

CONSTELLATING TRANS LEGIBILITY

THE FORM OF the codex is mapped to the form of the body: the book has a head, a tail, and a spine that runs between them. In textbooks and diagrams its structures are often referred to in terms of “anatomy.” The skin of the parchment page is identified as a site of particular bodily recognition, never fully divorced from its animal origins. Joints, folds, and areas of loose skin are recalled by variations in pigmentation, thickness, and texture.¹ As Sarah Kay demonstrates, book producers could use flaws and irregularities in the parchment surface to extend and augment narrative incidents. For example, in a mid-fourteenth-century copy of Jean de Vignay’s *Légende dorée*, a French translation of the Latin *Legenda aurea*, “a tear that has been largely stitched up” is visible to readers of the life of St. Bartholomew, creating “a short-circuit between textual content and the material state of the page” as the parchment becomes a “metaphorical expression[...] of that same, (flayed) human skin.”² In such instances, the surface is recruited in service of the text: irregularities in the parchment enact the events of the text on the page. In this chapter, I propose that the effect of the parchment skin does not end in its service to particular texts, as a visual-tactile metaphor for the narrative body. Instead, I examine the parchment surface as reading support, which, through its metonymic relationship with (gender)queer bodies, supports the development of trans communities of intimate care.

The surface of the page has become a productive site of study. Surface studies, Georgina Wilson explains, “[m]oves away from a binary of objective/subjective readings” to combine “[m]odels of figurative and material surfaces” as a means of “engag[ing] with the intellectual, political, and emotive responses available to readers.”³ The paper page, Jonathan Senchyne posits, has layers: “the material (paper is made up of cellulose fibers meshed together), the representational (words and images on paper invite

¹ See, for example, Bischoff, *Urkundenformate*, esp. 48–51; Gumbert, “Skins, Sheets, and Quires,” 82–84.

² Kay, “Original Skin,” 55 and 36, and Kay, *Animal Skins*, 89 respectively.

³ Wilson, “Surface Reading Paper,” 370 and 371.

interpretation), and the ‘presence layer’ (the traces of individuals who have contributed to its making).⁴ But paper also has depths. Wilson’s study reads through its layers “both materially and metaphorically” in order to “make...room for a greater network of individuals, including women, who intervened in early modern texts.”⁵ Taking watermarks as “an intellectual prompt,” Wilson uses the labour of female rag-pickers to enliven the vertical and horizontal political hierarchies that underpin Ben Johnson’s *Sejanus*, to “reintegrate the work of marginalized papermakers into the shaping of literary forms and so to extend literary production beyond its usual gendered and socioeconomic coordinates.”⁶ Rag paper is also the focus of Orietta Da Rold’s *Paper in Medieval England*, which analyzes how medieval English writers and readers responded to the material affordances and cultural implications of this new-to-them technology. Paper’s qualities (of “chromaticity,” “plasticity,” and “porosity and tensility”), Da Rold finds, were not only vital to an increasingly bureaucratic writing culture, and to the promulgation of printing in the following century. Paper production and trade infused (and became highly visible in) the literary imagination as a metaphor that opened up—as Wilson also shows—the multiple levels on which it signalled to contemporary audiences.⁷ Similarly, Joshua Calhoun has shown that early modern paper retains “legible ecologies that record the environmental negotiations of people and things, of humans, humanists, and nonhumans.”⁸ Like its material affordances, these ecological traces (in the form of plant material, gelatine sizing, insects, mould, and decay), enter into the literary imagination “alter[ing] the ways human ideas can be expressed and even conceived.”⁹ As Senchyne puts it, the paper page “absorbs traces of people, places, and actions, making them available for thinking and touching.”¹⁰ In this chapter, I suggest that the parchment surface is also a deep surface that can sustain and transmit touch as trace in the service of communal and intellectual relations.

I have written elsewhere about the potential for the materials of the book to develop and sustain communal networks across geographic and

4 Wilson, “Surface Reading Paper,” 370, citing Senchyne, *Intimacy of Paper*, 5.

5 Wilson, “Surface Reading Paper,” 370 and 372.

6 Wilson, “Surface Reading Paper,” 379 and 376.

7 Da Rold, *Paper in Medieval England*, esp. 180–209.

8 Calhoun, *Nature of the Page*, 1.

9 Calhoun, *Nature of the Page*, 2.

10 Senchyne, *Intimacy of Paper*, 19.

temporal removes.¹¹ I revisit that argument here, through the model of the constellation developed in the previous chapter. For trans community members, such constellations rely on the trans legibility of material components. Equally, readers must be trans literate: able to identify, decode, and activate features that suggest transness. That a textual object is trans legible, does not mean that every reader will recognize transness in it. As Sarah Pyke and Malcolm Noble observe, queer and trans literacies remain vital to sustaining both individual and communal identities.¹² Queer and trans readers find affinities with and in books, often from a very young age. “It’s amazing,” Lee Lynch writes in “Cruising the Libraries,” “how unerring a kid with a variant eye can be.”¹³ Through cover copy, card catalogues, and morsels in reviews and conversations, queer and trans readers like Lynch develop “an instinct” for the “literary whisper(s)” that might offer community connection.¹⁴ Such whispers may be materially, as well as textually, instantiated, as in Detroit in 1957, when Kathleen V. Forrest found that she “did not need to look at the title for clues” to the content of the lesbian pulp fiction that “leaped out at [her] from the drugstore rack.”¹⁵ In this chapter, I suggest that trans legibility and the concomitant trans literacies developed by gender non-conforming readers predate the card catalogue and the dime novel. I extend work on the parchment page as interface and on the imagery of Christ’s side wound to develop an understanding of the surfaces of the medieval book as sites of trans(community)formation through constellation.

Skin Surfaces

In a thirteenth-century English copy of the *Bestiary* of Guillaume le Clerc, Sarah Kay observes a “long hole,” which interrupts the description of the weasel. In the bestiary tradition, the weasel is characterized by her unusual reproductive practice: in this version of the text, she is said to conceive through her mouth and give birth through her ear. In Guillaume le Clerc’s allegorical reading of the bestiary, the weasel’s behaviour is that of the believer who listens to everything they are told but does not retain it. The hole in the page “falls right below the passage...about the Weasel’s reproduction,”

11 Sargan, “Trans Codicology.”

12 Noble and Pyke, “Queer Bibliography,” 154–56.

13 Lynch, “Cruising the Libraries,” 6.

14 Lynch, “Cruising the Libraries,” 9.

15 Forrest, *Lesbian Pulp Fiction*.

producing on the page a “literal manifestation of her problematic orifices.”¹⁶ This alignment of surface and text is one example that Kay provides of parchment chosen as a “material correlate” to narrative.¹⁷ The colocation of text and material, Kay proposes, enhances le Clerc’s moralization through jarring bodily recognition. In other words, flaws in the parchment surface draw attention to its status as vulnerable skin, and thereby its ontological likeness to the skin of the human body (which this text reminds us is spiritually, as well as physically, vulnerable). Through the scribe’s material choices, the reader is encouraged to “assume” the skin of the weasel/page at any given narrative moment.¹⁸

Some manuscript makers more directly evoke the human body. Nancy Vine Durling reads five holes in a page used to transcribe lyrics from the Passion group in British Library, MS Harley 2253 as “a kind of analogue to Christ’s own wounded body.”¹⁹ The surface of the page thus provides a material aid to the contemplation demanded by the text. But Christ’s body also presents a mechanic to understand the skin of the book outside of the narrative moment. The middle English *Charters of Christ* tradition consists of a series of texts that imagine Christ’s promise of salvation granted in the form of a document written upon the crucified body:

And so I stood bounde all the nyght
 Tyll on the morowe þat was light
 Streyned well faste vp-on a tree
 As parchemyn owyth for to be
 Heryth now & 3e shall wetyn
 Howe thys chartyr was I-wretyn
 Ouer al my face fell the ynke
 Thornys in myn hed be-gonne to synke
 The pennys þat the letterys wretyn
 Were scorges þat I was wytht smetyn...²⁰

In this case, the features of the parchment document or page are mapped on to Christ’s body:²¹ Christ’s skin, the properly prepared parchment; his blood, “the ynke”; his wounds, “the letterys”; and the “scorges” used upon

16 Kay, *Animal Skins*, 84.

17 Kay, *Animal Skins*, 86.

18 Kay, *Animal Skins*, 151.

19 Durling, “British Library MS Harley 2253,” 291.

20 Holsinger, *On Parchment*, 219n43.

21 Holsinger, *On Parchment*, 219.

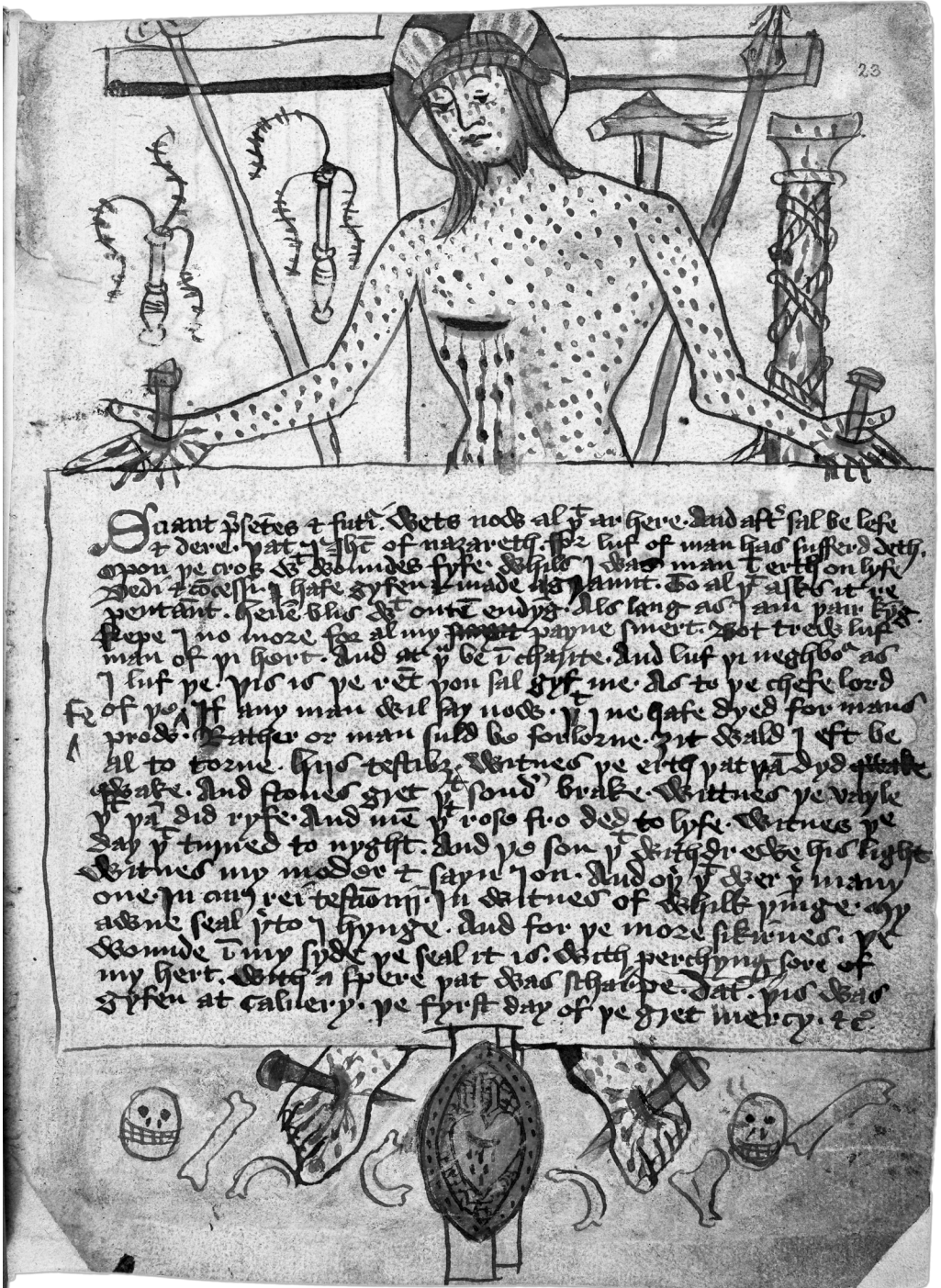


Figure 9. *The Short Charter of Christ*, an illustrated Yorkshire Carthusian religious miscellany, fifteenth century. London, British Library, MS Additional 37049, fol. 23r. Reproduced by permission of the British Library.

him, the “pennys (pens).” An illustrated copy of the short Charter, copied in a Carthusian miscellany in the second half of the fifteenth century, depicts Christ before the cross, presenting the charter that holds the text in his still nailed hands (Figure 9).²² The text is unlineated and the copy bordered to represent a flat folio, with a wax seal hanging from the bottom, emphasizing its documentary status. Christ bleeds profusely, with the blood picked up in the red tipped initials that mark the start of each poetic line. The parchment surface has been left uncoloured to represent both the body and the document, again suggesting that the body of Christ, the copy we hold, and the one described are “co-extensive.” The implication is that this copy in this book can be understood as metonymic for some hypothetical original charter and so participates in the materiality of Christ’s body.

The idea of Christ’s body as “incarnate writing” is not unfamiliar. The opening of the Gospel of John reads, “In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum. (In the beginning there was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.)”²³ Sarah Noonan, Eleanor Baker, and Bruce Holsinger trace this collocation of page and (divine) skin in written and illustrated traditions.²⁴ Such metaphors evoke the form of the book and the manual labour that brought it into being, the status of the book as a devotional locus, and the affective processes that govern reading practice. As Baker demonstrates, in Middle English literature the pervasive use of bodily metaphors, like those found in the *Charters of Christ*, evidence a “widespread familiarity” with the ontological code-switching—between parchment, skin, and human body—that they entail.²⁵ Holsinger observes, after surveying images of Christ as book found in fifteenth-century books of hours, “a long tradition of bookish thought that associated human skin intimately with the carnality and materiality of writing in its sacrificial immediacy...*The Book of Nature*, the *Book of the Heart*, the *Charter of Christ*: these and other topoi draw on the technology and physicality of parchment to conceive membrane books and documents as a symbol, figure, or totem central to the ritual and theological lives of the human subjects who read, touch, and consume them. As the Word of God, the book of skin embodies the sacrificial dimensions of Christian redemption while inducing others to

22 London, British Library, MS Additional 37049 (Short *Charter of Christ*), fol. 23r.

23 Jn 1:1 LV (DR)

24 Noonan, “Bodies of Parchment”; Baker, “References to Material Texts”; Holsinger, *On Parchment*, 193–222.

25 Baker, “References to Material Texts,” 168.

participate through their own scriptive identifications in the great incarnate narrative.”²⁶

Richard de Bury’s *Philobiblon* (1345) is peopled by books. De Bury’s books speak in the first person—“we who are the light of faithful souls everywhere”—and take verbs usually reserved for living creatures: they have “slumbered through long ages...wake up and are astonished.”²⁷ As Michael Camille has observed, it is in books’ fleshly capacities that de Bury is most invested.²⁸ For de Bury, books are sensual and responsive. As they age, de Bury’s books suffer bodily infirmities: back pain, “palsy,” and “bleared eyes.”²⁹ In their sickness they are fleshy too; their illness likened to those of “Lazarus[...] and Job,” both of whom were associated with diseases of the skin. Camille points out the capacity for iconographic connections between the afflictions of these figures and the “tears and sores that disfigure parchment.”³⁰ However, no actual sores are needed to activate the connection. The invocation of the material of the book is enough to make the “flesh of the volumes” both substitute and metonym for the (saintly) human body.³¹

This is not to imply that medieval readers saw *every* book as a living object and *every* parchment page as potential human skin. Conservator Nancy K. Turner has warned against foreclosing medieval understandings of parchment’s materiality. She reminds us that parchment is a “manufactured material” with “varying qualities, features, and uses,” and that medieval readers had a different “knowledge and understanding of the material” than we do today.³² Kay also worries about attributing anachronistic standards to medieval readers’ perceptions of the skin of the page. Peggy McCracken finds that animal skins were “a technology of sovereignty” in medieval culture, the wearing of which “reinstates human dominion over animals as well as

26 Holsinger, *On Parchment*, 211.

27 de Bury, *Philobiblon*, iv.72 and viii.120.

28 Camille, “Book as Flesh.”

29 de Bury, *Philobiblon*, iv.62–64: see Camille, “Book as Flesh,” 54.

30 Camille, “Book as Flesh,” 54.

31 Camille, “Book as Flesh,” 55.

32 Turner, “Materiality of Medieval Parchment,” 41. Turner’s intervention is tremendously useful, and I engage with it more extensively in my forthcoming monograph, *Reading Early Middle English Books*. However, it is worth noting, as Baker does of the texts she surveys, that many material metaphors required an understanding of *both* the dermal origins of parchment and the techniques by which it was processed: see, for example, the *Charters of Christ* tradition above: Baker, “References to Material Texts,” 50–79.

over land and other human subjects.”³³ It is natural that the “sovereignty” people felt over the animals they raised or hunted should be extended to the products they made from their hides also. From this perspective, the parchment page says less about the human body than it does about the workings of social and environmental power. Indeed, proto-capitalist values of ownership might raise the status of the processed skin as written object, especially as it became associated with the institutions of political, legal, and/or religious institutions as the bearer of normative text. Here, the processed parchment skin signals dominion over not just animals but people too.

At the outset, the alignment of parchment pages with trans bodies might seem simplistic and even a little crass. Comparisons involving shaving, stitching, and scarring write themselves, evoking a medicalized idea of transness that echoes the pernicious and nonsensical concept of “*the surgery*”—the false idea that gender reassignment is achieved through a single (usually non-specific) surgery and that until this has happened transition is invalid or unattainable (“But have you had *the surgery*?”). Such concerns notwithstanding, the skin is a complex and multivalent site for trans people: it can feel wrong, or uncomfortable, it might be surgically or hormonally altered, but it can also be reformed, decorated, celebrated, a site of affirmation and being in the world. Scars are not just the still-tender memories of old wounds, for many they are affirmative indicators of survival and becoming. Trans skin may be all or none of these things; it may be a mark of shame and/or a source of joy. The skin, Sue Cataldi concludes in her book *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, both “protects us from others and exposes us to them,” but for many trans people exposure risks judgement, censorship, or violence.³⁴ In either scenario, trans skin is a site of hyperawareness, a surface that is policed and surveilled by the self and others.

It is not wrong, then, to suggest that for some the marks on the parchment page—holes, sewn repairs, surface abrasions, and beneath them bruises, pores, and vasculature—prompt recognition. “The transsexual body,” Susan Stryker writes, in the performance piece “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix,” “is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born.”³⁵ Hyperbole is intended in Stryker’s monologue, which in 1994 sought to reclaim trans experience from the normativizing

33 McCracken, *Skin of the Beast*, 9.

34 Cataldi, *Emotion, Depth, and Flesh*, 145.

35 Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein,” 238.

aims of the medical establishment, but it reflects the truth of some trans experience. And, as Gabrielle M. W. Bychowski and Turner have variously shown, the parchment page is a surface that has undergone a transition: the transition from skin, to parchment, to page is not a gender transition, “but what emerges from reading both skins for trans textuality is an affirmation that within all surfaces lie depths of ongoing transition.”³⁶ In considering the affinities between the body and the page, then, we must think beyond simple equivalences and celebrate the complexity of trans bodily experience.

Like reading, as Turner and Kay point out, the surface is culturally, socially, and historically embedded and not all signs are equally legible to all readers. With the terms trans literacy and trans legibility, I intend to flag not just the historical and cultural contingency of reading practice (broadly construed as the interpretation of signs), but also its embodied individual exigencies. The widespread deployment of the parchment page both as bodily metaphor and as staging space for embodied action shows that connection with the skin-ness of the page was possible. Trans and gender non-conforming readers, I suggest in this chapter, may be particularly alive to the skin of the surface.

Trans Pages in Normative Books

When Bychowski observes the ontological overlaps between the trans body and the medieval page, which she formulates in terms of “trans textuality,” she outlines three principles by which moments of affinity between the two might be understood: “dysphoria, duration, depth.”³⁷ In what follows, I take Bychowski’s principles as a starting point from which to expand as I shift from the consideration of parchment as subservient to text in the creation of meaning (as writing support) to an understanding of its material properties as a world-building skin-technology in its own right. I begin by extending the modes of recognition discussed above to the trans body in particular, through bibliographic images of the wounds of Christ. The devotional books that contain such images tend to be highly normative, though not necessarily in the same way as the legal rolls and ledgers discussed in Chapter 2. Books of hours, in particular, are a common venue. While such books could be personalized through the selection of “accessory texts” and the addition of prayers, images, and personal details, they required a standard set

³⁶ Bychowski, “Trans Textuality,” 322.

³⁷ Bychowski, “Trans Textuality,” 321–25.

unconditional love. Liz Herbert McAvoy views this moment of Christological explication as the culmination of a “feminization of Christ’s body” that acts—through juxtaposition, identification, and dislocation—as a “matrix” for Julian’s *Revelations*.⁴³ Julian’s Christology is “fully embodied” when she witnesses the Crucifixion in a vision. Here, she presents Christ in a perpetual state of labour, out of which comes salvation, through the shedding of “full thick,” “browne rede” menstrual blood and then the accelerated “bright rede” flow of post-partum hemorrhaging.⁴⁴

In her 1982 monograph *Jesus as Mother*, Caroline Walker Bynum assesses the tradition developed by women from twelfth-century Cistercian writings that showed an “increasing preference for analogies taken from human relationships.”⁴⁵ Such preferences included allusions to other familial relations, community leaders, and friends, as well as to the special care provided by mothers. Contemporary medicine understood that a mother’s milk was produced from her blood, and idealized mothers nursing their own children, so the conflation of Christ’s side wound (from which flowed blood and water: John 19:33–34) with the maternal breast was “more than merely the parallelism of two bodily fluids.”⁴⁶ Thus wrote Aelred of Rievaulx in the early twelfth century: “Then one of the soldiers opened his side with a lance and there came forth blood and water. Hasten, linger not, eat the honeycomb with your honey, drink your wine with your milk. The blood is changed into wine to gladden you, the water into milk to nourish you.”⁴⁷ The use of bodily imagery was intensified by women like Julian’s predecessors, Gertrude the Great and Mechthild of Magdeburg, both nuns of the Cistercian-influenced house at Helfta, who used “graphic gynocentric imagery” to explain the mysteries of the Sacred Heart.⁴⁸ Mechthild of Magdeburg dwells on the eroticism of the soul’s relationship with God, writing “He kisses her (the soul) passionately with his divine mouth...Then she rises to the heights of bliss and

43 McAvoy, “Moders Service,” 184.

44 See McAvoy, “Moders Service,” 193 and 189. The Carthusian prioress, Marguerite of Oingt, is more explicit in her figuration of the Crucifixion as a birth scene as she describes Christ labouring on the bed of the cross, before he “gave birth to the whole world”: see Easton, “Wound of Christ,” 401.

45 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 129, for example.

46 Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 132.

47 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Treatises*, 90–91.

48 McAvoy, “Moders Service,” 181. For more background on the convent at Helfta see Bynum, *Jesus as Mother*, 174–81.

to the most exquisite pain when she becomes truly intimate with him"⁴⁹ The side wound in particular could be kissed, licked, touched, and drunk from in gestures that might be read as both erotic and intimately nourishing.

Until recently, scholars could be rather coy in noticing the alignment between the shape of the stylized wound images and that of the vulva. However, in the last twenty years the likeness has been more readily accepted: Martha Easton describes the images as "almost inescapably vaginal."⁵⁰ The metonymy is encoded in James of Milan's *Stimulus amoris* (1293), where James puns on the proximity of the words *vulna* (wound) and *vulva*:

O amantissima vulnera Domini mei Iesu Christi! Nam, cum ea quadam vice oculis subintraem apertis...ibi tanta abundo dulcedine, ut tibi non valeam onarrare. Et qui prius pro peccatoribus fuerat in utero virginali, nunc dignatur me miserum inter sua viscera comportare...quantumcumque me pariat, scio, quod semper sua vulnera sunt aperta, et per ea in eius uterum iterum introibo.

(Oh most loving wounds of my Lord Jesus Christ! For, when I enter into it with my eyes open...there I abound with such sweetness that I cannot tell you. And He who was previously in the Virgin's womb for sinners, now deigns to carry me, wretched, within his bowels...No matter how often he births me, I know that his wounds are always open, and through them I will enter his womb again.)⁵¹

The connection is reinforced by the makers of medieval manuscripts: significantly, when it comes to the gendering of Christ, in several thirteenth-century depictions of the Crucifixion that show St. Peter/God assisting in the birth of the figure of Holy Church—dressed in robes and crown—who emerges from the wound in Christ's side.⁵² A thirteenth-century Parisian *Bible moralisée* interestingly parallels this sacrificial birth to the creation of Eve, depicting her being birthed, fully-formed, out of Adam's side in the roundel above and casting God in the role of midwife in both cases (Figure 10).

Images of the wound were often purported to be life-size and sometimes commentary was provided to assert this claim. A fifteenth-century

49 Mechthild of Magdeburg, *Flowing Light*, 88–89.

50 Easton, "Wound of Christ," 397. See also observations by Trexler, "Gendering Jesus Crucified," 109; Lewis, "Wound in Christ's Side"; and Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies."

51 James of Milan, *Stimulus amoris*, 70–71 (for more, see 70–76); see Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," 189–90.

52 See Lewis, "Wound in Christ's Side," 215; Sexton, "Gender-Queering Christ's Wounds."



Figure 10. Detail from a *Bible moralisée*, Paris, 1225–1250. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, MS Cod. 2554, fol. 1v. Courtesy of the Austrian National Library's open access initiative, <https://data.onb.ac.at/rep/10017A6C>.

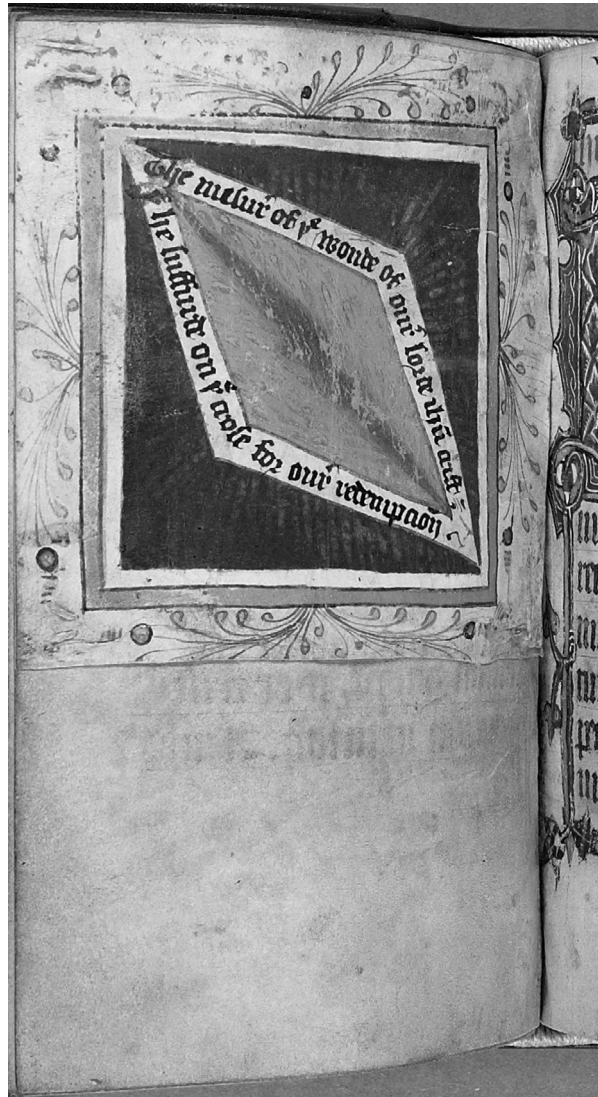


Figure 11. An image of Christ's side wound added to the Lewkenor Hours on a sewn-in slip, England, 1375–1400. London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 545, fol. 78v. Reproduced by permission of the Lambeth Palace Library on behalf of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

illustration of Christ's side wound stitched into the English Lewkenor Hours, is both abstracted from Christ's body—floating in space within an immediate rhombic frame, itself centred on a larger framed black square—and mapped closely onto it (Figure 11).⁵³ The double-framing of the image contains its potential for bodily messiness and draws attention to its status as artistic representation. However, the writing inside the first frame, which proclaims that the image is "[t]he mesure of þe wonde of oure lorde ihesu crist," asserts its proximity to a real and measurable wound. As Bynum

53 London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 545 (Lewkenor Hours), fol. 78v.

documents, the production of wound images “to the dimensions supposedly given in a vision or brought from the Holy Land” asserted their metonymy *with* Christ’s body. Metric relics, which claimed to replicate the length, or a portion of the length, of a devotional object, body, or place, were increasingly popular in the fourteenth century as “metonymy or concomitance became a general way of thinking about presence.”⁵⁴ In this context, images of the wound reflect the logic of material relics, like a vial of Thomas Becket’s blood or the preserved finger of John the Baptist, in which the fragmented body invokes and transmits the power of the whole. In some ways, then, this wound presents a body outside of gender—a body that is wound only; but in others, it is all gender—insomuch as we might measure that attribute through the primary sex characteristics of the vulvic wound.

The wound in the Lewkenor Hours might be compared with a similar image in a *passional* made in the early fourteenth century for Kunigunde, the Abbess of the Benedictine convent of St. George’s in Prague Castle, by a canon of that house. Two full page miniatures in the manuscript show different visualizations of the *arma christi*: in the first, they take the form of heraldic insignia displayed on a shield; in the second, the instruments of the crucifixion along with a life-size wound, surround Christ as Man of Sorrows (Figure 12).⁵⁵ In this context, the side wound is not abstracted from Christ’s body, but an extension of it, painted hovering above his hand as if magnified. The doubling of the wound on the page emphasizes the synecdochic qualities of such images, in which all versions are one and the same wound. Importantly, these two examples demonstrate that the visual rhetoric of the side wound was shared across secular and institutional contexts.

Rather than a “vulvar synecdoche that feminizes the body,” Sexton argues, “the vulva-wound is better understood as evidence of the integral fluidity of Christ’s gender, being incorporated into a body that refuses to signify as either/or within binary terms.”⁵⁶ As such, Christ’s wound becomes a model of trans potential within normative devotional contexts. Placed within books, the transcendent possibilities of Christ’s wound combine with the metonymic affordances of the parchment page, activating the volume as a site of gender possibility. Here, the transitivity of Christ’s body is extended

⁵⁴ Bynum, “Violent Imagery,” 23.

⁵⁵ Prague, National Library of the Czech Republic, MS XIV.A.17 (Abbess Kunigund’s *Passional*), fols. 3r and 10r. For more on the composition of the manuscript see Lewis, “Wound in Christ’s Side,” 204–5.

⁵⁶ Sexton, “Gender-Queerying Christ’s Wounds,” 139.

to the material of the page: as in the examples of the previous section, the book also provides a space for Christ's body to be realized.

It is worth repeating that such perceptions are culturally, socially, and historically situated. Not everyone who came into contact with images of the side wound would read them gynecologically or, if they did, extend that gynecological reading to their gendered vision of Christ. However, the traditions outlined above demonstrate that such readings were available. Similarly, our perception of the medieval gendering of Christ is situated. I approach these images from a trans and queer perspective, in which both of those terms are used to express a wide range of non-specific behaviours and identifications that resist normative structures of cisheterosexist power. These transcendent images of divine gender occupy a troubling position within such claims to resistance because of their transmission within such arguably normativizing books. However, this chapter argues that their place within such books reorients the cisheterosexist and patriarchal structures of the church (as represented by the book of hours), tactically turning normative models toward embodied trans experience and community building through the constellating affordances of trans touch. Moreover, the replication of such images in institutional and lay contexts, and the potential for personal selection by book owners, sets them in constellation, facilitating trans "lines of flight" into and around monastic gender-flexible space.

Taking seriously the two suggestions made above—the first that the parchment page might, with the right textual and/or environmental cues, invoke the presence of human skin; the second, that images of the side wound in both secular and monastic contexts participate in a tradition of Christ as gender transcendent figure—I suggest that, in these devotional and medico-devotional contexts, parchment pages that bear wound images might be imagined as a trans skin technology. Here, the colocation of codicological (parchment), spiritual (Christ's), and reading skins found in the *Charters of Christ* and other similar traditions, has (trans)gendered implications. Through the imposition of the "vaginal" side wound, the body of Christ is transposed from a neutral (masculine) body to a gender transcendent one. Further, in its abstraction from Christ's body, the wound is superimposed onto a new body, that of the reader. The presence of the wound on the surface(?) of the parchment skin/reading skin, offers further (trans)gender possibilities for readers and users.

Constellating Trans Touch through the Page

In the final sections of this chapter, I propose that the gender transcendent possibilities of images of the side wound, as they are inscribed on the parchment page, offer up a tactic for the formation of trans communities of care across and within normative book objects. In parchment, I find a skin technology that can hold and sustain trans touch. In doing so, I build on the significance of Sexton's observation that haptic interaction with images of the wound could provide a source of gender and gendered recognition, identification, and becoming.⁵⁷ I observe in such touches the gestures of intimate, sometimes erotic, gender labour and care. These gestures, I suggest, when retained by the page, form constellated communities of trans carers across image networks.

My first claim, that parchment registers, holds, and transmits touch, is based on the understanding that parchment is a deep surface. The skin, Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey show in the introduction to the volume *Thinking Through the Skin* (2003), has been fetishized as a "boundary-object" that separates the body from the world around it. It is a legible surface or interface "assumed to contain either the body, identity, well-being or value"; "allow[...] the contours of the body to appear *as given*"; and transmit the truth of what is within outward.⁵⁸ On this basis, parchment presents an ideal instantiation of skin as surface. It is a thin, flexible substrate, on which meaning is transmitted unmediated in the form of writing. However, neither parchment nor skin uncritically transmits the truth. Just as writing is a cultural product, the meanings attributed to skin are culturally produced. Nor do those meanings remain on the surface. As Ahmed, Stacey, and others have argued, the skin is not without depth. Trans men have an acute sense of the skin's physical depth: a subcutaneous testosterone injection is best given with a 5/8" needle held at 90° or a 1" needle held at 45°. Just as Wilson takes watermarks as a testament "to the depths of paper," Bychowski considers the pores visible on the parchment page as evidence of the skin's depths.⁵⁹ These pores, she suggests, reveal that the bodies that Chaucer's Physician "works to seal off" in his tale are actually "penetrated and porous," evidencing "internal touch, anima, active desire, and shame."⁶⁰

57 Sexton, "Gender-Queerying Christ's Wounds," 146–50.

58 Ahmed and Stacey, "Dermographies," 3, emphasis mine.

59 See Wilson, "Surface Reading Paper," 373.

60 Bychowski, "Trans Textuality," 329.

Images of the side wound present another means of accessing the skin's depths. Visually, the black interior of the wound implies an unseen, unknowable depth to the depiction: a "void."⁶¹ As Olsen demonstrates, that "void" was visualized by medieval devotants as variably extensive. In Olsen's words, the wound was a "liminal space or gateway that signified the transition between secular space (the here and now of the beholder) and sacred space (salvation and life-everlasting)."⁶² The wound, per James of Milan, offered a location that could be entered into as part of devotional performance.

For Gilles Deleuze, the wound might be considered fold-like. "[F]olds" like this are indicative of the skin's bodily function; it performs "a folding-in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding outwards of affects."⁶³ Deleuze's theorization accords with Olsen's description of the performative wound, which effects a similar folding in and folding out as it "simultaneously performed for the believer (it bled) or was acted upon through tactile interaction (touching or kissing), thereby inviting participation on the part of the devotee."⁶⁴ Didier Anzieu conceptualizes the psychical apparatus in similarly topographical terms, where the skin presents a multilayered, flexible "surface containing pouches and cavities," which offers a protective but permeable boundary between the internal Ego and external stimuli. The skin, Anzieu proposes, is "a filter of exchanges and for the recording of the earliest traces, the function that makes representation possible."⁶⁵ By either formulation, the skin is not a flat surface that simply receives or permits inscription, but a deep and textured surface that changes and is changed by our experience of the world.

Reading a manuscript (and, to some degree, any material book) is an intensely embodied experience. In parchment codices, the feel, sound, and smell of the page all contribute to the reading experience and participate in the delivery of information. Medieval interactions with books were accompanied by embodied gestural practices, variously interpreted by modern scholars: from the vocalization and sub-lingual muttering that Paul Saenger suggests accompanied reading into the fifteenth century, to the fetishistic

61 Olsen, "Penetrating the Void."

62 Olsen, "Penetrating the Void," 315.

63 See Braidotti, "Teratologies," 159, as cited by Ahmed and Stacey, "Dermographies," 4.

64 Olsen, "Penetrating the Void," 315.

65 Anzieu, *Skin-Ego*, 112 and 105 respectively.

grooming and preening of the collector.⁶⁶ In recent years, touch has been accorded a more significant role in the medieval reading process. Kathryn M. Rudy observes a range of “deliberate and charged” touching techniques indicative of different affective responses to manuscript imagery and content. The damage produced by routine and/or extraordinary touch, she suggests, can “reveal how books were handled,” and in so doing inform us of what was important to their individual or communal users.⁶⁷ For Andrew James Johnston, Wolfram R. Keller and Henry Ravenhall, medieval readers’ impulse to touch reveals that “manuscripts operated as an interface that allowed [them], through certain acts of (self-)inscription, to situate themselves politically, ethically, and emotionally in relation to” textual content.⁶⁸ In my own work, I figure touch as opening up a suite of embodied reading practices that locate the page as a social space for bodily community formation.⁶⁹ In each case, haptic approaches to the page result in what Camille terms the “interpenetration of corporeality and codicology.”⁷⁰

Images of the side wound present a particular instance of that interpenetration. Sexton analyzes an image of the five wounds of Christ in the *Loftie Hours*, a mid-fifteenth-century Dutch prayerbook equipped with a schema of eighteen miniatures by the Masters of the Delft Grisailles, that show evidence of having been subject to what Rudy categorizes as “wet touch.”⁷¹ The image displays the five wounds in red, oriented vertically, organized two by two with a larger wound in the centre and with copious amounts of dripping blood. The ink of the bottom two wounds has been blurred by repeated touching, which seems to have lifted the red ink from the centre of each.⁷² Wet touch, Rudy shows, is often a sign of veneration. It might include kissing, either with the mouth against the manuscript, or with the finger(s) as intermediary; weeping; or the application of some kind of sanctified substance

66 See, Saenger, *Space Between Words*; Camille, “Book as Flesh.” Other studies have taken a different view to Saenger. Most notably, Coleman, *Public Reading* emphasizes the persistence of reading aloud in the form of communal reading and performance (although I would note that the two are not mutually exclusive.)

67 Rudy, *Touching Parchment*, 2:4.

68 Johnston, Keller, and Ravenhall, “Touching Troy,” 425.

69 Sargan, “Trans Codicology,” 578–82. For more on this, see my forthcoming book: Sargan, *Reading Early Middle English*.

70 Camille, “Book as Flesh,” 36.

71 Rudy, “Touching the Book Again.” See also, Rudy, *Touching Parchment*.

72 Baltimore, Walters Art Museum, MS W.165 (*Loftie Hours*), fol. 110v; Sexton, “Gender-Queerying Christ’s Wounds,” 147.

(like oil or holy water). Wet touches often build up over time as part of a repeated ritual of engagement with the images of the book.⁷³ Sexton associates users' interactions with the Loftie wounds with Mark Amsler's gestures of "affective literacy," in which meditative and devotional contact with the wound gave readers the "freedom to touch, to feel (literally and emotionally), to become, through meditative practices, similar to [Christ's] suffering body, connected to it through touch and sight."⁷⁴

Rudy identifies wet-touch in another image from Abbess Kunigunde's *Passional*—the dedication image of the abbess on her dais. Here, the wear is "directed entirely to Kunigunde's face" and appears to have been caused when a reader, or more likely generations of successive readers, "kissed her finger and then touched the represented face with a moistened digit." The marks of the finger(s) can be seen, where the ink from the grid-like pattern of Kunigunde's habit has been transferred to the blank space of the parchment surrounding the face. Rudy points to similar osculatory practices at work during the Mass, when the Missal was kissed by the celebrant performing the *Te igitur* or reading from the gospels. This context, she suggests, implies that Kunigunde was the subject of saint-like veneration by the nuns of her community, who perhaps kissed her image as a regular, ritualized aspect of their reading of the book. Indeed, the marks participate in the ritualization of such actions, their presence punctuating the gestures of reading and acting as prompts for readers to repeat them year on year.⁷⁵ In this case, the marks of wet touch are both evidence of community identity and relationality and the facilitators of those connections, inviting others into communal relationships.

The side wound in Kunigunde's *Passional* was also subject to wet touch. Here, the contact drifts between the wound and the adjacent face of Christ on the cross, marked by a darker area of parchment and a single wet drip mark that has lifted red ink from the wound itself (Figure 12). It is possible that this touching represents a similar kind of mobile devotional veneration, traversing between Christ's face and the wound as generations of users kissed the image. Images of Christ Crucified, Rudy observes, were sometimes equipped with osculatory targets to divert the kisses of celebrants

⁷³ Rudy, "Touching the Book Again," 250–52.

⁷⁴ Sexton, "Gender-Queerying Christ's Wounds," 147. See Amsler, "Affective Literacies," 98.

⁷⁵ Rudy, "Touching the Book," 252.

during the Mass away from Christ's face and/or feet.⁷⁶ Perhaps the wound in this image enacted a similar function, allowing the nuns to participate in the moment of transubstantiation by re-enacting the gestures of the Mass. Widespread imagery, particularly among Cistercian communities, of kissing, touching, and drinking from the wound in particular, might also inspire readers to physical touch as a form of devotion.

However, even within these institutional and ritualized settings, the gesture of the kiss should not be divorced from its intimacy and potential eroticism. The kisses offered to Kunigunde's face in the *Passional's* frontispiece, while they may be devotional, also affirm her status as part of the community. They are an intimate gesture shared between the members of the convent—those present at any given time, those who repeat them across time, and the nuns and abbess depicted in the image—to reaffirm their shared status and values. As such, they are gestures that maintain and direct communal relations. In these material settings, Vebeke Olsen claims, “the wound could be visualized, venerated, touched, partaken of, and even penetrated by the faithful in an infinite variety of fluid scenarios involving the senses and that were freed from the constraints of biblical narrative and time.”⁷⁷ The kissing of the wound, particularly when its trans potential is recognized, implicates the user in gestures of queer and trans intimacy and “provokes the erotic tension of the *vulna/vulva* overlap.”⁷⁸

Other images of the side wound exhibit different kinds of contact from their readers. Scratch marks are visible on the surface of the wound in the *Lewkenor Hours* (Figure 11). Other examples, like a wound incorporated into a miniature of the Crucifixion thought to be by the Fauvel Master have been rubbed from the page. The wound in an illustrated copy of Gautier de Metz's *Image du monde* produced in Paris in the 1320s is prioritized by its location, overspilling the bounds of its own portal at the centre of the page. The centre of the wound has been “partly erased and the black and red paint rubbed off” through vigorous scratching.⁷⁹ Another example, found among a series of prayers on a roll that Mary Morse categorizes as a birth girdle, shows wear and abrasions to the diamond at the centre of the wound.⁸⁰

⁷⁶ Rudy, *Touching Parchment*, vol. 1, 86–108.

⁷⁷ Olsen, “Penetrating the Void,” 323.

⁷⁸ Amsler, “Affective Literacy,” 98.

⁷⁹ Amsler, “Affective Literacy,” 98. See Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 547 (*Image du monde*), fol. 140r.

⁸⁰ London, British Library, Harley Roll T 11. See Morse, *English Birth Girdles*, 271–300.

Still more images exhibit flaking, chipping, and smudging of paint. Such abrasions indicate that these wounds have been touched vigorously with dry hands, in some cases over long periods. Dry touch and wet touch might be similarly ritualized, with similar affective resonances. But dry touch may also register other kinds of heightened emotional states—like anger, fear, or frustration. Indeed, some readers, like the reader of Gautier de Metz's *Image du monde*, who nearly succeeded in removing the wound from the page altogether, may have been acting out of repulsion rather than devotional interest. As Sexton reminds us, there is no way to know exactly what motivated users to touch their books in this way, but it is clear that depictions of the side wound attracted touch in ways that other images, and even other parts of the same image, did not.⁸¹

More appealing, perhaps, is the suggestion that, like so many doubting Thomases, readers probed the wound for Christological assurance and gender affirmation. In his analysis of depictions of the crucifixion, Richard C. Trexler figures Christ's body as "a volume to be penetrated by [the] audience."⁸² Building on the suggestion that images of the side wound allowed readers to participate in St. Thomas's affirmation of the truth (physical truth, devotional truth, gender truth) of the resurrection, I suggest the readers probing of wound images sets up relational networks of queer and trans questioning, witnessing, and intimacy (erotic or not). Indeed, the vulvic wound might also draw to mind the apocryphal story of Salome, the midwife at the birth of Christ who did not believe in Mary's virginity, so probed her vagina with a finger to feel for the presence of a hymen. By touching the wound, readers witness the truth of Christ's gender transcendent body and participate in the intimate process of caring for that body. Such interactions provide space for queer and trans interrelation and establish communities of intimate care. They do this in two ways: first, through trans skin technologies that allow parchment to register, hold, and transmit touch through time (a concept somewhat aligned with Bychowski's sense of "duration"); second, through the tactic of constellation. Such constellatory tactics invoke Karma Lochrie's observation that the feminizing of Christ's body "opens a mesh of possibilities" for devotional action, but provides that mesh with connective, directional, and liberatory potential.⁸³

⁸¹ Sexton, "Gender-Queerying Christ's Wounds," 147.

⁸² Trexler, "Gendering Jesus Crucified," 108.

⁸³ Lochrie, "Mystical Acts, Queer Tendencies," 189.

The skin-to-skin contact—skin to page, skin to holy body as page, skin to reader's body as page—that devotional touch effects, then, is retained by the deep surface of the parchment. That contact, variously figured as loving, venerating, questioning, witnessing, is registered on the page, but it also becomes part of the books' affective resonances and affinities. Bychowski frames such affinities as a recognition of the page's (trans) "soul": the skin, she suggests—building on Kay—is "the grounds from which an *animus* (soul) emerges" and that *animus* within the parchment results in recognition that "emerges when skin touches skin, reader touches manuscript."⁸⁴ Elsewhere I have articulated similar feelings of connection in more secular terms: "The parchment surface retains trans experiences to be reanimated in concert with trans literate readers."⁸⁵ Rudy describes how such touches might build up over time, the marks that they make becoming a cue to further ritualized touching. Deleuze and Guattari extend the social implications of such touches. We understand from them that the inner surfaces of the wound-fold touch back. The surface of the parchment, as a synecdoche for gender transcendent body of Christ, offers spiritual and social affirmation to its users. Finally, the wound offers contact between users, as it sustains the touches of those who have come before. Just as the generations of nuns who touched and kissed the face of Abbess Kunigunde reaffirmed their participation in a shared convent community, successive users of these vulvic wound images shared affective bonds across the surface of the page.

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The affective trans communities developed on the page are not delimited by the boundaries of the book. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, shared codicological structures might be deployed as a mechanism of community formation. For example, the use of seal skin chemises in Cistercian libraries allowed monks in separate houses to participate in a community through shared visual and haptic experiences.⁸⁶ I suggest that images of the wound offered similar tactics of community formation. Such images form constellations that can amass trans experience across space and time and put readers into affirming and intimate relation with other users of the gender transcendent wound. In doing so, they afforded those participating in the trans potentials of the side wound access to the single gendered, non-normative

⁸⁴ Bychowski, "Trans Textuality," 324 and 332.

⁸⁵ Sargan, "Trans Codicology," 581.

⁸⁶ See Sargan, "Trans Codicology," 578–80.

spaces of religious houses from a position inside the normative and norm-policing spaces of the book of hours.

When considered in constellation, the locations and formats of wound images provide for their use in the construction of a trans community of care. The earliest examples of the genre, of which Abbess Kunigunde's is one, are found in volumes associated with female religious communities.⁸⁷ The images are intrinsic to the volume and usually participate in an overarching design of the book. Kunigunde's book, for example, contains five tracts on the Passion, three of which make up the body of the manuscript. The items are framed by dedicatory materials in praise of the book's patron, whose image is found on the first opening.⁸⁸ The first three texts are heavily illustrated, their imagery tying the theme of Christ as knight—prevalent in the first text, *De strenuo milite*—to the *arma Christi*, including the side wound.⁸⁹ The capacity for transness as virtue in this monastic context is introduced by the author of the texts, who, in his dedication to Kunigunde, instructs her, "Vos ergo, que femineo pectori virilem inserendo animum in hac pugna cotidie viriliter confligitis, ad arma passionis dominice prudenti usa consilio convolatis. (You, who contend manfully in this battle daily by implanting a male mind in a female breast, hasten to the arms of the Lord's Passion with a plan for their prudent use.)"⁹⁰ A further illustration presents the transcapable Kunigunde as a model of devotion to the side wound. Kunigunde, in the same habit as she wears in the presentation image, is shown kneeling in prayer before Christ, now descended from the cross and with his side wound on show. Her eyes are directed towards the wound, and his rubricated command reads, "aspice vulnera sevaque verbera que toleravi (Look at the wounds and savage blows that I have endured.)"⁹¹ Here, the situation of the wound image within the book opens up the monastic space for trans iconographic connection.

Later images are often found in lay books of hours, in sections adapted to the wishes of their patrons. Sometimes these images were added on individual leaves, either commissioned for the construction of the book,

87 Easton, "Wound of Christ," 395–97.

88 Rudy, "Touching the Book," 247–48.

89 Toussaint, *Passional der Kunigunde von Böhmen*, 105–41.

90 Toussaint, *Passional der Kunigunde von Böhmen*, 190; see Prague, NK, MS XIV.A.17, fol. 2r.

91 Prague, NK, MS XIV.A.17, fol. 7v. My thanks go to C. E. M. Henderson, Jessica J. Lockhart, and Stephanie J. Lahey for help interpreting this inscription.

or tipped in after the book was made. The eighteen full-page miniatures by the Masters of the Delft Grisailles in the *Loftie Hours*, for example, all appear on singletons opposite the opening of the prayer they are intended to illustrate.⁹² The parchment appears to be of a different quality to that of the written pages, and it is quite likely that these miniatures were commissioned together to illustrate the prayerbook from a separate producer than the rest of the manuscript. Meanwhile, the image of the wound in the *Lewkenor Hours* is on a cut down square of parchment, tacked to the page with two small stitches in each of the corners.⁹³ This piece was clearly added after the book was bound, perhaps to fill a blank space or replace another less-satisfactory item. Rudy has termed these kinds of tipped or stitched in images “postcards.” Such images were “personal, portable, and capable of being owned by people at a variety of social levels.” Rudy demonstrates that, though most examples now survive in manuscripts (due to the increased stability supplied by a binding), paintings on parchment were “demotic,” “did not just belong in private manuscripts,” and might be made by “amateur artists,” as well as by professionals like the Masters of the Delft Grisailles.⁹⁴ Such images, through the constellation of their iconography, provided a lay audience with access to the queer and trans potentials set up by images like Kunigunde’s.

In the fifteenth century, woodcut images of the wound circulated as indulgences.⁹⁵ Ephemeral printed images like this one might be preserved by sticking them into prayerbooks and other volumes or used for a time before they were lost or discarded. The availability of the wound image in a variety of forms, more or less personalized to the user, meant that people could opt in to the generic network they established. It was possible, at any time, to adapt the normative prayerbook towards gender transcendent devotional modes.

92 WAM, MS W.165, fols. 13v, 20v, 23v, 26v, 29v, 32v, 79v, 100v, 107v, 110v (wounds image), 113v, 116v, 118v, 120v, 123v, 125v, 127v, 130v.

93 LPL, MS 545, fol. 78v.

94 Rudy, *Postcards on Parchment*, 313.

95 Olsen, “Penetrating the Void,” 325.