Bodily fluids were central to late medieval piety and artistic practice in fifteenth-century Northern Europe. Blood devotion, in particular, was reified during this period. The obsessive and anxiety-ridden interest in Christ’s wounds, bleeding, and suffering marked a deep desire to understand the physicality of Christ’s death as well as to achieve a new, body-centered form of piety. Blood frenzy widely manifested itself in images, texts, and alleged visions; one of the most extreme manifestations of late medieval blood piety and interest in physical modes of devotion is found within British Library manuscript Egerton 1821.

Made in England circa 1480–90, Egerton 1821 is comprised of a Psalter, Rosary of the Virgin, and litany, among other smaller devotional texts. It was likely crafted by Carthusian monks at the priory of Sheen and possibly intended for the use of a laywoman in Kent. What is most visually striking about this pocket-sized codex are its prefatory pages—they have been seemingly spattered with the blood of Christ: the first three pages are painted entirely black and filled with numerous blood-red drops (Fig. 1). The following eight pages are covered with hundreds of tiny crimson wounds superimposed on red vellum back-drops (Fig. 2). Beginning on the verso of folio 8, this same design continues but is mostly covered by three pasted-in woodcuts depicting Christ and the Arma Christi, the Five Wounds of Christ, and Christ as the Man of Sorrows (Figs. 3, 4, & 5).

The main purpose of this paper is to consider the gendering of Christ’s blood and how Egerton 1821 articulates this in both text and image. I will first consider the manuscript in the context of this fanatical period of blood devotion in order to answer the question that first comes
Fig. 1: London, British Library Manuscript Egerton 1821, England (Sheen?), 1480-1490, pigment on vellum, 120 x 180 mm. Folios 1v-2r. Photo © The British Library Board; used with permission of the British Library.

Fig. 2: London, British Library Manuscript Egerton 1821, England (Sheen?), 1480-1490, pigment on vellum, 120 x 180 mm. Folios 6v-7r. Photo © The British Library Board; used with permission of the British Library.
Fig. 3: London, British Library Manuscript Egerton 1821, England (Sheen?), 1480-1490, pigment on vellum and inked woodcut, 120 x 90 mm. Folio 8v, Christ framed by the Arma Christi. Photo © The British Library Board; used with permission of the British Library.

Fig. 4: London, British Library Manuscript Egerton 1821, England (Sheen?), 1480-1490, pigment on vellum and inked woodcut, 120 x 90 mm. Folio 9r, the Five Wounds of Christ. Photo © The British Library Board; used with permission of the British Library.

Fig. 5: London, British Library Manuscript Egerton 1821, England (Sheen?), 1480-1490, pigment on vellum and inked woodcut, 120 x 90 mm. Folio 9v, Christ as the Man of Sorrows. Photo © The British Library Board; used with permission of the British Library.
to mind when faced with these seemingly bizarre images—what does all this blood mean? Then, I hope to show how the intended owner of Egerton 1821 might have read, received, and engaged with such imagery.

In carefully studying the manuscript’s visual markers of a physical, blood-centered devotion to Christ and his Passion, I argue that the viewer engaged in a Eucharistic sacrament of sorts in his or her reading of Egerton 1821. This individual ingested the blood of Christ both visually and tangibly; marks on the parchment of scratching, touching, and/or kissing provide clues of such physical intimacy. In reading inscribed prayers, touching the image of a bleeding Christ, and kissing Christ’s painted blood, the user of Egerton 1821 relives Christ’s Passion in looking at these pages, ultimately trying to recreate and re-feel Christ’s suffering to gain an intimate and physical union with him. In MS Egerton 1821, blood is not revered as a mere indicator or sign, but as a quasi-sacramental rupture in the flesh, inviting access to Christ.

I should stipulate that though I aim to discuss the presentation of Christ’s blood, wounds, and their devotion as gendered and even feminized, this argument does not hinge on whether or not a woman was the original owner of the book, as some scholars have suggested. Rather than focusing on whether or not it was a woman who commissioned and/or used this manuscript, I hope instead to explore the appropriation of a female-centric visual language as well as the reception and implications of such imagery. No matter the sex of the viewer, the pure abundance of blood in Egerton 1821 is remarkably gendered as it resonates with a newfound, female-instigated mode of devotion in the late fifteenth century.

**A Visual Overview of Egerton 1821**

British Library Manuscript Egerton 1821 was completed around 1480-90 by Carthusian monks in the Priory of Sheen in Richmond, Surrey. Each page of the codex measures 120 x 180 mm when open. There are 68 vellum folios in total, and four colored woodcuts have been pasted into the manuscript, each on a separate page. These woodcuts depict the Virgin and Child (Fig. 6), a crucified Christ framed by the *Arma Christi* or the Tools of the Passion, the Five Wounds of Christ, and a Carthusian monk kneeling before Christ as the Man of Sorrows.
Cardinal Francis Aidan Gasquet (d. 1929) has completed the most thorough study of the book’s contents, though his account focuses primarily on the text of the Rosary rather than on the blood-ridden images. We will later consider the instructions on reciting the Rosary when investigating ways that the codex was received by its owner. Thus given Gasquet’s emphasis on text rather than image, I will begin with a purely visual and stylistic overview of Egerton 1821 before proceeding to a discussion of the gendered implications and use of its blood and Passion imagery. The painted imagery within Egerton 1821 can be divided into three categories: blood and wounds, passion imagery, and other devotional imagery. I will discuss these three visual motifs in this order.

It is the blood-spattered prefatory pages of this manuscript that immediately mark it as an anomalous object of devotion: folios 1r, 1v, and 2r are painted entirely in black pigment with tiny red blood drops. I know of no other pages in any manuscript of this period quite like these three folios; their artistic and religious eccentricity invites close visual scrutiny. There appear to be two types of blood drops depicted on folios 1r-2r: (1) a large tear-shaped drop with a thin, undulating tail on top, and (2) a tiny flat-headed drop with a thin tail that trails towards the
bottom of the page. There are twenty-five drops on folio 1v, and red smudge marks appear in the top left-hand corner of the page, almost as if the blood drops were mistakenly rubbed when still wet. On folio 2r, most of the black paint has been rubbed and/or possibly scratched off by an owner’s fingernails. Of all the pages in Egerton 1821, it is folio 2r that appears to have been the most fervently and repeatedly touched, scratched, rubbed, and/or kissed by its user. Wound images continue on folios 6r–9v, which are completely covered in red pigment with tiny crimson wounds painted atop each vellum page (Fig. 7, 8). These bifolios constitute a separate and perhaps the most visually jarring quire in the codex. Folio 6r introduces a series of multivariate wounds that are quite stylistically different from the drops of blood found on the preceding black pages.

The three Passion-themed woodcuts also comprise a particularly noteworthy part of the codex. On folio 8v, Christ as the Man of Sorrows is depicted with the *Arma Christi*. Christ stands in a tomb and is
flanked by the lance and vinegar-soaked sponge. There is an inscription below Christ, and though it has been crossed out by a thin line, it is still legible and reads: “To all those who devoutly say five Pater Nosters, five Aves, and a Creed before such a figure are granted 32,755 years of pardon.”

Twenty instruments of the Passion surround him, each in an individual compartment.

A second woodcut, depicting the Five Wounds of Christ, appears on the following page, folio 9r. Apart from the most obvious wounds in the hands, feet, and side (shown as a heart) of Christ, a number of other stylistically nuanced wounds can be found in this image. On each arm of the Cross, dark brown pigment emulating the concentric circles found within the inside of a tree creates ovular, wound-like shapes. The Five Wounds motif also constituted a popular coat of arms during this period, as is seen in other woodcuts from the Sheen Priory dating from the late fifteenth century. The final woodcut-covered red page in Egerton 1821 is folio 9v, depicting a blood-covered Carthusian monk kneeling before Christ and his Crucifix, flanked by the lance and vinegar-soaked sponge of the Passion. Each figure holds a scroll and communicates with the other. The monk’s scroll reads “Domine obsecro dirige ad me salutem,” and Christ responds “Fili fuge, vince, tace, quiesce.” Below the figures, an English commentary on the image reminds the viewer that “The greatest comfort in al temptacyon is the remembraunce of Crystes passyon.”

Given the presence of this monk on folio 9v, scholars have argued that the codex was made either for or at a Carthusian monastery in England. Campbell Dodgson has suggested that the manuscript was most likely used by a Carthusian monk either at the Charterhouse in London or the Priory of Sheen, though Cardinal Gasquet and John Lowden have interpreted the presence of the Carthusian monk as an indication of its maker, not intended reader. The litany provides the textual counterpart to these visual clues regarding where, for whom, and by whom the codex might have been made. The book is clearly for a layperson and for private rather than public devotion, as the reply to each invocation of the litany reads “Orate—pro me,” or “My daily exercise,” marking this as an individualized act of piety. Gasquet contends, as does Lowden, that the manuscript was most likely “drawn up to aid the devotion of a
woman” given that in the “daily exercise,” two days per week are devoted to female saints, and many female saints are mentioned in the litany.\textsuperscript{11}

There is one final image that fits into neither the ‘blood and wounds’ nor ‘Passion imagery’ categories discussed thus far. This Mary-centered devotional image can be found on folio 2v, where a colored woodcut of the Virgin and Child has been pasted into the codex. Christ sits on Mary’s right knee, suckling her breast that she squeezes for him between her fingers. She stares down at her son while he gazes directly out at the viewer. The two are enthroned within a trefoil niche articulated with stylized acanthus fronds before a series of round-arched windows. A kneeling figure on the left appears to have been partly removed. On the top of the image, the text reads: “Qui Christum vult laudare, Mariamque Virginem honorare / Debet sursum cor levare, rosarium hoc dicere et divulgare,”\textsuperscript{12} while underneath the Virgin and child, the text reads “Suscipe rosarium Virgo deauratum / Ihu per compendium vitæ decoratum.”\textsuperscript{13}

Much that could be said on the codicology of Egerton 1821 is outside the scope of this paper, but I will briefly note, given the centrality of this point to my thesis, that the red- and black-painted pages were originally intended to be part of this manuscript. Though these markedly different pages constitute an entirely separate quire, it is evident in the devotional texts that the Carthusian scribes knew that their work would ultimately be coupled with a series of Marian and Passion-centric images. Text and image are mutually dependent on one another, and this symbiosis can be seen via the many references to images of Christ in the text of the Rosary; these include Christ’s wounds, blood, different parts of his body, the \textit{Arma Christi}, and the Virgin breast-feeding Christ.\textsuperscript{14} Furthermore, a note on the importance of meditating on images can be found in the text: “For images are, according to the opinion of the holy doctors of the Church, the books of the faithful. Therefore let the beautiful image of Mary be before you.”\textsuperscript{15} There are additionally instructions to the viewer to “keep before your eyes the sweet image of the Blessed Mary.”\textsuperscript{16} Thus given the referential nature of the text to the images, it seems reasonable to conclude that the owner of Egerton 1821 had the complete, image and text-filled codex presented to him or her in 1480–90.\textsuperscript{17}
Egerton 1821 visually epitomizes late medieval blood piety in several ways. First, there is an overwhelming excess of blood and wound imagery throughout the codex. Second, there is a clear interest in quantifying the number of individual wounds Christ endured, as seen in the hundreds of tiny, distinct wounds on the red-washed pages. Upon demonstrating how Egerton 1821 is a visual archetype of late medieval blood piety in Northern Europe, we may contextualize this codex among its visual and textual blood-bathed counterparts to decipher the meaning of such blood. And, in turn, we might learn how it was consumed by the reader of Egerton 1821.

Bountiful Blood

Though other images of this period reflect an increased interest in the bleeding and suffering of Christ, the pigment-soaked pages and woodcuts of Egerton 1821 particularly and poignantly evoke the extremities of this blood-centric obsession and a general anxiety surrounding access to God. Iconographically, the Passion imagery in these woodcuts is fairly unremarkable. Images of Christ’s wounds and penetrated body were widespread in Northern Europe at this time. Of the four woodcuts in Egerton 1821, it is the woodcut of the Five Wounds of Christ on folio 9r that perhaps best characterizes the central mode of devotion visually elicited by the codex—an obsessive fetishization of Christ’s fragmented body. Wounds abound in each of the other two Passion-themed woodcuts as well as on the red vellum pages, yet it is on folio 9r that these wounds are given visual prominence by their very size and detail, inviting the viewer to ponder the individual blood-spurting penetrations of Christ’s body. In this image, the viewer is presented with the most revered aspects of Christ—the wounds on his hands, feet, and side. The visual deference paid to Christ’s wounds was widespread; special Votive Masses dedicated to these wounds were not uncommon in fifteenth-century England.

This near-fragmentation of Christ’s body is a widespread trope in the writings and preachings of many theologians, including Robert Grosseteste (d. 1253), who argued that iconographic motifs like the
five wounds of Christ indicate the closeness between Christ’s blood, wounds, and will. In other words, “Christ chose to appear scarred as a reminder that the divine wholeness chooses to be fragmented for the salvation of human kind.” His fragmentation, then, is a sign of “our wholeness to come.” Though Scripture indicates that Christ died on the Cross as both a whole and unbroken being, there is a clear tendency both iconographically and textually in the Rosary to fetishize his different parts.

Similar fixations on Christ’s individual wounds can be found on fol. 20r of British Library MS Add. 37049, a Carthusian Miscellany. In this image, a large heart bears five wounds and, though fragmented, is representative of Christ as a whole being. Interestingly, the side wound is aligned horizontally, as if it were a mouth and speaking to the viewer. Bloodied images of Christ during his Passion can also be found in sculpture, stained glass, and painting of this period. The Andröchte pietà from Soest, made around 1380–90, depicts Christ with stick-like blood drops gushing down his right side. There is also a large, eye-shaped gash on his right side that is deeply gouged into his rib cage. It is indeed the recycling of these iconographic tropes as well as the mottled red pigment emulating blood on Christ in each of the three Passion-themed woodcuts in Egerton 1821 that make these images characteristic of late medieval Northern European blood piety.

Quantifying Suffering

It is not only the quantity of painted blood or wounds within Egerton 1821 that mark it as both an exemplar and an extremity of late medieval blood piety; rather, it is the clear attempt to quantify his suffering by making each mark of Christ’s affliction distinct and discrete. The literally hundreds of wounds on the black and red pages of the codex reflect the then-contemporary intellectual and theological interest in determining the number of places that Christ’s body had been penetrated and the extent to which he suffered. By visually articulating each wound as separate and countable, a “part-by-part” approach to the reliving and rethinking of the Passion is evoked, which parallels the Rosary’s focus on each part of Christ’s and Mary’s bodies. Visual encouragement to consider the different stages and parts of Christ’s Passion also manifests
itself within the woodcut imagery; each “arma” of the Arma Christi on folio 8v marks a different part of the Passion narrative, while each of the five wounds of Christ on folio 9r mnemonically invites a consideration of the individual narratives surrounding each penetration of Christ’s body. We will return to this part-by-part approach to the Passion, as the fragmented nature of Christ’s body and tools of the Passion invite specific ways of remembering the sacrifice of Christ on the part of the viewer.

This passionate (and Passion-centered) interest in quantifying Christ’s suffering is best understood when contextualized amidst other images, texts, and prayers that also reflect this obsessive interest with numbers. There are several formulae from this period to calculate the precise number of drops of blood shed from Christ’s wounds during his Passion. One of these many formulae estimated that Christ had 5,475 wounds and 547,500 drops of blood.25 John Lowden has counted the number of wounds on one of the red pages with no woodcut and found there to be 540 of them; the formal similarity of this number to that yielded in the aforementioned formulae is likely not coincidental. It appears that by counting the number of wounds Christ endured, the viewer could in turn calculate the number of prayers he or she needed to recite in order to seek forgiveness for sins or reduce family members’ time in purgatory.

The Dominican Rosary, which is the textual focal point of Egerton 1821, also bears strong ties to the quantifying of Christ’s wounds. Fifty smaller beads on the Rosary refer to Mary, while five larger beads invoke each of the Five Wounds of Christ.26 The notion that not a single part of Christ’s body remained unwounded was believed to be prefigured in Isaiah 1:6, too— “From the sole of the foot even unto the head there is no soundness in it; but wounds, and bruises, and putrefying sores: they have not been closed, neither bound up, neither mollified with ointment.”27 It seems that by quantifying Christ’s suffering, his Passion and pain become all the more palpable and comprehensible to viewers.

Christ’s wounds and suffering were not the only entities that late medieval theologians wanted to quantify, though. This number obsession also led to the creation of number-specific formulae regarding the number of years one could avoid in purgatory by reciting certain prayers. Though the prayer beneath Christ on folio 8v (reminding viewers that
they will be granted 32,755 years of pardon upon reciting a series of prayers) has been scratched out, its presence is still noteworthy. The number 32,755 is not so seemingly random; it in fact originates from the *Vita Christi* by Ludolf of Saxony, a widely-read text during this period. However, Lowden has argued that this indulgence was perhaps not taken so seriously by the owner of the manuscript, as “a combination of hyperinflation and opportunism by printers among others had seriously devalued the indulgence” by the end of the fifteenth century.

In contextualizing the numerological focus of Egerton 1821 within a larger fifteenth-century Northern European obsession with quantifying Christ’s suffering, it becomes possible to further study the far-reaching implications of the hundreds of painted wounds and blood drops in the codex. Amidst their visual and textual counterparts, these wounds provide lucid insight into the medieval blood-obsessed mind’s eye and its interpretation, reception, and construction of meaning of such bloody imagery. An inquiry into the fifteenth-century semiotics of blood as well as the multifaceted and multifarious meanings of blood is thus in order.

*The Semiotics of Blood*

Blood in Egerton 1821 is metonymic and multivalent—standing for a number of anxiety-causing political, social, and pressing religious ideas, threats, and controversies in late fifteenth-century Northern Europe. Christ’s wounds recall not only the violation of his body, but they also mark a point of access, a liminal “lieu de mémoire,” through which one can reach Christ’s immaterial essence. The images in Egerton 1821 evoke the widespread devotional praxis to understand, at the most basic level, the central soteriological theme of Christianity—the death of Christ. Within each of the blood-covered pages of the codex, Christ’s blood drops and wounds represent his active, ongoing death—despite the common knowledge that Christ did not biologically die from blood loss, but rather suffocation via crucifixion. Elaine Scarry has noted that it is the crucifix itself that heightens the sense of horror experienced when gazing upon the dying Christ and his blood—as the cross’ “hurt of the body does not occur in one explosive moment of contact; it is not there and gone but there against the body for a long time.”
The blood of Christ was hardly viewed as a singular, even definable entity in late medieval Northern Europe. It was at once dualistic, asymmetrical, and paradoxical in nature. Blood was nourishment (particularly in Eucharistic practice) as well as indicative of violence and sacrifice. Caroline Walker Bynum writes that Christ’s blood was understood as “dew, seed, fertility; it is cleansing water, life itself, quencher of thirst, and intoxication; it is a spark...from which a frenzy of guilt, love, and longing can be ignited. It is suffering, torture, and bloodshed—a sacrifice offered for salvation yet an indictment of those who made such sacrifice necessary.”

This contradictory nature of blood is nicely paralleled by the way women’s bodies (and menstrual blood) were viewed during this period as both abject and Christ-like—a point to which I will return in this paper when providing a gendered reading of the blood imagery in Egerton 1821.

Mitchell Merback writes of how images of blood, wounds, and the body in pain aimed to antagonize and discomfort medieval viewers. Though discomforting, they also served to inspire meaningful meditation. Bernard de Clairvaux advocated gazing upon images of Christ’s blood, arguing “What can be so effective a cure for the wound of conscience and so purifying to keenness of mind as steady meditation on the wounds of Christ?” The spectacle and the spectacular coexist in this blood imagery, as seeing the body in pain had “the power to focus the gaze and compel fascination in a way few other sights could.” In reading an iconography of suffering, one also reads pleasure—hence the dualistic reception of Christ’s blood as both abject and seductive.

**Page as Body, Pigment as Blood**

While the imagery within Egerton 1821 provides evidence of particular practices of late medieval blood piety, the very materiality of the codex may also further our understanding of its reception. Pigment and vellum, albeit typical media used in the making of a manuscript, were widely referenced by medieval theologians in constructing analogies regarding the blood and body of Christ. Particularly in the fifteenth century, there was a widely espoused understanding of Christ’s body as vellum and his blood as ink. An imaginative and transformative reading of these materials is clearly relevant to our understanding of Egerton 1821. This
analogy is employed in *Fasciculus Morum*, the manual of a fourteenth-century English preacher, wherein the Crucifixion is likened to a kind of manuscript production in which Jesus

stretched out his blessed body, as a parchment maker can be seen to spread a hide in the sun. In this way Christ . . . offered his body like a charter to be written on. The nails in his hands were used as a quill, and his precious blood as ink.38

English fourteenth-century mystic Richard Rolle also constructed a Jesus-book analogy: “sweet Jesus, thy body is like a book written with red ink; so is thy body all written with red wounds. . . . grant me to read upon thy book, and somewhat to understand the sweetness of that writing.”39

Would the owner and reader of Egerton 1821 have understood that the red, wound-filled pages are metonymically Christ’s actively bleeding body? While the Rosary text in Egerton 1821 does not make such overt references to Christ’s body as a vellum page, the wound-infested pages seem to be tailor-made visual accompaniments to the ideas preached in the aforementioned fourteenth-century sermons. In the recounting of the Passion in Egerton 1821, the text overtly tells the reader to not view this codex as a mere book—she or he should make a metaphorical leap of faith: “Here, in place of a book, thou shalt have the image of Christ suffering and crucified.”40 Together, the visual and textual urgings of Egerton 1821 enable the viewer to look beyond the materiality of the vellum, ink, and pigment. These materials collectively encourage an engagement in an imaginative devotional practice as well as ask the viewer to “see” the immaterial and transcendent within the physical object before him or her.

**Reception of MS Egerton 1821**

Now that we have closely examined the visual contents of Egerton 1821, we focus our attention on the way the codex was received, read, and ultimately brought to life by the viewer. I now consider three ways the manuscript was likely consumed by its owner. These three modes of reading are individually characterized by (1) an exercise in remembering
Christ’s Passion; (2) a kind of role-playing by which the reader likened him or herself to the Virgin Mary; and (3) a sacramental-like consumption of image and text.

The remembering and mental re-staging of the Passion constitutes a primary mode of reception of Egerton 1821. Visual and textual mnemonic cues abound in the codex, inviting the viewer to corporally invest him or herself in the reliving of Christ’s suffering. Before surmising how the reader of Egerton 1821 might have used certain memory triggers to meditate upon Christ’s Passion, it is useful to consider the politics and understanding of memory in the late fifteenth century. Peter Parshall has noted a heightened interest in mnemonic theory during this period, evident in the widespread popularity of the most discussed book on memory and rhetoric in the fifteenth century, *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, written much earlier by Cicero in the first century BCE.⁴¹ In this canonical work, Cicero writes that the most effective kind of memory-making is evoked via personal and idiosyncratic images that speak to the viewer. This phenomenological view of memory informed the construction of medieval memory images as kinds of “private sign[s]” that must have both “an obscure and inscrutable relation to what is signified.”⁴² How, then, would late medieval mnemonic theories and semiotics of memory have influenced the making of Egerton 1821 so that the viewer might recall Christ’s Passion most effectively?

The visual manifestation of these mnemonic triggers is seen most clearly in the woodcut of the *Arma Christi* (f. 8v). These iconographic tropes invite a part-by-part approach to the remembering of Christ’s Passion so that the viewer might feel the pain that Christ endured via individual and collective meditation on each of these visual props. The image on folio 8v seems ready-made and dogmatic, to some extent, yet it still provides for an individualized remembering of Christ’s Passion, as this “segregated set of memory cues” are “parsed out” by the viewer in any sequence she so chooses.⁴³ It is these visual details that are the most effective mnemonic cues. Every wound and blood drop on the red and black vellum pages constitute “private signs,” too, as their discreteness demands individual meditation on each mark of Christ’s suffering.⁴⁴

Gasquet’s work on the text of Egerton 1821 also demonstrates how memories of the life of Christ and the Virgin are recalled via a part-
by-part approach in the text of the Rosary. In the first (of three) parts of the Rosary, the viewer is instructed to “keep before [her] eyes the sweet image of the Blessed Mary, and . . . say the first Ave to her heart, the second to her ears, the third to her eyes, the fourth to her lips.” Clearly, the images are an important part of this meditative practice, as the viewer is encouraged to look at Mary (f. 2v) when meditating upon her different parts. In the case of Christ, his “chief members” that individually receive Pater/Ave prayers in the Rosary are his feet, knees, legs, hands, arms, breast, wound, and crown of thorns. These individual body parts are akin to the aforementioned mnemonic visual triggers; in tandem, the Rosary text and accompanying images provide for a most effective exercise in remembering the Virgin and Christ and in reliving his Passion. Intrinsically to such poignant acts of remembering is the real-time suffering of Christ, making the Passion a never-ending “crisis of suffering,” as well as the perpetual renewal of Christ’s “offer of grace.” The viewer is herein confronted with “a moment of profound and reflective truth, a trauma inflicted through the reinstatement of a cataclysmic memory.”

Flora Lewis also writes of Christ’s wounds as kinds of visual triggers that provoke a meditative union between the viewer and Christ, as the viewer is invited to visually pierce and look within his vulva-like open wounds. In the Stimulus Armoris, a widely accessible fourteenth-century guide to meditation, the reader is urged to “strive as far as you are able to share in Christ’s passion.” This meditative, sight-propelled union with Christ can be likened to a bride and bridegroom joined in marriage, as is recounted in the Song of Songs 2:6. Given the feminine form of Christ’s almond-shaped wound, it seems important to recognize that this spousal imagery is not an exclusively female mode of devotion—the wound served as a mnemonic trigger for either male or female viewers, alike.

In addition to reliving Christ’s suffering via his textually enumerated parts and visual mnemonic cues, the viewer (particularly if female) might have engaged in another role-playing game of sorts while reading Egerton 1821. The Rosary is an inherently gendered prayer; the 150 Ave-salutations comprise a gesture of devotion principally to the Virgin, not to Christ. The text of the Rosary also advises the viewer to strive
to emulate the Virgin: “whomever says the prayer to honor the pure Virgin must . . . be pure and lead a chaste life.” Furthermore, the first woodcut image to appear in between the black and red pages on folio 2v is that of the Virgin and Child, which hardly seems coincidental. This near-immediate physical presence of Mary marks the inclusion of Marian-centric prayers in the manuscript as well as invites the viewer to consider the importance of the Mediatrix for his or her devotional practice. Thus visually and textually, there are plainly clear urgings for the viewer to play a part, so to speak, in her contemplation of Mary and her subsequent consumption of the codex.

The viewer’s imaginary identification with Mary, though, does not undermine his or her additional desire to emulate the suffering of Christ in her reading of the manuscript. In fact, he or she likely identified with both figures simultaneously. Mary physically empathized with Christ during his Passion, and so in striving to emulate the Virgin, the viewer would subsequently also be empathizing with Christ’s physical pain. In the story of the Presentation in the Temple, Simeon tells Mary “Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,” indicating that Mary will feel Christ’s wounds and suffering upon his death. Though this text is not directly cited in Egerton 1821, the foreshadowing of Christ’s death and Mary’s empathy pains described in this biblical narrative are not unlike the visual foreshadowing of Christ’s death presented in the image of the Virgin and Child (f. 2v), which mirrors the iconic pietà, wherein Mary cradles her dead son on her lap. The Virgin’s physical proximity to Christ and his Passion thus further invites the viewer to actively, imaginatively identify with both figures at once.

Egerton 1821 was fervently used by its owner. Marks of touching, scratching, rubbing, and perhaps even kissing remain on many of its pages, though they are most evident on folio 2r. In reflecting on why its owner would have physically marked these images, I will illustrate why the reading of this text is a kind of sacramental act, particularly given these acts of physical intimacy with the manuscript.

Given that all members of the laity were forbidden to drink from the Eucharistic cup in the late fifteenth century in England, other means were sought to gain physical closeness to Christ and his blood. Women, in particular, were urged by late medieval theologians to find ways to
metaphorically ingest Christ’s body and blood to spiritually nourish themselves. Aelred of Rievaulx (d. 1166) urged female recluses to both contemplate Christ’s crucifixion and to “eat it in gladness.” He references the Song of Songs in writing “Hasten, linger not, eat the honeycomb with your honey, drink your wine with your milk. The blood is changed into wine to inebriate you, the water into milk to nourish you.” This kind of meditation is clearly a Eucharistic one, as the female is supposed to fantasize about the ingestion of Christ’s blood.

As discussed above, analogies comparing Christ’s body to vellum and his blood to ink were widespread during this period. The owner would have likely known of such comparisons, and so might have read the red pages of Egerton 1821 as the bleeding body of Christ. So, by touching them, rubbing them, and particularly kissing them, the viewer gained a physical proximity to Christ that he or she was otherwise denied, as the individual could literally put his or her mouth on Christ’s body and blood, becoming one with him via this codex. Thus reading is a performance of the sacrament, as the viewer is able to visually and even physically take in the Eucharistic wine and host.

The notion of a book being seen as more than just a book also invites a consideration of Egerton 1821 as a pseudo relic of sorts. Like the bleeding host representing Christ’s bleeding body, these “bleeding” pages are vivid material representations of Christ’s body (vellum) and blood (pigment). Patrick Geary sums up this point nicely in his discussion of medieval memory construction, noting that memories “corresponded to the circumstances of the present” rather than to the facts of the past. So, via the act of remembering Christ’s Passion, the pigment on the folios of Egerton 1821 could undergo a viewer-directed, near-Eucharistic transformation to the actual blood of Christ. Though some might claim that granting the codex relic-status is extreme, I believe that given the visual virtuosity that characterizes each of the wound-covered pages, it can be argued that the reader who touched these pages also experienced them as the bleeding skin of Christ.

**Sexing Blood and Body: Gender and Egerton 1821**

In studying Christ’s blood through a gendered lens and considering yet
another facet of this holy liquid, I will demonstrate how the reader of Egerton 1821 most likely thought of blood as a gendered, particularly feminized entity. Christ’s blood was widely considered to be life-giving and fertile. The widely espoused view of Christ’s blood and wounds as feminine, coupled with women’s anatomical predispositions to bleed in menstruating and giving birth, led to the first-ever instance of a female-centric devotional practice in Christian history. Given the centrality of blood in uniquely women’s late medieval devotional and meditative practices, then, we might consider whether the appropriation of such gendered imagery in Egerton 1821 might be visual evidence of the popularity—and success—of a quasi-liberatory religious movement for women that taught men and women alike of the power in essentializing the female body to gain close proximity to Christ. This final point will be explored in further detail in this section.

Lay and clerical devotees considered Christ’s blood to be (1) composed entirely of Mary’s uterine blood, which, in medieval scientific terms, meant that Christ’s body, too, was entirely made of her uterine blood, and (2) a life-giving substance, marking Christ as feminine, fertile, and even pregnant. The implications of each of these interrelated interpretations are far-reaching and hardly insignificant given that the viewer of Egerton 1821 was in all likelihood female. I should preface this section by noting that visually, the Passion-themed woodcuts of Egerton 1821 are not feminine in any obvious way, yet the copious amount of blood covering each of these images and their vellum backgrounds takes on gendered meaning when considering the ways a female owner would have understood blood as a partly feminized, female fluid.

In fifteenth-century medical doctrine, it was widely understood that the fetus was composed of entirely maternal uterine blood. From this medieval understanding of the formation of the fetus, we gather that Christ’s body and all its contents are made entirely of Mary’s uterine blood. Thus, his blood is the same as that of the Virgin Mary. This concept of Christ’s body and blood, which privileges the feminine form and fluids, became a widespread image of salvation in late medieval spirituality. Blood was intrinsically feminized, as was the body of Christ. Interestingly, the redemptive blood that Christ gives Christians in Eucharistic worship then, too, is Mary’s uterine blood.
Through menstruation, uterine blood marks fertility. Christ’s bloody sacrifice, though death was implicit, was a life-giving act for humanity. Thus viewing Christ’s body as a pregnant being, delivering life via his bloodshed, was yet another common visual and textual theological trope in the late fifteenth century. Tertullian (d. 220), among others, alluded to Christ’s blood as a type of seed from which the Christian faith grows, thus evoking positivity and literal life—via birth—that emerges from such clear signs of death and suffering. Fifteenth-century devotional writers built on this idea, conceptualizing the emission of blood from Christ’s wounds as a “flow of birthing.” This notion of Christ as a birthing being, or a pregnant one, marks him as a kind of androgynous redeemer.

Each of these painted markers of simultaneous birth and death in the codex would have visually prompted the owner to re-live Christ’s Passion. The owner may have wanted to remember Christ’s Passion viscerally and corporeally by imagining the pain he endured. Merback contends that late medieval depictions of wounds are “paradigmatic generators of horror, and perhaps also disgust, because of the way they locate perception at the pulsing boundaries of the body.” He indicates that “it is as if a fault line has opened up across the body’s topography, one that threatens to tear open ever wider expanses of the body’s hidden interior.” Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* also illuminates the hermeneutics of viewing pain and suffering. He argues that when someone suffers, “it is a moment of truth that all the spectators question: each word, each cry, the duration of the agony, the resisting body, the life that clung desperately to it, all this constitute a sign.” These “signs” of which Foucault writes would have likely resonated more strongly with female viewers than with their male counterparts in the case of Egerton 1821, as they employ a visual language that is inherently feminine as well as recall theological interpretations of Christ’s blood and wounds as feminized.

Though women were able to commiserate with Christ’s suffering via their ability to give birth, they were also kept from participating in certain devotional practices. In the tenth through twelfth centuries, though, women were allowed to participate and lead a number of semi-clerical tasks in the Church, including “preaching . . . bestowing blessings, and sometimes administering communion to themselves in rituals known.
as ‘masses without priests.’” However, these religious opportunities became suppressed in the mid-thirteenth century. Women were no longer allowed to teach, preach, touch sacred vessels, and “in general, the office of a man [was] forbidden to women.” Laywomen were expected to be passive “inspired vessels,” which was markedly different from men’s roles as “priest, preacher, and leader by virtue of clerical office.”

Though both men and women were denied access to the Eucharistic cup in fifteenth-century England, the stripping of women’s religious authority prompted the “fairer sex” to engage in an imagination-driven quest for Christ’s blood. These types of visions are, after all, “within the realm of female experience, with the heightened sensibility to pain, bodily suffering, and the possible incorporation of discrete bodies.”

Women’s fantasies of consuming Christ’s blood elicited radically frenzied moments that turned the most ordinary of women into zealous mystics. Late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century mystics like Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich had visionary, corporeal, and sensory-loaded experiences of Christ’s Passion; it seems that it was their biology that allowed for these brief albeit empowering moments with Christ. It was not just blood, though, that linked the suffering of Christ to women; visually, blood squirting from Christ’s right side was likened to milk coming from a mother’s breast. In suffering like Christ, women’s biology enabled them to be intercessory figures to Christ. Bynum contends that it is during this time that we can identify the first women’s movement of sorts in Christian history, as we “can speak of specifically female influences on the development of piety.” It appears that the central role that blood played in women’s piety was the catalyst of this newfound spiritually liberatory movement for women.

Ergo, considering the meaning and implications of Egerton 1821 in the context of this medieval blood frenzy and newfound spiritual space for women demonstrates the extent to which the codex is iconic of a somewhat emancipatory period of religious history. For medieval women, this codex is a visual embodiment of their new niche in spiritual devotion via the reclamation of their bleeding bodies that had been previously barred from misogynistic religious practices.
Conclusion

In “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Walter Benjamin writes that “artistic production begins with ceremonial objects designed to serve in a cult.” These objects have an irreuplicable “aura,” or an intrinsic essence that can be wholly experienced only when studying an original work of art. Egerton 1821 abounds in the Benjaminian aura—it presents the living blood of Christ to the viewer in a codex that resurrects both Christ and the fifteenth-century fanatical trends of blood devotion. It invites the viewer to relive and remember Christ’s Passion in a highly participatory, corporeal way. Made during a period when Christ’s body and blood were seen as partly female, it is difficult to disregard the relation that MS Egerton 1821 likely had to the then-contemporary establishment of a feminized spiritual space wherein women used that which made them less—their bodies—to access the non-corporeal essence of Christ. This focus on one’s own body, pain, and blood in contemplating Christ’s Passion provided for a powerful meditative experience that was hence appropriated by men and women alike.

The very materiality of late medieval objects of devotion was of paramount importance in eliciting such acute religious thought. The multivalency of the manuscript lends itself, in a characteristically medieval way, to a number of different secular and sacred readings, meanings, and interpretations. I have herein detailed what I believe to be the most likely modes of comprehension and consumption, though there are certainly others to consider.

End Notes

1. Francis Aidan Gasquet provides the most compelling and detailed argument supporting the theory that the codex was made for a Kentish woman in “An English Rosary Book of the 15th Century,” Downside Review 12 (1893): 215–28. Citations here are to a reprint of the article (Yeovil, 1894), pp. 3–16 in the British Library. I will later elaborate on the evidence Gasquet employs to arrive at this conclusion.

2. Caroline Walker Bynum, Wonderful Blood: Theology and Practice in
Late Medieval Northern Germany and Beyond (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 251.

3. The Priory of Sheen is also often referred to as Richmond Priory.


8. There is a trace of a jagged cut-out red page following this final woodcut. Only one centimeter of this page sticks out before the beginning of what is now folio 10r. However, there was clearly once another red page in existence covered with wounds.


11. Ibid., 16. The prominence accorded to female saints in both the litany and “daily exercise” is unusual; typically fewer female saints are featured in Rosary books of this period.

12. “Whoever wants to praise Christ and honor the Virgin Mary should raise up the heart, read and spread the rosary,” Parshall and Schoch, Origins, 185.

13. “Accept, Virgin, this golden Rosary / Adorned with a summary of the life of Christ” (my own translation).


15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.


21. Ibid.
25. Lowden, “Treasures.”
27. The Bible, King James Version, Isaiah 1:6 (1611).
29. Lowden, “Treasures.”
40. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 464.
44. Ibid., 464–65.
48. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Mary Carruthers’ s work on medieval memory theory in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), cited extensively by Parshall, also aids in an estimation of how Egerton 1821 may have been received by its owner. She contends that medieval images were intrinsically associated with remembering, just as religious meditation was an act of remembering. Indeed, in remembering, an internal image is/was created, too.
55. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
69. Ibid.
71. Ibid.