

Johannes Trithemius

From *In Praise of Scribes* (*De Laude Scriptorum*)

Johannes Trithemius was born at Trittenheim on the Moselle in Germany in 1462, just as printing from movable type was invented, and died in 1516, a year before Martin Luther posted the 95 Theses on the church door in Wittenberg, the precipitating event of the Protestant Reformation. Trithemius became a monk in 1482 and was named abbot at twenty-two, a very young age for such an honor. While abbot, he promoted learning and scholarship among the monks, building up a great library.

He wrote *In Praise of Scribes* in 1492, as printing was rapidly spreading around Europe, seemingly eliminating the need for hand-copying. Interestingly, he chose to have the treatise printed, apparently because he realized he would gain a wider readership this way. In this selection from *In Praise of Scribes*, Trithemius puts forward a number of reasons that hand-copying should be continued despite the introduction of a supposedly superior technology. He presents an amalgam of spiritual and practical reasons. One practical reason he gives—that books written on paper will never last—does not turn out to be true. Early printed books were printed both on vellum (parchment) and paper; moreover, paper manufactured before the nineteenth century (when wood pulp, a highly acidic material was introduced) remains white and strong today.

Printing did not immediately replace scribes; in fact, scribes of various kinds were important through the early twentieth century, when typewriting finally replaced scribal record-keeping. But the monastic system of devotional copying was indeed doomed, not directly because of printing, but because the Reformation about to sweep through Europe and England devastated the monastic life.

Before we begin to speak on the praise of scribes we invoke the assistance of him who has promised true scribes the reward of eternal life in glory. "The learned will shine as brightly as the vault of heaven, and those who have instructed many in virtue as bright as the stars of all eternity." This quotation refers both to those who, by their talents, have created the new and to those who have copied the old. This will be shown, with the help of God, in the following remarks.

However useful the findings of the scholar may be, they would never reach posterity without the skill of the scribe. However good our actions, however profitable our teaching, they would all soon be forgotten if the zeal of the scribe did not transform our efforts into letters. It is the scribes who lend power to

words and give lasting value to passing things and vitality to the flow of time. Without them the Church would see faith weakened, love grown cold, hope confounded, justice lost, the law confused and the Gospel fallen into oblivion. Without the survival of the written word people would be dispersed, piety lost and the peace of Catholic unity utterly destroyed. Without scribes the written word would not long survive unscathed but would be exposed to destruction by chance and weakened by age.

The printed book is made of paper and, like paper, will quickly disappear. But the scribe working with parchment ensures lasting remembrances for himself and for his text. He enriches the Church, preserves faith, destroys heresy, dispels vice and promotes morals and virtue. The dedicated scribe, the object of our treatise, will never fail to praise God, give pleasure to angels, strengthen the just, convert sinners, commend the humble, confirm the good, confound the proud and rebuke the stubborn. The scribe, distinguished by his devotion, is a herald of God whose will he proclaims to present and future generations; he carries the promise of eternal life to the good, of pardon to the penitent, of punishment to the negligent, and of condemnation to the lukewarm. There is nothing more salutary than this office, or more commendable than this piety which is loved by God, praised by the angels and admired by the citizens of heaven. It is this piety which forges the weapons of the faithful against heresies, scatters the proud, weakens demons and sets the norms of Christian living. It teaches the ignorant, strengthens the faint-hearted, supports the pious and unites in charity of all lovers of peace.

What more can I say in praise of copying? Whatever I say would be insufficient since it is beyond my ability to do justice to such an exalted topic. I have to confess that I share the fate of inexperienced speakers. They feel overwhelmed by the grandeur of their topic; neither can they express what they feel nor do they, in their modesty, go so far as to keep silent. And so it may happen that they might fail in their ultimate purpose because they are afraid to violate the rules and regulations of speech. Just as on occasion the gift of prophecy deserted the prophets of old, so the ability of normal eloquence is not always at the command of the speaker. Much more am I overwhelmed by fear and trembling since I am neither a rhetorician nor capable of embellishing a serious topic with my own words. My tongue is already sticking to my dry palate, my breathing grows weak, and my pen is shaking. Yet my whole being is filled with the desire for, and the love of, writing. And if I should fail, the only reason would be that I was wanting not in matter but in words. Nevertheless, with the help of Christ, I shall try my best since the only motive for our labor is charity which, as is rightly said, can accomplish everything.

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That it is, as it were, the proper and suitable work for monks to copy the books of the ancients

Brothers, listen to what the apostle Paul has to say about our topic and what our holy lawgiver Benedict proclaims in his Rule. It is they who are our

guides; we must obey their instructions. St. Paul says: "The man who will not work shall not eat." St. Benedict writes: "Then are they truly monks when they live by the labor of their hands."

If he who does not want to work it not to eat, then idle monks should either not eat or be aware that they are acting against the injunctions of the apostle. However, since they cannot live unless they eat, they have to work so that by both working and eating they may have a good life because to live and not to live well means already to die. A man who lives other than he should lives badly. But we all must live according to the precepts of God and the Catholic Church. And so, he who in idleness does not live as the Church would have him live lives badly. The end of a bad life means the beginning of a life still worse unless penance is done before it is too late. Likewise, if true monks live by the labor of their hands, it follows that those who live idly and do not like to work cannot be true monks. If a man lives in the monastery and is not a true monk, then, please, what is he? The man who does not live honestly does not live at all, is not truly alive. It follows that he who does not live honestly cannot be a monk. Everything contrary to truth is not as it should be. But the man who is what he should not be contradicts truth, which in all things and under all circumstances rules the order of being. Such a man is not honest and sincere.

Therefore, brothers, we have to work in order not to provoke the indignation of the apostle by eating in spite of idleness, and by ceasing to be what we took upon ourselves when we entered the monastic enclosure. There is no monastic work more appropriate, more useful, and closer to our vows than the office of copying. Our obligation to the Divine Office prevents us from digging and heavy work in the fields. By such strenuous work and the fatigue caused by agricultural labor the Divine Office would suffer. Since the work of God is to be preferred to all other occupations it would be extremely prejudicial if monks were to engage in exterior activities to the detriment of the inner life.

Copying, however, does not interfere with the hours assigned to divine services. Since the Hours are separated everybody will have sufficient time at his disposal. We read of the holy monk, the Venerable Bede, that in spite of writing many books and studying extensively, he rarely missed divine services because he was satisfied with writing his almost innumerable works during his free time between the Hours.

Nevertheless, a good scribe may sometimes be excused from the common exercises according to the judgment of the abbot. In such cases of dispensation, however, the individual circumstances have to be weighed carefully. Not each and every motive can be trusted. It is the business of the monk to deplore his own and others' failings, to await in fear the coming of the Lord, to devote himself frequently to prayer and contemplation, to flee the world and to live in solitude. But now, who could think of one monk among thousands who persistently perseveres in the height of contemplation? And so, being too indolent to pray, not well enough trained for contemplation, and exposed to the risk of being distracted by idle desires, we can best compensate for all these deficiencies by zealously copying books which will serve the edification of many.

But if a monk could spend his free time properly and consistently in prayer and meditation, he could be excused from the labor of writing. However, the decision of this matter should rest on the discretion of the abbot or another experienced monk. The reason is that the sentiments of the young cannot be trusted indiscriminately. They may approach dangerous errors when, as happens frequently, they presume to have arrived at the peak of mystical contemplation. I am addressing myself now to you, abbot or prior: if you perceive that one of your younger monks is not yet sufficiently trained in the customary exercises but still indulges in his passions, even though he uses big words, do not believe him, do not dispense him, but pull him by his legs down to the solid ground of obedience that he may learn not to indulge in pride and vanity, but be satisfied in all humility with simple things.

By this we do not mean to say that he who does good should be prevented from doing so. But he should be taught, in so far as possible, how to advance in monastic perfection so that he will not trespass upon the glory of the sacred mountain of Sinai and thereby incur death, since it is written that even a dumb beast must be stoned for doing so. But he who crucifies vice and lust, knows how to rule his passions, and has learned to live humbly in obedience, young as he still may be, will be able to climb the mountain of God. He who is still subject to his lower passions and is still sick or weak, may not set his foot on the mountain, but must give himself to the holy exercise of an active life. Such men should be told to engage in copying so that their dangerous unchecked liberties will not plunge them into the abyss of error. There are no ready-made masters. We men advance only through various degrees of trial and temptation. If we want to walk the right road to contemplation, we have to begin with the active life.

Nothing will draw the monk more closely to active perfection than giving himself, for love of neighbor, to the copying of divine Scripture. The monk cannot give alms since he owns nothing. As you well know, a devout scribe performs abundantly the works of mercy; the results of his labor have even greater value. Someone has written: "The scribe is preaching and searching; he generously gives and prays; he chastises himself; to those who are to follow he is salt, source and light; he enriches, strengthens, protects and honors the Church." No labor is more profitable than his eminent work. Whoever may want more information on this subject should read the book by Johannes Gerson, chancellor of the University of Paris, *De laude scriptorum*. There can be found in abundant detail the above-mentioned benefits and advantages of the art of copying and a multitude of collected arguments in praise of the good scribe. No other manual labor is more suitable for us than copying.

Mindful of this, the monks of old zealously copied books. They knew that this activity was particularly pleasing to almighty God who wishes that we learn his will and do it and carefully observe his instructions. But we would never know his will had not the zeal of the scribes put it into writing. Scribes, therefore, are the heralds of the divine will which they have handed down to us through the visible written word.

How well copying suits monks

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Great, therefore, are the benefits to be harvested from this sacred art which proclaims the will of God not only to the living but also to those who are still to come. But monks who have to copy sacred texts and therefore are not called to preach have the duty not to teach but to forbear silently; they have to proclaim the will of God, pen in hand, to all generations to come.

The dedication of the scribe is of greater importance than the office of the preacher. The exhortation of the preacher is lost as time passes on; the message of the scribe will last for many years. The preacher speaks only to those who are present; the scribe preaches to those still to come. The sermon, once it is heard, vanishes into thin air; its text, if written down and read even a thousand times, does not lose its impact. The preacher's office dies with him. The scribe may have passed away long ago, but the book he copied still provides moral instruction. The office of the preacher would not amount to much if not supported by the service of the scribe. What would the preacher preach about if the scribe had not written first what the preacher is now able to read? It is only through the devotion and piety of the scribe that the word of the preacher becomes efficacious. If the scribe had not written previously, the preacher now would have nothing on which to preach.

The monk, through his dedication to copying, will gain four conspicuous benefits: his time, a most precious commodity, is productively put to use; his mind, while he writes, is illumined; his sentiments are enkindled to total surrender; and after this life he will be crowned with a special reward.

No monk could use the time allotted to him more fruitfully than by copying books for the love of God. This work is pleasing to God, the angels lend their joyful assistance, and the faithful support it by their sincere piety. Finally, he who copies accepted and holy texts will not be burdened by vain and pernicious thoughts, will speak no idle words, and is not bothered by wild rumors; rather he sits in silence and solitude and immerses himself pleasantly in his manuscripts. His good works will call the reader to the praise of God's glory.

And as he is copying the approved texts he is gradually initiated into the divine mysteries and miraculously enlightened. Every word we write is imprinted more forcefully on our minds since we have to take our time while writing and reading.

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The repeated reading of Scripture will inflame the mind of the writer and carry him happily to total surrender to God. The reward awaiting him in heaven will be measured by the extent of his labors.

When this reward is bestowed on the just, the dedicated and sincere scribe, as we have reason to believe, will not receive less than the preacher. As the preacher teaches by word of mouth, so the scribe teaches by the work of his hands. There once lived in a Benedictine monastery with which I am well acquainted a pious brother who zealously supplied their library with copied books. After performing his choir duties he regularly retired to the solitude of his cell and gave himself to this sacred labor. With boundless devotion he copied a great number of books of the saints. When many years after his death

his remains were exhumed, it was discovered that the three fingers of his right hand, with which he had written so many books, were as preserved and fresh as if buried the day before. Of the rest of the body nothing remained but bones. This proves how sacred the task of the scribe is in the eyes of God who so honored even in death the limbs of the scribe to demonstrate to the living the merits of his work.

My brothers, if you would realize the usefulness of this labor, you would not be such lazy, slow and negligent scribes. Or do you really think God can be pleased with the sacrifices of fools? In the eyes of God, the merit of a humble brother who surrenders in obedience to copying is much greater than the merit of a monk who on his own authority seems to be engaged in contemplation. "Obedience is better than sacrifice." If so ordered, the monk has to interrupt even profitable work and must do the lawful will of his abbot, not his own. Nothing but good can come of obedience.

For this very reason, beloved brothers, you should not neglect this good work nor should you attach little value to zealous writing. This art of the scribe is a great good, beneficial to the Catholic Church and your souls. You will recognize its great value the moment you practice it. If begun with zeal, it will end with holy charity. In the house of God everyone gladly contributes through his labor to the benefit of others. The Lord is generous and just. He will not accept your devoted and profitable labors, so necessary to the Church, without, in return, bestowing upon you his highest reward.

That monks should not stop copying because of the invention of printing

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Brothers, nobody should say or think: "What is the sense of bothering with copying by hand when the art of printing has brought to light so many important books; a huge library can be acquired inexpensively." I tell you, the man who says this only tries to conceal his own laziness.

All of you know the difference between a manuscript and a printed book. The word written on parchment will last a thousand years. The printed word is on paper. How long will it last? The most you can expect a book of paper to survive is two hundred years. Yet, there are many who think they can entrust their works to paper. Only time will tell.

Yes, many books are now available in print but no matter how many books will be printed, there will always be some left unprinted and worth copying. No one will ever be able to locate and buy all printed books. Even if all works ever written would appear in print, the devoted scribe should not relax in his zeal. On the contrary, he will guarantee permanence to useful printed books by copying them. Otherwise they would not last long. His labor will render mediocre books better, worthless ones more valuable, and perishable ones more lasting. The inspired scribe will always find something worth his trouble. He does not depend on the printer, he is free and as a scribe enjoys his freedom. He is by no means defeated by the printer; he must not cease copying just because the art of printing has been invented. He should pursue his path with-

out looking back; he should be certain that in the eyes of God his reward will be not less, without regard to anyone else.

He who gives up copying because of the invention of printing is no genuine friend of holy Scripture. He sees only what is and contributes nothing to the edification of future generations. But we, beloved brothers, shall keep in mind the reward of this sacred occupation and not slacken our efforts, even if we were to own many thousands of books. Printed books will never be the equivalent of handwritten codices, especially since printed books are often deficient in spelling and appearance. The simple reason is that copying by hand involves more diligence and industry.

QUESTIONS

Re: Reading

1. Trithemius argues that scribes should continue writing even after the invention of printing and that manuscripts are superior to printed books. What reasons does he give for his arguments?
2. Trithemius claims that the scribe's "labor will render mediocre books better, worthless ones more valuable, and perishable ones more lasting" (p. 474). What does he mean by this? How can the labor of copying add value to books? How do you think Trithemius defines "value"?
3. How is the relationship between speaking and writing presented in Figure A?

Linking

1. Compare Trithemius's discussion of the virtues of copying with Birkerts's discussion of the virtues of reading printed books.
2. Trithemius had his book printed, just as Birkerts's publisher chose to distribute selections from *The Gutenberg Elegies* on the Web. Compare these choices with Ong's claim that it is not possible to criticize a technology without using it. Does the use of a technology to produce one's work undermine arguments against that technology?
3. Socrates is nostalgic for oral culture, Trithemius for scribal culture, and Baker and Birkerts for print culture. From comparing these views, what conclusions can you draw about how older technologies are perceived as they begin to be displaced by newer ones?

Writing

1. Trithemius lauds copying as a noble occupation, good for the soul, but this is scarcely the experience of Bartleby in Melville's short story. Can you imagine one of the monks saying "I prefer not to"? Write a response to Trithemius in the voice of one of the monks in the monastery who "prefers not to" copy.

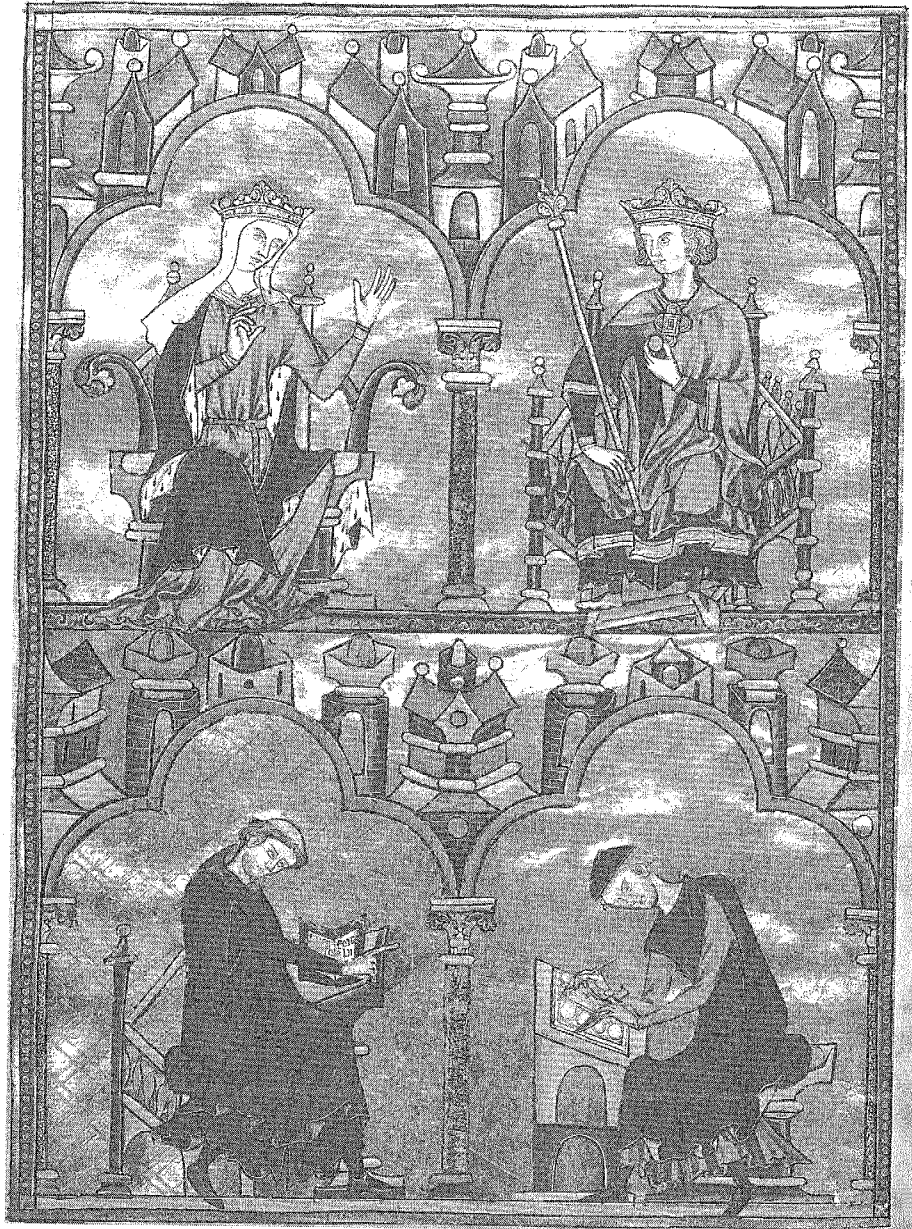


Figure A The medieval scribe.