

46 Albin

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SPEAKERS

Olivia Branscum, Tianyi Ding, Milan Terlunen, Andrew Albin, Mansi Garneni

M Milan Terlunen 00:02

This is How To Read. I'm Milan.

O Olivia Branscum 00:06

And I'm Olivia, the producer of this episode.

O Olivia Branscum 00:10


Today we're speaking with Andrew Albin, a scholar of late medieval English literature and the history of the senses. This episode is about the sounds of medieval books.

O Olivia Branscum 00:23

Reading today is typically silent. Whether reading a book in a library or reading messages on our phones, we don't expect the activity to be noisy. At most, we expect the sound of a page quietly turning. But Andrew Albin is interested in the medieval period, when books made all kinds of sounds. Medieval books were noisy: they crackled and creaked, and were usually read aloud, even in private. Andrew argues that we should think of medieval books not just as objects to look at but as a kind of musical instrument that needs a reader to bring its sounds to life.

M Milan Terlunen 01:03

Andrew Albin, welcome.



A

Andrew Albin 01:05

Thank you.

M

Milan Terlunen 01:06

So today, we're going to talk about the sounds of medieval books. And the first question that I have is just, for people that don't know - what, what were medieval books, what were they like?

A

Andrew Albin 01:19

Yeah. So, Middle Ages, you're not getting identically printed, typeset, you know, you know, nicely edited books. You're getting...

M

Milan Terlunen 01:29

Because this before the invention of the printing press?

A

Andrew Albin 01:31

Exactly, exactly. Right, you're getting like handwritten, painstaking, you know, like objects of labor. But you have there, right, this body of, literally a body of material, right? Like the manuscript is a collection of animal skins that have been, you know, carefully scraped, and prepared and stretched and, and, you know, readied for...

M

Milan Terlunen 01:56

So they didn't have paper, they were writing on animal skins?

A

Andrew Albin 01:58

So they do have paper. Paper, I forget the exact date, but I think, you know, by the 13th century paper is an available writing surface. But it is primarily used for really workaday objects, right? If you're making a book, you're gonna be using parchment, because parchment is more durable. It's also more expensive. And books are prestige objects, especially if they're well prepared, and you know, illustrated. And I think the interesting thing about manuscripts, right, is that they're profoundly interactive objects, even though when we encounter them now, in the archive, like for good reasons, we're supposed to interact them with them as little as possible, in order to preserve them for future users who might want to consult them. And there's a part of me that's very, like, has a suspicion that archival practices end up re-enforcing intellectual practices, right, so like, our being forbidden from like, messing around with the manuscripts also encourages a style of thinking that engages with the manuscript as a visual object. And so part of the work that I'm trying to build now is to come up with styles of thinking about and working with manuscripts that reinvests them with sound.

M Milan Terlunen 03:17
Yeah... I'm just gonna check on this tea, and then I wanna ask you another question... Yeah, I would say that's alright - would you like some.

A Andrew Albin 03:29
Sure, thank you.

M Milan Terlunen 03:35
I'm now wondering, like, what what do manuscripts sound like?

A Andrew Albin 03:38
Yeah, this is fascinating, right? Um, so you know, you have the classic sound of like the turning page, but because it's made out of animal vellum, or animal parchment, it like, it has a different sound quality, right? Like it crinkles and cracks as you sort of turn the page. Because it's prepared skin, right. So it doesn't have the same kind of pliability, as, you know, pulp paper does, or or, you know, paper as we, as we use it today. So there's definitely a different sound quality there. But reading practices during the Middle Ages were really different from reading practices now.

M Milan Terlunen 04:18
Ok cos nowadays, yeah, I think silent reading is just the norm.

A Andrew Albin 04:21
Precisely, precisely.

M Milan Terlunen 04:22
Only children read aloud, or maybe audiobook professionals...

A Andrew Albin 04:26
Exactly, exactly. So I mean, there are a couple of things to say about that, right. You know, the idea that silent reading is the norm emerges in the 18th century, I think? 17th, yeah 18th century, in the 18th century. And has a lot to do with the wider availability of printed books,

and also the privatization, right, the sort of taking reading as a practice and doing it in the domestic space.

M Milan Terlunen 04:53

And so back in the medieval period, like how did sound play into their reading practices?

A Andrew Albin 04:58

So it was almost by default, you were speaking the texts in some form of out loud manner, right? Even when you were reading it by yourself.

A Andrew Albin 05:04

So not just for an audience.

A Andrew Albin 05:10

No, although, although part of the pleasure of books, of literature during the period was precisely that, was reading a text for an audience, right for social gathering, right? you'd read texts, and you'd share the story, and you'd talk about the story. And we have these great images and narrative scenes from literary texts that show us that book reading was a social practice. But even when you're reading a book by yourself, you're sort of sub-vocalizing the words right? You're sort of muttering them to yourself. And this is in part coming from monastic traditions, where when you read the Bible...

M Milan Terlunen 05:45

Monastic is like monastery?

A Andrew Albin 05:47

Yeah, as in monastery.

M Milan Terlunen 05:48

And monks...

A Andrew Albin 05:48

Right yeah, precisely, precisely. So part of your worship practice in the monastery is to read the Bible, and to reflect on the Bible. And their practices were very much about reading the Bible,

the Bible out loud. As part of the practice, you're supposed to chew over the words. And so as that practice, moves out into sort of wider public, and more people in a wider public acquire books and learn how to read and want to read, those practices end up spreading outward as well.

M Milan Terlunen 06:21
Yeah, I just want to pour some more tea actually.

A Andrew Albin 06:23
Yeah please...

M Milan Terlunen 06:23
Do you want some, Olivia? Do you want any more?

A Andrew Albin 06:25
Yeah, thank you.

M Milan Terlunen 06:30
There's some good, like, background noise of tea pouring...

O Olivia Branscum 06:34
Clinking porcelain...

A Andrew Albin 06:36
The social the social life of sound, right?

M Milan Terlunen 06:39
Right. Would you like some too? Ok...

M Milan Terlunen 06:44
So there's something kind of social, we have to think about when we think about like the sounds of reading for medieval people, we have to think about it as kind of social, right, like

sounds of reading for medieval people, we have to think about it as kind of social, right, like, we've talked about the sound of the pages...

M Milan Terlunen 06:55

... But we also have to think about kind of the, you know, the sounds of reading aloud with an audience, or even if there's not an audience, kind of the idea that there might be?

A Andrew Albin 06:55

Yeah.

A Andrew Albin 07:04

Yeah, and also like, because books are made out of parchment, right? That's living flesh...

M Milan Terlunen 07:11

Well, dead flesh...

A Andrew Albin 07:12

Dead flesh, but like once living, once living flesh. And the tactility of engaging with a medieval manuscript is really quite striking because you can feel with your hand, what side was the outside of the animal, what side was the inside of the animal, you can see on the page.

M Milan Terlunen 07:27

Like its skin, like which was the, which was the outside of its skin?

A Andrew Albin 07:31

The piece with the fur, and which was the piece that was the inside that was against the fat and the muscle? Yeah. And so as you're engaging with the book, it's this intensely corporeal, bodily, sensory, even sensual experience. And so the degree to which, like your body is pulled into the experience of reading a manuscript is much more intense than our modern experience of engaging with a printed book.

M Milan Terlunen 07:56

Do you, do you have any manuscript that we can kind of like, look at?

A Andrew Albin 08:00
Oh, I wish, I wish. I do have some animal parchment that I'm working on for a separate project, that I could...

M Milan Terlunen 08:09
This is animal parchment?

A Andrew Albin 08:10
Yeah, that's animal parchment.

M Milan Terlunen 08:11
Okay, can we, can we hear it, touch it? Okay, so this first of all, I think I need to narrate for listeners what we're seeing here. This is a huge sheet. It's kind of whitish, but I'm starting to see, I feel like I can see a vague animal shape and a spine. So yeah, tell us again, what we should be looking at.

A Andrew Albin 08:35
Yeah. So I mean, like, this is, this is a sheepskin. Okay. The hair side? I mean, like, if you feel...

M Milan Terlunen 08:42
Right, I'm gonna... Oh, yeah, it's fuzzy.

A Andrew Albin 08:46
It's fuzzy. It has a suede feel.

M Milan Terlunen 08:48
Suede. Yeah, exactly.

A Andrew Albin 08:49
And then you can feel the reverse...

M Milan Terlunen 08:54
This is a very large... Okay. Oh, and that's much more like leather. Yeah, yeah, like smooth.

A Andrew Albin 08:59
Yeah, very much, right?

M Milan Terlunen 09:00
Okay.

A Andrew Albin 09:02
So part of what's driving my thinking about this particular project, is trying to do that thing that I mentioned earlier about, trying to reinvest the manuscript with sound. And so part of what I'm trying to, like think through is, alright, so when we look at medieval books, we tend to think about them as if they were the ancestors of modern books, right? And so we tend to conceptualize them as if they were modern books.

M Milan Terlunen 09:33
Yeah, and all that kind of silent and smooth reading that we associate that with.

A Andrew Albin 09:38
Precisely. But, you know, as we were saying earlier, right, if the culture of aloud reading was such a big part of medieval books, medieval books and book reading. Then, as a technology, the medieval manuscript has to have been built knowing that its future was going to be in sound, and that most people were going to encounter what was inside the book through their ears and not through their eyes.

M Milan Terlunen 10:03
Yeah.

A Andrew Albin 10:03
And so for me, the way that I'm coming at that is to say, rather than compare the medieval book to a modern printed book, I want to compare the medieval book to a musical instrument. They're both sound producing technologies that require a human being to take them up to play with them, in order to make them produce the sound. And what's so interesting is I've been

doing some thinking about this and talking with, I have very dear and delightful friends who are professional musicians who specialized in early music. One in particular, Niccolo Seligmann, he specializes in bowed and plucked stringed instruments. And one thing that he sort of explained to me, which kind of blew my mind was, we have good evidence that medieval plucked stringed instruments, so the sort of flat surface, which creates the sounding board, so that part of the instrument, the flat top of the instrument, was oftentimes made out of parchment, rather than made out of wood.

M Milan Terlunen 11:07
So that same animal skin parchment?

A Andrew Albin 11:08
Same animal skin parchment. And most of the depictions that we have of medieval instrument, instrument players playing plucked string instruments, they're using a quill in order to pluck the strings. So the same materials...

M Milan Terlunen 11:21
Parchment and quill...

A Andrew Albin 11:22
Precisely right. The same materials that are used to write a book are the materials that go into making a medieval plucked string instrument make sound.

M Milan Terlunen 11:29
Do you have one of these instruments?

A Andrew Albin 11:30
Of course, yes.

A Andrew Albin 11:31
So this is the full quill, this is a, this is a turkey feather. And so Middle Ages - turkeys, probably not, but peacocks, for sure. And so you can sort of see, you have the writing end here? Yeah. If you were to snip this off the end, the inside would be hollow, it'd be a good place to sort of, you know, suck up ink, and then use ink in your writing. This is the end that points out. And so...

M Milan Terlunen 11:31
Can we see it? Can we hear it? So okay...

M Milan Terlunen 12:03
So there's a kind of, yeah, sort of a thin pointy end, the actual kind of feathers have been cut off. But we're just getting the kind of spine of the feather...

A Andrew Albin 12:09
Exactly, yeah, exactly. And so with this, this is the piece that would probably be parchment.

M Milan Terlunen 12:15
So I mean, for people that can't see this, so it looks loosely like a guitar. Yeah. And so the kind of the body, the sort of round part of the instrument, that would be where the parchment would be covering.

A Andrew Albin 12:27
Exactly, exactly, yeah. And so either the round part of the instrument, or in particular, the rose at the center...

M Milan Terlunen 12:31
The opening?

A Andrew Albin 12:35
Yeah, I've seen a lot of instrument makers say that they've created the roses out of like, multiple layers of parchment in order to create more elaborate designs. But yeah, I mean, you know... [sounds of stringed instrument] ... gives us a bit of a sound. These are not properly historical gut strings, these are synthetic strings.

M Milan Terlunen 13:00
The strings would have been made of guts?

A Andrew Albin 13:01
Yeah it would have been made out of probably cat gut

Yeah, it would have been made out of probably cat gut.

M

Milan Terlunen 13:04

So so many animals had to die for all of these books!

A

Andrew Albin 13:08

Absolutely. I mean, again, and this is one of the things like talking with the performers in Alkemie, you know, when they talk about their relationships to their instruments, and the ways that their instruments respond to the environmental conditions, right? The instruments are living objects, right? They swell, they change their tone, they become more temperamental, based on how humid, how hot, how cold, how crowded, the space that they're performing in. So...

M

Milan Terlunen 13:32

Cos there's all this like organic material?

A

Andrew Albin 13:34

Exactly, exactly. So, and books do the same things, right? You know, the reason why we have the metal clasps on medieval books, to sort of keep the covers closed, is the parchment that's in the middle, eventually is going to want to return to the shape of the animal, if it's given enough humidity. And so you have the clasps on the covers of the book, in order to keep it tightly squeezed shut, so that the pages don't warp and memory of the animal that it once was...

M

Milan Terlunen 14:06

Wow!

A

Andrew Albin 14:06

Right? So the instruments and the books are sort of living organic creatures. And I think that sets up a really interesting metaphor for thinking about how we could reimagine medieval book readers and their relationship to their books. And also reimagine our like intellectual or scholarly relationship to medieval books, right? If we re-encounter the medieval book as an instrument, rather than as a modern printed edition. And think about the medieval manuscript as a sonorous instrument that requires our interaction in order to make it sound again.

M

Milan Terlunen 14:45

Yeah we can't just look at it

Yeah, we can't just look at it.

A

Andrew Albin 14:46

Exactly, exactly. It's not how it was designed. It's not the technology.

M

Milan Terlunen 14:50

Yeah, right. Yeah. I love this idea of kind of like the book as like a sound producing technology, right, like, yeah, thinking about that parallel with the musical instrument and the book... Um, okay, I have a last question. It's slightly different, but, so, you know, you've talked about kind of the book as a sound technology and thinking about like the book as something to be read aloud. So, if you could have like, any person, let's say living, because then maybe it could happen, like any living person, read something aloud to you.

A

Andrew Albin 15:24

Mmmm...

M

Milan Terlunen 15:25

So book of your choice person of your choice. Who would you want to hear read to and what would they read?

A

Andrew Albin 15:33

Oh, gosh... Oh, gosh... So I have one answer that I can sort of gain access to because there's a recording of them reading this poem. Okay. One of my favorite poets Mark Doty has, oh I'll have to look up the title, has a poem, of which there is a recording of him thinking about and reflecting on his relationship with his partner who passed away from AIDS. And the recording is just... He's an amazing narrative poet. He spins a beautiful story he describes with such intensity, and it's this beautiful reflection on his, like, very fond and kind of melancholic... I wouldn't say melancholic, I'd say... wistful... recollections, and joyful recollections of his partner who has passed. And there's one line in the middle of the poem, "warm brown tea." That's part of a line. And the way he speaks it, every time I listen to it, I just get chills. It's so beautiful. And the poem is so touching.

M

Milan Terlunen 16:54

Wow. Okay, well, Andrew Albin, thank you very much.

A

Andrew Albin 16:58

Thank you so much. It's been such a delightful conversation.

Thank you so much, it's been such a delightful conversation.



Olivia Branscum 17:04

That's it for this episode. For links to books mentioned in our discussion, plus further reading, visit our website, howtoreadpodcast.com You can also listen to a bonus clip in which Andrew describes his collaboration with a sound artist on an art installation involving folded paper sculptures and a medieval Bible.



Milan Terlunen 17:24

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Olivia Branscum 17:34

... And by me, Olivia Branscum.



Mansi Garneni 17:38

With editorial assistance from me, Mansi Garneni...



Tianyi Ding 17:40

... And from me, Tianyi Ding.



Olivia Branscum 17:45

Our theme music is by Poddington Bear. Special thanks to Columbia University for its support. And thank you for listening!