

# ‘Touch’

From Anglo-Norman and Old French *tocher, tochier, tucher, tuchier*.  
 To make contact with something using an instrument or a part of the body.  
 To discuss or mention.  
 To have sexual intercourse with.  
 To affect, influence.  
 To lay hands on to cure the king’s evil.  
 To stir the feelings or emotions.  
 To test the fineness of gold or silver.  
 To play a musical instrument.  
 To handle, eat, or drink.  
 To hit someone.

*OED*, ‘Touch’.

A touch, a touch; I do confess’t.

Laertes in William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (c. 1601).

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The codex encourages discontinuous reading. The fingers are themselves a crucial form of bookmark but they can be replaced by prosthetic fingers: pieces of paper or parchment; ribbons of linen or silk; pressed flowers; tabs or bobbles glued into the book itself.

Peter Stallybrass, ‘Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible’ (2002).

## Gill Partington & Adam Smyth

And when I touch you  
 I feel happy inside  
 It’s such a feeling that, my love  
 I can’t hide I can’t  
 hide I can’t hide

John Lennon and Paul McCartney,  
 ‘I Want to Hold Your Hand’ (1964).

The ‘medium of the tangible’, Aristotle wrote in his *De Anima* (On the Soul) (c. 350 BCE), ‘is flesh’.

If my left hand is touching my right hand, and if I should suddenly wish to apprehend with my right hand the work of my left hand as it touches, this reflection of the body upon itself always miscarries at the last moment: the moment I feel my left hand with my right hand, I correspondingly cease touching my right hand with my left hand.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964).

Touch itself as a reciprocal event

Taylor Hare and John Gullede, ‘Marking Readers’ (2023).

[W]e...flatter ourselves that we constitute the world, because it presents us with a spectacle spread out before us at a distance, and gives us the illusion of being immediately present everywhere and being situated nowhere. Tactile experience, on the other hand, adheres to the surface of the body; we cannot unfold it before us and it never quite becomes an object. Correspondingly, as the subject of touch, I cannot flatter myself that I am everywhere and nowhere; I cannot forget in this case that it is through my body that I go to the world...

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945).

*Tactus* (‘Touch’), an engraving by Dutch artist Crispijn van de Passe (c. 1565–1637), printed in Cologne around 1600, shows touch personified as a seated woman with a bird perching on the finger of her right hand. The bird is biting her finger. The woman’s left hand grips the fabric of her clothing. Behind the woman’s head, to her left, is a spiderweb with a spider in the centre: the spider is an iconic figure of touch since it extends its tactility into its own web. In the background, a genteel couple walk towards a town. The word ‘TACTUS’ floats high in the sky.



Crispijn van de Passe, *Tactus* (Cologne, late 16th/early 17th century). Folger Shakespeare Library. Creative Commons International License.



Andreas Vesalius, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (1543), p. 214. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public domain.

After Andreas Vesalius’ *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* (‘On the structure of the human body in seven books’) (1543), anatomical knowledge came to be seen less as a matter of returning to classical authorities like Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and Galen (129–216 CE), long passed down as written texts, and instead became the product of first-hand knowledge, of a direct, hands-on engagement with the body. Vesalius himself performed dissections and as a result discovered errors in the ancient authors’ teachings. His printed text *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* included more than 200 woodcuts produced by a skilled group of artists that probably included Jan Steven van Calcar (1499–1546), who trained in Titian’s workshop.

[I]f, with my eyes closed, I touch something that I cannot recognize, I will pull my hand back sharply in fear and revulsion.

Gabriel Josipovici, *Touch* (1996).

4. Tactile pillows.
5. Tactile sofas.
6. Tactile beds.
7. Tactile shirts and dresses.
8. Tactile rooms.

In these tactile rooms, we will have floors and walls made of large tactile boards. Tactile values of mirrors, running water, rocks, metals, brushes, lightly electrified wires, marble, velvet, rugs that will give the bare feet of the male and female dancers varied pleasures.

9. Tactile streets.
10. Tactile theatres.

We will have theatres arranged for Tactilism. Seated spectators will rest their hands on long, running tactile ribbons that will produce tactile sensations with different rhythms. It will also be possible to place these ribbons on small rotating wheels, accompanying them with music and light.

F.T. Marinetti, ‘Manifesto of Tactilism’ (1921).

Through touch, I am constantly ‘in touch’ with that which surrounds me. But also in those states it is difficult to say just where I end and the world begins. All the specific touches found in focal attentiveness are never separate from the total Touch as the constant field in which I live.

Don Ihde, *Sense and Significance* (1973).

And graven with diamonds in letters plain,  
 There is written her fair neck round about:  
 ‘Noli me tangere;’ for Cæsar’s I am,  
 And wild for to hold, though I seem tame.’

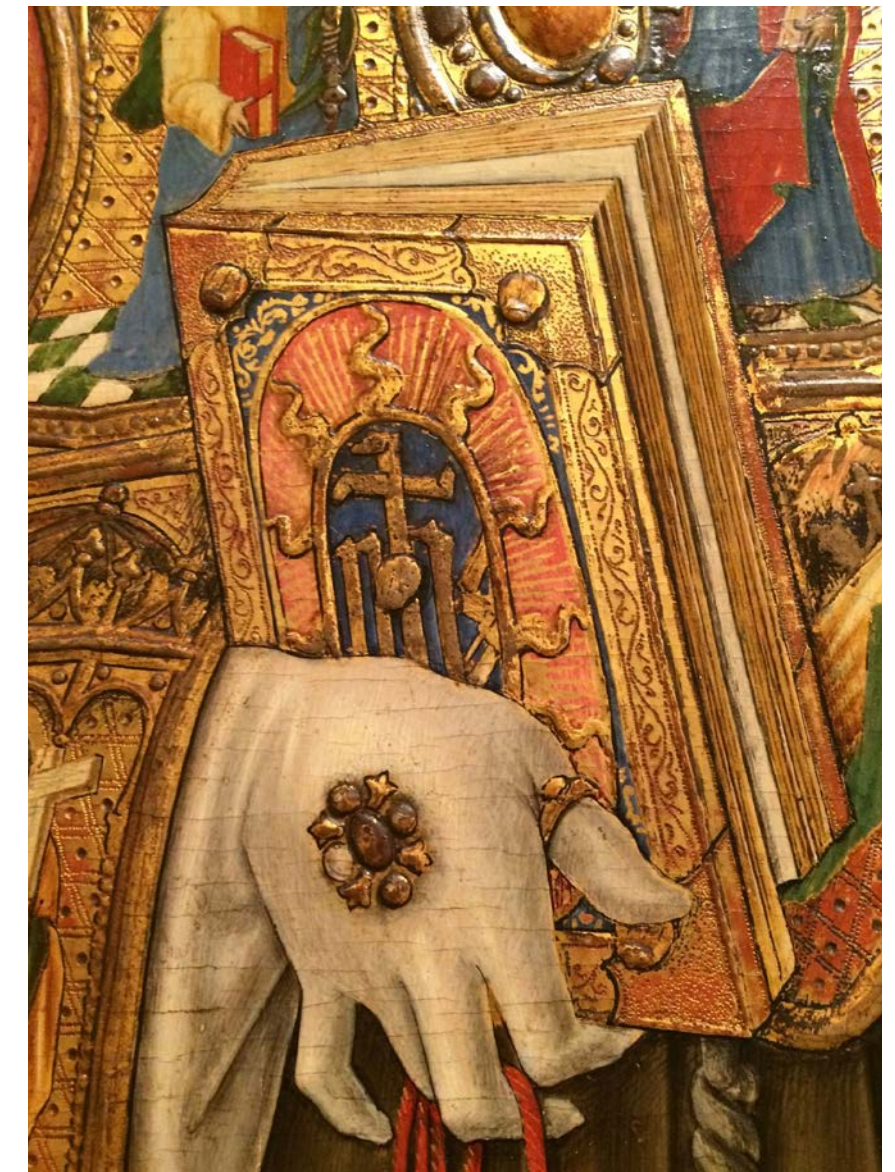
Thomas Wyatt, ‘Whoso List to Hunt’ (c. 1530).

Jesus saith unto her, Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.

John 20.17, King James Bible.

Of touch they are, that without touch doth touch

Philip Sidney, *Astrophil and Stella* (c. 1580s), sonnet 9.

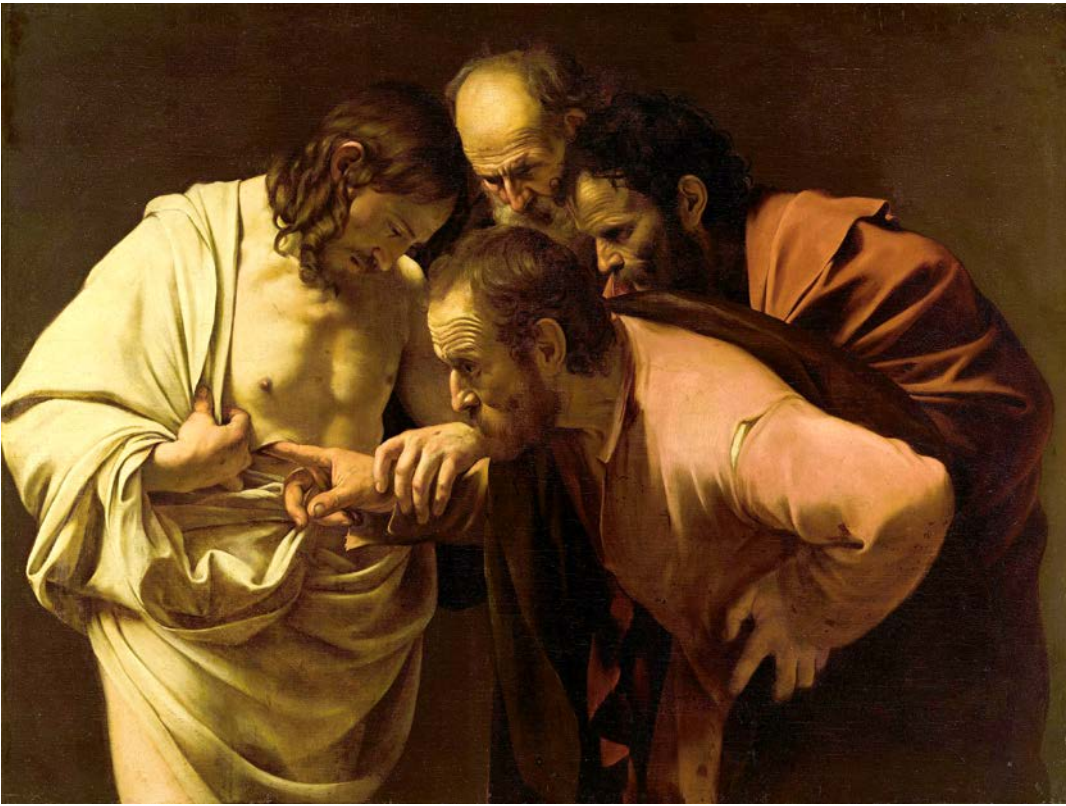


From Vittore Crivelli, 1481 altarpiece. Philadelphia Art Museum.

1. ‘touch me not’.

Equipment for seeing – and likewise for hearing, such as the telephone receiver – has what we have designated as the inconspicuousness of the proximally ready-to-hand. So too, for instance, does the street, as equipment for walking. One feels the touch of it at every step as one walks; it is seemingly the closest and Realest of all that is ready-to-hand, and it slides itself, as it were, along certain portions of one’s body – the soles of one’s feet.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927).



Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (c.1602). Saanssouci Picture Gallery, Potsdam, Germany. Public domain.

The 'royal touch' was the name given to the power of monarchs to miraculously heal their subjects of diseases through touch. Many in seventeenth-century England looked back to Edward the Confessor (reigned 1042–66) as the first monarch to practice the royal touch; it peaked with King Charles II (r.1660–85), who offered the curative 'royal touch' to over 92,000 sufferers of 'the King's evil', or scrofula (tuberculosis of the neck).

Fool, do not boast.  
Thou canst not touch the freedom of my mind.

The Lady to Comus, in John Milton, *A Mask presented at Ludlow Castle* (1634).

DO NO TOUCH! How many times do children hear this order? No one would ever say: do not look, do not listen, but touching is different. Evidently a lot of people think you can do without.

Bruno Munari, *The Tactile Workshops* (1985).

Touch has a memory. O say, love, say,  
What can I do to kill it and be free?

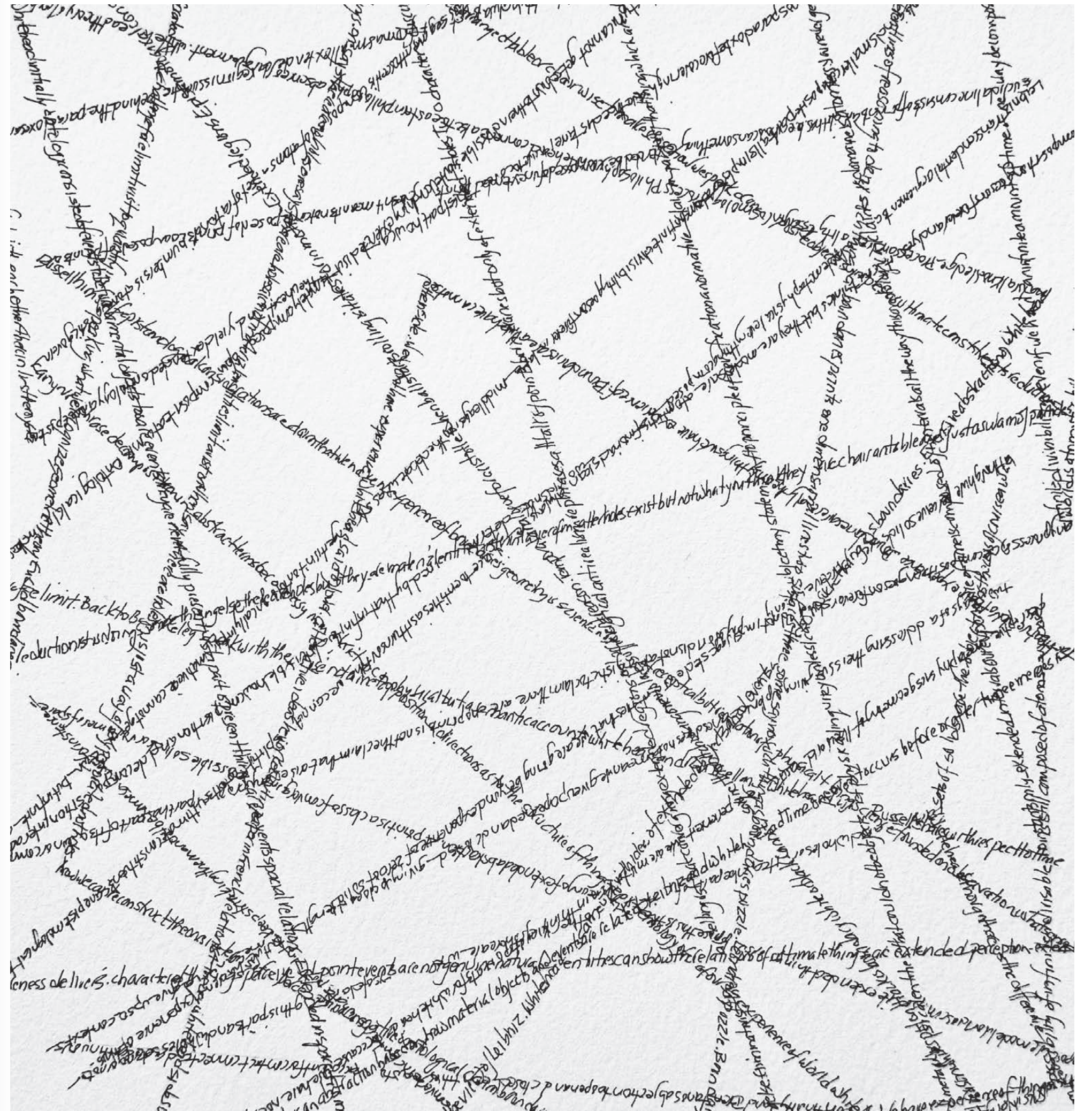
John Keats, 'What can I do to drive away ...'.

Again, it is part of the decency of scholars that whenever they return from meals to their study, washing should invariably precede reading, and that no grease-stained finger should unfasten the clasps, or turn the leaves of a book. Nor let a crying child admire the pictures in the capital letters, lest he soil the parchment with wet fingers; for a child instantly touches whatever he sees. Moreover, the laity, who look at a book turned upside down just as if it were open in the right way, are utterly unworthy of any communion with books. Let the clerk take care also that the smutty scullion reeking from his stewpots does not touch the lily leaves of books, all unwashed, but he who walketh without blemish shall minister to the precious volumes. And, again, the cleanliness of decent hands would be of great benefit to books as well as scholars, if it were not that the itch and pimples are characteristic of the clergy.

Richard de Bury, *Philobiblon* (c.1340).

Are you alive?  
I touch you.  
You quiver like a sea-fish.  
I cover you with my net.  
What are you – banded one?

H.D., 'The Pool' (1915).



Alice Attie, *Class Notes* (2022).