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# “God may open more than man maye vnderstande”: Lady Margaret Beaufort’s Translation of the *De Imitatione Christi*

Patricia Demers

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Article abstract

Bien que l’oeuvre de Lady Margaret Beaufort, première femme anglaise à être publiée, ait été le plus souvent négligée au profit de ses talents de stratège du camp des Lancastre ou de son rôle de fondatrice de la dynastie des Tudor, les analyses de Brenda Hosington et de Stephanie Morley ont récemment mis en lumière l’importance et la singularité de son cas. Dans la continuité de ces travaux, j’examine ici les stratégies à l’oeuvre dans sa traduction du quatrième livre du *De Imitatione Christi*, le fameux traité de dévotion attribué à Thomas à Kempis, en portant une attention particulière à la force évocatrice de l’oeuvre de Lady Margaret, ainsi qu’à ses doubles valences. M’appuyant d’une part, sur les analyses de Hosington, qui identifie la source française du texte, et offre un exposé détaillé des stratégies d’« explicitation, inclusion, personnalisation, [et] intensification » déployées par Lady Margaret ; et d’autre part, sur les remarques théoriques de Morley, selon qui la traduction permet à cette dernière de « s’octroyer le pouvoir symbolique de manipuler sa propre identité publique », je m’intéresse ici aux procédés de traduction qui lui permettent d’entremêler, au sein d’un texte portant sur l’Eucharistie, la ferveur de la dévotion et l’instruction pratique. Bien que la traduction laisse a priori peu de place à l’expression personnelle, le choix de la source et l’exercice même de réécriture d’un texte destiné à la transmission et à la diffusion d’enseignements théologiques donnent ici à lire tout ensemble le moi et son public ; il semble alors, pour reprendre les termes de Meredith Skura, que, tout en évoquant le moi intérieur, Lady Margaret Beaufort retrace aussi « l’histoire de ses relations aux autres ».

“God may open more than man maye vnderstande”:  
Lady Margaret Beaufort’s Translation of the  
*De Imitatione Christi*

PATRICIA DEMERS  
University of Alberta

*Bien que l’œuvre de Lady Margaret Beaufort, première femme anglaise à être publiée, ait été le plus souvent négligée au profit de ses talents de stratège du camp des Lancastre ou de son rôle de fondatrice de la dynastie des Tudor, les analyses de Brenda Hosington et de Stephanie Morley ont récemment mis en lumière l’importance et la singularité de son cas. Dans la continuité de ces travaux, j’examine ici les stratégies à l’œuvre dans sa traduction du quatrième livre du De Imitatione Christi, le fameux traité de dévotion attribué à Thomas à Kempis, en portant une attention particulière à la force évocatrice de l’œuvre de Lady Margaret, ainsi qu’à ses doubles valences. M’appuyant d’une part, sur les analyses de Hosington, qui identifie la source française du texte, et offre un exposé détaillé des stratégies d’« explicitation, inclusion, personnalisation, [et] intensification » déployées par Lady Margaret ; et d’autre part, sur les remarques théoriques de Morley, selon qui la traduction permet à cette dernière de « s’octroyer le pouvoir symbolique de manipuler sa propre identité publique », je m’intéresse ici aux procédés de traduction qui lui permettent d’entremêler, au sein d’un texte portant sur l’Eucharistie, la ferveur de la dévotion et l’instruction pratique. Bien que la traduction laisse a priori peu de place à l’expression personnelle, le choix de la source et l’exercice même de réécriture d’un texte destiné à la transmission et à la diffusion d’enseignements théologiques donnent ici à lire tout ensemble le moi et son public ; il semble alors, pour reprendre les termes de Meredith Skura, que, tout en évoquant le moi intérieur, Lady Margaret Beaufort retrace aussi « l’histoire de ses relations aux autres ».*

**A**lthough Margaret, countess of Derby and Richmond, leading patron of William Caxton’s press, translated and had printed two works from French

to English in the first decade of the sixteenth century—the fourth book of *The Imitation of Christ* and the complete *Mirror of Gold for the Sinful Soul*—she is remembered primarily for other activities. As an adroit Lancastrian strategist she netted substantial land holdings, and as a “principal benefactor”<sup>1</sup> of Cambridge University she created divinity readerships and chantries, and founded Christ’s and St. John’s Colleges. Survivor of four marriages, unflagging champion of her only child, and friend of the poor, her name and image survive as “the most important ancestress to the Tudor dynasty”<sup>2</sup> and exemplar of piety. A political force to be reckoned with, “it was Margaret who was able to take her son’s very dubious claim to the throne and turn him into a viable rival to the incumbent king.”<sup>3</sup> The lasting consequences of such success in uniting Lancastrian and Yorkist claims and thus ending the Wars of the Roses led Samuel Daniel to fashion this praise of James I’s great-great-grandmother:

Thou Mother, Author, Plotter, Counsellor  
Of vnion, that didst both conceiue, beget,  
And bring forth happinesse to this great State  
To make it thus intirely fortunate.<sup>4</sup>

Lady Margaret’s devotional work has been less thoroughly charted and assessed. Among the mementoes of her ascetic life are her portrait as a widow at prayer kneeling before an open prayer book, which hangs in the Great Hall of St. John’s, her statue displayed over the gate of Christ’s, and Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford’s first women’s college, commemorating her. Familiar as she was throughout her life with the “daily Ladymass that became common . . . as Lady chapels proliferated,”<sup>5</sup> she is buried in a tomb adorned with the arms of Beaufort, Tudor, and Stanley in the Lady Chapel of Westminster Abbey. Thomas, Lord Stanley, was her fourth husband from whom she received consent to live chastely and independently. For her biographers today the view of Lady Margaret as “the conspirator turned matriarch” has been surpassed by that of “the pious benefactress.”<sup>6</sup> Although Michael Jones and Malcolm Underwood characterize her “personal literary contribution” as “limited,” they do acknowledge that “it was almost a generation” before her translation of Book 4 of *De Imitatione Christi*, along with the translation of the first three books which she commissioned of William Atkynson, fellow of Jesus College and Pembroke Hall, “was superseded” by the work of male translators.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, despite Erasmus’s later

commendation of the efforts of Lady Margaret and her mentor-confessor and chief executor Bishop John Fisher to subvent a clergy mandated to preach to the people, “ad populo tradendam philosophiam evangelicam,” one historical perspective, citing the change in clerical establishment and vanishing of chantries, concludes that “Margaret’s influence at Cambridge, guided by the piety of her time, was intense but short-lived.”<sup>8</sup>

Her deeply devotional lifestyle and regimen of practical action dedicated to “the renewal of the church through a teaching clergy”<sup>9</sup> found reinforcement in her work as a translator of the *Devotio* classic attributed to Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. As Diarmaid MacCulloch rates its importance, here was a text in which “all sorts of expressions of pious activism might contribute to this earnest quest to come closer to Christ: it was not a faith only for the clever or the articulate.”<sup>10</sup> Determined and privileged as she was, yet “neither commissioned ... nor hoping for patronage,” Lady Margaret chose a text promoting “frequent, pious, and humble reception of the sacrament of the altar, an object of pronounced female attention in the Middle Ages.”<sup>11</sup> In this activity she became “Renaissance England’s first female translator” and, Brenda Hosington argues conclusively, “the *only* female translator of [à Kempis] in Europe throughout the whole medieval and early modern period, commanding a place among monks, priests and university-trained men.”<sup>12</sup> Underscoring Lady Margaret’s importance as “the first English woman in print,” Stephanie Morley registers surprise that “little scholarly attention has been paid to her translations from French into English”; although she reads Lady Margaret’s translations as “faithful renditions that show little augmentation or alteration,” Morley does award her “‘compensatory power,’ a textual control through which she is able to ventriloquize moral and religious instruction to a broader audience.”<sup>13</sup> Alexandra Barratt issues a call for “a good modern edition” of Beaufort, whose work “suffers from the apparent convention that incunables can be satisfactorily studied from facsimiles, digital images, or even from microfilm, and do not need the sort of careful presentation, annotation, and glossing that is devoted to medieval texts preserved in manuscript.”<sup>14</sup> Lady Margaret’s latest biographer, Elizabeth Norton, identifies *The Myrroure of Golde* as “her most famous translation project”;<sup>15</sup> however, the publication history and textual analysis in Hosington’s authoritative study do not support this claim. Not only was the *Imytacion*’s “popularity ... well attested” with Pynson’s re-issue in 1504, second edition in 1517, and variant in 1518, along with de Worde’s

edition in 1519, but the *Myrroure's* "compilation of quotations from the Bible, Church Fathers, and various saints," arranged for each day of the week, was "less stylized," containing "virtually no reflection on the quotations and much less contemplation."<sup>16</sup> Because I concur with Hosington's judgment and because I think Lady Margaret's genuinely popular though under-studied work offers more opportunities to consider her achievements as a translator, I propose to concentrate on the *Imytacion*.

"A difficult but also profoundly constructive act,"<sup>17</sup> translation was and remains an exploration of the multiplicity of language. As Roger Ellis outlines the range of medieval understandings of translation, from "terse" rendition to "moralizing exposition," which might refer to the task variously as "extracting and compiling" and "reciting and recording,"<sup>18</sup> the activity of translating in the vernacular, in particular, carried a strongly political charge. Since throughout the fifteenth century "theological writing in English had been associated with dissidence," it is important to note, Brian Cummings observes, the convergence of English as "an independent, analytic tradition in grammar, logic, and rhetoric" and "a new theology."<sup>19</sup> Nestled within late medieval and Tudor theories of translation were practices of simultaneously creative and faithful interpretation. Rhetoric and hermeneutics, Nicholas Watson explains, "were important to processes of cultural translation, as models, on the one hand, for an inventive, transgressive relationship between translated work and source, and, on the other, for the assimilation of a source through exegetic paraphrase."<sup>20</sup> It seems unwise, therefore, to understand words in a late medieval devotional text as having "a univocal meaning" and just as limiting to subscribe to "a set of logocentric assumptions—that meaning is unchanging and that writing is a supplementary medium that delivers the meaning transparently—which have their basis in faith."<sup>21</sup> This further examination of Lady Margaret's strategies as a translator of the fourth book of the popular devotional manual *De Imitatione Christi* attends specifically to the double valences and power of Lady Margaret's work.

Indebted to Hosington's identification of the French source text and finely detailed exposition of Lady Margaret's "textual explication, inclusion and personalization, [and] intensification" and to Morley's theorizing about the translator's ability "to confer upon herself the symbolic power to manipulate her own public identity,"<sup>22</sup> my interest in this text focuses on the linguistic procedures of her translation through which she braids devotional intensity and practical

instruction to vivify the sacramental reality of the Eucharist. I want to explore precisely the significant augmentations and alterations of her translation to determine if, in fact, they correspond to any of the choices available to the late Middle English translator as suggested by Roger Ellis; if her work is neither “erroneous” nor entirely “literal,” could it be both “close” and, within its historical context, “free”?<sup>23</sup> As Lady Margaret aimed to express clearly and broadly the intimate yet shared social experience of the sacrament, might other designations, such as epithets as “rude” and “symple,” enlarge the taxonomy of descriptive possibilities? In Nicholas Watson’s gloss, “words like ‘rude’ and ‘symple’ belong within a larger set of terms denoting clarity (*pleynnesse*), and it is significant that their rise to prominence in late M[iddle] E[nglish] coincides with the tendencies towards either literal or highly literary translation.”<sup>24</sup> Through an examination of her word choices as a translator, I want to consider where Lady Margaret’s “plain” work might be located on this wide spectrum from the literal to the literary. In striving to uncover how her text communicates “the deepening of ordinary human experience that c[o]me[s] when God impinge[s] upon it,” this paper attends to what Caroline Walker Bynum calls the “continuation of self.”<sup>25</sup> Although a devotional translation might seem a “reticent personal document,” the selection of text and the very exercise of composing a translation to convey and disperse theological understanding provide a sense of both self and audience, intimate *and* shared experience, suggesting that in writing about the self, Margaret Beaufort is also writing about “the history of relationships to others.”<sup>26</sup>

In the early sixteenth century, Eucharistic devotion and belief—the topic of the *Imitation*’s fourth book—contained “the very core of faith,” which later in the century would become “the organising principle of Catholic reform.”<sup>27</sup> Valuing “devout heart above inquisitive head,” the *Imitation* “was no medieval fossil, but quite simply the most popular of all Catholic devotional books.”<sup>28</sup> Hence, it is worth considering the ways Lady Margaret used her firm foundation in the language of her source text, *Le liure tressalutaire de limitation de nostre seigneur jesuchrist*, published in Paris by printer-booksellers Jean Lambert and Jean Trepperel (sometimes Treperel), respectively, in 1493 and 1494, as the base of her expansions, catechetical glosses, and introduction of precisely appropriate English words. While Lady Margaret’s assumed faithful translation indicates both a level of linguistic assurance and prayerful participation in devotion, its inclusivity and print format also gesture to an embrace of a

community of readers, far larger than the “restricted group of Carthusians and Brigittines” among whom a manuscript translation from the Latin circulated in the fifteenth century.<sup>29</sup>

Her decision to translate from the French was both practical and pedagogical, hallmarks of every one of Lady Margaret’s undertakings. Bishop Fisher’s sermon preached a month after her death, his “mornynge remembrance had at the moneth mynde of the noble prynces Margarete,” explained that though she understood the liturgical Latin of the missal, to her chagrin a study of the language’s grammar had not been part of her formation. “Ful often she complayned that in her youthe she had not gyuen her to the vnderstondynge of latyn wherin she had a lytell perceyuyng especyally of the rubrysshe of the ordynall for the sayeng of her seruyce whiche she dyde wel vnderstande.”<sup>30</sup> Noting Lady Margaret’s Martha-like qualities of nobility, discipline, and order to God, Fisher also drew attention to the linkages between the personal and the communal in her domestic conduct; the self-restraint of her personal dietary regimen, “[e]schewynge bankettes, reresoupers, ioncryes betwyxe meales,” left time for and propelled “her godly hospytalyte,” through which “Poore folkes to the nombre of .xij. she dayly and nyghtly kepte in her house, gyuyng them lodgyng, mete & drynke & clothyng, vysytyng them as often as she conueniently myght.”<sup>31</sup> This future martyr for his own principles later testified to her truly inspiring example, admitting that he “learned more of what leads to an upright life from her rare virtues than [he] ever taught her in return.”<sup>32</sup>

Lady Margaret does not use her catechetical glosses “for explaining difficult words, creating neologisms, or paraphrasing.”<sup>33</sup> Though these absences may seem surprising, they are not inconsistent in light of her concerns. She is not directing attention to herself as dispenser of knowledge, but rather hoping to engage a readership through the clarity and quotidian examples of her writing. Lady Margaret’s aim is to create an instructive narrative that supplies specificity, completes the thought of a French phrase, and instills a sense of creaturely responsibility. She wastes no time in emphasizing the meaning of Eucharist as a good gift, vital and unmerited. The prologue’s “ma chair pour la viande du monde” and “mon corps qui pour vous sera baisse” become “my flesshe for the lyfe of the worlde” and “my body that for you shal be gyuen in sacryfice.”<sup>34</sup> Spiritual sustenance is of utmost importance. “Viande” as “lyfe” and “baisse” as “sacryfice” indicate that this nourishing and voluntary subjection transcends mere external or material manifestations. Moreover, her echo or anticipation

of the Biblical pericope (John 6:51), with which she would have been familiar likely through prayers and John Fisher's tutelage in Jerome's Vulgate rather than the Wyclif Bible, shows a thoughtful internalization of the prevailing Catholic dogma of the Eucharist at the same time as it adroitly avoids citing a proscribed Biblical translation.<sup>35</sup> The opposite of the abundant, vivifying gift is the state of the recipient: "nat pure to receyue so great a mystery"; Lady Margaret's translation of "non digne de recevoir si grans mysteres" stresses the moral blot of unworthiness at the same time as it elevates, through negation ("nat") the ideal ("pure").<sup>36</sup> Worthiness ("digne") is a matter of purity of spirit. For the woman who heard Mass four or five times daily,<sup>37</sup> "non digne" may have recalled the Communion invocation following the elevation, "Domine, non sum dignus, ut intres sub tectum meum," itself recalling the Gospel account (Luke 7:6; Matthew 8:8) of the centurion's requested cure of his servant. Theologically correct and deliberate, Lady Margaret assigns special significance to the moral unreadiness every creature must experience before the Creator, always aware that the approach to God, "approucher de toy," means an "approch to thy hygh presence."<sup>38</sup>

Her additions to the text, intensifying the language of devotional experience, reflect the humanity of devotion, its mandated duty despite mankind's manifest unworthiness and fallibility, in ways that recall (without citing) Aquinas's discussion of the spirituality and sacramentality of the Eucharist.<sup>39</sup> These additions serve to clarify and complete the thought, noting that the "dyunyne seruyce" of the "patryarkes and prophettes" took place "in tyme passyd" and completing the thought about drawing "les cueurs des deuots" as "draweth ... the hertes of deuote people to deuocyon."<sup>40</sup> She is just as adept at pinpointing and inculcating a sense of responsibility. Our knowing and commending the bounty of the holy sacrament not only please God, "donques pour ce que cecy te plaist," but as Lady Margaret glosses, "and also thou haste commaunded it be done."<sup>41</sup> Reverence is a prime duty, to be spelled out beyond "graces et louenges sont deues a toy pour ces choses," which becomes, in light of peccant fallibility and essential unworthiness to receive such a gift, "due vnto the of vs synners."<sup>42</sup> She is at ease amplifying terms and conditions, making the title of chapter 6, "dene interrogation dexercice deuant la communion," into "A inwarde remembrance ... that a man ought to haue afore the receyuinge of the body of our lorde Iesucrist."<sup>43</sup> The examination of conscience is an act of spiritual memory, she contends; a combination of subjunctive and optative moods in the modal "ought" accentuates duty; and this sacrament, she affirms in the voice of an



ardent catechist, is the transubstantiated Real Presence. Similarly, her expansion of the title of chapter 17 to consider “the brennyng loue & great affection that we shulde haue”<sup>44</sup> emphatically directs action. Her amplifications, such as rendering “ma sentence est ferme” from chapter 8 as “my sentence is ferme & stable” and “tous mes peches” from chapter 9 as “my great and abhomyable synnes”<sup>45</sup> underline non-palliative directives: Lady Margaret’s readers must be mortals with eyes wide open, humbled, aware, penitent, but not crushed by their sinfulness. The closing chapter’s explanation of “les mescreans” as “the myscreauntes and vnfeythfull people”<sup>46</sup> reinforces the linkage between weakness and lack of faith. With homiletic fervour she explicates the ideals of living in innocence (“sigrande innocence,” ch. 11) as “in soo great innocencye of lyfe as we ought to do and of the poor man’s thanking the rich man (“doucement remercier,” ch. 12) as “mekely to thanke hym, he wolde do it,”<sup>47</sup> presenting them as attainable goals.

Lady Margaret shows great agility in forming new parallel structures that demonstrate both a deep understanding of and liberation from the French text. Her version of the communicant’s state of mind (“ie suis a tard toute recueillie ie suis tres a tard purgee de toute distraction,” ch. 1) deletes the repetition of “a tard” and “tres a tard,” replacing it with boldly different adverbs that intensify the echo: “I am but losely gathered together and full coldly purged from all distraccions of mynde.”<sup>48</sup> Equally adept at avoiding a string of nouns in favour of a descriptive phrase, she combines the dismissal of “aucune legierete curiosite ou sensualite” into the negation of “any lyghtnes of sensuall curyosyte,” and reduces the imperatives of “renouuelle purifie & embrase mon affection” to the personal agency of the desire that “I may puryfye and renewe the heete of my refeccyon.”<sup>49</sup> Designating the communicant’s renewed fervour when receiving the sacrament, the shift from “affection” to “refeccyon,” from emotional devotion to warmed food, connects this image to the mention in the previous sentence of the “swete refecccyon” of worthy souls at the same time as it expresses hope in the chafing power of the Eucharist. She can also trim adjectives to retain triadic balance, presenting the theological virtues of “ferme foy deuote esperance pure et vraye charite” as “ferme fayth, deuote hope and pure charyte.”<sup>50</sup> Her parallelisms strive to illuminate the mystery of transubstantiation, rendering “contenu tout entier sous une petite espece de pain et de vin et tues mange sans consumption de celui qui terecoit” as “holy conteyned vnder a lytel lykenesse of brede and wyne, and thou arte hole receyued without consumyng

of hym that so receyueth the."<sup>51</sup> Showing her awareness of the rhetorical device of "*homoeoteleuton*, the use of words with the same ending in consecutive clauses,"<sup>52</sup> the internal echo of "holy conteyned" and "hole receyued" conveys the sacred unity and intactness of the bread and wine. Lady Margaret's parallel structures sound warnings, too. She forms the directive against abandonment to "exterioures soulas et mondanities" as an antithetical prohibition of "outwarde solace & inwarde pleasures."<sup>53</sup>

The woman who was such a rigorous observer of fasts and such a hospitable welcomer of guests, poor and rich, was profoundly aware of the meaning of this sacramental meal, visual ritual as a performative act with transformative significance. With attention to a spiritual etiquette Lady Margaret treats the Eucharist, "ton saint Disner" and "ta belle cene," as "a holy feest" and "royall souper."<sup>54</sup> She translates the verb "introduire" as "entertain" ("how shal I entertayne the into my house" and "howe great an host enterteynst thou into thy lodgyng") and "receive" ("How dare I ... receyue the into my house").<sup>55</sup> The protocols of this celebration, however, operate under a strictly clerical, ecclesiastical aegis. Recalling New Testament accounts of the upper room where the first Eucharist was celebrated during Passover (Luke 22:12), Lady Margaret identifies the priest who performs the duties ("fait les offices") as the one who "occupyeth the rometh."<sup>56</sup> Lady Margaret's elevation of priestly duties prompts me to question Stephanie Morley's characterization of her role as "a sort of ordained translator ... voicing male-authored texts and claiming them as her own."<sup>57</sup> It seems to me that Lady Margaret's reverence maintains a distance between ordained clergy and devout, albeit regal, laity. Her "conspicuously sacerdotal"<sup>58</sup> obedience to the magisterium is evident in the directive to keep the common way: "selon l'institution des manieres" becomes "after thordynaunces of the holy faders," and to submit, "humilie ton sentiment a la foy," is rendered "submytte ... all thy vnderstandyng to the feythe of holy church."<sup>59</sup>

The precision of some word choices, whether the word is now considered obsolete or not, illustrates Lady Margaret's full grasp of the lesson to be conveyed. "Sanctification" (ch. 1) correctly becomes "helth"; the conferral of spiritual grace ("la grace spirituelle est conferee," ch. 1) rings with the affirmations that "spyrituall graces be confermed"; "remys et paresseux" (ch. 6) appears as "neglygent and lothe to lerne" pointing to the fault of intellectual sloth; and the priest's heart, "pur et net" (ch. 11) is "undefyled."<sup>60</sup> The image of shutting oneself off "come fait le passereau oyseau solitaire dessous le toict" (ch. 12)

is fixed in a real location—without identifying the sparrow—as the “solitary byrde under euesynges [eaves] of an house,”<sup>61</sup> clarifying that this remove from others’ eyes is not just under the roof but actually invisible beneath the overhang. She imparts an immediate physical reality to the states of being “tristes pusillanimes deiettes” (ch. 4) as “hevy & dull and ouerthrowen.”<sup>62</sup> Collapsing three nouns, “pusillanimite pesanteur et paresse” (ch. 10), into two descriptive phrases, “feblenes of mynde and the spyce of sloweth,”<sup>63</sup> allows admonition and the piquancy of temptation to co-exist. Similarly, the reduction of “uniplonge & consume tout en toy (ch. 13) to “vnight and gadred all hole in the”<sup>64</sup> makes the paradoxical mystery of total abandonment and consumption realizable and perceptible. Lady Margaret’s additions and changes, often involving small doublets, are subtly powerful. She intensifies “dieu et homme” (ch. 4) as “very god and man”; after an exhaustive catalogue of sins, and rather than emphasizing nothingness, she transforms “peu ou rien” (ch. 7) into the more decorous “lytell bryngeth to good affecte.”<sup>65</sup> Some words, though obsolete, convey their meaning through hints embedded in sounds and actions to suggest an onomatopoeic understanding. “Remply ... de plusieurs mauvaises passions” (ch. 4) becomes “entryked with many euil passions”; the impediments of “anxiete et scrupule” (ch. 10) become “anxyete & stryppe,” possibly intending the fifteenth-century variant “scriple,” which the *Oxford English Dictionary* labels rare and obscure; and the need to purify and cleanse, “mondifie et nettoye labitation de ton cuer,” (ch. 12) leads to the wish to “mundifye and clense the habytacion of thy herte.”<sup>66</sup> The *OED* cites Lady Margaret’s sixteenth-century usage of “mundify” as the earliest example.

It must be admitted, too, that, in addition to the periodic but inconsistent slippage between “createur” and “creature,” Lady Margaret does miss some opportunities to particularize and sharpen the focus. In presenting the priest who “before hym [and] behynde hym ... bereth the crosse,”<sup>67</sup> she omits the phrase “en sa chasuble” (ch. 5); the chasuble, the outermost liturgical vestment, was customarily embroidered with a large cross on the front and the back. The pursuit of “union interiore & liquefaction de ardant amour” (ch. 16), rendered as “inwardly vnight vnto the by grace & brennyng loue,”<sup>68</sup> misses the sense of the white heat of this love which will convert solids to liquids. In its concluding emphasis on faith containing matters beyond comprehension, “les choses qui sont au dessus toy” (ch. 18), *Le livre tressalutaire* concentrates on the gift of God: “il donne entendement aux petits et euure le sentement et entendement

aux paures desprit.” This capacious gift to children and the humble is not entirely transmitted in “He gaue vnderstandynge vnto them that were poore in spyrite.”<sup>69</sup> The particular receptivity of children and the poor in spirit, underlined in the beatitudes and throughout the Epistles (Ephesians 5:8; Hebrews 12:5) is shortchanged here. Moreover, the sharp difference between following and preceding, expressed in “toute raison et naturelle inquisition doit suiure la foy: et non la preceder,” is muffled in the rendering “All reason and naturall inquysycyon ought to folowe the feyth without farther reasonynge.”<sup>70</sup> Her insistence on brooking no rational intervention before faith misses the more subtle point of an acknowledged ideological order.

Poring over these two texts side by side underscores how much writing is a matter of difference, often of great differences discovered in small ones. The composition of a translation, moreover, draws attention to the fertility of language, its ability to conflate the metaphorical and the literal, and, ultimately, its transforming potential. Yes, Lady Margaret’s translation is close, but the excisions and amplifications, the freeness, are important indicators of her commitment to a catechetical mission in communicating the *De Imitatione Christi* to a monolingual readership and the illiterate to whom it could be read. With concern for the health of her own soul and those of her readers and listeners, she is accepting and fulfilling an instructive role, locating herself among the sinners at the same time as she exhorts others to raise themselves up, offering refection while enjoining understanding and obedience at what proved to be a critical juncture in the development of Eucharistic devotion. The very assumption of the role of lay instructor in the central mystery of the Mass, daring to transpose the terms of social etiquette to emblemize the ritual celebration of “one thing made of visible and invisible”<sup>71</sup> and the ease with which she makes sense through sounds, colouring and reshaping words to affect other people, all argue for a strong purposiveness. Lady Margaret’s is not a reticent personal document, but a poignant depiction of how religious experience feels, how language can be bent to doctrinal purposes, how writing declares an ethical stance.

Of course it is wise to temper the tendency to idealize and indulge in blinkered speculations about a writer whose work is infrequently studied and whose French source is not widely available. Amanda Vickery’s criticism of “a common tendency among historians to search out and celebrate forms of female agency sympathetic to modern liberal tastes, ideally acts of resistance to male authority, rarely extreme female piety or sectarianism,”<sup>72</sup> is both sobering

and instructive for the case of Margaret Beaufort's translation. Without making it an antique curiosity, the work's position in historical time, its fidelity to Eucharistic devotion, and recognition of the *magisterium* mean that its piety not only sidelines it from current tastes but also contributes to the neglect of Lady Margaret as the first published woman writer in English. Although I concur with Caroline Walker Bynum's argument, with possible reference to Beaufort, that "there is nothing specifically female about ... the extravagance of certain fourteenth- or fifteenth-century efforts at *imitatio*"<sup>73</sup> and with Thomas Bestul's observation, with possible reference to à Kempis, that in male-authored medieval passion narratives "both misogyny and resistance to misogyny might co-exist within a single text,"<sup>74</sup> it seems at least worth remarking—without resorting to essentialist idealization—on the seamlessness of the prayerful and the pedagogical, the ardent and the prescriptive in Lady Margaret's translation. Returning to book 4 and filtering it through the lens of the French, rather than a Latin, source have also allowed for the evolving of an emotional response. Curiously, it was Lady Margaret's omission of "en sa chasuble" that reinforced for me the power of her work. The most memorable depiction of the chasuble I am familiar with is Albrecht Dürer's fourth woodcut in his *Salus animae* series, "The Mass of Saint Gregory" (1511), which O. B. Hardison, Jr. used as the frontispiece of his *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages*. With emphasis on the transformative, literally transubstantiative, moment, the retable becomes the sepulchre; the altar cross, the True Cross; and basilica walls disappear into apocalyptic space. Hardison observes: "We have a sense of bearing witness with St. Gregory to a timeless event, and we realize suddenly, and with a sense of shock, that as onlookers we have been placed in the position of the skeptic for whom the miracle is intended. It is our *salus animae* which concerns Christ and St. Gregory, and, incidentally, Albrecht Dürer."<sup>75</sup>

Our twenty-first century awareness of peccant fallibility and awe likely does not coincide with Lady Margaret's or that of her readers. Yet we cannot deny the implication of this subject in her word, in a knowledge of the resonance and plasticity of her writing. Contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben identifies "the ethical relation that is established between the speaker and [her] language" as the production of the "sacrament of language."<sup>76</sup> It is "the speaking animal," Agamben contends, who "put[s] its nature at stake in language and ... bind[s] together in an ethical and political connection words, things, and actions."<sup>77</sup> Lady Margaret "articulate[s] together life and language,

action and words,” forming a benediction in which “there is a correspondence between the signifier and the signified, between words and things.”<sup>78</sup>

The decisive and peculiar virtue of human language, for Agamben, lies in the fact that “it prepares within itself a hollowed-out form that the speaker must always assume in order to speak.”<sup>79</sup> In light of her articulation of self-scrutiny and the shading of words to affect other people, Lady Margaret, I suggest, fulfils the ethical criterion of language as sacrament: “The human being is that living being that, in order to speak, must say ‘I,’ must ‘take the word,’ assume it and make it [her] own.”<sup>80</sup>

### Notes

1. Malcolm G. Underwood, “The Lady Margaret and her Cambridge Connections,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 13.1 (1982), p. 67.
2. Elizabeth Norton, *Margaret Beaufort, Mother of the Tudor Dynasty* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Amberley Publishing, 2010), p. 217.
3. Norton, p. 217.
4. Samuel Daniel, “A Panegyrike Congratulatory Deliuered to the Kings most excellent maiesty,” in *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose*, 5 vols., ed. Alexander B. Grosart (London, 1885, reissued New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), vol. 1, p. 159.
5. David J. Rothenberg, *The Flower of Paradise: Marian Devotion and Secular Song in Medieval and Renaissance Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 103.
6. Michael K. Jones and Malcolm G. Underwood, *The King’s Mother: Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 5.
7. Jones and Underwood, pp. 9, 15.
8. Underwood, “The Lady Margaret and her Cambridge Connections,” pp. 70, 80. Underwood quotes Erasmus’s *De Ratione Concionandi, Opus Epistolarum*, vol. 11, ed. H. M. Allen and H. W. Garrod, pp. 191–92, ll. 71–84.
9. Underwood, “The Lady Margaret and her Cambridge Connections,” p. 80.
10. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation: Europe’s House Divided 1490–1700* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin Group, 2003), p. 23.

11. Alexandra Barratt, "Women Translators of Religious Texts," *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English, Volume I: to 1550*, ed. Roger Ellis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 284, 287.
12. Brenda M. Hosington, "Lady Margaret Beaufort's Translations as Mirrors of Practical Piety," in *English Women, Religion, and Textual Production, 1500–1625*, ed. Micheline White (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2011), pp. 188, 203.
13. Stephanie Morley, "Translating Lady Margaret Beaufort: A Case for Translation as Compensatory Power," in *The Medieval Translator/ Traduire Au Moyen Âge: Lost in Translation?*, *The Medieval Translator*, vol. 12, ed. Denis Renevey and Christiania Whitehead (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2009), pp. 251, 253, 254.
14. Barratt, p. 289.
15. Norton, p. 46.
16. Hosington, pp. 194, 195.
17. Nicholas Watson, "Theories of Translation," in *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English, Volume I: to 1550*, p. 76.
18. Roger Ellis, Preface, *The Oxford History of Literary Translation in English, Volume I: to 1550*, p. 3.
19. Brian Cummings, *The Literary Culture of the Reformation: Grammar and Grace* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 188.
20. Watson, p. 75.
21. Morley, p. 251.
22. Hosington, p. 196; Morley, p. 254.
23. Roger Ellis, "The Choices of the Translator in the Late Middle English Period," in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England: Papers Read at Dartington Hall, July 1982*, ed. M. Glasscoe (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1982), p. 33.
24. Watson, p. 87.
25. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 295, 296.
26. Meredith Anne Skura, *Tudor Autobiography: Listening for Inwardness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 7, 227.
27. Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 99, 355.
28. Eamon Duffy, *Fires of Faith: Catholic England under Mary Tudor* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 191.

29. Brendan Biggs, “The Style of the First English Translation of the *Imitatio Christi*,” in *The Medieval Translator: traduire au moyen age*, vol. 5, ed. Roger Ellis and René Tixier (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 1996), p. 188. Biggs identifies the “earliest surviving Latin manuscript copied in England” as the work of “John Dygon, a recluse at Sheen”; two of the four surviving manuscripts, not printed until the nineteenth century, were “written by Sheen scribes, Stephen Dodesham and William Barker, the latter for Elizabeth Gibbs, Abbess of Syon” (p. 188). Hosington also attends to this manuscript circulation (pp. 189–90). See also Maximilian von Habsburg, *Catholic and Protestant Translations of the Imitatio Christi, 1425–1650* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), in particular ch. 5.
30. John Fisher, *A mornynge remembraunce had at the moneth mynde of the noble prynces Margarete countesse of Rychemonde & Darbye moder vnto kynge Henry the .vii. & grandame to oure souerayne lorde that nowe is, vppon whose soule almyghty god haue mercy*, in *The English Works of John Fisher*, ed. John E. B. Mayor, Part I (London: Early English Texts Society, 1876), p. 292.
31. Fisher, pp. 293–94, 297.
32. Jones and Underwood, p. 249; they quote the Dedicatory Epistle to *De Veritate Corporis et Sanguinis* in *Johannis Fischeri Opera* (Wirceburg, 1597), p. 747.
33. Hosington, p. 196.
34. *Le liure tressalutaire De limitation de nostre seigneur jesucrist* (Paris: Jean Trepperel, 1494), feuillet iii, xxvi (Author’s note: although chapters are identified and marked, the pages in Trepperel’s edition are not numbered. Trepperel’s spelling throughout is “feuillet,” although the standard spelling of leaf of paper is “feuillet.” The first set of Roman numerals refers to the leaf, the second to the page’s consecutive position within this leaf). Lady Margaret Beaufort, trans., *The Earliest English Translation of the ... De Imitatione Christi*, ed. John K. Ingram (London: Early English Text Society, extra series 63, 1893), p. 259. Lady Margaret’s additions are underlined.
35. The 1408 Constitutions of Archbishop Arundel had legislated against all Bible translations in English. The Wyclif Bible (1382–84) was the first complete English Bible in manuscript form in both early and late versions. Although John Wyclif supported Jerome’s translation as authentic, in 1428 Wyclif’s body was exhumed and burned 44 years after his death. For Wyclif’s defense of Jerome, see John Wyclif, “Inter nostros libros latinos et suos hebreos non est in sensu diversitas,” in *De Veritate Sacrae Scripturae: Now Edited from the Manuscripts with Critical and Historical Notes*, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg, 3 vols. (London: Wyclif society, 1905), vol. 1, pp. 233–34.



36. Beaufort, p. 259; *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 1, feuillet iii. xxii.
37. Linda Simon, *Of Virtue Rare: Margaret Beaufort, Matriarch of the House of Tudor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982), p. 105.
38. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 3, feuillet iii. xxv; Beaufort, *The Earliest English Translation of the ... De Imitatione Christi*, p. 264.
39. In Book 3, Question 80 of the *Summa Theologica* St. Thomas Aquinas addresses "The Use or Receiving of this Sacrament in General," in which he distinguishes between mere and imperfect sacramental eating and a spiritual eating which unites the communicant with Christ through faith and charity; see *Summa Theologica*, 5 vols., trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York, NY: Benziger Brothers, 1947; reprint Westminster, Maryland: Christian Classics, 1981), vol. 5, pp. 2480–94.
40. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 1, feuillet iii. xxvii; Beaufort, p. 261.
41. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 2, feuillet iii. xxiv; Beaufort, p. 263.
42. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 11, feuillet iii. xxiv; Beaufort, p. 263.
43. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 6, feuillet iii. xxviii; Beaufort, p. 268.
44. Beaufort, p. 281.
45. Beaufort, pp. 270, 271.
46. Beaufort, p. 283.
47. Beaufort, pp. 275, 276.
48. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 12, feuillet L; Beaufort, p. 277.
49. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 1, feuillet iii. xxx, ch. 3, feuillet iii. xxx; Beaufort, pp. 261, 265.
50. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 1, feuillet iii. xxx; Beaufort, p. 261.
51. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 3, feuillet iii. xxx; Beaufort, p. 263.
52. Biggs, p. 198.
53. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 12, feuillet L; Beaufort, p. 277.
54. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 3, feuillet iii. xxx, ch. 11, feuillet iii. xxxviii; Beaufort, pp. 264, 275.
55. Beaufort, pp. 260, 265, 260.
56. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 5, feuillet iii. xxxviii; Beaufort, p. 268.
57. Morley, pp. 259, 254.
58. Barratt, p. 288.
59. *Le liure tressalutaire*, ch. 10, feuillet iii. xxxvii; ch. 18, feuillet Liii; Beaufort, pp. 273, 282.
60. Beaufort, pp. 262, 269, 275.

61. Beaufort, p. 276.
62. Beaufort, p. 266.
63. Beaufort, p. 273.
64. Beaufort, p. 277.
65. Beaufort, pp. 266, 269.
66. Beaufort, pp. 267, 272, 276. *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 1876, 2683.
67. Beaufort, p. 268.
68. Beaufort, p. 280.
69. Beaufort, p. 283.
70. Beaufort, p. 283.
71. O. B. Hardison, Jr., *Christian Rite and Christian Drama in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965), p. 37.
72. Amanda Vickery, “Don’t Marry a Christian,” *London Review of Books*, September 8, 2011, p. 25.
73. Bynum, p. 258.
74. Thomas H. Bestul, *Texts of the Passion: Latin Devotional Literature and Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), p. 116. Hosington cites a passage from the *Speculum* describing blood nourishing the foetus as “infait et menstrueux” (aii<sup>v</sup>–aiii) which Lady Margaret translates as “corrupt and infet” (Aiv), and observes “One can only assume that Lady Margaret found it distasteful to talk about menstrual blood and unnecessary to repeat clerkly prejudices of the sort found in medieval misogynist texts” (p. 306).
75. Hardison, p. 36.
76. Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 71.
77. Agamben, p. 69.
78. Agamben, p. 70.
79. Agamben, p. 71.
80. Agamben, p. 71