

Acknowledgments

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Henning Laugerud, Salvador Ryan & Laura Katrine Skinnebach

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Introduction

HENNING LAUGERUD, SALVADOR RYAN
& LAURA KATRINE SKINNEBACH

This volume explores aspects of the devotional world of late medieval northern Europe, with a special emphasis on how people interacted with texts, images, artefacts and other instruments of piety. It focuses on the materiality of medieval religion and the manner in which Christians were encouraged to engage the physical senses – gazing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting – in their devotional practices in order to intensify the devotional experience. The contributions shed light, in different ways, on how bodily, sensory and material actions and objects were strategically applied for the purpose of reinforcing the devout sentiments of the soul and were solidly integrated into memory, which was regarded as one of the most essential faculties of human perception. In so doing, the collection brings together the ideals of medieval mystical writing and the increasingly tangible and material practice of piety characteristic of the period.

THE SENSORY AND BODILY ASPECT OF DEVOTION

The study of medieval – and particularly late medieval – devotion is a large and still expanding field. A striking feature is its fundamental interdisciplinary approach, which applies all kinds of cultural-historical perspectives, theories and methods, as is evident also in this collection of studies, both within each contribution itself, but also the collection at large. This is in line with much of the recent historiography of the Middle Ages. It is an approach that opens up new vistas on the medieval world in a kind of ‘global Middle Ages’, as Miri Rubin has termed it.¹

Recent scholarly research has firmly established the body and the bodily senses as one of the most significant aspects of medieval devotional practice. The work of Caroline Walker Bynum is paramount, but other scholars such as Barbara Baert, Susannah Biernoff, Daniel Heller-Roazen and Christopher Woolgar have made important contributions to the field.² The body, it has been argued, was a devotional

¹ See Miri Rubin's historiographical reflections, with her study of Mary as a point of departure, in ‘The global “Middle Ages”’ in Miri Rubin, *Emotion and devotion* (New York, 2009), pp 5–43. ² See, for example, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian materiality* (New York, 2011); *idem*, *Wonderful blood* (Philadelphia, 2007); and *idem*, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley, CA, 1987). See also Barbara Baert, *Collected essays on ‘Noli me tangere’* (Leuven, 2011); Susannah Biernoff, *Sight and embodiment in the Middle Ages* (Basingstoke, 2002); Daniel Heller-Roazen, ‘Common sense: Greek, Arabic and Latin’ in Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz and Alison Calhoun (eds), *Rethinking the medieval senses* (Baltimore, 2008); *idem*, *The inner touch* (New York, 2007) and C.M. Woolgar, *The senses in late medieval England* (New Haven, CT, 2006).

instrument in its own right.³ Because of the paradoxical nature of the relation between the human material body and the divine spiritual soul, questions concerning *how to deal* with the body lay at the very core of medieval theological reflection.⁴ The result was, however, not a rejection of the flesh, but an attempt to embrace it.⁵ Physical movements such as kneeling, lying face down on the floor, lighting a candle, and the employment of the outer senses – beholding an image, touching a rosary or the cold floor against one's face or knees, tasting the Eucharist or the words of prayer in one's mouth or the dryness following hours of recitation, smelling the sweet scent of incense and listening to names of the Virgin or words from holy scripture – were not merely outer expressions of the inner state of the soul, but devotional actions strategically incorporated for the purpose of affecting the soul. The practice of devotion strived towards transcending the paradoxical relation between body and soul by transforming the relation into a mutual dependence where body and soul followed each other closely, making common cause in contemplating God. Although bodily chastisement could be regarded as an attempt to suppress the material body (sometimes termed 'mortification'), it was also a way in which the close bond between body and soul became effectively and physically manifest to the self. As Bynum has stated, 'Control, discipline and torture of the flesh is, in medieval devotion, not so much the rejection of physicality as the elevation of it – a horrible yet delicious elevation – into a means of access to the divine'.⁶

According to a frequently used metaphor, the five senses were the gates to the soul. What passed through these gates affected the soul. If the gates were not sufficiently guarded by sober judgment, the soul would be engulfed by enemies, whereas a well-guarded sensory apparatus could be constructive. Medieval theories on perception acknowledged the indispensable connection between sense and cognition and thus regarded the *sensorium* as the combination of the outer sensory instruments and the inner sensory faculties. Thomas Aquinas stated that 'it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from the senses'.⁷ The act of sensing did not merely produce passive sensory experiences, but also organized and formed the mind and senses according to medieval religious and devotional culture. In his commentary on Aristotle's *De Anima*, Aquinas also argued that when we sense something, we are changed and affected by what we sense, so that the senses become somehow *like* the objects.⁸ Sensing was, then, according to this

³ Bynum, *Christian materiality*; Laura Katrine Skinnebach, 'Practices of perception' (PhD, University of Bergen, 2013). ⁴ Kristin B. Aavitsland, 'Incarnation: paradoxes of perception and mediation in medieval liturgical art' in Henning Laugerud, Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen and Laura Katrine Skinnebach, *The saturated sensorium* (Aarhus, in press). ⁵ See Bynum, *Christian materiality*; Aavitsland, 'Incarnation: paradoxes of perception and mediation in medieval liturgical art'; Laura Katrine Skinnebach, 'Devotion: perception as practice and body as devotion in late Medieval piety' in Henning Laugerud et al., *The saturated sensorium*. ⁶ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, p. 182. ⁷ ST, I, Q. 1, art. 9, quoted from Thomas Aquinas: *Summa Theologica* ed. and trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London, 1920). ⁸ Thomas Aquinas: *Commentary on Aristotles De Anima*, for example Book II, ch. XII; see Thomas Aquinas: *Commentary on Aristotles De Anima*, trans. Robert Pasnau (New Haven, CT, and London, 1999), pp 197–202. A good example of this can be found in bk VI of Augustine's

view, the process by which the senses were changed by what they sensed.⁹ Beholding an image of the Virgin and child, for example, was thought to have a beneficial effect on the soul. Devotional objects – images, prayer books, rosaries, prints, amulets – were central to devotion because of their ability to mediate the divine and affect the senses and, thus, the soul in a positive manner. Lecherous or explicitly violent sights and other sinful uses of the senses were, on the contrary, regarded as unfavourable or even as outright works of the devil. Sensing was indeed not a ‘natural’ practice, but distinctly culturally defined.¹⁰

Such embodied devotional practices were closely connected to memory and mnemotechnical practices. Memory worked on different but completely interlaced levels, structured, as it was, around a set of visual concepts and figurations that incorporated the whole *sensorium*. In the practice of devotion, memory was operationalized through the practice of bodily and mental actions; bodily positions, sensory absorption of objects and devotional circumstances were, in an almost physical manner, *imprinted* on memory. Through this memory, it was thought, the self would be transformed into a living image of Christ.¹¹

THE MATERIALITY OF LATE MEDIEVAL RELIGIOSITY

As the present volume illustrates, medieval devotion – mysticism and more ordinary devotions alike – exhibited a deep and profound awareness of the essential importance and, consequently, devotional potential of materiality. It should be underlined that materiality, in the medieval conception of *matter*, was regarded as anything but static or dead. On the contrary, as Bynum has argued, ‘the basic way of describing matter – default language, so to speak, into which theorists tended to slip – was to see it as organic, fertile and in some sense alive’.¹² When dealing with medieval materiality – or matter – we need to go beyond the ostensible exteriority; the sensory world was not regarded as superficial but as immanently spiritual and the senses were able to ‘see through’ the surface of things and perceive their inner essence or quiddity, as Aquinas argued; ‘Thus that which is the object of our intellect is not something existing outside sense objects, although intellect apprehends the quiddities of things differently from the way they are in sense objects’.¹³ This also applied to objects and artefacts created by man; their devotional significance was due to the fact that the distinction between

Confessions in which he relates the cautionary tale of his friend Alypius, who was beset by a craving for the gladiatorial games and chose to attend one of the contests. Upon witnessing one gladiator fall wounded, the sight of the blood spurting from the gladiator’s body drove Alypius into a frenzy of excitement and Augustine comments that Alypius thereby ‘suffered a more grievous wound in his soul than the gladiator he wished to see had received in his body’: *Confessions*, trans. Maria Boulding OSB (New York, 1997), pp 108–9. ⁹ Thomas Aquinas *Commentary*, bk III, ch. 1, pp 291–9. ¹⁰ See the discussion in Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen: ‘Sensorium: a model for medieval perception’ in Henning Laugerud et al., *The saturated sensorium*. ¹¹ See Henning Laugerud, ‘Memory: the sensory materiality of belief and understanding in late medieval Europe’ in Henning Laugerud et al., *The saturated sensorium*. ¹² Bynum, *Christian materiality*, p. 30. ¹³ Thomas Aquinas *Commentary*, bk III, ch. 8, p. 357.

materiality and spirituality was, in itself, porous. What we may regard as absolute dichotomies were, in a medieval context, absolutely interlaced. Body and soul, inner and outer, interiority and exteriority, materiality and spirituality were reciprocally intertwined; the one could not exist without the other; and medieval men and women were well aware of this. As a result, modern enquiries into the religious culture of the medieval period face a number of challenges regarding the way we approach the very texture of devotion. Bynum touches the heart of matter when she states that ‘until we understand medieval art in a new way – until we see how it plays with, uses and interrogates materiality – we will not understand what it is that we need to explain’.¹⁴ And the same could be said with regard to all other aspects of devotional practice; the incorporation of perception, memory, the senses and the body.

THE INTERLACED *SENSORIUM*

The present volume offers different perspectives on medieval materiality, but one specific characteristic will shine through; the practices involved with or involving materiality were – as will be shown – somehow *interlaced*. Body and soul were like two sides of a coin; it was impossible to see both sides at the same time, but it was equally impossible to use only one side as payment. In spite of their paradoxical nature, body and soul were inseparable and mutually constitutive. The five outer sensory instruments were interlaced in a similar manner. No one would disagree about the existence of five distinctive senses whose sensory abilities were distributed to mouth, ears, eyes, nose and skin. But in *practice* their abilities could not be separated equally neatly. Theological texts and devotional guides dealing with the senses were well aware of the amorphous perimeters between them. Senses could interact – as when seeing was regarded as a form of touch – or take each other’s place – as when the Eucharist was tasted with the eyes (*manducatio per visum*) – or senses could be made to flit from one sense to the other – as when a visual object was transformed into a candle that conveyed new sensory information.

The practice of devotional sensing – incorporated as it was through repeated performance of bodily and mental exercises – was fundamentally connected to the medieval understanding of signs and meaning. As Henning Laugerud states in his contribution, signs were *polysemous*, almost inexhaustible because of the fallen state of man.¹⁵ The Bible itself had to be interpreted and understood as containing meaning on many levels.¹⁶ In the Middle Ages human understanding could not be reduced to a single truth. Understanding was a continuous practice; Truth was in God, not in man. A single sign could, then, convey a whole world of meanings that were all intricately interlaced and yet concentrated around the truth of God. Materiality – both

¹⁴ Bynum, *Christian materiality*, p. 52. ¹⁵ Laugerud, this volume, p. 000. ¹⁶ See especially Susan Boynton and Diane J. Reilly (eds), *The practice of the Bible* (New York, 2011).

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natural and created props – mediated by the senses, could open the doors of memory and trigger unending trails of reflection. Isidore of Seville (c.560–636) introduced his ‘De Pictura’ (‘On Pictures’) in *The Etymologies* by stating that ‘a picture is an image representing the appearance of some object, which, when viewed, leads the mind to remember’.¹⁷ When looking at an image of Christ on the Cross, for example, all of the different aspects related to Christ and the Cross would spring to the mind. Even the most basic sign could be unfolded to signify whole worlds, something that may be illustrated by one of Julian of Norwich’s visions in which she experienced how she was given a small object about the size of a hazelnut:

And in this he showed me something small, no bigger than a hazelnut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was round as a ball. I looked at it with the eye of my understanding and thought: What can this be? I was amazed that it could last, for I thought that because of its littleness it would suddenly have fallen into nothing. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and always will, because God loves it; and thus everything has being through the love of God.¹⁸

The small object does not tell Julian anything in itself, but *through* her reflection on its being (the *eye* of her *understanding*), a whole new world of understanding is opened. From the little insignificant object she is led further to an insight of tremendous depth, namely about the nature of the love of God that is the reason for all being.

Such signs or *vestigis* triggered the physical appreciation that led further to imagination where signs were processed and made comprehensible according to the individual devotional level. In her recent study of the religious imagination in the Middle Ages, Michelle Karnes states that as ‘the last of the sense faculties, imagination made a unique contribution to the process by which sensory knowledge became intellectual apprehension’.¹⁹ Far from serving to denigrate medieval piety, Karnes links the period’s (affective) meditations on events in Christ’s life to an Aristotelian notion of imagination. For her, these meditations should not be regarded as solely affective; more often than not (especially in the devotional writings of St Bonaventure) ‘affect and intellect are proportionate and interdependent’.²⁰ St Bonaventure himself states that ‘imagination assists understanding’.²¹

Karnes underlines her point by elaborating on the role imagination plays in the

¹⁷ ‘Pictura autem est imago exprimens speciem rei alicuius, quae dum visa fuerit ad recordationem mentem reducit’, *Etymologiae*, bk 19, ch. 16. Here cited after (English trans.): *The etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, ed. and trans. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006), p. 380. Latin text: Isidore of Seville: *Etymologiarum sive Originum*, vol. II (ed. W.M. Lindsay) (Oxford, 1951 [1911]), Lib. XIX, XVI; 5. ¹⁸ Julian of Norwich: *Showings*, long text, ch. five. Here quoted from Julian of Norwich: *Showings*, trans. E. Colledge and J. Walsh (Mahwah, NJ, 1978), p. 183. ¹⁹ Michelle Karnes, *Imagination, meditation and cognition in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, 2011), p. 4. ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16. ²¹ See the prologue to his *Lignum Vitae*. Here quoted from St Bonaventure: *Mystical Opuscula*, trans. Jose de Vinck (Paterson, NJ, 1960), p. 98.

movement from the corporeal to the non-corporeal. She quotes the twelfth-century pseudo-Augustinian *Liber de spiritu et anima*, which states that ‘when the mind wants to rise up from the lower to higher things, we first meet with sense, then imagination, then reason, then intellection, and understanding, and at the top is wisdom’.²² Mary Carruthers has characterized theological ‘pictures’ such as those produced by Opicinus de Canistris (1296–c.1353), Hugh of St Victor (c.1096–1141) and Hugo de Folieto (c.1100–74) as mnemonic rebuses that have very little in common with modern diagrams. They are not image-for-word rebuses in the ordinary meaning of the word. They are *imagines rerum*, designed to call to mind the framework of a composition that each individual should ponder and elaborate further. ‘They provide “places” as it were, for memorial “gathering”, *collatio*’.²³ Signs provided places for further exploration and through one single sign the whole mystery of Christianity could be comprehended. Signs provided little doors of perception that could lead the way further to transcendent experiences. Thus, a vast hinterland of meaning lay embedded in each single picture, object or movement.

From a rhetorical point of view, the function of signs was to consolidate meaning in the minds of the devout. All expressive aids were able to do this, but they did it in different ways; signs differed according to *how* they helped store information in the mind and how *effectively*. The importance of storing information in the mind was closely connected to the position of *commemoration* in medieval culture. According to the New Testament, Christ, during the Last Supper, requested his disciples to remember his sacrifice ‘*hoc facite in meam commemorationem*’.²⁴ The biblical events belong to the past and cannot be experienced first-hand. In order to keep faith and memory alive it was of crucial importance that the past was constantly commemorated through the rituals and ceremonies of the Church that recalled the actions and deeds of Christ and left images and traces of the past in the minds of the faithful. The event was fundamental in liturgical celebration where the sacrifice of Christ was commemorated in such a way that it became present, the liturgical dimension called *anamnesis*. At the same time, medieval culture relied heavily on memory; whereas people today have the possibility of storing information in books and other media that we can consult if needed, medieval people had to rely on a combination of books (which were only accessible for the few), images (the medieval democratic medium per se) and what they were able to store in their own memories. This has led Mary Carruthers to argue that medieval culture was basically a culture of memory; *memoria* was one of the cornerstones of medieval education and this is clearly mirrored in the material culture of the period where learning was designed to aid the mind in forming and maintaining heuristic formats that were both spatial and visual because this was thought to be the best way to memorize.²⁵

²² *Liber de spiritu et anima*, PL 40:786C. Quoted in Karnes at p. 26. ²³ Mary J. Carruthers, *The book of memory* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 254. ²⁴ Luke 22:19. ²⁵ Carruthers, *The book of memory*, esp. p. 32.

THE ANTHOLOGY

In their own distinctive ways, the eight contributions in this volume address many of the scholarly concerns highlighted above.

Berndt Hamm's contribution concerns the understanding of the mediation of grace in the later Middle Ages, where we can find an intensified representation of the holy and that which sanctifies. This he describes with his key concept of 'proximate grace' (*nahen Gnade*), an understanding that Grace was immanent and close to man. This is, in Hamm's view, closely linked to new forms of mediality of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, where also the new printing technologies played an important role.

Rob Faesen focuses on the thirteenth-century poet and mystic, Hadewijch of Amsterdam's (Eucharistic) Visions, usually numbered 7–8. Faesen suggests that the two visions should be seen as one, and shows how the latter (8), which has remained relatively enigmatic in recent scholarship, may be interpreted in light of the former (7). Hadewijch analyses the different aspects of the union with Christ, the climax being the 'union without difference'. In this contribution, Faesen proposes a new hypothesis, which focuses on the physicality both of Christ and of Hadewijch ('without difference'). The visual and the theological aspects thus become mutually clarifying.

The questions raised in **Henning Laugerud**'s contribution concern what the visionaries of the Middle Ages saw. In other words, how do visions appear to medieval visionaries, and in their accounts? And not least, how are we to understand what the visionary sees? Visions are by definition visual acts and have to do with *seeing* in one sense or another. Visions are inner or outer *images* of transcendental, holy or divine beings, which appear in a manner that human beings can see, and represent an experience that transports them away from their immediate surroundings and places them in contact with the next world. During the Middle Ages visions and the literature regarding visions were an essential element of Christianity, both as practice and experience, yet also in a dialogue with and part of theological speculation. This contribution explores the relationship between visions, images – both exterior physical and interior mental images – and memory.

Salvador Ryan, in his contribution, explores the motif of Christ, lover of the soul, a theme that was very popular in late medieval mystical writing and, indeed, more broadly in devotional literature. Some of this literature depicts the relationship between Christ and the individual Christian soul while using a host of sensuous, carnal and even eroticized imagery. While often associated with the writings of female (but not exclusively female) religious mystics in England and on the Continent, Ryan draws attention to instances in which remarkably similar imagery appears in the lesser-known religious verse of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Irish bardic poets. This is especially the case in Irish poetry concerning Christ's passion and poems that emphasize devotion to Christ's wounds.

Laura Katrine Skinnebach's contribution takes as its point of departure the biblical story of the transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of three of his disciples. The story describes how the disciples come to understand the nature of Jesus as the Son of God as a result of a change in the appearance of Jesus that leads to a shift in their mode of perception. Skinnebach argues that the theme of transfiguration lies as an undercurrent in the practice of devotion and descriptions of devotional experiences. Body, senses and objects were incorporated into the practice of devotion through a combination of different devotional actions, through which the mind and body of the pious practitioner went through a transformation that left him or her enlightened.

In their joint contribution, **Soetkin Vanhauwaert** and **Georg Geml** take a close look at the so-called *Johannesschüssel*, an object with a close relation to the cult of relics. On the one hand, the sculpture has been seen as a substitute for the head-relic of John the Baptist that was brought to Amiens in the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade. On the other hand, many *Johannesschüsseln* contained relics themselves. This is not very surprising as many of these examples meet the ideal image of a reliquary: they are made of gold and silver, and precious materials were believed to be essential for a reliquary. However, there are several *Johannesschüsseln* that contained relics and were nonetheless made of wood without any precious materials, not even gemstones. As this observation challenges the common understanding of reliquaries, the contribution examines the materiality of the *Johannesschüssel* as reliquary and asks the following questions: What was it that made the wooden *Johannesschüsseln* worthy? Were these sculptures intended to contain a relic or did they become reliquaries at a later date? Did the materials used change the perception of the reliquary? And finally, did the relic define the sculpture?

In her essay, **Barbara Baert** revisits the Quattrocento iconography of the Annunciation from the standpoint of the senses. She argues that the devotional *Bildakt*, the interchange between the image and its beholders, in this period becomes unlocked through the pictorial (self-) reflections on the *sensorium*. In Tuscan Quattrocento interpretations of the theme especially (for example, Filippo Lippi) we can find an argument for how the *performative* interchange is built upon new insights in the optics, upon certain convictions about the role of the ear (hearing), and even upon intuitions regarding taste and smell. By integrating this *sensorium*, seen as a complex and chiasmic osmosis (that is, seeing as hearing), into the iconography, a new devotional and sensuous relationship between image and beholder was established. Hence, in this essay Baert contributes to the 'hermeneutic of the senses in iconology'.

The *mediation* and *instrumentalization* of perception has most often been thought of as a marker of secularized modernity and of the disenchanting modern alienation of sensory experience. In contrast to this post-human assumption, **Hans Henrik Lohfert Jørgensen** employs late medieval devotional instruments to argue that the human

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sensorium was always already mediatized and organized by the cultural practices and cultic images through which its religious world-view and beliefs were shaped. The Christian *hagiosensorium* produced a world of holy perception through its multimodal media of cult and devotion.