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The Imitation of Christ's Spiritual Interiority Dramatized in Elckerlijc/Everyman

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La classification conventionnelle d'*Everyman* comme une moralité néglige souvent la piété intensément intériorisée qui distingue cette pièce des moralités anglaises antérieures comme *Wisdom* et *Mankind*. Si David Leigh fait valoir que leur « morale eschatologique » montre la dépendance des moralités anglaises sur les pièces antérieures ayant trait à la fin des temps dans les cycles de mystères anglais, parce qu'*Everyman* est une traduction de la pièce moyen-néerlandaise *Elckerlijc*, on devrait aussi chercher des influences plus immédiates aux Pays-Bas.

Les Pays-Bas étant le centre de la *devotio moderna* au XV^e siècle, ce pays a vu se multiplier des mouvements promouvant des morales en tension avec les formes traditionnelles d'organisation sociale et de pratique ecclésiastique. Par l'intermédiaire d'œuvres comme *L'Imitation du Christ* de Thomas à Kempis (1379-1471) et de groupes tels que les Frères de la Vie Commune et les Canons de Windesheim, l'influence de la *devotio moderna* s'est répandue hors des Pays-Bas. Dès 1450 *L'Imitation* de Kempis a été traduite en anglais, et l'importation littéraire d'*Elckerlijc* fait partie d'un courant d'influence néerlandaise sur la littérature anglaise à la fin du Moyen Age et à la Renaissance qui se poursuivra jusqu'au XVI^e siècle.

Geert Kazemier défend la thèse de la dépendance littéraire d'*Everyman* sur les écrits de Jan van Ruusbroec, mystique flamand du XIV^e siècle. Je soutiens que, malgré la différence de langue originale, on trouve un modèle plus proche pour les thèmes moraux dominants de *Elckerlijc/Everyman* dans *L'Imitation du Christ*, œuvre moins mystique et plus pratique qui, ayant été imprimée dans plus de cent éditions dans six langues, y compris le néerlandais, avant 1500, est un des textes les plus largement distribués du XV^e siècle. Les quatre traités que comprend *L'Imitation du Christ* esquissent une conversion de la personne qui suit le chemin d'une morale progressivement intériorisée culminant dans la participation sacramentelle sous l'égide d'un ecclésiastique. *Elckerlijc/Everyman* suit ce modèle, avec une exception importante à examiner ci-dessous, dans laquelle une personne renonce aux vanités du monde transitoire en faveur de la conscience contemplative de son propre isolement et de la nécessité de la grâce divine. Cette dépendance d'*Everyman* sur le modèle de Kempis en matière de conduite morale fait entrer la *devotio moderna* dans le théâtre anglais.

The conventional classification of *Everyman* as a morality play often overlooks the intensely interiorized piety that distinguishes *Everyman* from earlier English morality plays such as *Wisdom* and *Mankind*. While David Leigh argued that this “eschatological morality” demonstrated the dependence of English morality plays upon earlier doomsday plays within English mystery cycles, because *Everyman* is a translation of the Middle

Dutch play *Elckerlijc* one should also search for more immediate influences from the Low Countries.¹

As the center of the *devotio moderna* in the 15th century, the Low Countries witnessed the rise of movements promoting moralities in tension with traditional forms of social organization and ecclesiastic practice. Through works such as Thomas à Kempis's (1379-1471) *The Imitation of Christ* and related groups such as the Brethren of the Common Life and the Windesheim Canons, the *devotio moderna's* influence spread outside the Low Countries. By 1450 à Kempis's *Imitation* had been translated into English, and the literary importation of *Elckerlijc* was part of a stream of late-medieval and Renaissance Dutch influence on English literature that would continue through the 16th century.²

Geert Kazemier argued for *Everyman's* literary dependence upon the writings of the 14th century Flemish mystic Jan van Ruusbroec.³ I claim that, despite the difference in the original languages of the texts, a closer model for the dominant moral themes in *Elckerlijc/Everyman* is the less mystical and more practical *Imitation of Christ*, which was printed in over one hundred editions in six languages, including Dutch, before 1500, making it one of the most widely distributed texts of the 15th century.⁴ The four treatises that comprise *The Imitation of Christ* outline a person's conversion along a path of progressively interiorized morality culminating

¹ See David J. Leigh, "The Doomsday Mystery Play: An Eschatological Morality," *Modern Philology* 67/3 (1970), pp. 211-23. In highlighting *Everyman's* status as a translation, I do not deny that its author deliberately crafted his English-language adaptation in such a way as to capture the interest of an intended audience different from that of *Elckerlijc*, but unlike the intentions of other authors, my goal in this piece is not to render aesthetic judgment on the comparative literary merits of these two plays. Essays cited in this article (e.g. Ladd, Pritchard, Vanhoutte) call attention to the ways in which *Everyman's* creator edits *Elckerlijc* in distinctive and interesting ways. Nevertheless, responsible source criticism must insist that interpretations of *Everyman* always remain conscious of its original provenance, and the themes to which I call attention here are central in both plays. The readers will see that this interpretative principle governs the present essay.

² See *The Imitation of Christ: The First English Translation of the 'Imitatio Christi'*, ed. B. J. H. Biggs (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Roger Lovatt, "The 'Imitation of Christ' in Late Medieval England: The Alexander Prize Essay," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 18 (1968), 97-121; Ben Parsons, "Dutch Influences on English Literary Culture in the Early Renaissance, 1470-1650," *Literature Compass* 4/6 (2007), 1577-1596.

³ Geert Kazemier, "Elckerlijc, Het Dal sonder Wederkeeren, en de Mystiek," *De Nieuwe Taalgids* 34 (1940), 87-96, 116-28.

⁴ See the introduction to *The Imitation of Christ: A New Reading of the 1441 Latin Autograph Manuscript*, trans. William C. Creasy (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1989), p. xiii.

in sacramental participation under the aegis of a cleric. *Elckerlijc/Everyman* follows this pattern, with one prominent exception to be examined below, in which a person renounces the vanities of the transitory world in favor of contemplative awareness of one's own isolation and need for divine grace. In its reliance upon à Kempis's model for moral behavior then, *Everyman* marks the *devotio moderna's* dramatic transformation into English literature.

I will proceed in the following three stages. First (1), I will briefly recapitulate some of the moral ideals in à Kempis's classic work that illustrate *The Imitation of Christ's* distinctive version of spiritual interiority. Second (2), I will examine how *Elckerlijc* dramatizes these ideals in literary form. Third (3), I will briefly use recent scholarship to place the English appearances of *The Imitation of Christ*, *Elckerlijc*, and *Everyman* in a common early 16th century historical context.

1. Moral Interiority in *The Imitation of Christ*

At the beginning it is necessary to distinguish the ideal of moral interiority from the ideal of the vowed monastic life. What I term moral interiority does not necessarily entail formal and institutionalized separation from the world by means of monastic life in the manner of the story of Barlaam and Josaphat in *The Golden Legend* of Jacobus de Voragine, one of the commonly cited literary influences on *Elckerlijc*.⁵ Rather, the ideal of moral interiority is a spiritual ideal that locates what is essential to human life in the decisions of free will, the commitment to performing good deeds, and the affective devotion to religious piety. An ideology of moral interiority will privilege these facets of human existence over the acquisition of material goods and comforts, the exterior results of one's good deeds, communal relationships, social and political reforms, and any other elements of human life that transcend the scope of an individual's privatized decisions.⁶

⁵ The editors of the recent *Everyman and Its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc* draw this parallel between *Elckerlijc* and this story from *The Golden Legend* in their introduction to the plays; see *Everyman and Its Dutch Original, Elckerlijc*, ed. and trans. Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh, and Ton J. Broos (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 2007). This text is also available online at <<http://www.lib.rochester.edu/camelot/teams/daevfrm.htm>> (January 23, 2009). All quoted translations from *Elckerlijc* in this essay are taken from this online edition of the text. See Lawrence V. Ryan, "Doctrine and Dramatic Structure in *Everyman*," *Speculum* 32 (1957), 722-735, especially pp. 726-27, for an understanding of how the authors of *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman* have adapted the older Barlaam and Josaphat story.

⁶ Attentive readers of *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman* will note that the character "Virtue" ("Duecht" in Dutch) in *Elckerlijc* is translated in *Everyman* as "Good Deeds." If

Late medieval spiritualities that emphasized moral interiority mark a historical shift away from older monastic and mendicant ideals grounded in communal uniformity, recitation of the divine office in choir, and social praxis. Thomas à Kempis, the Windesheim Canons, and the members of the Brethren of the Common Life lived during this period of spiritual transition. The spiritual founder of the Brethren, Gerard Groote (1340-84), emphasized a rigorous balance between both active and contemplative ideals as he sought to reconcile older monastic patterns of rural sanctity with the increasingly urban lifestyle in which his followers were immersed. Something of this balance is captured in one of Groote's surviving spiritual instructions, which draws upon Augustine's classic formulation of God as *interior intimo meo* in book three of the *Confessions*. Groote writes:

Thou hast one cell without, another within. The outward cell is the house wherein thy soul and thy body dwell together; the inward is thy conscience, which ought to be dwelt in by God (who is more inward than all thine inward parts) and by thy spirit. . . . Wherefore love thou thine inward cell, and love the outward; and give unto each its proper service . . . and get for thyself the lordship therein.⁷

Scholars such as Ross Fuller have reminded us how these groups of lay canons, struggling to maintain an ideal of spiritual interiority in the active world, had to fight consistently for ecclesiastic legitimacy in the 15th century. In the wake of the Council of Constance (1414-18), Jean Gerson countered Dominican criticism of lay attempts to live the evangelical councils of poverty and celibacy outside of established religious orders, and both Gerson and Pierre d'Ailly vigorously defended the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life.⁸ The *devotio moderna*, or "new devotion," promoted by the Brothers and Sisters and other lay religious groups in the

examined without reference to the context of the play, one could make the argument that such a translation marks a move in the direction of greater moral exteriority. By itself, however, the translated name of the character of Duecht does not convincingly demonstrate that *Everyman* moves in this thematic direction. No beneficiaries of *Everyman's* good deeds are integrated into the dialogue of the play, and *Everyman's* good deeds are done primarily for the benefit of the dying protagonist's own salvation.

⁷ Quoted in Ross Fuller, *The Brotherhood of the Common Life and Its Influence* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. x. Augustine's classic description of God as *interior intimo meo* is found in *Confessions* 3.6.11.

⁸ Those familiar with the manuscript tradition of *The Imitation of Christ* will recall that Gerson was widely identified as its author as late as the 19th century. For a review of the history of attribution, see Creasy's introduction to *The Imitation of Christ*, pp. xvi-xxi; also, R. R. Post, *The Modern Devotion: Confrontation with Reformation and Humanism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), pp. 524-33; and John Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, trans. John Van Engen, with a preface by Heiko A. Oberman (New York: Paulist, 1988), pp. 13-17.

Low Countries understood itself as distinct from both the older monastic spirituality and the scholasticism dominant in the universities. The new *devotio* pursued by the Brotherhood was summarized by Groote's co-founder Florence Radewijns (1350-1400), who was an early mentor for Thomas à Kempis during the 1390s at Deventer, as "nothing other than the desire of the soul to please God."⁹ From the beginning of the new devotion then, the "practical mysticism" of this movement occupied a perilous position, one which was obviously a break from older sedentary models of vowed religious life and yet deliberately indebted to monastic ideals of withdrawal and separation from the world. In pursuing such a *via media* one must, writes Thomas, consider oneself an exile on earth.¹⁰ This distinctive spirituality is well characterized by John Van Engen, who writes: "The interiority toward which they strove was not so much that of the late medieval mystics or related groups, for the Modern Devout said almost nothing about mystical union. The proper point of reference or comparison was rather the perfunctory practice that apparently characterized so much of late medieval religious life."¹¹

In its first book, the *Imitation of Christ* displays its debt to the monastic ideology of seclusion and purgation by identifying wisdom as searching for the kingdom of heaven through contempt of the world.¹² Thomas à Kempis's first example of vanity, that vice that ignores God's kingdom by embracing the world, is trust in riches that perish, a theme that *The Imitation of Christ* shares with *Elckerlijc*.¹³ Thomas's estimation of knowledge in the *Imitation's* first book is higher than his approbation of riches, but it is heavily qualified in two respects. First, in recalling a classical biblical allusion that also appears in the prologue to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, Thomas asserts that knowledge without the fear of God and

⁹ Quoted in Fuller, *Brotherhood of the Common Life*, p. 82.

¹⁰ I use the phrase "practical mysticism" in the sense employed by Albert Hyma, meaning a mysticism that sought to serve one's neighbor via an educational apostolate in an urban setting. See Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance: A History of the "Devotio Moderna,"* 2nd ed. (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1965), p. 120. For more on the "mixed life" of the Brethren of the Common Life, see Fuller, *Brotherhood of the Common Life*, pp. 99-113; also, see Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, 1.17.

¹¹ Van Engen, *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, p. 27.

¹² See Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.1.

¹³ The theme of wealth and social criticism in *Everyman* is treated in Elizabeth Harper and Britt Mize, "Material Economy, Spiritual Economy, and Social Critique in *Everyman*," *Comparative Drama* 40/3 (2006), 263-311. Also see Roger A. Ladd, "'My Condicion Is Mannes Soul to Kill': Everyman's Mercantile Salvation," *Comparative Drama* 41/1 (2007), 57-78; V. A. Kolve, "*Everyman* and the Parable of the Talents," in *Medieval English Drama: Essays Critical and Contextual*, ed. Jerome Taylor and Alan H. Nelson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 16-40.

submission to Christ is worthless.¹⁴ Second, Thomas claims that salvific knowledge is interiorized knowledge as opposed to knowledge of external things, as he writes: “a humble rustic who serves God is better than a proud intellectual who neglects his soul to study the course of the stars. He who knows himself well becomes mean in his own eyes and is not happy when praised by men.”¹⁵ For Thomas, love transcends all merely human wisdom.¹⁶ This Augustinian rhetoric of interiority and corresponding contempt for exteriority continues in the seventh chapter with Thomas’s succinct claim that “vain is the man who puts his trust in men, in created things.”¹⁷ On this point, Thomas is a faithful disciple of Groote, who deemed an anonymous treatise titled *The Meditations of Saint Bernard on Acquiring Knowledge of the Human Condition* required spiritual reading for the Brethren. The *Meditations* advise the reader that “I shall turn from those things that be outward to inward things, and from inward things I shall lift my mind to things above, that I may know whereof I came and whither I go . . . And so, by knowledge of myself I may ascend and come to the knowledge of God.”¹⁸ These cautionary notes regarding wealth and

¹⁴ See Proverbs 1:7; 9:10; Psalm 111:10; Benedict, *Rule*, Prologue; à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.2; 1.14.

¹⁵ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.2, trans. Aloysius Croft and Harold Bolton (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1940). This translation is also online at <<http://www.leaderu.com/cyber/books/imitation/imitation.html#toc>> (January 23, 2009); subsequent translations to *The Imitation of Christ* in this essay will reference this online version by book and chapter numbers. “Melior est profecto rusticus humilis, qui Deo fervit, quam superbus philosophus, qui, se neglecto, cursum coeli confiderat. Qui bene se ipsum cognoscit sibi ipsi vilescit, nec laudibus delectatur humanis” (p. 7); the Latin quotations from *The Imitation of Christ* in this essay are quoted from *De Imitatione Christi*, ed. Tiburzio Lupo (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982). The numbers in parentheses after the Latin quotations from Kempis refer to page numbers in this critical edition.

¹⁶ See Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.14.

¹⁷ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.7; “Vanus est qui spem suam ponit in hominibus aut in creaturis” (p. 23); see also 2.1: “Do not place much confidence in weak and mortal man, helpful and friendly though he be”; “Non est magna fiducia ponenda in homine fragili et mortali, etiamsi utilis sit et dilectus” (p. 90); 3.10: “It is a great honor, a great glory to serve You and to despise all things for Your sake”; “Magnus honor, magna gloria tibi servire et omnia propter te contemnere” (p. 160); and 3.42: “You ought, therefore, to be so dead to such human affections as to wish as far as lies within you to be without the fellowship of men”; “Ita mortuus esse debes talibus affectionibus dilectorum hominum, ut quantum ad te pertinent, sine humano optes esse consortio” (p. 241).

¹⁸ Quoted in Fuller, *Brotherhood of the Common Life*, 123. Groote’s list of recommended readings appears on pages 70-71 of *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, ed. Van Engen. Book two of the *Imitation* begins by quoting Jesus’ words in Luke

learning contrast the ideals of the Brotherhood of the Common Life and *The Imitation of Christ* with the ideals of both the expanding merchant class and the university theologians.

This preference for spiritual interiority leads Thomas into his distinctive interpretation of the late medieval theme of *memento mori* towards the end of book one of the *Imitation*. “Truly, the inner man,” writes Thomas, “is greatly burdened in this world by the necessities of the body, and for this reason the Prophet prayed that he might be as free from them as possible, when he said: ‘From my necessities, O Lord, deliver me’ (Ps. 24:17). . . . woe to those who love this miserable and corruptible life.”¹⁹ He continues in the next chapter: “[A]ct as though you were to die this very day. If you had a good conscience you would not fear death very much. It is better to avoid sin than to fear death.”²⁰ This same chapter warns: “Do not put your trust in friends and relatives, and do not put off the care of your soul till later, for men will forget you more quickly than you think.”²¹ A moral exhortation that follows can serve as a synopsis of not only the *Imitation* but also of *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman*:

See, then, dearly beloved, the great danger from which you can free yourself and the great fear from which you can be saved, if only you will always be wary and mindful of death. Try to live now in such a manner that at the moment of death you may be glad rather than fearful. Learn to die to the world now, that then you may begin to live with Christ. Learn to spurn all things now, that then you may freely go to Him.²²

17:21: “The kingdom of God is within you”; *Imitation of Christ*, 2.1; “Regnum Dei intra vos est” (p. 89). The interior/exterior contrast continues in this chapter, as Thomas writes: “Forsake this wretched world and your soul shall find rest. Learn to despise external things, to devote yourself to those that are within, and you will see the kingdom of God come unto you”; “relinque hunc miserum mundum, et inveniet anima tua requiem. Disce exteriora contemnere et ad interiora te dare, et videbis regnum Dei intra te venire” (p. 89).

¹⁹ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.22: “Valde enim gravatur interior homo necessitatibus corporalibus in hoc mundo. Unde Propheta devote rogat quatenus ab istis liber esse valeat dicens: De necessitatibus meis erue me, Domine. Sed vae non cognoscentibus suam miseriam et corruptibilem vitam!” (p. 67).

²⁰ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.23: “Sic te in omni facto et cogitatu deberes tenere, quasi statim esses moriturus. Si bonam conscientiam haberes, non multum mortem timeres. Melius esset peccata cavere quam mortem figure” (p. 70).

²¹ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.23: “Noli confidere super amicos et proximos, nec in futuris salutem tuam differas, quia citius obliviscentur tui homines, quam existimas” (p. 72).

²² Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.23: “Eia, carissime, de quanto periculo te poteris liberare, de quam magno timore eripere, si modo semper timoratus fueris et de morte suspectus! Stude nunc taliter vivere, ut in hora mortis valeas potius gaudere,

Later in book two of the *Imitation*, Thomas characterizes this moral ideal as a “*morientem vitam*,” a “dying life.”²³

Thomas's advocacy of interiority cannot of course be pushed too far into a Stoic direction. In *The Imitation of Christ* human interiority does not translate to autocracy, which becomes clear in the third book when the dominant motif shifts from purgation to illumination, illustrated by its emphasizing the benefits of human dependence upon God. Here the *Imitation* moves to a resolutely Christocentric focus, taking the form of a dialogue between Christ and the disciple. The disciple cries out, “Let not Moses speak to me, therefore, but You, the Lord my God, everlasting truth, speak lest I die and prove barren if I am merely given outward advice and am not inflamed within.”²⁴ Christ in turn tells the disciple: “For a man's merits are not measured by many visions or consolations, or by knowledge of the Scriptures, or by his being in a higher position than others, but by the truth of his humility, by his capacity for divine charity, by his constancy in seeking purely and entirely the honor of God, by his disregard and positive contempt of self.”²⁵

The subject of the *Imitation of Christ* changes dramatically in book four, however, and we must recall that the books of the *Imitation* originally circulated separately in the early 15th century. It is possible that à Kempis, like many a religious thinker who has aged, had misgivings about possible misinterpretations of his work. After all, Gerson had attacked the mystical writings of Jan van Ruusbroec on the grounds that they failed to account for the essential difference between the soul and God.²⁶ While the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life remained loyal to the Roman pope during the Great Schism in the early 15th century, suspect groups such as the ill-defined Free Spirits were present in Northern Europe.²⁷ Just as the early Franciscans promoted the reception of Catholic sacraments to distinguish

quam timere. Disce nunc mori mundo, ut tunc incipias vivere cum Christo. Disce nunc omnia contemnere, ut tunc possis libere ad Christum pergere” (p. 73).

²³ See à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 2.12.

²⁴ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 3.2: “Non ergo mihi loquatur Moyses, sed tu, Domine Deus meus, aeterna veritas, ne forte moriar et sine fructu efficiar, si fuero tantum foris admonitus et intus non accensus” (p. 136).

²⁵ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 3.7: “Nam merita non sunt ex hoc aestimanda, si quis plures visions aut consolations habeat vel si peritus sit in Scripturis aut in altiori gradu ponatur; sed si fuerit vera humilitate fundatus et divina caritate repletus, si Dei honorem pure et integer semper quaerat, si se ipsum nihil reputet et in veritate despiciat.” (p. 153).

²⁶ See André Combes, *Essai sur la critique de Ruysbroeck par Gerson*, 4 vols. (Paris: Vrin, 1945-72).

²⁷ See Robert E. Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit in the Later Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 164-81.

themselves from heretical anticlericalists such as the Cathari and the Waldenses, so too the fourth book of the *Imitation of Christ* moves in this direction. Transubstantiation promised medieval Christians a material encounter with the divine, and à Kempis attempts to balance reception of the Eucharist with inculcating a proper subjective disposition in the reader: “you should prepare yourself for it by constantly renewing your heart and pondering deeply the great mystery of salvation.”²⁸ After urging the reader to prepare to receive Holy Communion frequently by confessing one’s unworthiness à Kempis then moves into an exaltation of the priesthood: “Great is the Mystery and great the dignity of priests to whom is given that which has not been granted the angels. For priests alone, rightly ordained in the Church, have power to celebrate Mass and consecrate the Body of Christ.”²⁹

The spiritual balance between interiority and exteriority in relation to the reception of the Eucharist is succinctly encapsulated in the opening lines of a short treatise by à Kempis’s contemporary John Brinckerinck (d. 1419), whom à Kempis mentions in the chronicle that he wrote for the monastery of Mount St. Agnes.³⁰ Brinckerinck’s explanation of the proper taking of communion defines worthy communication in terms of interiority:

We receive our dear Lord in two ways, spiritually and sacramentally. When we receive him sacramentally, we do so in great danger whenever we approach him without any inwardness. We approach without inwardness when we do not confess our faults nor wish to and have for that no remorse, or again when we stand firm in certain serious faults and do not wish to turn away. But the more we are ready to confess our faults and make a firm resolution to better ourselves, the more inwardly we approach the holy sacrament.³¹

To close this first section, the concluding sacramental theme of the *Imitation of Christ*, if not out of place, is certainly different in emphasis from the strong accent on interiority in the preceding three books. Thomas à Kempis’s work encapsulates a tension in late medieval Christianity between inner experience and orthodox sacramental theology, in which the

²⁸ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 4.2: “Ideo nova semper mentis renovatione ad hoc disponere te debes et magnum salutis mysterium attenta consideratione pensare” (p. 315).

²⁹ Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 4.5: “Grande mysterium et magna dignitas Sacerdotum, quibus datum est quod Angelis non est concessum. Soli namque sacerdotes in Ecclesia rite ordinati potestatem habent celebrandi et Corpus Christi consecrandi” (p. 323).

³⁰ See Thomas à Kempis, *The Chronicle of the Canons Regular of Mount St. Agnes*, trans. John A. P. Thomas (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1906), pp. 197-98.

³¹ John Brinckerinck, “On the Holy Sacrament,” in *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, p. 231.

former is given heuristic priority over the latter without rejecting it outright. As we will see, this tension is also present in *Elckerlijc*.

2. Moral Interiority in *Elckerlijc*

Despite the scholarly achievement represented with the recent critical edition of *Elckerlijc* by Clifford Davidson, Martin W. Walsh, and Ton J. Broos, we are no closer to ascertaining the author of *Elckerlijc* than we were decades ago. In arguing for the influence of *The Imitation of Christ* on *Elckerlijc* my arguments for extended thematic connections are accordingly tentative and subject to further correction in the light of ongoing researches. The early manuscript tradition for *Elckerlijc* is incomplete, and to my knowledge there is no manuscript tradition that would link these two works in a common collection of 15th or 16th century writings. In the structural analysis that follows then I look to the two texts themselves for points of comparison, examining how *Elckerlijc* should be interpreted in part as a dramatic allegorization of à Kempis's assertion that "a man is upset and distracted only in proportion as he engrosses himself in externals."³²

The link between the themes of *memento mori* and interiority found in *The Imitation of Christ* is different from the treatment of these topics in other English moralities, where these two themes do not appear intertwined in this manner. Take for example the 14th century fragment *The Pride of Life*.³³ In this play the haughty king ("Rex") refuses to listen to the admonitions of his queen ("Regina") or the bishop ("Episcopus") that he prepare himself for the afterlife. In addressing the theme of *memento mori*, Episcopus conjures the specter of eternal punishment, the "delful derknys," for the young king, but his magisterial warnings are not couched as Augustinian elevations of the inner life over the outer world. A closer but still insufficient parallel is in the play *Wisdom*, where the Christ-figure Wisdom recalls the patristic and medieval theme of *imago Dei* in advising Anima ("Soul") where to find wisdom: "By knowynge of yowrslyff ye may have felynge / Wat God ys in yowr sowle sensyble. / The more knowynge of yowr self passyble, / The more veryly ye shall God knowe."³⁴ Wisdom's subsequent explanations on this theme, however, outline the faculties of the

³² Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 2.1: "Tantum homo impeditur et distrahitur, quantum [sic] sibi res attrahit" (p. 93).

³³ Critical editions of the morality plays *The Pride of Life*, *Everyman*, *Wisdom*, and *Mankind* can be found in *Early English Drama: An Anthology*, ed. John C. Coldewey (New York: Garland, 1993). References to this text will cite the line numbers of the relevant play, followed by the page number in parentheses.

³⁴ *Wisdom*, ll. 95-99 (p. 74); also, see l. 252 (p. 78): "Thus by knowynge of me to knowynge of Gode I assende."

soul that are later introduced as characters in the drama – Mind, Will, and Understanding – and the elevation of spiritual interiority over the sensible world is not present to nearly the same extent. In *Wisdom*, Anima’s “Five Wits” are chastised for their inconstancy in virtue, but they never depart from their protagonist in the course of the play as they do in *Elckerlijc*.³⁵

Elckerlijc opens with God’s lament that humanity has forgotten God due to its concern with worldly riches: “They are enamored of worldly treasures, / which they have chosen over God, / and have forgotten me, who heretofore / had suffered death for the profit of man.”³⁶ Throughout the play, the link God draws between death and interiorized spiritual profit stands in stark contrast to the connection humanity, represented by Elckerlijc, draws between the acquisition of goods and exteriorized worldly profit. At the end of God’s opening monologue, God returns to the theme of riches. This time God introduces the theme of justice, which leads in turn to God’s summoning death: “How many goods have I freely lent them / out of the treasure of my mercy / that thus belong to them by right. However, they are so foolish, / and blinded by earthly goods, / that justice must be done / on Everyman, who is living so without fear. / Where are you, my Death, who no one spares?”³⁷ Subsequently rebuffing Elckerlijc’s attempts to purchase a longer span of life with exterior goods, Death chastises Elckerlijc with a question that turns their initial exchange toward the theme of spiritual purgation and the cultivation of spiritual interiority: “How can you be so foolish, / Everyman, you have five senses after all, / and are so impure inside?”³⁸ This encounter between Elckerlijc and Death provides *Elckerlijc* with its first structural theme as the drama progresses towards the ideal of interiority.

Having failed in his attempt to bargain with Death, Elckerlijc seeks the help of Fellowship, who originally promises Elckerlijc that he will

³⁵ See *Wisdom*, ll. 295-300 (p. 80), 1093-1100 (p. 102).

³⁶ *Elckerlijc*, ll. 6-9; “Opten aertschen scat sijn si versot, / Dien hebben si voer Gode vercoren, / Ende mi vergheten, die hier te voren / Die doot heb geleden doer tsmenschen profijt.”

³⁷ *Elckerlijc*, ll. 40-46: “Hoe menich goet ic hem vry heb verleent / Uut mijnder ontfermherticheydens tresoor / Dat hem recht toe hoort. Nochtans sijne soe door, / Ende verblent int aertsche goet, / Als dat justicie wercken moet / Aen Elckerlijc, die leeft so onvervaert. / Waer sidi, mijn Doot, die niemant en spaert?”

³⁸ *Elckerlijc*, ll. 144-46: “Hoe sidi aldus onvroet, / Elckerlijc, daer ghi hebt vijf sinnen, / Dat ghi soe onsuver sijt van sinnen”; one should note that the *Imitation* 1.24 advises readers to ponder “how you shall stand before the strict Judge from Whom nothing is hidden and Who will pronounce judgment in all justice, accepting neither bribes nor excuses”; “qualiter ante districtum iudicem stabis, cui nihil est occultum, qui muneribus non placatur nec excusationes recipit, sed quod justum est iudicabit” (p. 75).

accompany him to hell.³⁹ Fellowship's recantation of this pledge to Elckerlijc upon hearing of Elckerlijc's encounter with Death begins the second structural theme in *Elckerlijc* – Elckerlijc's successive disappointments as he is abandoned by others whom he relies upon to accompany him to his final judgment. Fellowship's departure is followed by those of Kinsman, Cousin, and Goods, symbolizing the severing of Elckerlijc's social and material connections.

Elckerlijc's move from purgation to interior illumination begins with his encounter with the figure of Knowledge, who leads Elckerlijc to Confession. Just as *The Imitation of Christ* defined saving knowledge as interiorized knowledge of one's own self, so Knowledge in *Elckerlijc* refers not to scholarly learning or ratiocination, but to the acknowledgement of one's own sins and subsequent contrition.⁴⁰ After Elckerlijc consents to Confession's advice to scourge his body as a sign of penance, he remarks upon his spiritual progress: "God be honored in this! / Now I shall begin my penance, for the light has enlightened me within, though these knots are harsh and hard."⁴¹ Virtue grows stronger as Elckerlijc holds his body in contempt, in accord with à Kempis's somber injunction: "Unless you do violence to yourself you will not overcome vice. So long as we live in this fragile body, we can neither be free from sin nor live without weariness and sorrow."⁴²

What follows next sets the stage for a new round of abandonments in which the theme of *memento mori* is interpreted in terms of a movement towards increasing spiritual interiority, just as in *The Imitation of Christ*. The new characters who emerge after the penitential scourging – Beauty, Strength, Prudence, and Five Senses – represent not exterior relations but facets of Elckerlijc's characteristics and personal abilities.⁴³ Just as Elckerlijc's friend and relatives earlier pledged their steadfast allegiance to Elckerlijc, so too do these new characters, and just as Elckerlijc's associates renege on their promises, so too do Elckerlijc's allegorized capacities. The revolt begins with those two traits that are connected to the outer body. Beauty rebels against descending into the grave and chafes at

³⁹ See *Elckerlijc*, ll. 208-09.

⁴⁰ See Ryan, "Doctrine and Dramatic Structure," pp. 728-29.

⁴¹ *Elckerlijc*, ll. 527-30: "God si hier in Gheert! / Nu wil ic mijn penitencie beghinnen, / Want dlicht heeft mi verlicht van binnen, / Al sijn dese knopen strenghe ende hardt."

⁴² Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, 1.22: "nisi tibi vim feceris, vitium non superabis. Quamdiu istud fragile corpus gerimus, sine peccato esse non possumus nec sine tædio et dolore vivere" (pp. 68-69). Also see 1.23: "Chastise your body in penance now, that then you may have the confidence born of certainty"; "Castiga nunc corpus tuum per poenitentiam, ut tunc valeas certam habere confidentiam" (p. 73).

⁴³ See Ryan, "Doctrine and Dramatic Structure," pp. 729-30.

Elckerlijc's admonition to die to the world.⁴⁴ Strength then follows Beauty's example and takes leave.⁴⁵ With Elckerlijc's physical capabilities removed, those capabilities that connect one's mental world with the outer world – Prudence and Five Senses – also depart.⁴⁶ At Elckerlijc's death, only Knowledge and Virtue have remained with him.

From Elckerlijc's encounter with Death to his actual death, his progress toward greater moral interiority and his corresponding salvation has one glaring inconsistent exception, one which I must confront forthrightly because it seems problematic for my thesis. While Elckerlijc's encounters with his friend and kin proved disappointing, there is one person whom Knowledge and Five Senses commend to Elckerlijc – Priesthood.⁴⁷ The character of Priesthood has no dialogue in the extant texts of *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman*, and we are unable to reconstruct what stage direction might have been followed at this point in the Dutch text.⁴⁸ For the thesis of this current essay, what is important is that the sacramental and hierarchical mediation of the priest marks an interruption in Elckerlijc's transition to moral interiority. Since the character of Five Senses is rooted in the tangible and sensual world as a matter of course, it is appropriate that the character of Five Senses provides an encomium on the seven sacraments. *Elckerlijc* is especially concerned to stress the eucharistic doctrine of transubstantiation, which orthodox medieval Catholicism could not dispense with in service of an ideology of intangibility. In the words of Five Senses, during the performance of the Mass the priest is able to invert the normal cosmic hierarchy that privileges the spiritual over the material, and the invisible over the visible. Five Senses says: "For every priest can without doubt make, / with five words on the altar / during Mass (be sure about this), / God's body, true flesh and blood, / and holds his Creator in

⁴⁴ See *Elckerlijc* ll. 746-59.

⁴⁵ See *Elckerlijc* ll. 764-85.

⁴⁶ See *Elckerlijc* ll. 786-808.

⁴⁷ See *Elckerlijc* ll. 660-81.

⁴⁸ The lack of clear stage direction at this point in *Elckerlijc/Everyman* needs to be remembered when considering Harper and Mize's interpretation of *Everyman* regarding the importance of the priestly interlude. In arguing against interpretations that minimize the communal and social dimensions in *Everyman*, they draw conclusions from similar episodes in which protagonists leave the stage in the English morality plays *Wisdom* and *Nature*. Although Harper and Mize have perceptively drawn attention to the ways in which the English translator has creatively adapted *Elckerlijc* to highlight socio-economic themes, so long as scholarly consensus grants *Elckerlijc* temporal priority in relation to *Everyman*, any structural analysis of *Everyman* must grant pride of place to its predecessor by first testing its conclusions against the Dutch original, as both these authors admit. See Harper and Mize, "Material Economy, Spiritual Economy, and Social Critique," pp. 281-85, 306.

his hands.”⁴⁹ And, in a parallel with the treatment of priesthood and the Eucharist in *The Imitation of Christ*, the play refers to the same comparison between priests and angels, as Five Senses closes his encomium by stating: “Whoever needs comfort from sins / can find no refuge / but with a priest. / This the Lord has bestowed upon the priest, and he is present here [in the world] in his place. / Thus he is placed above the angels.”⁵⁰

This long digression on the priesthood and the sacraments has attracted attention in previous scholarship on *Elckerlijc/Everyman*. Some have judged the episode out of place, while Thomas Van Laan, Elizabeth Harper, and Britt Mize grant these lines central importance in their respective analyses. Van Laan interprets the passage theologically in accord with the medieval theology of grace perfecting nature (*gratia perfecit naturam*). If viewed in this light, the subsequent appearance of Beauty, Strength, and the rest can be interpreted as an allegorical dramatization of Elckerlijc's restored natural capacities.⁵¹ Van Laan understands *Everyman* as encapsulating the protagonist's descent and subsequent ascent, the boundaries for the drama's two phases being demarcated by the arrival of Knowledge. For their part, in connecting Knowledge's denunciation of greedy priests to Everyman's amply demonstrated greed, Harper and Mize aim to demonstrate that Everyman is centrally concerned with social criticism and economic denunciation.⁵² They understand Everyman's subsequent almsgiving as restitution for his earlier miserliness. Both of these interpretations are at odds with the emphasis on progressive interiority for which I have been arguing, and so I address each interpretation in turn.

In answering the points raised by Van Laan, I side with the analysis of Wallace H. Johnson. Johnson interprets the second group of desertions in *Elckerlijc/Everyman* as a recapitulation of the first group of departures in the plays rather than as a reversal of the previous thematic development.⁵³ Johnson convincingly asserts that reading Everyman's obvious panic and

⁴⁹ *Elckerlijc* ll. 691-95; “Want elc priester kan maken claer, / Met vijf woerden opten outaer / Inder Missen (des zijt vroet), / Gods lichaem, warachtich vleesch ende bloet, / Ende handelt den Scepper tusscen zijn handen.”

⁵⁰ *Elckerlijc* ll. 700-705; “Wie van sonden troost begaert, / Die en connen vinden gheen toeverlaet / Dan aenden priesterliken staet. / Dit heeft die Heere den priester ghegheven, / Ende zijn in zijn stede hier ghebleven. / Dus zijn si boven die enghelen gheset.”

⁵¹ See Thomas F. Van Laan, “*Everyman*: A Structural Analysis,” *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 78 (1963), 465-75.

⁵² See Harper and Mize, “Material Economy, Spiritual Economy, and Social Critique,” pp. 281-85.

⁵³ See Wallace H. Johnson, “The Double Desertion of Everyman,” *American Notes and Queries* 6 (1968), 85-87.

despair at the loss of Beauty, Strength, Prudence, and the Five Wits makes the assignment of these departures to a sequence of ascending fortune very difficult.⁵⁴ Moreover, since Beauty and the rest of Everyman's natural gifts are precisely gifts to be prized, it is not convincing to assert as Van Laan does that Everyman's despair at their departure is "ironic" in light of Everyman's future spiritual development in the play. If these newly-discovered companions are the positive result of Everyman's spiritual purgation and illumination by means of penance and confession, then why should their subsequent betrayals matter so little, especially according to the scholastic theology that asserts that grace does not destroy nature but perfects it (*gratia non destruit sed perfecit naturam*)? I agree with Van Laan that there is further spiritual development in the play after these latter departures, but disagree that an overarching structure of descent and ascent is the most cohesive frame of reference in which to understand *Elckerlijc/Everyman*.

Moving to the alternative line of argument advanced by Harper and Mize, their contention that *Everyman* displays a consistent concern for social criticism, rather than exemplifying an abstract allegory drained of such social critique, is itself unobjectionable. What is problematic is their elevation of economic themes of greed and restitution to a position of preeminence that is unwarranted given the textual evidence in *Everyman*, particularly in the second half of the play.⁵⁵ Given the genre and didactic purposes of *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman*, any interpretation that stresses economic considerations must be able to demonstrate a consistent focus on that theme throughout the entire drama. Yet after the transformative practices of penance, flagellation, and confession, Elckerlijc distributes his goods in a perfunctory eleven-line speech, after which the theme of

⁵⁴ See *Elkerlijc*, ll. 758-808.

⁵⁵ This same response can be made to the argument advanced by V. A. Kolve in his article "Everyman and the Parable of the Talents." In distinguishing his own interpretation of *Everyman* from others rooted in the search for *Everyman's* place in the historical *ars moriendi* tradition, Kolve notes that the title of *Everyman* refers to the "a-counte" that all people must give to God, rather than to the need to die well. This is true, but in drawing upon the parable of the talents in Matthew 25:14-30 for his interpretation, Kolve does not give sufficient attention to how the apocalyptic context of that parable in that Gospel would have influenced its reception, and by extension the reception of this trope in *Elckerlijc/Everyman*. The distinction between the individual reckoning that Everyman must give and God's apocalyptic judgment alluded to in the three parables of Matthew 25 (the wise and foolish maidens, the talents, and the final division of the blessed and damned) cannot be drawn that sharply. The attention by scholars given to the influence of the *ars moriendi* tradition upon *Elckerlijc/Everyman* is justified. See Kolve, "Everyman and the Parable of the Talents."

monetary restitution disappears from the remainder of the drama.⁵⁶ Knowledge's later denunciation of simony and miserly clerics is not followed by any further exchange of goods that rectifies the social and religious abuses which Knowledge denounces. Furthermore, despite Knowledge's blunt denunciation of clerical greed, no cleric is given spoken dialogue in the play, which forces readers again to ask how central this priestly digression is to the structure of *Elckerlijc*.

Having responded to these alternative interpretations regarding the "priestly digression" in *Elckerlijc*, I think that we should appreciate the previous line of scholarship that has seen this episode as dramatically out of place in the play. That is by no means, however, to judge this episode unimportant. In fact, the episode's thematic importance is demonstrated precisely by its anomalous presence. While the priestly digression may puzzle critics, the tension between *Elckerlijc*'s development of progressive spiritual interiority and the exterior sacramental mediation of the priest is mirrored in *The Imitation of Christ*. Late medieval Christianity struggled to hold these two poles together, and while *Elckerlijc*'s treatment of penance and confession is doctrinally orthodox, the awkward juxtaposition between the ideology of interiority and the central importance of a clerical character given no dialogue and possibly absent from the stage altogether is indicative of the *devotio moderna*'s influence on 15th century Christianity in the Low Countries.

Although doctrinally orthodox, members of the *devotio moderna* did encounter suspicion over their distinctive practice of "fraternal correction," in which groups of lay men and women would confess their sins to one another and accept correction in turn. Van Engen writes: "To suspicious clergymen it looked very much like a substitute for the canonically required confessional—and it probably functioned partially in that way."⁵⁷ The Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life resolved their situation in an uneasy truce with local clergy in which this communal correction co-existed with sacramental confession. Similar tension is found in *Elckerlijc*

⁵⁶ See *Elckerlijc*, ll. 648-59. In their article Harper and Mize note the ways in which the English translator and adaptor of *Everyman* has shaped the narrative to give greater prominence to the theme of greed and money. That point is true, but the changes in the English translation of *Elckerlijc* do not provide enough textual evidence to counter the particular thematic argument I offer at this point. For more on the nuances in the translation of *Elckerlijc* to *Everyman*, see Jan Pritchard, "On Translating Elckerlyc, Then and Now," *Dutch Crossing* 22 (Apr. 1984), 38-48; and Jacqueline Vanhoutte, "When Elckerlyc Becomes Everyman: Translating Dutch to English, Performance to Print," *Studies in the Humanities* 22 (1995), 100-16.

⁵⁷ Van Engen, introduction to *Devotio Moderna: Basic Writings*, p. 17.

by examining selected details in the priestly interlude as they relate to penance and confession.

When Elckerlijc first encounters the figure of Confession, Elckerlijc does not actually enumerate any of his specific failings in this passage.⁵⁸ From a dramatic perspective, perhaps such a listing of faults would be redundant since Elckerlijc's specific sins (especially greed) have been apparent in earlier episodes of the drama. From a theological perspective, however, the penance of flagellation that Confession assigns to Elckerlijc precedes any formula of absolution – the ecclesiastical prerequisite for the forgiveness of personal sins in late medieval Catholicism. Does Confession's penitential assignment replicate the function of the silent character of the priest who is later introduced into the plot? If so, why did the playwright insert this awkward duplication? If Confession's role is distinct from that of Priesthood, then what is their relation? Adding to the confusion is that when the figure of Five Senses enumerates the seven sacraments, only six are actually listed and confession/penance is excluded: "The Seven Holy Sacraments: / Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Orders, / and the Eucharist, God's flesh and blood, / Marriage and the Extreme Unction also: / these are the seven unblemished: / Sacraments of great value."⁵⁹ Is this simply a textual omission, or does the author have theological and pastoral doubts about the status or practice of penance?

Additional tension is in evidence in the dialogue that ensues between Five Senses and Knowledge while Elckerlijc has gone to receive sacraments from the priest. After Five Senses, in the lines referenced above, offers fervent praise for the superangelic sacramental power of the priestly office, Knowledge offers a terse response: "That is true, for those [priests] who stay unblemished," and then follows with the diatribe against simoniac clergy.⁶⁰ Five Senses answers: "I hope, God willing, that none do this. / Let us therefore honor the priests / and always follow their teachings. / We are their sheep and they our shepherds, / by whom we all are

⁵⁸ See *Elckerlijc*, ll. 543-619.

⁵⁹ *Elckerlijc*, ll. 676-81; "Die Heylighe Sacramenten seven: / Doopsel, Vormsel, Priesterscap goet, / Ende tSacrament, God vleesch ende bloet, / Huwelic ende tHeylich Olyzel met, / Dit zijn die seven onbesmet: / Sacramenten van groter waerden." The author of *Everyman* rectifies the deficiency. See *Everyman*, ll. 722-25 (p. 62): "The blessyd sacramentes seven there be: / Baptym, confyrmacyon, with preesthode good, / And the sacrament of Goddes precyous flesshe and blod, / Maryage, the holy extreme unccyon, and penance."

⁶⁰ *Elckerlijc*, ll. 706; "Dats waer, diet wel hout onbesmet."

protected. / Let's not talk about this anymore."⁶¹ A cursory reading could interpret this passage in a conventionally orthodox manner, in which medieval Catholicism's distinction between the sacramental reliability of the priestly office and the variability in clerical moral behavior are kept separate. Such a synthesis would be doctrinally sound, but Five Senses' closing imperative to halt discussion of the topic of clerical misbehavior reveals that this is a sore subject for the author of *Elckerlijc*. Furthermore, Five Senses will prove unreliable to *Elckerlijc* and will abandon him along with Beauty, Strength, and Prudence. Knowledge, who emphasizes not ritual efficacy but moral behavior, proves on the contrary to be a reliable companion. Five Senses and the sacramental system of medieval Catholicism are given their due, as Knowledge is the character who after all recommended *Elckerlijc* go to Priesthood, but exterior ritual is here subtly subordinated to an internalized spirituality.⁶²

Furthermore, Knowledge urges that *Elckerlijc* go to the priest to receive "the Sacrament and the Chrism."⁶³ When *Elckerlijc* returns from his visit to the priest, he reports that he has indeed received "my Sacrament and the Unction."⁶⁴ There is, however, no mention of auricular confession or the reception of an additional penance from the priest, despite Virtue's claim that *Elckerlijc* has "settled up."⁶⁵ While the celebration of unction did include a formula of absolution for sins, its performance was not understood as generally duplicating the sacrament of confession/penance or making it superfluous. The performance of penance in *Elckerlijc* then takes place, if not in overt opposition to standard sacramental practice, at least outside of it. The relation between *Elckerlijc*'s interiorized spirituality and sacramental requirements do not resolve all the questions interpreters can pose to the text of the play on this issue.

Ignoring either the interior or exterior pole or pitting them against each other in a zero-sum analysis of *Elckerlijc* can lead to misinterpretations. On one hand, interpreters can minimize the episode of sacramental confession, look ahead to future historical developments, and interpret *Elckerlijc* as a play that foreshadows the secularizing trends of post-medieval humanism. This interpretation has a superficial plausibility when we consider that,

⁶¹ *Elckerlijc*, ll. 720-25; "Ic hope, of God wil, dat niemant en doet. / Daer om laet ons die priesters eeren / Ende volghen altijt haer leeren. / Wi zijn haer scapen ende si ons herden, / Daer wi alle in behoet werden. / Laet dit wesen niet meer vermaen."

⁶² See *Elckerlijc*, ll. 660-64.

⁶³ See *Elckerlijc*, l. 663; "Tsacrament ende Olijs mede.

⁶⁴ See *Elckerlijc*, ll. 730-31; "Ic hebbe ontfaen mijn Sacrament / Ende dat Olizel mede."

⁶⁵ See *Elckerlijc*, l. 726; "hi heeft voldaeen." The author of *Everyman* uses the more exact phrase "hath made true satysfaccyon" and places this comment not in the mouth of Virtue but of Five Wits. See *Everyman*, ll. 769-70 (p. 63).

between the opening lines given to the characters God and Death and the closing speech of the Angel, *Elckerlijc* has no other supernatural characters on stage for the play. There are no demonic characters driving the plot in *Elckerlijc* as there are in *Wisdom* and *Mankind*. Coupled with the more overtly supernatural presence in earlier English morality plays, the abrupt departure of God after *Elckerlijc*'s prologue and the absence of any supernatural characters other than Death and the Angel can be read as propelling the morality genre in the direction of a humanistic worldview, in which psychic interiority encroaches upon institutionalized religious observance.⁶⁶ An opposite interpretation could stress the religious orthodoxy of *Elckerlijc*'s confession episode to the extent that *Elckerlijc*'s distinctive ambivalence on this topic is overlooked. For example, in providing historical context for the morality plays Robert Potter helpfully reviews the sacramental legislation of the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, in which the Church mandated individual confession once a year, and he describes subsequent attempts by both religious and secular clergy to implement this decree at the parochial level. Potter describes the morality plays as calls to "the acknowledgement, confession, and forgiveness of sin, institutionalized in medieval Christianity as the sacrament of penance."⁶⁷ The importance of confession in both *Wisdom* and *Mankind* is duly noted, but neither play hedges its religious bets, so to speak, by balancing these episodes with the type of clerical denunciation present in *Elckerlijc*.⁶⁸ Moreover, unlike *Wisdom and Everyman*, *Mankind* incorporates the act of confession into the text of the play as an extended closing scene between the figures of Mankind and Mercy. As we have seen above, nothing so prominent appears in *Elckerlijc* and there are serious doubts about whether the performance of penance in *Elckerlijc* takes place under clerical auspices.

A solution emerges to the problem of the priestly interlude when we recall Gerhard Groote's earlier admonition to love both the "inward cell" and the "outward cell." As part of the *devotio moderna*'s embrace of the mixed life of contemplation and secular employment, Groote's spiritual heirs struggled to achieve a balance between the spiritual interiority they

⁶⁶ For example, see Dorothy Wertz, "The Theology of Nominalism in the English Morality Plays," *Harvard Theological Review* 62/3 (July 1969), 371-74. Leigh does not go this far, but points to the tempering of the earlier eschatological focus, relative to the earlier mystery plays, in the later morality plays. See Leigh, "Doomsday Mystery Play," p. 219.

⁶⁷ Robert Potter, *The English Morality Play: Origins, History and Influence of a Dramatic Tradition* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 16; also, see pp. 16-29.

⁶⁸ See *Wisdom*, ll. 979-88 (pp. 98-99); *Mankind*, ll. 815-902 (pp. 132-35).

prized and participation in the sacramental life of their parishes at a time when the moral example of clergy was at low ebb. It is worth noting that the oldest surviving manuscript of *Elckerlijc* dates from a year (1496) when the then reigning *pontifex maximus* Alexander VI made any praise of priesthood subject to the type of anticlerical denunciation then raging in Savonarola's Florence. As I mentioned above this balancing act, this mixed life, brought criticism to the clerical and lay members of the *devotio moderna* in the early 15th century. It is worth recalling that in the later 15th century the play *Wisdom* includes an episode in which Lucifer responds to Mind's assertion that "Contemplatyff lyff ys set before" by dangling before Will, Mind, and Understanding the prospect of a *vita mixta* that will allow them to remain in the world and make use of goods.⁶⁹ Against this background, the solution to the problem of *Elckerlijc*'s priestly digression is to accept the drama as a "mixed play," just as the *devotio moderna* of which Thomas à Kempis and *The Imitation of Christ* were a part was a mixed movement combining both lay and ordained members, combining both active labor and contemplative meditation. *Elckerlijc* is in large part a mirror of a late-medieval socio-religious movement that was torn between its commitments to religious orthodoxy and an increasingly individualized late medieval spirituality, and its English translation *Everyman* stands out from other English morality plays because of its foreign roots in this movement.

3. The *devotio moderna* in Late 15th and Early 16th Century England

The final part of this essay briefly offers some historical threads that move beyond thematic similarities between *The Imitation of Christ*, *Elckerlijc*, and *Everyman* to examine how the *devotio moderna* was transmitted to England in the years preceding the composition of *Elckerlijc* and *Everyman*. Doing so will help to aid further research on the possible motives of those responsible for translating *Elckerlijc* into the English language and early Tudor society.

The traditional view that *Elckerlijc* was a typical example of 15th century Dutch *Rederijker* dramas was questioned in a recent article by Roger Ladd, on the grounds that *Elckerlijc* does not contain any of the demonic or "tempter" figures often present in these rhetoricians' dramas, as noted by W. M. H. Hummelen.⁷⁰ Ladd, like Harper and Mize, sees the roots of the

⁶⁹ *Wisdom*, I, 417 (p. 83); see ll. 399-444 (pp. 82-84).

⁷⁰ See Ladd, "My Concion Is Mannes Soul to Kill," p. 57; also, Parsons, "Dutch Influences on English Literary Culture," pp. 1581-82. For the Dutch *rederijker* in general, see *For Pleasure and Profit: Six Dutch Rhetoricians Plays*, 2 vols., ed. and trans. Elsa Strietman and Peter Happé (Lancaster: Medieval English Theatre, 2006);

play in a playwright and an audience located in the growing mercantile sectors in late medieval Flemish and English societies. In response to this argument, while *Elckerlijc*'s denunciation of avarice may indeed have been of particular interest to the merchant class, both the more immediate and the more distant inspirations for the play itself cannot be restricted to that social sphere given the current state of research, and I have commented above about the eclipse of the theme of avarice in the second half of *Elckerlijc*. The denunciation of mercantile greed by those outside of the merchant class, but yet economically influenced by it or subject to it, was prominent in many spheres of late medieval society. Ladd himself draws comparisons to such denunciations in *Piers Plowman*, where Langland's sympathies lie with an idealized vision of agrarian life, and condemnation of mercantile greed is woven into the fabric of the entire *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer, whose own background was not in commerce but in political administration.⁷¹

The earliest surviving English manuscript of the original Latin text of *The Imitation of Christ* belonged to one John Dygoun, who was a resident of the Sheen Charterhouse and died in 1450. According to the manuscript research of Roger Lovatt, Dygoun appears to have had access to manuscripts that together comprise most of the first three books of the *Imitation*. Later fifteenth-century manuscripts of the *Imitation* appear to have been disseminated almost exclusively in England through the agency of the Carthusian order, just as had been the case with the earlier distribution in England of selected treatises of Jan van Ruusbroec.⁷² Two of the four earliest manuscripts containing the first mid-15th century English translation of the *Imitation* can be traced to the charterhouse at Sheen. According to Lovatt, however, this translation had little influence in England in the 15th century outside of the eremitic Carthusian houses, as Lovatt writes, "It becomes clear that its circulation in England was restricted to a small, conservative, intellectual and spiritual elite."⁷³

With the second English translation of 1502-04 printed by Richard Pynson and Wynkyn de Worde, however, the reception of the *Imitation* in England increased dramatically upon leaving its predominantly Carthusian preserve. De Worde's edition of the second English translation of the

Urban Theatre in the Low Countries, 1400-1625, eds. Elsa Strietman and Peter Happé (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006); W. M. H. Hummelen, "The Drama of the Dutch Rhetoricians," in *Everyman and Company: Essays on the Theme and Structure of the European Moral Play*, ed. Donald Gilman (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 169-92.

⁷¹ See Ladd, "My Condiçion Is Mannes Soul to Kill," pp. 63-70.

⁷² For the manuscript tradition, see Lovatt, "The 'Imitation of Christ' in Late Medieval England," pp. 100-113.

⁷³ Lovatt, "The 'Imitation of Christ' in Late Medieval England," p. 114.

Imitation went through four more editions over the next quarter-century, and the earliest surviving English manuscript of *Everyman* was printed by Pynson, possibly well within a decade of his edition of the *Imitation*. By the early 1530s, Pynson had printed a second edition of *Everyman* and John Skot had also printed two versions of the English play. As Lovatt pointed out, by 1531-32 Thomas More could recommend that “unlearned people” needing instruction in anti-Protestant religious apologetics read the *Imitation*, along with Walter Hilton’s 14th century *Scale of Perfection* and a work titled *Meditations on the Life of Christ* that was translated into English before 1410.⁷⁴ Unlike the *Imitation*, English editions of the latter two works had been available to a broad audience through printed editions in the 1480s and early 1490s, before the first surviving manuscript of *Elckerlijc*.

Of course the arrival of the printing press in the late 15th century certainly made Thomas More’s appreciation of the *Imitation of Christ* possible. It is also striking, however, that both *Everyman* and the *Imitation of Christ* earned the esteem of both English printers and their readers at roughly the same point in the early 16th century, and both enjoyed commercial success in those decades. Despite their different genres both these texts remained spiritual classics of Christian literature in England long after the Henrician dissolution of the monasteries and the Elizabethan-era restrictions on the staging of religious plays. In the comparatively brief period before the English Reformation and its denigration of monastic and vowed religious life, these two texts—with their common origin in the Low Countries—successfully managed to promote the *devotio moderna*’s ideal, mixing systematized interior contemplation with an apostolate comprised of lay Christians living outside of monastic, mendicant, and clerical institutions. Such a mixture would be socially and religiously impossible in England for centuries afterward.

⁷⁴ See Lovatt, “The ‘Imitation of Christ’ in Late Medieval England,” pp. 97-99. More misattributes *The Imitation of Christ* to Gerson, and the *Meditations on the Life of Christ* to Bonaventure.