Integral to many studies of late-medieval and early-modern Christianity in England is the notion of interiority. Interiority, said either to emerge or, more reasonably, to expand from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries, is credited with extensive accomplishments, which include the restructuring of society and the birth of individualism. It developed, we read, in the form of inward-directed religious devotion: no longer governed by and transparent to the church, devotion became much more a matter of individual prayer, meditation, and reading—the monastic trinity of oratio, meditatio, and lectio now turned popular. Prominent in accounts of the expansion of interior religious devotion are vernacular devotional texts, produced in ever larger numbers in order to satisfy a steadily larger group of interested, educated laypeople, along with affective religious images, also increasingly prominent in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The defining form of such devotion is the meditation on Christ’s Passion, and its consequence

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is a sort of lay empowerment: if religious devotion is interior, then it is in some substantial way independent; and if it is independent, then it is antihierarchical and even free. Thus, discussing Luther’s claim that laity and clerics alike were members of the “spiritual estate,” Brian Cummings identifies a “new theology” that depended on the dissemination of vernacular texts: “[t]he liberation of the German nation from its religious yoke lies in its recovery of power over language.” Power in the religious community accordingly shifted downward with the aid of vernacular book production and the individual interpretation it invites.

As suggested above, it is not just the language but the content of such books that effected this redistribution of power. Eamon Duffy points particularly to affective devotional texts, particularly those that instruct their readers or hearers to imagine Christ’s Passion. Their substantial influence via the liturgy and primers reflects, for Duffy, “the democratization of the tradition of affective meditation on the Passion which was the staple of the religious practice of the devout and the religious élite of late medieval England and Europe in general.” Duffy sees in this influence a “democratization” because it transferred Gospel meditations into the domain of both lay and learned, both individual and official spirituality. For Duffy, their interiority as well as their vernacularity contributed to individual empowerment. Gospel meditations, Duffy writes, “evolved as part of an individual and intensely inner spirituality”; their dissemination in various forms thus constituted an expansion of devotional inwardness, which is often used to characterize late-medieval and early-modern piety, culminating in the triumph of the Protestant individual. Of course, inward piety prospered in late antiquity and the earlier Middle Ages, both inside monasteries and outside of them, and its regular affective engagement with Christ’s suffering dates back to at least the eleventh and twelfth centuries. It is because the interiority associated with the late Middle Ages and early modern period differs in reach that it can be made so powerful; as such devotional practices transferred from clerics to laypeople, they might likewise have softened the boundary between clerical and lay spirituality and so elevated the relative standing of the lay believer. Nicholas Watson argues along these lines when he affirms that Richard Rolle’s goal was “to proclaim an ambitious spiritual attitude which belongs less to the ecclesiastical institution than to the desert, the inner space where the soul sits in solitude.” It is because of this translation of interior spirituality to the province of the laity that Rolle’s “writings contain at least the potential for a wholesale democratizing of the spiritual life,” rendering

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4 Duffy, Stripping of the Altars, p. 265.
5 Ibid., p. 19.
6 Rachel Fulton calls the dating for the emergence of this “new piety” “frustratingly vague,” in From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200 (New York, 2002), pp. 60–64, at p. 61. Of course, the “new piety” was not entirely new: see Barbara C. Raw, Anglo-Saxon Crucifixion Iconography and the Art of the Monastic Revival, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 1 (Cambridge, Eng., 1990), and Celia Chazelle, The Crucified God in the Carolingian Era: Theology and Art of Christ’s Passion (Cambridge, Eng., 2001), both of which discuss the development of earlier affective imagery, though both note that images of a heroic Christ remained dominant.
him “radical.” By transferring interior spirituality from the desert to the wider audience of the late Middle Ages, Rolle thus collapsed the devotional, perhaps even social, distance between the hermit and the lay believer.

The purpose of this essay is not to deny the textual or even social expansion of inward-oriented devotion but to dispute its natural association with individual “liberation,” the “democratization” of the Christian community, and the vernacular. It does so by examining the function of inwardness in late-medieval devotional texts, particularly by comparing two very popular and influential late-medieval meditations on Christ’s life, or Gospel meditations: the Latin, pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditationes vitae Christi (early fourteenth century) and Nicholas Love’s Middle English translation of it, the Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ (c. 1410). Gospel meditations describe a series of Gospel and apocryphal scenes for their reader or hearer to imagine systematically, and they are often taken to represent (as for Duffy) the archetypal expression of textual, devotional inwardness in the late Middle Ages because of their affective content and their wide distribution, often in the vernacular. The comparison of these two giants in the genre shows us that while inward-directed Gospel meditations promote devotional interiority, they are variously committed to devotional freedom and individual empowerment. Indeed, one more often finds a scaled-down, circumscribed authority in vernacular Gospel meditations, though that pattern is not absolute. The best-known Latin representatives of the genre in the Middle Ages, the Meditationes vitae Christi and Ludolph of Saxony’s Vita Christi (1377), along with siblings of the genre, like James of Milan’s Stimulus amoris (late thirteenth century), give the meditator extensive freedom to shape and participate in imagined Gospel scenes and invest such meditations with the greatest of spiritual value. Such a presentation of Gospel meditations is hard to find in Middle English texts and is certainly missing in Love’s. This is not to say that Latin is a better friend

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8 Such texts are often grouped under the heading “lives of Christ,” but their purpose is less to recount Christ’s life than to present individual episodes from it for meditation. The alternative category of “Gospel meditations” has its own problem, namely, that the texts frequently include extrabiblical material, but I think it more accurately captures the purpose of the texts.

9 It should be noted that the Vita Christi belongs more to the genre of imitatio Christi than Gospel meditation. Nonetheless, it presents the Gospel meditation as necessary to an effective imitation of Christ’s life.

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to Gospel meditations across the board; various Latin discussions of such meditations, such as those by Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, limit their spiritual potential, while the anonymous Middle English *Book to a Mother* (c. 1370–80) treats meditation on Christ’s life as a supremely effective spiritual tool. Nonetheless, the fact that Latin, rather than Middle English, devotional literature provides the most powerful understandings of Gospel meditations gives pause to the tendency to interpret the vernacular as an equalizer, as establishing a “homogeneous” religious community. By looking at this most characteristically inward genre of medieval devotional literature, we can see that translated interiority is not necessarily the same as clerical interiority, and so does not necessarily create parity between clerics and the laity. In their Middle English forms, Gospel meditations are instead least inclined to elevate the religious and social standing of the individual lay believer.

This essay therefore examines an understated contest over the proper function and parameters of inward devotion by looking primarily at the early fifteenth century, when Love translated the *Meditationes vitae Christi* (henceforth *Meditationes*) and when such devotion was in its early stages of institutional promotion by such figures as Archbishop Arundel. Both the *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (henceforth *Mirror*) and its source enjoyed tremendous popularity, as indicated by the survival of the *Meditationes* in 217 manuscripts and the *Mirror* in 64, even if their medieval popularity is not proportionately represented by modern scholarly attention. Their influence was profound and undeniable; the *Meditationes* was popular throughout Europe, exerting a strong influence on both visual art and medieval mystery plays, while the *Mirror*, also influential with respect to medieval drama, was the most popular new piece of literature in fifteenth-century England, published at least ten times between 1484 and 1606. Michael Sargent calls the *Mirror* “one of the most well-read books in late-medieval England,” falling below only the Wycliffite Bible, the *Prick of Conscience*, and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* with respect to the number of surviving manuscripts. And while the *Meditationes* and the *Mirror* were the most popular representatives, in their respective languages, of one of the most popular genres of prose devotional literature in late-medieval England, the *Mirror* has the added distinction of insti-


tutional authorization. Because of its official approval by Archbishop Arundel in 1410, Love’s Mirror has influentially been read as an expression of what the fifteenth-century church wanted lay devotion to be.

The two texts, although similarly significant with respect to medieval literature and devotion, nonetheless conceive of the capabilities, purpose, and proper audience of interior religious devotion, specifically of Gospel meditations, in strikingly different ways. Love self-consciously directed the text to a lay audience and then shaped his treatment of Gospel meditations to suit the needs of his audience as he perceived them. He significantly altered his source text’s spiritual ambitions with a fundamental revision of the mental faculty that enables such meditating, imagination. At its most sophisticated, imagination functioned within medieval theories of cognition to help convert material into spiritual, intellectual knowledge, and it is in this respect, I will argue, that it was such a powerful spiritual tool for texts like the Meditationes. However, for Love, imagination generates only material thoughts, making the Gospel meditations that derive from it likewise solely material. He therefore made Gospel meditations incapable of the elevated spiritual purposes that his source text had afforded them. Love’s systematic demotion of Gospel meditations and the capabilities of interior devotion through his narrowed understanding of imagination further reflects on a long-standing contention about Love’s Mirror, namely, that it formed an alternative to the hereticized Wycliffite Bible. Love, however, was intent on removing the Bible, whether Latin or vernacular, from the meditator’s view, not on replacing it in some other form. Although establishing his text’s fidelity and subordination to the Bible, he insists that the practice of meditating on the Gospels must occur at a distance from the Bible. As we will see, for Love, meditating on the Gospels is a wholly different activity from reading them, a difference that is reflected in the text’s rigid distinction between meditating on Christ’s humanity and contemplating his divinity.

LOVE’S LAY AUDIENCE

Little is known of Nicholas Love’s life beyond his station first as rector and then, beginning in 1410, as prior of the newly Carthusian Mount Grace Charterhouse. In other words, he is known to us primarily as the author of the Mirror. The study of the text has focused on its manuscripts, many of which possess apparatus and ornamentation sophisticated enough for Vincent Gillespie to label the text “a devotional thoroughbred.” Discussions of the Mirror as a translation of the Meditationes have largely concerned themselves with matters of style, Love’s

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omissions (his version has 63 chapters; the original has 108), and his additions (especially those pertaining to the Lollards).17 His alterations to the original Latin text have been noted more for their overall fidelity to the original than for their departure from it. Thus Elizabeth Salter’s authoritative study of Love affirms, “Love preserves the content and disposition of the Meditations in his translation, making only such changes as are forced upon him by the demands of a wider, more varied class of readers”; he altered the text only by moving “towards greater simplicity of thought, and directness of presentation.”18 Love’s concerns for his audience clearly did motivate his alterations, but the audience he appealed to is one of his own invention, and he determined its needs as he shaped his translation to meet them. In the process Love significantly recast the purpose of the Meditations, redefining it in his original prologue and in his presentation of the individual meditations.

The Mirror repeatedly directs itself to a lay audience. While the Meditations was written to a Poor Clare, and so a member of an enclosed religious community, the Mirror redirects the text away from the “religiose woman” to “symple creatures.”19 Whereas various authors, such as Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, characterize as “simple” those novices who have yet to ascend in spiritual proficiency, and so refer to the spiritually unsophisticated rather than to the laity, “symple creatures” can fairly be seen to represent “laypeople” in Love’s text because he does not allow those “creatures” to graduate to any less simple state. They start out as they end, and so constitute the unlearned rather than the learning.20 Kantik Ghosh notes that Love “aligns the affective tradition of ‘carnal’ meditation on Christ’s humanity with intellectual and religious infancy much more sharply than does his source,”21 and it is precisely this persisting infancy that separates Love’s audience from the original’s. Befitting this shift in audience is, of course, a shift in language. However, although Love presents himself in the prologue as a simple translator, using a time-honored rhetorical technique best known through Chaucer, he makes a complicated, albeit subtle, argument about the content of the Meditations. He explains that he has produced this translation because

19 Love’s Mirror, ed. Sargent, prologue, p. 10. I have standardized u and v and either removed the punctus elevatus or replaced it with a comma in brackets. Unless otherwise noted, all future references to the text will be to this edition. Sargent reprinted this text in his 2004 Exeter edition (above, n. 13), even keeping page and line breaks but dispensing with much of the critical apparatus of the earlier critical edition.
20 Notice also that Love distinguishes Latin texts written “to clerkes” from English texts written “to lewde men & women & hem pat bene of symple undirstondyng” (prologue, p. 10). For him, the movement from Latin to English seems necessarily to be one from clerics to laypeople. Nicholas Watson also takes the audience of the text to be laypeople; see “Conceptions of the Word: The Mother Tongue and the Incarnation of God,” New Medieval Literatures 1 (1997), 85–124, at p. 95.
21 Kantik Ghosh, “Nicholas Love,” in A Companion to Middle English Prose, ed. A. S. G. Edwards (Cambridge, Eng., 2004), pp. 53–66, at p. 56. Ghosh likewise argues that the Mirror “explicitly recasts the original’s stated and implied audience through a series of changes designed to adapt the text to the alleged intellectual and spiritual (in)capacities of a lay audience,” but he says no more about the changes (p. 56).
the *Meditationes*, “for þe fructuouse materie þerof[,] steryng specialy to þe love of Jesu ande also for þe pleyn sentence to comun undirstondyng[,] semeþ amonges opere sovereignty edifiying to symple creatures þe whiche as childryn haven nede to be fedde with mylke of lyȝte doctryne.” Thus the rich, yet comprehensible, matter of the *Meditationes* constitutes milk particularly appropriate to “symple creatures.” Love accordingly renders the Latin text, already suited to laypeople because of its content, accessible to its target audience through his translation: content that was appropriate to a religious woman is now appropriate to the laity. Love might seem here simply to address directly a general devotional trend whereby educated lay readers increasingly embraced vernacular texts originally written for women religious. However, Love did not simply translate the content of the *Meditationes* as the foregoing comments suggest he would. He made systematic alterations that belie his claims about the essential layness of the content of the *Meditationes* and that complicate his equation of Gospel meditations with lay spirituality.

Love’s changes far exceed *verbum pro verbo* translation, not simply because of his additions and excisions but because of his systematic and often subtle alterations to the meditations he describes. Although presenting his translation with the implicit justification that the Latin of the *Meditationes* impeded it from fulfilling the purpose to which its content and method called it—the “fructuouse materie . . . semeþ amonges opere sovereignty edifiying to symple creatures”—he nonetheless altered that content to make it more suitably lay. This is not to say that he denied making changes; “with more putte to in certeyn partes & wipdrawyng of diverse auctoritis and maters as it semeth to pe wryter hereof moste spedefull & edifiying to hem þat bene of symple undirstondyng,” the translated text clearly departs significantly from the original. Love’s alterations, however, extend to the text’s purpose, as we see when we view the claims of the prologue in conjunction with the numerous alterations discussed below. The content of the *Meditationes* turns out to be both lay and not lay enough: removing the “diverse auctoritis” and discussion of inappropriate “maters,” Love allies Gospel meditations with the laity by removing the higher associations that the *Meditationes* had given them. For Love, the *Meditationes* is clearly not ready-made for lay consumption, unlike his translation. His changes then reflect his idea of what a proper lay spirituality both is and is not.

Love proceeds to explain more fully how the meditation on Christ’s life best meets the spiritual needs of “symple soules.” Quoting William of St. Thierry’s *Epistola ad fratres de Monte Dei,* Love explains that, to such people, “contemplacion of þe monhede of cryste is more likyng[,] more spedefull[,] & more sykere

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22 *Love’s Mirror*, prologue, p. 10.

23 As Vincent Gillespie writes in explanation of this trend, “The laity, for all their pragmatic literacy (either in Latin or the vernacular), came to occupy a position in the educational hierarchy similar to that which had long been occupied by women religious”: “*Lukynge in baly bukes: Lectio in Some Late Medieval Spiritual Miscellanies,*” in *Spätmittelalterliche geistliche Literatur in der Nationalsprache*, ed. James Hogg, Analecta Cartusiana 106, 2 vols. (Salzburg, 1984), 2:1–27, at p. 4.


25 Love attributes the text to Bernard of Clairvaux, a common misattribution in the Middle Ages.
pan is hy3e contemplacion of pe godhed[,] ande perfore to hem is pryncipally to be sette in mynde pe ymage of crystes Incarnacion[,] passion[,] & Resurreccion so that a symple soule pat kan not penke bot bodyes or bodily pinges mowe have somewhat accordyng unto is [sic] affecion where wip he maye fede & stire his devocion."  

Unable to contemplate nonmaterial concepts, such as Christ's divinity, simple souls should instead content themselves with thoughts of his humanity and use them to foster their devotion. William of St. Thierry (c. 1085–c. 1148) did indeed recommend meditations on Christ's humanity to the religious novice, but as the passage that Love quotes continues, William wrote that one who thinks about Christ's humanity "does not wholly depart from the truth, so that as long as his faith does not separate God from man he will learn eventually to grasp God in man."  

For William, meditations on Christ's humanity possess value because of both their validity (they are not false) and their destination: they achieve their highest purpose when they defer to contemplation of Christ's divinity. They do not offer ends in themselves, as they do for Love, who accordingly places the laypeople to whom he directs his translation in an unending novitiate: unlike William’s Cistercian brothers, Love’s simple souls will never proceed beyond this introductory meditative exercise. Their meditating is confined to material matters, unable to promote the progression to spiritual contemplation that had made Gospel meditations so useful to various of their earlier and later authors. The Mirror's devotion is interior, but restrictively so.

Love’s express limitation of his audience to laypeople has the logical consequence of distancing him from the piety he describes. Although the Mirror makes occasional references to recluses and other religious, it offers the practice of meditating on the Gospels for lay use. The author of the Meditationes, in contrast, writes that he recommends systematic imagining of the scenes of Christ’s life because he has derived great benefit from that very exercise.  

Love’s Mirror does not perpetuate the participatory spirit of the original: Love assigns and shapes the


28 He writes, “Cumque enim utiam Domini Iesu quam hoc libello tibi transcribo meditando procurarem et circuibam quasi comprehensam quamlibet ebdomadan ut plurimum complemer, et hoc per plures annos continuarem.” The author explains that, because he once forgot what he considered to be a particularly beautiful meditation, he decided to write them down, to his benefit and his reader’s (“et sic forte tibi prodest illa obliuio”): Johannis de Caulibus Meditationes vitae Christi olim S. Bonaventuro attributae, ed. M. Stallings-Taney, CCCM 153 (Turnhout, 1997), 61, pp. 222–23. Stallings-Taney attributes the text to Johannes de Caulibus, but this remains a contested, and to my mind unpersuasive, attribution. Sarah McNamer makes the case for the attribution in “Further Evidence for the Date of the Pseudo-Bonaventuran Meditationes vitae Christi,” Franciscan Studies 50 (1990), 233–61. I follow the lead of such scholars as Bernard McGinn and Thomas Bestul, who continue to label the text anonymous: see McGinn, The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism (1200–1350), The Presence of God 3 (New York, 1998), p. 119; and Bestul, Texts of the Passion, p. 48.
meditations on Christ’s earthly life without any reference to the benefits that might accrue to himself. He assumes the role of religious director, establishing his authority over the devotional exercises he counsels but does not use. To see that Gospel meditations need not necessarily belong to lay piety, one can look at Ludolph of Saxony’s *Vita Christi*, itself clearly influenced by the *Meditationes*. Regarding meditation on Christ’s life, Ludolph writes, “Anyone, whether beginner or novice, experienced or advanced, can have this life, and in it find a good nest for him or herself, where in the same way turtledoves repose and shield the chicks of pure love, each according to his or her capacity.” Not only does Ludolph repeatedly offer his spiritual method to any believer, lay or learned, but he gives it the capacity to convert the lay into the learned. He writes, “A memory filled with this Passion renders any unlearned person most learned and makes the inexperienced and uneducated into masters.” Love both limits his audience to the laity and prevents its members from graduating to a higher state. Indeed, meditating on Christ only reinforces their layness as he presents it. There is here nothing like the *Book to a Mother*’s advice that the “mother” study Christ’s life internally and emulate it lovingly in order that she might, the author tells her, “better konne Holi Writ þan ony maister of divinite þat loveþ not God so wel as þou,” adding, “who loveþ best God, can best Holi Writ” and “who þat lovþ him best is best clerk.” Love’s meditator, confined to this-worldly meditation, makes no such progress.

**The Medieval Imagination**

Love’s selective quotation of the *Epistola* indicates the defining alteration that he makes to the content of the *Meditationes* and how he makes it. The *Meditationes* allows the meditator to proceed from meditation on Christ’s humanity to contemplation of his divinity, following a path similar to that outlined for William’s dutiful student, but accelerated and better articulated. As Sarah Beckwith notes, Love insists that the meditator’s imagining “not confuse what is spiritual with what is bodily, what is high with what is low.” What allows for such confusion in the *Meditationes* is its reliance on imagination, which drives the Gospel meditation and empowers it to move from thoughts of Christ’s humanity to those of his divinity through its own capacity to bridge material and spiritual knowing.

30 Ibid. 2.58, 4:459: “Frequens Passionis hujus memoria indoctum quemquam reddit doctissimum, ac imperitos et idiotas facit proficere in magistros.”
32 Sarah Beckwith, *Christ’s Body: Identity, Culture, and Society in Late Medieval Writings* (London, 1993), p. 65. Her discussion of the *Mirror* extends from p. 63 to p. 70. Beckwith nevertheless reads the text differently from the way I do, seeing it as empowering to the lay reader in spite of its adherence to a “clerical project”; she writes that it unwittingly “gave an extraordinary dynamism to lay piety, whilst it subtly de-authorized clerical authority” (pp. 69–70).
Love, in contrast, understands imagination, and the Gospel meditation dependent on it, as solely material, incapable of promoting higher spiritual activity. The disparity between the texts shows that the genre of Gospel meditations, although popular, was not static, and we can find in its often overlooked development a variation in the purposes to which it was put and the inward piety that it describes.

Imagination is commonly identified as the source of inward devotion in general and of Gospel meditations in particular. The Cloud of Unknowing (c. 1390), for instance, defines imagination when controlled by reason as the imagination of Gospel meditations: “ymaginacion,” when it is “in grete partye refreynd by þe ligt of grace in þe reson,” manifests itself “in contynowel meditatcion of goostly þinges, as ben þeire [the believers’] wretchednes, þe Passion & þe kyndenes of oure Lorde God, wip many soche oþer.”33 Gospel meditations are accordingly the expression of an obedient imagination, and they serve for the Cloud author to distinguish a positive, nearly prelapsarian brand of imagination from its “feynid & fals” cousin, imagination that disobeys reason and is a product of the Fall.34 Imagination, then, is the mental power that operates within Gospel meditations, but its operation in that context is not simple or entirely self-evident. It is easy to dismiss Gospel meditations, and many have, because of their intense affectivity and even because of their reliance on imagination, but by better appreciating the complexities and authority of imagination in the Middle Ages, I will argue below, we can better appreciate the method and ambitious spiritual purpose of those meditations. Before discussing how Love re-envisioned the genre with his more limited concept of imagination, then, we should first see what he was changing.

In medieval theories of cognition, imagination wears many hats: it is a faculty that, among other things, stores images of things seen, creates images of things unseen (like a golden mountain), enables foresight, generates dreams, misinterprets sensory data, and creates images for use by the intellect. That final capacity, though largely overlooked by scholars, is most relevant to imagination as it functions in Gospel meditations. The function derives initially from Aristotle, who placed imagination as the last of the sense faculties and gave it a central role in transmitting sense data to the intellect. Any good Aristotelian believed that knowledge begins with the senses, and in order to derive proper intellectual conclusions from sensory data, one needed a faculty to help the senses communicate with the intellect. Aristotle gave imagination that role when he affirmed that “the soul never thinks without an image,” an image that comes from imagination.35 In later com-

33 The Cloud of Unknowing, in The Cloud of Unknowing and Related Treatises on Contemplative Prayer, ed. Phyllis Hodgson, Analecta Cartusiana 3 (Salzburg, 1982), 65, p. 65. The texts in this edition are the same as those in EETS O.S. 218 and 231.


mentaries on Aristotle’s philosophy of the soul, imagination’s capacity to facilitate understanding, to provide the intellect with its thinkable object, becomes only clearer. The basic system is this: The senses pass data on to common sense and then to imagination. Imagination’s image, or phantasma, configures the data in such a way that the intellect can act on them, separating the intelligible wheat from the sensible chaff. The intellect does this through abstraction (for Aristotelians), illumination (for Augustinians), or some combination of the two. John Duns Scotus (1265/66–1308), for instance, explained that “the essences of things are known in virtue of the active intellect, a participation of the Uncreated Light, which illumines the imagination and in this way purity of truth results.”

The agent intellect, the Aristotelian faculty that abstracts the universal (e.g., chairness) from the phantasm of a particular object (the chair I am sitting on), here works in conjunction with Augustinian divine illumination to generate intellectual, non-sensible knowledge. Once imagination is thus illuminated, the intellect can find its intelligible object within imagination’s image and can then know. It is accordingly thanks in part to imagination that one can comprehend “the essences of things,” the universals that are the intellect’s true objects.

The basic system that Duns Scotus describes is not hard to find in medieval theories of cognition; inherited from Arabic philosophers such as Avicenna and Averroes, it takes a central place in the psychological works of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, among others. When Gospel meditations lead their meditators from initial thoughts of Christ’s humanity to thoughts of Christ’s divinity, then, they would seem to depend on imagination’s ability to move from sense to intellect, from material humanity to the divinity it signifies and expresses. The relationship I am suggesting between medieval philosophy and devotional literature might seem improbable, but it is important to recall that the two often overlapped, particularly in the thirteenth century, with theologians like Robert Grosseteste (c. 1170–1253) and Bonaventure (1221–74), who authored both philosophical and devotional works. For my purposes, Bonaventure is the more important: the author of arguably the first full-length Gospel meditation, he was also a Paris-trained master of theology. In his works he translates Scholastic imagination into devotional imagining. His Sentences commentary shows his familiarity with and belief in the Aristotelian account of imagination outlined above, an account that he integrates with Augustine’s Neoplatonic view of imagination in order to show how imagining Christ’s life is a uniquely productive thing to do.


38 Distinguishing between the active and passive power of imagination in order to compare them to the intellect, Bonaventure wrote, for instance, “organum corporale, in quo recipiuntur phantasmata,
Bonaventure shared the Augustinian belief that Christ participates in every act of human cognition through illumination, and thus “our intellect is joined to that eternal Truth.” In Bonaventure’s quite complicated cognitive system, knowledge of material, earthly matters is transformed into true, immaterial understanding by means of illumination and its action on imagination, particularly on the images it produces. The cogitating mind here realizes a capacity natural to it in Augustine’s theology, which locates a person’s greatest resemblance to God in his or her cognitive faculties. In line with his Christian Neoplatonism, Augustine identified the second person of the Trinity, the Son, with knowledge or understanding because he reflects back to the Father all that the Father knows. The Son possesses knowledge of all things, their eternal exemplars, and as a consequence any human knowledge is enabled by the Son through illumination. Therefore one early English theologian can write, “Christ is the light of men because he illumines the hearts of all men which deserve to be illuminated with the presence of his own cognition.”

Knowing accordingly consists of seeing Christ’s knowing within the mind, a position that Christ attains through illumination because all knowledge derives from him. Bonaventure, however, invests this cognitive model with profound mystical implications. If Christ guides the conversion of sensible to intelligible understanding, then anyone who ponders this process can analogously proceed from an understanding of Christ’s humanity to an understanding of his divinity.

Bonaventure elaborates the theology of Augustinian illumination by allowing the meditator to ponder Christ’s operations in the mind and, with their aid, to proceed from Christ’s humanity to his divinity. Bonaventure writes that the Son, “as the Incarnate Word . . . dwells in spiritual minds which are still united with flesh.” He does so in order to lead them from material to spiritual knowledge, a power that Christ derives from his joining of humanity and divinity in his own being. When it grasps any truth, then, the mind relies on the specific cognitive resources of Christ’s Passion, which builds a bridge between this world (via Christ’s human nature) and God (via Christ’s divinity). Bonaventure developed a well-established tenet of Christian theology: in his joining of humanity and divinity, Christ establishes a link between the material world and God, or truth. As John Scotus Eriugena wrote in the ninth century, Christ “unites in himself with incomprehensible harmony the sensible and intelligible worlds,” and his Passion...
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in particular serves as the nexus between the two. In its wake, material knowledge can travel along the path that Christ’s Passion created and proceed to spiritual understanding.

Bonaventure developed this doctrine into a spiritual program that presents imagining Christ’s humanity as the best means to reach his divinity. One who knows anything makes a transition from material to spiritual understanding within the confines of Christ’s own being, as it is present to the mind’s images through illumination. Translating his philosophy into devotional practice in his Lignum vitae, his meditation on Christ’s life, Bonaventure presents imagining that life as a realization of the power implicit in humans’ cognitive likeness to God. The Lignum vitae is in many ways Bonaventure’s defining work; one can often recognize Bonaventure in medieval art by the tree of life, sometimes containing the chapter headings of his text, that stands beside him. The text presents affective imagining as capable of uniting the meditator not only with Christ’s humanity but also with his divinity. In it, Bonaventure divides the events of Christ’s life into twelve segments, which he arranges on an imaginary tree. He advises the meditator first to consider the earliest episodes in Christ’s life, which are represented by the lowest branches. As the meditator proceeds through the events of Christ’s life, he climbs the tree that also doubles as a crucifix. In a manner analogous to Julian of Norwich’s cross, Christ’s crucified body provides the text’s destination as well as the means to reach it. By ascending that body/tree, the meditator unites himself to Christ’s humanity and, by consequence, to his divinity. Thus, regarding Christ’s baptism, Bonaventure writes, “It is for you also to remain faithfully by His side. Once regenerated in Him, delve into His secrets, so that . . . you may be carried up to God.” To attach oneself to Christ’s life by imagining it is to gain access to God, to participate in Christ’s life after the Passion. As imagination enables a cognitive progression from sensible to intellectual knowing, so it allows material thoughts about Christ’s humanity to translate into immaterial, spiritual thoughts of his divinity.

Such imagining directly utilizes the mechanisms of illumination and results in contemplation of the divinity of Christ by making recourse to the faculty that makes humans most proximate to Christ. At the end of the thirteenth century, the Franciscan James of Milan wrote that one who meditates on Christ’s earthly life “will be rescued from the depths, brought to innermost secrets, and lifted to the highest heights with sweetness.” Thinking about Christ’s humanity enables not just thinking about but an actual engagement with his divinity. Christ is present to the mind when it knows; and when a mind knows about Christ, it is present to him, and even participates in him, through its illuminated mental images. For James as for Bonaventure, there is nothing quaint about meditating on Christ’s

42 John Scotus Eriugena, Periphyseon, PL 122:912D: “mundum sensibilem et intelligibilem in seipso incomprehensibili harmonia adunans.”

43 Bonaventure, Lignum vitae 9, in Opera omnia, 8:73: “Quem et tu fideliter comitare, ac iam regeneratus in ipso, eius scrutare secreta, ut . . . sursum feraris in Deum”; trans. de Vinck, Works of Bonaventure, 1:110.

44 James of Milan, Stimulus amoris, Bibliotheca Franciscana Ascetica Medii Aevi 4 (Rome, 1903), prologue, p. 3: “ab infinis eripitur, ad intima colligitur, ad summa erigitur cum dulcore.”
humanity, nor does the fact that Gospel scenes are imagined make them fictive. As Ludolph of Saxony explains about Passion meditations in his *Vita Christi*, “It will be necessary that you sometimes think yourself present with your thought, as if you were present there at that time when the Passion happened, and thus that you conduct yourself in speaking, living, and suffering as if you saw your Lord suffering directly before your eyes. And indeed God himself will be present to you in spirit, just as he is imagined to be present by you, and he will hear your prayers and recognize your works.” The quotation is that God’s spiritual presence exactly accords with its imagined one: imagination traverses the very boundary between the fictive and true. With a similar faith in the powers of imagination, Bonaventure gives the meditator the ability to participate directly in imagined Gospel scenes. After advising that the meditator imaginatively visit Jesus in his crib, Bonaventure counsels him, “Embrace the sacred manger; press your lips upon the Child’s feet in a devout kiss.” James of Milan’s *Stimulus amoris* abounds with recommendations that one touch Christ, as does the *Meditationes*; and various Latin meditations, such as the *De meditatione passionis Christi*, roughly contemporary with Bonaventure, lead the meditator in an extended conversation with Jesus. The actual presence of the meditator in Gospel scenes indicates the power of meditating on Christ’s humanity: imagining participation spiritually, not figuratively, confers it. The ascent that the meditator might experience at the end of the Gospel narrative is therefore equally real. Love, however, allows Gospel meditations no such power. They no longer bring invisible things within range of visible ones but instead distantly evoke the invisible without providing any tools to engage with it. Accordingly, what had enabled the high ambitions of earlier Gospel meditations, imagination, becomes for Love a material faculty incapable of more than material understanding. Yielding nothing beyond themselves, Love’s Gospel meditations define an equally limited lay piety. The authority of imagination in matters cognitive and spiritual in the Middle Ages is nowhere contained in the modern concept of imagination. Perhaps this accounts in part for our tendency to discount Gospel meditations as anti-intellectual and to accept Love’s understanding of them as intrinsically lay. Richard Rambuss, for instance, refers to “the suspicion with which the imaginative faculty was typically regarded in the Middle Ages,” but the suspicion attaches only to certain aspects of imagination, as when it disobeyes reason in the Cloud author’s comments above. James Simpson notes that “English writers from the

45 Ludolph of Saxony, *Vita Christi* 2.58, 4:456: “Necessarium enim erit, ut aliquando ita cogites te praesentem cogitatione tua, ac si tunc temporis, ibi praesens fuisses quando passus fuit; et ita te habeas in loquendo, in vivendo, in dolendo ac si Dominum tuum coram oculis tuis cernerem patientem. Ita enim et ipse Dominus in spiritu tibi praesens erit, sicut a te cogitabtur praesens esse; et accipiet tua vota, et acceptabit tua facta.”


mid-sixteenth to the early nineteenth centuries understood the later Middle Ages as an age wholly subject to, and dangerously infantilized by, the rule of imagination,” but in doing so they demonstrate a profound misunderstanding of medieval imagination.49 The broad semantic scope of “imagination” contributes to its misunderstanding, but its importance is not diminished by its polysemy. The various definitions simply require that we consider what definition a particular author used and to what purpose.

Love’s Revisionary Translation

Although its affectivity renders it susceptible to flippant criticisms—Leo Steinberg calls the work a piece of “naïve sentimental piety” written “to the plebs”—the Meditationes, along with its related texts, is neither plebeian nor naïve.50 Using imagination to constitute the basis for an articulated spiritual method, it promises great benefits to the Poor Clare who imagines herself in Gospel scenes and feels appropriate emotion in response. If the text is “lay,” as Steinberg and others suggest, it is only lay in a profoundly qualified way. Written to a member of a religious community, it neither confines itself to a material, carnal understanding of God nor concedes any limitations to its spiritual efficacy. Anyone who follows its prescriptions will achieve nothing short of mystical union. In his translation of the Meditationes, however, Nicholas Love reconceived the purpose of the Gospel meditation. No longer treating Christ’s humanity as a segue to his divinity, Love’s Mirror argues for the text’s layness in a strictly limited sense: Gospel meditations are lay because they confine themselves to considerations of the material world and treat affect as an end in itself. Accordingly, Love writes that the images of Christ’s life evoked by his text are appropriate to “a symple soule pat kan not penke bot bodyes or bodily pinges.”51 The quotation’s adjectival clause is non-restrictive; no simple soul can venture beyond carnal thoughts. Therefore, by “styr-nyng symple soules to pe love of god,” the text’s “devoute ymaginacions & likenesss” appeal to a lay capacity to imagine bodily objects.52 Meditations on Christ’s humanity foster lay piety because they respect the same material limitations that the lay intellect does. Using materiality and layness to define each other, Love participates in a well-established tradition. Jacques de Vitry (c. 1170–1240), for instance, offers recommendations for “teaching ignorant people and educating peasants, to whom should more often be offered things comparable to bodily and tangible things and the sort of things they know through experience. For they are more moved by external examples than by authorities or wise sayings.”53

51 Love’s Mirror, prologue, p. 10.
52 Ibid.
53 Jacques de Vitry, Exempla, ed. Thomas Frederick Crane (London, 1890), introduction, p. xli: “ad edificationem rudium et agrestium eruditionem, quibus quasi corporalia et palpabilia et talia que per
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generalizes his view about imagination in Gospel meditations, the genre of devotional literature that most saliently counsels a piety based in imagination, but his perspective on such meditations does not extend to the Mirror's generic colleagues. By recognizing Love's divergence from his equally self-conscious source, we can more easily see the purpose that his revisions served him.

By preventing the Gospel meditation from leading to nonmaterial contemplation, Love distinguishes his text from contemporary contemplative treatises; as Nicholas Watson notes in comparison of the two, Love "insists on treating as permanent a state of the soul they think of as a beginning." Love diverges not just from contemplative treatises but from earlier Gospel meditations, most notably his source text, as well. In the Meditationes, Gospel meditations explicitly and crucially lead to higher spiritual contemplation, which is why the text contains an extended "tract on contemplation" (which Love omits). In his prologue the author of the Meditationes recommends his text's method as "more necessary and beneficial than all the schools of spiritual practice (spiritualis exercitii studia), and one that can lead to greater heights." Notably implying that the Gospel meditation constitutes one such school, the author affirms not just its value but its superiority, and this because Gospel meditations provide access to Christ's divinity through his humanity. Continuing his advocacy for his text's method, he writes, "[T]here have been many unlettered and simple persons who have come to know about the great and puzzling truths of God in this way." No less a figure than Francis, he notes, followed such a path.

Love does not accept that meditations on Christ's humanity permit excursions or constitute segues into his divinity. Where the Meditationes allows the meditator to shift attention from Christ's humanity back to his divinity before his crucifixion, Love's Mirror is strikingly silent. Love removed a sizable and, with respect to the Meditationes, integral passage, which reads, in part, "Return afterwards to his divinity and think of that immense, eternal, incomprehensible, and imperial incarnate Majesty bending humbly to the floor, stooping and collecting his clothing. . . . Having compassion by means of these thoughts, you can gaze on him the same as when he was tied to the column and horrendously flogged." The Meditationes can include this passage because it requires that Christ's divinity be considered through the lens of his humanity, but Love permits no such transition. Removing

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54 Watson, "Conceptions of the Word" (above, n. 20), p. 97.


57 *Meditationes* 77, CCCM 153:268: "Redeas post ad diiunitatem et considera illam immensam, eternam et incomprehensibilem et imperatoriam Maiestatem incarnatam, se flectentem humiliter ad terram inclinatem pannos recolligentem. . . . Eisdem eciam considerationibus compaciens intueri potes eundem cum ad columnam ligatus sic enormiter flagellantur"; modified translation of Taney et al., p. 249.
the passage above, Love creates a gap that needs filling; it is no longer clear what purpose the meditations serve. Love’s addition, original to him, explains that the meditator should ponder Christ’s crucifixion even though the scene is painful to witness, because it is also “a likyng siht to us, for þe matire & þe effecte þat we haue þerbye of oure redempcion.” Love offers no further clarification of this rather ambiguous passage: the matter of the scene, Christ on the cross, is pleasing to look at because it results in human redemption. The benefits that derive from meditating on Christ’s Passion are therefore only the (albeit profound) benefits that derive from Christ’s Passion; meditating on Gospel scenes neither offers a clear means to achieve that redemption nor promises additional rewards (such as spiritual intimacy in this life) to the meditator.

Significantly, Love removes the plentiful references in the Meditaciones to touching Christ and other biblical figures, an omission that appears to have received no scholarly attention though it removes a fundamental element in the Meditaciones’ spiritual program. Love’s divergence from his source in this matter indicates the lesser power that imagination has for him: in the Mirror, imagination creates distance from rather than proximity to the imagined scenes. Describing the journey of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, the author of the Meditaciones writes, “You too go with them: help carry the boy and observe carefully each and every thing said and done because they are sacred actions.” Love separates the meditator from Christ in his revision: “Now lat us here go with hem by devout contemplacion & help we to bere þat blessed birpen þe child Jesus in oure soule by devoucion, & take we inwardly gude entent to alle þat bene here seide & done, for þei bene ful devoute.” Love’s qualifications alienate the meditator from the scene: he joins the trip “by devout contemplacion” and carries Jesus in his soul “by devoucion.” Where the Meditaciones enables the meditator to participate in biblical scenes directly, the Mirror describes a spiritual exercise that remains within the confines of the present. In other words, the Mirror’s journey is unmistakably fictive. Further, by changing the address from the second-person command (“You too go with them”) to the first-person plural (“lat us here go”), Love replaces the Meditaciones’ union between the meditator and the biblical scene with one between himself as author and the meditator. The meditator of the Meditaciones has the freedom to engage directly with the Bible, whereas Love, attaching himself to the meditator, permits an engagement that is decidedly more textual and remote.

Although Love’s qualifications regularly appear where the Meditaciones has the meditator physically interact with biblical figures, they also occur where the meditator originally witnesses a scene directly. Thus where the Meditaciones declaratively narrates, “Jesus then walked between the two sisters,” Mary and Martha, Love writes, “we mowe se by devout ymaginacion how oure lord Jesus gop before
bytwix þo tweyn sistres." Seeing "by devout ymaginacion" seems to be less potent than just seeing. Likewise, describing the mistreatment of Jesus by the crowd, the *Meditationes* orders the meditator, "See how they shout and rail at him, bold and insolent." The mocking comments follow. The *Mirror* describes the same crowd "Abreydyng him & reprovyng in þes manere wordes as we reasonably mowe suppose." Love replaces seeing with reasonably supposing, a crucial distinction, and one that Love consistently makes by means of his alterations and omissions. The care that Love takes to alter the *Meditationes* in this respect—making what might appear inconsequential changes but doing so consistently and therefore consequentially—indicates his awareness that he is altering the text by way of redefining the imaginative component of imaginative meditations. In his prologue Love writes, "þe discrivyn or [sic] speches or dedis of god in heven & angels or opere gostly substances bene only wryten in pis manere, & to pis entent þat is to saye as devoute ymaginacions & likenessis styrnyng symple soules to þe love of god & desire of hevenly pinges." Love presents "devoute ymaginacions" as synonymous to "likenessis" that are merely representational, and he uses this equation to articulate his text's purpose. The meditations that follow "only" seek to increase love of God, and while the *Meditationes* never disavows this purpose—that the love of God is in a sense the height of its aim—that love when achieved is coupled with spiritual knowledge and even mystical union. For Love it has little to do with either.

Likewise, when Love narrates the ascension, he allows the meditator to witness it only indirectly. Compare the following accounts:

**Meditationes**: The Lord Jesus opened the gates of Paradise which up to that time had been closed to humanity, and entered in triumph and joy, with all that happy and magnificent multitude.

**Love's Mirror**: Nowe go we up by devout contemplacion to oure lorde Jesu beholdyng in ymaginacion of hevenly pinges by likenes of erpely pinges, howe he with alle þat forseide worpi & blisfulle multitude of holi soules, oponyng heven 3ates þat were before þat tyme sperede æzeynus mankynde . . . seide, Fader I þonke þe.

The passage from the *Meditationes* occurs in the midst of a description of all the things one "sees" when Christ ascends, and it thus permits the meditator to participate in the journey with Christ. As the gates to Paradise open, the meditator

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62 *Love's Mirror* 34, p. 133.

63 *Meditationes* 75, CCCM 153:262: "Intuere igitur qualiter illi audaces et pessimi conuiicantur eidem"; trans. Taney et al., p. 244.

64 *Love's Mirror* 40, p. 168.

65 It should be noted that Love does retain a couple of the original passages in the *Meditationes* that do not accord with its revised purpose as I have described it. For instance, he keeps the promise that the dutiful meditator will begin to feel the spiritual joys of salvation in this life: *Mirror* 40, p. 162; *Meditationes* 74, CCCM 153:252, trans. Taney et al, p. 236. However, the few instances are so overwhelmed by Love's manifold changes that they simply appear anomalous and inconsistent.


herself seems to gain access to the heavenly wonders, which the author evocatively describes in the chapter’s continuation. Love’s ascent entails no departure from the earth: comprising a “devout contemplation,” it permits access to “heavenly pinges” only by indirect analogy to “earthly pinges.” Love’s meditator witnesses Christ’s return to heaven in material, earthly terms, beyond which he never ventures. Imagination thus conceived constitutes a restriction for Love, a means to distance the meditator from his imagined scenes, where it had provided the meditator of the Meditationes a means to engage in precisely those scenes. Where the Meditationes writes regarding Christ, “at this point regard him lovingly for a long while (Hic igitur eum diligenter considera per longam moram),” the Mirror has, “Take now here good heed by inward meditation of all his pains.”69 The meditator does not get to see Christ directly and prolongedly but instead ponders his pains, thus engaging with his feelings rather than his person, and does so through inward meditation. The addition of the reference to inward meditation in Love’s far less intimate scene renders that meditation a distancing tool and highlights a difference between the place of the meditator and that of the imagined Gospel scene. The meditator travels inwardly but remains in a fixed and real “here” while Christ is decidedly elsewhere.

Love’s constricted understanding of Gospel meditations also announces itself in the lessened freedom he gives to his meditator to mold Gospel scenes. When conjecturing about what the angels might have fed Jesus at the end of his forty-day fast, the author of the Meditationes writes, “Scripture does not tell us about that. We can, however, order up this triumphant luncheon as we please.”70 The text revels in its freedom. Compare Love’s Mirror: “Here of spekep not holi writ, wherfore we mowe here ymagine by reson & ordeyne pis worpi fest as us likep, not by errour affermyng bot devoutly ymaginyng & supposyng, & that after pe comune kynde of pe manhode.”71 Love takes the fun out of the exercise, restricting the meditator’s ability to imagine a celestial feast by warning against too confident and ambitious a creation. Devout imagining stands in notable opposition to erroneous affirming, an opposition that would render such imagining safe and wholly conjectural. Love’s contrast recalls that of Archbishop Arundel, whose Constitutions of 1407–9 protect devotional activities such as pilgrimage and the honoring of images by opposing them to the heretical and insubordinate declarations of Oxford theologians.72 Although the intimacy of Love’s relationship with


70 Meditationes 17, CCCM 153:89: “De hoc enim scriptura non loquitur. Possimus autem hoc vitiosum prandium sicut uolumus ordinare.”


72 For Arundel’s comments on acceptable devotional practices, see the ninth constitution. The entire text can be found in Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae, ed. David Wilkins, 4 vols. (London, 1737; repr. Brussels, 1964), 3:314–19. Thomas More similarly positions devotional texts like the Mirror (which he names, along with two others) as correctives to the Lutheran writings that he deemed
Arundel and his indebtedness to him have likely been overstated, the two nevertheless share a common impulse to praise devotional exercises as they condemn heretical theologizing.73

Reminding the meditator of inviolable rules that contain his activity, Love sets certain conditions that must be met for the Gospel meditation to be fruitful. He therefore warns against too much imaginative freedom. When describing the Incarnation, the author of the Meditationes writes, “For although the Blessed Trinity is everywhere, now you may meditate that it is present there [at the Incarnation] in a special way because of its special activity.”74 Love instead offers an extended warning against thinking too deeply about the Trinity or any topic that falls outside the purview of natural reason: “when thou herest any siche thing in blyeve pat passe pe kyndly reson, trowe sopfastly pat it is sop as holy chirch techep & go no ferpr.”75 As the meditator should not proceed beyond a material engagement with Gospel scenes, so he should respect the limitations of his natural reason and defer to the church when appropriate. Love therefore disqualifies the Trinity as a topic for meditation. Further, in his appended and apparently coeval treatise on the Eucharist, Love writes, “it is grete folly & gostly perile, to seke curiously in ymagination of reson pe merveiles of his worpi sacrament.”76 Love clearly feared excessive speculation on the part of his audience and so installed barriers to their meditating not present in the original. The author of the Meditationes prohibits any meditating that contradicts doctrine, justice, morality, or truth generally, but these restrictions are minimal and do not restrict meditative freedom any more than Augustine’s rule of faith limits biblical interpretation. Indeed, as the author of the Meditationes continues, he requires such freedom of his meditator: stipulating that he will often attribute a statement or action to Jesus that “cannot be proven through Scripture,” he writes, “you should nonetheless accept it, as devout meditation demands.”77 The efficacy of meditations as he presents them depends on a largely uncritical acceptance of them as true, as opposed to Love’s meditations, which frequently remind the meditator that the meditations are not true and should not be accepted as such. Not surprisingly, then, Love omitted the original author’s minimal restrictions about the requirements of devout meditation.

As Love limits the spiritual aims of Gospel meditations by making them resolutely earthbound, he concomitantly limits the freedom of the meditator to create and engage in imagined Gospel scenes. The meditator of the Meditationes is able

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73 For a succinct review of the evidence for Love and Arundel’s relationship, see Sargent’s critical introduction to Love’s Mirror, pp. xxiii–xxv and xlv–xlvi.
75 Love’s Mirror 3, p. 22.
77 Meditationes, prologue, CCCM 153:10, trans. Taney et al., p. 4.

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to be present in such scenes by imagining herself so, and to shape them as she desires. Thus, when discussing the flight to Egypt, the author of the *Meditationes* writes, “I have given you the setting. Enlarge on it and proceed as it seems fit.”

The reader has narrative and imaginative control. Love deletes the instruction, and his changes have the cumulative effect of restricting the ambitions of the Gospel meditation. Love disables the mechanism that allowed Gospel meditations to yield engagement with God’s divinity by rendering imagination a solely material faculty. He notes in his prologue that he alters the text in order to make it appropriate to “symple soules,” and these changes implicitly help him to meet that goal. Only when revised into the form of the *Mirror* does the *Meditationes* constitute for Love a wholly suitable lay piety.

Love’s clear separation between meditation and contemplation, and his reworking of imagination to accord with that separation, receives external support from other late-medieval vernacular texts. For instance, the *Cloud of Unknowing* likewise distinguishes meditation sharply from contemplation, though it looks at the division as a contemplative treatise rather than a meditative one. Imagination, the author insists, has no relevance to his recommended spirituality because it concerns itself only with material meditation. Accordingly, while he emphasizes the spiritual value of meditating on Christ’s life, he insists that one who desires contemplation “algates leve” these “meditacions.” Such meditations serve a similar purpose for Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), who wrote, “Of course this devotion to the humanity of Christ is a gift, a great gift of the Spirit. I have called it carnal with comparison to that other love which does not know the Word as flesh. . . .” Gospel meditations have devotional and spiritual merit, but they do not help the meditator to reach contemplation. So firm about the division between meditation and contemplation is the *Cloud* author that he seems to have upset some of his readers. In his later *Book of Privy Counselling* he praises such meditation more passionately and more clearly explains its value, lest anyone think him its opponent. He is equally clear, however, that neither Gospel meditations nor imagination ventures beyond material thoughts, and thus that neither bears directly on his spiritual program.

Likewise, Walter Hilton (c. 1340–96) explains that imagination and imaginative meditations, while spiritually commendable and useful, are different in kind from contemplation. He writes that, while God cannot be seen “bi bodili liknes in ymaginacion,” “thou may through devout biholdynge of His precious manhede fele His godenesse and the grace of His Godhede, whanne thi desire is esid and

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79 *Cloud of Unknowing* 7, p. 15.


holpen and as it were maad free and myghti from alle fleschlie thoughtes and affeccions, and is mykil lifted up bi a goostli myght into gosteli savour and delite of His gostli presence.”82 Passion meditations may generate a desire for the Godhead, and so provide the means to rise above themselves, but they do not participate in that ascent. Hilton gives such meditating value, and allows it to lead to contemplation more clearly than the Cloud author, but still insists that “goostli thinges are seen and knownen bi undirstondynge of the soule and not bi ymaginacioun.”83 Perhaps most noteworthy is the concerted interest of both authors, each clearly knowledgeable of and influenced by the other, in determining the precise relationship of imaginative meditation to contemplation. Whether responding to the growth of affective piety or criticizing, as Hilton is often seen as doing, Rolle’s association of the senses and sensible feelings with contemplation, both authors seek to establish parameters for the proper use of imagination and its standard devotional manifestation, meditation on Christ’s Passion.84 A few decades later Love clearly participated in this effort to define what imaginative piety, long associated with Passion meditations, can accomplish. According to both the Cloud and the Scale of Perfection, these meditations are an exercise explicitly for beginners and those who lack the grace to surpass them. As they come to occupy a lower rung in the intellectual hierarchy, so they descend in the devotional one, alienated from contemplation and defining a restricted form of inward piety.

Nor is the Mirror the only late-medieval translation to significantly temper the enthusiasm of the original text. While the translation of James of Milan’s Stimulus amoris, the anonymous Prickynge of Love, still contains many graphic images of crawling into wounds and so on, it diminishes some of the enthusiasm and ambition of the original with various qualifications, omissions, and additions.85 Thus, where the Stimulus has, “I want always to see you crucified,” the Prickynge has, “ai mote I se pe crucified with myn inner y3e.”86 Simple seeing becomes seeing with the inner eye. Compare the passages as they continue:

83 Ibid. 2.30, p. 205.
84 Bestul mentions the possibility of Hilton’s responding directly to Rolle in this way in his introduction to The Scale of Perfection, p. 3.
85 Nicholas Watson reads the Prickynge as a counterpoint to Love’s Mirror and credits the Prickynge with a fuller sense of the significance of Christ’s humanity: “Conceptions of the Word,” pp. 107–11. While the Prickynge may appear to be theologically more profound, its own limitations appear clearly when the translation is compared with the Stimulus amoris.
86 The Stimulus amoris experienced a complicated process of accretion, discussed by Clare Kirchberger in the introduction to her translation, attributed to Walter Hilton, The Goad of Love (London, 1952), pp. 13–44. The text (cited above, n. 44) with its later additions is included with Bonaventure’s works in St. Bonaventure, Opera omnia, ed. A. C. Peltier, 15 vols. (Paris, 1864–71), 12:288–91 and 631–703; the passage translated here is on p. 638: “semper te videam crucifixum.” For the shorter version, more genuinely James of Milan’s, see n. 44 above. The English translation is The Prickynge of Love, ed. Harold Kane, Elizabethan and Renaissance Studies 92/10, 2 vols. (Salzburg, 1983), here 2, 1:22. I have altered the punctuation and removed textual markings, as well as modernizing u, v, i, and j.
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Stimulus: Wherever I look, I want everything to appear to me to be red with your blood, as if everything extends toward you so that I am able to discover nothing beyond you, nothing unless I am able to look at your wounds.87

Prickynge: wat þat i loke on al reed [make] þat hit seme with licour of þi bloode, and ȝif I mai not do þis ay in hoolnesse of devccioun [sic] ne in likynge of goostli ymagnacioun, at þe laste þat I mai do hit in stabilnesse of feith & in holi conversacioun. (2, 1:22)

Where the Latin text expresses a desire to see nothing that is not Christ’s blood or an extension of it, the Middle English decreases the intensity and extent of the desire and adds a prayer asking that the speaker not be led astray: if the devotional exercise as described does not work, the speaker wants lesser piety based in faith and conversation. The Middle English includes an out for those unequal to such devotion and, interestingly, aligns “goostli ymagnacioun” with the higher species of devotion, the one that immerses the meditator into Christ and that the average person may not be able to perform. The urgency of the Stimulus, which treats such devotion as a lifestyle that cannot simply be relinquished, becomes a devotional exercise to be taken up or put down at will. In late-medieval England the meditation on Christ’s life did not transfer directly from Latin into Middle English. Rather, it lost a good deal of its power along the way.

The Mirror and the Wycliffite Bible

At this point, it seems appropriate to consider a position that has become standard in criticism on Love’s Mirror, namely, that it constitutes an attack on Lollards not simply through its direct addresses to Lollard beliefs but through its very method. Accordingly, the text does not just consist of Gospel meditations but consists of them instead of straightforward biblical translation, a decision that is neither accidental nor neutral. The Mirror’s method implicitly opposes the Wy Clyffite Bible, and so, the argument goes, its Gospel meditations themselves argue for the superiority of vernacular Gospel meditations to a vernacular Bible. This position has the status of argument because Love nowhere mentions the Wy Clyffite Bible.88 He does repeatedly address the Lollards by name and elsewhere identifies them indirectly, by means of beliefs commonly attributed to them. Further, in the Memorandum attached to nineteen of the surviving manuscripts, Arundel approves the text precisely for its “confutation of the heretical Lollards (hereticorum sive lollardorum confutacionem).”89 Nonetheless, it is not obvious that Arundel

87 Bonaventure, Opera omnia, ed. Peltier, 2:638: “Et quidquid aspexero, in tuo sanguine mihi apareat rubricatum: ut sic in te totus tendens, nihil praeter te valeam invenire, nihil nisi tua vulnera valeam intuere.” See the previous note on the inclusion of this text in Peltier’s edition.

88 Nor does Love once quote the Bible, as Kantik Ghosh mentions in his article “Nicholas Love” (above, n. 21), p. 55. For Ghosh, the absence of quotation signals the Mirror’s intended substitution of the Wy Clyffite Bible and its opposition to the Lollards.

Love is explicit in his disagreement with Lollards on the subjects of the real presence in the Eucharist and silent confession, for instance, but neither he nor Arundel expressly opposed Gospel meditations to the vernacular Bible. My point here is not to deny that Love’s spirituality opposes Lollard spirituality but rather that efforts to link the two have distorted Love’s own treatment of the Bible. They have further written Gospel meditations into religious politics such that the entire genre appears to be both institutional and conservative. As a result, Love’s own reconstitution of the Gospel meditation genre, which is enabled by his treatment of the Bible, has gone unnoticed. Love distances his meditator from the biblical text with a devotional program that makes the Bible irrelevant. Placing the meditator on the near side of a substantial divide between lay and learned spirituality, he leaves the Bible over with Pearl’s maiden on the other shore.

Criticism on Love’s *Mirror* has created an opposition between the genre of Gospel meditations proper and Lollardy, as though Gospel meditations were deliberate antagonists to Lollardy. As a result, critics render the *Mirror*’s devotional system dogmatic: its Gospel meditations themselves express a conservative belief system. The result is something of a logical sinkhole. That is, because the *Mirror* criticizes Lollards in content, it might reasonably be seen to criticize them through its method; and if its method (the Gospel meditation) is anti-Lollard, then its very textuality might seem to stand in opposition to the Wycliffite Bible. If the *Mirror* is consequently anti-Lollard in method, content, and textuality, then it is absolutely anti-Lollard such that every positive statement it makes implies a negative one about Lollard or the Wycliffite Bible: the *Mirror* describes a lay spirituality, so it criticizes the Wycliffite Bible as inappropriate to lay spirituality; the *Mirror* loosely communicates biblical narrative, and so it criticizes Lollard demands for lay access to the literal text of the Bible. The *Mirror* is orthodox and the Wycliffite Bible is heterodox, each defining its opposite and depending on its opposite for its own definition. One might then only read the *Mirror* in contrast to the Wycliffite Bible; its purpose becomes univocal. Instead, I suggest that Love makes the Bible irrelevant to lay devotion (whether this is an anti-Lollard gesture or not) in the same way that he makes higher spiritual activities such as contemplation irrelevant to his lay audience. He writes in two registers: in one he addresses his lay audience; in the other he places their devotion in a larger religious and textual context. As Ian Johnson says of the author of the *Stanzaic Life of Christ*, "he looks two ways at once at his double audience of clerks and laity." Love places


91 A. I. Doyle supports a less Lollard-determined reading of the *Mirror* when he writes that its anti-Lollard material has “something of the air of an afterthought” about it: “Reflections on Some Manuscripts,” pp. 83–84. Also in dissent is Elizabeth Salter, who understands Lollard dogma rather than biblical translation proper as the object of Love’s attack, noting that Love’s *Mirror* and the Wycliffite Bible are not necessarily “opposed in nature or even, more controversially, in purpose”: Love’s *Mirror*, p. 244.

the *Mirror* in a textual community with the Bible but not a devotional one; as texts the two clearly communicate, but the *Mirror*’s spirituality requires that the Bible stand outside the ambit of the lay meditator. Love’s audience will not have direct access to the Bible, but the *Mirror*’s own subordination to and dependence on the Bible are utterly clear. The Bible belongs to clerics; the Gospel meditation to the laity. No Bible stands within the meditator’s view.

The idea that the *Mirror* deliberately and purposefully opposes the Wycliffite Bible has a long and distinguished pedigree and appears often enough to render numerous citations of it unnecessary; so common is it that it can be affirmed without being argued. Its basis is the common Wycliffite complaint that the laity are given access to legends rather than the literal text of the Bible; according to the *Lanterne of List*, the soul dies without “hevenli bredde, and this breed is Goddis worde.” The *Meditations* and the *Mirror* represent, this reading goes, the very sort of religious text that the Lollards so vehemently opposed. Thus Michael Sargent writes that Lollard objections to religious legends were “directed at exactly that Franciscan form of spirituality that the *Meditationes vitae Christi* and its vernacular versions best represent,” though no Lollard text, as far as I know, mentions Gospel meditations directly. If Lollards objected to Gospel meditations, then Gospel meditations written in the aftermath of such criticisms could logically appear to reject the Lollards and their advocacy for a vernacular Bible. Thus, Anne Hudson argues, “Implicitly the entire text of the *Myrrour* stands in opposition to Wycliffite attitudes and doctrines” because “the method of this particular treatise is contrary to Lollard insistence upon the difference between scripture, on the one hand, and other teaching however pious, on the other.” Nevertheless, where Hudson sees implicit opposition, her successors see in the *Mirror* a “calculated” and “conscious” attack on the Wycliffite Bible.

The scholars who have offered the fullest arguments for the understanding of the *Mirror* mentioned above are Nicholas Watson and Kantik Ghosh. Thus Watson writes that Love “wrote the *Mirror* in part as an orthodox riposte to the

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93 For one example, see Beadle, “Devoute yimaginacioun” (above, n. 12), p. 8.


95 This idea dates back at least to 1922, when Margaret Deanesly wrote that translations of texts such as the *Meditationes* “would seem to have been considered safer reading for the devout laity than translations of the ‘naked text’ of the gospels”: “The Gospel Harmony of John de Caulibus, or S. Bonaventura,” *Collectanea Franciscana* 2 (1922), 10–19, at p. 10.


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Wycliffite Bible” and elsewhere that the Mirror “was written to counteract” the Wycliffite Bible.99 And Ghosh, who devotes a chapter to this topic in his recent book The Wycliffite Heresy, examines the “war” that the Mirror “wages . . . on Lollard approaches to the scriptural text.”100 Both locate the opposition between the Mirror and the Wycliffite Bible in method, and both present the Mirror as an intended antagonist to that Bible. They are joined by other influential voices in the field: regarding the Lollard call for a vernacular Bible, David Aers writes, “Love’s response was to offer his own book as a more salutary alternative for the laity.”101 And James Simpson, while acknowledging the “imaginative and moral limits” that Love imposes on the Gospel, writes that Love’s Mirror “permits audiences officially denied access to Scripture an even greater authority: they can claim visual experience of divine events.”102 It is worthwhile to reconsider these arguments, which have usefully sparked interest in the Mirror but which have created the impression that the Mirror overtly takes a position in the late-medieval translation debate. Love’s decision to locate his explicit criticisms of Lollards in his translation is certainly a provocative one, and of course literary criticism would be very dull if we had to confine ourselves to the explicit. Nonetheless, we might place greater emphasis on Love’s own positioning of the Mirror with respect to the Bible.

The readings discussed above begin, implicitly or explicitly, with the rejection of the most obvious account of Love’s Mirror: that it simply perpetuates the thriving genre of Gospel meditations, offering a full Middle English translation of the Meditationes where predecessors seem to have offered only partial ones. Concerning this possibility, and taking into account contemporary contention on the subject of lay biblical interpretation, Ghosh writes, “[I]t is therefore not adequate to consider Love as a mere participant in an affective tradition of venerable pedigree, for such affectivity and its literary formations are explicitly identified by him . . . as especially appropriate for the intellectually unsophisticated, the puerile.”103 Through this identification, Ghosh suggests, Love engages with debates about vernacular Bible translation and lay interpretation. The literary antecedents of Love’s Mirror have been fully explored by Michael Sargent and Elizabeth Salter. After a detailed discussion of the various lives of Christ in late-medieval England, including Love’s, Sargent notes that “Nicholas Love’s Mirror did not play the role of Bolingbroke against its Ricardian precursors. It was much more like the eventual resolution: it incorporated the most successful aspects of its precursors on all sides, but brooked no opposition.”104 Sargent makes this comment by way of explaining the Mirror’s greater popularity than Ludolph of Saxony’s Vita Christi (translations of which were more popular on the Continent) and an independent fifteenth-century Middle English translation of the Meditationes, the Speculum

102 Simpson, Literary History, 2 (above, n. 71), pp. 436 and 437.
104 Sargent, “Versions of the Life of Christ” (above, n. 76), p. 67. On the Mirror’s sources, see also Sargent’s introduction to Love’s Mirror and Salter, Love’s Myrrour, pp. 55–118.
devotorum. Incorporating material from various lives of Christ in various languages, other religious texts such as the *Ancrene Wisse* and Hilton’s *Mixed Life*, and various Continental works, such as Suso’s *Horologium sapientiae*, Love’s *Mirror* is well grounded in earlier medieval literature.

Nonetheless, because of the polemicization of issues concerning vernacular spirituality in the early fifteenth century, Watson and Ghosh contend that Love’s *Mirror* gave an old genre a new valence. Arguing that the text’s traditional elements constitute its polemical force, Ghosh writes, “Nicholas Love’s *Mirror* accepts, self-consciously, certain inherited modes of devotional reading, and deploys them against the Lollards, thereby underlining . . . the polemical, reactionary charge that traditional exegetical practices had assumed in the new heretical environment.”

Thus, what is traditional in the *Mirror*—its being composed of Gospel meditations—becomes “reactionary” by being situated in the “new heretical environment.” Ghosh’s argument that a well-established and still active genre bears this new charge requires a great deal of the “Lollard context” and “Lollard environment” that he often mentions. It requires, specifically, that Lollardy reverse the force of the Gospel meditation written within its temporal boundaries, making what was traditional now polemical. External pressures accordingly determine the text’s purpose and motivations.

Love does liken the Gospels to the Gospel meditation, borrowing the beginning of the *Meditationes*’ prologue when he writes that St. Cecilia “bare alwey þe gospel of criste hidde in her breste, þat may be undirstand [sic] þat of þe blessed lif of oure lord Jesu criste writen in þe gospele, she chace certayne parties most de-voute.”

Cecilia’s grasp of the Bible resides in her selected attachment to certain parts of it, implicitly setting the following Gospel meditations the task of providing a Cecilia-like engagement with the Bible. Unable to cull scenes from the Bible directly, the meditator learns a devotional activity made possible by someone else’s reading of the Bible. For the *Mirror*, the Bible always lingers in the background, safely guiding the author and his text but inaccessible to the meditator. Thus Love repeatedly explains that he skips over certain events because the Bible or other devotional texts contain extended treatments of them. Unlike his predecessor, he also expresses great discomfort whenever he diverges from the biblical text, often calling on the Bible to support his comments, for instance, in “confirmacion” of the power of prayer “& of al þo þinges þat bene seide before,” which “holi writte & doctours seyinges fully prevene.” He and his text serve Scripture, and it is their intimacy with the Bible that indicates the meditator’s alienation from it.

It is, of course, unlikely that a member of Love’s intended lay audience, the simple soul steeped in carnal thinking, would have access to the Bible or that Love

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would expect him to. Love is not unique in speaking over the head of his named audience to the clerics beyond; audiences for medieval religious texts were often far larger than their stated ones, and clerics writing to laypeople also knew they were addressing clerics. We see this in the Book of Privy Counselling when the author defends the Cloud against charges that it was too sophisticated for the audience the author assigned to it. The Cloud author addresses clerical and non-clerical audiences simultaneously. Similarly, Nicholas Love makes several references to clerics of various sorts, occasionally addressing them directly, and his comments about the Mirror’s relationship to the Bible clearly pertain to that audience. The Mirror serves the Bible, but the Mirror’s express audience serves an invisible master that is present only in the authority of the text’s author. The lay meditator is as far removed from the Bible as his material devotion is from contemplation. It seems undeniable that the Mirror’s spirituality is far removed from a Lollard one, but the former does not exist solely as an antidote to the latter. Rather, the Mirror’s views on lay piety and the Bible’s proper place in it are more interesting than their absolute opposition to Lollardy permits us to see.

Margery’s Meditations

Love revised the Meditationes so that it accords with lay piety as he defined it: Gospel meditations concern themselves solely with the material world, and so the faculty of imagination that they use and the audience they appeal to are equally material. The Gospel meditation then meets and defines the whole of lay capacity. Love did not, however, issue the final word on either Gospel meditations or imagination, a point that Margery Kempe’s Book (c. 1436) supports. Through the visions that she variously characterizes as “thoughts,” “meditations,” “revelations,” and “contemplations,” Margery experienced Christ’s humanity as a bridge to his divinity and accordingly treated her spirituality as utterly sophisticated. Confidently chastising and contradicting clerics, Margery imposes no limitations on the efficacy of her piety or the authority it provides her. Margery may hesitate when offered access to the divinity of God, but unlike Julian of Norwich, she proceeds and weds God by means of Christ’s humanity. God the Father appears to Margery, commends her for her wholehearted devotion to Christ’s humanity, and says, “Dowtyr, I wil han þe weddyd to my Godhede, for I schal shewyn þe my prevyteys & my cownselys.” Margery responds with trepidation: “sche cowde no skylle of pe dalyawns of þe Godhede, for al hir lof & al hir affecyon

110 Nicholas Watson similarly writes that, from the perspective of his audience, Love’s “voice is that of the Church, the body of Christ on earth, and so is close to being the voice of God”: “Conceptions of the Word,” p. 97.
111 Love is typically named as the primary source for Margery’s spirituality. See, for instance, Simpson, Literary History, 2:446, or Barbara Newman, “Medieval Visionary Culture,” p. 31 (Newman also names the Meditationes as a likely source). I would propose The Prickynge of Love, whose Latin title Margery twice mentions and whose spirituality is much closer to Margery’s, as a more appropriate source.
was set in pe manhode of Crist & þerof cowde sche good skylle & sche wolde for no-thyng a partyd þerþro.”113 Claiming a greater proficiency with and capacity for Christ's humanity than his divinity, she appears to adopt the boundaries that Love prescribes for his lay meditator. However, Jesus then appears to Margery and facilitates her higher union; as he answers her questions, he, the humanity of God, literally mediates between Margery and the Godhead. Likewise, the Speculum devotorum, a fifteenth-century translation of the Meditationes also produced at Mount Grace after Love’s, quotes an address from God in Suso’s Horologium sapientiae: “Be hyt knowe to the, that hyt ys not ȝeve to come to the hynesse of the godhede or unusyd suetnesse but to folke I drawe be a manyr meke aﬀeccyon of feyhte & love be the byttyrnesse of my manhede & passyon.”114 The author of the Speculum here recalls the ambitions of the Meditationes, but he realizes them far less systematically than the Meditationes itself. Traces of the Meditationes' spiritual program thus remain, but in less systematic form.

When Love presented his vernacular Gospel meditation for the laypeople whom he expressly designated as its audience, he simultaneously scaled back its spiritual efficacy. The Gospel meditation accordingly became lay by way of losing its spiritual sophistication, and its translated inwardness is far less potent than the inwardness of its Latin forebear. Love certainly perceived spiritual value in the devotional exercise he counseled, but he, like his influential predecessors Walter Hilton and the Cloud author, limited the spiritual potency of Gospel meditations when he made them lay, distinguishing them with new fervor from the higher spiritual activity of contemplation. If the vernacular Gospel meditation represents a nascent form of anything to take hold in the Reformation, perhaps it is stronger oversight of devotional activities (whether by church or state). Or perhaps it is better not to read the genre forward but to see in it simply a medieval struggle to determine what a vernacular spirituality should look like.

113 Ibid. 35, p. 86.