Erasmus once wrote that no book is ever finished. He learned this not only from editing patristic texts and the New Testament but also from editing and reshaping his own previously published material. While further revision can improve the syntax of a text, it can more importantly adapt a text to changing contexts. Where once scholars looked hard to find the final, authoritative, version of an author's work, we now delight in textual indeterminacy. Such lack of fixity opens up fascinating biographical and cultural avenues for exploration and analysis. The revision of early modern texts, though, did not end with the author's death, and, given his own editorial work, Erasmus probably would not have been surprised to learn that new authors and editors would transform his texts to serve their own social, political, and religious contexts. The extent of the changes, however, likely would have shocked him.

The influence of both humanism and Erasmus in the early stages of the English Reformation is well known. For the period beyond the reign of Edward VI, however, there are remarkably few critical studies of Erasmus' works or influence and although Erasmus' ideas did play a less direct role after the 1550s, his writings were still routinely adapted, manipulated, rewritten, and cited in Elizabethan and Stuart England. In this article I focus on the early seventeenth century and examine three texts: William Burton's Seven Dialogues in 1606 and 1624; Robert Snawse's A Looking Glasse for Married Folkes in 1610 and 1631; and E S.'s Picture of a Wanton: Her Leawdnesse Discovered in 1615.

Adrian Johns has written that "an apparently authoritative text, however 'fixed,' could not compel uniformity in the cultures of its reception. In practice,
rather the reverse seems to have happened. Local cultures created their own meanings with and for such objects. 3 While Johns was not specifically referring to Erasmus, the texts I will examine reveal just how far “local cultures” went in crafting their own meanings out of Erasmian texts. Rather than pen new treatises themselves, Burton, Snawsel, and F. S. chose to translate, edit, and manipulate the writings of Erasmus. Each of these editors had particular religious and social objectives in mind and felt that Erasmus’ texts could help him make his points and garner an interested audience. All three, to varying degrees, disagreed with Erasmus’ theology as it was expressed in the very texts they were publishing. They wanted to use Erasmus, but not before recasting his texts to correspond better with their own diverse goals for English Protestantism. Where Burton used Erasmus to support moderate religion and the established Jacobean church, Snawsel and the semi-anonymous Puritan, F. S., used him to push a Calvinist social and theological agenda. Erasmus was thus drawn into the increasingly vitriolic conflict between Puritans, who demanded further religious reform, and the established Jacobean church, which promulgated a rhetoric of moderation, conformity, and, increasingly, anti-Calvinist theology. Although these three texts do suggest that he remained a popular, respected, and perhaps authoritative voice in early Stuart England, the creative techniques employed to present a Protestant, even a Puritan, Erasmus to English readers also reveal just how problematic his theology and Catholicism were for English translators, editors, and publishers.

While the Colloquies were widely available in Latin, their first significant presentation in English came in 1606 when William Burton translated and compiled seven colloquies. 4 This English edition was reissued three times: twice in 1606 and again in 1624. According to E. J. Devereux, there is some indication that the first 1606 printing did not sell very well, and therefore a modified version was reissued later that same year. 5 Several major adjustments were

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3 E. J. Devereux, Renaissance English Translations of Erasmus: A Bibliography to 1700 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983), 57.