BINDING OF A BREVIARY, FIFTEENTH CENTURY (BACK).
On the Influence of Good Binding.

Among the elements which constitute the value of a book—rarity of course being essential—one might say he counted the binding highest. He was not alone in this view, for it would be difficult to give the uninitiated a conception of the importance attached to this mechanical department of book-making by the adepts. About a third of Dibdin’s Bibliographical Decameron is, if I recollect rightly, devoted to bindings. There we find binders who have immortalized themselves—as Staggemier, Walther, Payne, Padaloup, Herig, De Rome, Boyerian, Du Seul, Bradel, Faulkner, Lewis, Hayday, and Thompson. Their names may sometimes be found on their work, not with any particularities, as if they required to make themselves known, but with the simple brevity of illustrious men. Thus, you take up a morocco-bound work of some eminence, on the title-page of which the author sets forth his full name and profession, with the distinctive initials of certain learned societies to which it is his pride to belong; but the simple and dignified enunciation, deeply stamped in his own golden letters, ‘Bound by Hayday,’ is all that that accomplished artist deigns to tell.

And let us, after all, acknowledge that there are few men who are entirely above the influence of binding. No one likes sheep’s clothing for his literature, even if he should not aspire to Russia or morocco. Adam Smith, one of the least showy of men, confessed himself to be a beau in his books. Perhaps the majority of men of letters are so to some extent, though poets are apt to be ragamuffins. It was Thomson, I believe, who used to cut the leaves with his snuffers. Perhaps an event in his early career may have soured him of the proprieties. It is said that he had an uncle, a clever active mechanic, who could do many things with his hands, and contemplated James’s indolent, dreamy, “feckless” character with impatient disgust. When the first of ‘The Seasons’—‘Winter’ it was, I believe, had been completed at press, Jamie thought, by a presentation copy, to triumph over his uncle’s scepticism, and to propitiate his good opinion he had the book handsomely bound. The old man never looked inside, or asked what the book was about, but, turning it round and round with his fingers in gratified admiration, exclaimed: ‘Come, is that really our Jamie’s doin’, now? Well, I never thought the cratur wad hae had the handicraft to do the like!’

The feeling by which this worthy man was influenced was a mere sensible practical respect for good workmanship. The aspiration of the collectors, however, in this matter go out of the boundaries of the sphere of the utilitarian into that of the aesthetic. Their priests and prophets, by the way, do not seem to be aware how far back this veneration for the coverings of books may be traced, or to know how strongly their votaries have been influenced in the direction of their taste by the traditions of the Middle Ages. The binding of a book was of old a shrine on which the finest workmanship in bullion and the costliest gems were lavished. The psalter or the breviary (see opposite page) of some early saint, a portion of the Scriptures, or some other volume held sacred, would be thus enshrined. It has happened sometimes that tattered fragments of them have been preserved as effective relics within outer shells or shrines; and, in some instances, long after the books themselves have disappeared, specimens of these old bindings have remained to us beautiful in their decay.”—Burton (“The Bookhunter”).