

# FLAYING

## IN THE PRE-MODERN WORLD



EDITED BY LARISSA TRACY

# FLAYING

*in the Pre-Modern World*

*Practice and Representation*



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*in the Pre-Modern World*

*Practice and Representation*

*Edited by*  
Larissa Tracy

D. S. BREWER

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# Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Acknowledgements	xiii
List of Contributors	xiv
List of Abbreviations	xviii

Introduction: Rending and Reading the Flesh	1
<i>Larissa Tracy</i>	

## I FLAYING IN PRACTICE

1 Tools of the Puncture: Skin, Knife, Bone, Hand	20
<i>Jack Hartnell</i>	
2 A Tale of Venetian Skin: The Flaying of Marcantonio Bragadin	51
<i>Kelly DeVries</i>	
3 Flesh and Death in Early Modern Bedburg	71
<i>Susan Small</i>	
4 Medievalism and the 'Flayed-Dane' Myth: English Perspectives between the Seventeenth and Nineteenth Centuries	91
<i>Mary Rambaran-Olm</i>	
5 Skin on Skin: Wearing Flayed Remains	116
<i>Frederika Bain</i>	

## II REPRESENTATIONS OF FLAYING

6 Robed in Martyrdom: The Flaying of St Bartholomew in the Laudario of Sant'Agnese	140
<i>Asa Simon Mittman and Christine Sciacca</i>	
7 Masculinist Devotion: Flaying and Flagellation in the <i>Belles Heures</i>	173
<i>Sherry C. M. Lindquist</i>	
8 A Window for the Pain: Surface, Interiority and Christ's Flagellated Skin in Late Medieval Sculpture	208
<i>Peter Dent</i>	
9 'Flesche withowtyn hyde': The Removal and Transformation of Jesus' Skin in the English Cycle Passion Plays	240
<i>Valerie Gramling</i>	

- 10 No Skin in the Game: Flaying and Early Irish Law and Epic 261  
*William Sayers*
- 11 Reading the Consumed: Flayed and Cannibalized Bodies in *The Siege of Jerusalem* and *Richard Coeur de Lyon* 285  
*Emily Leverett*
- 12 Losing Face: Flayed Beards and Gendered Power in Arthurian Literature 308  
*Michael Livingston*
- 13 Face Off: Flaying and Identity in Medieval Romance 322  
*Larissa Tracy*
- 14 'Thou shalt have the better cloathe': Reading Second Skins in *Robin Hood* and *Guy of Gisborne* 349  
*Renée Ward*

Epilogue: Anthropodermic Bibliopeggy in the Early Modern Period 366  
*Perry Neil Harrison*

Select Bibliography 384

Index 403

## Illustrations

- 1.1 Anatomical figure of a flayed man holding his skin on a stick over his shoulder, from a copy of Henri de Mondeville's *Cyrurgie*, 1314, France. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 2030 (formerly Colbert 4478), fol. 10v. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France. 21
  
- 1.2 Surgical instruments interspersed with the text of a Latin copy of al-Zahrāwī's treatise on surgery from *Kitāb al-Tasrīf li-man 'an at-ta'līf* (*The Method of Medicine*), late fourteenth century, Italy. London, British Library, Add. MS 36617, fol. 34r. Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 30
  
- 1.3 A pair of scissors and a knife interspersed with the text of a small surgical manual in Flemish, based on the *Cyrurgie* of Jan Yperman, last quarter of the fifteenth century, Flanders. Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, MS BPL 3094, fols. 97v–98r. Photo: Leiden University Library. 31
  
- 1.4 The process of operating on an anal fistula, and the instruments involved, from a copy of John Arderne's *Practica*, c. 1420–30, England. London, British Library, Add. MS 29301, fol. 25r. Photo: © The British Library Board. 32
  
- 1.5 The surgical instruments of Jean Gispaden, from his notebook containing excerpts from surgical textbooks, itineraries and case descriptions, second half of the fifteenth century, eastern France (perhaps Grenoble). Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Lat. 7138, fols. 199v–200r. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France. 33
  
- 1.6 Surgical armamentarium from Hieronymus Brunschwig's *Buch der Chirurgia* (Strassburg: Johann Grèuninger, 1497). Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 35
  
- 1.7 Surgeon dissecting a corpse at the chest, from the *Anathomia* of Guido da Vigevano, 1345, Paris. Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 334. Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 39
  
- 1.8 Dissection scene from a later edition of the *Fascicolo di medicina* (Venice: Gregorium de Gregoriis Fratres, 1495). Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 40



- 1.9 The knife-maker Linhart Lebenbrüst, from the *Hausbuch der Mendelschen Zwölfbrüderstiftung*, 1476, Nuremberg. Nuremberg, Stadtbibliothek, MS Amb. 317.2° (Mendel I), fol. 95v. Photo: Stadtbibliothek Nürnberg. 41
- 1.10 The flaying of St Bartholomew, from the Luttrell Psalter, c. 1325–40, England. London, British Library, Add. MS 42130, fol. 103v. Photo: © The British Library Board. 42
- 1.11 Mondino da Luzzi directing an anatomical dissection, from a copy of the *Anatomia Mondino* (Melerstadt: 1493). Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 43
- 1.12 Amputation knife with bone handle, late fifteenth or sixteenth century. London, Science Museum (on long-term loan to the Wellcome Collection), museum no. A648001. Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 44
- 1.13 Amputation saw (with detail below), metal frame and ivory handle, sixteenth century. London, Science Museum (Hamonic Collection, on long-term loan to the Wellcome Collection), museum no. A121435. Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 45
- 1.14 The flaying of St Bartholomew, from the Breviary of John the Fearless and Margaret of Bavaria, 1410–19. London, British Library, MS Harley 2897, fol. 379r. Photo: © The British Library Board. 46
- 1.15 Amputation saw, early sixteenth century. London, Science Museum (on long-term loan to the Wellcome Collection), museum no. A241432. Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 48
- 3.1 A table with an array of anatomical instruments used for vivisection, photolithograph, 1940 (Bern: Dr A. Wander, 1940), after a woodcut, 1543. Wellcome Library, museum no. 24377i. Photo: Wellcome Library, London. 72
- 3.2 Lukas Mayer, *Hinrichtung Peter Stump* [The Execution of Peter Stubbe], woodcut, 1589. Photo: Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain. 77
- 5.1 Reproduction of *nábuxur*, popularly known as ‘necropants’, in The Museum of Icelandic Sorcery and Witchcraft. Reproduced with permission. Photo: Sigurður Atlason © Strandagaldur ses, <http://www.galdrasýning.is/press/>. 133
- 6.1 Pacino di Bonaguida, folio from the Laudario of Sant’Agnese, showing five scenes from the flaying of St Bartholomew, c. 1340. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection (2006.250). Reproduced under Open Access for Scholarly Content, <http://www.metmuseum.org>. 140

- 6.2 The folio in Fig. 6.1, with the sequence of the scenes marked. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection (2006.250). Reproduced under Open Access for Scholarly Content, <http://www.metmuseum.org>. 143
- 6.3 Diptych of St Clare, from the workshop of Guido da Siena, late thirteenth century. Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale (Inv. no. 4). Photo: Pinacoteca Nazionale, Siena. 151
- 6.4 Bible moralisée de Naples, 1350 or later, Naples. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 9561, fol. 78v. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France. 153
- 6.5 Martyrdom of St Bartholomew, bronze carving on the door of San Paolo fuori le Mura, Rome, eleventh-century. Photo: by permission of Christine Sciacca. 154
- 6.6 King Shapur Zu'l Aktaf observes Mani's flayed body, from Abu 'l-Qasim Ab Ferdowsi Tusi, *Shāhnāma* [Book of Kings], c. 1570, Persia, Shiraz. New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, promised gift of William M. Voelkle. By permission of William M. Voelkle. 158
- 6.7 Façade of the church of St Bartholomew in Logroño, Spain, showing Bartholomew preaching, thirteenth century. Photo: La Rioja Turismo, <https://lariojatourismo.com>. 159
- 6.8 Hungarian Master and workshop, the apostle Bartholomew's martyrdom and burial, Hungarian Anjou Legendary, c. 1325–1335. New York, The Morgan Library & Museum (MS M.360.21r). Purchased by J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913) in 1909. Photo: By permission of the Pierpont Morgan Library. 165
- 7.1 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'January', (b) 'Zodiac Boy', *Très Riches Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1411/12–1416. Chantilly, Musée Condé, MS 65, fols. 14v, 2r. Photo: Wikipedia Commons, Public Domain. 178
- 7.2 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, 'Flagellants', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 74v. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 179
- 7.3 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'St Jerome's Dream', (b) 'Temptation of St Jerome', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 183v, 186r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 180

- 7.4 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'Procession of St Gregory', (b) 'Procession of St Gregory', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fols. 73v, 73r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 184
- 7.5 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, 'Flagellation of Christ', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 132r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 185
- 7.6 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, 'Martyrdom of St Bartholomew', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 161r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 187
- 7.7 (a) Breviary Master, 'St Bartholomew', Breviary of John the Fearless and Margaret of Bavaria, 1410–19. London, British Library, MS Harley, 2897, fol. 379r. Photo: © The British Library Board. (b) 'St Bartholomew', from Jacobus de Voragine, *Legenda aurea*, 1348. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 241, fol. 219r. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France. 189
- 7.8 Master of the Parement of Narbonne (Jean d'Orléans?), 'Flagellation of Christ', *Très Belles Heures de Notre Dame*, 1382–4. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS nouv. acq. Lat. 3093, fol. 197r. Photo: Public domain. 191
- 7.9 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'Christ before Caiaphas', (b) 'Burial of Diocrès', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fols. 124r, 95r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 194
- 7.10 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'Entering the Grande Chartreuse', (b) 'Vision of Bishop Hugh', 1405–1408/9. *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 97r, 95v. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 195
- 7.11 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, 'Pilate Washes his Hands', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 138r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 196

- 7.12 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'September: Treading Grapes – Libra', (b) 'January: Youth and Old Age – Aquarius', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fols. 2r, 10r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 197
- 7.13 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'St Martin and the Beggar', (b) 'The Sick Attending the Funeral of St Jerome', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fols. 169r, 189v. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 197
- 7.14 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'The Duchess of Berry in Prayer to the Trinity', (b) 'The Duke of Berry in Prayer', *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fols. 91v, 91r. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 200
- 7.15 Jean Herman and Paul de Limbourg, (a) 'The Duke of Berry on a Journey' (b) detail of (a), showing letter 'P' (for Paul de Limbourg?) on the castle turret. *Belles Heures* of John, Duke of Berry, 1405–1408/9. New York, The Cloisters Collection 1954, MS. 54.1.1, fol. 223v. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <http://www.metmuseum.org/collections>. 202
- 8.1 Gautier of Metz, *Image du monde*, c. 1320. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 574, fol. 140v: 'Crucifixion; side wound and instruments of the Passion; a bishop and a cleric in prayer'. Photo: Bibliothèque nationale de France. 217
- 8.2 Nicola Pisano, *Annunciation and Nativity*, marble pulpit (Pisan style) at the Baptistery, Pisa. Photo: © Can Stock Photo Inc. / wjarek. 230
- 8.3 Follower of Giroldo da Como, *Annunciation*, marble relief at the Duomo, Florence, early fourteenth century. Photo: © Peter Dent. 231
- 8.4 After Benedetto da Maiano (?), *Virgin and Child with the Young St John the Baptist*, painted and gilt terracotta and carved wood, 1475–1500. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, museum no. 5-1890. Photo: © Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 232
- 8.5 Unknown sculptor, crucifix at S. Maria im Kapitol, Cologne, polychromed wood, first decade of the fourteenth century (?). Photo: © Peter Dent. 234

8.6 Unknown sculptor, crucifix at San Domenico e Giacomo, Bevagna, polychromed wood, c. 1295? Photo: © Peter Dent.	235
8.7 Unknown sculptor, crucifix at San Domenico, Oriveto, polychromed wood, late thirteenth or early fourteenth century (?). Photo: © Peter Dent.	238
8.8 Detail of Fig. 8.7, showing Christ viewed from the foot of the cross. Photo: © Peter Dent.	239
15.1 Front cover of the anthropodermic <i>L'Idolotrie Huguenote</i> . Reprinted with permission of The University of Memphis Library.	372
15.2 Spine and tail edge of the anthropodermic <i>L'Idolotrie Huguenote</i> . Reprinted with permission of The University of Memphis Library.	374

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## Abbreviations

DIL	<i>Dictionary of the Irish Language</i> , ed. E. G. Quin et al. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1913–76)
EA	<i>Egils saga einhenda og Asmundar saga berserkjabana</i> , in <i>Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda</i> , ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, vol. 3 (Reykjavík: Bókútgáfan forni, 1943), pp. 153–89
EETS e.s.	Early English Text Society, Extra Series
EETS o.s.	Early English Text Society, Original Series
EETS s.s.	Early English Text Society, Supplementary Series
MED	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i> , The Regents of the University of Michigan (18 Dec. 2001). <a href="http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/">http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/</a>
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). <a href="http://www.oed.com/">http://www.oed.com/</a>
ÖO	<i>Örvar-Odds saga</i> , in <i>Fornaldarsögur Norðurlanda</i> , ed. Guðni Jónsson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, vol. 1 (Reykjavík: Bókútgáfan forni, 1943), pp. 283–399. <a href="http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/orvar.htm">http://www.snerpa.is/net/forn/orvar.htm</a>
RCL	<i>Richard Coer de Lyon</i> , ed. Karl Brunner, in <i>Der Mittlenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz</i> , Wiener Beiträge zur Englischen Philologie 42 (Vienna and Leipzig, 1913)
SD	Stage direction

# INTRODUCTION

## Rending and Reading the Flesh

Larissa Tracy

SKIN is the parchment upon which identity is written. Class, race, ethnicity and gender are read upon the human surface. Removing skin tears away identity and leaves a blank slate upon which law, punishment, sanctity or monstrosity can be inscribed. Flaying strips away the means by which people see themselves or are viewed by others. Modern popular culture is fascinated with flaying – it often appears as a motif in horror films or serial crime dramas because, as Judith Halberstam writes, '[s]kin is at once the most fragile of boundaries and the most stable of signifiers; it is the site of entry for the vampire, the signifier of race for the nineteenth-century monster'.<sup>1</sup> In the 1991 film *Silence of the Lambs*, the serial killer branded 'Buffalo Bill' by the sensational media dresses up in a patchwork of skin sewn together to make a 'woman suit'; prancing in front of a mirror, he becomes 'a layered body, a body of many surfaces laid upon one another'.<sup>2</sup> For 'Bill' flaying is part of the transformative act through which he can emerge from a chrysalis of conflicting identities into a fully formed entity. The voyeuristic act of watching 'Bill' watching himself 'transformed' horrifies and, at the same time, captivates. In this sense, skin becomes 'a metaphor for surface, for the external; it is the place of pleasure and the site of pain; it is the thin sheet that masks bloody horror'.<sup>3</sup> This metaphor of skin as a surface for touch, pain, pleasure, torment and suffering is not exclusively a modern phenomenon.

Frequently when flaying is employed in modern popular culture (though not in *Silence of the Lambs*) it evokes a sense of the medieval – or what is assumed to be medieval. Like torture, flaying is one of those acts that modern audiences generally prefer to locate in a distant past, the product of a less enlightened age. Thus, it is often – erroneously – enumerated as one of many 'medieval' horrors, and it is used in fantasy and popular culture to evoke a particularly 'medieval' kind of atrocity. In George R. R. Martin's wildly popular modern fantasy series *Song of Ice and Fire*, a flayed man acts as a sigil for one of the more brutal houses. The HBO film adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, treats modern viewers to the display of banners adorned with a stylistic image of a skinless corpse. One of the more sadistic members of the House of Bolton, the illegitimate Ramsay

<sup>1</sup> Judith Halberstam, *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996, repr. 2006), p. 163.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

Snow, delights in honing his family reputation by systematically flaying the traitorous Theon Greyjoy, piece by piece, until Theon has lost any sense of himself. Repeatedly in later seasons, viewers are witness to other bloody, skinless trophies of Ramsay's sadism. In *Song of Ice and Fire* and its television adaptation, flaying is a medievalism that perpetuates a fantasy of medieval brutality and cruelty.

Barbara Tuchman imprinted the modern imagination with images of a bloody Middle Ages in which the 'tortures and punishments of civil justice customarily cut off hands and ears, racked, burned, flayed, and pulled apart people's bodies'.<sup>4</sup> Flaying is among the litany of tortures Tuchman ascribes to Bernabó Visconti, who ruled jointly with his brother Galeazzo in Lombardy and established a regime in which murder, cruelty, avarice and savage despotism alternated with effective government, respect for learning and encouragement of the arts.<sup>5</sup> She provides a lurid description of the *Quaresima*, 'a forty-day program of torture attributed to Bernabó and his brother, supposedly issued as an edict on their accession', which she hopes was intended to frighten, 'rather than for actual use': 'With the *strappado*, the wheel, the rack, flaying, gouging of eyes, cutting off of facial features and limbs one by one, and a day of torture alternating with a day of rest, it was supposed to terminate in death for "traitors" and convicted enemies'.<sup>6</sup> Thanks in part to studies like Tuchman's, flaying is often associated with spectacular displays of medieval cruelty. But it was actually a fairly rare punitive practice and not all aspects of flaying are simply barbaric, or even damaging. There are profound cultural, aesthetic, medical and ideological ramifications of skin removal.

In the Middle Ages the body was 'the preeminent symbol of community'.<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross write: 'Body was not only that which was most intimately personal and most proper to the individual, but also that which was most public and representative of the interlocked nature of the group'.<sup>8</sup> Abrasions and disruptions of the body begin with the skin – the locus for touch, for beauty and for reverence. Its removal or restoration, by any means, has inspired countless artists and poets to render it on canvas – as canvas – or in literature as a site for divine sacrifice or penal justice. Skin is imbued with power; its removal and reuse acts as a means of transferring power in certain shamanistic rituals,

<sup>4</sup> Barbara W. Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978), p. 135.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 240.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>7</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross, 'Limits and Teleology: The Many Ends of the Body', in *The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture*, ed. Akbari and Ross (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), pp. 3–21 at p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

as transformative and purifying, while removing human skin in an act of judicial brutality, as a comic device or as a sign of spiritual sacrifice, leaves lasting impressions about the qualities and nature of humanity. Human excoriation often functioned as an *imaginative* resource for medieval and early modern artists and writers, even though it seems to have been a rare occurrence in practice. Skin makes identity; its removal erases and strips away that identity, or remakes it into something new. As Steven Connor writes, skin provides ‘a model of the self preserved against change, and also reborn through change’, because flaying is always accompanied or followed by the ‘possibility of re-assumption: either the assumption of another skin, or the resumption of one’s own skin (through healing)’.<sup>9</sup> Yet the skin can be changed, marked for or with new meanings, especially in the case of judicial mutilation and ordeal. Monstrosity that is embedded in the skin can be removed with the skin as surely as monstrous identity can be inscribed by removing the skin, rendering the beautiful into something horrific. When beautiful skin is removed, the product is monstrous; when monstrous skin is removed, it yields the potential for beauty. It is this contradiction that informs medieval artistic and literary depictions of flaying.

In his influential analysis of torture and pain in medieval art, Robert Mills explains medieval notions of skin as memory. He writes that ‘to flay someone alive would be to tear away the bodily surface onto which transitory memories and identities could be inscribed – only to fashion an etched parchment in its place (the dead skin), from which “timeless” moral lessons could be read’.<sup>10</sup> Other recent studies, like that edited by Katie Walter, read skin as a legible text upon which various identities and anxieties are inscribed.<sup>11</sup> Walter’s volume explores the ‘dense tissue of associations of skin in medieval culture’<sup>12</sup> through essays on the monstrous touch of the Blemmye, touch in religious literature and art, the transformative properties of werewolves, reading the skin during confession and disfiguring diseases of the skin. But only Mills’ essay deals with the concrete act of flaying a living person, in his analysis of

<sup>9</sup> Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 31, 32.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005), p. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Katie L. Walter, ed., *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave, 2013). Also see: Sarah Kay, ‘Flayed Skin as *objet a*: Representation and Materiality in Guillaume de Deguileville’s *Pèlerinage de vie humaine*’, in *Medieval Fabrications: Dress, Textiles, Clothwork, and other Cultural Imaginings*, ed. E. Jane Burns (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 193–205; Sarah Kay, ‘Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and other Works’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.1 (2006): 35–73.

<sup>12</sup> Katie L. Walter, Introduction to *Reading Skin*, ed. Walter, p. 1.

the thirteenth-century Middle English *Havelok the Dane*.<sup>13</sup> In addition to Walter's compelling collection, there have been several important studies on skin and on touch, like Connor's *Book of Skin* and Constance Classen's *The Deepest Sense*.<sup>14</sup> But within those texts discussions of flaying are limited and often repeat the same sources, the same mythologies, and analyse the same iconography and texts. To date, no study has looked comprehensively at the actual practice of excoriation in relation to the artistic and literary representations, nor has any study approached this question through a multidisciplinary lens. In Karmen MacKendrick's words, it is possible to 'thematize that which is both fragmentation and joining, schism and suture', and to do so 'in a philosophy of touches and folds and scars, surfaces marked without depths revealed'.<sup>15</sup> But while there are many modern theoretical paradigms through which flaying can be discussed, this collection focuses more on literal flaying, both human and animal – the act, the laws, the instruments, the implications, the representations, the reality – within the context of the Middle Ages. In some instances, we will deal with the same sources and mythologies as previous studies, but we hope to offer a more textured understanding of flaying and its functions in medieval literature and culture by presenting them in tandem with more unusual or unique episodes and by analysing practice and representation together.

Framed in the discourse of modern misconceptions and medievalisms, this volume explores literal skin removal from the eleventh century to the early seventeenth century, across a variety of cultures (Ireland, England, France, Italy and Scandinavia), interrogating the connection between practice and imagination in depictions of literal skin removal (rather than figurative or theoretical interpretations of flaying), and offering a multilayered view of medieval and early modern perceptions of flaying and its representations in European culture.

### *Forms of Flaying and the Mythology of Excoriation*

Flaying refers to any act of skin removal, for any purpose, whether in its entirety or in strips during the process of flogging, scourging or (in rare instances) scalping. The term 'flaying' generally applies to the removal of human integument; animals were usually 'skinned', though at times the linguistic division between human and animal was as porous as their hides, and in their removal those boundaries collapsed. In Latin, *pellis* refers

<sup>13</sup> Robert Mills, 'Havelok's Bare Life and the Significance of Skin', in *Reading Skin*, ed. Walter, pp. 57–80.

<sup>14</sup> Connor, *Book of Skin*, pp. 10, 31, 67, 284 n. 44; Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Karmen MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), p. 7.



specifically to dead, flayed skin – this word was used for animal skins and ‘evokes disgust, disgrace and horror’; in contrast is *cutis*, living skin that ‘protects, that expresses and arouses and that is the subject of care and beautiful attention’.<sup>16</sup> The act of cutting away the skin has an independent life in romance languages: Old French *escorcier*, ‘to skin (an animal), to flay (a person)’, has its root in the Latin *excorticare*, ‘to strip of bark or skin’.<sup>17</sup> The term appears in Old English as *flēan*, *flōg*, *be-flagen*, and in Old Norse/Icelandic as *flā*, *flō*, *flōgum*, *fleginn*. According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, *flen*, or *floweren*, means:

- 1 (a) To strip the skin from (a person, a part of someone’s body); also, to tear the skin to shreds (by blows, scourging, etc.); to strip (the skin from the flesh); ~ **of**, to flay off (the skin); ~ **out of skin**, to flay (someone) completely; also *fig.*; (b) ~ **quik**, to skin (someone) alive, to strip off (the skin) while the victim lives; (c) ~ **of berd**, to remove (someone’s) beard with the skin.
- 2 (a) *Surg.* To remove or peel back the skin from (part of the body); also, to expose (something) by cutting and drawing back the flesh; (b) to circumcise.
- 3 To break the skin or the mucous membrane of (a part of the body); abrade, bruise, excoriate; to tear or corrode (the skin).
- 4 (a) To remove the hide from (an animal, part of an animal), to skin; to peel back (an animal’s skin); (b) **fleing knife**, a skinning knife.<sup>18</sup>

From images of St Bartholomew holding his skin in his arms (or wearing it like a cloak), to the scourging of Christ and Christian saints, to scenes of execution in *Havelok the Dane* and skins worn to channel divine power, to laws that prescribed it as a rare punishment for treason, flaying takes a variety of forms in medieval and early modern culture. The primary concern here is the physicality of flaying – the instruments used to achieve it, the uses to which the flayed skin was put, the textual implications of inflicting it as well as its existence as an aspect of literature and art.

To remove the flesh rendered criminals unrecognizable – or clarified that damning label; it neutralized the threat of a ‘barbarian Other’. As such, several myths regarding the frequency of medieval flaying emerge in later centuries, creating an impression of cruelty and barbarism in a darker, less civilized age. Marsyas, the satyr flayed (justly, many argue) for his presumption in challenging Apollo to a musical duel, is a touchstone for

<sup>16</sup> Connor, *Book of Skin*, p. 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Dictionnaire de l’ancien français, le Moyen Âge*, ed. A.J. Greimas (Paris: Larousse, 1995), p. 231. I am grateful to Daniel O’Sullivan and Jeff Massey for their input on this matter.

<sup>18</sup> *The Middle English Dictionary*, online at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med> (accessed 2 May 2014).



many medieval discussions of this judicial punishment. Ovid only briefly tells his tale in the *Metamorphoses* (vi.383–400), but Marsyas' suffering informs medieval penal imagery, 'the network of visual and textual significations that transform the violated bodies of executed criminals into discourse and fantasy'.<sup>19</sup> As a punishment, flaying is an arresting motif in medieval iconography, particularly in visual renderings of St Bartholomew's martyrdom – the only prominent saint condemned to be entirely flayed alive. Gerard David's triptych *The Judgement of Cambyzes* (1498), installed in the Judgement Chamber of the Bruges Town Hall, adroitly analysed by Mills, captivates its audience with its grisly public flaying of the corrupt judge Sisamnes. His criminal-skin 'communicates the horror of death in the minds of the viewers' and, equally, 'mediates something immaterial and abstract: the intangible "truth" of just judgment'.<sup>20</sup> In mythologies of medieval flaying, justice is often the aim – even if it is not the product.

As Akbari and Ross suggest, the dynamic aspect of embodiment is often expressed in medieval sources through engagement with the processes of the body; at other times, it is expressed 'through performance, whether literally acted out within the text or used as a metaphorical system that employs the body as a flexible symbol to denote religious, civic, national, or ethnic communities'.<sup>21</sup> The body as a whole is often the site for these discourses, but sometimes the focal point is only skin-deep. This volume probes beneath the surface aspects of embodiment and considers both the practice and the representation of flaying in two parts. Within each section, the chapters are arranged thematically to capture the transformation of flaying as both an idea and a practice in the premodern world, crossing the gap between practice and cultural representations in art and literature. The articles in the first part have counterparts in the second, where practice is envisioned in fantasy and representation. Thus, the chapters function as interlocking parts that build upon one another and speak to each other. The first section deals with the instruments used to remove skin, the specific processes involved, and the medical effects on the flayed body, as well as early modern accounts of human skin as a material object worn as clothing for divination. Other pieces in this section investigate the reality of flaying in historical and legal practice, often revealing an absence rather than a presence. Representations of flaying in religious and secular contexts, including art, literature and performance, follow in the second section, with particular attention to depictions of St Bartholomew. The discourse is wrapped up in the Epilogue, on book-binding with human skin, tying

<sup>19</sup> Mills, *Suspended Animation*, p. 65. Mills lays a great deal of the groundwork for subsequent discussions of flaying in medieval representation and practice.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>21</sup> Akbari and Ross, 'Limits and Teleology', p. 4.

together threads of discussion throughout and bringing the issue of flaying into a modern context.

### *Flaying in Practice*

While flaying is a feature of modern folklore about pre-modern judicial or medical procedure, chronicles and legal texts make scant reference to it as an *actual* practice. Medically speaking, the skin was the organ penetrated in wounding and through which surgeons and physicians probed in order to heal. Skin is debrided to remove dead or infected tissue and to promote healing. The skin must also be cut in order to access the inner depths of the body for care and for cure, as Jack Hartnell explains in the first chapter of this volume. In the 'flayed figure' woodcut in Juan de Hamusco's *Historia de la composicion del cuerpo humano* (1556), the subject holds both his skin – like a discarded garment complete with eye holes – and the knife with which it was removed, striking a pose so that the musculature underneath is visible and accessible to the medical student.<sup>22</sup> Henri de Mondeville (c. 1260–1320), in his unfinished *Cyrurgia* (started in 1306), dealt thoroughly with wound treatment<sup>23</sup> and opposed the Hippocratic view that advocated suppuration – pus formation – preferring dry healing instead; that is, the simple bathing of wounds, immediate closure by suture, and dry dressings with minimal loss of flesh or skin.<sup>24</sup> Hartnell points out that the skin was simply a casing for the body that must be healed, and knives were simply the tools used to access it, though some surgeons had specialist instruments commissioned as a mark of their status. Of course, anxieties about the integrity of the soul developed with the rise of surgery as a discipline. Any breaking of the skin through blunt or sharp-force trauma, any puncture or slash, laceration or abrasion, threatens the interior systems of the body and so the removal of that skin destabilizes the symbiotic relationship between skin and soul.<sup>25</sup>

According to Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, the 'body/soul opposition was deployed regularly in medieval rhetoric to denote a troubling proximity of incommensurable, yet coexisting entities'.<sup>26</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum highlights this relationship, writing that the 'experiences of souls were

<sup>22</sup> See: Mills, *Suspended Animation*, p. 75 fig. 36.

<sup>23</sup> Roy Porter, *The Greatest Benefit to Mankind* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), pp. 116–17.

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Huard and Mirko Drazen Grmek, *Mille ans de chirurgie en occident: Ve–XVe siècles* (Paris: R. Dacosta, 1966), p. 40.

<sup>25</sup> Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries, Introduction to *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Tracy and DeVries (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, Introduction to *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Kay and Rubin (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), pp. 1–9 at p. 5.

imaged as bodily events', pointing to the use of bodily metaphors for spiritual states in many societies.<sup>27</sup> In this context, flaying peels away the body from its frame – pulling away from the soul. Even after the separation of 'the inside and the outside of the body, the role of the skin is to maintain the integrity of the soul – to be, as it were, the soul's body'.<sup>28</sup> As MacKendrick explains in terms of the Gospel of John, flesh 'is not simply that which blocks the light but that which makes possible the very fact of illumination as both medium and object of luminosity'.<sup>29</sup> Flaying also reveals the humanity underneath, the flesh and blood that signified mankind's divine origins and separation. As early as 1109, Guibert of Nogent weighed in on debates about the physical manifestation of Christ, specifically the efficacy and legitimacy of his relics.<sup>30</sup> The skin that is flayed remains intact as an object of devotion. Martyrs were willing to sacrifice their bodies 'because they know every particle will return in the end'; they participate in a 'vision of last things in which not just wholeness but reassemblage is the ultimate promise'.<sup>31</sup> To medieval minds, the basic idea of flesh and flaying often evoked the sacred flesh of Christ. After the Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, the Eucharist and the doctrine of transubstantiation are directly tied to the *idea* of Christ's flesh – removed, combined, reconstituted, consumed and, yet, whole and intact. Flesh, and flesh made Word, were centralizing features of medieval Christian devotion; flesh that was both 'Light and Word, is also the medium of *touch*, which enfolds and cuts across a nearly bewildering array of meanings'.<sup>32</sup> To touch the flesh was to touch the divine; to witness sacrifices of the flesh was often perceived as a means of participating in divine sacrifice.

Part of reconciling these disparate, conflicting entities – flesh and divinity – involved subordinating the body to the soul, and moderation of the body could help achieve greater control over the soul.<sup>33</sup> Prayer manuals, devotional works and the rules of religious Orders, like the Dominican treatise *The Nine Ways of Prayer of St Dominic* (1260–88),

<sup>27</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone, 1992), p. 234.

<sup>28</sup> Connor, *Book of Skin*, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin*, p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Steven F. Kruger, 'Becoming Christian, Becoming Male', in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 2000), pp. 21–41 at p. 22. See also: Guibert of Nogent, *The Deeds of God through the Franks*, trans. Robert Levine (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1997), p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, pp. 12, 13.

<sup>32</sup> MacKendrick, *Word Made Skin*, p. 27.

<sup>33</sup> Walter Simons, 'Reading a Saint's Body: Rapture and Bodily Movement in the *Vitae* of Thirteenth-Century Beguines', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Kay and Rubin, pp. 10–23 at p. 14.

included flagellation, though its use was contested throughout the Middle Ages and is more correctly thought of as penance rather than prayer.<sup>34</sup> An anchoress was permitted to beat herself with scourges weighted with lead, with holly, or with thorns, but only with her confessor's permission; however, she 'should not sting herself anywhere with nettles, or scourge the front of her body, or mutilate herself with cuts, or take excessively severe disciplines at any one time, in order to subdue temptations'.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the anchoress could share the suffering of Christ, and it could be 'internalised as a punitively penitential inscription on the body'.<sup>36</sup> But that was as far as she could go in her mimetic devotions. As far as surviving sources indicate, actual martyrdom by flaying was solely a facet of religious literature and iconography.

Though it is often described as such, flaying was not a form of torture; its use was strictly punitive rather than interrogative, and then it was generally reserved (in limited cases) as a punishment for treason or other heinous crimes.<sup>37</sup> In each of these instances, flaying is part of the process of punishment, a final outcome after sentence is passed or the victim condemned – guilty or innocent. Emanuel J. Mickel writes, 'that the popular imagination condemned treason in the strongest terms can be seen in the literature of the period where [...] flaying was also thought to be a traditional way of punishing traitors'.<sup>38</sup> Punishments for treason publicly inscribed the crime against the body politic – or the body of the king – upon the body of the traitor. This revealed, above all else, 'the constant interplay of the somatic and the conceptual that served to explain

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 14–15.

<sup>35</sup> Part 8 of the outer rule of *Ancrene Wisse*, in *Medieval English Prose for Women: 'Ancrene Wisse' and the Katherine Group*, ed. and trans. Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 136, ll. 13–19.

<sup>36</sup> Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, 'Chaste Bodies: Frames and Experiences', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. Kay and Rubin, pp. 24–42 at p. 33.

<sup>37</sup> In *Torture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), Edward Peters points out that to the medieval mind *torture* meant something very specific – judicial torture was the *only* kind of torture, however it was administered, and any other form of punishment not designed to elicit a confession should not be called torture (p. 7). Canon law required at least two 'half-proofs' before the accused could be subjected to torture to obtain the 'Queen of Proofs' – the confession. Between 1150 and 1250 jurists raised confession of the accused up as the most valuable proof, with other proofs arranged in a hierarchy below it – a hierarchy that provided the essential background for the use of torture, especially in capital crimes (p. 46). We employ Peters' definition of *torture* as distinct from *punishment*, throughout this volume.

<sup>38</sup> Emanuel J. Mickel, *Ganelon, Treason, and the 'Chanson de Roland'* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989), p. 147.

everyday social interaction'.<sup>39</sup> Flaying was supposedly the punishment meted out to Bertram de Gurdun, the man whose quarrel found its mark in the body of Richard I. According to Roger de Hoveden, Bertram was flayed alive, despite the pardon of the dying king.<sup>40</sup> While Roger's account conflicts with others regarding Richard's death, the story became very popular in later centuries. As Emily Leverett points out in this volume, Richard develops an equally legendary association with flaying, which may have developed from this 'historical' event, but which belongs securely in the realm of literary fantasy. Acts of treason often merited the worst punishments, even if they were only threatened rather than actually carried out. In 1176, Henry, the 'Young King', condemned his vice-chancellor Adam to be hung up and flayed alive for reporting the young king's activities to his father, Henry II.<sup>41</sup> Adam escaped this punishment, claiming benefit of the clergy.<sup>42</sup> Violating the king's body, or those of his royal daughters, was also considered an act of treason, for which flaying may have figured as a punishment in select cases. In 1314, Philip and Walter de Launoy were supposedly condemned to be flayed by degrees after being convicted of adultery with the two daughters-in-law of King Philip IV of France.<sup>43</sup>

The presence of flaying in legal discourse is more problematic. Anthony Musson points out that 'ideologies of law' are multidimensional, operating on several different levels.<sup>44</sup> Nor were all laws confined to identifiable legal texts. Musson writes that institutions 'forming the royal judicial and administrative machine and other bodies, such as parliament, the county, urban and manorial courts, the Church, and the universities, could also create and disseminate ideology by providing an interface for the communication and exchange of ideas, beliefs and opinions'.<sup>45</sup> As such, medieval law was not a uniform entity; not every society shared the same views on punishment or the integrity of the body, and if they did, not every community wrote them down. Thus, legal references to any form of

<sup>39</sup> Danielle M. Westerhof, 'Amputating the Traitor: Healing the Social Body in Public Executions for Treason in Late Medieval England', in *The Ends of the Body*, ed. Akbari and Ross, pp. 177–92 at p. 178.

<sup>40</sup> M. J. Swanton, "'Dane-Skins": Excoriation in Early England', *Folklore* 87.1 (1976): 21–8 at p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. The actual account appears in *Placita Anglo-Normannica: Law Cases from William I to Richard I Preserved in Historical Records*, ed. Melville Madison Bigelow (London: George Olms, 1879), pp. 314–15.

<sup>42</sup> Swanton, "'Dane-Skins'", p. 22.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Anthony Musson, *Medieval Law in Context: The Growth of Legal Consciousness from Magna Carta to the Peasants' Revolt* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), p. 7.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

flaying – flogging, flagellation, complete excoriation (pre- or post mortem) or scalping – are scattered and varied.

According to Peter Baker, the Latin *Life of St Swithun* refers to a law from a lost law code of Edgar *reported* to have dictated that thieves and robbers should be tortured, then the skin and hair of their heads flayed off.<sup>46</sup> Baker cautions, however, that while the spirit, if not the letter of this law, seems to have been confirmed by later laws that included similar penalties for theft, ‘one may doubt how often the state was able both to apprehend and punish such criminals’, potentially leading to a certain amount of localized vigilante justice.<sup>47</sup> In her studies of early English and Continental law, Lisi Oliver discusses scalping as a punishment, but also the amount of restitution that could be claimed for *wælt wund*, potentially ‘a wound that detaches a strip of skin’.<sup>48</sup> Cnut’s code, drafted by Archbishop Wulfstan, includes removal of the scalp among a catalogue of possible corporeal punishments where survival of these mutilations might be uncertain (or undesired), but there was a chance that the victim would live to repent.<sup>49</sup> Scalping as punishment was meant to leave a permanent scar rather than kill. Oliver writes that because hair cannot grow back on the scalped portion of the head, ‘not only is the transgressor publicly humiliated and physically tortured, but he is branded for life’.<sup>50</sup> Michael Swanton points out that after the Conquest scalping appears in the English customary law collection *Leges Henrici Primi* (*Laws of Henry I*) as a punishment for the crime of *lèse-majesty* where a man is found guilty of slaying his lord.<sup>51</sup> Swanton suggests that ‘enthusiastic executioners’ might have overstepped their mark and resorted to flaying the whole body, contending that ‘it is but

<sup>46</sup> Peter S. Baker, *Honour, Exchange and Violence in ‘Beowulf’* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013), pp. 5–6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Lisi Oliver, *The Beginnings of English Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), p. 103. See also: Lisi Oliver, *The Body Legal in Barbarian Law* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 84, which deals specifically with injuries to the scalp. On scalping and scourging as punishment, see: *The Body Legal*, pp. 175–6. Visigothic law adds scalping to the humiliation of public beating (p. 176).

<sup>49</sup> Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century*, vol. 1: *Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 126.

<sup>50</sup> Oliver, *The Body Legal*, p. 176. Swanton claims that ‘judicial excoriation seems to have been known since earliest times on the Continent of Europe – where it may be related to the much-debated Merovingian practice of scalping’, but says that the practice makes ‘only a relatively belated appearance in England’ (“Dane-Skins”, p. 21). However, he further explains that ‘excoriation’ means superficial lacerations on the skin rather than flaying.

<sup>51</sup> Swanton, “Dane-Skins”, p. 21.



a small step from flaying the head to flaying the entire body'.<sup>52</sup> However, it is a great leap from scalping to flaying. W. R. J. Barron 'concedes that the punishment was not common in reality, for it is not found in chronicles or the law'.<sup>53</sup> It was always an *exceptional* penalty, one that does not seem to have been performed regularly, if at all, despite Barron's contention that it was an ancient practice.<sup>54</sup> Mickel rejects the idea that flaying was born of 'ancient usage' and quite correctly points out that such 'an assumption comes from our natural inclination to ascribe harsher penalties to an earlier, less enlightened age'.<sup>55</sup>

Flaying was rarely used as a method of capital punishment in the medieval period; when it was – either legitimately or illegitimately – the flayed body was an eloquent canvas upon which the punitive excesses of the secular authority may be written. As Mitchell Merback writes, 'the maimed body of the condemned spoke an arresting language of pain that spectators understood not as an unfortunate by-product of the performance of justice, but as a portentous source of information'.<sup>56</sup> Here, Susan Small analyses the graphic execution of Peter Stubbe, who was condemned as a sorcerer, sexual predator, serial killer and werewolf, to be beaten on a wheel, flayed, dismembered, decapitated and burned at the stake. Stubbe was accused of effecting his transformation into a werewolf by wearing a magic girdle secured through a deal with the devil. Skin – the loss of the human and appropriation of the wolf – is intimately connected to the narrative of Stubbe's crimes and punishment. There were also extraordinary circumstances where the 'wolf' was not the one who was flayed, but the one who did the flaying. In this collection Kelly DeVries provides a concise case study of the Venetian Marcantonio Bragadin, who was flayed by Turkish invaders of Crete and had his skin stuffed with straw, simply for being an able general who refused to surrender. This account provides one of the few surviving narratives of *actual* punitive flaying.

One of the most infamous myths regarding medieval flaying, one which persisted well into the modern era, was enshrined by Samuel Pepys on 10 April 1661. Visiting Rochester Cathedral, Pepys observed the great doors of the cathedral that were said to have been covered with the skins of Danes, flayed by the Anglo-Saxons as a punishment for sacrilege.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> W. R. J. Barron, 'The Penalties for Treason in Medieval Life and Literature', *Journal of Medieval History* 7 (1981): 187–202 at p. 197.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Mickel, *Ganelon, Treason*, p. 147 n. 303.

<sup>56</sup> Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (London: Reaktion, 1999), p. 19.

<sup>57</sup> Lawrence S. Thompson, *Bibliologia comica; or, Humorous Aspects of the Caparisoning and Conservation of Books* (Hamden, CT: Archon, 1968).

Lawrence S. Thompson gives credence to this report, claiming that Pepys was ‘not merely propagating idle rumor’ and citing the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century debates in the pages of *Notes & Queries* as evidence that ‘[o]ur Anglo-Saxon forebears’ were no less savage than the Romans in ‘their treatment of marauding Danes who violated their places of worship’.<sup>58</sup> Allegedly, church doors in Hadstock, Copford, Worcester and Southwark, in addition to Rochester, were decorated with the skins of Danes.<sup>59</sup> In her contribution to this volume, Mary Rambaran-Olm tackles the persistence of this myth as part of a nationalizing medievalism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that continued well into the twentieth century. These myths, coupled with a profound sense of alienation from the past, have created the image of the medieval world perpetuated in modern popular culture, as in *Game of Thrones*. But the reality of flaying in the medieval period was quite different.

Medieval representations and interpretations of the body and human identity were complex. Anxieties about community, inclusion and exclusion were often embodied in the skin. As such, the occurrence of flaying is not restricted to accounts of punishment or brutality, or even human practice. As Connor writes, ‘nothing is deader than a skin, peeled, shucked or sloughed. And yet skins are often imagined as containing or preserving life and therefore having the power to restore it’.<sup>60</sup> Thompson enumerates ‘folk beliefs which may have their roots in times we do not care to recall in all their details’, beliefs that are supposedly full of ‘human skin legends’.<sup>61</sup> Here, Frederika Bain re-examines this folkloric evidence and offers a far more current and nuanced analysis of traditions that involved wearing human skin, including narratives where skin is presented as having both curative and transformative properties. Bain’s chapter emphasizes the transgressive potential of wearing skin – animal or human – crossing the boundary between literal and literary. Bridging the gap between practice and representation, Bain investigates accounts of wearing animal skin to absorb the essence and traits of the animal, juxtaposing them with similar accounts where a human skin was worn to absorb its power. References to flaying in medieval tradition imply both a fascination with and revulsion from such excessive brutality among medieval populations. Some scant physical as well as textual evidence does survive that suggests that flaying was carried out for a variety of legitimate and illegitimate reasons during the Middle Ages, though most of the recorded episodes covered here occur in the sixteenth century and the myths of flayed skins largely emerge in the seventeenth century. Medieval Europe seems to have had a distaste for it, except in apocryphal accounts and spurious reports. This scarcity in reality

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. See also: Swanton, “‘Dane-Skins’”.

<sup>60</sup> Connor, *Book of Skin*, p. 31.

<sup>61</sup> Thompson, *Bibliologia comica*, p. 120.



raises complicated questions about its prevalence as an artistic and literary motif – in many instances, flaying seems only to exist in the pre- or early modern imagination.

### *Representations of Flaying*

While flaying was limited in practice, it widely featured in representations of pain, suffering and sanctity throughout the Middle Ages. Flayed bodies were displayed on canvas, parchment, in churches, described in romances as criticism of illegitimate power, or used as aspects of Otherworldly monstrosity. Flaying is a popular literary motif that occasionally reflects or distorts actual practice. Representations of flaying intersect with medieval notions of the body as an intact or inviolate vessel for the soul. The hagiographical experience of flaying – particularly that associated with St Bartholomew, who was said to have been flayed by a non-Christian tyrant during his missionary endeavours in India – its participation in the spectacle of pain associated with the sacrifice of martyrdom,<sup>62</sup> featured abruptions of the skin, penetrating wounds, and occasionally skin removal. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw a renewed debate over theological matters ‘in which the relationship of the part to the whole was crucial, and [there was] a new emphasis on miracles [...] in which bodies are the mediators between earth and heaven’.<sup>63</sup> As a consequence, religious iconography and texts were filled with torture imagery and narratives about rending the body and the flesh – tearing away layers of both meaning and being with the hope, the assumption, that upon salvation all would be whole again. Flesh rendered would be flesh restored. For many medieval people, witnessing this spectacle in artistic depictions, ‘the experience of *seeing and imagining* a body that was ravaged and bleeding from tortures inflicted upon it lay at the centre of a constellation of religious doctrines, beliefs and devotional practices’.<sup>64</sup> A body of medieval hagiography, the most popular collection of which was Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda aurea* (1255–66) [*LgA*],<sup>65</sup> circulated throughout medieval Europe and codified

<sup>62</sup> Mills highlights the medieval cultural associations surrounding the removal of skin, specifically the place of flaying within medieval penal imagery – ‘the network of visual and textual significations that transform the violated bodies of executed criminals into discourse and fantasy’ (*Suspended Animation*, p. 65).

<sup>63</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption*, p. 13.

<sup>64</sup> Merback, *The Thief, the Cross, and the Wheel*, p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> The *Legenda aurea* has been translated and edited by both William Granger Ryan and Christopher Stace. See: Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, ed. and trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); *The Golden Legend*, ed. Christopher Stace with an introduction by Richard Hamer (Middlesex: Penguin, 1998).

the sufferings of countless martyrs to the Christian faith, many of whom simply existed as stock, formulaic characters, reinforcing the polemic of holy sacrifice.

More than 1,000 manuscripts of the *LgA* survive. It was translated into French (*Legende doreé*, 1380–1480)<sup>66</sup> and Middle English (the *Gilte Legende*, c. 1438)<sup>67</sup> and later printed by William Caxton as *The Golden Legend* (1483). The Middle English *South English Legendary* (1270–80) evolved independently of the *LgA*; it was assembled in the southwest Midlands during the second half of the thirteenth century and was revised and supplemented around 1380–90. There are more than sixty extant manuscripts, making it one of the best-represented works in Middle English, next to *Prick of Conscience*, the *Canterbury Tales* and *Piers Plowman*. Its adaptation of Latin material is marked by a specific attention to native English saints' lives.<sup>68</sup> These collections circulated widely and popularized legends devoted to the tribulations of saints, providing a scintillating spectacle of violence and torture, including flogging and flaying. The martyrdom of these saints was specifically and deliberately inscribed on their skins – or inscribed in the inefficacy of torments that failed to mark the beautiful skin of a martyr who had to be dispatched by more conventional means, like beheading.<sup>69</sup> Sinners are often afflicted with skin

<sup>66</sup> See: Genevieve Hasenohr, 'Religious Reading amongst the Laity in France in the Fifteenth Century', in *Heresy and Literacy, 1000–1530*, ed. Peter Biller and Anne Hudson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 205–21.

<sup>67</sup> See: *Three Lives from the Gilte Legende, Edited from MS BL Egerton 876*, ed. Richard Hamer (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Carl Winter, 1978); *Gilte Legende*, ed. Richard Hamer with the assistance of Vida Russell, 3 vols., EETS o.s. 327, 328 and 339 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 2007 and 2012); and *Supplementary Lives in some Manuscripts of the Gilte Legende*, ed. Richard Hamer and Vida Russell, EETS o.s. 315 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>68</sup> Karen Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 71–2. See also: Manfred Görlach, *The South English Legendary, Gilte Legende and Golden Legend* (Braunschweig: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1972), reiterated in *Studies in Middle English Saints' Legends* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Carl Winter, 1998); and Oliver Pickering, 'The Temporale Narratives of the *South English Legendary*', *Anglia* 91 (1973): 425–55; *The South English Ministry and Passion: Ed. from St John's College, Cambridge, MS B.6*, ed. Oliver Pickering, Middle English Texts (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Carl Winter, 1984); and Oliver Pickering, 'The Outspoken *South English Legendary* Poet', in *Late Medieval Religious Texts and their Transmission: Essays in Honor of A. I. Doyle*, ed. A. J. Minnis (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1994), pp. 21–37.

<sup>69</sup> See: Larissa Tracy, *Torture and Brutality in Medieval Literature: Negotiations of National Identity* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2012).

diseases, flaying off their skin with their own fingernails, like Sir William Tracy, one of the murderers of Thomas á Becket, who could not be cured until he repented his crime against the saint and sought forgiveness (just before death).<sup>70</sup> Flaying functions as an important and popular motif of sanctity and hagiography. Whenever it is employed, flaying is a stunning visualization of the contradictions of fragility and durability of the flesh. In Chapter 6, Asa Simon Mittman and Christine Sciacca explore the visual aspects of the flayed Bartholomew in the *Laudario* of Sant'Agnese, in which the saint is depicted wearing his own skin as a garment, and analyse the visual implications of this scene. In the following essay, Sherry Lindquist similarly investigates images of St Bartholomew in the *Belles Heures* of the Duc de Berry and considers the representations of flaying and flagellation in terms of masculinist devotion. Next, Peter Dent looks through 'a window of pain' at questions of surface, interiority and Christ's flagellated skin in late medieval sculpture. Artistic representations of flaying as the locus for devotional practice are mirrored in performance, as Valerie Gramling then explains in regard to the English Passion Plays in Chapter 9. These pieces are all connected by the emphasis on flagellation as a means of wounding the body – of saint, saviour or sinner – and reflect back on the practices examined by Small.

In Chapter 10, William Sayers juxtaposes Irish literary and hagiographical accounts of flaying, including that of Bartholomew and *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* (*The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel*), with the absence of flaying in Irish legal texts. While representations of flaying are important modes of religious devotion, flaying appears most frequently as a literary motif in medieval romance. The chivalric world is visible to medieval and modern audiences through a thin film of associations and realities. Knights fulfil their quests in a world that bears a hazy resemblance to that in which people actually lived and operated. Medieval romance is populated by the fantastic (both creatures and feats), and often critiques the savage deeds of its actors. In romance, knights and kings, and even Vikings, exact justice in the pursuit of chivalry, but occasionally they go too far and perpetuate needless brutality in the name of law. Kings who resort to torture or excessive judicial brutality – specifically flaying – are potentially tarnished by their cruelty and inhuman justice. In her essay, Leverett considers the intersections of flaying, religious and national identity in *The Siege of Jerusalem* and *Richard Coeur de Lyon*, where

<sup>70</sup> Sir William's tale is told as the last miracle story of St Thomas' *vita* in the *South English Legendary*. William tries to find repentance in England, but his skin breaks out in foul, stinking boils that fester and he pulls off the skin from his hands and arms until there is nothing but sinew and bare bone. Yet he cannot not die, so he calls on Thomas' mercy and dies, possibly forgiven. *The Life of St Thomas of Canterbury*, in *The South English Legendary, or Lives of Saints*, ed. Carl Horstmann, EETS o.s. 87 (London: Trübner, 1887), pp. 106–77 at p. 175 (ll. 2382–416).

Christians flay Muslims and dine on their flesh, an inversion of the historical episode of Bragadin examined by DeVries: 'The flayed, skinless bodies are consumed, either literally or metaphorically, like parchment manuscripts meant to be read, digested, and, in some cases, burned'.<sup>71</sup> Next, Michael Livingston returns to the *Siege of Jerusalem*, but with particular regard to beard-flaying in this text and the wider Arthurian tradition. Flaying off the beards of defeated enemies has profound implications for masculinity and appears as a facet of shaming. As such, the loss of face – literally, when the skin of the face is torn, ripped or burned off – also results in a loss of identity. But in Norse romances, as Larissa Tracy explains in Chapter 13, the loss of a monstrous identity through flaying as part of a combat or quest provides a fresh tableau for the inscription of a different identity, that of ally instead of enemy. Tracy's analysis of flaying in Norse texts as an aspect of magical transformation contradicts the perception of Viking cruelty that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century antiquarians breathed into life with their tales of 'Dane-skens' flayed off savage, sacrilegious Vikings by just and righteous English Christians.

In a reflection of Bain's piece concerning the practice of wearing flayed remains and the literary use of horsehide, Renée Ward's essay investigates the intersection of animal and human skin in *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, especially where animal skin masks human identity, or human identity is further effaced through facial flaying. Animal skin was a staple of medieval life, particularly in the production of manuscripts and clothes.<sup>72</sup> In her work on reading texts written on animal skins, Sarah Kay maintains that, 'wounds in [a manuscript's] parchment may have been seen as a graphic realization of the text's content, an uncanny precipitate of its ideas in concrete form'.<sup>73</sup> Most human clothing was made from animal skin or hair, so wearing clothing involved a close physical contact with animals, as did many other aspects of medieval life. In the Old Norse/Icelandic *Völsunga saga* (*Saga of the Volsungs*), Sigmund and Sinfjötli train for vengeance by donning wolf skins they take from men they find sleeping in a

<sup>71</sup> Emily Leverett, 'Reading the Consumed: Flayed and Cannibalized Bodies in *The Siege of Jerusalem* and *Richard Coeur de Lyon*', p. 287.

<sup>72</sup> See: Sarah Kay, 'Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading', *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 2.1 (2011): 13–32, and several works by Bruce Holsinger, including: *Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture: Hildegard of Bingen to Chaucer* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); 'Parchment Ethics: A Statement of More than Modest Concern', *New Medieval Literatures* 12 (2010): 131–6; and 'Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal', *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 616–23.

<sup>73</sup> Kay, 'Original Skin', p. 36.

hut in the forest – after they kill the previous owners.<sup>74</sup> In *Hrólfs saga kraka* (*Saga of King Hrolf Kraki*) (c. 1400) the evil queen transforms her stepson by striking him with wolfskin gloves and uttering a curse that will lead to his death (in bear form) by hounds, after which he is flayed and fed to his wife.<sup>75</sup> Here, Hartnell, Bain and Ward all consider the symbiosis between animal and human flesh, both in how it is taken and how it is worn.

Skin as a boundary is crossed, erased and effaced in the act of flaying. Skinning an animal or a human removes the essential identity that separates one species from another. Consider the difficulty – before the era of genetic testing – of identifying the flayed remnants on English church doors as either definitively human or definitively cow. Another persistent myth that bleeds into practice is the ‘tradition’ of anthropodermic book binding, from supposed examples from the medieval period through World War II. In the Epilogue, Perry Neil Harrison challenges many of the older assumptions about the prevalence of this practice and offers new insights into the mythology of binding books in human skin, while gathering together the threads of inquiry from the other chapters.

THIS collection includes a selection of widely diverse examples of flaying, probing the layered responses to skin-removal in art, history, literature, manuscript studies and law. The sources cover a broad geographical and linguistic range: French (Lindquist, Tracy), Irish (Sayers), Italian (Bain, DeVries, Dent, Mittman and Sciacca), Middle High German (Bain, Small), Old Norse (Bain, Tracy), Welsh (Livingston), Old English (Rambaran-Olm) and Middle English (Gramling, Leverett, Livingston, Tracy, Ward). They deal with issues of race and religious identity (DeVries, Leverett), misogyny (Bain) and mysticism (Gramling). Some follow the fascination with skin into the modern era (Bain, Rambaran-Olm, Harrison). But overall, the individual articles re-evaluate the commonality of flaying, how art reflects spiritual responses to skin removal and how flaying, in any form, was used to further political or religious goals. They often share sources, or refer to the same events, and aim to communicate with each other as much as possible – highlighting the intersections within their own scholarship and the material at hand. We have, therefore, gathered all the sources together in a select bibliography of primary sources and shared secondary texts with a particular emphasis on the various aspects of flaying. As a whole, this collection literally gets beneath the skin of medieval sensibilities regarding punishment and sacrifice in a nuanced discussion of medieval flaying.

<sup>74</sup> See: *Saga of the Volsungs: The Norse Epic of Sigurd the Dragon Slayer*, trans. Jesse Byock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

<sup>75</sup> *The Saga of King Hrolf-Kraki*, trans. Jesse Byock (London: Penguin, 1998), pp. 37–9.

I  
FLAYING IN PRACTICE

# Tools of the Puncture: Skin, Knife, Bone, Hand

*Jack Hartnell*

[...] a descrete leche schal openly knownen  
þe tortuouse depnesse of his ensenchinge.<sup>1</sup>

A HAIRLESS figure stands at the centre of a manuscript illumination, his curved body delicately tinted pink and apparently naked (Fig. 1.1). He seems to be looking vacantly outwards, staring into the empty space immediately to his left. Yet, on closer inspection, this cannot be; he has no eyes or eyelids, only empty sockets. In fact, his body sports no outer layer at all: His skin is folded in two like a piece of stiff fabric, slung over a long stick he carries at his shoulder. Amongst the flaps and folds, his arms and legs are still distinguishable by their intact hands and feet, as is the body's once-full head of hair which spirals out in strange black weaves from a central corona-like scalp.

Despite the singular and static depiction in front of a traditional checker-work background, this is not a devotional image from a religious text. It certainly resembles depictions of St Bartholomew, rendered unflinching despite his absent skin through a sense of anaesthetizing spirituality, but this is not the saint inventively presenting his pelt on a pole.<sup>2</sup> Neither is this a figure from more mythic or historical sources: the corrupt Persian judge Sisamnes, for example, whom Gerard David depicts so vividly in a 1498 diptych, flayed alive with his skin draped across his chair of judgement.<sup>3</sup> Nor is this figure intended as a more playful marginal

<sup>1</sup> From an anonymous Middle English surgical manual, c.1392, London, Wellcome Library, MS 564. An edited version of the text appears in Richard Grothé, 'Le MS. Wellcome 564: deux traites de chirurgie en Moyen-Anglais', PhD dissertation (University of Montreal, 1982). The phrase is further discussed in Virginia Langum, 'Discerning Skin: Complexion, Surgery, and Language in Medieval Confession', in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. Katie L. Walter (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013), pp. 141–60.

<sup>2</sup> On Bartholomew in this volume, see: Asa Simon Mittman and Christine Sciacca, 'Robed in Martyrdom: The Flaying of St Bartholomew in the Laudario of Sant'Agnese', pp. 140–72; and Sherry C.M. Lindquist, 'Masculinist Devotion: Flaying and Flagellation in the *Belles Heures*', pp. 173–207. On the 'anaesthesia' of saintly glory, see: Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 252.

<sup>3</sup> On the Sisamnes myth, especially David's diptych, see: Robert Mills, *Suspended Animation: Pain, Pleasure, and Punishment in Medieval Culture* (London: Reaktion, 2005), p. 59.



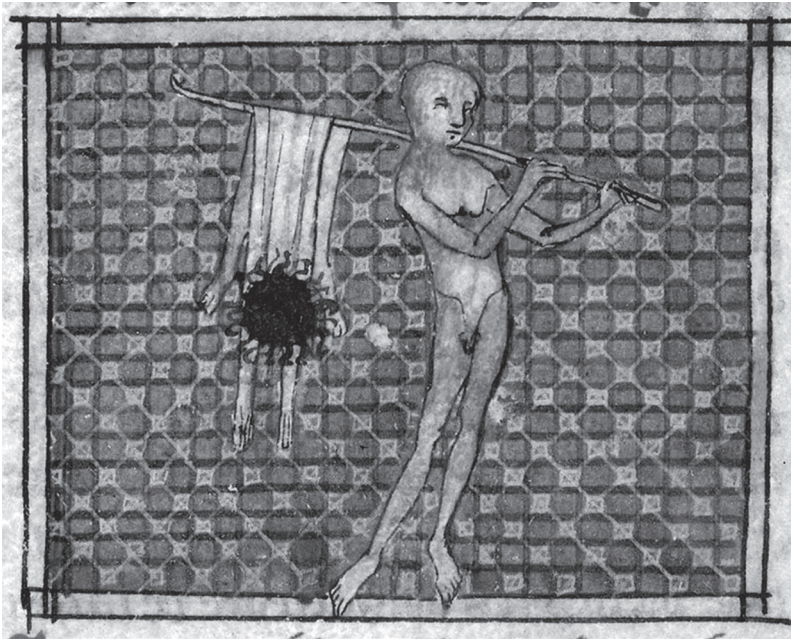


Fig. 1.1 Anatomical figure of a flayed man holding his skin on a stick over his shoulder, from a copy of Henri de Mondeville's *Cyrurgie*, 1314, France (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 2030 (formerly Colbert 4478), fol. 10v)

image, parodying or punning on the grotesque. Unlike the two miniature wide-eyed rabbits who flay a bound man in the *bas-de-page* of the Metz Pontifical, this skinned man is central to his manuscript context, spanning with bold prominence an entire column of text.<sup>4</sup> Instead, this image stems from a sphere of visual culture that provides an important counterpoint to the punitive and saintly narratives of skin removal: the emergent medieval discipline of surgery. Rather than exclusively embodying flaying's violent aspects – an idea that chapters later in this collection will go on to explore – this skinless man was used instead for instruction in healing. This is a flayed figure of repair, rather than removal.

The flayed man is fourth in a series of small diagrams from a 1314 copy of the French master surgeon Henri de Mondeville's *Chirurgia magna*. An accompanying caption illuminates something of its function:

le 4 figure. un home escorchie portant son cuir sus ses espaulles o un baston et la pert le cuir du chief eschevele, le cuir des mains, et des pies et la char lacerueuse et glandeuse qui est par le cors et la blanche qui est es mamelles et es emuptoires, et par la fixeure du ventre apert la gresse le sain loint.

<sup>4</sup> The Metz Pontifical, 1302–16, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam MS 298, fol. 74r.



[The fourth figure, a flayed man carrying his skin over his shoulders on a stick; and the skin of his head with hair, the skin of his hands, and his feet; and the lacerated flesh that is on the body, and the white which is the breasts and the emunctories, and by the opening of the venter is the fat and the lard.]<sup>5</sup>

Exposing the whitish hue of the subcutaneous fat [*la gresse*] that lies under the body's outer layers, the depiction of the flayed figure outside his skin [*le cuir*] is deliberately revelatory, displaying the subtle gradations of colour and texture found in the body beneath. The thirteen illustrations that feature in the *Chirurgia* are perhaps related to several larger sketches of individual internal organs, now lost, used by Henri in his lectures at the University of Montpellier in 1304.<sup>6</sup> Like these larger sheets, the smaller 1314 manuscript also functioned didactically, allowing practitioners or students consulting the learned surgeon's texts to acquaint themselves with the body's internal workings through evocative visualization, as well as to find their way to relevant sections of the surgical material.

Whilst restrictions on anatomizing bodies in later medieval France mean it is unlikely that Henri himself would have so deliberately flayed a human figure, surgical discussions of skin frequently surface in the medical literature of the period.<sup>7</sup> Considered to have a twofold face, skin consisted of two separate elements dubbed 'skin proper' and the 'pannicule', outer and inner layers that doubly protected the body's internal workings.<sup>8</sup> Medically, skin was many things: to quote Henri, it was 'nervosum, forte,

<sup>5</sup> Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS Fr. 2030, folio 9v. A similar series of surgical figures appear as uncoloured line drawings in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.2.44. My translation.

<sup>6</sup> Loren C. MacKinney, 'The Beginnings of Western Scientific Anatomy: New Evidence and a Revision in Interpretation of Mondeville's Role', *Medical History* 62.3 (1962): 233–9. On medical illustrations like these more broadly, see: Loren C. MacKinney, *Medical Illustrations in Medieval Manuscripts* (London: Wellcome Library, 1965); Rudolph Herrlinger, *A History of Medical Illustration* (London: Pitman, 1970); Peter Murray Jones, *Medieval Medicine in Illuminated Manuscripts*, rev. edn (London: British Library, 1998); Hilde-Marie Gross, 'Illustrationen in medizinischen Sammelhandschriften', in *Ein deutsch puech machen: Untersuchungen zur landessprachlichen Vermittlung medizinischen Wissens*, ed. Gundolf Keil (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1993), pp. 172–348.

<sup>7</sup> On restrictions and allowances for human dissection in the period, see: Katharine Park, *The Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone, 2006); and Elizabeth A. R. Brown, 'Death and the Human Body in the Later Middle Ages: The Legislation of Boniface VIII on the Division of the Corpse', *Viator* 12 (1981): 221–70.

<sup>8</sup> For more on skin's taxonomies see: Katie L. Walter, 'The Form of the Formless: Medieval Taxonomies of Skin, Flesh and the Human,' in *Reading Skin*, ed. Walter, pp. 119–39.

tenax, mediocre in duritie et mollitie, flexibile, multum sensibile, tenue temperatum in complexione, totum corpus in parte exteriori circumdans' [nervous, tough, resistant, medium-hard, flexible, very sensitive, thin and temperate in complexion; it covers the entire surface of the body].<sup>9</sup> And as well as various physical characteristics, skin imparted itself to a whole host of wider meanings and interpretations in a varied medical discourse. It was a surface to be read for signs and symptoms in its colour, temperature and texture – an important interface for uncovering underlying causes lurking beneath. Like many diagnostic tools in medieval medicine, examination of the skin was as likely to highlight defects in the patient's moral or spiritual integrity as it was to expose more corporeal flaws in their diet or humoral balance.<sup>10</sup>

Skin removal featured in discussions of surgical technique too. Limb amputations (often unsuccessful) necessitated the stripping back of the skin to access and saw through bone; cauterizing or suturing the skin was common to stop bleeding or infection; incisions or counter-incisions into the skin could be made to enlarge entry wounds for removal of foreign bodies or relax separated body parts; skin could be etched away with corrosives; growths or ulcers were cut directly out of the skin; and the frequently prescribed practice of phlebotomy also called for the partial removal of the skin to let blood flow, an act sometimes referred to in the French literature as *flagellation*.<sup>11</sup> From the 1450s onwards, surgeons like the Brancas dynasty from Catania in Sicily contributed to a growing market in plastic surgery, especially rhinoplasty and other facial treatments to repair

<sup>9</sup> For the Latin, see: Julius Pagel, ed., *Die Chirurgie des Heinrich von Mondeville* (Berlin: Hirschwald, 1892), p. 22; for a French translation, Edouard Nicaise, ed., *Chirurgie de maître Henri de Mondeville* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1893); for an English translation, Leonard D. Rosenman, ed., *The Surgery of Henri de Mondeville*, 2 vols. (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> For an interesting discussion of the liminal position skin occupied in medieval medicine, see the many contributions to *La pelle umana / The Human Skin*, a special issue of the journal *Micrologus* 13 (2005); Luke Demaitre, 'Skin and the City: Cosmetic Medicine as Urban Concern', in *Between Text and Patient: The Medical Enterprise in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, ed. Florence Eliza Glaze and Brian K. Nance (Florence: Sismel – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2011), pp. 97–120. On skin and reading, see: the works of Sarah Kay, in particular 'Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and other Works', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36.1 (2006): 35–74.

<sup>11</sup> On the affective appearance of flagellation – beating or tearing the skin from the body – as a variation on flaying, particularly in terms of Christ's scourging, see in this volume: Peter Dent, 'A Window for the Pain: Surface, Interiority and Christ's Flagellated Skin in Late Medieval Sculpture', pp. 208–39; and Valerie Gramling, '"Flesche withowtyn hyde": The Removal and Transformation of Jesus' Skin in the English Cycle Passion Plays', pp. 240–60.

or replace scarred features and absent skin.<sup>12</sup> Animal skin similarly featured in surgical treatments, not only as leather bags for administering drugs to patients, or straps to bind the body and help in the healing of bones, but also sometimes in more graphic treatments that strangely juxtaposed the flayed skins of man and beast.<sup>13</sup> Henri de Mondeville sceptically cites a cure for skin lesions that recommends the burial of the patient for three days and nights, neck-deep inside the stripped skin of a horse [*equi statim excoriata*] stuffed with hot manure, so that portions of their own skin might in turn be ‘flayed off’ [*flagellis*] by the heat.<sup>14</sup> Although seemingly unusual, Henri was not the first to acknowledge this treatment, nor the last. His Italian predecessor Guglielmo da Saliceto states that wrapping the patient in the skin of a recently flayed horse is particularly efficacious for treating victims whose skin had been removed.<sup>15</sup> Early modern medical treatises, too, prescribe immediately covering new mothers after giving birth in the skin of a black sheep which has been flayed

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Joseph, *Nasenplastik und sonstige Gesichtsplastik* (Leipzig: Kabititzsch, 1931). On the long history of aesthetic surgery, see: Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). On its medieval history in particular, see the chapter ‘Surgery Between Alchemy and Cosmetics’, in Michael McVaugh, *The Rational Surgery of the Middle Ages* (Florence: Sismel – Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2006), as well as Demaitre, ‘Skin and the City’. As a contemporary counterpoint to surgical beautification, compare such restorative rhinoplasty with the deliberately punitive facial interventions discussed in Patricia Skinner, ‘The Gendered Nose and its Lack: “Medieval” Nose-cutting and its Modern Manifestations’, *Journal of Women’s History* 26.1 (2014): 45–67.

<sup>13</sup> On the medieval concept of skin as both bodily facet and raw material, see: Isabel Davis, ‘Cutaneous Time in the Late Medieval Literary Imagination’, in *Reading Skin*, ed. Walter, pp. 99–118; Renée Ward, ‘“Thou shalt have the better cloathe”: Reading Second Skins in *Robin Hood* and *Guy of Gisborne*’, pp. 349–65, in this volume.

<sup>14</sup> Pagel, *Chirurgie*, p. 394. Mondeville is himself not keen on this elaborate treatment. It was also a prescribed treatment for shock among the medieval Mongols. See: Timothy May, ‘Spitting Blood: Medieval Mongol Medical Practices’, in *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 175–93.

<sup>15</sup> For the Latin, see: Christian Heimerl, ed., *The Middle English Version of William of Saliceto’s ‘Anatomia’* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2008); for a French translation, Paul Pifteau, ed. and trans., *Chirurgie de Guillaume de Salicet* (Toulouse: Saint-Cyprien, 1898); for an English translation, Leonard D. Rosenman, ed., *The Surgery of William of Saliceto* (Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2002). For more on William of Saliceto, see: Jole Agrimi and Chiara Crisciani, ‘The Science and Practice of Medicine in the Thirteenth Century according to Guglielmo da Saliceto, Italian Surgeon’, in *Practical Medicine from Salerno to the Black Death*, ed. Luis García-Ballester et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 60–88.