

Vol. XCIV

2025

No. I

MEDIUM ÆVUM

Edited by

David Rundle

Corinne Saunders Sylvia Huot

Stephen Mossman

Published twice-yearly by the Society for the
Study of Medieval Languages and Literature

Annual Subscription


£85

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MEDIUM ÆVUM

SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF MEDIEVAL LANGUAGES AND LITERATURE



Medium Ævum Essay Prize 2026

Submission Deadline:

12:00 midday (GMT)

Monday 1st December, 2025

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A competition for unpublished work of postgraduates and those recently graduated with a higher degree

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The journal welcomes submissions in all areas relating to medieval literature and languages. Articles can vary in length but are normally in the range of 7,000 to 12,000 words, while notes of under 2,000 words are also fully acceptable. The Editors will acknowledge articles submitted on receipt, and will endeavour to reach an in-principle decision on publication within twelve weeks.

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ISSN 0025-8385 (print)

ISSN 2398-1423 (online)

Typeset in Great Britain by Val Lamb

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Kathryn M. Rudy, *Touching Parchment: How Medieval Users Rubbed, Handled, and Kissed Their Manuscripts*, vol. 2: *Social Encounters with the Book* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2024). 474 pp.; 199 colour illustrations. ISBN 978-1-80511-164-1 (paperback). £34.95. 978-1-80511-166-5 (PDF). <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0379>.

In this second of four volumes, Kathryn M. Rudy continues her groundbreaking investigation into the tactile practices of medieval European manuscript culture. There is a little overlap with the first volume, which laid out a new terminology and considered book-touching – especially of the Gospels – in formal ceremonies. Now attention turns to social encounters. ‘Books’, Rudy claims (p. 6), ‘served as a social adhesive’, the glue that held bonds together and facilitated the ritualized expression of group belonging. Developing her method of ‘use-wear analysis’ – the forensic examination of traces left on manuscripts to discern patterns of usage – Rudy recovers the physical interactions elicited by written objects made mostly between *c.* 1100 and *c.* 1500 in northwestern Europe. If accepted, Rudy’s conclusions should prompt a revised history of medieval reading, thanks in particular to chapters 3 and 4, where the professional reciter of texts or ‘prelector’ is radically hypothesized as a dramatic and tactile mediator between book and lay reader.

Each chapter studies a social dimension of manuscript use. Chapter 1 charts the transmutation of religious profession (*professio*) into social oath (*iuramentum*) after *c.* 1200, as well as the fluctuating gestural language, book-touching, and inscriptional practices that accompanied it. These oaths were increasingly used in secular and civic contexts, but carried some of the trappings of ecclesiastical ritual. Confraternities, elite social clubs of clerics and/or laypeople defined by particular statutes, are the focus of chapter 2. A comparative study of three confraternities – in Valenciennes, Linkebeek, and Brussels – and their manuscripts shows the centrality of touching rituals in reinforcing the ‘collective identity of the group’ (p. 118). Chapter 3 argues that practices of rubbing images were normalized in childhood through group educational encounters. In volume one, Rudy posited the growing theatricality of the Mass and the desire to imitate it as one mechanism by which readers came to abrade their books. Teaching is now another way these haptic practices spread. An effective case study is the popular didactic text, the fourteenth-century *Ci nous dist*, whose manuscripts attest to how touching images was linked to moral instruction (pp. 159–66). Chapter 4 is about the audio-visual-tactile performance of vernacular ‘courtly’ manuscripts. Rudy examines the *Lancelot-Grail*, Gautier de Coinci’s *Miracles de Nostre Dame*, *Les Vœux du Paon*, the *Roman de la Rose*, Jacob van Marlaent’s *Rhimebible*, and the *Grandes Chroniques de France*, among others. Throughout, she reconstructs the physical and interpretive processes which led to the rubbing

– with or without saliva – of certain miniatures. The prelector, Rudy argues, was largely responsible, as he sought to dramatize his reading by manipulating details, perhaps inviting his audience to touch the image too. This ‘reading situation’ was ‘still hierarchical and moralizing, but more intimate’, shared among a small audience who ‘would have craned their necks to see the images’ (p. 190). Chapter 5 studies necrologies and mortuary rolls, whose handling and continued use expressed a social orientation towards death. The material form and haptic rituals of rolls and necrologies ‘tied communities together, spatially and temporally, connecting the past, present, and future’ (p. 285). If Rudy has proposed destructive but authorized touching, then the Conclusion considers the implications for manuscript culture. Did artisans anticipate damage and adapt as a result? Did book owners welcome these signs of wear because they conferred ‘tradition and solemnity’? (p. 308) The final pages discuss the practice of ‘wet-touching’ initials, which may have marked a new session of reading, connected voice with word, or initiated a ‘casual oath’ (p. 314) to remain true to the letter.

Touching Parchment moves thrillingly between careful book history and more speculative phenomenological accounts of reading. Rudy imagines moments of medieval performance which, although unverifiable, could have involved ‘cheering as the prelector defaced the antagonists’ (p. 202) or ‘whoops of appreciation’ (p. 236). The book is a model of academic transparency. It constantly exposes its own method and explains limitations or uncertainties. The Appendices were made using ChatGPT-4 (p. 343). While a comparison of Appendix 3 with the manuscript’s Middle French reveals the occasional transcription error, the book is nevertheless a vital conversation-starter about new methods, a changing publication landscape, and the very ontology of the medieval manuscript.

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DOI: 10.65290/ETJU1364

Eva Lieberich, *Neid und soziale Ordnung. Diskurse, Strukturen, Narrative*, Trends in Medieval Philology 44 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2023). vi + 326 pp. ISBN 978-3-11-117915-5. €99.95.

With *Neid und soziale Ordnung*, Eva Lieberich offers a thorough reinterpretation of the role of envy at court in Middle High German and Latin texts from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Far from being strictly negative, Lieberich argues, envy plays an ambivalent role in negotiating the courtly social order, challenging, destabilizing, but ultimately reinforcing it.

From the starting point of Keie’s envy in *Iwein*, Lieberich expands an argument against distinguishing medieval theological conceptions of envy as sin from the modern view of envy as a product of social dynamics, to show that the narration