the material bodies
of medieval religious
performance in
england

jill stevenson

city university of new york
ABSTRACT

The cultural debate surrounding Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* revealed a degree of anxiety in contemporary society about the power religious performances exert over the spectator's body. Specifically, critics were troubled by how the materiality of *The Passion*’s violence might translate into alternative religious acts through the bodies of spectators. These concerns have a rich historical legacy, particularly during the Middle Ages. Medieval opponents of religious performances express apprehension about the same characteristic that contemporary critics fear—the ability of religious performance’s effect to remain lodged in the spectator’s body. This article argues that medieval religious performances engaged the spectator’s body in a unique form of visual piety and, ultimately, trained it in a form of literacy. Laypeople then used this “performance literacy” in other devotional contexts with different images.

To explore this concept, I use performance as a lens through which I examine eight devotional images inserted into a fifteenth-century manuscript commonly called the “Pavement Hours.” These insertions suggest different ways in which an object’s users could draw upon their bodies to recreate a performance-viewing aesthetic that situated them as sacred viewers, marked sacred events with their material presence, and reinterpreted their devotional role accordingly.
Mel Gibson's 2004 blockbuster *The Passion of the Christ* not only boasted a stunning cebut at the box office, but also provoked the most heated and lengthy controversy to surround a contemporary performance piece in recent memory. The massive amount of ink and air time devoted to the film by the press in the months preceding and following its release reflected the film's significant cultural impact. Although, as Mark C. Taylor notes, negative reviews of the film revolved around three major issues (how the film places blame for the crucifixion on Jews and thereby fuels anti-Semitism; Gibson's insensitivity to, or ignorance of, historical conclusions about the Bible and Jesus Christ; and the film's extreme violence [Taylor 2006, 140-1]), the concerns raised over Gibson's interpretation of history and artistic choices largely stemmed from misgivings regarding the film's excessive violence. For instance, the film's most noted and vocal opponent, Frank Rich of *The New York Times*, charged Gibson with focusing on the verisimilitude of the crucifixion's violence, while ignoring other levels of verisimilitude in the passion story. For Rich, such a concentration functioned to "vilify Jews" and revive old prejudices (Rich 2004, 6). What frustrated or, perhaps, frightened a number of critics, was the brutal style in which Gibson chose to present his "theology" to audiences. A. O. Scott's review for *The New York Times* is typical of the language used by many critics to describe the bloodshed. He recounts how Gibson's "version of the Gospels is harrowingly violent, the final hour of the 'The Passion of the Christ' essentially consists of a man being beaten, tortured and killed in graphic and lingering detail. Once he is taken into custody, Jesus (Jim Caviezel) is cuffed and kicked and then, much more systematically, flogged, first with stiff canes and then with leather whips tipped with sharp stones and glass shards. By the time the crown of thorns is pounded onto his head and the cross loaded onto his shoulders, he is all but unrecognizable, a mass of flayed and bloody flesh, barely able to stand, moaning and howling in pain" (Scott 2004). Scott's meticulous focus on the materiality of the film's violence—"stiff canes," "leather whips tipped with sharp stones and glass shards," "crown of thorns pounded onto his head," "cross loaded onto his shoulders"—cannot be ignored. Using similarly material terms, Scott contends that, "By rubbing our faces in the gristy reality of Jesus' death and fixing our eyes on every welt and gash on his body, this film means to make literal an event that the Gospels often treat with circumspection and that tends to be thought about somewhat abstractly" (Scott 2004). Scott's concern over the film's stark materiality is representative of what the majority of the movie's detractors found most disturbing.

Rather than evidence of "theological naivete," as one author maintains (Taylor 2006, 141), I suggest that these negative responses reflect a twenty-first-century anxiety about the affective power of religious images. It was not merely *The Passion* 's violence, but instead the accentuated materiality of that violence (or even references to this stark materiality, since the criticism began before most people had seen
the film), which provoked the impassioned reactions, both positive and negative. Scholars have discussed the extreme attention paid to the viscerality of the via dolorosa in Gibson’s Passion. William G. Little proposes that during the film, “in the absence of personal narrative, the viewer’s attention is drawn to the presence of the flesh,” particularly “the sheer weight of [Christ’s] body” and its “surfaces and extremities” (Little 2006, 174). Although both scholars and critics have recognized something particularly evocative about the film’s brutality, most attribute its effect to its extreme realism, which generates in movie-goers a sensation of presence at the events portrayed. It is true that Gibson uses cinematic techniques, such as shot-reverse shots, to create viewing positions that replicate those of live witnesses (Beal 2006, 203). But Gibson’s direction also urges the spectator into a relationship with the film’s action that goes beyond that of passive witness and ultimately creates a sensual viewing experience that forces spectators into a body-centered Passion encounter. This characteristic produced anxiety amongst many critics.

In my own viewing, I ultimately had to turn away from the screen during the last few minutes of Christ’s eleven-minute scourging because the sight of flesh being ripped in pieces from Christ’s (or, rather, James Caviezel’s) back was too extreme for me to watch. After some reflection, I have concluded that it was not too much violence, but too much materiality in that violence, that caused me to look away. In those moments, I was drawn into the body of Christ because I shared a common corporeality with the actor. Gibson reinforces this similarity of bodies by using Latin and Aramaic, rather than English, dialogue, which compelled me to forge visual, rather than verbal, connections with the dramatized action. Although the two-dimensional medium of film can often eliminate any acknowledgment of a bodied similarity between actors and audience, Gibson’s use of close-ups and slow-motion sequences forcefully draws attention to the material body of Christ and serves to highlight this “bodied” similarity between image and viewer. The repeated emphasis in reviews on the film’s presentation of Christ’s material body reveals concern about exactly how The Passion situates the body in visual piety, what art historian David Morgan defines as “the visual formation and practice of religious belief” (Morgan 1998, 1). More specifically, critics were troubled by how the materiality of The Passion’s violence might become translated through the bodies of spectators into (perhaps, violent) religious acts undertaken in the name of faith.

Scholars have written about The Passion as a continuation of the medieval Passion play tradition (Enders 2006; Hollywood 2006), but we can also interpret the criticism surrounding the film as a continuation of medieval discourse about performance. Concerns over the instability and excitability of religious performance images are not new, but have a rich historical legacy, particularly during the Middle Ages. In their discussions of performance, medieval writers often focused their arguments on the materiality of bodies.
and the consequences to spectators of theatre’s accentuated “bodiedness.” Medieval opponents of performance appear nervous about the same characteristic that contemporary critics of The Passion fear – the ability of religious performance’s effect to remain lodged in the spectator’s body after the performance has ended and eventually to manifest itself through other (unacceptable or unorthodox) devotional practices. In order to understand the implications of this fear, historians must try to recapture the materiality of pious seeing in its cultural context.

Performance theory helps us make claims about bodies located in the past and, particularly, about how the materiality of those bodies influenced the reception of performance events. It can also help us to see how performance experiences are retained within the spectator’s material body and then continue to influence modes of spectatorship after the theatrical event. In this article, I argue that medieval religious performances, like Gibson’s Passion, offered lay spectators an opportunity to practice a “way of seeing” that engaged their bodies and operated as a powerful agent of visual piety. The viewing experience existed as a cultural product that laypeople continued to use and manipulate for other, often unregulated or unsupervised, purposes, and that may have influenced the ways in which laypeople encountered devotional objects. To explore this concept further, I use performance-viewing as a lens through which I examine lay devotional images, specifically the eight images inserted into York Minster Library Manuscript XVI.K.6, a fifteenth century manuscript commonly called the Pavement Hours. The decision to include these insertions may be attributed to the type of performance-viewing experience they offered, an indication that laypeople strove to recreate a performance aesthetic in other devotional contexts. Although I recognize the ephemeral aspect of performance, I am inspired by Aleksandra Wolska’s notion of “theatre as a mode of becoming” that “does not stop with the fall of the curtain, but continues in the body and mind of the viewer” (Wolska 2005, 86). Acknowledging the materiality of the spectator’s body in our studies of devotional practices allows us to explore the “becoming” constructed in medieval religious performance, and how that “becoming” continued to operate in the bodies of medieval laypeople.

**Pious Seeing as a Lay Material Practice**

To understand how performance may have influenced lay visual piety, we must first place it into its specific devotional context. Scholars typically characterize the late Middle Ages as a period during which affective piety flourished, especially in respect to the laity. As Eamon Duffy notes, late medieval piety “was a Christianity rooted in the concrete, nourished by the sight of images and the touch of relics and of ‘sacramentals’ (sacred objects and ceremonies) like holy water, focused on the Passion of Christ and the intercession of the saints . . . . It was a ritual piety” (Duffy 2003, 57). To support this materially oriented devotional culture,
Artisans produced a vast number and kind of devotional images for the laity, both in England and on the continent. As Richard Marks notes, works of art were imported into England throughout the late medieval period, "but by the early sixteenth century, books, altarpieces, devotional images, painted cloths, textiles, ceramics, plate and armour were flooding into England on an unprecedented scale" (Marks 2003, 15). These images, no longer exclusively designed for wealthy patrons, included a wide range of objects that varied greatly in cost and quality (Marks 2003, 22). Although some were personally commissioned, such as Books of Hours, others—such as alabaster sculptures or small painted images—were sold off the shelf. These images contributed greatly to late medieval affective piety, a piety that "responded vividly and immediately to the visual" (Duffy 2003, 65).

The popularity of personal, domestic images may reflect a lay desire to bring a more material devotional encounter into the home. Susan Foister notes that the elusive and flexible nature of private medieval devotion makes it difficult to define and reconstruct, but that medieval laypeople often grounded these practices in images: "the availability of a physical image would serve to sharpen and intensify the experience; imagery and images were inseparable from the devotional process" (Foister 2003, 334). Late medieval rituals, like the taking home of candles from the Candlemas service, indicate that laypeople sought to extend the sanctity and liturgy of the church into the home through objects. Sometimes laypeople temporarily brought images from the church to their homes for specific ritual purposes. In her study of changes in practices surrounding reproduction during the Reformation, Mary E. Fissell lists many different types of objects kept in churches or religious houses that women borrowed during childbirth, such as girdles, necklaces, relics, crosses, rings, and staffs, and she argues that "domestic and devotional worlds intersected in such objects" (Fissell 2004, 54). Pilgrims' souvenirs offer another instance of sanctity moving by material means.

Pilgrims purchased badges and other souvenirs as proof and memento of their journey, but also because they believed that these objects had therapeutic powers acquired by touching the relic, shrine, or image they commemorated. The market for such objects grew and developed steadily from the twelfth century onwards and, as Brian Spencer notes, by the fifteenth century appears to have "extended to include alternative expressions of commemorative piety, such as religious pictures, statuettes of saints, votive figurines, candles and candleholders, as well as secular and heraldic badges, bells, whistles and other knick-knacks, which had nothing to do with the shrine concerned" (Spencer 1998, 5). Although acquired on pilgrimage, these objects sometimes served broader devotional needs, particularly because they were often relatively inexpensive objects. As Spencer suggests, for many with little to spend on devotional images "large pilgrim signs or purpose-made panels, triptychs, altar crosses, and free-standing figures, all of pewter, might serve, like the ivory or enamelled equivalents of the rich, as aids to devotion in the
home" (Spencer 1998, 16). In addition, laypeople filled their wills with bequests of rosaries, rings, religiously decorated tapestries and silver plate, crucifixes, and other religious images. The materiality of extant objects helps us to penetrate the elusive quality of lay private devotion and examine it as a material process of bodily engagement.

The late Middle Ages also witnessed a growing desire by laypeople to participate in their devotional lives actively, even physically. Processions and gestural interactions with small objects formed an important component of affective piety, as laypeople used objects to serve as avenues into devotional encounters with the divine. "As Jeffrey Hamburger asserts, "medieval devotion embraced the entire person, not only the mind, the emotions, and the imagination, but the body as well. Devotional performance engaged all the senses, corporeal as well as spiritual, through speech, sight, and gesture" (Hamburger 1998, 19). Although we can characterize various devotional practices with objects and images as "performative," it is critical that we also consider how religious performances proper contributed to lay visual piety in specific, and equally body-centered, ways. Public religious performances offered laypeople unique devotional encounters that were both visual and physical in nature. The power of these performances to move spectators affectively is articulated in theatrical discourse from the period.

**Reembodying the Medieval Spectator**

Although anti-theatrical in nature, *A Tretise of Miracles Playinge* (c. 1380–1425) provides us with valuable information about late medieval performance. After presenting a series of prevalent arguments that support drama’s devotional efficacy, the treatise’s author refutes each one in turn. More concerned with responses to dramatic content than with the content per se, the author’s arguments reflect a medieval preoccupation with the performance encounter rather than the dramatic text. The author worries that “pleyinge” will lead men to serve “luste of the flayssh and minthe of the body,” and entice people away from proper “recreaion” such as “werkis of mercy to his neebore” (Davidson 1993, 96, 104). Although plays present religious, ritual actions, the author argues that these representations should not be confused with true worship because they only amount to empty gestures, not pious deeds. The author appears troubled that because “miracles pleyinge” portrays bodies engaged in sacred events and actions, spectators will interpret these plays as religious worship; the implication being that religious theatre created a degree of confusion between play and worship. The author further argues that such “pleyinge” makes men “wepen [weep] for the play of Cristis passioun; leeyeinge to wepen [fauling to weep] for the sinnies of hyself and of thirre children” (Davidson 1993, 102). This troubles him because it shows that spectators “lowyn more the likinge [pleasures; sinful feelings] of thirre body and of prosperite of the world than likinge [pleasures] in God and prosperite.
of vertu in the soule" (102). The author expresses concern that plays focus spectators on their own bodily states, which distracts from meditation on Christ, and later argues that "miracles playing" should be avoided because it "be[n] made more to deliten [delight; please] men bodily." (104). The author's central concern relates to performance's innate ability to access and influence the spectator's body. The fear—as with Gibson's film—is that the corporeality of performance images work on the body. The effects of performance-viewing are not limited to the dramatic encounter but, in addition, by focusing spectators on their "fleshy" desires and delights, performances continue to influence (negatively) the activities of spectators in their daily lives.

Whether consciously or not, this critical reaction takes a phenomenological approach to lay performance-viewing practices. Rather than analyze particular dramatic passages or images, the Tretise's author concentrates his arguments on the physical encounter between spectators and theatrical event. A phenomenological approach to theatre offers us a way to recapture the materiality of the spectatorial body within the performance context and understand its potential implications for reception. Medieval religious performances engaged the devotee's body in a pious practice, but unlike other forms of enacted devotion in which a viewer might physically act on an object or in which viewing is strictly mental, in performance the actor/image and spectator are both embodied and neither acts exclusively on the other. In his study of phenomenology and performance, Stanton Garner, Jr. explains that "theatrical space is 'bodied' in the sense of being comprised of bodies positioned within a perceptual field, but it is also 'bodied' in the more fundamental sense of being 'bodied forth,' oriented in terms of a body that exists not just as the object of perception, but as its originating site" (Garner 1994, 4). This quality has special implications for medieval religious performance, which not only grounded the spectator in her body, but similarly grounded live, devotional viewing in the spectator's body, thereby drawing attention to the body, not only as the "agent of theatrical experience" (Garner 1994, 5), but also as the agent of devotional viewing. In order to better understand how performance engaged the body in a devotional act, we must, as Garner asserts, reembody the discourse of theatre (26).

In the Middle Ages, theorists defined seeing as a corporeal practice with ethical associations and spiritual consequences. A phenomenological approach accesses the materiality inherent in medieval theories of sense perception, as well as their implications for devotional performance-viewing practices. Most ancient and medieval theories of vision rested on the principle of species, a substance believed to travel between object and viewer to produce visual effects. For example, Roger Bacon—who developed one of the most influential visual theories of the Middle Ages—argues that vision is a mutual process that requires the agency of both object and eye; the object's species impress themselves
upon the eye, while the visual rays from the eye “alter” and “enoble” the object’s species in order to make vision possible (Bacon 1900, 2, 52). As Suzannah Biernoff notes, for Bacon species were not only responsible “for sensation or thought, but physical causation generally” (Biernoff 2005, 48). Although Bacon defines species as neither body nor matter, they have corporeal form. Bacon, like other visual theorists, conceives of seeing as a process that involves a degree of physical touching.

The metaphors and models developed by ancient and medieval writers to describe visual practices are strikingly similar to those used in modern phenomenology.” Both theoretical frameworks situate the body as a “hinge between self and world” (ibid.) and vision as an experience during which the body inserts the self into that world. The apprehensions expressed in the Tretise are more understandable when placed alongside medieval sense theory. As spectators watch a performance, they make physical contact with the actors (bodied images). In light of this theory, one can more easily appreciate how “playinge” might “bein made more to delight men bodily” and inspire “lustis of the fleysh and mirthe of the body.” By engaging both actors’ and spectators’ bodies, performance brought the material body into the foreground of the devotional viewing experience and situated the spectator’s body as the basis for developing lay visual piety. I will illustrate the implications of this experience with a brief example from medieval drama—the York cycle’s The Crucifixion pageant.

The York cycle, a sequence of biblically based plays that dramatize world history from the late medieval Christian perspective, was performed in the English city of York on Corpus Christi Day. The city’s craft guilds staged the Corpus Christi cycle on a processional route composed of between twelve and sixteen stations that traversed the city streets. Its roughly fifty individual pageants, running to around 14,000 lines of Middle English verse, were performed on wagons that functioned as mobile stages. The cycle was performed on a more or less annual basis for approximately two hundred years, with a record from 1376 supplying us with the earliest evidence of performance, and the last known pre-modern production taking place in the 1560s. Although there existed a great diversity of dramatic forms in England and on the continent during the Middle Ages, the York cycle offers us one example of the types of large-scale community performance events staged during the period.

Not only is The Crucifixion one of the most well-known pageants from York’s cycle, it also presents a sophisticated moment of lay visual piety in performance. When Christ is onstage during this play, he spends most of his time lying on the stage as the soldiers fasten his body to the cross, and is therefore likely out of view, or partially obstructed, for a large portion of the audience. The pain inflicted on Christ’s body is central to the play’s action and theology, and yet spectators do not see the torture enacted for very long. Over the course of the play, four soldiers vividly describe pulling Christ’s arms
so that they can nail his body to the ill-made cross. After numerous attempts and the expense of great effort, they succeed in raising the cross at around line 210; two-thirds of the way through the play’s dialogue. At this point, as many scholars have observed, the scene forms an iconographic image for lay viewers. The moment replicates the Elevation of the Host, which, as Pamela King notes, “had become an essentially voyeuristic experience” for the laity by the late medieval period (King 2003, 165).

Once the soldiers raise the cross and Christ hangs from it immobile and, except for a brief twelve-line monologue, silent, the dramatic agency shifts to the spectator. This scene creates a specific theatrical dynamic that compels spectators to engage the pageant in a different perceptual way—one relevant to the theory of visual piety. Garner writes, “To explore the activity lodged in stillness and to investigate the depths of visual latency . . . is to etch the contours of performance even more in the spectator and to replace a theater of activity with a theater of perception, guided by the eye and its efforts to see” (Garner 1994, 79–80). Performance-viewing now constitutes the primary dramatic action. Spectators generate meaning for themselves through the actors’ bodies, and through their own bodily presence at the theatrical event. But Garner further notes that stillness during a play “embodies [audience] members as participants in an actual intercorporeal event” (Garner 1994, 82). The silence at the heart of The Crucifixion encourages spectators to forge a corporeal connection with the onstage Christ and to allow the materiality of their bodies to contribute to the meaning and value of the performance. Consequently, the spectator generates meaning from the way in which his/her viewing position is actually staged. The scenic silence not only makes spectators conscious of their physical “presence” at the sacred event, but also of their ability to create devotional meaning actively by seeing the sacred event. Bodily presence is not only acknowledged, but becomes essential, for the affective piety.

The devotional power created by this type of embodied performance-viewing is exactly what Gibson exploits, and what critics such as Dowd and Rich fear, in The Passion. In reference to Christ’s perpetual silence in the second half of the movie, Amy Hollywood contends that throughout the “final moments of the film, the images become more and more static, increasingly resembling medieval and early modern religious paintings, sculptures, woodcuts, and manuscript illuminations derived from and often used as pictorial aids to the meditation on Christ’s Passion” (Hollywood 2006, 166). She argues that the film oscillates between presenting images of the pietà and images of the arma Christi (weapons of Christ). But within this scene we can also identify the film’s visual and devotional resemblance to medieval performance. Christ’s silence in The Passion compels the audience to forge visually the same embodied connection to Christ that York’s Crucifixion encourages. The film’s stillness does not reduce its bodily focus, but instead contributes to a process of visual.
piety that, as Hollywood contends, "elicits belief in Christ through detailed attention to the extremity and viscerality of his suffering" (Hollywood 2006, 167). Viewers feel this belief, as much as they see it.

Learning Literacy through the Body
My phenomenological approach to the spectator's body defines viewing as a process in which the embodiment of the spectator generates performance meaning. In the context of late medieval devotional culture—as I have already noted, a culture in which the laity cultivated extremely material and affective pious practices—we can also suggest how other, equally material, devotional encounters may have triggered the same powerful acknowledgment of the body as a critical component of visual piety. In his article on bodily knowing, J. Giles Milhaven describes his viewing experience before a three-dimensional pieta as unique to this particular art form: "Before the Pieta I rested in pain. In every line of stone or wood, I felt Christ. God and man, dead for love of me. I felt the mother grieving him dead. That was all I felt. I felt nothing else at the moment, nor wanted to... The art itself pinned me down within the Passion of Christ and Mary. It held me fast in their pain and sorrow" (Milhaven 1989, 356–7). He later suggests that the materiality of sculpture may "convey more powerfully than painting a tactile experience" (360). The process of establishing a unique experience of visual piety through a devotional object's materiality is what I have attempted to describe in reference to performance. But Milhaven further argues that the traces of a viewing experience continue to influence subsequent devotional encounters: "After the devout person's experience of the Pieta, she cannot go back in memory and distinguish in the original experience a nonbodily union with Mary from a bodily one" (Milhaven 1989, 355). Applying this same ongoing experience of materiality to performance suggests a new form of lay literacy.

During medieval religious performance, the spectator's body learned a viewing practice that functioned as a form of lay literacy. Building on Kathenna Ziemann's idea of "liturgical literacy," I call this "performance literacy." Ziemann writes that "literacy, whether defined in medieval or modern terms, is not a unitary or uniform activity, nor does it have meaning outside of the social formations that determine how written texts might function within them" (Ziemann 2003, 97). Rather than explore literacy through strictly textual practices, Ziemann asserts that the lay "understanding" of texts was "grounded in the body" through a "visceral" relationship (Ziemann 2003, 101). For the person who is not connected to the Mass in a grammatical relationship, one that is subsumed by linguistic knowledge conveyed through grammatical instruction, "meaning is perceived in the body, not in the mind" (103; 101). In relation to medieval nuns, Ziemann constructs a notion of "liturgical literacy" that "could draw upon a number of learned abilities, from those we might qualify as musical (such as solmization), to phonetic decoding.
skill, to mnemonic techniques, to a variety of grammatical proficiencies" (106).

Literacy is an extremely useful term to apply to medieval lay performance-viewing practices. Performance-viewing taught laypeople how to engage their faith through their bodies and therefore constructed a kind of "performance literacy" that laypeople could use in other devotional settings. Medieval devotional performances, such as the York cycle, created a sensual devotional space in which laypeople controlled their piety, beginning with how they controlled their bodies. Eating, drinking, shouting, heckling, walking, leaving, arriving—all of these are changes made through the body. These changes not only altered the perception of performance, but they also taught laypeople that they had the capacity to transform their individual visual piety with their own bodies.

The applications of "performance literacy" are not limited to medieval drama, but can be extended to art objects as well. As I noted above, the late medieval laity had access to a number of objects that they could use in private devotional practices. One object that particularly invites us to consider lay devotion as a material practice is the Book of Hours, which came into use in England in the late thirteenth century and functioned as a prayer book for the laity. As Jeremy Goldberg notes in his study of lay book ownership, evidence from wills reveals that such books, "works specifically designed for lay use and easily the most numerous of service or devotional books in lay hands, became increasingly popular as the fifteenth century wore on" and that they "represent the only books regularly noted in the wills of artisans" (Goldberg 1994, 165). His survey of registered wills from York between 1321 and 1500 reveals that Books of Hours accounted for a high proportion of all texts mentioned (Goldberg 1994, 189). Less complex versions of breviaries and Psalters, these books are organized around the hours of the Virgin and usually begin with a calendar of saints' days and church feasts, then include prayers to the Virgin and saints, the seven Pentecostal psalms, the Office of the Dead, and other relevant offices. While these texts are usually in the traditional Latin, certain prayers, such as those said at the Elevation of the Host, are often in the vernacular. Many follow this model, but Books of Hours were not standardized and owners often personalized them in any number of ways based upon individual desires. For this reason, although laypeople used them in public spaces, such as parish churches, individual needs informed their functions. Books of Hours represent devotional objects over which laypeople exercised a degree of control.

The Pavement Hours offers us a particularly useful opportunity for exploring the materiality of lay devotion in relation to performance spectatorship in a local context. Scholars link this book to medieval York for a number of reasons, but specifically because it shows evidence of local use in such inclusions as a prayer to Richard Scrope (archbishop of York from 1338 to 1405 and locally celebrated for his martyrdom after being executed for leading an
insurrection against Henry IV) and dedications in its calendar
to the relics of York Minster cathedral and the Church of All
Saints, Pavement in York. The Pavement Hours is dated to
circa 1420 and measures 215 x 162 mm, with writing space
of approximately 150 x 108 mm (Adams 2004, 1). Although
portable, this was not a pocket-sized book, but a distinctly
visible object that, even when held in the hand, others would
notice. As is the case with all medieval manuscripts, this book
has a devotional materiality that only becomes obvious in a
live encounter. The gold leaf of the illuminations imparts a
three-dimensional quality that extends to the reader/viewer.
The images are painted on parchment sheets, animal skin
that has been defleshed, stretched, and scraped smooth.
Touching these highly decorated pages communicates
the flimsy material presence of both texts and images.
But certain unique features of this book offer compelling
textures of devotional materiality and access to the ways
that "performance literacy" may have influenced the lay
consumption of this materiality.

Inserting the Body into the Book
The Pavement Hours contains thirty-seven folios with border
decorations and twenty-nine historiated initials. Additionally,
as Amelia Adams notes, the urge for personal adaptation
may be evident in the manuscript's original production, since
a number of folios at the end of each gathering were left
blank (Adams 2004, 52). Some of these were later filled with
texts and prayers, while others remain bare, presumably
to accommodate the additions that continued throughout
the fifteenth century. As well as these textual additions,
eight images were inserted into the manuscript, most of
which are sewn onto the top edges of the folios on which
they appear (Figure 1). These often cover texts and do not
usually clearly relate to the matter over which they are sewn.
Such a devotional object offers evidence of the complexity
of medieval visual culture, a culture that provided countless
opportunities for individuals to create unique devotional
practices through material means.

The insertions in the Pavement Hours provide fascinating
instances of devotional materiality, and "performance literacy"
can help to unpack the encounters that they construct. I posit
that these images not only reproduce the kind of devotional
seeing that is central to the viewing of the York cycle, but
that they allow the reader/viewer of the Pavement Hours to
physically and materially insert herself into the devotional
moments of the manuscript, an insertion that mimics live
performance viewing. Although interactions between art and
drama occurred in all Western European medieval contexts,
a local focus allows me to identify the traces of specific
performance-viewing practices in material objects. Both
the cycle performance and the Pavement Hours generated
experiences of visual piety grounded in material encounters.
"Performance literacy" helps us to identify and explore the
material contact between lay body and manuscript insertion
as a site of lay devotional performance.
The first instances of insertions in the Pavement Hours occur as a cluster (Figure 2). A sixteen-line high image of Saint Clare is sewn across the top margin of folio 26v, thereby placing it over the final folio of the prayer Salve plaga lateris and facing the opening folio of the prayer said at the Elevation of the Host. Inserted between folios 26 and 27 is a large leaf, almost the size of a full folio, which contains an image of Saints Anthony, George, and Roche. As Adams notes, this grouping of saints is uncommon and most likely reflected the individual desires of the owner. She indicates that “this sort of image would most likely have been bought from a market, and it is reasonable to assume that on commissioning the purchaser asked for this particular grouping of saints” (Adams 2004, 39). The third insertion in this cluster appears on folio 27r where a small, three-line high monogram of Jesus, IHC enclosed in a heart, is sewn in place of the opening letter of the prayer recited at the Elevation of the Host (“Ave Jesu Christi, verbum patris, filius virginis, agnus dei, salus mundi, hostia sacra, verbum caro, fons pietatis”). The only insertion completely sewn into the manuscript, this image appears integrated into the existing design of a page.

This trio of insertions appears at the place in the liturgical service that was most important to the layperson—the Elevation of the Host—suggesting that the owner felt the need to materially inscribe or mark this moment as part of her pious
practices. Although, as Adams points out, Saint Clare might have been associated with the Host because she composed a prayer to the five wounds of Christ and was particularly devoted to the veneration of Passion events (Adams 2004, 38), the trio of male saints is not obviously related to this liturgical moment. I suggest that the manuscript’s owner chose to materially mark this moment in the liturgy with an image that she found efficacious in her particular devotional life and thereby restructured this moment as a personal, visual encounter. By doing so, the user emulated in private devotion the focus on the visual emphasized in the liturgical service.

Most of the other insertions occur in isolation. The third saint image is of a female saint holding a book and accompanied by a small animal (Figure 3). The subject of this nine-line image has not been definitively identified, though Adams posits that the animal is a lamb and the saint Agnes. It is sewn into the top of folio 106r and over the prayer to the Name of Jesus, which also appears on folio 84r. The image’s border pattern is different from the manuscript’s other images, and therefore was likely purchased loose from a disassembled manuscript (Adams 2004, 41). The next saint insertion is a sixteen-line image of Saint Christopher carrying the Christ child, which is sewn across the top margin of folio 106v and over the prayer said at daybreak (figure 4). I propose two possible functions for these insertions, both related to cycle viewing practices. Placing images over texts duplicates a common characteristic of late medieval lay devotional viewing,
which required laypeople to continually navigate and hold in their minds multiple levels of meaning during devotional practices. Mary Carruthers’s work on medieval memory aids has revealed the sophistication of medieval texts and images, and the many different layers of interpretation that a single text or image might invite users to contemplate simultaneously (Carruthers 2000; 1998; 1993; 1990). By placing images over texts, the owner of the Pavement Hours is not reducing the value of the text or excising it from the devotional encounter. Instead, this practice highlights and embellishes the textual moment, echoing the devotional viewing experience learned in performance.

Similarly, during the York cycle performance spectators not only saw the biblical story, but they also saw the contemporary allusions made throughout the pageants, as well as the actors (laypeople in York), the characters these actors played in the pageant, the role/s they had in the community (civic offices, guild associations), the set design on the carts, and the civic background against which these were placed. Throughout each pageant, spectators navigated these multiple visual layers, while also engaging them as both entertainment and devotion. Over the course of the cycle, or
even a single pageant, viewers experienced moving into and out of embodied viewing positions (I am at the crucifixion; I am before an image of the crucifixion; I am before a dramatic version of the crucifixion. I am a spectator at a play; I am standing on my street; I am a citizen of York. I am a member of the Christian community) by moving different veils across the performance lens. The layered viewing that the cycle invokes is reproduced in the Pavement Hours insertions, by means of which the user can literally lift and lower images and thereby lift and lower ways of devotional seeing.

Moreover, in these insertions I observe a desire not only for images, but also for a material presence at specific sacred moments. There are images throughout the manuscript that were part of its original construction, but the insertions have been purposefully placed at specific textual or liturgical sites by the users and/or owners of the book. In some cases, these may have functioned as bookmarks or placeholders for important liturgical moments to which the book's users might want to return. For instance, the cluster that occurs at the Elevation prayer would likely have served to mark that important liturgical moment: the female saint image's location in the manuscript might indicate the significance of the prayer over which it is sewn. Adams argues that “the repetition of this prayer suggests one of two options: either the prayer was of very great importance and was included twice at the owner's choice, or it was mistakenly repeated as part of a scribal error. In the case of f. 106v [sic], it is likely that the owner placed the Agnes image here knowing that the same text appeared earlier in the manuscript. Therefore, covering the text here would not interfere with the use of the text” (Adams 2004, 41). I would amend this conclusion slightly to argue that the prayer's importance is signaled by its reiteration and that the image's placement, rather than suggesting that this second version of the text is deemed unnecessary, marks the prayer for the user so that she can locate it easily. Rather than erasing the second copy of the prayer, the insertion highlights its value for the user.

The image of Saint Christopher carrying the Christ child might function similarly. Christopher was a common subject of wall paintings and stained glass, and similar depictions are found in York parish churches, specifically All Saints Pavement and Holy Trinity Goodramgate. As with the female saint insertion, Adams argues that the different border style suggests that the image was purchased from a vendor. As the protector of travelers, Christopher held particular appeal for merchants involved in seafaring expeditions. If such a merchant used this Book of Hours, he would likely have a special relationship with, and need to frequently turn to, the prayer that this image marks. But, perhaps more significantly, both of these images materially insert the book's user into these devotional moments. If purchased by or for a female user, the image of the female saint holding a book might physically mirror the reader herself and thereby sew her presence into the book's pages. If another of the manuscript's users was a merchant, the image of Saint Christopher may
have functioned to stitch his profession—and therefore himself—into a devotional context. The insertions not only mark specific prayers, but they also thread the material presence of the book’s owners into these prayers. As in The Crucifixion pageant, during which the spectator’s bodily presence generates devotional meaning, here the insertion foregrounds the manuscript user’s (material) presence and thereby layers the prayers with additional pious significance.

I identify materiality not only in the insertions themselves, but also in the physical relationships they construct between image and viewer. As I already indicated, the female saint and Saint Christopher images may reflect the lay owner’s desire to be physically present at specific devotional moments of the liturgy. The cluster of images at the Elevation prayer might function similarly. Inserting images that one can touch, and therefore with which one can interact, automatically highlights the reader’s physical, bodied presence and acts as evidence of the owner in the devotional book’s landscape. I will further examine this relationship using two Passion image insertions that may have been acquired on pilgrimage journeys.

A fifteen-line high image of the Arma Christi is sewn along the top margin of folio 44v (Figure 5). The accompanying Latin
text indicates that this image functioned as an indulgence token that granted 6,755 years off from Purgatory: "who sum euere devoutely beholdidh these armys of criste haith vii vir iv yer per." (transcription from Ker and Piper 1992, 729). This insertion appears at the Gradual Psalms before the opening of the Psalms of the Passion. As Adams notes, pilgrims often recited the Gradual Psalms while traveling to Jerusalem. This choice of manuscript location, coupled with the fact that writing on the back of the parchment indicates previous use, suggests that the owner may have acquired the image while on pilgrimage. The other Passion insertion, a narrative scene of Christ before Pilate, is sewn along the top of folio 45r, facing the Arma Christi and overlaying the opening folio of the Psalms of the Passion. Like the Arma Christi, the back of this image also shows evidence of previous use (Figure 6) and I would suggest that due to its placement, it too may have been purchased while on pilgrimage and, perhaps, at the same time as the Arma Christi image.

These insertions may enact the manuscript owner's desire to recreate her physical presence at a sacred moment, in this case, pilgrimage. If we assume that these images were acquired on pilgrimage, then they mark the Passion Psalms
with material evidence of the owner's journey. These images (themselves pieces of flesh) place the devotee physically, materially at a sacred moment, just as performance places the devout spectator physically, materially at biblical moments. They use the flesh of parchment to stand in for the flesh of the pious viewer. And, because these insertions are not sewn entirely onto the folios, they offer the manuscript's user a way to physically interact with and enter the devotional text (Figure 7). Although Adams admits that many of the insertions correlate to the texts over which they are sewn, she also states that "these insertions form an independent meditational focus that, while linked to the themes found throughout the manuscript, forcefully supersedes the text. The dominance of the insertions makes them the focus of attention, drawing interest away from the textual contents to these separate devotional images" (Adams 2004, 50). Alternatively, I would assert that these images engage the body in the textual contents as much as they may refocus the eye away from the textual material. As with the actor's body in performance, the unique materiality of these insertions fixes the viewer as a material presence and allows her to have an embodied encounter with the book's devotional program. They allow her to mark her bodily presence in the book and to interact as an embodied viewer with the book. As in live performance, these insertions enrich the devotional viewing experience by emphasizing the material lay body.

Troubling Material Bodies
The Pavement Hours insertions reveal different ways that medieval laypeople could enrich their devotional lives by introducing and manipulating images as part of their private practices. Figure 7 illustrates how these insertions offered physically engaged encounters. Lifting and lowering an image, a seemingly ordinary practice, could evolve into a lay ritual that, under specific circumstances, signified an extraordinary act. This ritual was lodged in the layperson's body, where it might merge with the viewer's "performance literacy" to form an alternative pious practice. One insertion in particular offers an especially subversive opportunity for this material interaction. The insertion sewn into folio 94r shows the Face of Christ surrounded by the four symbols of the evangelists and an inscription reading "Salva sancta facies nostri redemptions in quinque specie divini" ("Holy sacred face of our Redeemer on which shines the divine likeness"), the first line of the prayer to the Holy Face of Christ (Figure 8). Adams indicates that this image is placed over a prayer by Augustine that was intended to protect its devotee from harm (Adams 2004, 47). Devotion to the holy face was popular during the Middle Ages, particularly in those practices surrounding Veronica images, named after the woman whose cloth was reportedly impressed with the face of Christ on his way to Calvary. These images of Christ's face, oftentimes in the form of mass-produced prints and badges, offered pious viewers a face-to-face divine encounter. Jeffrey Hamburger argues that the late medieval popularity of the Veronica reflects "a process
by which vision, once cloaked in subtle distinctions between corporeal and intellectual sight intelligible only to a spiritual elite, became the standard by which all religious experience was authenticated and in which all, in turn, could participate” (Hamburger 1998, 320). The Pavement Hours insertion presented its medieval viewers with an opportunity to gaze upon the face of Christ that is similar to the participatory experience Veronica badges offered, but it accompanied this practice with an additional performative possibility.

The Face of Christ insertion not only allows the viewer to gaze upon Christ and mentally imagine a reciprocal gaze, but its materiality also invites the user to lift and lower the image; this action reproduces the priest’s liturgical gesture during the Elevation of the Host. Miri Rubin identifies anxieties that arise when the body is engaged in religious rite specifically because such physical engagement destabilizes meaning by making it subject to various interpretations and translations. She describes this happening in late medieval eucharistic practices, especially those that incorporated physical gestures, such as the Elevation of the Host (Rubin 1991, 98). Lifting the insertion replicates this sacred liturgical moment but, in this case, the fleshy image is made Christ. The insertion allows the devotee to manipulate, lift, lower, and touch God, but it is performance that enables this lay ritual to accumulate pious meaning. As an embodied medium, performance shows lay bodies interacting with God, which not only validates the pious quality of these physical encounters, but also offers lay viewers a means to perform visual piety privately. The lay body, activated by the embodied performance viewing experience, can, through a material image, develop and perform a potentially unorthodox form of visual piety. As Morgan contends, “consumers [of mass produced images] do not mindlessly conform to patterns of consumption established by producers but appropriate the product to their own uses and needs, thereby preserving a degree of agency or self-determination in the construction and maintenance of their worlds” (Morgan 1996, 134). The insertion of a material Face of Christ which, incidentally, appears in a circle that visually resembles the eucharistic wafer, creates the opportunity for a lay Elevation ritual. It suggests how performance, liturgy, and material images may have coalesced within lay visual piety.

The unstable viewing position before the Face of Christ insertion reveals the subversive possibilities for what kind of “performance literacy” the body learned to practice. According to Michel de Certeau’s theory of consumption, the marginalized “other” uses tactics to temporarily seize and manipulate events in order to transform them into opportunities, thus turning the order of things to their advantage (De Certeau 1984, xix). “Performance literacy” can be interpreted as a tactic of lay visual piety. Kathleen Ashley argues that the metaphor of the tactic “allows us to see medieval dramatic performances as always a reinterpretation or adaptation of traditional myths and ideologies” (Ashley 1995, 9). But it also allows us to see the performance
encounter as a reinterpretation or adaptation of the laity’s traditional role in devotion and devotional seeing. Religious performance created a space in which laypeople could develop a sensual, individualized, and, most importantly, transportable, devotional “performance literacy.” The Pavement Hours insertions provide examples of different ways in which an object’s users could draw upon their bodies to recreate a performance-viewing aesthetic which situated them as sacred viewers, marked sacred events with their material presence, and thereby reinterpreted their devotional role accordingly.

When medieval laypeople sewed images into their devotional books, they also created a mode of viewing that functioned as part of their “performance literacy.” This is not to say that art objects and drama existed in isolation. The visual experiences before both were augmented by other devotional practices, but a phenomenological approach allows us to identify specific ways in which laypeople might have transferred the performance encounter from the public to the private sphere.

Today’s pious laypeople watch movies or television shows with religious themes, read novels based on sacred stories, or decorate their homes with devotional images. Like their medieval counterparts, they also use devotional objects as a means to continue sacred performances in other parts of their lives. In addition to memorabilia like rings, posters, CDs, and a coffee-table book, The Passion of the Christ’s official website also sells replica pewter nails on leather thongs for $12.99 (large) or $16.99 (extra large) each. Twenty-first-century spectators, seeking ways to draw upon and retain the sanctity of this cinematic event after they return to their homes and personal lives, can employ a material means strikingly similar to that offered to medieval pilgrims 600 years ago. Medieval practices may therefore illuminate both the enthusiasm and the fear prompted by today’s material religious lay rituals. By considering the ways in which bodies and objects materially shape religious spectatorship, we open up new avenues of investigation that allow us to explore performance as an ongoing practice that does not end when the play/performance/film does, but remains, embedded in the spectator’s body as a “mode of becoming.”

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notes and references

1 Particularly troubling were statements by Gibson, such as "I wanted to bring you there and I wanted to be true to the Gospels. That has never been done," and regarding the authors of the Gospels. "I mean, these are reliable sources. These are guys who were around," which seemed to ignore research by scholars into the historical Jesus. Both Gibson quotations from Peter J. Boyer's "The Jesus War," The New Yorker, September 15, 2003, 60 and 64.

2 Gibson's The Passion Recut, released in time for Lent on March 11, 2005, was far less violent and did far less business in theaters. Although I have not seen The Passion Recut, I can infer from descriptions that the materiality of its violence was significantly reduced since Gibson cut approximately six of the film's most violent minutes. Playing in 957 theaters, the recut grossed only $239,850 at the box office in the first weekend. In contrast, the original version earned $117.5 million in ticket sales in the first five days on 4,000 screens at 3,043 theaters.

3 An example described in an article in The Guardian suggests that in some cases film is better able to recreate the materiality of the Passion events than live performance. Annual outreach Passion services in Britain often include "actors and priests bearing heavy crosses through the malls." In describing one procession that followed a nun carrying a cross along Victoria in London, Father Michael Seed admitted, "we used to have a very heavy cross but the person playing Jesus kept falling under it, so we now use a more wimpish, lighter one from Methodist Central Hall. We don't want to get sued under criminal injuries legislation. Anyway, Sister Ellen will be wearing shoulder pads." From Stephen Bates, "Churches Take Ritual of Passion on to the Streets," The Guardian, April 9, 2004.


A number of scholars have used phenomenological approaches to explore the performing arts. See, specifically, Stanton B. Garner, Jr., Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994); Sondra Horton Fraise, Dance and the Lived Body (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987); Simon Shepherd, Theatre, Body and Pleasure (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). These authors build on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work in phenomenology, which is attributed with introducing the body into phenomenological discourse. Merleau-Ponty argued that our being of existence is a "being-in-the-world" (être au monde) and that our body is the basis by which we differentiate ourselves from this world and derive meaning from it. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).


In a larger project, I examine a number of moments in the different York pageants when the body is situated as the basis for devotional meaning through visual piety. I specifically examine how the cycle’s devotional objective changes in The Death of Christ, the pageant that follows The Crucifixion, during which Christ makes a number of lengthy speeches from the cross.

David Morgan has also written about how Gibson’s film returns to a premodern iconography of Catholic art once used to visualize the passion of Jesus.” (85). See “Catholic Visual Piety and The Passion of the Christ,” in Re-Viewing The Passion: Mel Gibson’s Film and Its Critics, ed. S. Brent Plate, 85–96 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

Mihaven is building on Joanna E. Ziegler’s ideas about materiality and devotion discussed in Sculpture of Compassion. Ziegler’s intent is "to pursue the exchange between material (object) and the immaterial (feeling), and to explore the construction of emotions through art" (15), specifically as this occurs between Christian believers and the pietàs.

The Horae Eboracensis offers a model for the medieval Book of Hours based upon the York Use. See Horae Eboracensis: The Prayere or Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary, According to the Use of the Illustrious Church of York with other devotions as they were used by the lay-folk in the Northern Province in the XVth and XVIth centuries, Ed. C. Wardlaw (Durham, UK: Surtees Society, 1920).

A number of wills from York include bequests to the head of Richard Scrope, which was kept as a relic at a shrine, and these attest to the strength of his cult in the city and diocese. Examples include Katherine de Craven’s 1418 bequest of a small striped gold girdle to Scrope (Borthwick Institute, Register 3 fol 613r-v), John Dautre’s 1458 bequest of one of his funeral torches and a set of coral beads (rosary) to the chapel of Richard Scrope, which he specifies as standing outside the city wall (Borthwick Institute, Register 2, fol 413r–Q144), Isabel Bruce’s 1477 bequest of jewelry to the “capell Ricard Scoppe” (Borthwick Institute, Register 5 fol 17v), and Alison Clark’s 1509 will that specifies “an old noble [6] to be disposed about the ornaments and the holy man, Bishop Scoppe” (Dean and Chapter Wills, volume 2 fol 821r–83v).

Although I use the pronoun she throughout this analysis of the Pavement Hours for convenience, I would actually argue that this primer likely had multiple, simultaneous users and that these users were likely of both sexes.
"There are other medieval manuscripts that contain images sewn or pasted onto the pages. For instance, Jeffrey Hamburger describes examples of this devotional practice in relation to Veronica images and pilgrimage badges. He argues that "the [Veronica] images inserted in the margins of missals underscore the Veronica's claims to concrete physical presence, a presence associated with both the original relic and the consecrated Host" (Hamburger 1998: 332). He cites three specific manuscripts as illustration: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MSS 26, an addition to the Westminster Psalter, London, British Library MS Royal 2 A. XIX, and London, Lambeth Palace Library MS 203. For descriptions of these manuscripts, see N. Morgan, Early Gothic Manuscripts I-III (London: Harvey Miller, 1982-88), vol. 1, pages 156-40; vol. 2, pages 49-50 and 101-5.

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