The Sensory Experience of Books

This chapter focuses on how the senses were involved in experiencing objects, and in particular how they were involved in the physical manipulation and comprehension of books. Books, of course, are not static objects; they contain images and information that are fundamental to a comprehensive understanding of them. As Richard Newhauser has argued, the senses were fundamental to medieval knowledge acquisition; they were the “foundation of cognition,” in the words of Michael Camille.1 The complex mechanics of medieval manuscripts, and especially the folding almanacs with their need for elaborate manipulations, required sustained engagement with multiple senses in ways not required by other types of objects. In discussions by Camille, Mark Cruse, Maura Nolan, Jonathan Wilcox, and others, the intimacies of book use demonstrate that the senses were essential for the richest experience of reading.2

The multisensory nature of the act of reading folding almanacs creates an experience that one might describe as phenomenological. Not coincidentally, in his introduction to Sensory Perception in the Medieval West, Simon C. Thomson notes the resonances between considerations of sensory experience and the embodied perception articulated by phenomenology.3 Phenomenology offers a philosophy for describing bodily experience — or, in the words of one of its key theorists, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, one’s “being-in-the-world.”4 Thinking phenomenologically about medieval objects and spaces allows one to acknowledge the interconnected nature of the senses in most experiences, rather than focusing on the action of individual senses. Such an approach provides a critical apparatus for investigating user reception through the concept of a “lived body” that experiences the world and also impacts that world, a notion that resonates with medieval materiality. My own work has frequently considered medieval spaces and objects, including manuscripts, through the lens of phenomenology, which informs my approach to sensory engagement as well.5

Reading a book involves, in the words of Maura Nolan, “a repertoire of bodily motions and gestures” that are activated by the handling of the book, creating a phenomenological experience that engages all of the senses.6 Both Nolan and Jonathan Wilcox consider the multisensory nature of medieval book reading in part by contrasting that experience with the inevitable limitations of digitized manuscripts, which really only engage one sense: that of sight. According to Wilcox, “the tactile is everywhere in the operation of a real book, but absent from the digital simulacrum.”7 He goes on to describe how the materiality of the book is asserted through that tactility, stating, “Parchment alerts an attentive hand to the difference between flesh side and hair side, while the book asserts values of weight and heft, portability and haptic involvement of those who hold it.”8 That haptic involvement on the part of the user is especially pronounced with the folding almanacs and the many manipulations they encourage.

Books have a sensory impact on their viewers: the senses play a role in facilitating use or comprehension of an object, but an object may direct or control the sensory experience as well. Medieval perception was affected by both animate and inanimate entities and things — or, as Chris Woolgar asserts, “the sensorium extended to and was affected by qualities of objects and beings round about them.”9 A number of scholars of the senses have pointed to the notion of object agency in the formation of sensory


8 Wilcox, “The Sensory Cost of Remediation,” 39. Wilcox organized the hands-on manuscript workshop at University of Iowa in 2008 in which I participated, and he also edited the resulting publication, Scrapped, Stroked, and Bound: Mysteriously Engaged Readings of Medieval Manuscripts (see n. 5 above).

experience; for instance, Thomson has suggested that an “audience’s sensory perception could be exploited or piqued by objects and experiences in the medieval world.”10 In thinking about the power these books have to manipulate their users, I draw on Jane Bennett’s ideas about active objects and their potential for animation.11 In the case of the folding almanacs, movement and resistance to movement are the most pronounced actions they make, engaging the user primarily through tactility and sound.

The particular format of the folding almanacs requires a different sort of engagement than does the traditional codex form seen in most medieval manuscripts. The user’s senses are not just engaged by the act of reading; the unusual manipulation necessitated by the almanacs’ format — the repeated opening and closing of folios, the folding and unfolding of the parchment — itself directs the user’s experience and stimulates the senses. My argument here, that the folding almanacs direct the sensory experience of their users, builds on previous work that explores another facet of their format. Elsewhere, Karen Overbey and I have contemplated the portability and potential performativity of these manuscripts. We consider the way in which their manipulation could have facilitated medical efficacy through an almost ritualistic performance of folding and unfolding, enacted by the handler for the benefit of the patient or audience, animating the space of the consultation.12 Building on that previous work but moving in a different direction, in this chapter I think more about the effect of such manipulations on the handlers themselves. As Newhauser has pointed out, “sensory organs were not just passive receptors of information, but actively participated in the formation of knowledge.”13 The folding almanacs actively engage the senses of their handlers — through sight, but also through touch and sound — to facilitate cognition and understanding of their medical content within the embodied exchange of health consultation. By consenting to actively engage the folios of these manuscripts, the handlers themselves are moved.

The Format and Organization of Folding Almanacs

The folding almanacs have been described as essentially calendar books, meant to provide guidance for determining the best time for the treatment of a particular ailment. The notion of propitious times was pertinent in a variety of cultural contexts and, according to Hilary M. Carey, can “be seen as part of popular rather than learned culture.”14 The folding almanacs supplied what was needed to determine the phases and movements of the moon before undertaking a procedure.

Most of these manuscripts are made up of just a few folios, all folded individually to create a pocket-sized object. In some cases, the leaves are folded into thirds; in others, fourths. The extant manuscripts do not always have the same content or number of folios. Carey describes the organization of one of the tri-fold variations this way: “Each folio is divided into two horizontally and three vertically, making six recto and six verso sections, with an upper half ‘a’ and a lower half ‘b’ on each side.”15 A hypothetical representative example might contain ten leaves, of which folio 1 could display the table of movable feasts, the calendar canon, and a vein man as in Figure 1.16 Folios 2 through 5

14 Hilary M. Carey, “Astrological Medicine and the Medieval English Folded Almanac,” *Social History of Medicine* 17 (2004): 345–363, at 361–362. That said, these books were more advanced than the basic, “more popular regimen of noting good and evil days of the month.”
16 Good examples of this format are BL MS Harley 5311 and Wellcome MS. 8932.
might contain the calendar, which looks similar to the calendars in late medieval books of hours. Each month occupies half of one side of a folio, with three months depicted on each of the four folios; the text filling the spaces in columns that are usually demarcated by the folds. The fourth space of each folio is what remains visible when it is completely folded up, and it is left blank except for the title of the folio's contents (for example, “April, May, June” in Figure 2). Lunar tables and a corresponding canon, and often the zodiac man, might appear on folio 6 (Plate XIVa). Folios 7 through 9 could display eclipses, often spectacularly illuminated with gold; folio 7 might display solar eclipses with a canon, and folios 8 and 9 could show lunar eclipses (Plate XV). We might also find a diagram of the Sphere of Apuleius, a prognostication device, as well as vessels containing urine samples along with a canon, on folio 9 (Plate XVI). Finally, folio 10 could contain a tract on astrological prediction.

The sophisticated organization of the folding almanac’s information highlights its remarkable symbiosis of form and content, with both elements working together to create an unusual and singular type of book. More than forty folding almanacs with this type of astro-medical content have survived, most made in England during the fifteenth century. The specific folded format of this group of manuscripts, along with their limited geographic and temporal scope, is remarkable. Since these innovative pocket-sized books contain information that was also available in traditional codex form, their makers were using an unconventional and sophisticated format for existing content. The organization of this information within the folding almanac is ingenious: it is tightly laid out on each folio and positioned so that it can be easily read by the holder of the manuscript regardless of how fully a folio has been unfolded (in fact, viewed from any other position, the material will be upside down). It is only possible to open one folio at a time; thus, each time a folio is viewed, the page must be folded back up before another one can be opened.

The folding almanacs produced in fifteenth-century England are not the only books created in this manner, but they represent the largest group: thirty-one out of the sixty or so folded manuscripts catalogued by J. P. Gumbert. Gumbert states that books made in this format have three distinct features: (1) they have folded leaves which cannot be read unless unfolded; (2) the leaves are not grouped into quires, but instead have tabs on one edge, which are gathered and sewn together “into a stub”; and (3) the book is held by the stub, and the text on the unfolded leaf is read “from outer (upper) edge toward the stub.” These characteristics demonstrate the primary differences between these manuscripts and other small medieval codices, such as tiny books of hours or girdle books. The folding book served a specific function, and seems to have appeared in the thirteenth century as a solution to the problem of “how to make something that is small outside but large inside.” It accommodates a sizeable amount of text while being small enough to be carried on one’s person. Such folded books do eventually disappear, except in the case of one type of text that particularly benefited from the “large inside” made possible by

Figure 2: Titles for April, May, June calendars, Almanach, tabula festrorum, mobilium ab anno 1364 usque annum domini 1462, York, England, between 1406 and 1424. Collection: The Rosenbach, Philadelphia, MS 1004/29, fol. 3. Photograph: J. Borland.

17 Thirty-one English folding almanacs are currently known. Carey lists twenty-nine in “What is a Folded Almanac?” J. P. Gumbert catalogues sixty-three books total using this format, of which forty-four are almanacs (thirty English and fourteen Continental). Gumbert, Bat Books.
19 Gumbert, Bat Books.
21 Gumbert, Bat Books, 23.
this format: calendars, and especially almanacs. These texts might only be a few leaves thick if created in codex form, which would be awkward; their wide tables do best with larger leaves, which would be far too big to carry on a girdle or belt. In the case of the folding almanac, form and content work together to create an ingenious solution, making objects that are functional, accessible, and informative.

For most of the surviving almanacs, a user would have begun by holding the entire closed manuscript in their palm, much as one might hold a smartphone today. Usually the tab or binding would be held facing the user, while the opposite, open edge of the manuscript would be oriented away from them. The handler would then select a folio based on the titles written on the folded, closed folios—in fact, the orientation of these titles can be used to determine the proper orientation of the manuscript as a whole (Figure 2). These titles appear on the verso and face outward when the tri- or quarter-fold is closed, but are hidden from the viewer once the opening of the folio commences. The user would then bend the other closed folios away from the selected one, in order to open up sufficient space around it for unfolding. The selected folio would next be opened, first by unfolding it horizontally, which would result in gaining access to the first of the three half sheets that contain content—this first half sheet, the reader will note, is facing the right direction to be read by the handler. If the user then required access to the other two half sheets, they would fully open the folio away from them, in order to view the entirety of the recto side, which usually contained two half sheets of content oriented correctly for the reader. To access another folio, the open folio would first have to be closed, reversing the order of unfolding that already took place. Although each instance of use would be somewhat unique, depending on the idiosyncrasies of user, illness, time of year, and other factors, the process of opening and closing sequential folios might eventually become somewhat mechanical or habitual, as the handler became familiar with the nuances of the specific book, its folded pages, its binding, and the feel and sound of manipulating these different elements.

This complicated process not only reflects the unique experience of using one of these almanacs, but also demonstrates the careful attention that went into their planning, organization, and production. Several copies have survived unbound, giving us a particularly good sense of the mechanics of their construction. For example, MS Lansdowne 331 at the British Library was unbound and later rebound as a codex; the binding tabs have been lost or removed, and the sheets were sliced in two before being bound (Figure 3). Taken from an example of the quarter-fold type, the two columns on either side of what is now the spine of the book do not match, and much of the manuscript appears upside down. Such examples keenly demonstrate how this information has been shaped to fit the format of the folding book, and how this format works differently than the bound codex.

Figure 3: Almanac folios rebound in codex (two columns of September on left, two columns of August upside down on right), British Library, London, Lansdowne MS 331, 11v-12r, ca. 1463. Copyright The British Library Board.

While the reader might have used the almanac as a tool to impact engagement with a patient, the manner in which this was done would have been largely controlled by the format of the book itself. To begin with, the size of the book, the size of its text, and the way in which it must be opened to be made sense of are all deliberately designed for a single user. One cannot easily set the book on a table to read it; instead it must be held, making it difficult to fully share the reading experience the way one might with a larger codex, which two or more people could have used together. Although it was possible for two people to view one of these manuscripts, with one person handling it while an observer stood next to the handler and

22 Gumbert, *Bat Books*, 24. Carey suggests that by the sixteenth century, a folded almanac was “an old-fashioned object”: Carey, *Astrological Medicine*, 355. Perhaps a move away from health care by itinerant physicians led to the decreased usefulness of such books—if such practitioners were no longer common, there was no longer a need for mobility (or for such a marker of authority).
24 But this is not always the case; sometimes a book employs both orientations, depending on the folio.
25 For a video of a conservator handling MS. 8932 at the Wellcome Library, see https://wellcomelibrary.org/term/b206050559?c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0 (accessed 27 November 2017).
was shown specific folios, the tangible experience of manipulating the book could not have been shared.

There is also no easy way to hold more than one folio open at a time; in fact, simply unfolding a single folio is rather cumbersome, requiring deft maneuvering with both hands. The design of the manuscript dictates this particular method of unfolding; the specific manner in which a handler manipulates the book has been predetermined. The experience of touching is much more pronounced in a book like this, compared to folios in a codex. Of course, manipulating a codex also requires touching, but the 180-degree flexibility of many medieval bindings would have allowed some books to rest open (Figure 4). Thus readers often would have had to use both hands only when opening the codex; from then on, they could turn the pages with just one hand, allowing for largely hands-free reading. In contrast, folding almanacs demand constant, two-handed touching. The experience of viewing these books in libraries today underscores this difference, as the reader of a folding almanac is often allowed a greater amount of handling than is usually granted with the average codex. This necessity is also one reason why some libraries will not allow handling of folding almanacs at all, not even by their conservators. The heightened haptic engagement necessary to fully understand them is driven by the format of the object itself, which incorporates the necessity for touching and movement.

32 Siraisi, Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine, 106.
healthy balance was different, and maintaining the balance of these humors was the essence of medieval medical care. Phenomena that impacted the body’s health were categorized as naturals, nonnaturals, and contranaturals: naturals were the fundamental elements within the body, such as the temperaments, humors, and body parts, while contranaturals were pathological conditions or diseases. The nonnaturals, however, were especially pertinent to the understanding of the causes and treatment of disease: they usually comprised the factors of air, food and drink, sleep and wakefulness, motion and rest, evacuation and repetition, along with the passions of the mind, and sometimes included bathing, sexual practices, and physical activity as well.

Calendars are common in a variety of genres; they are relevant to devotion when they are incorporated into books of hours, and to astrological medicine when included in the almanacs. Treatment and prognosis of patients was not limited to prescribing a change in diet, an herbal remedy, or bloodletting; to ensure successful healing, practitioners also took into consideration facets of astrological medicine, specifically following the theory of “critical days,” a branch of medical astrology that dealt with calendar dates and thus the phases of the moon. The type of material found in fifteenth-century English folding almanacs can also be found in codex form. English almanacs were based on the larger works of two astronomers from Oxford: John Somer and Nicholas Lynn. The folding almanacs were among the simplest types of medical almanacs, in contrast with more robust almanacs that supplied more thorough information on the planetary positions throughout the year and would have existed in larger codex form. Most of the folding almanacs do not diverge from the calculations of Somer and his successor Lynn and are somewhat generic; even though these compact almanacs were designed as “personal objects,” they rarely display markers of ownership or individualization.

Physicians were not especially common in fifteenth-century England, and even in places where access to such physicians might be available, they were not the only healers or even the primary ones. Much healing probably still took place in the home, while university-trained physicians primarily served wealthier lords and prelates. Almanacs were most likely taken into the field by trained practitioners whose practices were not in court or urban settings, but rather in the vicinity of busy provincial towns like Norwich or York. Such practitioners may have had some professional training, but they likely based their practice on primarily empirical knowledge of remedies and prognosis. Especially in England in this period, practitioners of all types—barber-surgeons, university-trained physicians, or skilled laywomen—gained training through a wide variety of avenues. Regardless of the specific training of the practitioner, the excessive dirt and other signs of wear displayed by many of the surviving folding almanacs suggest abundant use by their owners.

The small size, portable format, and abbreviated texts of the folding almanacs provided the basic reference material for diagnosis of common complaints, but the usefulness of these small books for healthcare practitioners may have also resided in the way they conveyed the appearance of learned expertise. The almanacs, carried visibly on the belt and activated during the course of a patient’s consultation with the doctor, undoubtedly suggested prestige and authority. In fact, the folding almanacs appear at a time when medical hierarchies were becoming increasingly specialized and there was notable public concern about issues such as the licensing of practitioners and other means of assessing competence.

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37 "In the end, various kinds of medical almanacs were produced which supplied information at a variety of levels of astrological expertise to meet the needs of physicians." Carey, "Astrological Medicine," 350.


43 Overbay and Borland, “Diagnostic Performance and Diagrammatic Manipulation.”

Although their content is similar to that found in other calendar or astrological codices, it was the design of the folding almanacs that probably appealed to a wide range of users from diverse social backgrounds. The innovative, almost exclusively English design of these almanacs establishes them as specialized tools that nonetheless became increasingly familiar to both patients and practitioners in the period. The novelty of their format may also have appealed to elite bibliophiles or others interested in medicine. Carey, for instance, argues for a range of users, including physicians but also people generally interested in astrology: “a social range similar to that reflected in the appearance of their books,” which vary from luxurious to roughly executed. The proliferation of folded almanac production in the fifteenth century mirrors the increased practice of collecting many genres of books, including encyclopedic texts, practical health-care and household guides, and newly vernacularized texts. Gumbert also suggests that these books would have been of interest to a variety of educated laypeople with appropriate resources. While the specific content of the folding almanacs suggests use by itinerant health practitioners interested in having this information in portable form, these books likely also had a wider book-collecting audience. Precise users of the folding almanacs are unknown, yet it is helpful to consider the likely audiences in order to think through why they were formatted in this way and how that format was implicated in their use.

**Audiotactility and Agency**

The power and authority associated with these objects may not only be due to their specialized charts and diagrams or their sartorial display, but also the way they were manipulated within a context that included other talismanic practices. Health management would have made an attempt to use all possible methods for curing illnesses and healing injuries, and these would have included amuletic charms on small parchment scraps, either read aloud or placed on the body; jewelry, gems, and other talismans worn on the body for protection or cure; pilgrim badges; and visits to local (or sometimes distant) saints’ shrines or other holy places. Medical texts often recommend charms and the creation of amulets as part of treatment. The folding almanacs were also worn on the body, potentially making them talismanic or amuletic too.

The folding almanacs may have sometimes hung directly on the belt, or they may have been carried in a small hanging purse or pouch. Other portable objects were probably also kept in those pouches or hung alongside the almanacs: rosaries, jewelry or gems, pilgrim badges, coin purses, materia medica, and textual amulets could all have been carried alongside a small, encased manuscript. Talismanic connotations were attached to folding almanacs in part because of how they were worn, creating an association with other types of things that hung from the belt or girdle. Many of the extant folding almanacs have two limp covers, sometimes made of leather, sometimes covered in textiles. Some have remnants of cords attached, and several leather slipcases also survive, in which the book would have been kept when not in use. Amulets, talismans, and pilgrim badges, of course, are all examples of objects that gained efficacy by appealing to the senses—that is, through their proximity to the body. The affinities between these kinds of objects and the folding almanacs indicates that they were similarly associated with the benefits of immediate sensory access. The talismanic quality of an almanac was amplified by the content accessed by its handler.

This sensory experience of reading is further augmented by the recalcitrance of the materials, more pronounced in the folding almanacs because they ask parchment to behave differently than it does in conventional codices. Unlike paper, parchment has a collagen-based fibrous structure that resists reshaping. It is always inclined to unfurl, as though channeling a memory of its earlier physical state as the skin curving over an animal’s back: in the words of Christopher Clarkson, “[i]t is not natural for parchment to lie flat.” Many covers of medieval codices were clasped or locked shut when not in use to prevent such curling and buckling. Meanwhile, changes in

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47 Overbye and Borland, “Diagnostic Performance and Diagnostic Manipulation.”
48 The charms were even sometimes written directly on the body or ingested. Peter Murray Jones describes a charm that is to be written on the cheek: Jones, “Amulets: Prescriptions and Surviving Objects from Late Medieval England,” in *Beyond Pilgrimage Souvenirs and Secular Badges*, ed. Sarah Blick (Oxford: Oxbow, 2007), 92–107. Lea T. Olsen discusses charms written on consumable items that were then ingested: Olsen, “Charms and Prayers in Medieval Medical Theory and Practice,” *Social History of Medicine* 16 (2003): 343–366. See also Don C. Skemer, *Binding Words: Textual Amulets in the Middle Ages* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2006).
50 Skemer, in his discussion of how textual amulets were worn or carried, points out that “once folded or rolled, individual amulets could be carried in linen, velvet, or silk sacks, slung over the person’s shoulder or suspended from the belt like girdle books and *vade mecum* folding books.” *Binding Words*, 160.
temperature and humidity over time can lead to a loss of moisture that results in hardening and brittleness: once folds have been pressed into place, this hardening can cause them to hold their shape. Thus the act of unfolding is also resisted by the manuscript’s pages. In a medieval codex, each piece of parchment, or bifolio, has only a single fold at the center; it is joined at this fold with other bifolios in a quire or gathering, which is then sewn into the binding of the book. If we think about how the codex is constructed, this center fold is sometimes – probably most of the time – fully folded when the book is closed; even when the book is open, that fold is rarely flattened completely. Thus its crease stays within a comfortable range. In a folding almanac, there are many additional folds; greater manipulation has been performed upon the piece of parchment. In a tri-fold almanac, for example, three folds are made, the last two of those to already doubled-up parchment. Once these folds have been made and the folios have stayed folded over many centuries, the books are audibly reluctant to unfold (Figures 5–6). When we handle them today, the folded pages can be quite resistant, crunching and cracking as they are opened. These small books and their noisy pages shape their users’ sensory experiences, forcing the handler to grapple, literally, with the physical reality of the object.

Every medieval manuscript made of parchment is going to creak and crinkle some of the time. But the parchment sheets of folding almanacs are exponentially noisier than those of the average codex; the folding and unfolding required of the reader consistently makes remarkably satisfying sounds. This may be amplified by the type of parchment used in folding almanacs. These are usually not elite books in the traditional sense, even though they are often illuminated with colorful images and gold leaf. The parchment tends to be of the thicker and more robust type, perhaps chosen for these books – given that they might sustain a high level of handling when used in the field – because it was sturdier. The number of surviving and intact almanacs that also show a great deal of wear seem to suggest that this was the case.

54 While the original parchment may have been supplier when it was made than it is today, modern parchment samples suggest that even new parchment can still be quite audibly resistant to manipulation such as folding.

55 These satisfying crunches seem to generate a pleasure similar to that of cracking a joint or popping bubble wrap, which often seems to have a calming, stress-reducing effect.
Thicker parchment would have held up longer, but it would have also been harder to bend.

But it is not just that the parchment has been forced to accept more folds, and then to keep them (since the resting state of an almanac is folded); it is also expected to completely unfold on demand. These conflicting states are in tension with each other, and are further complicated by the parchment's original curvature. The parchment itself pushes to open up and stretch, but the deep folds also cause it to snap back from its flattened state. And this stress is manifest in movement and in noise, demonstrating the different physical forces at play in these folios. Given this constant tension between open and closed, folded and unfolded, their preferred state would probably be somewhere in between. These are objects that not only move on their own, but also may resist the actions of their handlers. They are dynamic, creating a rush of air and a snapping sound. Such factors, essential to the parchment sheets folded within an almanac, dictate how the user engages with the book, and what that user has to do to make the book work in the desired manner.

These parchment pages enact or respond to the laws of physics: crunching and crackling when you unfold them and springing back into folded form as soon as you loosen your grip, their thick parchment pushing back against the user and making noises in protest. Is this an example of Jane Bennett's notion of "thingly power" - that is, "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle"? Her argument for understanding matter not as dead but as having material agency is folded into a call for us as humans to be more attentive, through our senses, to the "channels of communication" created by objects and matter: "an actant never really acts alone," but is dependent on collaboration. It may not really be much of a challenge for us to accept that our experiences, even our movements or actions, can be influenced by the matter and objects around us; perhaps the more tricky aspect of Bennett's assertions has to do with how we describe or imagine thingly power.

The assertiveness of the folding almanacs, their apparent self-determinacy, lends itself to anthropomorphism. Although scholars generally avoid anthropomorphizing their subjects, Bennett makes the case that anthropomorphism can be valuable and legitimate. As she observes, "a careful course of anthropomorphism can help to reveal [the] vitality of objects, while our "encounters with matter ... expose a wider distribution of agency." It is especially challenging to resist such language with a folding almanac; Gumbert's observation that such manuscripts "hang upside-down and all folded up" when in rest but "lift up their heads and spread their wings wide" when in action demonstrates the animated status of these books. The recognition that things have agency reveals, according to Bennett, a world of "lively matter" through "the inflection of matter as vibrant, vital, energetic, lively, quivering, vibratory, evanescent, and effluents." Those adjectives assert the capacities of objects to engage our senses, to move us.

A book's weight, the size of its text, page markings like chapter headings, rubrics, and page numbers, the presence of images - all of these factors contribute to the experience of using it, activating specific habits of reading. According to Nolan, "habit is deeply connected to sensation," with the various sensory cues generated by objects like books activating "habitual behaviors" in the user. In the case of the folding almanacs, the characteristics of these compact manuscripts are notably unique compared to the much more common codex form found in modern printed books as well as most medieval manuscripts. The manuscript's weight as it hangs in a pouch on one's belt, the book's heft in the hand, the series of foldings and unfoldings of the individual folios that might occur over the course of a diagnostic session - the folding almanac would have created very different habitual reading behaviors than a codex, generating a specific set of embodied motions and gestures that engaged specific senses in distinctive combinations.

Nolan and others bring attention to the "multimodal" or "cross-modal" effects of reading, arguing that the simultaneous engagement of multiple senses encourages information processing and even readerly well-being. Specifically writing about the role of sound in the production of parchment and the reading of books made of parchment, cites recent research that indicates that "auditory-tactile stimulation" can be "a means to increase health and well-being." She goes on to propose that the combination of touch and sound "might have produced a mental state in the (medieval) reader that made them particularly receptive to spiritual experience." Beatrice Kitzinger has also argued that a spiritual benefit is inherent in the "activation" of a manuscript, the instrumentality of which facilitates "apprehension" through the senses but also beyond them, toward an understanding of the scope

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56 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 6.
57 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 21.
58 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 122.
59 This also leads to his idiosyncratic description of them as "bat books," Gumbert, Bat Books, 19.
60 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, 112.
65 Sauer, "Audiotactility & the Medieval Soundscape of Parchment."
of Christian time. There were certainly health benefits associated with the content of the folding almanacs, and the performative manipulation of these almanacs may have generated further confidence in both the practitioner’s authority and the manuscript’s efficacy. While the direct health benefits of this multisensory engagement were likely minimal, such engagement may well have enhanced the book’s amuletic properties in the minds of both patient and practitioner.

Books also reflect the limits of what is reasonable in terms of discernment or understanding, exhibiting a kind of logic of comprehensibility that is linked to physical engagement. Sensation has a role in forming a handler’s reading habits, but those habits are also directed by the manuscript layout, which “opens a window onto medieval habits of representation and reading.” Bodily limitations determine the limitations of a book, in terms of how much information can be processed by the eye at once, or what can be held by the hand. Such considerations are especially pertinent to the almanacs because of their specific form. Did they seem as controlling, as recalcitrant, to original users as they might to us today? During a period of regular, active use, the parchment leaves of a folded almanac may have been suppler and more yielding than they are now. Without regular use, however, they would likely lose some flexibility and settle into their folds, making them resistant as well as noisy. Even if these folding almanacs demonstrated greater flexibility when newly made and regularly used, the noise of unfolding would have always been fundamental to the experience of them—especially with the thicker parchment of which they were often made.

Conclusion

To access the full efficacy or impact of folding almanacs requires sensory engagement specific to these books and their particular format-content combination. The physics of this format insist on a particular way of being used, one that might have even altered how the content was absorbed. The format facilitated an especially performative use within the spaces of medical treatment, but such manipulation was not generated solely by the handlers; the handlers were also manipulated by the almanacs. Through their construction they generated, and continue to generate, forces, movement, and sounds that encourage a particular type of use; this use potentially increased their efficacy along with the well-being of those who used them or were in their presence.

In other words, the significance, power, and efficacy of the folding almanacs are tied up in their handling as much as in their content. While folding almanacs contained specific information with a practical function and were probably used to gain access to that content at least some of the time, there was also an important performative aspect to their use, activating the potential space between practitioner and patient. This performance—whether witnessed by a patient or simply experienced by the handler—would have eventually become habitual, ritualized, even talismanic. It would have contributed to the aura of the knowledge contained inside the book, knowledge that was activated by and through handling. Although the closed almanac is potentially a symbol of knowledge when displayed on a belt, the book’s power is wrapped up in the “mechanics of physical contact” that are required for its usefulness to be fully realized. The movement, the engagement of touch and hearing and other senses, the ritualized combinations of unfoldings and refoldings—these are necessary for that full power to be engaged. Bennett describes the impact of objects as “enchanted” in an effort to get at “the agency of things that produce (helpful, harmful) effects in human and other bodies.”

In an important discussion of textual amulets, Don C. Skemer suggests that proximity and tangibility are key to these objects’ efficacy. Just as textual amulets were made more powerful by being worn, the manipulation of the almanacs, and the sensory engagement inherent in that use, were made more powerful through “physical agency.” In a sense the almanacs are like textual amulets, but it is not just touching or sensing them that makes them powerful. It is their form and the complicated series of actions that they produce: the promise of privileged knowledge is only fully realized through a kind of ritualized or habitual movement that is directly linked to their form. A folding almanac maintains these various levels of use, layering amuletic visibility and proximity onto an even more direct physical engagement through the handling of the book and the medical treatment of patients’ bodies. The deep connection between habit and sensation is based in the physical book that “orchestrates” that habit; as articulated by Nolan, the material book’s “conventions act as triggers for habitual behaviors, which in turn function as a means of ordering both the physical sensations of reading and the immaterial content of the work.”

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67 Overey and Borland, “Diagnostic Performance and Diagrammatic Manipulation.”


70 I appreciate parchment maker Jesse Meyer’s expertise in helping me think through the characteristics and behaviors of parchment; email message to author, 21 December 2016.

71 Skemer, Binding Words, 127.

72 Bennett, Vibrant Matter, xii.

73 Skemer, Binding Words, 134.

Richard Newhauser

10 “putten to ploughe”: Touching the Peasant Sensory Community

The Good Plowman and Peasant Agency

To the rest of the historiographical evidence that illustrates peasant agency in medieval England we can add the positively valued activity of the plowman in the art and literature of the later Middle Ages. The good plowman depicted in these contexts supplements the data that has been gathered in recent investigations into the range of choices available to peasants, the forces that shaped those options, and the milieux of peasant societies and their effects on peasant decision-making. In particular, historians who have examined peasant societies have demonstrated in various ways the cohesiveness of village life, pointing, for example, to the way in which communal control of agriculture in village communities affected economic growth, or to the fact that strong peasant communities could restrain increases in money rents demanded of them and even hold rents lower than what landlords might otherwise have been able to charge. Furthermore, as R. B. Goheen argued some time ago, peasant agency extended to politics as well, since “medieval English peasants participated in the crown’s provincial politics partly at least on their own terms and for their own ends, and in the process they influenced both the form and content of these politics.” But such social and political histories largely


Plate XIVa (Borland): Wellcome Library, London, MS. 8932, 1415–14207
Photograph: Wellcome Collection.


Plate XVIIa (Newhauser): The De Lisle Psalter, given by Robert de Lisle to his daughters on Nov. 25, 1339; the tree of vices (detail). British Library, London, MS Arundel 83 (II), fol. 128v. Copyright The British Library Board.

Plate XVIIb (Newhauser): London Rothschild Hours (Hours of Joanna I of Castile), southern Netherlands, compiled ca. 1500 for a female member of the Spanish court or royal family, perhaps Joanna I, Queen of Castile and Aragon, September Labor: men plowing and sowing. British Library, London, MS Additional 35313, fol. 5v. Copyright The British Library Board.
Sense, Matter, and Medium

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