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Fig. 1.

This article focuses on medieval improvisation and intervention in the production of MS Ashmole 33, Bodleian Library, Oxford, a parchment-wrapped 14th-century manuscript containing medieval romances. This book's limp binding consists of two wrappers, now detached from the text-block. Fig. 2 shows Stephen H. Shepherd's speculative reconstruction of these wrappers. The pair of parchment wrappers were made from recycled papal and clerical documents. Remarkably, the wrappers also carry a written draft of *Sir Firumbras*, a Middle English romance found in full in the main body of the book.

In this unusual and rare survival, both draft and fair copy of the romance coexisted until the former was used as an improvised binding to wrap the latter. In addition, the materials of this manuscript demonstrate multiple interventions by medieval bookbinders: recycled parchment was used for the draft copy, then the fair copy was written, the text-block was bound, and the draft copy formed a double wrapper. Fig. 1 shows one of those wrappers, the outer layer of limp binding, as it survives now. This extraordinary case study demonstrates the

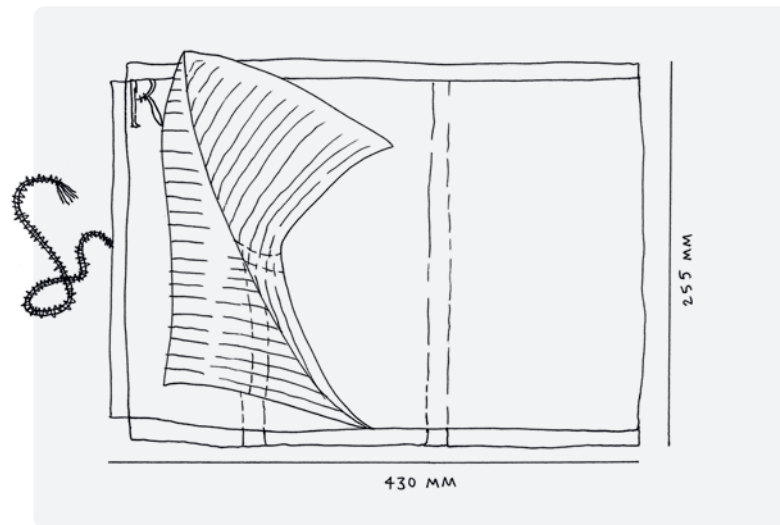


Fig. 2.

range and ingenuity of medieval improvisation and intervention in bookbinding.

Medieval books were diverse, and were clothed with an array of binding designs. Manuscripts could be so large that

they were difficult to move, such as the huge books made to be seen by a whole choir of singers, or so small that they fitted comfortably in the palm of the hand, such as tiny Books of Hours. Bindings on these variably-sized books might take the form of leather covers over wooden boards, which could be made of tanned leather or alum-tawed skin, and then might be blind-tooled, stamped, or treated with *cuir-ciselés* (cut or chiselled leather). Some were fitted with coverings to enable the owner to wear the book on the hip as a girdle book. There were high-end commissions too, such as lavish textile bindings, and treasure bindings. Another option was to wrap the book in limp covers – known in medieval library catalogues as *libri sine asseribus* (literally, ‘books without boards’), in *quaterno* (a booklet or pamphlet), *sine postibus* (‘without posts’, so, without sewing supports), or in *pergameno* (‘in parchment’).¹

In all their varied forms, manuscripts demonstrate medieval improvisation and intervention in bookbinding. Many original bindings are still intact today and provide valuable evidence for the historic development of this craft skill. Fashions wax and wane, and binding is no exception. The continued existence of bookbindings on codices from the early Anglo-Saxon period, as well as those from the later Middle Ages, such as the case study explored here, indicates the quality and resilience of many medieval binding techniques. These ‘original’ bindings are not the only survivors: bindings can be fragmentary, and some bindings may be dated to the medieval period but constitute second or third replacements for earlier coverings. Fragmentary scraps of bindings may be found incorporated into other manuscripts or early print books as waste material, especially where they are ‘limp’ soft coverings in nature. After all, medieval books take a remarkable variety of forms.

MS ASHMOLE 33

The boardless binding on which this article focuses is a parchment-wrapped late 14th-century manuscript containing medieval romances. This collection includes the romances *Roland and Ferragus*, *Sir Otuel*, and the unique copy of *Sir Firumbras*, (also known as *Sir Ferumbras* or *Sir Fyrumbras*). The text-block itself is conventional enough – a handwritten collection of romances on paper, probably written sometime in the 1380s, now with some leaves lost. Its binding, however, is more unusual. It is limp, formed of two parts, each of which is folded from parchment. Technically, the limp binding no longer serves its full function as a covering. It is now detached and kept in a conservation box, stored alongside the text-block. MS Ashmole 33, then, is a book in bits, surviving as separate components.

These book components demonstrate medieval improvisation and intervention through efforts taken to recycle material and to make the book durable. While all manuscripts demonstrate multiple campaigns of production, for example, the work of parchmenters, scribes, and binders, here I will focus on two specific interventions in MS Ashmole 33: redrafting, and double-wrapping. These interventions are not unusual in and of themselves. Indeed, most medieval books were probably the product of redrafting. However, I attend to the combination of creative choices present in this unusual bookbinding. Not only is the combination of redrafting and double-wrapping rare in the history of medieval bookbinding, these interventions were also undertaken with a further purpose in mind: to sustain the book.

REDRAFTED

The first striking intervention by the person who bound this manuscript was the decision to make the pair of parchment wrappers from recycled parchment. Salvaged papal and clerical documents relating to the dioceses of Exeter and Sherborne in the South West of England have been repurposed, perhaps by a clergyman, to form the coverings.² The outer wrapper is “a letter executor of a bull of pope Innocent VI for the presentation of Thomas de Silton to the vicarage of Columpton, in the diocese of Exeter, then vacant by the death of Peter Moleyns,” dating to 1357 (Fig. 3 shows the written inside face of the outer wrapper). The inner cover, which dates to 1377, “is a very long and imperfect public instrument,” regarding a tiff between the rector Roger Langman and the vicar John Brygge over a burial ground adjacent to the chapel of Holne (Fig. 4 shows the outside of the inner cover as it appears when completely unfolded, and Fig. 5 shows the inside of the same inner cover).³

Unusually, the material encasing this manuscript also carries a holograph draft version of 800 lines or so of *Sir Firumbras*, one of the Middle English romances found in full in the main body of the book. In this rare survival, both draft and fair copy of the romance coexisted, and an improvised binding was fashioned from the former to wrap the latter. As Phillipa Hardman notes, this manuscript presents a “very rare opportunity to see the ‘foul paper’ [...] state of a Middle English text”.⁴ While recycling bits of books is common, and there are several examples of reused parchment used to wrap other medieval books, which still carry visible or partly-visible writing, I am not aware of any other medieval limp wrappers which bear a draft of the main text in this way. Extraordinarily, then, the book continues to coexist with an earlier version of itself, its draft like a sloughed-off skin.

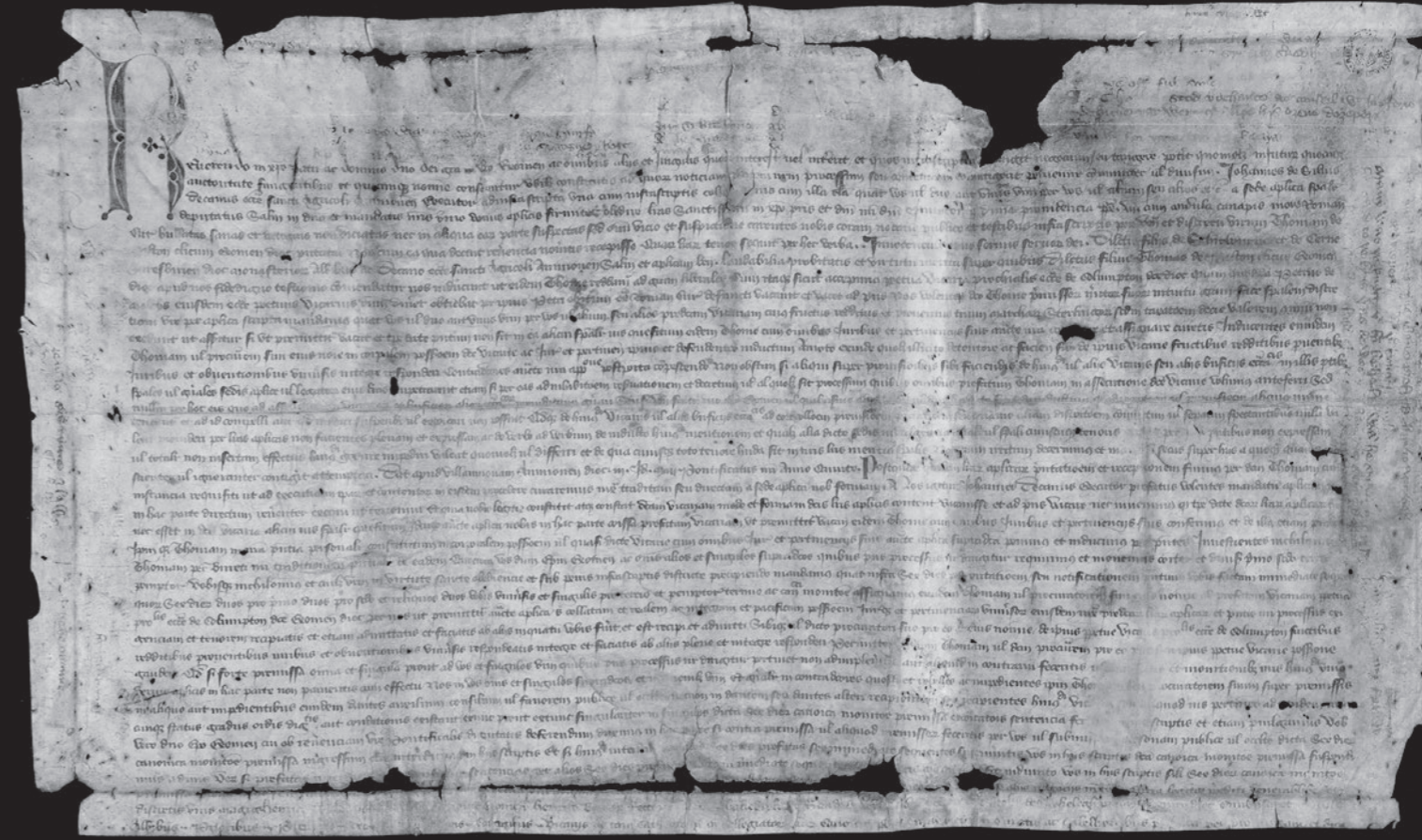


Fig. 3.

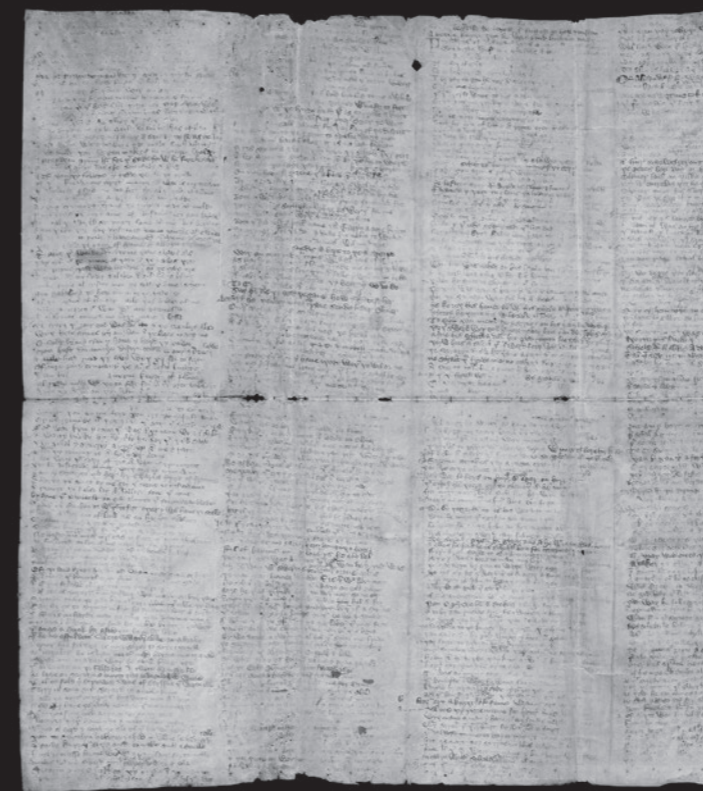


Fig. 4.

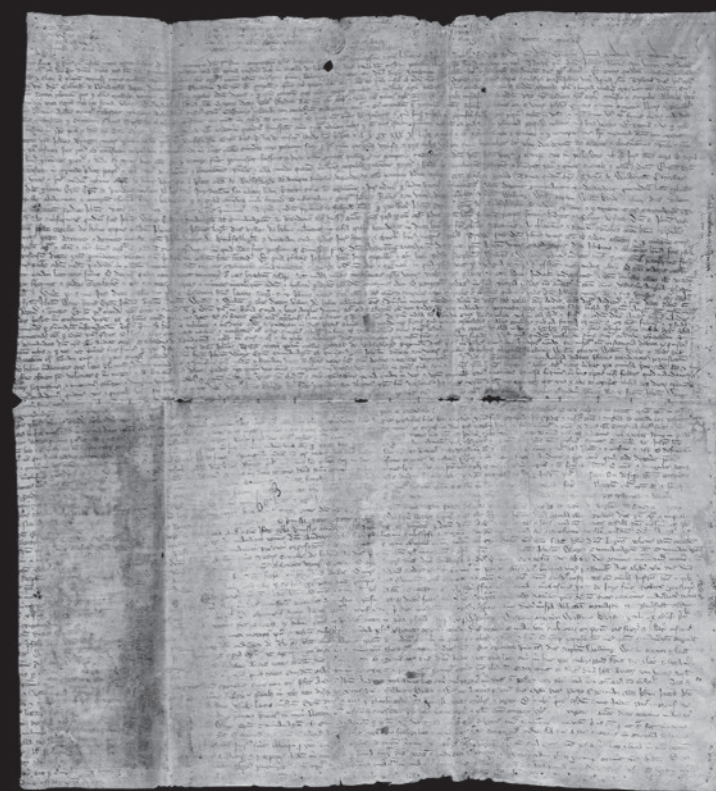


Fig. 5.

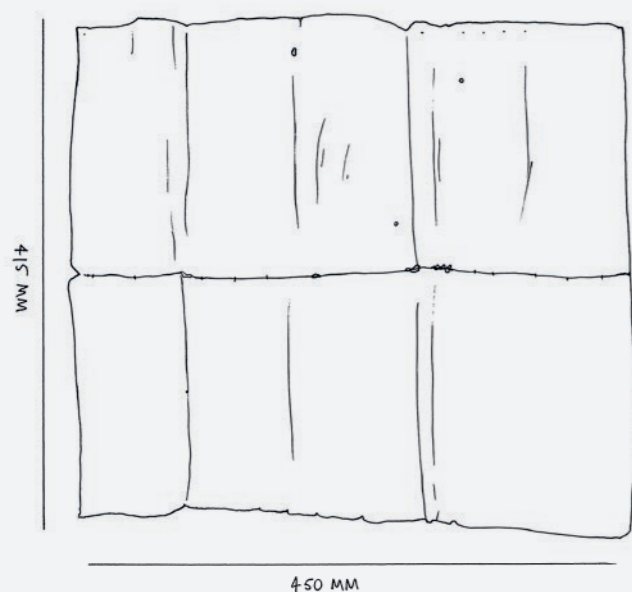


Fig. 6.

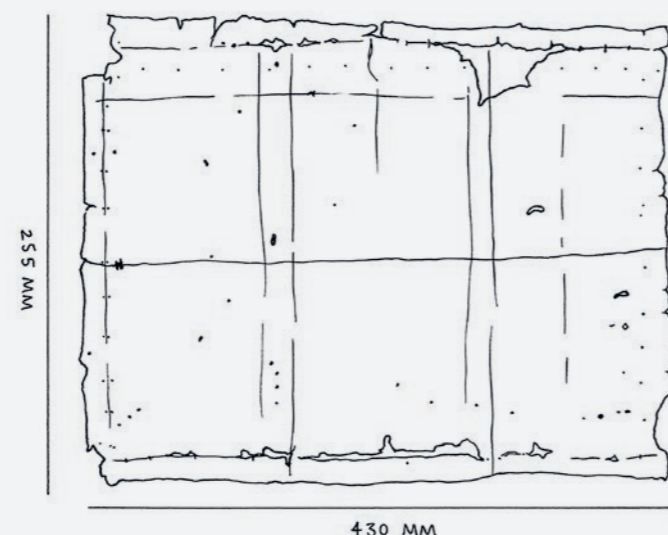


Fig. 7.

DOUBLE-WRAPPED

The second notable intervention is the way in which the wrappers enclose the text-block. Typically, many medieval limp bindings were sewn to the spine, tacketed (attached with a loop of flexible material, which could be laced through multiple holes) or stab-stitched through the quire. However, for the simplest limp binding structures, the cover was sometimes not stitched at all. Some limp bindings were something like a modern-day folder format. Loose, folder-like covers are, though, susceptible to loss or destruction, making them rare survivals and therefore more difficult to study. Limp wrappers are thought not to survive well because they are presumed to be ephemeral or temporary binding solutions. This is not necessarily the case. Surviving limp wrappers, such as MS Ashmole 33, suggest a latent potential for long-term endurance.

For this manuscript, the two pieces of parchment were shaped into a double-lined protective shell, which ultimately results in three layers of parchment, due to the extra folds made to fit the wrapper around the text-block. The inner cover, which measures 450 × 415mm when unfolded, is made of thinner parchment. This is perhaps the reason why it was folded in half, and then in half again, to fit the text-block and to better protect the

manuscript. This cover also has an extra overhanging flap of parchment. Fig. 6 shows the inner cover unfolded, and outlines fold creases. The outer cover, on the other hand, is made of thicker, stiffer parchment, which is discoloured and has become shiny in parts with wear (see Fig. 2 for a colour image, showing the shiny worn quality of the parchment). When unfolded the outer cover measures 255 × 430mm. It was kept single-ply and folded in three around the text-block. Fig. 7 shows the outer cover unfolded, and highlights where the folds fall. Parchment is springy, and – as treated skin – tends to try to return to the shape of the animal, a phenomenon known as the *sens de la peau* (“impression of the skin”).⁵ In this case, the folds have taken so well that both covers spring back to their folded form (see again Fig. 2, which shows the cover as if in motion, returning to its folded form).

Though these covers might sound slapdash – mismatched covers thrown together from whatever is to hand, which happens to be old drafts on parchment – the construction is inspired. Larger pieces of parchment have been folded down to make a resilient double-wrapped, folder-like protective wrapper. This design conforms to the tendency, identified by Nicholas Pickwoad, for binders to use overlarge leaves in their construction of manuscript limp covers.⁶ This makes sense when we consider the expediences and practical benefits of using a bigger piece of material to wrap a book. The production of both wrappers on MS

Ashmole 33 was remarkably efficient (just folding, no trimming or stitching) and folding down large leaves has resulted in multiple-ply protection. While this may be a scrappy-looking binding, care was taken to fold it into a protective enclosing wrapper.

IMPROVISATION AND INTERVENTION

But what of medieval bookbinders’ improvisation and intervention? Improvisation, etymologically, “is modern in all European languages” so the word itself was not known to those in the Middle Ages.⁷ And the etymology of ‘intervention’ finds its origins in Latin, with the Middle English word *intervencioun* meaning ‘intercession’ or ‘intercessory prayer’.⁸ As we have seen in this case study, the important sense of these words for my purposes here is something more like a campaign of creativity, perhaps impromptu, and in some ways distinct from the usual course of action involved in the production of a binding. Whether medieval people had the words to express this sense matters less than the fact that they left evidence of those concepts in action.

Like their modern-day counterparts, medieval bookbinders married finely-tuned craftsmanship with improvisation. Then as now, medieval binding work required craft skills, bodily practices honed by tradition and repetition. As Richard Sennett explores in *The Craftsman*, haptic engagement, the synthesis of mind with matter, can yield both happy accidents and deliberate experiments. The inspired interventions in the binding of MS Ashmole 33 certainly made the most of available materials, and did so in such a way that the book preserved both the processes of poetic production, and the techniques of protective wrapping. As this case study has shown, not only did medieval bookbinders experiment with the materials at their fingertips, they also undertook interventions that tweaked or disrupted the usual ways of doing things. The hard-won muscle-memory of making by hand can lead to serendipitous moments in which truly remarkable innovation takes place.

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NOTES

1. For definitions, see *The Language of Bindings Thesaurus*, and the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*.
2. Nicholas Perkins and Alison Wiggins note that this “suggests the composer was a clergyman of some sort with access to such materials,” in *Romance of the Middle Ages*, p.65.
3. Henry Black, *Quarto Catalogue, X*, pp.14-15; Gisela Guddat-Figge, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Middle English Romances*, p.245.
4. Phillipa Hardman, ‘Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 33: Thoughts on Reading a Work in Progress’, p.88.
5. Denis Muzerelle, *Vocabulaire codicologique, s.n.* sens de la peau.
6. Nicholas Pickwoad draws this conclusion from his studies of post-medieval limp bindings, however, it is readily applicable to medieval limp bindings too, ‘The Use of Fragments of Medieval Manuscripts in the Construction and Covering of Bindings on Printed Books’, p.4.
7. Leo Treitler, ‘Medieval Improvisation’, p.2.
8. For a definition, see the *Middle English Dictionary*.