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Sewing as Authority in the Middle Ages

Kathryn M. Rudy

THIS ESSAY has grown from my time as a fellow at the Internationales Kolleg für Kulturtechnikforschung und Medienphilosophie (IKKM) in Weimar during the summer of 2014. The theme for the year was »How to do things by framing and sewing«, a title that recalls Austin's famous *How to Do Things with Words*, in which he lays out speech-act theory.¹ The basis of this theory is that there are certain kinds of language – speech acts – which perform by their very utterance. In contradistinction to normal declarative sentences (»The ship is called the Argo.«), a speech act changes the world in some way, for example: »I call this ship the Argo.« These words, spoken by someone who has the authority to speak them, and possibly accompanied by certain ritual actions (such as breaking a bottle of champagne over the ship's bow) will effect a change. From that moment forward, that ship will be synonymous with the Argo.

In the spirit of 2014 theme, I address a different kind of performance, that of sewing, in order to ask: What is the relationship between sewing and authority? In the middle ages, how might sewing have effected a change along the lines of Austin's speech act theory? I offer here some examples, drawing from late medieval material survivals, in order to flesh out the cultural operation of sewing. Specifically, I consider cases involving parchment, fabric, relics, and other objects that grow by stitching, whereby sewing becomes an operation of asserting authority. As with speech acts, the person wielding the needle and thread has the authority to do so, and effects a change in the world by transforming an object: making it larger, making it contain new elements, causing its increase in dimensionality (usually changing it from a two-dimensional object into a three-dimensional one), forcing a new ritualistic use upon it, and reframing it. Stitching often calls attention to itself as a means of attachment, as if the ritualised form of attachment were being showcased in the resulting object.

All medieval books were sewn together. Even medieval rolls, if they were large, have been made from multiple membranes stitched together. However, it was folding and stitching that enabled the codex to function. I am particularly interested

¹ John Langshaw Austin: *How to Do Things with Words*. The William James Lectures, Oxford 1962.

in the intersection of parchment as a material and sewing as an operation. Parchment as a material has qualities altogether different from its nearest neighbours, leather, fabric, and paper. Of course different kinds of cloths and parchments had different cultural charges. Locally produced linen cloth has a different value and role than imported fine silk or linen, while parchment differs in whiteness, thinness, and handle according to what beast the skin came from and how the material was processed. But even within those parameters, the respective materials have some distinguishing differences. Unlike leather, parchment is (off-)white and thin, which makes it ideal as a writing surface. In this respect, it is like ecru silk fabric, which was used as a writing and painting surface in China before the advent of paper. But unlike (silk) cloth, parchment can be inscribed on both sides, as it does not absorb liquid ink. Like cloth and unlike leather, parchment is thin and workable enough to receive a normal sewing needle. Unlike fabric, parchment is rigid and has an even texture, whereas most textiles are more granular. Parchment has a much greater longevity than paper or cloth. Without parchment, Christianity and the religion of the book could not have thrived, as the papyrus rolls that it replaced were simply too unwieldy and friable to use as the basis of a *livresque* culture. Furthermore, papyrus can only be produced from a plant that grows along the Nile, and was therefore unsuitable for a proselytising and colonising culture that relied on books for authority. Animal-based parchment, on the other hand, could flourish wherever there were literate carnivores and cheese-makers who sacrificed young male animals and folded and stitched their skins together into books.

For the remainder of this discussion I have selected objects that reveal some of the cultural charges of sewing. These case studies are not meant to be exhaustive. I begin by looking at medieval documents with seals, then turn to other operations of sewing that involve parchment: adding folios to the book; attaching curtains or veils to the parchment page; stitching cloth around relics and stitching relics to cloth. Sewing is a cultural operation of ceremonial attachment.

1. Folding

In book-making, sewing often accompanies folding, and the two together often transform a basically two-dimensional object into a three-dimensional one. Manuscripts themselves are made by arranging a stack of parchment sheets and folding them so that they form nested bifolia. The bookmaker then stitches through the aligned folds to secure the stack of bifolia to thongs, which form invisible anchors tethering all the folded edges to the centre. These operations are fundamental to the codex form, which transforms two-dimensional sheets into a three-dimen-

sional book block, arranged in a fixed order. Furthermore, folding plus stitching makes for an interactive object. Although a closed book, especially one in a treasure binding, can make meaning even in closed form (by being processed, displayed, elevated, or touched ceremonially),² it is only opening the book that reveals the plethora of surfaces. The action of turning the pages multiples the surfaces, grows them. This is because folding plus stitching forms a kind of hinge, demanding interaction for fulfilment.

A dramatic extension of these operations is at play in the maps that Matthew Paris included in the *Chronica Majora* that depict the Holy Land. These maps put Jerusalem at the centre with the rest of the known world around it. Thus, the extent of the map is the extent of human knowledge about the world. He demonstrated that one way to extend the world is to sew a piece on, which quite literally changes the boundaries of human knowledge. Stitching can perform the operation of increasing symbolic landmass. Matthew performed this operation several times in conjunction with his maps included in the *Chronica Majora*. These are illuminated maps, complete with green water, and land the colour of sand, or parchment. Two of them survive. One is in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (Ms 26), from around 1250; and the other in London, British Library, Royal Ms. 14 C vii. (For images of these maps, see the websites of their respective holding institutions.) In both of these manuscript-maps, the flap at the top, and the one at the side, have been added. They not only make the available space larger, but they require the user to perform an additional action, that of unfolding, in order to reveal the additional sites.³ In a second copy of the *Chronica Majora*, again with fold-outs, Matthew Paris has connected the flaps by interlacing the parchment, so that the resulting attachment resembles crenulations, as if stitched parchment were tantamount to masonry.

Judith of Flanders played on the properties of stitched parchment (and of silk) when she commissioned a gospel book with an opening miniature (fol. 2v) depicting the patron giving the manuscript – a copy of the Gospels – to Christ.⁴ What is unusual is that her book maker has stitched in a curtain of sorts, a piece of parchment painted in imitation of fine silk bearing 28 compartments with lions to form

² For a history of some of these actions, consult Eyal Poleg: *The Bible as Talisman. Texts and Oath-Books*, in: Eyal Poleg: *Approaching the Bible in Medieval England*, Manchester 2013, pp. 59–107.

³ Within the vast literature about the manuscripts of Matthew Paris, see in particular Daniel K. Connolly: *Imagined Pilgrimage in the Itinerary Maps of Matthew Paris*, in: *The Art Bulletin* 81/4 (1999), pp. 598–622 on the operations of folding and unfolding.

⁴ Regina Hausmann: *Die Handschriften der Hessischen Landesbibliothek, Fulda/Wiesbaden* 1992, pp. 59–61. For images, turn to <http://fuldig.hs-fulda.de/viewer/image/PPN314754709/9/>.

the facing folio (fol 3r). This leaf evokes a precious textile, and indeed its repeating motif resembles one that could be woven into a length of two-tone silk. But instead of sewing the veil to the face of a parchment sheet, the bookmaker has sewn the parchment sheet with a fictive veil right into the binding. The reader therefore parts the veil, and experiences the associated sense of revelation, merely by opening the book. At the same time, the bookmaker calls attention to his own work as a source of revelation, using the fact that the medieval book itself is an object that is stitched together from modules (quires, or signatures). Stitching is the primary operation for adding new material to a book, just as it was the primary operation for the creation of the book in the first place. The faux textile page reveals and frames the presentation scene, which shows the gifting taking place. The lifting of the veil suggests the moment of revelation. The book is a gift to God on behalf of both bookmaker and patron, even as the word contained within is God's gift to them – a gift of revelation.

2. Sewn and sealed

The papal court at Avignon produced, in considerably quantities, large single parchment sheets bearing notices of particular indulgences available in locales around Christendom. Keepers of shrines, miracle-working objects, and those wishing to raise revenue for ecclesiastical building projects could appeal to the pope in Avignon to request an indulgence. Such sheets were produced until 1364 when Pope Urban V halted them.⁵ One indulgence, for the Sisters of the Common Life of Het Rondeel in Zutphen, was issued in Avignon in 1336 (Zutphen, Archief, Inv. 4; fig. 1).

The text at the centre makes a proclamation based on a boilerplate model. The images, which are painted around the periphery of the sheet and help to lend it authority and specificity to this particular convent, include Mary with the Christ-child, flanked by a donor and sisters of Het Rondeel in the large historiated initial. More generalised images appear below them: an image of a bishop, the Face of Christ, flanked by the busts of St Peter and St Paul. Nearly all of the Avignon indulgences feature an image of the Face of Christ. Not only was Christ the primary voice of authority for the Church, but the Face of Christ was the most important

⁵ Judith H. Oliver: *The Herkenrode Indulgence, Avignon, and Pre-Eyckian Painting of the Mid-Fourteenth-Century Low Countries*, in: Maurits Smeyers and Bert Cardon (eds.): *Flanders in a European Perspective: Manuscript Illumination around 1400 in Flanders and Abroad: Proceedings of the International Colloquium, Leuven, 7–10 September 1993*, Corpus Van Verluchte Handschriften = Corpus of Illuminated Manuscripts, Leuven 1995, pp. 187–206.

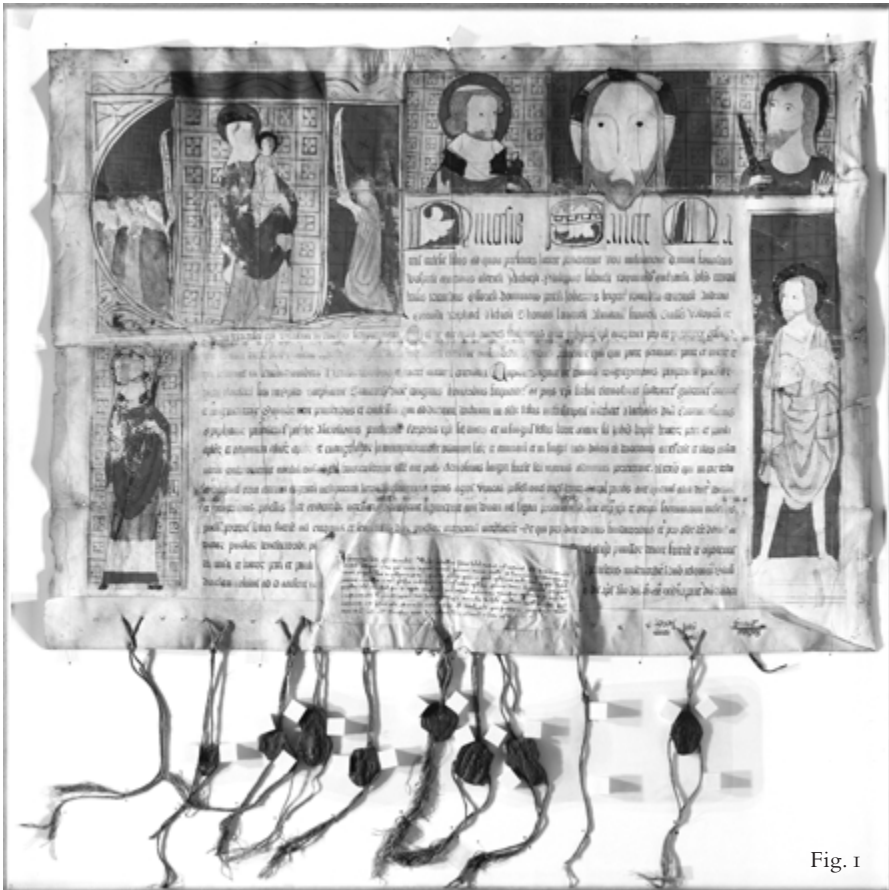


Fig. 1

relic of Rome, and painting it onto the indulgence issued in Avignon could help to lend the object papal authority, even when that pope resided in France. Meant for public view, both the sheet and the bold images are large enough to be seen by multiple viewers simultaneously and could be tacked to a wall. The bold images lent it authority and gave it visual interest, which would have helped it attract attention.

The other mechanism by which the document proclaims its authority and commands attention are the seals that are sewn into the document and dangle from it. They cause the document – which is generally a two-dimensional object – to burst into the third dimension. The bottom of the document is folded in order to stiffen it. This folding is the beginning of a series of operations that transforms the flat (two-dimensional) document into a more authoritative and imposing three-

dimensional one. Like bulls and other official documents, the seals testify to the officials who ratified them. Each of their seals – disks of wax imprinted with an image matrix – hangs from a parchment cord at the bottom of the document. Strips of parchment have been twisted into thongs and drawn through apertures in layers of the parchment document before the wax seal was melted around them thereby locking them in place. Thus, the thongs are threaded through the bottom of the document in an operation related to sewing involving a needle and thread. The sewing is done on a highly visible macro-level; casting off in this process is done with heat, when the wax is pressed around the thongs and impressed with the seal matrix. The document is ›sealed‹ because the wax seals can only be attached in the presence of the seal-bearer. His matrix is carefully guarded. To use it without approval would be akin to forging a signature.

These seals are on display, as their visibility is essential to their function. But why are there so many of them? While popes could issue larger indulgences, each bishop was only allowed to grant an indulgence of 40 days; therefore, bishops often collectivized in order to ratify larger rewards. Seals are like badges that brandish the identity of the ratifier. Authority is something that can be sewn to the page. Sewing made a visual and tactile claim for the legitimacy of the sewn object. With papal bulls that were produced serially in Avignon, the more seals that were sewn on, the more legitimate the document, a kind of embellishment of authority in a manner similar to military officers who are ›decorated‹, meaning they have many coloured badges sewn to their lapels. Sewn authority takes a »more is better« approach.

The final approval comes from a different method of sewing. Namely, a letter on parchment from the local bishop in the Netherlands provided the final ratification. This object is sewn in over the top of the other seals, so that it approves not only the written content of the sheet, but also the former approvals. Thus, both sewing and ratification came in layers, with the most local appearing on top. The effect of this is to prioritize local authority, even when the more distant authority might be the more ›important‹, simply by dint of the local being on top and having as it were the final say. Sewing created not only a topography of approval, but a hierarchical one.

Because papal indulgences, together with their seals, were on public display, they invited physical interaction, often to the detriment of the object itself. So many people have inspected the seals, that they've been reduced to small slivers, like miniature bars of soap. The indulgence is threadbare from use. The embellished authority, like the decorated soldier's chest bristling with medals in a parade, was intended for public view. Its authority was a public visual claim.

Such indulgences were handcrafted serially, although they were finished separately, as they were inscribed in Avignon but usually painted by the recipients. The pendulous seals of course had to be attached in Avignon, but even there one sees

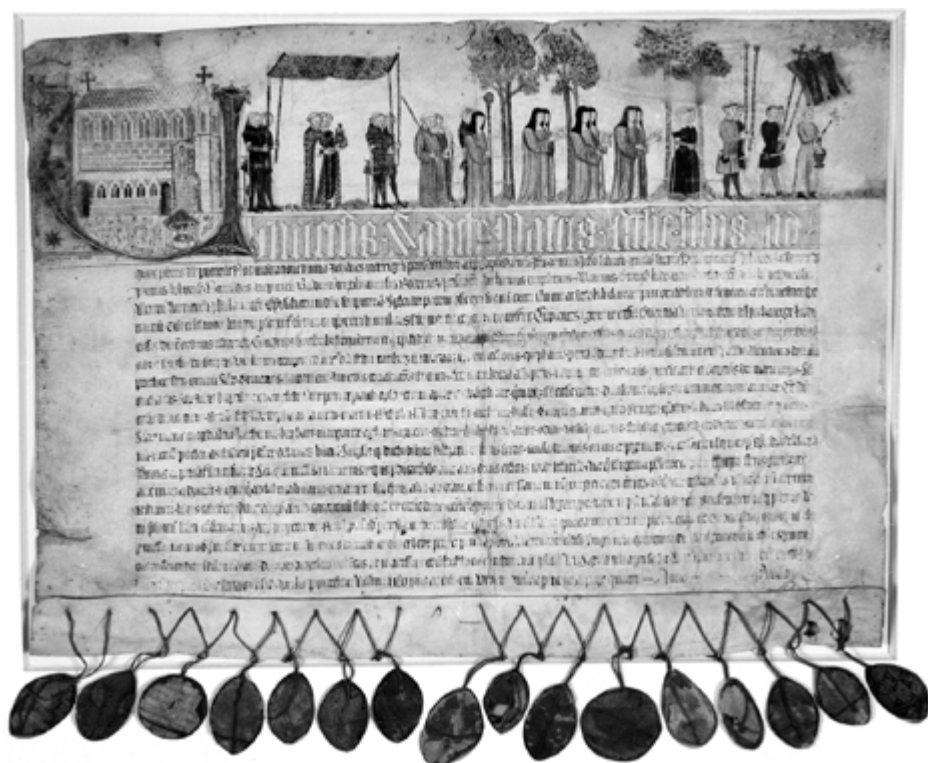


Fig. 2: Sint-Truiden, Provinciaal Museum voor Religieuze Kunst

some latitude in handling. One could presumably pay for special treatment, as on an indulgence for the Cistercian Nunnery of Herkenrode, issued in 1363 (see fig. 2).

Distinguishing this indulgence from others are the unusual seals, which have their own built-in protection against overzealous handlers. Specifically, each of the seals wears a little jacket, or seal bag.⁶ Sewing them into silk coats is an operation that asserts authority, since the silk is foreign, exotic, and controlled by a powerful elite. This silk must have been supplied in Avignon, rather than anywhere in the vicinity of Herkenrode. In this period it was made in France, Italy, and Spain, but not in Northern Europe, which could not support the mulberry trees required for the hungry caterpillars. The indulgence production machine in Avignon covered the wax seals with the silk when it was still pliable. Noteworthy

⁶ For an overview of these objects in an English context, consult Gertrude Robinson and H. Urquhart: *Seal Bags in the Treasury of the Cathedral Church of Canterbury*, in: *Archaeologia* 34, second series (1935), pp. 163–211.

is the variety of silks displayed dangling from the document. In fact, one could see this document as a textile collection, or as a vehicle for the precious wares of the papacy's new stomping grounds to disseminate through Europe. Silk fabric is using the document as a way to explore the world and maximise its own distribution.

The seals are marked as special because they are wearing precious textiles that obfuscate the identity of the seals. Perhaps there is no emperor wearing these lovely diminutive clothes. Perhaps underneath are just lumps of wax. But to take the silk jackets off would surely ruin the impression beneath, if there is an impression at all. One is forced to believe, as is so often the case, that an object of import rests behind the opaque veil. Using silk wrappings was not unknown in the Middle Ages; however, they usually accompanied a different sort of object: a relic. Relics were normally hidden from view. They were displayed in reliquaries that branched the physical presence of their contents even as they hide them from view. Someone placing a relic – say the desiccated tongue of a saint – in an ostensorium would normally wrap the relic in silk, thereby swaddling the object in a rich material so that its ugliness is not on view.

While many reliquaries were made by goldsmiths, some were made by embroiderers and needle workers and took the form of purses. These are usually made of silk stitched together to form a pouch that would secret its contents from view. The stitched object veils, protects, and dignifies the objects within it. When the maker of the Herkenrode indulgence jacketed the seals, he or she was treating them like relics. In fact, they are secondary relics of touch, bearing witness to contact with various bishops and officials, people who were dignified by not sanctified. To swathe these ›relics‹ in silk was to elevate those who impressed them. The seals, like signatures, require the presence of the matrix owner. Only the seal owner could make the impression; as such each seal forms a contact relic of its owner, who are the various authorities in Avignon/Rome. The seals are no longer making an argument based on their indexical relationship with the seal bearer, but rather a visual and tactile one, based on the sumptuousness, rarity, and opulence of the silk fabrics.

3. Veiling

Many medieval gospel books depict the four gospels writers, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, behind curtains that are blowing open, as if to suggest that their writing performs an operation of revelation. Around the ninth century, the idea of painting a curtain over an apostle was transferred to a secular figure. Namely, the First Bible of Charles the Bald (made in 845–846) shows the patron enthroned under a textile swag (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, cod. Lat. I,

fol. 423r).⁷ Charles the Bald, one of Charlemagne's grandsons, commands respect, and the illuminator has conveyed this through the position and gestural language of those he ruled. Military officials pay homage to him in the upper tier, while in the bottom tier tonsured ecclesiastical figures look up at their ruler with enthusiastic gestures of esteem. The illuminator has also conveyed this with a curtain, white and billowing and suspended over Charles the Bald's throne. Thus a visual technique used for heightening the gospel writers' revelation became part of the visual repertory for conveying the legitimacy of a secular ruler.

There was but a small step from depicting a fictive curtain within the miniature to sewing a physical curtain to the parchment page. From this period onward curtains were added to manuscripts, usually by being sewn to the upper margin. A fourteenth-century example here illustrates the point; however, the practice was much older. Such curtains were so delicate that very few of them survive. In the early ninth century, Byzantium had become self-sufficient in its production of silk, which implied growing technical abilities in all the various steps of sericulture, from growing mulberry trees to inventing and perfecting weaving tools.⁸ Byzantine silks diffused through Western Europe, typically given as gifts. Such gifts were often fragmented: bits of material were often salvaged when the original garment or article wore out, and subdivided to be used as relic wrappings. They signify revelation, and add a layer of ritual, for the user of a manuscript with real curtains must perform a new operation, that of lifting the curtain. Such curtains also confirm the value of the object beneath, for it is valuable enough to be swathed in textile.

The operation of lifting the veil is like the operation of turning the page, as both reveal something formerly concealed. Adding textiles to a book not only constitutes an act of framing, but it also forms a hinge that juts out boldly at an angle from the planar surface of the image, forcing the beholder to contend with three dimensions instead of two. This act of framing bridges the picture plane with the three-dimensional world inhabited by the beholder. The curtain also creates a more interactive object. Sewing a veil over an image not only framed the

⁷ Ildar H. Garipzanov: *The Symbolic Language of Authority in the Carolingian World (C.751–877)*, Leiden/Boston 2008 provides a full discussion of this manuscript. Christine Sciacca: *Raising the Curtain on the Use of Textiles in Manuscripts*, in: Kathryn M. Rudy and Barbara Baert (eds.): *Weaving, Veiling, and Dressing: Textiles and Their Metaphors in the Late Middle Ages*, Turnhout 2007, pp. 161–190 discusses the textiles depicted in the presentation miniature. Sciacca calls the manuscript the Vivien Bible, as it was thought to have been commissioned by Count Vivien, the lay abbot of St. Martin at Tours, and presented book to Charles the Bald.

⁸ David Jacoby: *Silk Economics and Cross-Cultural Artistic Interaction: Byzantium, the Muslim World, and the Christian West*, in: *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004), pp. 197–240.

image, but demanded a new ritual – that of lifting the veil – in order to see what lies beneath. Although in the Ottonian empire, curtains were reserved for luxury manuscripts, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the laity began to sew their own curtains into less rarefied volumes, desiring the interactive experience that at the same time ensured its own destruction. In thousands of manuscripts, the delicate silks have torn and worn away, but needle holes at the tops of manuscript pages attest to readers' desires to make their books grander, more embellished and more interactive.

4. Cloth as relic

The Virgin's chemise and her girdle, Veronica's veil, the seamless garment of Christ, the Shroud of Turin: these were all textiles that had touched the bodies of Mary, Christ or a saint and brought their unobtainable (because historical) physical bodies into the viewer's present space and time. Less exalted stuffs could make tangible the moments of sacred history that formed the conceptual basis for the belief system. One of these moments was the Annunciation, and a textile object that animated it was a piece of the headscarf that Mary wore when she received the greeting from Gabriel. The object – or at least a small piece of it, for such objects were nearly infinitely fragmentable – is now housed in the Basilica of Our Lady (Basiliek Onze-Lieve-Vrouw) in Tongeren (now Belgium). Whereas in the examples above, the sacred object had its importance heightened by being sewn into exotic and colourful cloth, in this example, an entire multi-media sculptural display serves to frame a small, undistinguished rectangle of cloth (see fig. 3).⁹

The resulting small painted triptych was assembled in the first decade of the fifteenth century. Whereas most painted triptychs put an iconic or narrative image at the centre so that the wings can elucidate the event of the central panel, or provide space for donors or earthly figures, this one features a textile relic. When the reliquary is open, and the relic has been lifted off from its hooks, one is confronted with a painted image depicting two angels emerging from clouds to deliver a small white square from heaven (see fig. 4).

The angels are presumably returning a piece of the garment from heaven, where Mary resides, as if to suggest that she was assumed into heaven while wearing this very headscarf. In other words, the physical relic is suspended in front of a painted representation of itself, contextualised by the object's origin myth.

⁹ For a large selection of photos of this object, search www.balat.kikirpa.be/photo for the object number 43504.



Fig. 3

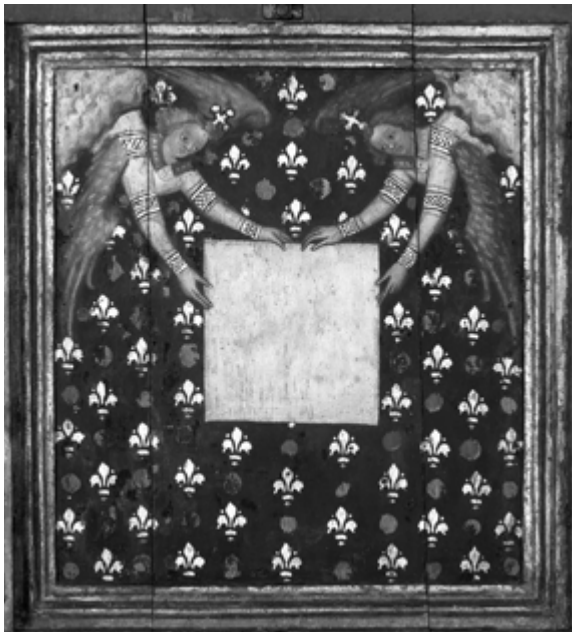


Fig. 4

The small piece of white textile – the relic – has been set in a series of nested frames, like a Matryoshka doll. The outer layer is the wooden triptych on panel with its painted interior and wings; this was built in order to frame the piece of textile suspended from the central compartment. The multi-layered fabric object suspended inside itself consists of the white cloth at the centre, which is the relic. This rectangle of material has been in turn framed in other textiles and objects. The relic's most immediate frame consists of a string of pearls stitched around the periphery of the fabric. The second frame is a larger piece of red silk to which it has been stitched. As was the case above, the act of stitching extends the size of a surface, in this case, making the relic more strikingly visible by silhouetting it against a bright contrasting colour. Stitching here is an operation of embellishment and aggrandisement. A third frame consists of the further stitching along its border of the red cloth, along with a thin decoration made of gold wire circumscribing this layer. Furthermore, the red silk cloth provides a substrate for numerous other objects, all of which heighten the meaning of the white rectangle at the centre. These objects include a thick metallic frame, secured at the four corners, which provides a solid boundary around the rectangle. It also supports an *authentique* written on parchment in early fifteenth-century script. Upon it are written the words »De capitegio b[ea]te Marie Virgi[nis]« (from the headscarf of the Blessed Virgin Mary), which extinguish any doubt about the veracity of the central object. The meaning of this *authentique* comes from its having been attached – with stitches – directly below the rectangle, thereby labelling it. It forms an element in an approximately symmetrical composition, but also an index of authority due to its position.

Other items stitched to this red cloth perform functions that both label and embellish. The embroiderer who has been entrusted with the task of framing the relic has also stitched pearls to the red cloth so that they spell out the letters »maria«. Serving as both image and word, the pearls enrich the surface with rhythm. Like the *authentique*, these letters are centred over the relic and function to label it. Even more than that, they suggest that the very name Maria is sacred, and that the letters forming this word bridge between the conceptual spheres of seeing and reading. Further letters, Gothic minuscules sculpted in gold, have been sewn to the green silk, which forms the next frame around the red silk. All of the objects sewn onto the silk raise the imagery above the planar substrate. With varying degrees of thickness, they turn a flat piece of cloth into a textured three-dimensional object.

Finally, the triptych itself functions like a book, whereby the wings open to reveal the inner contents. The wood panels have been »sewn« together like hinges, and the hinge demands a ritual action of opening and closing.¹⁰ Like the sealed

¹⁰ Lynn F. Jacobs: *Opening Doors. The Early Netherlandish Triptych Reinterpreted*, University Park, PA 2011.

documents, this multimedia object has been produced and presented in layers. Sewing, in its various forms, increases the surface, allows for more layers of authority, more possibilities to demonstrate authenticity.

5. Conclusion: the bishop's hat

So far I have considered the operations of stitching parchment, cloth and even wood and folding it. These actions have resulted in three-dimensional forms that have extended the surface of the stitched object and concomitantly its authority. They have also resulted in objects that invite manipulation, handling. The ultimate object in this matrix is a bishop's mitre, made of parchment in the twelfth century (see fig. 5, p. 130).

Like many of the other objects discussed above, this was painted, but this time with the materials, methods and visual vocabulary of manuscript illumination, as a book page might be divided into registers and subdivided into arched bays. Furthermore, the illuminator of the mitre has painted a margin, akin to the border around a book page. This border is a fictive band of brocade, studded with lavish jewels that have been cut into various geometric shapes. The saintly figures painted on it lend it authority and gravitas. Seated saints form a ring around the wearer's cranium, while God in majesty fills the apex just above his head. Angels fit into the triangular interstices, flanking a bishop (recognisable from the shape of his self-referential hat and his shepherd's crook), who seems to confer the legitimacy of the object's wearer. The parchment has been folded and sewn to make it three-dimensional. Of course, folding it also makes the material rigid enough to function as a hat. As with corrugated cardboard, the material will not bend easily in any direction except parallel to the fold. This gives the parchment the stiffness to stand up into the required shape, the form recognisable as a bishop's mitre from a great distance or in silhouette or in the miniature painted on the hat itself. The finished item invites interaction, namely, to have its mouth opened slightly so that it may grasp a bishop's head. The item has been constructed from the raw materials of a book, whose surface has grown through sewing, to turn it into a most powerful hat. A bishop's office and mitre confer upon him the authority, for example, to seal the indulgences discussed above.

These examples have demonstrated that the operations of folding and stitching often went together. Attaching pieces of material grew the surface of parchment and often turned its surface into manifolds or three-dimensional forms. Sewing usually added a layer of crafted opulence. The resulting objects become more interactive, more available to ritualistic functions. As the book of Judith of Flanders indicates, the major function of real curtains was not so much to protect the image



Fig. 5

as to heighten its ritual power, to demand (and offer to the owner) the extra action of lifting afforded by the veil. Sewing differs from gluing in several important ways, even though both are methods of cohesion/adhesion. Stitching is simultaneously a form of ornamentation, whereas gluing is generally not. In this vein, gluing is about invisibility while stitching often creates its own frame. Stitching is more reversible, which is why documents are ›stitched‹ with thongs, but then sealed with wax. Stitching, as the examples above attest, is often tantamount to hinging, and as such leads to greater possibilities of movability, whereas gluing yields brittleness.

Sewing intensified the procedures already inherent in the object. For indulgences, sewing increased their authority; for the seals, sewing protected their stamped quality (which was their essential form); for the devotional images, sewing increased their revelatory significance, itself inherent in the turning of the page (so, built into their being images in books); for the relic, stitching aggrandised, embellished, and labelled. Just as certain kinds of sentences are speech acts that perform by their utterance, certain kinds of stitches could confer the authority of a bishop, a relic, an indulgence through their workings, which left indelible marks of the needle.

Picture credits:

Fig. 1: Indulgence made in Avignon in 1336 and painted in the Netherlands for the Sisters of the Common Life of Het Rondeel (Zutphen, Gemeente Archief, Archief Rondeel, inv. no. 4).

Fig. 2: Indulgence for the Abbey of Herkenrode, fitted with seals in silk bags; dated 16 April 1363 (Hasselt, Provinciale bibliotheek).

Fig. 3: Reliquary in the form of a triptych with a fragment of the Virgin's headscarf, tempera on oak, ca. 1401–1410, with a multi-media textile object suspended from hooks at the centre (Tongeren, Basilica of Our Dear Lady).

Fig. 4: Reliquary in the form of a triptych with the relic removed to reveal a painting depicting angels bringing the Virgin's headscarf from heaven. Tempera on oak, ca. 1401–1410 (Tongeren, Basilica of Our Dear Lady).

Fig. 5: Bishop's mitre made of painted parchment, 12th century (Namur, Trésor d'Oignies).