustinus*. Tam preclarus thesaurum //";

Chapter two of *Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, ending precisely where the text picks up on f. 18 (see above).

ff. 46-49v, beginning imperfectly, "// [et tue expirationis tribus uicibus] lege sursum ad celum oculis eleuatis. Pater in manus tuas commendo spiritum meum ... et in omnibus deo et hominibus subiectus";

The Little Book on Spiritual Exercise, beginning where the text breaks off on f. 59v (see below).

ff. 49v-52v, *Capitula libelli sequentis. De cognitione proprie fragillitatis .j. De contemptu uaneglorie .ij. ... De cognitione proprie fragillitatis*, incipit, "COgnoui domine quia equitas iudicia tua et in ueritate tua humiliasti me. Hec uerba sancti prophete et humilis regis dauid ... quantam indignationem aduersus eum illatis iniuriis conciperes //";

The *Libellus de recognitione proprie fragilitatis* (*Little Book on the Examination of One's Own Frailty*) of Thomas a Kempis, ending imperfectly in the middle of chapter one. The text is complete in this volume, but no longer presented continuously. The next portion of the text begins on f. 60. *Examination* has been edited in Pohl (1904, pp. 359-373). We know of no other copies of this text on the market in the last century.

ff. 53-59v, *De scrutinio consciencie in speciali. Capitulum x*, incipit, "QVuoniam [sic] igitur iustus in principio sermonis accusator est sui ... Verbum christi in cruce ultime dictum in memoriam mortis eis //";

The Little Book on Spiritual Exercise, beginning where the text breaks off on f. 34v (see above) and breaking off in the middle of chapter eleven. The concluding portion of the text begins on f. 46 (see above).

ff. 60-77v, beginning imperfectly, "// uel eum correptione puniendum censeris. Sed quis tu et cuius potestatis in comparacione dei ... et oratio mea sicut incensum vespertinum ad te ascendat et placeat in eternum. AMEN."

The Little Book on the Examination of One's Own Frailty, beginning where the text broke off on f. 52v (see above).

Volume II:

ff. 1-38, beginning imperfectly, "// Ante se crucem gerit ut peccata propria lugeat ... Si talia essent opera dei ut facile ab humana caperentur racione non essent mirabilia nec ineffabilis dicenda"; [f. 38v, blank].

An excerpt from Thomas a Kempis's *Imitatio Christi* (*The Imitation of Christ*), beginning in the middle of the last of four books, specifically in chapter five, and ending at the close of the text. There are two modern editions of this extremely important late medieval work, the first by Pohl (1904, pp. 3-264) and the second by Lupo (1982). In 1971, Axters assembled a lengthy inventory of the surviving manuscripts. Since then, the estimate of the number of surviving manuscripts and printed editions of *Imitation* has increased steadily. Van Engen suggested there were 750 manuscripts and that the text was printed in more than 3,000 editions from the first edition in 1472 down to the last century, fifty of which date before 1500 (1988, p. 8); he later mentioned 900 fifteenth-century manuscripts and one hundred early printed editions (Van Engen, 2008, p. 9); and Von Habsburg (2011) more recently suggested that there are 800 manuscripts and more than 740 printed editions from its composition up to 1650, making it the most frequently printed book in the sixteenth century apart from Bible, with over 100 editions before 1500. During the fifteenth century *Imitation* was translated into French, German, Dutch, Middle English, Castilian, Catalan, Italian, and Portuguese among other languages.

Volume III:

ff. 1-2, incipit, "DEbemus domino Ihesu spiritualem mensam preparare in qua ministremus ei septem fercula spiritualiter ... omnium virtutum floribus refertum";

Treatise on Seven "Dishes" to Prepare for the Spiritual "Meal." We have not been able to find any other copies of this text.

f. 2rv, incipit, "Propinemus etiam domino Ihesu tria pocula ... dulcedinis intimam et spiritualem infusionem";

Treatise on Three "Drinks" to Pledge to Jesus, showing some textual indebtedness to the *Liber specialis graciae* [Book of Special Grace] of the famous German mystic, Mechtild of Hackeborn (1240/41-1298). We have not been able to find any other copies of this text.

ff. 2v-3v, *De virtute pacientie*, incipit, "Pacientia perfecta est ... sed etiam inferendas desiderat exemplo christi dicentis Improperium exspectavit cor meum";

Treatise on the Virtue of Patience. We have not been able to find any other copies of this text.

ff. 3v-17v, *Quidam doctor dicit*, incipit, "Fili numquam securus es in hac vita ... Compunctio est quando ex consi//";

A collection of spiritual sayings excerpted from the writings of Thomas a Kempis, Gregory the Great, Augustine, Cassian, Isidore of Seville, Isaac of Nineveh, and others, ending imperfectly. Though these sayings circulated widely during the Middle Ages, we have not been able to find any other copies of this particular collection.

f. 18rv, beginning imperfectly, "/// rogaui de eisdem. Valeas et neophiti qui mecum sunt et ex te et per te et in te confortentur. IGnacio dilecto con discipulo humilis ancilla chrisi ihesu ... sed valeat et exultet spiritus tuus in deo salutari tuo. Amen."

The remainder of the *Letters of Ignatius the Martyr and the Blessed Virgin Mary*, beginning in the midst of the third letter, where the text breaks off on f. 25v of Volume I, and concluding with the fourth letter, spuriously attributed to the Virgin Mary.

These three remarkably small volumes make up a collection of complete or excerpted devotional works centering on Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the pursuit of a devout life. Several works by the late medieval writer Thomas a Kempis, including an incomplete excerpt from his wildly popular *Imitation of Christ*, appear alongside a complete excerpt from Conrad of Saxony's popular *Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary*; a spurious correspondence between Ignatius the Martyr, St. John the Apostle, and the Blessed Virgin Mary; and a number of short, previously unknown texts (all but one of them complete) that may well be unique to these manuscripts.

Thomas a Kempis (1379/80-1471), or Thomas of Kempen (he was born in Kempen, Germany), was part of the second generation of the *Devotio moderna* movement, founded by Geert Grote (1340-1384). He was educated in a school of the Brothers of the Common Life in Grote's

native Deventer, Holland, and then became a canon at the Agnietenberg priory (Mount Saint Agnes), near Zwolle, a priory of the Congregation of Windesheim, where his brother John served as prior. He made his profession there in 1406 and was ordained in 1413. He was a prolific author, composing numerous devotional tracts, as well as a chronicle of the priory.

Thomas a Kempis's *Imitation of Christ* has been called "the most influential devotional book in Western Christian History" (Van Engen, 1988, p. 8). *Imitation* is a collection of hundreds of spiritual sayings, inspired by the practice encouraged by Geert Grote, founder of the Brethren of the Common Life: Grote and his followers recorded notable sayings in commonplace books, or *rapiaria*, to serve as a focus for spiritual reflection. Its four books originally circulated as independent booklets: "Useful Reminders for the Spiritual Life," "Suggestions Drawing One toward the Inward Life," "On Inner Solace," and "The Book of the Sacrament" (that is, Holy Communion). There are at least thirty early copies dating c. 1424-1441, many with only one of its four books. The oldest copy with all four books dates from 1427 (Brussels, Royal Library, MS 22084).

In this work, Thomas encapsulates the spirituality of the late medieval *Devotio moderna*, or Modern Devotion, movement, especially its emphatic focus on Christ and on the importance of the Bible, its recommendation of the vernacular for religious writings, and its cultivation of an interior life and a calm withdrawal from the world. The degree to which Thomas himself internalized the Bible is found in the astounding number of scriptural citations found throughout the work; Becker (2002) lists 3,815 scriptural sources in *Imitation*.

Two other works by Thomas a Kempis appear here in their entirety. *The Little Book on Spiritual Exercise* and *The Little Book on the Examination of One's Own Frailty* are two of sixteen ascetic tracts written by Thomas to provide an introduction to the spiritual life. As subprior at Agnietenberg, he was responsible for instructing novices, and his pedagogical responsibilities seem to have inspired these tracts, as well as *Imitation* (see above). In fact, in one manuscript, Vienna, Schottenkloster, cod. 314, in which *Spiritual Exercise* and *Examination* appear in Middle Dutch translations, they are presented as part of *Imitation*, as two additional books following the standard four.

Like Thomas's *Imitation*, Conrad of Saxony's *Mirror of the Blessed Virgin Mary* was the work of a teacher invested in training members of his own Order. A Franciscan preacher and ascetical writer, Conrad (d. 1279) no doubt drew on his experience at the Franciscan convent school at Hildesheim training qualified friars for the preaching ministry when he was writing *Mirror*, which takes the form of a substantial commentary on the popular prayer 'Ave Maria,' with eighteen sections offering expansive interpretations of the prayer and its parts. The ascetic and mystical character of the work likely contributed to its immense popularity in the later Middle Ages. *Mirror* is Conrad's best-known work, though early publishers mistakenly attributed it to his Franciscan contemporary and superior in the order, Bonaventure.

This collection very likely originated within the milieu of the *Devotio moderna* movement. A clear preference for works of Thomas a Kempis is evident here. This is especially notable as these manuscripts appear to have been copied within his lifetime or shortly after his death.

Furthermore the collection of spiritual sayings in the third volume weaves Thomas's sayings in with those of some of the most esteemed authorities among earlier Christian theologians. The

lesser known texts within the collection sustain Thomas's focus on guidance for cultivating a spiritually rich interior life. Given the three manuscripts' unusually small size, they were likely all part of a personal volume, gathered perhaps by a lay devotee of the *Devotio moderna* movement or within a religious house associated with it, and organized around that individual's devotional needs and interests.

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