

The Healing Power of Touch: Gestures, Objects and Rituals of Salvation

In recent years, scholars in the Humanities have paid increasing attention to the sensoria and the paradigms of sensory experiences lived by individuals and groups in Medieval and Early Modern Europe, exploring the social, cultural and spiritual values implied by sensation in that period. Extensive consideration has been given to sensorial stimulation in devotional practices and performances, with scholars showing the crucial part played by objects and rituals in activating the senses, arousing devotion and orientating the devotee's response. In fact, the senses were considered to be transmitters, allowing the transfer of qualities between objects, rituals and the perceivers. Touch, in particular, was believed to be a crucial implement in permitting the direct passage of virtues between the material objects of devotion and the faithful.

This paper is devoted in particular to the healing power associated with touch and with the gestures, objects and rituals where it played a central role as agent of spiritual and physical salvation. Sets of different materials will be examined comparatively in order to tackle the topic from diverse and complementary perspectives. The intellectual framework for the discussion will be provided by texts of natural philosophy, medicine and theology. Hagiographical texts, such as *Vitae Sanctorum* and narratives relating to healing miracles, together with chronicles and records composed by pilgrims and devotees, will grant a glimpse at lived experiences and daily practices. Finally, material implements of devotion, such as shrines, reliquaries, manuscripts, objects and performances of different kinds, will be examined as tools which mediated, through bodily contact, the devotee's encounter with the divine, initiating miraculous healings. The overall discussion will also comprise substitutes used by the faithful when a direct contact with holy places and materials was limited or not possible, such as fragments of tombs, or even carbon generated by the burning of incense, pieces of wax from candles, and drops of the oil used in saint's shrines which were brought to sick people who could not move and visit the holy place; but also alternative practices such as blessing the devotees with arm-shaped reliquaries as means of transmitting the saints' power and grace through gesture rather than direct contact.