Desiderius Erasmus, *A deuoute treatise uppon the Pater noster, made fyrst in latyn by the moost famous doctour mayster Erasmus Roterodamus, and tourned in to englishe by a yong vertuous and well lerned gentylwoman of. xix. yere of age, trans. Margaret More Roper* (London: Thomas Berthelet, [1526?], [1531?]; *STC 10477, 10477.5*)

Margaret More Roper (1505–1544), the eldest child of Thomas More, was an accomplished scholar of Greek and Latin who earned the respect of leading humanists of her time. Her emendation of a faulty passage in the works St Cyprian became standard in the field of patristic studies, and contemporary accounts praise her skill as a writer. Unfortunately, very little of her work survives apart from *A Devoute Treatise upon the Pater Noster*, which is a translation of Erasmus’ *Precatio dominica in septem portiones distributa* (Basel: Johann Froben, 1523). She completed it before 1 October 1524, the date given in a prefatory letter by Richard Hyrde. Her age corresponds with the title: she was nineteen years old at the time.

The work offers seven meditations upon the verses of the Lord’s Prayer. Roper gives each clause in Latin at the beginning of the section and translates the devotional prayer arising from it. The first meditation concerns the prayer’s opening phrase: ‘Pater noster qui es in celis / sanctificetur nomen tuum’. Erasmus contemplates mankind’s unworthiness to be called God’s children and their redemption through God’s only Son (sigs B4r—C4v). The second phrase, ‘Adveniat regnum tuum’, leads to a meditation about God the King, who overthrows the tyranny of sin (sigs C4r—D4v). In the third meditation, Erasmus considers the words ‘fiat voluntas Tua sicut in celo et in terra’, contrasting the fallibility of earthly life with the perfection of Heaven (sigs D4r—E2v). The fourth section of the Lord’s Prayer reads ‘Panem nostrum quotidiam da nobis hodie’, and the meditation discusses the spiritual nourishment provided by the Eucharistic host (sigs E2r—E4v). The fifth part concerns the forgiveness of sins: ‘et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris’ (sigs F4r—F1v). For the sixth meditation, ‘et ne nos inducas in tentationem’, Erasmus recalls the stories of Job, Saul, David, and Solomon from the Old Testament as lessons about the perilousness of temptation, and he prays for help through Christ (sigs F1r—F3v). The seventh and final clause, ‘sed libera nos a malo’, leads Erasmus to contrast the devil’s malice with God’s inherent goodness, and mankind’s salvation through Jesus (sigs F3v—F4v).

Critics see Roper’s translation as being faithful to the original, yet with scope for discernment in the choices she makes. John Archer Gee writes that the *Devoute Treatise* ‘rarely follows the Latin ordering and structure to the extent of being slavishly literal’; instead, ‘the Latin construction is treated with a felicitous freedom which combines scholarship and art’. Elizabeth McCutcheon observes that Roper’s version is ‘significantly longer’ than her source because English syntax conveys meaning differently from the concise inflection system of Latin; furthermore, she ‘frequently doubles nouns and verbs, giving two near synonyms where Erasmus has just one word’, a customary feature of translations at the time. Rita Verbrugge assesses the vocabulary as being ‘simple, straightforward, and unpretentious’, while the

For Christmas in 1523, he wrote a letter dedicating his Commentarius in duos hymnos Prudentii to her as a present with felicitations upon the birth of her first child. In another letter from the same year addressed to her brother John, Erasmus commends Roper and her sisters Elizabeth, Cecily, and Margaret Giggs in glowing terms for their academic pursuits:

si per omne genus autorum vtriusque linguae velut apiculas quasdam volitantis consideret — hic annotantes aliquid quod imitentur, hinc decerpetes insignis dictum quo in mores transferunt, hinc lepidam aliquam historiolam ediscintes, quam inter sodales referant —, dicas Camoenas in amoenissimis Aoniae campis sauaiter ludentes [...]

After witnessing their success, other families began to extend the scope of their daughters’ education. Roper ensured that her own five children received excellent training in a variety of humanist disciplines; one of her daughters, Mary Bassett, became an accomplished translator in her own right. Even in More’s unusual ‘school’, however, the humanist rationale for educating male and female students differed in terms of the gendered roles they would fulfi l in society. Men of suffi cient means to acquire academic knowledge could put it to use in a public career, but women primarily engaged in domestic endeavours that did not require a familiarity with Latin or in-depth knowledge of patristic authorities. The chief argument in favour of female learning, then, rested on its potential benefi t to the soul: it would be better, they argued, for a woman doing needlework to spend the time contemplating a moral treatise rather than letting her thoughts wand er the dangerous path of a lazy, unguided imagination. A Devoute Treatise identifies the translator as a ‘vertuous and well lerned gentylwoman’, similar to the greeting of Erasmus’ 1523 Christmas letter to the ‘castissimae pvellae [virtuous maiden]’ Margaret Roper (Ep. 1404, p. 366; Mynors, p. 133). Hyrde emphasizes the correlation between studiousness and virtue in his preface to A Devoute Treatise, addressed to Frances Staffordon, Roper’s cousin. Juan Luis Vives affi rms these socially conservative ideals in De institutione foeminae christianae (1523), which Hyrde translated as the Instruction of a Christen Woman before he died in 1528 (STC 24856), and it went through many subsequent editions. More, Hyrde, and Vives di fered to an extent in their philosophies, but the consensus among humanists was that female education represented a laudable means of cultivating personal virtue.

Not all women, of course, retired from public view. Historians take particular interest in the fact that Roper served as a liaison with More following his imprisonment on 17 April 1534 for refusing to support Henry VIII’s break from Rome and marriage to Anne Boleyn. Critics debate the extent to which the surviving correspondence refl ects Roper’s work, or whether More himself wrote the ‘Alington letter’ from prison to explain his views; refusi ng to recant, he was executed on
Popular accounts tend to focus on Roper as a faithful daughter, but she was more than this to him. With considerable pride in her intelligence, he showed off examples of her work to John Veysey, the bishop of Exeter, and Reginald Pole, who would become the archbishop of Canterbury in 1555. Erasmus also boasted of her skill to friends, and his commentary on Prudentius, which was first printed by Johann Froben in 1524, includes her name on its title page: Commentarius Erasmi Roterodami in Nucem Ouidii, ad Ioannem Morum Thomae Mori filium. Eiusdem commentarius in duos hymnos Prudentii, ad Margaretam Roperam Thomae Mori filiam.

A Devoute Treatise does not, nor is she identified as the translator elsewhere within it. Hyrde’s letter describes her reticence towards publishing her work as a sign of feminine modesty. Manuscript copies could be given to specific readers, retaining control over its dissemination in a way that would not be possible in print. Political turbulence and anxiety about religious heresy might have made anonymity a prudent shield, and Erasmus’ name carried far greater recognition than Roper’s; a copy of his portrait appears in the second edition after the introductory letter by Hyrde, who was also an intellectual of respectable standing among humanists. Jennifer Summit examines the displacement of women writers from a traditionally male literary history during the period from 1380 to 1589, and although she does not single Roper out for discussion, some might argue that A Devoute Treatise exhibits a similar pattern. Hyrde’s voice takes prominence, filling more than a quarter of the publication’s length as a whole. That said, the title-page woodcut shows a young woman sitting at a lectern as she turns the pages of an open book, with others visible in the room around her. The title itself leaves no doubt that a woman wrote the translation, adding a novelty factor perhaps for a prospective reader. Hyrde’s letter is strongly pro-feminine, and its inclusion broadens the exhortation from a single student of his to the education of women more generally. Roper’s legacy might be overshadowed by her famous father, as many critics note, but she herself became a role model for others through her excellence as a scholar.

The STC tentatively assigns the two extant editions of A Devoute Treatise the dates of 1526 and 1531. Both are from the press of Thomas Berthelet, who began trading in 1524 at the sign of Lucrece in Fleet Street. On 12 March 1526, London vicar general Geoffrey Wharton called Berthelet to account for printing religious works without obtaining requisite permission from the censors in advance; A.W. Reed identifies the books in question as A Devoute Treatise (STC 10477, [1526?]); Erasmus’ De immensa dei misericordia, translated into English (STC 10474, [1526?]); his selected Dicta sapientu[m] (STC 10478.7, [1527?]), also in English; and A Sermon had at Paulis (STC 10892, [1526?]; 10892.4, [1526?]) preached by John Fisher, bishop of Rochester, against the Lutheran heresies. The timing of the decision appears to explain why the STC uses 1526 as a possible date for the works, but as Reed notes, the extant copies convey authority outranking that of a vicar general:

The Pater Noster contains on the reverse of the title-page a full page cut of Cardinal Wolsey’s Arms, and the Sermon has an Introduction by [Bishop] Fisher stating his reasons for publishing, one reason being ‘for ye great noyse of ye people within ye churche of Paules (Whare it was sayde) it myght not be herde’.

Added to this, all known editions of De immensa dei misericordia bear some form of authorization in their colophons (Cum priuilegio a rege induito, STC 10474, sig. Mvj [1526?]; Cum priuilegio, STC 10474.5 [1531?], sig. MyjV; CVM PRIVILEGIO, STC 10475, sig. M7 [1533]; Cum priuilegio ad imprimentum solum, STC 10476, sig. KiiI [1547]). One should be wary therefore of identifying STC 10477 as the censured edition, and copies of the unauthorized version might not survive in the light of its suppression.

Other evidence can help establish a timeframe for publication. Hyrde’s prefatory letter is dated 1 October 1524, and Cardinal Wolsey fell from grace in 1528, so it would seem that the copy bearing his arms belongs somewhere between these two dates. The colophon of the second edition, STC 10477.5, identifies Berthelet as ‘printer vnto the kinges mooste noble grace’ (sig. fiiijV). He assumed this title in 1530 and relinquished it after Henry VIII’s death in 1547, which supplies bookend dates for its publication once again. Roper’s translation would conceivably remain of interest through the time of Katherine Parr, Henry’s sixth wife, whose education followed the model set by More for his children; she was a writer herself and had a keen interest in the publication of devotional texts in the vernacular.

The text of A Devoute Treatise remains substantively unchanged from one edition to the next. Page breaks and punctuation on the whole correspond, although STC 10477.5 replaces ‘/’ with a comma in some places while retaining it in others. Orthography differs in several ways between the two editions. Double ‘/’ at the end of a word often becomes a single ‘\’ in STC 10477.5. Substitution of ‘/’ ‘\’ occurs frequently, and the same words may or may not have a final ‘e’. Both are queried in 4s with signatures on the recto side of the first three folios, using single lower-case letters followed by roman numerals. Catchwords appear at the bottom of every page, recto and verso. In the earlier edition, Berthelet concludes the last line of a paragraph with a decorative design; the space is left blank in the later version. Combined, only three copies remain extant for the two editions. The EEBO facsimile of STC 10477 comes from British Library...
C.37.e.6.(1.); a second copy is held by the Yale Beinecke Library (If M81 Z526). Only one copy of STC 10477.5 remains (John Rylands University of Manchester, Deansgate/R22447). Access to them online makes it possible to consider how the presentation of the text shapes the context of reading it. Despite the fidelity of the two texts to each other, they feel quite different. The early edition emphasizes that it is the work of a woman, and a young one at that, with prestigious social standing. The Wolsey arms, surmounted with a cardinal’s hat, attests to its orthodoxy, and the royal badges found in the border around it find an echo in the decorative capital ‘P’ with a Tudor rose enclosed in its lobe at the beginning of Roper’s translation. The second edition leverages it instead as a humanist endeavour. The title-page border and Roman capital ‘P’ are consistent in this case with the style used for Latin texts and then, in time, vernacular ones. The content of A Devoute Treatise might remain the same, but it seems possible that the two editions represent a deliberate strategy to win the interest of a broad range of readers.

Modern critics might bear out the truth of this in the diversity of approaches one could take in examining A Devoute Treatise, with its particular relevance to early modern women’s studies; Tudor translation practices; devotional writing; and the development of Northern humanism.

**Diplomatic editions**

‘Erasmus’ Paraphrase of the Pater Noster (1523) with its English Translation by Margaret Roper (1524)’, ed. Germain March’hadour, Moreana 7 (1965), 9—63


**Selected criticism**


Hope Johnston
Baylor University