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Objectification, Identity and the Late Medieval Codex

Ryan Perry

The self is invariably shaped in complex relation to the objects that surround it. We are defined in respect of our tastes – through styles of furniture, clothing, cars; through our predilection for sun-dried tomatoes, for malt whisky, for abstract art, or whatever. Interactions with materials testify to who we are, and according to some anthropologists, the belongings we accrue might even be understood as extensions of our personhood, with blurred lines between subjects and the objects they accrue.¹ Our things publically proclaim something of our identities in a much more obvious sense than our names or our fleeting spoken words.

Exploring the relationship between material things and the types of identity they may have produced might be especially fruitful in reference to a society where so many material productions are bespoke, are directly tailored for, and in some respects designed by their consumers. Pre-industrial consumers were regularly involved not only in the utilisation of the objects they owned, but in the production process too. Regarding the ornamental features of manuscripts, the initials, borders and miniatures that adorn so many medieval books, Kathleen Scott asserts that ‘the ultimate decision for the type of illustrative format would, for reasons of cost, have remained with the patron, not the book designer’.² Patrons of medieval manuscript production were not only consumers of objects produced by artisans, but will have often had an input into the design of the codex, and will regularly have provided the book producer with the exemplar(s) to be copied into the commissioned

1 For seminal discussions of the idea of ‘partible’ or ‘distributed personhood’ see M. Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift* (Berkeley, CA, 1988); and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998).

2 Kathleen Scott, ‘Design, Decoration and Illumination’, in Jeremy Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (eds), *Book Production and Publishing in Britain 1375–1475* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 42.

volume. The artisans responsible for producing the medieval codex should often be considered as a conduit for the creative agency of the patron.

Codicological inquiry has ever been concerned with probing the idiosyncratic character of a book's construction: how do the manuscript's material features – its quality, decoration, type of script, dimensions, dialect employed and so on – combine to provide insights into the manufacture, ownership and patronage of a manuscript? The medieval book has thus traditionally been studied in direct relation to its creation: the agency of its producers, patrons and audiences is regularly understood in respect of that moment of manufacturing creativity, and the production is analysed according to the processes that shaped its existence. It makes sense, in light of the materialist focus of codicological analysis, to revisit the medieval codex in light of anthropological accounts of materiality and consumerism. Such approaches allow for the development of a methodology that attends to the status of books as desired objects within later medieval culture. Rather than merely questioning how audiences responded to a given text, this essay asks what did the synthesis of book *and* text mean to medieval patrons? Studies in art history, archaeology and material cultural have alerted us, for example, to how people objectified their social aspirations through the clothes that they wore, their material possessions, and even the food they ate. Pierre Bourdieu's theories of objectification have been vastly influential in anthropological accounts of materiality and how identity might be constructed and advertised through material things:

People's tastes and preferences, their lifestyles and patterns of consumption are objectified through the clothes they buy and how they wear them, the food they eat and their table manners, the kinds of cars they drive and so on, in a systematic and predictable manner. Bourdieu is interested in not just documenting differences in 'tastes' and lifestyles, but in how these are mobilized in struggles for status and prestige and naturalized in various ways, made to appear to be self-evident and non-arbitrary.³

The sumptuary legislation of the later medieval period provides a documentary echo of Bourdieu's idea of 'cultural capital', with materials, foods and styles of clothing codified in a hierarchy intended to map onto a society stratified both through lineage and, increasingly, disposable wealth.⁴ It has long been noted that the repeated attempts to update the sumptuary legislation in the period indicates that the laws invited transgression by aspirant members of society. The laws enshrined taxonomies for the material representation of social status, and encoded a template for manifesting a particular socially

3 Christopher Tilley, 'Objectification', in Christopher Tilley et al. (eds), *Handbook of Material Culture* (London, 2005), p. 67.

4 For a study exploring the legislation from such a perspective see Claire Sponsler, 'Narrating the Social Order: Medieval Clothing Laws', *CLIO*, 21/3 (1992): 265–83.

exclusive identity. Ironically, the sumptuary legislation may have thus provided the basis for its own subversion, particularly for the aspirant, so-called 'self-fashioning' middle classes. Books too, although not proscribed by sumptuary law, nevertheless could represent forms of exclusivity through which consumers might express various forms of status and identity. Again, Bourdieu's idea of 'cultural capital' has bearing on the objectifying potential of books:

People are argued to be involved in a never-ending struggle with regard to different forms of capital: economic (money, access to material resources), social (networks with other persons), cultural (legitimate and legitimated knowledges), symbolic (prestige and social honour).⁵

Books have the potential to intersect with each of the various fields of cultural capital discussed here. In terms of economic capital, commissioning a book was a relatively costly process, and materially sumptuous productions could be extraordinarily so. The subject matter of books can be emblematic of high cultural forms through texts associated with, say, courtly reading tastes (romance fiction, books on hunting, on martial practice, or heraldry), or they might alternately manifest empowering scientific, philosophical and religious wisdom. Different kinds of books might represent fashionable literary tastes or scholastic knowledge; perhaps more importantly, books record access to social networks – to possess a copy of a text is also to conterminously possess a direct and personal link to an owner of a copy-text: in pre-print culture one needs firstly to know about the existence of a book and then to obtain it so that it might be copied – books thus have the potential to record and celebrate for their owners various affiliations, friendships, marriages and links between associated people and institutions – as Ralph Hanna writes in *Pursuing History*:

The transmission of ... text did not occur in vacuo, but in real places among real persons ... This perception ... must imply some physical contact between book producers and, thus, the lines of communication that implicitly establish evidence for material literary communities.⁶

Because of the necessity of a social and material bond for the dissemination of texts, their transmission would (unlike materials such as clothes and foods), be arbitrarily restricted, as texts circulated within their 'incestuous' textual communities. Therefore, although relatively few texts (such as texts containing 'suspect' theology) were encoded with explicit prohibitions as to who might read or copy the book, to obtain, or even to be aware of the

5 Tilley, 'Objectification', p. 67.

6 Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, CA, 1996), p. 10.

material existence of a work was concomitantly to be part of a social network. Even a work such as Nicholas Love's *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ*, a text often accompanied by Archbishop Arundel's *Memorandum* that it be 'published universally for the edification of the faithful', did not penetrate into socially diverse ownership contexts to any great degree.⁷ The extant corpus of manuscripts suggests that the *Mirror*, preserved largely in good quality codices, invariably circulated between such networks as religious institutions and the gentry affinities orbiting and intersecting with noble households. In Arundel's *Memorandum* the idea of universal publication should not be understood as a wildly unrealistic aspiration for universal access to Love's text, but rather a document proposing that access to the *Mirror* need not be purposefully denied.

Texts clearly intersect with various nexuses of power in which a particular type of knowledge is either instrumental or culturally valued. The participation in a culture where texts are loaned, gifted or read in shared communal practices allows the subject to accrue what one might term a socio-dialect.⁸ The books commissioned, borrowed and owned by the Pastons, a family understood by scholarship to represent the apotheosis of the fifteenth-century *arriviste* gentry, illustrate something of the role of texts in allowing persons to gain and manifest culturally esteemed linguistic and cultural registers.⁹ In a letter from Thomas Daverse to Sir John Paston II, Daverse is able to imply his friend's evident success in romantic pursuits through reference to books; he promises to send a volume that has been requested by John, a copy of 'Ouyde *De Arte Amandi* ... þis next weke', and jests that 'Ouide *De Remedio* were more mete for yow ... Ye be the best cheser of a gentellwoman þat I know.'¹⁰ Shared, and culturally prestigious textual knowledge allows the men to engage in a homosocial discussion that would have been barely comprehensible to John's farming forbears, only a few generations back in the Paston line.¹¹ Among the books mentioned in the family's correspondences, the codex described by its main writer, William Ebesham, as the 'Grete Booke', might be understood as

7 For discussion and the translation here cited of Arundel's *Memorandum* see Michael G. Sargent (ed.), *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Full Critical Edition* (Exeter, 2005), intro. pp. 36–7.

8 I am influenced in this construction by Mikhail Bakhtin's discussions of *heteroglossia*, particularly in 'Discourse in the Novel', in Carl Emerson (trans.), Michael Holquist (ed.), *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin, TX, 1981).

9 Mention of books occurs fairly regularly in the letters, and particularly in relation to John Paston II; see Norman Davis, (ed.), *The Paston Letters and Papers of the Fifteenth Century*, 3 vols. Early English Text Society s.s. 20–22 (Oxford, 2004–2005).

10 Davis, (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, vol. 2, p. 379.

11 John's great-grandfather Clement had been a husbandman; for discussion of the Paston's contentious heritage see Colin Richmond, *The Paston Family in the Fifteenth Century: The First Phase* (Cambridge, 1990) pp. 1–22; for further examples of John Paston II's literary interests see Karen Cherewatuk, 'Aural and Written Reception in Sir John Paston, Malory, and Caxton', *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 21 (2004): 123–31.

embodying the newly acquired ideologies with which the family now invested itself.¹² The book, identified by A.I. Doyle as British Library Lansdowne MS 285 (Illustration 22.1), contained a number of chivalric treatises, ranging from texts on coronation and knighting ceremonies and accounts of relatively recent jousting challenges to texts dealing with conduct, war and statecraft including Stephen Scrope's *Epistle of Othea*, an English translation of Vegetius's *De Re Militari* and Lydgate's translation of *Secreta Secretorum*.¹³ There is little doubt that this is the same codex Sir John Paston II mentions in his inventory 'off Englysshe bokis', where he tellingly characterises the compilation of texts as 'my boke of knyghthod'.¹⁴

The similarity of much of the contents of the 'Grete Booke' to those in another contemporary codex, Pierpont Morgan Library MS 775 (though the texts are differently ordered), appears to demonstrate that a core of texts were understood by other patrons as forming a coherent anthology on 'knyghthod'.¹⁵ If Doyle is right that either the Pierpont Morgan MS or a shared exemplar was a source for the Paston book, then it is clear that John added to his exemplar a substantial further layering of texts, some forty or so in all, and largely with a focus on the ceremonial detail of heraldic presentation and knightly decorum. It is little surprise that the book subsequently came into the possession of heralds, who added their own heraldic treatises to the examples compiled by Paston.¹⁶ The parallel contents and perhaps more tellingly, the items John Paston added to complete his book reveal a patron who wanted his own copies of texts on the moral, ritualistic and emblematic culture of chivalric self-representation. It should be noted that the 'Grete Booke' was made only 14 years after the Paston's own (utterly and knowingly fabricated) knightly pedigree had been affirmed by Edward IV, when the king accepted that the family were 'gentlemen discended lineally of worshipfull blood'.¹⁷ The acknowledgement of the Paston's lineage represented a key riposte to an innuendo that had dogged the family, epitomised by the circulation of a document in Norfolk that lampooned the family's humble bucolic origins,

12 The book was under construction c. 1478, see Davis (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 387, 393.

13 See A.I. Doyle, 'The Work of a Late Fifteenth-Century English Scribe, William Ebesham', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 39 (1957): 289–325. The Lansdowne MS no longer includes the *Othea* despite its appearance in Ebesham's record of contents; it appears likely that this text was separated from the 'Grete Booke', and is included as a distinct volume in John's inventory of English books. Illustration 22.1 shows the opening of 'The maner and fourme of the kingis and Quenes coronacion in Englonde'.

14 Davis (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, vol. 1, p. 518.

15 For the texts in Pierpont Morgan MS 775 see Curt F. Bühler, 'Sir John Paston's *Grete Booke*, a Fifteenth-Century "Best-Seller"', *Modern Language Notes*, 56/5 (1941): 345–51.

16 Doyle argues that the first herald to own the book, Thomas Wriothesy, might even have received the volume directly from John Paston II, see Doyle, 'The Work of a Late Fifteenth-Century English Scribe, William Ebesham', p. 307.

17 Davis (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, vol. 1, p. xli; vol. 2, pp. 549–50.

The maner and forme of the Kyngis and
Queenes coronacion in Englonde.

D the kyngs pryner shall be made to be coronat the day before his coronacion of all his
appoynted and chosen vntil most noble and wisest charyng. And so he shall goe from the
Chyrche of London to the palace at Westmynster thynge the chyrche of London by the
Fyring with hym temporal lordes and the churchmen of the same citty with
other muche and noble people.

The daye he shall it must be ordainid that in the day of the kyngs coronacion
in the grete halles of Westmynster: the kyng shal be fully ordainid and geyse in
clothe of silke and gold and shall be geyse and shall be geyse. **And** the popye shall in
Westmynster thynge must be ordainid and pulpit with geyse on omyr side. And the
musyke to be playd with flutes of silke of gold and shal be on the wyndeside.
The bysshop shal be in that pulpit shall be a scroll shew and a scroll shew
the kyngs the kyng shall be. And it shall also be written that the kyng shall be geyse
and clothe of gold and silke. **The** abbot of Westmynster shall ordainid the daye
it is to be with that the abbot of Westmynster shal be for the tyme that he
shal be before the kyngs coronacion or the Queene and shall ordainid them of vntil
ordainid that they shall be in thys coronacion and shal be to
ordainid and to shew thys coronacion before the holy maning. And vntil the
abbot be vntil ordainid or in hys coronacion or vntill he shall be of the
kyng of the chyrche to the kyng by the chyrche that shall fulfill and so in the
abbot shal at the same tyme of coronacion. **The** chyrche and the chyrche shall
come vntil the coronacion the same pryner that shall be ordainid shall
be left vntil in the forsaide scroll shew in the halles. but first he shall be beate
and shal be with thys shall be ordainid to hym and vntil shys and a scole of
silke ordainid to the best ordainid the chyrche in the myddle of the
kyng. And shone the scole he shall be with thys vntil shys
And he shall vntil shys vntil shys. **The** solomons procession. **And**
thys shall be a solomons procession ordainid by the abbot and chyrche of West
mynster in solomons forns from the chyrche of Westmynster vntil the chyrche
doe in the grete halles in the whiche the pryner shall be ordainid the proce
ssion and in thys procession shall be a schyberthys and other prolews. and shal
shall the pryner shal do and shal the procession vntil the chyrche and he
shall go vntil shys clothe lade vntil his feet on the grounde from the omyr
thys and thys shall be ordainid in the bestowing of kyngs of queenes.
The chyrche. **And** the chyrche the pryner the chyrche vntil shys the chyrche
be thys of silke shal be vntil in the procession by the abbot the pryner and the



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Illustration 22.1 'The maner and forme of the Kyngis and Queenes coronacion in Englonde', BL MS Lansdowne 285, f. 2r. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

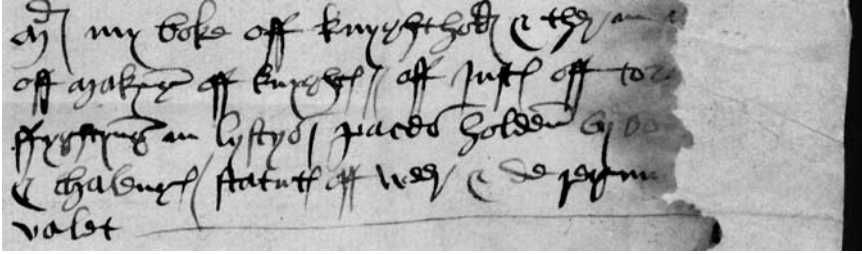


Illustration 22.2 John Paston II's 'Inventory off Englysshe bokis' (detail), BL MS Additional 43491, f. 26r. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved.

describing a patriarch of the Paston line 'one Clement Paston', who 'yede att on Plowe both wynter and somer, and he rode on the bar horsbak with hys corn under hym, and brought hom mele ageyn under hym'.¹⁸ The writer of this work of parochial propaganda inherently understood the semiotic value of material things – the detail of the unsaddled horse is part of a pointed and barely veiled code for Clement's rusticism.

The rise of the Paston family can be chronicled through their surrounding themselves with material witnesses to their status that belied such constructions of their identity. Most important was land, of course, and the enabling rights that came with it, but also other titles (most importantly, John II's acquisition of knightly status) and possessions, described by Claire Sponsler as 'material status signifiers' that manifested the Paston's rapidly ascending social position.¹⁹ The family's engagement with literature and their acquisition of books must be understood as part of a process of naturalising their social identity through material things. In compiling the 'Grete Booke', a volume that then encompassed perhaps 56 discrete items, yet was imaginatively understood against the epithet 'of knightthod', John Paston II engaged in a process of materialising in textual form the cultural values that he no doubt saw as integral to his own sense of identity (Illustration 22.2).

John Paston's unique compilation of textual materials demonstrates only one of the ways in which books could perform status and manifest the ideologies of the subject. The ability of books to perform the identity of the consumer is perhaps best demonstrated in relation to a much more widespread textual production. *Horae*, generally known in medieval England as Primers and to us as Books of Hours, perhaps hold a special claim to having almost universally understood semiotic properties in late medieval England. These were the most widely owned type of book among lay consumers and according to Eamon Duffy carried an 'instantly recognizable' set of emblematic properties,

¹⁸ Davis (ed.), *The Paston Letters*, vol. 1, p. xli.

¹⁹ Claire Sponsler, 'Narrating the Social Order: Medieval Clothing Laws', p. 266.

so much so, that their signifying value was employed as a 'prop' in art works from the fourteenth century onwards, particularly in portraiture, where it acted as a 'symbol of recollectedness, interiority and prayer'.²⁰ A ubiquitous feature of the Book of Hours for high status consumers was its sumptuous materiality. Often with a relatively small frame for text, Books of Hours were regularly lavishly illustrated with miniatures and decorative borders in a manner that seemingly risked the marginalisation of the text itself against the pervasive material richness of the volume. The fact that opulent materiality was somehow considered an integral facet of *Horae* is demonstrated by the innovative production techniques in Flanders which were developed to provide books for a middling English mass market from the late fourteenth century onwards.²¹ Such productions provided a materially impressive veneer but are described by Duffy as being of a 'mediocre' quality.²² Of course, Duffy's unflattering description is infused with the bias of someone who has beheld the richest examples of the genre's material remains, the kinds of de luxe books the production-line techniques in Flanders were aping. To the aspirational owners of such volumes, however, such immediately visually dazzling books were no doubt treasured possessions, and were likely to be the only highly decorated texts in a small family collection.

One manner of contextualising ostentatious book production might be to view such codices as examples of what Thorstein Veblen called 'conspicuous consumption'.²³ Such a view would see the decorative aspects of the book as superfluous to the volume's actual utility as reading material. Scott's description of ornamentation in medieval books appears to echo Veblen's idea, arguing that such features represent 'advertisement(s) of the importance of the manuscript ... and the worth and connoisseurship of its owners'.²⁴ As Christopher Berry's general discussion of ornamentation indicates, however, such production elements must be understood in terms of their pragmatic utility from the perspective of the object's patron:

In its purest form, as identified by Veblen, conspicuous consumption is consumption of the totally useless. But this is not to say that such consumption is pointless. Indeed, we can detect, perhaps paradoxically, an element of 'necessity' here ... Conspicuous consumption has to be understood in terms of social perception. To consume conspicuously is to consume these goods that non-consumers are presumed to perceive as (*inter alia*) luxuries. However, from the consumer's

20 Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours: English People and their Prayers 1240–1570* (New Haven, CT and London, 2006), p. 3.

21 Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, pp. 83–4, plates 53–4.

22 Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, p. 83.

23 See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions* (New York, 1912).

24 Scott, 'Design, Decoration and Illumination', p. 32.

perspective this consumption is instrumental/necessary to the maintenance of the very (presumed) perception and thence to the maintenance of their social status.²⁵

Such observations might lead us to question whether some medieval books were viewed by their owners as objects to be used 'performatively', as material symbols of prestige rather than necessarily having been constructed to be actively, or easily read by the patron. Laurel Amtower imagines the possibility that books were 'brought to church and other public places', something we know was a common enough practice from sources including *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 'as designations of status'.²⁶ However, other than just advertising the status of the owner, the magnificent materiality of religious books including Books of Hours might be understood as holding other meanings. Religious books are ultimately concerned with the immaterial, life beyond this worldly, this material plane – as Daniel Miller argues in the introduction to *Materiality*, religious faith is often 'rested upon a belief in the inherent superiority of the immaterial world'.²⁷ Paradoxically however, the idea of the immaterial can often only be expressed through the material. Medieval culture is abundant in its rich material manifestations of religious belief – from the massive monumentality of medieval cathedrals and churches (often fabulously decorated within) to jewel encrusted reliquaries, the ineffable greatness and glory of God and the immaterial world to which the faithful aspire is inflected through opulent materiality. Sumptuous *Book of Hours*, through the synthesis of lavish materiality with religious text, thus had the potential not only to act as totems of a person's status, but also as an apt manifestation of their piety. The outlay of a considerable sum of money in decorating an item specifically designed for religious use should be seen as an investment in the immaterial. Indeed, despite the material and monetary value of books, items that could be and regularly were pawned as security against loans in the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, codices were objects that in some respects elided standard materialistic classifications.²⁸ Certainly this is true of the bibliomaniac Richard de Bury's understanding of the book. In his fourteenth-century treatise on books and bookishness, *Philobiblon*, de Bury directly contrasts book ownership with worldliness, 'all who are smitten with the love of books think cheaply of the world and wealth; as Jerome says to

25 Christopher J. Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge, 1994) pp. 30–31.

26 Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages* (New York, 2000), p. 32.

27 Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality* (London, 2005), p. 16.

28 For a brief discussion of medieval books with pawn markings see Raymond Clemens and Timothy Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies* (Ithaca, NY and London, 2007), pp. 45–7, pl. 3.25.

Vigilantius: The same man cannot love both gold and books'.²⁹ In Michael Camille's Freudian analysis of *Philobiblon*, the art historian perceives de Bury's 'massive evasion of the book's materiality', arguing that it is related to the author's need to adhere to 'the traditional Christian renunciation of the vanity of material objects'.³⁰ Contra Camille, it might be argued that such an 'evasion' of the materiality of even fabulously decorated books was a common cultural trope. Certainly, it was customary for members of religious orders, in which private ownership of property was disallowed, to have books marked as being privately owned. There is, it seems, something intrinsically immaterial about a textual object. The physicality of books is usually displaced by ideological language – the book is *of* something which has no relationship to the book's materiality in a manner that makes it different from other kinds of things: the book is, for instance, 'of philosophy', 'of Christ's passion', 'of history' or to give John Paston II's example, 'of knighthood'. When we describe, or classify an actual book, it is almost always in reference to its textual thingness, and thus in terms of its relationship to varieties of language and discourse, rather than in respect of its objectness.

Stephen Kelly's contribution to this volume has been crucial, in that he indicates the tendency, in fact more disconcertingly, the *need* for historiographical practices to ascribe meaning onto objects, requiring the object to 're-present' something no longer present. This is a method that he argues elides the object's materiality, 'in preference for an assumed semiotic capacity'. In my discussion of the textual communities of the later Middle Ages I too appear culpable – these irrevocably absent, and qualitatively unknowable readerships are discussed through fragmentary material survivals, partial and imperfect relics of a once dynamic economy in hand-written books. But it is the strange capacity of books to exist coevally in a physical and semiotic state that separates them from so many everyday objects.³¹ The signifying power of books remains pervasive today despite the relative ease with which they can now be purchased. The book, although not always capable of carrying the same ability to mark and celebrate social position, yet manages to be stunningly emblematic, and thus continues to say things about its owner. Books continue to connect people ideologically, even though the once necessary material and social connections are no longer essential for textual dissemination in the post-print era. I leave you with an anecdote by Alberto Manguel:

29 E.C. Thomas (trans. and ed.), *Philobiblon: Richard de Bury* (Oxford, 1960; repr. 1970), pp. 138–9.

30 Michael Camille, 'The Book as Flesh and Fetish in Richard de Bury's *Philobiblon*', in Dolores Warwick Frese and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe (eds) *The Book and the Body* (Notre Dame, IN and London, 1997), p. 45.

31 For discussion of the coeval nature of books see Catherine Brown, 'In the Middle', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 30/3 (2000): 547–74.

Sitting across from me in the subway in Toronto, a woman is reading the Penguin edition of Borges's *Labyrinths*. I want to call out to her, to wave a hand and signal that I too am of that faith. She, whose face I have forgotten, whose clothes I barely noticed, young or old I can't say, is closer to me, by the mere act of holding that book in her hands, than many others I see daily.³²

32 Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London, 1996), p. 214.