

# TOUCHING PARCHMENT

## HOW MEDIEVAL USERS RUBBED, HANDLED, AND KISSED THEIR MANUSCRIPTS

VOLUME 1: OFFICIALS AND THEIR BOOKS

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Cover Charles V swearing an oath on an open book being held by a bishop, Paris, 1365. London, British Library, Cotton Ms. Tiberius B VIII/2, fol. 46v. image reproduced with kind permission from The British Library.

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# Conclusion

## The Gloves Are Off

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Manuscripts are part of a network of objects whose emotional connection was predicated upon their being handled. Given their size—which is an intimate nod to the animals that provided their raw material—the parchment surfaces of manuscripts only functioned as complex objects with multiple, changing surfaces if they were less than an arm’s length away and bracketed by two hands that turned their pages, not inanimately standing on a shelf or lying in a chest. I have shown how gestures by readers—including choirmasters, priests, university proctors, and aldermen—could enlarge the images and decoration so that they became more visible to audiences.

During the period covered by this study—from the twelfth to the early sixteenth century—literacy grew considerably, as did book production. People learned not only how to read, but also how to handle the books they read. Certain physical gestures enacted with manuscripts in the late Middle Ages—including kissing or laying hands on certain images and rubbing out the faces of others—imparted a ritual significance to them. Using manuscripts created the possibility for certain physical habits that changed people’s haptic and cognitive spaces. Just as our modern culture of ever smaller electronic screens has created a set of gestures and habits that did not exist previously (speed-typing with two thumbs, scrolling, clicking, tapping, pinching to zoom in), books also gave people a new set of gestures, of rubbing, wet-touching, and scraping, to name a few. By imagining how books incurred their indelible signs of wear, we can figure out how the objects were used, what habits created the wear, and what emotions or rituals lay behind those habits. (Volumes 2 and 3 will delve into more contexts and meanings of wet-touching.) Residue in

manuscripts demonstrates how ritualized reading conditioned gestures that then left marks.

The durability of parchment has allowed traces of these gestures to be preserved. This means that parchment manuscripts are especially good at recording habit and ritual: traces of wear are self-documenting. I have looked for signs of wear that help reconstruct book rituals and their permutations. The very act of turning the pages can break the fibers of parchment, and I have shown how backlighting photography might begin to document these transformations, with respect to the Grand Obituary of Notre-Dame. By measuring the darkness of backlighted pages (which indexes broken fibers) within a single volume, one can measure differential use.<sup>1</sup> Two folios in different parts of the book might have corners that look equally clean and unfingerprinted; yet backlighting will show that one of those folios has been more handled than the other because the fibers of the parchment have been creased and broken. Backlighted, the creases show up as dark shadows.

Moreover, dry-touching might only register on the surface of the parchment after multiple events, while wet techniques, because they are more damaging, are likely to be evident after a single event, and their traces can sometimes record separate events. The evidence presented above suggests that wet- and dry-touching were appropriate in different contexts, with wet-touching sometimes serving as a substitute for kissing with the mouth, and dry-touching appropriate for oath-swearing. In Volume 3 we will see that some of the wet-touching introduces dampness at scenes of extreme sadness, as if the beholder were adding real or imitation tears to the image.

In studying the embodied beholding of late-medieval manuscripts, I have considered a variety of manuscript genres, each used in a different context. Book handling took place in social environments, where particular architectural settings contextualized users' actions. I have concluded, however, that these contexts often overlapped, that rituals from one domain borrowed from other domains. As I have shown in this book, oath-taking rituals borrowed from the mass, and images

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1 In this way, the premises behind the use of a densitometer to measure fingerprints could be extended to large-format manuscripts, which do not reveal their dirt the way that octavo-sized manuscripts do, which have to be held continuously to keep them open. I refer to Rudy, "Dirty Books."

in oath-taking books are often indistinguishable from the Crucifixion images used in missals. Its presence further demonstrates that official rituals, like swearing-in laws, borrow components from the liturgy. Such actions trickle into other forms of public life (to be discussed in Volume 2), and then even into private devotion (to be discussed in Volume 3). Religious rituals shaped events far beyond the altar.

In the end, these book-touching habits were performed by people who had roles in civic, ecclesiastic, and domestic spheres and carried knowledge between them. One of the most significant gestures—the kiss—spread from the missal to these other spheres. These service books were developed in the twelfth century just as the Mass became more theatrical, and the rituals in the constellation of the Mass likewise became more theatrical.

Overall, these sites and patterns suggest five models for transmission, which operate in this and in the subsequent volumes of this study:

1. Someone is required, by the script of the ritual, to carry out particular actions (vertical)
2. A person in authority models behavior that others follow (vertical)
3. A person in authority (for example, a teacher or confessor) actively shapes the behavior through instruction (vertical)
4. Individuals apply haptic habits from one realm into another (horizontal)
5. Peer groups forge and copy behavior as a route to group formation (horizontal)

Some of these forms of transmission can be expected in a rule-bound, hierarchical society that was permeated and held together by religious practices. Interdisciplinary studies may reveal that these moments of transmission were motivated by humans imitating social behavior by means of mirror neurons.<sup>2</sup>

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2 See Antony D. Passaro, "A Cautionary Note from a Neuroscientist's Perspective," *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies* 3 (2012), pp. 355–60; Jill Stevenson, *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); John Onians, *European Art: A Neuroarthistory* (Yale University Press, 2016).

In making these claims, I am not precluding other forms of behavioral transmission that would have had a bottom-up structure. In particular, exemplars may include wandering minstrels and players, who were socially marginalized but worked in a living literary culture, and may have had an effect on their audience's behavior; or the behavior of pilgrims at shrines, which may have been partially controlled by shrine keepers but probably involved rituals invented and normalized by pilgrims, such as touching relics, images, and relic-proxies—to have some kind of tangible climax after expending considerable effort to get there. Likewise, certain medical treatments involving relics and images, which may have been spread by cure-seekers at shrines, may not have been strictly class-bound nor imposed from the top down. I leave it to others to pursue these forms of gestural transmission, which will require material evidence beyond the scope of this study.

How precisely one touches the image is directly related to the purpose of the touch. Touching a detail of the infant Christ in a small historiated initial requires great tenderness and care, the displaced tenderness of holding an actual baby. Touching an oath-image while the book is closed—under the very hand performing the touching—shows that physical contact with the image (and not necessarily looking at it) was instrumental for the oath. If my hypotheses are correct, then patterns of wear in oath books can reveal varying levels of literacy of the oath-swearers: perhaps the Cambridge University Statutes and the Arenberg Gospels in the Morgan Library were both touched at the bottom because the oath-swearer could read, whereas the book of statutes in den Bosch was touched at the side because the oath-swearer could not necessarily read, and instead, the relevant oath was read aloud to him by someone oriented toward the text, while the oath-swearer himself stood at the side. One implication of this study is that facsimiles of these manuscripts—even inexpensive ones made with a color printer—can help to enact the physical treatment that books have undergone, and thereby specify the role they played in rituals and in participants' emotional lives.

This study would have been impossible 20 years ago for two reasons. First, that world was still embroiled in iconographic studies and arguments about “masters” and “hands.” Such questions of course persist, but other questions and perspectives have also become possible, shepherded in by material culture theory. Such studies inform

my current book, although I have decided to tell the story through the lens of previously unpublished medieval manuscripts rather than of recent theorists. Secondly, this study has been made possible by the advent of cheap digital photography, which makes visible thousands of manuscripts that were previously sequestered in the darkness of remote libraries. As I have demonstrated, what is photographed and how it is photographed have consequences for the types of arguments one can make about the past. Twenty years ago, many of the items in this study would have been deemed unworthy of being photographed. Damaged miniatures continue to be suppressed on some institutional websites, and they are often eschewed in printed catalogues (as noted earlier) when the author wants to reproduce a representative example of a particular illuminator.

Simple but underutilized techniques, such as photography with backlighting, have the potential to reveal aspects of an object's biography. Whereas traditionally, documentary photography of manuscripts has endeavored to show the quality of the painting in the clearest possible light, other modes of photography will be necessary as art historians' and book historians' research shifts toward books' material culture. Photographing fore-edges can reveal areas of concentrated wear, and photographs of the backs of kissed miniatures can reveal when users' facial oils have soaked through the parchment.<sup>3</sup> I look forward to a time when such non-standard photography is available to those other than conservators.

As my study of some 500 examples so far indicates, intentional damage to manuscripts falls into several categories, which are categories of method, of motivation, and of audience: gestures can be made with the hand, with the mouth, with another body part, or with an instrument. They can be made with a full hand or just a finger, and that finger can be wet or dry. Motivation could be veneration, destruction, making a physical connection, or simply pointing out a figure or detail to onlookers. The audience for ritualized acts of touching can never just be the reader, for that person's acts are indelible and will be visible to any future reader of the book. Thus, the audience could include many people over time (including future readers), or they could include

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3 Nicholson Baker, "Discards," *New Yorker*, April 4, 1994, pp. 83–84, applied similar thinking to libraries' card catalogues.

onlookers at this moment of ritualized touching, or both. Furthermore, a book can be touched by one person many times, or by many people once, and those resulting patterns of wear will look completely different. Thus, there is no single context for ritualized touching, but many, as my summative visualization shows (Fig. 120).

Fig. 120 Overview of ways a medieval manuscript is degraded. Diagram made by Kathryn M. Rudy.

<http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12434/74886711>



Of all these actions that degrade the manuscript, only a few of them involve the willful destruction motivated by hate or fear. In other words, few fall into the category of “iconoclasm.” The others resulted from strong feelings such as the desire to be part of a group, the desire to connect with the supernatural, the desire to be moved by texts and images, the desire to entertain an audience, or the desire for the public recognition of one’s gravitas, as when swearing an oath.

The ritual of swearing oaths on Gospel manuscripts persisted into the twentieth century, most visibly in court rooms across Anglo-American courts, where witnesses were “sworn in” on a Bible before giving testimony. Although in the United States witnesses now promise to tell the truth by while raising a hand, with no book present, in my lifetime this process required that they place one hand on a Bible and raise their other hand in the air while audibly promising to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” This recently obsolete touching ritual, in turn, replaces an earlier one involving kissing the book, a practice borrowed from England. Doctors in the *British Medical Journal* of 1892 report:

We are glad to see that the uncleanly practice of kissing the greasy covers of the much-thumbed Bible on which witnesses have usually been sworn is beginning to be dispensed with since the publication of our recent note on the subject. It cannot be too widely known that any witness can be sworn, on demand, with uplifted hand. At the inquest at Haileybury this week we notice that Dr. C. E. Shelly was so sworn, and so also Mr. Herbert Durham at an inquest at Guy’s. If the doctors set the example



of rejecting this risky and disagreeable process, the practice of swearing with the uplifted hand may soon come into general use.<sup>4</sup>

In short, the practice of authorized book-kissing persisted through the Enlightenment and was only laid to rest due to a medical campaign. The doctors' palpable disgust was no doubt fueled by discoveries made by Louis Pasteur (1822–1895) about the microbial causes of disease. If germ theory motivated the shift from kissing the book to touching it, then pluralism and waxing atheism rendered the Gospel irrelevant.

The "greasy covers of the much-thumbed Bible" can tell a story. Even when they were discarded and their book blocks rebound, that, too can tell a story. Bindings protected their contents and also presented a social skin for the book. An avenue for further inquiry involves studying bindings in order to uncover aspects of a book's utility. For example, when manuscripts were rebound, they were often trimmed, so that the dark, damaged patches could be excised. Another reason to rebound books was that their bindings were no longer firm enough to protect the contents. Systematically studying how manuscripts are trimmed and when they were rebound (in part because their original bindings wore out from hard use) could be a fruitful way to track when their use occurred. Many heavily worn manuscripts survive in pristine sixteenth-century bindings, which suggests that their wear occurred before the Reformation, after which they were seldom opened. For example, the Rood Privilegeboek discussed in Chapter 5 is in a binding dated 1580, a date that also corresponds to the final tranche of documents added to the end of the book, and also to the final date when the book was in active use.

While others have shown that ecclesiastical officials ritualistically touched gospels and missals, I hope to have shown that these codified ways of handling books spread into rituals far beyond the church. Laying a hand on the image of Christ on the cross could refer to the Mass and thereby borrow its gravitas, just as touching the image of Christ in Judgment could impose a promise-keeping force onto those who submitted to these rituals and those who witnessed them. When manuscripts were made to record rules and obligations and to ensure that people heeded them, they often included Last Judgment imagery

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4 *The British Medical Journal*, 2.1666 (Dec. 3, 1892), p. 1247.

of the sort displayed on church portals where judgments took place to buttress the authority of the book, as if to impress the gravity of obligation that they recorded.

At what point did an image become so degraded that it could no longer function? I have suggested that Canon pages in missals, which took the brunt of wear during the course of Mass, had a finite use before their keepers deemed them too worn to function and therefore swapped them, sometimes replacing an entire quire.<sup>5</sup> This situation invites further research: at what point did a Crucifixion image cease having utility within a missal? What happened to the images that were removed? Were they discarded, or held in some kind of elevated position and retained, like the items in a genizah? Indeed, at least some of them might have been taken from their manuscripts and retained as relics of performance. That might be the case with a damaged Crucifixion painting on parchment, which is now separate and glazed (Fig. 121).<sup>6</sup> Dating from ca. 1425–1450, it may have been deemed too damaged to function in its missal and was therefore taken out and framed. A backlit photograph reveals the extent of the damage, with the parchment weakened by handling (Fig. 122).

In the story I have told here, the Gospel, and later the missal, were religiously charged objects that mediated between God and human Christian believers. The Gospel was a tangible form of God the way that dry ice is a tangible form of carbon dioxide: a powerful, seething entity, employed in the theater of the supernatural. Various speech acts drew on this charged property, and on the Gospel's need-to-be-touched, and they call upon books to play the role of props in theatrical spectacles. Whereas legal frameworks became more secularized in the later middle ages, the "magic" element of books—the fundamental idea that they bind people to God through their divine authority—left its large residue in the new, increasingly secular legal frameworks, which retained the idea of swearing on not just a book (which might contain laws)

5 An example is Paris, Bibl. Sainte-Geneviève, Ms. 1259, a thirteenth-century missal from the Abbey of Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, which has two fourteenth-century quires in the center of the book (fols 161–78), which include a new, clean full-page miniature with a Crucifixion and a highly idiosyncratic *bas-de-page* image. Although the catalogue describes this volume as containing parts of two different missals, one could also see the two newer quires as an act of medieval conservation.

6 Collection Huis Bergh Castle, 's-Heerenberg, The Netherlands, fr 40 (inv. 244); see A. S. Korteweg, *Catalogue ... at Huis Bergh Castle*, p. 151.



Fig. 121 Crucified Christ between Mary and John, single sheet, glazed. 's-Heerenberg, The Netherlands, Collection Dr. J. H. van Heek, Huis Bergh Foundation, Ms. Fr 40 (inv. 244). Image © The Huis Bergh Foundation, CC BY 4.0

but on the image of Christ crucified, Christ as Judge, or the Gospel writers whose hands had been guided by God. It's not difficult to get people to embrace the new, but it's difficult to get them to shed the old. Supernatural habits are hard to shake.



Fig. 122 Crucified Christ between Mary and John, single sheet, glazed.  
's-Heerenberg, The Netherlands, Collection Dr. J. H. van Heek, Huis Bergh  
Foundation, Ms. Fr 40 (inv. 244). Amateur photograph with backlighting

# Coda

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This volume has offered an approach to reception theory, in that the user/viewer/reader co-produces meaning by creating a performance around, with, and in response to, the book and its contents. Insofar as the user/viewer/reader leaves a trace on the page, he or she is also co-producing the surface design alongside the illuminator and scribe, sometimes adding marks, sometimes rubbing them away, sometimes smearing or flattening surface detail. The method I have exemplified in these pages, unlike traditional art history, does not assume that the images in books will be experienced primarily optically, but that manuscripts (as opposed to just images) will be experienced in tactile, proprioceptive, auditory, olfactory, and gustatory ways, as well. It is my sincere hope that readers who have made it this far will close their screens and make their way to the nearest library with staff who will allow them to leaf through a medieval manuscript. Where is *your* nearest manuscript? French regional libraries are my favorites. When you arrive, avoid the urge to request their most famous manuscript, and ask for something grungy and neglected instead.

Ask this manuscript: How were you held, used, handled? Who interacted with you, and who was your audience? Who, if anyone, read you aloud, and how did they hold their audience's attention? Who touched you, and where?

By asking such questions, you are developing a more intimate approach to history. Please email me and tell me about what you learned by thinking about the physical material in this way.