

Article

The Lacerated Body of the Book: Bloody Animation of the Passion in a 15th Century Devotional Book

Laura Katrine Skinnebach 

Art History, Department of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University, 8000 Aarhus, Denmark; lks@cc.au.dk

Abstract: The body and blood of Christ are essential to Christian liturgy and passion devotion. In medieval devotional books, this came to the fore in an overtly material way. The skin of the pages, the red ink, the words, and the images constituted more than a symbolic representation of the body of Christ. The corpus of the book was experienced as the Corpus Christi, the living Savior. This is particularly evident in one specific manuscript from the British Library, BL MS Egerton 1821, in which the skin of several folios was covered with red ink almost as if the pages have seeped in the blood from Christ's wounds. The article investigates the material, fluid, hyperreal, and mechanical strategies that animated the body of Christ in the hands of the owner, focusing in particular on blood and milk as the substances of *life*.

Keywords: passion; devotion; animation; milk; blood



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1. A Book of Blood and Wounds

The Passion of Christ is essential to medieval devotion. His suffering and violent torments were depicted in statues, murals, prints and illumination; contemplated in devotional and spiritual writing; debated and ruminated in theological treatises. The beaten body of the saviour was brought to life in liturgical plays and theatrical staging in which an actor or a mechanical image with moving limbs and fully functional wounds played the role of the protagonist (Kopania 2010; Skinnebach Forthcoming a, Forthcoming b). The passion narrative was at the centre of the mass with the offering of the blood and body as the pinnacle. The passion was present everywhere. Vibrant matter, visual techniques, liturgical celebration, and theatrical performance all served to point to the dead body of Christ and his living presence in the world. Indeed, the body of Christ shaped, and was shaped by, medieval passion devotion (Beckwith 1993). In the later Middle Ages, passion devotion developed into a complex cluster of practices that focused on singled-out aspects of the biblical passion narrative: from specific events down to isolated sufferings exerted on his body (Ryan 2015). The various arms of his passion—the kiss of Judas, the whip, the crown of thorns, the nails, the spear, the sponge, the dice, the mocking faces, and, finally, the cross—each became focal points in meditations on his sufferings (Cooper and Denny-Brown 2014; Ryan 2016). The tormented, wounded, and bloody body of Christ was broken down into measures, wounds, limbs, or liquids that invited *compassio*, *imitatio* and *conformatio*. (Areford 1998, 2005; Dent 2017; Rudy 2011, 2016; Swanson 1995, p. 12). Especially the wounds of Christ, either the entire number of wounds that covered his scourged corpus or the five primary *vulnerum*, became the centre of ardent devotion (Areford 2005; Ritchey 2018; Tracy and DeVries 2015; Floyer 1922; McQuinn 2005). Various props—images, figurines, rosaries, prayer nuts, prints and amulets—were used as aids to enhance and intensify emotional, physical, and intellectual involvement with the passion (Laugerud et al. 2016). In medieval devotional books, this came to the fore in an exceedingly visual and material way. Devotional books were not merely symbolic objects that signified the life and body of Christ and the saints, but complex hypermedia that offered both the *imago*, the *logos*, and the *corpus* of Christ (Jørgensen 2012). Images of a distressed body

with gaping blood-red wounds surrounded by the instruments of torture that had caused them paraded the denigration, agony, and sorrow of the Man-God—but also professed his ultimate triumph. In the prayer texts and rubricated instructions, the biblical scenes were pondered, ruminated on, evaluated, contemplated, and turned over, again and again, to instruct and align the devout mind to a holy way of sensing, feeling, cogitating, acting, and moving (Skinnebach 2015). Materially the skin of the pages, the red ink, and the occasional perforations offered a very real presence of the living body of Christ whose body was, in medieval theology and mystical writing, fleshed out as the book of life, his lacerated skin as the parchment on which suffering and salvation were written in wounds and blood (Gellrich 1985; Hennessy 2013; Jørgensen 2012; Kay 2011; Spalding 1914). The relation between book and owner was one of hagi sensory and hagiokinetic reciprocity, that installed a circumstantial and potential openness and susceptibility towards divine encounters. Devotional practice was a matter of body and mind: by engaging the body in touching, seeing, tasting, smelling, and hearing the external body of the book, the mind and internal senses were elevated (Skinnebach 2013, 2015; Ritchey 2018).

One of the most evocative and poignant examples of this is the lacerated and bleeding MS Egerton 1821. The MS Egerton 1821 is a devotional book written in a combination of English and Latin. It contains the Psalter and the Rosary of the Virgin Mary and several verses and poems, but it is also dominated by a strikingly explicit and graphic rendering of the wounded and bleeding body of Christ (Parshall et al. 2005, p. 185). The book commences with three pages painted all in black covered with big red drops of blood (f. 1r–f. 2r) (Figure 1). The following pages contain an uncommon devotion called the five lilies of the Virgin (3r–5r). After this preparation of body and mind follows one of the most spectacular elements of the book: four folios—originally five—painted completely red on both the *recto* and *verso* and covered with hundreds of bleeding wounds in a darker red colour tone (Lowden 2007) (Figure 2). The wounds and droplets are painted in thick strokes with a shiny pigment that slightly elevates the drops from the page and makes them appear wet and fresh as if the skin of a body had just recently been breached to let the blood drip out (f. 6r–f. 8r). The last three of these bleeding pages have woodcuts pasted onto them, on top of the red and wounded skin. All three of them are explicitly sanguinary, one (f. 8v) showing the Man of Sorrows (Figure 3), the second (f. 9r) depicts the five wounds of Christ dispersed around a cross (Figure 4) and the third (f. 9v) shows the heavily bleeding figure of Christ standing by the cross with the sponge and lance (Figure 5). The rest of the book returns to the Virgin Mary, the Mother of God. First, there are instructions on how to perform the psalter of the Virgin including invocation of various saints (19v–27v). Then follows the Psalter itself (f. 28r and v), the *De Rosario beate marie virginis* introduced by a poem (ff. 29r–39v), an explanation for the five lilies and further instructions for the praying of the rosary (39v–44r) as well as an instruction on an alternative way of praying the psalter (45r–59v). The book concludes with a cluster of verses on the Harrowing of Hell, the Resurrection and Ascension, the Assumption of the Virgin, the intercession, the Judgement, and other subjects (the final folio is 68v). The book constitutes an explicit and direct passion devotion folded into an emotive Mariological focus. The Egerton volume represents a dramatic and appealing combination of sweet meditations on the body of the holy mother and fervent, hypnotizing, and repetitive devotion to the bleeding body of her tormented son. With its excessive bloodiness, it is a highly evocative and emblematic case of the late medieval frenzy for blood (Bynum 2007; Bildhauer 2006a, 2006b). The present article will focus on the depiction of blood in the Egerton volume, focusing in particular on how the sanguine embodiment of the book serves to animate the book in the hands of the owner by using material, fluid, hyperreal, and mechanical strategies.



Figure 1. MS Egerton 1821, an 18 × 12 cm large multisensory compendium of devotional practices from the late 15th or early 16th century. It opens with several black pages with big drops of blood. MS Egerton 1821, fol. 1v., British Library, London.



Figure 2. The manuscript has eight (originally ten) pages covered in red paint, hundreds of wounds and drops of blood. MS Egerton 1821, fol. 6r. British Library, London.

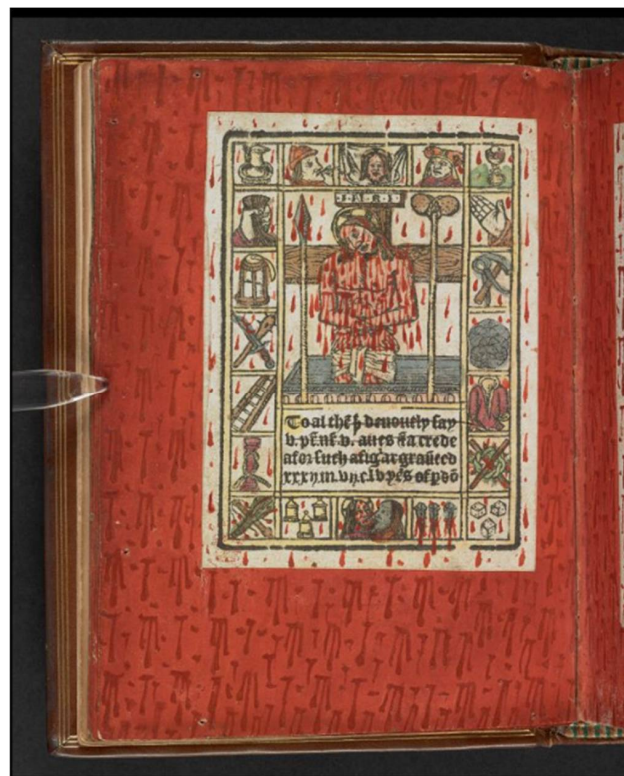


Figure 3. Three of the wounded pages have woodcuts pasted onto them. This first shows the Man of Sorrows surrounded by the Arma Christi. The entire woodcut is covered in blood stains as if the leaky body of Christ has flooded the page. MS Egerton 1821, fol. 8v. British Library, London.



Figure 4. The five wounds of Christ were major devotional foci in late medieval devotion. The frame of the woodcut has small wounds painted into it. MS Egerton 1821, fol. 9r. British Library, London.

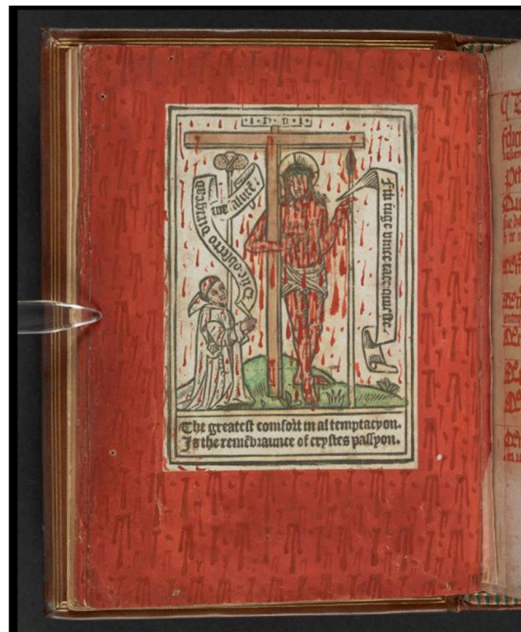


Figure 5. The last of the woodcuts depicts Christ holding the lance or scribal pen that has pained the side wound on his skin. His entire body is covered in blood and so is the head and habit of the kneeling Carthusian Monk by his side. A world covered in blood. MS Egerton 1821, fol. 9v. British Library, London.

2. Material Animation—Conflation of Body and Book

The Egerton volume is of English origin, but its precise context of use is debated. It has been argued that it was produced for and used in a Carthusian house, presumably the London Charterhouse or the House of Jesus of Bethlehem at Sheen (Dodgson 1928, 1936). The main support for the Carthusian provenience is the litany which includes several Carthusian saints, as well as a Carthusian monk kneeling before Christ on folio 9v (Figure 5). Others suggest that it was produced by Carthusian monks but used by a laywoman presumably from Kent (Thebaut 2009, p. 175; Gasquet 1893; Lowden 2007). In support of this thesis is the relatively high number of female saints mentioned in the book. Though its context of use is uncertain, there is no doubt that the book invited deep meditations on the body of Christ. The book has signs of wear and tear. On folio 2r the black paint has been rubbed off, most likely resulting from the devout owners kissing, rubbing, or caressing the page (Figure 6). Close corporeal interaction with the skin of prayer books, prints and prayer rolls—sometimes to the point of obliteration—was not uncommon in the Middle Ages as has been illustrated by Kathryn Rudy. Occasionally new owners even had to refresh the paint because of the previous owner’s hard use (Rudy 2011; Rudy 2016, pp. 231–32). The heavy rubbing or scratching in Egerton 1821 may, however, also stem from a post-reformation appropriation of the book by later post-reformation owners who have written their names with dates on the flyleaf and erased various text-bits throughout the book. The indulgence at the bottom of the image of the Man of Sorrows (f. 8v, Figure 3) has been struck out, and so has a section on how to pray the rosary (f. 44v) and psalter (f. 54v). A figure kneeling beside the Virgin Mary and Christ on folio 2v—who serves to bridge the time gap between the Crucifixion and the viewer—has been partly removed by greenish paint with only the rim of the cloak showing at the bottom of the page. These forms of erasure and appropriation were not uncommon in the reformation years as Eamon Duffy among others has shown (Duffy 2006, pp. 121–70; Walsham 2017; Skinnebach 2016, 2020). Originally the kneeling figure may have served as a model for the devout beholder, but the book also contains clear textual instructions on how it should be perceived and used. Introducing the Rosary, we read the following:



Figure 6. It is perhaps possible to trace the intimate and emotive use of the book in its pages. One page has clearly been rubbed or kissed or perhaps erased by a post-reformation owner trying to obliterate the animated pages of the living book. MS Egerton 1821, fol. 2r. British Library, London.

whilst saying *Ave Maria*, ever turn over in your mind and devoutly meditate upon some point connected to Christ's Nativity, Boyhood and other principal acts of His Life, to the Last Supper inclusively. Here the child Jesus in the arms of His Mother will be thy book, and his members and powers will be, as it were, the leaves. Images are, according to the opinion of the holy doctors of the Church, the books of the faithful. Therefore, let the beautiful image of Mary be before you (trans. by [Gasquet 1893](#), p. 220).

Echoing the 7th-century image theory of Gregory the Great, the Egerton volume promotes images as books of the laity. But it goes further than that. The "child Jesus in the arms of His Mother" is not merely an image, but a book with leaves of flesh. The idea of the body as a book, or the book as body, is central to medieval devotional thinking, which has been pointed out in much research ([Jørgensen 2012](#); [Gellrich 1985](#)). The general idea was that the book corpus was linked both metaphorically, analogically, and materially to the body of Christ founded on the biblical establishment of God as *verbum* and Christ as the Word that became flesh, *verbum caro factum est* (John 1:1 and 14). This word-flesh logic developed into convoluted theological interpretations of the connections between the passion of Christ and the production of a book. In the middle of the 9th century Rabanus Maurus (d. 856) described the Passion as a scribal act. The tortured body of Christ was "full of black and red letters (*litteris ligris et rubeis*), beaten with so many blows; bruises and spattered with bloody drops" (Maurus *Opusculum de passione Domini*, col. 1427C, trans. in [Hennessy 2013](#), p. 20). The black bruises and bloody wounds are letters and words of his passion, written on his skin. The flesh-book analogy was restated by the 14th-century mystic and hermit Richard Rolle (1300–1349): "sweet Jesus, thy body is like a book written with red ink; so is thy body all written with red wounds (. . .) grant me to read upon thy

book, and somewhat to understand the sweetness of that writing.” (Areford 2003, p. 17; Thebaut 2009, p. 188 citing Parshall et al. 2005, p. 187).

In logical continuity of the conception of Christ as the Word made flesh, Mary was perceived as the container and deliverer of the book of Christ. The German Dominican scientist Albertus Magnus (1206–1280) stated that the Virgin Mary “conceived the divine word in her womb” (Gertsman 2015, p. 98), but the French Benedictine monk Petrus Berchorius or Pierre Bersuire (1290–1362) took the interpretation even further:

Christ is a certain book written on the Virgin’s skin [*liber scriptus in pelle virginea*] and in the womb [*in camera*] of the glorious Virgin by the fingers of the Holy Spirit [*digitis spiritus sancti*]. That so-called book was dictated [*dictatus*] in the Father’s design, written [*scriptus*] in the conception of Christ, set forth [*expositus*] in words in the manifestation of his birth, corrected [*correctus*] in his passion, erased [*rasus*] in his flagellation, punctuated in the imprint of the wounds [*punctatus in vulnere infixione*], placed on top of the pulpit in the crucifixion [*super pulpito politus in crucifixione*], illuminated in the effusion of blood [*illuminatus in sanguine effusione*], bound [*illigatus*] in the resurrection, and debated [*disputatus*] in the ascension (Berchorius 1499, 11, p. cxciv. Quoted from Hennessy 2013, p. 23; See also Gellrich 1985, p. 17).

Berchorius’ assiduous description of the incarnation and passion deliberately described the entire conception, birth, and life of Christ using the terminology of book production: writing, dictating, correcting, erasing, punctuating, decorating, illuminating, binding, and debating. To the Benedictine reader, who most likely had first-hand experience with book production in the monastery, reading Berchorius must have evoked in a very visceral way the memory of flaying, cleaning, stretching, scraping, and finally writing on animal skin with a sharp feather quill and oak gall ink, that is, giving birth to the book. This 1:1 comparison did however not merely circulate in monastic settings but was also expressed among lay practitioners. In the so-called *Charter of Christ* which circulated in many different versions and several copies during the medieval period, Christ—in the first person—describes his own body as a parchment that has gone through several stages of preparation, stretching, and drying before being written on with the ink of Jews’ spittle, with letters formed by scourges and nails, and finally sealed with his blood (Spalding 1914, pp. 22–55; Kay 2006, p. 45; Ryan 2013). The popular 14th-century preacher manual *Fasciculus Morum* contains a particularly suggestive analogy that evoked the image of Christ who “stretched out his blessed body, as a parchment maker can be seen to spread a hide in the sun. In this way, Christ (. . .) offered his body like a charter to be written on. The nails in his hands were used as a quill, and his precious blood as ink.” (Thebaut 2009, p. 188; Areford 2003, p. 17; both citing Wenzel 1989, p. 213).

The medieval book was Corpus Christi. The parchment was his flesh, the leaves his limbs, the ink his blood, wounds and bruises, the corrections and erasures were the pains afflicted on his skin. In devotional books, the body-book-analogy was manifested in the management of the various materials of which the book consisted and perhaps most vividly in the visual treatment of perforations in the parchment. The perforations were likened to Christ’s wounds as seen in Anna Brade’s prayer book where all perforations have been circumscribed with red ink. A 14th-century manuscript from Vadstena has brought the perforation-wound-analogy even further and decorated all holes—and there are indeed several!—with coloured silk thread to illude wounds: dark on the fringes and bright red—or sometimes green or blue—towards the centre (Figure 7). But also, the practice of erasing seems to highlight the fleshiness of the leaves of books. Like the Egerton volume, Anna Brade’s book also bears traces of post-reformation use and appropriation. In both books, texts, images, or entire pages have been mutilated, and the skin injured as if to punish the body of the book for transmitting wrong thoughts (Skinnebach 2016).

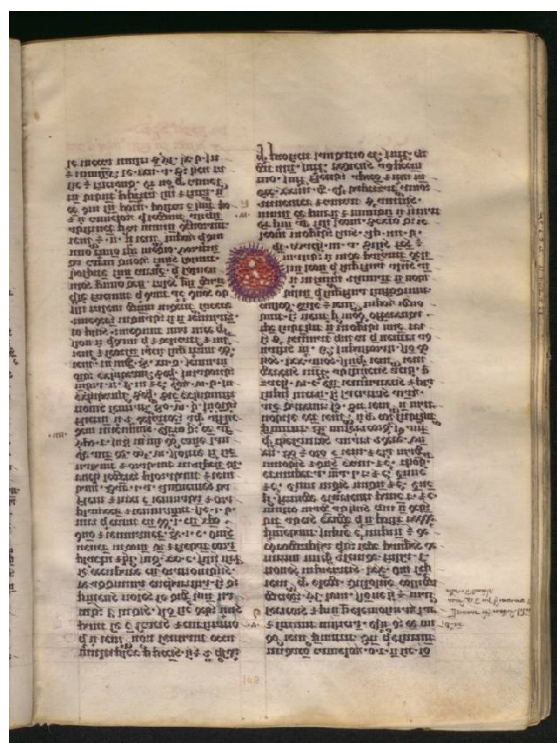


Figure 7. The wounded pages of the MS C317 from Vadstena have been decorated with silk thread in different colours: red, purple, green, yellow, and blue, to illustrate the wounds afflicted on the body of Christ. MS C317, fol. 8r. Uppsala Universitetsbibliotek.

This also underlines how the reader may have experienced and interacted with the skin of the book. In the practice of reading, the flayed animal skin was conflated with the beaten skin of Christ but at the same time, as Sarah Kay has suggested, the skin was bodily and emotionally experienced as a double of one's skin (Kay 2006; Kay 2011, p. 15). The reader could both witness and feel the pain afflicted by the instruments of passion. Indeed, "When turning the pages of a pious text especially, medieval readers would be faced, in the substance of the parchment on which it was copied, with one or both of the aspects of the dichotomy with which the work was centrally concerned: the torments of mortal life and the blissful eternity to which it would lead." (Kay 2006, p. 36). Reading the body of Christ in Egerton 1821 was at the same time a re-enactment of his bloody death and a foreshadowing of resurrection and eternal life. The book's very materiality combined with symbolic significance installs in the viewer a bodily and tactile form of perception (Biernoff 2002; Skinnebach 2013).

A prototypical example of the visualization of and interaction with the body of Christ as book is a German woodcut from a manuscript, c. 1484–92 (Figure 8). The woodcut depicts the body of Christ, not as a real body, but as a composition of pieces, like a puzzle, consisting of aspects of the passion: in place of the body is a huge blood-red wound inside which a cross and penetrated heart are depicted. In place of the head is the sudarium. Christ's injured hands and feet float as detached members around the wound in the middle. On each side of the wound, the body of Christ has opened into two scrolls with descriptions of the devotional use of the woodcut. In the small woodcut, Christ's body is a fragmented body, his members are divorced and parcelled out into readable signs of his passion, like graphemes or pictograms. Christ's limbs are leaves to be read as a narrative of his passion. The left banderol states that "This is the length and width of Christ's wound which was pierced in his side on the Cross. Whoever kisses this wound with remorse and sorrow, also with devotion, will have as often as he does this, seven years indulgence from Pope Innocent". The right banderol reads "This little cross standing in Christ's wound measured 40 times makes the length of Christ in his humanity. Whoever kisses it with devotion shall

be protected from sudden death or misfortune” (trans. from [Parshall et al. 2005](#), p. 259; see also [Powell 2012](#), p. 179ff.; [Areford 1998](#), pp. 211–13). The text addresses the trope of the Wounded Side as shelter and refuge for the soul, which was widespread in the period, and expressed among others by Aelred of Rievaulx in his *De Institutione Inclusarum*—“Crepe in-to that blessed syde where the blood and water cam forth” ([Aelred of Rievaulx 1984](#), p. 22)—and Bernhard of Clairvaux in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*: “The secret of his Heart is laid open through the clefts in his body; that mighty mystery of loving is laid open ... God ... has even led us by the open clefts into the holy place.” (Bernhard cited from [McQuinn 2005](#), p. 96). But the woodcut also illustrates that the reading of the body-book was one of close intimate interaction that involved “contact of skin on skin” ([Kay 2011](#), p. 13). Indulgence and protection were given only if the lips of the reader were devoutly pressed against the lesion of the Saviour, a gory full-size wound that appears *on* skin, and *as* skin in the middle of the fragmented and unfolded body. Measuring, counting, and sizing make the absent body of Christ present in a relic-like way, as Caroline Walker Bynum has argued, “to measure is to absorb the power of the measured self by contact with it” ([Bynum 2011](#), p. 172). The print was a metric relic bound to the body of Christ by size, shape, blood, and skin (on metric relics, see [Rudy 2015](#), pp. 209–15; see also [Ritchey 2018](#), p. 171). The Egerton volume with its bleeding and lacerated pages should in a similar fashion be read, kissed, and touched like a body with leaves of flesh corrected, erased, punctuated, decorated, illuminated, and bound, ready to be opened and ruminated by the reader. But instead of presenting the reader with a living wound, it animated the living and bleeding skin of Christ.



Figure 8. Hand-coloured German woodcut from the 15th century. On left banderole: Das ist die leng vnd weite der wunden Cristi die Im in/sein h. Seiten gestochen wart an dem Creitz wer die mit/reu vnd laid auch mit andacht kisset als oft er das/thuet hat er 7 jar ablas von dem pabst INNOCENTIO. On right banderole: Das Creitzlein das in der wunden Cristi stet zu 40/maln gemesen das macht die leng Christi in seiner/Menschait wer das mit andacht kisset der ist den/tag behiet vor dem gächen tott vnd vor ein schlag (trans. in [Parshall et al. 2005](#), p. 259; see also [Powell 2012](#), p. 179ff.). 12 × 8.1 cm. No. 1943.3.831, Rosenwald Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Public Domain.

3. Fluid Animation—Drinking the Milk and Blood of Life

Reading Egerton 1821 is like opening the body of the virgin and finding written inside her womb the book of her son's passion. The book consists of a carefully sequenced assemblage of material organized to guide the reader from the virginal body to the bloody passion. The book commences, as mentioned, with three full pages of darkness on which big, carefully shaped, heavy drops trickle down. There is an explicit tangibility, viscosity, and liquidity to the shape of the drops. They flicker between tears and blood, between the sorrow of the Virgin and the gore of Christ. The vital fluids make manifest that the salvific blood of Christ is born into a world of darkness and sin. As Elina Gertman has stated, "the blackness of sin and the darkness of death yield to eternal life, as the blood of salvation washes away worldly corruption (. . .)" (Gertsman 2021, p. 66). As the drops emerge from the skin of the page, the darkness of sin (of the world, of the flesh) gradually decreases. The tone of the book is set. What the reader is about to experience is how Christ is born into a world of sin and infernal darkness to bring about salvation and light through his passion. After this rather dark but hopeful entrance follows a woodcut showing Mary suckling the Christ Child (Figure 9) as an introduction to the five lilies which, in summary, instruct the reader to be mindful of the great pity and innocence Christ suffered for the salvation of man. Through these five small verses, the reader is instructed in compassion and immersion. In the Bible and mystical literature, the Lily is a symbol of purity, beauty, and virginity, but also of the Holy Trinity based on its physical characteristics and numerical symbolism (Caldwell 2014, pp. 5–6). But the lily of virginity is also "The sign of the first coming . . . but at his second coming, to war on sinners, he will carry the blood-red banner" (Caldwell 2014, pp. 14–15). The reader is warned of the sanguine content that will follow.

The theme of the first woodcut introduces a liquid and salvific theology based on the connection between milk and blood. It shows the crowned Virgin Mary seated on a throne amid a church room (f.2v) with the Christ child on her lap. With her left hand, she gently aids her bare breast into his mouth to feed him with her nourishing milk. Mary breastfeeding her child was a popular motif in the late Middle Ages, representing her as advocate for the salvation of humanity (Ryan 2002), but the meaning of her divine milk was established already in early medieval theology. In the 2nd century, Saint Clement of Alexandria developed an influential allegorical understanding of 'milk'. The point of departure was a sentence in 1 Corinthians: "I have fed you with milk (as children in Christ), not with meat, for you were not able, neither are you now able" (1Cor. 3:2) which he contrasted to what is stated in Exodus 3:8: "I will bring you into that good land which flows with milk and honey." Clement attempted to synthesise the two dichotomous statements:

"Does not this, as explained in a parable, mean something like this (. . .) I have instructed you in Christ with simple, true, and natural nourishment—namely, that which is spiritual: for such is the nourishing substance of milk swelling out from breasts of love. So that the whole matter may be conceived thus: as nurses nourish newborn children on milk, so do I also by the Word, the milk of Christ, instilling into you spiritual nutriment" (Clement of Alexandria 1885, Book I, Chapter VI, Trans. by William Wilson).

Allegorically milk is the Word, a substance for spiritual nourishment. The main prototype of milk as spiritual nourishment in medieval devotional and visual culture was St Bernard's vision of the lactating Madonna (Sperling 2018). According to the hagiography, Bernard knelt before a statue of the Virgin and asked her to reveal herself as a mother (*Monstra te esse matrem*), after which she "deposited a few drops of milk—transmitters of divine knowledge—upon the Cistercian's lips." (Gertsman 2015, p. 114). Indeed, medieval mysticism contains several examples of both men and women who either suckled the Christ child or were suckled by Mary or Christ to receive the spiritual milk-word: Margarete Ebner (1291–1351) suckled a wooden statue of the Christ Child; Lutgard of Aywières (1182–1246) had visions of suckling milk from Christ in the form of a lamb while Christina the

Astonishing (1150–1224) suckled from her own breasts (Sperling 2018, p. 875). In these examples, suckling the milk of the virgin lead to divine insight.

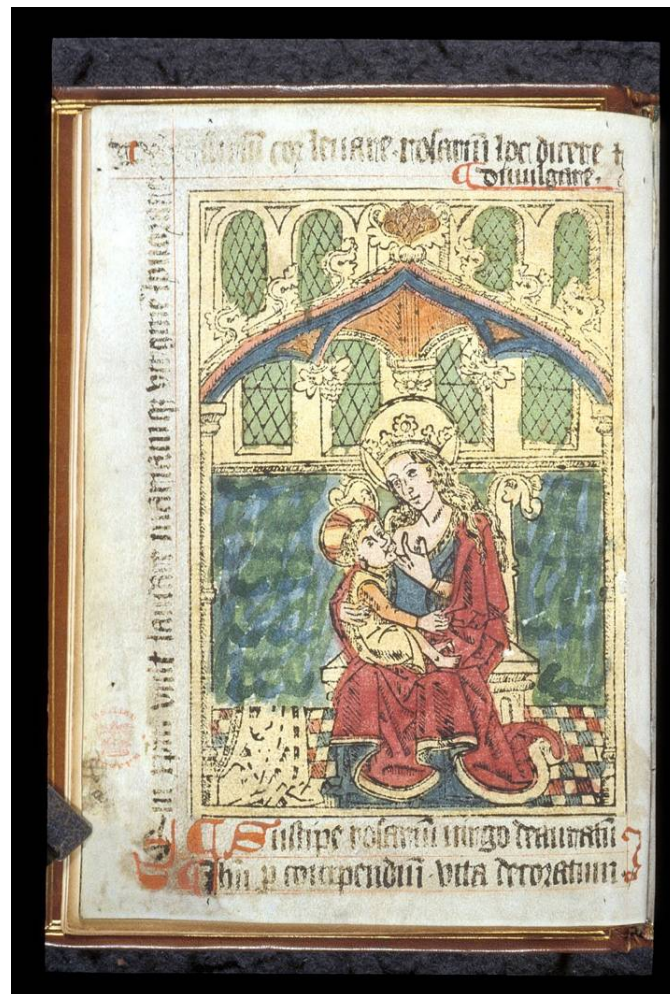


Figure 9. A woodcut showing the virgin suckling her child forms the entrance to the passion devotion of the book. Devotion to the bleeding body of Christ is folded into Marian devotion. MS Egerton 1821, fol. 2v. British Library, London.

In Egerton 1821 the suckling Christ child turns his head and looks directly at the beholder, summoning and inciting the beholder to comply with him, to imbibe the “spiritual nutriment” from the body of the book. Thus, when opening the body of the Egerton volume, the reader meets the body of the virgin who offers the nourishment of her body, namely the milk-word which is ultimately the salvific flesh of the newborn saviour. Mary’s body and milk are the entrance into the world of Christ. This is underlined by the text running around the image: “Whoever wants to praise Christ and honour the Virgin Mary should raise the heart, read and spread (*dicere et divulgare*) the rosary” and “Accept, Virgin, this golden Rosary/ Adorned with a summary of the life of Christ (*compendium vitæ decoratum*)” (translation from Parshall et al. 2005, p. 185; Thebaut 2009). Especially the latter underlines the connection between the body of Mary and the body of Christ, between the milk and blood contained in the book: Marian devotion adorned inside with the life of her son.

This liquidity of the meditational focus parallels medieval mysticism in which the milk of the mother and the blood of the son are closely intertwined. As Clement states, “No one should be surprised if we say that milk allegorically designates the blood of Christ; isn’t this blood equally symbolized by the allegory of wine?” Milk is simply “the drink of immortality” (Clement of Alexandria, Paed, I.VI, 39, 2–40, I, cited from Bolman 2005,

p. 17; [D-Vasilescu 2018](#)), thus paralleling the notion of the eucharistic blood of Christ as the substance of salvation and eternal life. According to Clement blood is the substance of the soul and a “kind of liquid flesh” and when a woman is pregnant, the blood is transmuted into milk inside her body, which is a sweeter and finer and more nourishing part of blood. In mystical experiences, the meaning of blood and milk, but also wound and breast, constantly merged and cross-fertilized: “Jesus as mother both shelters the faithful in his womb/mind/wounded side and nurses them with the breast milk that is the blood. “Mother Church” does the same, giving birth through the womb/font of baptism and suckling her “babes” with the sweet milk of doctrine” (Newman p. 325). The conflation of Mary-Christ, milk-blood, and breast-wound comes to the fore in numerous visions. Several years before Bernard, Aelred of Rievaulx (1109–67) inspired his fellow monks to decorate their cells with crucifixes, such that Christ might “delight them with his embraces and offer them milk of sweetness from his naked breast” ([Sperling 2018](#), pp. 873–74; [Hamburger 1998](#), p. 228). Richard of St. Laurent (d. after 1245) stated in *De laudibus sanctae Mariae* that “in the sacrament of (Mary’s) son we also eat and drink her flesh and blood . . . Mary feeds her guests . . . on her virginal flesh . . . also the sacrament where the flesh of Christ and the flesh of Mary are consumed, since the flesh of the Mother and of the Son are one flesh”. The conception of Mary’s and Christ’s hybrid bodies simply “hinged on the equivalences between milk and blood, breast and wound”. ([Gertsman 2015](#), p. 87; [Graef 2009](#), p. 211). So, milk and blood are fundamentally the same substance, just as Mary and Christ are one flesh, though milk is the gentler form of divine nourishment compared to blood. Milk is for children and those unprepared, whereas blood is the real deal. When turning the pages of Egerton 1821, the reader is transferred from the gentle milk of the Virgin to the stark confrontation with the blood spilt by the redeemer, the *sanguis Christi*, which is ultimately the liquid of truth, life, and of salvation ([Bildhauer 2006a](#); [Bynum 2007](#)). In general, blood was attributed to a revelatory effect. It was believed to offer “hidden insight and knowledge” just like milk ([Fricke 2013](#), p. 55). It was the fertilizer of the mind and spiritual development, it was “generative and fecund, promoting spiritual as well as organic development” ([DeVun 2009](#), p. 120 f.). Blood was the genesis of life. It gave life to the beholder and the book, as we shall see.

4. Hyperreal Animation—The Book as Sanguine and Pellicular Relic

While the book theologically frames the milk of the virgin and the blood of her son as spiritual nourishments, it also embodies a eucharistic reading of its pages. It is a book that insists on being *drunk* and *eaten* by its beholder. It installs a *manducatio per visum*, a spiritual form of sacramental communion that was much debated but firmly believed and frequently practised in the late Middle Ages ([Rubin 1991](#), p. 64; [Laugerud 2015](#), pp. 260–61; [Bynum 2002](#), pp. 688–90; [Biernoff 2002](#), pp. 133–64). The body of the book is the spiritual eucharistic sustenance of the reader who starts by suckling the milk-word from the gentle breast of the Virgin while getting prepared for the eucharistic blood and true flesh of Christ. From the body of the Virgin, the reader is now ready to enter the life and passion of Christ and to interact directly with the haemorrhaging flesh of the Man-God. In a world “awash with blood” the bloody pages of the Egerton volume would offer the reader an opportunity to engage in a “Eucharistic sacrament of sorts” ([Bynum 2007](#), pp. 1–2; [Thebaut 2009](#), p. 178). Just like Mary feeds Christ with her nourishing milk, the reader visually and tacitly feeds on the Word and salvific flesh and blood of Christ. It should, however, be underlined, that the eucharistic reading of the book cannot stand alone. As has been pointed out by Caroline Walker Bynum and Leah DeVun, blood had several other meanings in medieval culture besides referring to the eucharist. Blood was also connected to accusation, violation, torture, and blame as much as it signified salvation and eternal life: “Images of the blood and wounds of Christ (. . .) demonstrated the generative and reconciliative aspects of Christ’s blood—but they also accuse the killers (who included all of humanity) and stimulate guilt among believers”. In visual renderings of the passion of Christ, blood referred both to life force, *sanguis* and bloodshed, *cruor* (([DeVun 2009](#), p. 124; [Bynum 2002](#), pp. 685–714).

And as we shall see, the images in Egerton 1821 carried complex, and polysemic meanings. Immediately after the five lilies, the reader meets eight (originally 10) pages of profusely bleeding skin (Figures 2 and 3). Each page contains approximately 540 painted wounds which would have amounted to a total of 5400 wounds altogether and an even larger amount of blood drops (Lowden 2007). The sum echoes the medieval devotional formula that yielded, that Christ suffered 5475 wounds and shed a stunning 547,500 drops of blood during his passion. The formula is found in several devotional books of the period, including the Charter of Christ mentioned above (Spalding 1914, p. 26). The page after page with hundreds of wounds may be regarded as a metric relic that quantifies the lesions imposed on Christ's body. The wounds become enumerable and at the same time unfathomable in their immensity (Thebaut 2009, p. 183ff). They offer to the devout practitioner an opportunity to keep track, but also to lose track of the number of wounds—these fountains of blood—and the abstruse amounts of prayers one had to pray to honour them all. It differs from wounds relics that offer the beholder to take refuge in the blood-red crevice of the side wounds (Figure 7). It is instead a skin relic or *derma*-relic (see Jørgensen 2019) of the entire mutilated surface of Christ's flesh, a vigilant monitoring and almost microscopic study of Christ's lacerated skin. The material surface of the flayed animal skin is a hyperreal canvas on which the wounded body has been painted. Touching or kissing it—skin against skin—would feel like kissing the real body of Christ, what may be termed *derma* devotion, as if the skin of the book is the scourged or even flayed (a commingling of terms often made in medieval sources) skin of Christ himself (Jørgensen 2019; Dent 2017). The material significance of depictions of Christ's body on parchment should not be underestimated: the painted surfaces of the pages are after all merely a palimpsest upon an already mutilated—animal—body (Kay 2011; Turner 2018). As medievalist and new materialist Bruce Holsinger has stated, “The dead animal is the “con-text” of medieval literary production in the most immediate way: that with which writing is joined or woven inseparably together in and as text” (Holsinger 2009, p. 619).

The wounded pages are not only conspicuous for their materiality and metricality, but also for how blood is depicted. As Beate Fricke has argued, depicted blood was “intrinsically intertwined with theories of animation and mimesis” and therefore also presented a paradox: “The more imminent Christ's death appears to be, the more vividly his blood appears to flow” (Fricke 2013, pp. 54–55). But this paradox was also one of the most productive tropes of passion devotion: the dead body of Christ was the promise of life and resurrection. Depictions of Christ—in any medium—maintained a balance or even negotiation between the dead body and the living God (Skinnebach Forthcoming b). In Egerton 1821 the depiction of blood and wounds is not naturalistic in the modern sense of the term. The red pages do not attempt to imitate or portray the surface of offended skin or to render a vivid lifelike bleeding body as we observe in some sculptural representations of the period (Fricke 2013). We are not dealing here with cavernous rifts or vaginal slits that invite protection and penetration, but rather a production of presence and birth of the blood that surges into the world. The wounds are painted in a slightly darker and more wet paint as if to illustrate two different stages of bleeding: the surface paint is almost coagulated and dry whereas the wounds are fresh and agape—a rupture of the temporality of the passion if read against the anamnesis of the Mass: the death of Christ happened in the past, but is performed every day in the Mass. The fresh blood trickles from the lacerated pages, like a miraculous show of blood that reveals the true presence of Christ here and now (Bildhauer 2006a, p. 1049).

The owner of the book has customized and individualized the book according to devotional needs by adding three woodcuts to the bleeding pages. The first (f.8v) shows the Man of Sorrows rising from a Sepulchre. Christ is flanked by the spear of Longinus and a tall stick with the vinegar-soaked sponge (Figure 3). The central image is surrounded by 20 smaller images with a selection of the *arma Christi* as devotional cues to be mindful of the passion. An indulgence is written below the image (still legible despite the attempt to erase it): “To all those who devoutly say five Pater Noster, five Aves, and a Creed before

such a figure are granted 32,755 years of pardon (“to al thee yt deuoutly say v.pr.nt.v. aues et a crede afor such a figure ar granted xxxij. m. vij. c. lv years of pardon”). On the facing folio is a woodcut (f.9r) depicting the five wounds of Christ. In the middle is a huge blood-red heart on a cross pierced by the lance (Figure 4). Streams of blood are gushing from the penetrated skin. The final woodcut (f.9v) shows the heavily bleeding figure of Christ standing by the cross with the sponge and lance (Figure 5). A diminutive Carthusian monk kneels on his right-hand side. Two scrolls twist and turn on each side of the cross to suggest that the images of the monk and Christ speaks, just as so many other woodcuts and prints from the period did (Areford 2003, p. 10, *passim*). The conversation transmitted is “Domine obsecro dirige ad me salutem” (O Lord I beseech, send me salvation) and “Fili fuge vince, tace, quiesce” (Son, shun temptation, be silent, be still). Below the image, the main purpose of the passion images and bloody pages is stated: “The greatest comfort in al temptacyon Is the remembraunce of Crystes passyon” (Thebaut 2009, p. 181; Lowden 2007). The woodcuts and the sanguine skin of the body of the book are powerful mnemonic cues indeed, but the text is also the promise of salvation through blood. All three woodcuts share a striking feature: the entire picture space of the images is filled with drops of blood. In the image of the Man of Sorrows, the empty white areas around the bleeding and wounded body of Christ—“covered by a delicate garment made up entirely of decorative fringes of blood”, as Areford poetically writes (2003, p. 21)—is permeated with drops of blood almost as if the blood from his body has fertilized the surroundings. The image of the five wounds is equally covered in blood. Even the year rings visible on the wood of the cross seem to form ovular wounds. In the final image, blood seems not only to ooze from the body of Christ but to fall from the sky and cover the face and the habit of the kneeling monk. The lifegiving and nutrient fluid rains down and permeates the entire world with his vital gore. Just as blood exudes in heavy drops from the beaten body of Christ, so the bleeding of the lacerated body of the book, the effusive parchment skin, cannot be contained but penetrates the skin of the woodcuts glued on top of them. The fresh, wet, fluids running from the wounded skin threaten to spill into the surroundings and flood the devout body and mind of the devotee. The pages and woodcuts let us know that the Lord has given his eucharistic blood and flesh to fertilize the world and enlighten and save the lost souls (for other examples, see DeVun 2009, p. 120). The liquidity of the depicted blood also shows us, that the life-giving blood of Christ is not a slighted source, but a ‘well of everlasting life’ as the 15th century Coventry Ring in the British Museum tells us, into which the devout beholders may immerse themselves (Floyer 1922, pp. 197–98). On top of being a derma-relic, Egerton 1821 is also a sanguine relic that presents the suffering of Christ, and the eternal pouring-out of his salvific blood. Although the considerations above suggest that flesh and blood may be studied as two distinct elements, this is not the case, for these two substances were completely amalgamated in medieval thinking, which also lay at the foundation of sacramental debates. This idea is also expressed in a devotional book, the Heverlee, Abdij van Park, ms 18 which was made near the end of the 15th century for Augustinian nuns in Brabant (Rudy 2019, p. 275). It contains several illuminations, including one that illustrates the feast of the Holy Sacrament (fol. 49v). The small image shows the bleeding body of Christ standing on a mat of green grass with his right hand placed at the side wound. From the wound gushes a river of blood straight into a chalice. The bloodstream is mixed in with small round wafers: an entire eucharistic meal in one. The background is painted in a cross-hatched pattern with a drop of blood in each little square, thus contributing to the painting’s overall marriage of skin-ink and flesh-blood (Rudy 2019, pp. 277–78). Heverlee, Abdij van Park is not as visually explicit as Egerton 1821 and does not in the same fashion aspire to the status as skin-and-blood-relic, but the illustration shares a similar understanding of the world as permeated with the liberating blood and flesh of the Saviour.

Blood as life, truth and spiritual revelation came to the fore in medieval depictions and discussions on the exsanguination on the cross. It was described only briefly in the bible: “one of the soldiers with a spear opened his side, and immediately there came out

blood and water” (John 19:34). In medieval theology the effusion of the blood described in the biblical passage was believed to demonstrate that the body on the cross was not merely human but also divine: when Christ’s blood fell on Longinus eyes it cured him of blindness and made him see, both externally and internally, physically, and spiritually, the truth of Christ as the incarnated son of God. Blood gives access to the pure truth (Bildhauer 2013, pp. S60–S61), something which was often repeated in eucharistic miracles. In Egerton 1821 the spear of Longinus shows striking similarities with a quill (Hennessy 2013, p. 30). Just as the blood gushing from the wounds of Christ reveals the truth of his divinity, so does the blood-red ink on the parchment skin incarnate his true presence in the hands of the beholder. The passion has been written onto the body of Christ as it has been written onto the book. The skin of the pages has been lacerated and penetrated to reveal the blood inside and to make manifest that the body of the book is really and truly Christ. The iconic and symbolic referentiality of the painted drops of blood and wounds is paralleled by an indexical presence of the true sacramental blood of Christ that spreads from the wounds, saturates the pellicular pages, and permeates the world around. His blood gushes into the world and floods the beholder with divine presence.

But there is yet another animate association related to blood. Theologians like Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Grosseteste, and Biel all quoted Leviticus 17.11: *anima carnis in sanguine est*, the life of the flesh is in the blood, that is, blood was regarded as the spirit of all ensouled creatures. The blood of Christ *was* Christ and the gift of life itself: “Red and pulsating while poured out and left behind, blood could signal both Christ dying and Christ alive, both Christ present at earth (that is, shed—so to speak, *cruor*) and Christ gone to glory (that is, alive—so to speak, *sanguis*)” (Bynum 2007, pp. 162–72, especially p. 165). As Caroline Walker Bynum states,

“Hence blood is uniquely appropriate to represent life in and through death, Christ gone to glory and present on earth. It images a power that can descend or fall away from, and yet remain in continuity with. Hence blood is not merely a reminder of the pain and humiliation of Christ’s death, nor is it a metaphor that evokes the material stuff of the sacrament, whether water or wine. What blood means (. . .) is the power of life within it—a life that, to the fifteenth-century devout, is Christ himself” (Bynum 2007, p. 172).

The bloody book was the body and blood of Christ. It was not merely a representation, but fully and truly it *was* Christ, animated by the *anima carnis* painted on the pages. The blood gave life to the pages. And while compassionately gazing at and touching the wounded skin and letting one’s body and mind be flooded with redemptive gore, the beholder—so it is hoped—is pieced with sorrow and love for the Saviour and transformed both internally and externally (Smits 2019).

5. Mechanical Animation—Opening the Body

When opening the book, we are entering the womb of the Virgin where we find the life and body of her son written inside her flesh. One of the most obvious parallels of the Egerton volume is the animate medieval Shrine Madonna, the *Vierge Ouvrante*. The Shrine Madonna is a sculptural depiction of the Virgin Mary which opens down through the middle to reveal a whole world of images inside. On the outside, the Virgin is depicted with the Christ child, often by her bare breast, but when her body is split open, her womb reveals the trinity, often in the form of a detachable figure of God holding the cross with the dead son as is the case with the Morlaix Madonna and specimens from Cluny Museum and the Metropolitan. In her great study of the Shrine Madonnas, Elina Gertsman has pointed out, that its striking image-ness is based on the liminal metaphor of Mary as a door, portal, and gate, that plays on the dialectic of concealment and revelation, closing and opening (of a book, of a body). In addition, it plays on Mary as a container. She is a *camera*, tabernacle, sanctuary, church, fortress, bed chamber, house, temple, shrine, carrier, chest, or enclosed garden that hides—and ultimately reveals—the secret of the divine logos in her womb (Gertsman 2015, pp. 42–56; Brown 2018, pp. 263–308). The body of Mary

opens to reveal her mysteries, but her body also offers refuge to the devout who willingly enter her secret womb to explore the mysteries inside. This doubleness was expressed by Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253) in *Chateau d'amour* in which she appears as “a splendid castle, outfitted with all manner of furnishings, including an ivory throne for the incarnate God, and made at once categorically impregnable and unconditionally susceptible to human presence by the figure of the suppliant—the narrator—who wishes to enter the Virgin’s untainted protective flesh and thus escape from the evils of the world” (Gertsman 2015, p. 48). The Shrine Madonna is a visual and material manifestation of Mary’s body as a spacious chest that protects and gives birth, like a dollhouse from which things can be removed and reinserted. The potent body of the image unfolds like a book:

The very makeup of the medieval codex—with the text, written on animal cutis, resting between its covers—assures its revelatory promise, as does the body of the Virgin, which generates, conceals, nurtures, and reveals the incarnate Word behind the cover of her flesh [. . .] The Virgin here becomes the cover and so the access point for the pious reader’s journey to her son (Gertsman 2015, p. 44).

The distinctly bookish nature of the *Vierge Ouvrante* shares many similarities with the architecture of Egerton 1821. Like so many Shrine Madonnas, the lactating Virgin establishes the point of entry to the passion of Christ. Like the mechanics of the image, the mechanics of the book is like an unfolding body, the body of the Virgin that splits open to give birth to her son while at the same time revealing his passion and death inside. (Skinnebach Forthcoming b). The Virgin forms the point of departure before one enters her body’s inner chambers, finding the son’s mangled body, written in her flesh. Opening the body of the image or the book one experiences the incarnation, the birth of God, which is at the same time the birth of passion and, ultimately, salvation.

Medieval culture was a culture of animation. The presence of the body of the virgin and Christ becomes very real in Egerton 1821. Like so many other mechanical images of Christ, the book served to animate his body, a moving agent that interacted with the beholder through material, hyperreal, symbolic, and mechanical means. The book is structured so that it starts with a preparation of the mind before it sets out on a devotional journey that takes the reader from the birth to the death of Christ, from his sorrowful humanity to superhuman divinity, from the representation of Christ to the presence of his bloody suffering, all wrapped in devotion to the earthy mother. The visual strategies of the book transcend the metaphorical level when the body of the book is split open to reveal the bleeding flesh and wounds of Christ inside, painted on real skin. Mary opens her womb—very much like the *Vierge Ouvrante*—to offer a revelation of the bloody flesh of her son, and the beholder consumes, and is consumed by, the bloody pages of the book and is unified with the body of the saviour. The book serves as a technology of animation, a sort of material and mechanical animation of the body of Christ so that the beaten body of the book comes alive in the hands of the devotee. The word is fleshed out in the Virgin’s womb and the devotee’s hands. The reader witnesses how the sanguine skin of the book becomes the body of Christ when submitted to a sequence of scribal practices. And the reader is brought to understand and witness how the entire passion and resurrection were written in the Virgin’s flesh before the child was born and actualized again for the salvation of humanity.

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