CHAPTER 5

IMITATING THE IMAGINED: CLEMENCE OF BARKING’S LIFE OF ST. CATHERINE

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One of the most astonishing moments in Clemence of Barking’s Life of St. Catherine occurs in the opening lines of the text. Before beginning her narrative of Catherine’s vita, Clemence declares her intention to “translater la vie,/De latin respundre en rumanz/Pur ço que plus plaise as oianz” (31–34; to translate the life, expounding it from Latin into the vernacular, in order to please more those who hear it). With this self-assured statement, Clemence, a cloistered twelfth-century female writer, authorizes herself as a participant in the hagiographical tradition and proclaims herself qualified to pass critical judgment on the literary and aesthetic merits of previous (and presumably male-authored) versions of Catherine’s life. This bold strategy of self-authorization is the hallmark of Clemence’s text, suffusing the Life’s form, content, and, ultimately, devotional and theological implications. Many of Clemence’s modern critics have focused on her declaration of translatio, evaluating and commenting on her translation and transmission of Catherine’s vita. Clemence, however, focuses on the contemporary readers who receive her version of Catherine’s life. The very syntax of the lines reinforces her authorial investment: Clemence moves sequentially from the act of translating (“translater la vie”) to the method of translation (“de latin respundre en rumanz”), finally finishing the statement with a new clause (“Pur ço que plus plaise as oianz”), which emphasizes those (“oianz”) engaged with the text as readers and listeners. This sequence of increasingly specific clauses moves from the activity of translation to the contemporary reading subject, rather than the hagiographical subject, suggesting an
authorial practice that privileges the author’s devotional engagement with
the living mortal reader over memorialization of the immortal holy dead.
This authorial focus encapsulates the text’s characterization, structure,
and, ultimately, the model of devotional practice it offers to the reader.
 Seamlessly blending traditional rhetorical strategies of self-legitimization
with multiple levels of imitative narrative, Clemence reimagines hagi-
ography as devotional activity involving both author and audience: the
author’s textual imitation of her subject, figured specifically as imitative
speech acts, invokes a reading practice likewise patterned on imitative
identification. Catherine’s *Life* is itself a text of wonders; but not least
among the marvels of the text is her hagiographer’s self-confident asser-
tion that “l’estuet amender/E le tens sellunc la gent user” (41–46; it is
necessary to amend it, and to become accustomed to the times according
to the people).

These lines vividly display Clemence’s concern with the continued
presence of Catherine’s life and legend in the hagiographical canon, as
well as her acknowledgment that its reception varies according to audi-
ence. In response to these sometimes contradictory concerns, Clemence
contributes a significant amount of narrative commentary to her source
text in which she draws broad parallels among Catherine, Christ, and
herself. Modeling Catherine after Christ and her own narrative persona
on Catherine, Clemence uses potent imitative relationships to structure
the *Life* and give it powerful theological resonance. Within the *Life,*
Catherine’s *vita* and *passio* are modeled on Christ’s life and passion in the
traditional *imitatio Christi* pattern of hagiographic narrative. In the *Life*’s
narrative frame, however, Clemence models her authorial persona on
Catherine. Clemence’s imitation of Catherine is thus an imitation of both
Catherine and—at a further remove—Catherine’s model, Christ. The
dialectic between these relationships establishes hagiography as a devo-
tional exercise for the author in imitation of the hagiographic subject.

Clemence figures devotion as a textual imitation of Christ’s speech
acts.² The goal of this imitation is continued spiritual activity intended
to further the author’s piety, achieved through the text’s production
and reception—a goal that resonates in general descriptions of medieval
devotional practice. As I will show, Clemence’s text is aimed at achiev-
ing exactly these goals, both for herself and for her prospective readers.
Clemence’s self-presentation in her text demonstrates an author engaged
in imitation of her subject through the process of writing, thus implying
that authorial production can function as devotional imitation. In this way,
the author herself becomes a model of female sanctity for her readers: a
woman engaging in an activity designed to further her spiritual relation-
ship with God and her ultimate salvation—an activity, furthermore, that