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Introduction

Medieval Openness

MANUELE GRAGNOLATI AND ALMUT SUERBAUM

Umberto Eco, the great semiotician but also medievalist, presents a compelling sketch of a history of art, science, and culture progressing in openness in his essay ‘The Poetics of the Open Work.’¹ Works of art have always been open to interpretation, but in his account artists move from seeking to control the range of interpretation to encouraging it, as an ‘imperial and theocratic society’ with an ‘authoritarian regime’ (52) gave way to a more enlightened one, informed by a ‘modern scientific universe’ (57) that opens up towards empiricism and eventually post-Newtonian relativity and indeterminacy. Although there are some references to antiquity, Eco’s history begins with the Middle Ages as the pinnacle of closure:

In every century the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality. The closed, single conception in a work by a medieval artist reflected the conception of the cosmos as a hierarchy of fixed, preordained orders. (57)

The present volume challenges in different ways such a diagnosis of non-openness, albeit without claiming that medieval works are open

1 Umberto Eco, ‘The Poetics of the Open Work’, in *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1979), pp. 47–66. See also his *The Open Work*, trans. by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

in Eco's sense. Here, we would like to highlight that Eco's notion of an open work relies on a modern conception of the work of art and that this conception enacts its own closures.

Eco is quite explicit in situating his argument within an aesthetic theory that 'aspires to general definitions', and applies them 'to a whole variety of experiences, which can range from the *Divine Comedy* to, say, electronic composition', but that rests on a closely circumscribed notion of a 'work of art' in relation to its author:

[O]ur Western aesthetic tradition forces us to take 'work' in the sense of a personal production which may well vary in the ways it can be received but which always maintains a coherent identity of its own and which displays the personal imprint that makes it a specific, vital, and significant act of communication. (63)

However, such a notion of a work of art is not merely Western, but also modern; and even if Dante was perhaps among the first to perform it, more recent scholarship on medieval music, visual art, and literature has shown that conceptions of openness and, in the words of modern textual scholarship, *mouvance* were pervasive in medieval culture.²

In referring to medieval theories of the fourfold sense of Scripture, which could be read not only literally but also allegorically, morally, and anagogically, Eco admits that medieval art may have 'a measure of openness', but contends that

in this type of operation, 'openness' is far removed from meaning 'indefiniteness' of communication, 'infinite' possibilities of

2 For medieval music, see *Manuscripts and Medieval Song: Inscription, Performance, Context*, ed. by Helen Deeming and Elizabeth Eva Leach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). *Leaves from Paradise: The Cult of John the Evangelist at the Dominican Convent of Paradies bei Soest*, ed. by Jeffrey Hamburger (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Library of the Harvard College Library, 2008), analyses the ways in which scribes and artists in medieval convents used their knowledge of exegetical and iconographical traditions to compose new and often striking juxtapositions and interpretations. For *mouvance* within textual transmission, see Paul Zumthor, *Essai de poétique médiévale* (Paris: Edition du Seuil, 2000); Simon Gaunt, 'Discourse Desired: Desire, Subjectivity and *Mouvance* in *Can vei la lauzeta mover*', in *Desiring Discourse: The Literature of Love, Ovid through Chaucer*, ed. by James Paxson and Cynthia Gravlee (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1998), pp. 89–110; Almut Suerbaum, 'Es kommt ein schiff, geladen: *Mouvance* in mystischen Liedern aus Straßburg', in *Schreiben und Lesen in der Stadt: Literaturbetrieb im spätmittelalterlichen Straßburg*, ed. by Stephen Mossman, Nigel F. Palmer, and Felix Heinzer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 99–116.

form, and complete freedom of reception. What in fact is made available is a sense of rigidly preestablished and ordained interpretative solutions, and this never allows the reader to move outside the strict control of the author. (51)

While Eco cites Dante merely as an example and insists on a much longer tradition developed by authors writing in Latin (from St Jerome and Augustine to Hugh and Richard of St Victor, Bonaventure, and Aquinas) and referring to the exegesis of the Scriptures and classical texts, also written in Latin, we highlight the novelty of Dante's attempt to enact the kind of closure practised for classical texts and the Scriptures on his own vernacular texts.

Indeed, by focusing on Dante one can speak of the birth of the modern author and work of art, and describe this process as a move towards increasing closure.³ In this respect, the case of the *Vita Nova* is particularly instructive insofar as it lays out the textual strategies exerting control and fixity over a material that was fluid and open: while Dante, following contemporary custom, had begun his activity as a lyric poet by composing *rime*, i.e. stand-alone, independent poems that were not meant to be related to one another and whose meaning was often left open to the interpretation of fellow poets, the *Vita Nova* collects thirty-one of these lyrics and, through a prose commentary that is meant to specify their meaning once and for all, inserts them into a unitary and teleological first-person narrative describing the protagonist's ideal discovery of a correct form of desiring and writing. In this way, a new, individualized authorial figure emerges: the figure of the modern author controlling and guaranteeing the work's identity, coherence, and meaning.⁴

The *Vita Nova's* performance of an author proved so successful that subsequent readers have taken it at face value and found it hard to undo Dante's imposition of a rigid, new meaning on the *rime* and to recover the openness they originally had — something made even more difficult by the decision of most editions of the *rime* to exclude

3 See Albert Ascoli, *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

4 See Manuele Gagnolati, 'Authorship and Performance in Dante's *Vita nova*', in *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Manuele Gagnolati and Almut Suerbaum (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), pp. 123–40.

the lyrics included in the *Vita Nova*.⁵ Thus, the *Vita Nova* represents a model for how modern notions of work of art and authorship have retroactively curtailed the open, fluid, and indeterminate character of much medieval cultural production. At the same time, even for Dante's *Divine Comedy* one may question — as Nicolò Crisafi does in this volume — whether it is as closed as Eco suggests by mentioning it at one end of the range of experiences that his aesthetic theory narrates as a progression towards open works. Nonetheless, Eco's account remains inspiring insofar as it highlights how those works that in his conception are the most radically open — by leaving their interpreters and readers the freedom to finish them in all kinds of unpredictable ways — rely on an equally radical closure that ensures their 'coherent identity' bound to the imprint of their author, who ultimately functions like the God of Spinoza.

The essays in this volume seek to understand manifold kinds of medieval openness that become visible when one refrains from modern assumptions, and are also interested in how articulations of openness in the Middle Ages often stand in creative tension with forms of closure and can even be empowered by them.⁶ The chapters highlight the complex relationship between author, work, and text,⁷ but also explore several, often paradoxical, ways in which medieval culture mobilizes forms, practices, and experiences of openness without having a single abstract concept for it.⁸

5 See Manuele Gragnolati, 'The Lyric Poetry', in *Dante's 'Other' Works*, ed. by Zygmunt Baranski and Theodore J. Cachey, Jr (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 2022), pp. 1–34.

6 On the inevitable interconnectedness of openness and closure, see Cary Howie, *Claustrophilia: The Erotics of Enclosure in Medieval Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

7 Roland Barthes, 'From Work to Text', in his *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 155–64, provides a framework for these distinctions; on Barthes and medieval studies see *The Case for a Medieval Barthes*, ed. by Jennifer Rushworth and Francesca Southerden (= *Exemplaria*, 33.3 (2021)). For a medieval context and the new modes of reading developed in the thirteenth century, see Vincent Gillespie, 'From the Twelfth Century to c.1450', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*, 9 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990–2013), 11, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson (2005), pp. 145–235; Lukas Rösli and Stefanie Gropper, in the introduction to *In Search of the Culprit: Aspects of Medieval Authorship*, ed. by Lukas Rösli and Stefanie Gropper (Berlin, De Gruyter, 2021), pp. 9–16, provide a discussion of the relationship between work and text in the context of *mouvance* in transmission.

8 The most commonly used term in Latin is *aperire* (to open), which can refer to physical as well as metaphorical or interiorized opening; see Byrne in this volume on

Recent interest in the materiality of medieval culture, the physical dimension of textuality and transmission, as well as the performative nature of medieval writing and reading has shed light on the range of levels on which readers and listeners engage with a text.⁹ The ‘material turn’ of medieval studies has insisted that manuscripts are physical objects, and that the tactile handling of these objects was an integral part of medieval reading practices. Medieval thinkers and artists therefore frequently highlight the physical act of opening a book, and in turn reflect on the act of reading as an opening up of the mind or the text.¹⁰ Medieval readers would have been reminded of the significance of reading, speaking, and opening one’s mind at the start of each day when reciting the opening words of Psalm 51: ‘Domine labia mea aperies’ [Lord, open thou my lips].

While the Divine Office, the recitation of psalms across each day and week, was developed for monastic settings, the practice spread to lay circles as well. Psalm 51 opens the *Hours of the Virgin*, a compilation of psalms and prayers with a focus on Mary which became increasingly popular in prayer books for lay readers, especially women.¹¹ The

its use in scholastic thought, and Giusti on its significance in Augustine’s *Confessions*, whereas Otter discusses the literary uses in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Vita Merlini*. For vernacular terminology, Gragnolati and Southerden discuss Petrarch’s use of *m’apersè* (to open) in the *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, whereas Otter and Suerbaum highlight the paradoxical nature of Gottfried’s Middle High German term *offenliche* (openly) with its tensions between public and secret; this association between openness and public space is addressed in Sutherland for the Latin and Middle English accounts of the biblical stable which leaves its inhabitants *al opene* (exposed) to the elements.

9 See, for instance, *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Gragnolati and Suerbaum; Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) and *The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric, and the Making of Images, 400–1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy: Studies in the History of Written Culture*, ed. and trans. by Charles M. Radding (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Laurel Amtower, *Engaging Words: The Culture of Reading in the Later Middle Ages* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); *Orality and Literacy in the Middle Ages: Essays on a Conjunction and its Consequences in Honour of D. H. Green*, ed. by Mark Chinca and Christopher Young (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005).

10 On reading practices and the shift from corporeal to mental images, see Susie Nash, ‘Meditation and Imagination’, in her *Northern Renaissance Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 271–88, and Jeffrey Hamburger, *The Visual and the Visionary: Art and Female Spirituality in Late Medieval Germany* (New York: Zone Books, 1998).

11 On the *Little Hours of the Virgin*, see Rachel Fulton Brown, *Mary and the Art of Prayer: The Hours of the Virgin in Medieval Christian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), and the review by Barbara Newman in *Speculum* 93.4 (2018), pp. 1169–71.



Figure 1. Jean Pucelle, *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, Queen of France* (c. 1324–28), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, Accession No 54.1.2, fol. 16^r. © bpk Bildagentur / The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

psalm is inserted into the office of Matins, marking the start of the day. Liturgically, the *Hours of the Virgin* associate Psalm 51 with the Annunciation bringing salvation to humankind. The office therefore blends the start of the physical day with a contemplation on salvation history. It also allows the reader to associate herself with Mary receiving the angel's message and with Christ, whose incarnation and infancy the *Hours of the Virgin* memorialize.

Considering an individual example of such a prayer book illustrates the different levels at which the manuscript engages the reader.

A fourteenth-century book of hours for the French queen Jeanne d'Evreux, third wife of Charles IV of France, which was illuminated by the artist Jean Pucelle and which juxtaposes scenes from Christ's Passion with scenes from his infancy, opens the text of Psalm 51 with a historiated initial of the letter *D* in two registers: the lower one depicts Queen Jeanne reading a book, while the upper one represents the Annunciation, with the Virgin Mary holding a book as Gabriel addresses her (Figure 1).¹² The illumination combines and conflates different layers of meaning: physically, it is part of a book of hours and offers the reader a reflection of her own actions. In opening the book, she confronts the figure of Mary as a reader and mirrors herself in the Virgin, who is portrayed in contemporary clothes and in a contemporary interior setting. Textually, the initial highlights the first in a series of psalms whose recitation structures the monastic day of nuns and monks: while lay women are not bound by the same monastic rules, the books of hours highlights that prayer and the imaginative mapping of one's own lived time against the life of Christ and salvation history also imbues secular life. Iconographically, since the Incarnation, in the words of John 1. 1, is the word become flesh, the initial points to this aspect of salvation history and, indeed, the act of reading the psalter is a common representation of the Annunciation: reading is therefore not just a reflection of physical human activity, but a form of *imitatio Christi* in which the reader imaginatively inhabits the role of Mary and through her, can contemplate the Incarnation. Experientially, this imitation of Christ is possible only because the reader, by the divine grace sought in the opening prayer, is receptive to the mysteries of salvation history, and affected or transformed by them.

Psalm 51 thus takes on a special significance, marking the beginning of the hour of Matins and daybreak, while inviting the reader to reflect on salvation history; to experience, rather than to know, that the Annunciation offers the hope of redemption to all human beings. Such reflection may raise anxieties, since the hope of salvation also evokes the spectre of eternal damnation, yet it also offers reassurance,

12 Jean Pucelle, *The Hours of Jeanne d'Evreux, Queen of France* (c. 1324–28), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, Accession No 54.1.2, fols 15^v–16^r <<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/470309>>. See Beth Williamson, *Christian Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

since the act of accepting human sinfulness and vulnerability is also the condition in which divine grace may offer hope. Within the prayer book, the meditation shifts from the act of opening the book, through the articulation of prayer, towards an inner state of openness. Opening up lips and heart, as the psalm commentaries set out, may thus be the start of a devotional practice which required guidance and habituation as well as scriptural knowledge. Notably, such opening up goes hand in hand with the introduction to a closed, exclusive, or even secret space — the royal chamber of the Song of Songs, the wine cellar, or the *Hortus conclusus*, the enclosed garden in which against all expectations, the human bride and her divine bridegroom may become one.

The example of the prayer book highlights different levels on which even a simple, everyday act of devotion involves different forms of openness: on a physical level, the opening of the book at daybreak marks both a moment in physical time and the tangible start to the act of reading. At the same time, it encourages an interiorized experience in which the act of reading allows for reflection on the universal perspective of salvation history, but it is also transformative for the individual reader, who opens up to Christ and Mary's model and is shaped by it. Situated at the interface between institutional monastic practice and individual devotion by lay people, between Latin and the vernaculars, between fixed liturgical texts and individual paratexts which guide the transformation of readers, the example of the prayer book also illustrates a creative interplay between openness and closure — in this case closed physical spaces, fixed ritual practices and horizons of interpretation, as well the creation of interiority and space for individual responses. It is the richness of such creative tensions, fluid movements, and transformative experiences which the chapters of the current volume explore.

This volume is divided into three parts: 'Texts', 'Experience and Subjectivity', and 'Community' but chapters often overlap with one another and could also be arranged differently. The first part addresses forms of openness in medieval practices of making, reading, and appropriating texts. As the example of the prayer book illustrates, medieval culture conceives of reading as a complex activity which may involve the ability to inhabit several roles simultaneously. Where this involves

reading scriptural texts, it is predicated on assuming an absolute truth which the act of exegesis can reveal or unveil. Augustine, whose *Confessions* reflect on the importance of such acts of reading, became a seminal text for medieval readers precisely because it focused on the reciprocal acts of opening required — a God who is willing to open up to those who are radically different from the Divinity, and readers who are willing to accept the word revealed to them. Monastic institutions, and later the universities, provided structures through which readers could acquire and practise such ways of uncovering the revealed truth, yet the essays in this section also explore what happened when such practices were disseminated beyond the walls of the monasteries, to women and secular audiences.

Augustine provides the most widely disseminated model of reading as a transformative experience. Drawing on Derrida's and Lyotard's re-reading of Augustine, Giusti argues that an implicit conceptualization of openness runs through the whole of the *Confessions*. He identifies different layers: on the most practical one, the opening of a book marks a gesture of inclusion, because in sharing the book as material object, the act of reading encourages reciprocal disclosure between readers. Giusti contrasts this with the mimetic identification evidenced in the episode of Paolo and Francesca in Dante's *Inferno*. In Augustine's reading, the Scriptures — which open up to readers while retaining a veil of mystery — can have multiple meanings for different readers, though this openness to interpretation is not unlimited. It can therefore be argued to bear similarities with contemporary literary theory, especially Attridge's concept of authoredness: conveying intentions while leaving room for each reader. Giusti therefore argues that reading requires an act of faith as a performative search for truth. By ending the *Confessions* with a statement in the passive voice — 'thus will it be opened to us' — Augustine highlights that this search is not ultimately a matter of intention or referential truth, but a performative act: in being open to the text, readers are ready to be transformed.

Medieval institutions of learning nevertheless aim to regulate such acts of transformative reading, as the chapter by Philippa Byrne demonstrates. Focusing on the meaning of the verb *aperire* and its cognates in the commentaries and treatises of authors like Alan of Lille, Honorius Augustodunensis, Peter of Poitiers, Peter Abelard, Hugh of St

Victor, and Robert Grosseteste, Byrne's chapter explores the development of the concept of 'opening' a text in scholastic thought from the mid-eleventh to the mid-thirteenth century. At first, the 'opening up' of Scripture was associated with the revelation of truths according to a model of divine action and intervention in the created world: scholars sought knowledge, but understanding was granted to them by God through an act of revelation which stood outside the human mind, and the process was continuous and would, until the end of the *saeculum*, remain incomplete. Subsequently, another strand of theological thought began to associate the act of 'opening' a text with the application of dialectical reasoning — primarily to Scripture, but also to philosophical works and classical writing. In this sense, a text was 'opened' by the correct application of human reason, and in such a way that its meaning could be followed by readers or listeners. In this newer model, if a conclusion was 'open' (*apertus*), or proven openly (*aperte*), it could be considered clear, manifest, or evident — it was beyond challenge. The final part of the chapter highlights that the act of opening a text was given a polemical stance and became part of an argument about correct interpretation and intellectual pre-eminence which was not limited to the world of the schools but also informed Christian anti-Jewish disputational literature: from the late eleventh century onwards, authors like Gilbert Crispin, Peter Alfonsi, and Peter Abelard claimed that only Christian reason was capable of opening up the Old Testament, while Jewish irrationality and tradition was not.

While Latin learning is available only to select groups, who seek to differentiate themselves externally, as in the anti-Jewish defences of the faith, and internally, by highlighting the skill and training required to achieve ultimate clarity about divine truth, those reading vernacular texts face different constraints, but also opportunities, in a textual culture which often differs significantly from Eco's model of strong authorship and stable texts. Brian McMahon's chapter focuses on Icelandic sagas and highlights their textual openness, retaining features of orality even in the written forms which are their only mode of survival across time. While most scholarship has focused on the process of textualization and its aim to solidify the written text, McMahon foregrounds the freedom which the written texts afforded to reciters. Using prolegomena as a contemporary commentary on how the sagas

should be transmitted, McMahon argues that the comparative openness of oral versions was 'enclosed' in manuscript traditions, which furthermore restricted access to a closed community of readers. Nevertheless, prologues and epilogues defy this tendency towards strict control, and their variations allow a glimpse of the ways in which compilers understood their role. Focusing in particular on Oddr's *Óláfs saga Tryggvarsonar*, McMahon argues that the saga presents the text as an authorized redaction, the result of first opening up the text to commentary and then 'closing' it in an agreed version. Where epilogues offer the first and only instance of a first-person narrator, this can therefore be seen as an act of opening up the saga to a wider audience, marking a shift in the relationship between narrative voice and reader.

Such porousness is observable not just in vernacular literary forms traditionally associated with anonymity and collective tradition, but also extends to paradigms which are often evoked as the beginnings of modern authorship and its production of self-contained, stable texts and works. Nicolò Crisafi's chapter engages Dante's *Commedia* in a dialogue with Umberto Eco's concept of the 'open work' and contests the commonplace, shared by Eco himself, that Dante's poem is completely self-enclosed and perfectly reflects its internally coherent moral universe and the 'tetragonal' persona of its narrator. Crisafi explores a number of instances in the poem and its afterlife where this ideal airtightness is challenged or threatened. He focuses on the 'veiled threats of narrative interruption' (Barolini) from the obvious obstacles in the protagonist's path of *Inferno* I–II and VIII–IX to the more subtle anxiety of unfinishedness in *Paradiso* v and XIII, and investigates the safety valves in Dante's poem which vent the pressure of 'total coherence' (Contini, Ascoli) that is built into, and projected onto, the *Commedia*. In this way, Crisafi reclaims the material vulnerability of the text and of its author, showing that far from being a postmodern invention, the picture of Dante as a fragile and vulnerable author that emerges from these passages is picked up by his earliest admirer: in his tale of the lost cantos of the *Paradiso*, Boccaccio invites readers to consider a *Commedia* left unfinished and wide open. In thus blurring the line between the author's biography and the fate of his poem, between the narrator and his narrative, Boccaccio's account is attuned to the ways

in which the *Commedia* involves the *poeta* in the perilous and open-ended journey of writing.

The final chapter of this section argues that modern academic practice and its unspoken assumptions and tendencies to erect boundaries need to be challenged in the interest of true scholarly accuracy. Alastair Matthews's chapter shows that premodern German-language writing from the area now referred to as Denmark has often been marginalized. Situating his project within the context of recent scholarly debates, his chapter makes the case for moving beyond a philological discourse which has its origins in the nineteenth century and has therefore been shaped by concepts of nation states. Matthews argues that the cultures of northern Germany and Denmark were closely connected in the medieval period, but that the use of German as a writing language in Denmark has been largely ignored by scholars of Danish literary history. The chapter sets out four different methodological pathways for redressing this imbalance: analysing the plurality of languages (Latin, German, Danish) in the region; tracing the trajectory of texts translated from one of these languages into another; studying individuals and institutions; and investigating the material circulation of texts across territorial borders. Opening up a scholarly investigation which hitherto has been constrained by preconceptions of national boundaries would allow a more nuanced view of a literary landscape of mutual contact and exchange.

Whereas the first part of the volume addresses medieval forms of textuality, the chapters of the second part explore the open subjectivity that they articulate, shape, and produce. For instance, as already became evident in the earlier chapters, opening up can be presented as a path towards greater clarity and illumination. Yet, as the late medieval example of the Lüne nuns highlights, such openness can also be perceived as a state of exposure and vulnerability.

Monika Otter's chapter on Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vita Merlini* (c. 1150) draws on an unusual architectural space, enclosed and yet open to the elements, which Geoffrey appears to have invented: the observatory in the woods, built to Merlin's specification with seventy doors and seventy windows, where Merlin finds refuge after surviving a disastrous battle and losing his reason. The open-sided house is somewhere between a compromise and a paradox, almost a riddle: a house

that is not a house, a building that is both enclosed and not, indoors and outdoors, safe and open, companionable and solitary. Otter takes the building as a structuring emblem of Merlin's state of mind and, by extension, the poem's poetics and epistemology. First, she shows that the prophetic mind is both lucid and translucent, perspicacious but also alarmingly open to the outside and vulnerable to it. It is indeed significant that Merlin is relieved when he loses his prophetic gift and that gift is passed on to his sister Ganieda. Then, Otter argues that the project itself of the *Vita* could be described as negotiating a way of knowing and a way of writing that are open but not too open, that admit the outside world and permit communication with it in ways that nonetheless do not leave the speaker overly exposed and vulnerable. Finally, Otter claims that the sudden and abrupt end refers to Geoffrey himself and represents not so much a proud conclusion to a successful career but a sad, disillusioned abdication: the poem's vatic voice has also found the open poetic mind too much of a strain, and like Merlin, he is relieved to relinquish his prophecy as rapidly as possible.

Whereas Geoffrey's conceit of the half-open tower expresses aspects of existential vulnerability in its potentiality and attractiveness as well as danger, Annie Sutherland's chapter shows that a very similarly constructed 'house without walls' can be read very differently within a scriptural and theological framework. Sutherland investigates medieval presentations of the birth of Christ and argues that the association of the nativity with a stable as a narrow, confined space is widespread, but not supported by biblical text or indeed medieval exegesis. Sutherland demonstrates that medieval exegetes foreground the *diversorium* as a public space or structure, open to all. Medieval devotional writing explores the affective potential of this openness and multiplicity: drawing on the dialectic of enclosure and exposure, Bonaventure presents it as a space both empty and filled, sealed off yet open. In Anglo-Norman meditations, the stable thus becomes a 'house without walls', an image which Sutherland has established elsewhere as having a particular resonance for anchoritic audiences. The chapter highlights that these images in fact also inflect sermons for lay audiences. In focusing on Christ's birthplace as an open, liminal space, the English tradition therefore also centres on Christ's vulnerability — opening up the closed book of the Old Testament, interacting openly

with those who love him. Within the framework of salvation history, therefore, even extreme vulnerability can be contained, because it offers the hope of divine grace.

As the organ through which the soul interacts with the world, the medieval body takes up a position as a portal or gateway through which openness and its corollary of closedness can be articulated. Johannes Wolf's chapter argues that the devotional literature of the later Middle Ages places this tension centre-stage and, focusing on two Middle English texts and engaging them in a dialogue with Rosi Braidotti's concept of 'becoming' as an opening up of the self and an activation of intensity, shows that they make visible a set of unstable propositions about radical openness and the possibility of breaking down distinctions between individuals, identities, and even species. First, Wolf explores *The Book of Margery Kempe*, where the eponymous protagonist moves across geographies, communities, and identities in a shifting and mobile fashion, which frustrates her contemporaries, and reacts to visions of Christ's Passion in such a violent way that it unsettles both her physical frame and stable ontological distinctions. Wolf also shows that Kempe's compassionate imagination even seizes upon the image of a suffering animal in the street, offering a momentary glimpse of interspecies affect that disrupts the assumptions of a text otherwise calmly involved in the systematic exploitation and abuse of animals. Then, Wolf considers *The Life of Christina Mirabilis*, which also describes a body whose capacities scorn the dictates of nature and convention: Christina flies, lives in the river, and transforms into a limbless 'rownde gobbet' as she meditates; her transformations are explicitly associated with animals and especially with birds; and as her body prefigures the remade flesh of the Last Judgement, she also frustrates ontological distinctions and participates in a process of becoming-animal. Wolf also argues that while both texts reflect a medieval fascination with the transhuman and interspecies potential of the 'human' body, they also elicited anxiety in the masculine/male clerical elite and social institutions, which tried to control and suppress that fascination.

As Matthews's essays in the first section argued, our understanding of medieval texts is often influenced by modern academic and editorial practices and their unspoken and sometimes unreflected assumptions.

In a similar vein, Almut Suerbaum's chapter argues that Middle High German vernacular religious songs have often been marginalized because they do not conform to aesthetic norms which privilege stable forms and single, male authorship over the open textuality and collaborative modes characteristic of religious women's writing. Thirteenth-century courtly writing had developed a form of exclusive inclusion by encouraging readers to reject ignorant or mundane behaviour and thus demonstrating that they belong to a select group. Gottfried von Straßburg's *Tristan* pushes this strategy to paradoxical extremes by portraying his protagonists as both representative and exceptional, offering social and aesthetic role models which are open to every listener while insisting on their utter singularity. While Gottfried's exclusivity is ultimately aesthetic rather than social, contemporary mystical theology develops a similar tension: an unmediated encounter with the Divine which is both utterly exceptional and yet obtainable for all who are willing to leave everything behind in a state of spiritual nakedness. Eckhart's speculative theology is as exclusive as Gottfried's poetry, yet it finds its way into vernacular songs by and for women who open up forms of discourse that had hitherto been the exclusive prerogative of the universities and monasteries. These songs therefore offer a glimpse of poetic practices which are both collective and inclusive.

In the concluding chapter of this section, Manuele Gragnolati and Francesca Southerden offer a comparative reading of two poems by Petrarch, *Rerum vulgariium fragmenta* 23, known as the *canzone delle metamorfosi* [canzone of the metamorphoses], and 228, the sonnet 'Amor co la man dextra il lato manco'. In related but different ways, these poems explore the poetic subject's transformation into, or implantation with, the laurel tree that normally represents the poet's beloved, Laura, and imply a reversal in the traditional dynamics of desire, which — on the model of the Ovidian myth of Apollo and Daphne — consists of pursuit of the beloved, attempt at possession, and ensuing frustration. By bringing Petrarch's poems into dialogue with philosophical works that consider the nature of plant existence as a form of interconnectedness and porosity to the outside, this chapter shows that the becoming tree of the Petrarchan 'I' opens up new possibilities in terms of both subjectivity and desire. In particular, Gragnolati and Southerden read the loss of subjective autonomy,

vulnerability, and opening to the outside expressed in Petrarch's two poems through Rosi Braidotti's concept of 'becoming' (which she develops from Deleuze and Guattari and which incorporates what she calls a 'polymorphous vitalism'), and argue that, unlike most other poems in Petrarch's collection, *Rvf* 23 and 228 express a sense of desire not as lack but as intensity.

The final part of the volume considers instances in which openness can also be a category of intersubjective encounter and connection, establishing communities even where acts of exclusion are evoked. Damiano Sacco's chapter proposes a speculative notion of openness that embeds individual experience within a messianic horizon promising the eschatological reconciliation of differences, and considers the Franciscan form of life as an attempt to inhabit this promise as a community. It develops this notion of openness in the work of Giorgio Agamben by reading the question of man and animal in *The Open: Man and Animal* together with the promise of the Franciscans' vow, or *sacramentum*, in *The Highest Poverty: Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life*. These two texts unfold the themes of openness and promise in thirteenth-century settings instantiated, firstly, by the discussion of an eschatological miniature depicting a form of reconciliation between animal and human natures, and, secondly, by the analysis of the vow or promise pledged by the Franciscans upon entering monastic life. Through a discussion of the different forms of openness that, according to Heidegger, distinguish man from the animal, Agamben presents his own notion of openness as that of a constitutive element of the concept of life itself. Openness here stands for a certain void of representation that articulates the very separation between human life and animal life through which the human constitutes itself in the Western philosophical and political traditions. At the same time, this notion of openness relates to a certain structure of the promise, namely a messianic horizon that allows for a life that, as in the case of the righteous ones depicted in the eschatological miniature, is not premised upon excluding what Agamben calls 'bare life'. According to Agamben's *The Highest Poverty*, the Franciscans' *experimentum vitae* is one of the most successful attempts in the Western tradition at constituting a life that inhabits this promise and this openness, which, Sacco argues, the miniature of *The Open* had set as the very horizon of messianicity. Sacco

concludes by pointing to the common ground that underlies the two instances of openness and promise presented in *The Open* and in *The Highest Poverty*, namely the openness and promise of language itself.

As Agamben suggests, medieval institutions, especially those of the monastic orders, are predicated on conceptions of belonging, developing a sense of differentiation or even exclusion in order to foster radical openness for those who are initiated into the community. In a survey of almost a thousand years of monasticism, Benjamin Thompson's chapter argues that one of the key fault-lines in the history of English monasticism is the extent of the convent's openness to the society around it. It offers a three-part survey that scrutinizes a selection of texts from nearly a millennium of monastic history. First, it considers the Rule itself, Lanfranc's Cluniac-influenced customs for post-Conquest English monasticism, and the early Cistercian statutes, showing that the moral and physical enclosure of monks and nuns is central to the founding documents of Western monasticism but also the need for monasteries to interact with their societies through recruits, hospitality, and the monastic economy. Second, the papal reform proposals of the 1330s provide a focus for the state of enclosure at that point: addressing a more developed society, they tried to reinforce the old ideals of isolation and enclosure, but the competing functions of monasticism and pressures on the monastery resulted in a series of compromises with the world. Finally, focusing on visitation records in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, Thompson shows how difficult it was to negotiate enclosure for monasteries that increasingly felt society's demand that they justify their existence by providing a range of social and economic as well as religious and ecclesiastical services. As the government under Thomas Cromwell ordered the religious back into enclosure, they found themselves with little core function by which to justify their existence. Thus, ironically, the most reformed and austere houses, whose prestige at the top end of the monastic spectrum might have enabled them to argue for survival on the grounds of their faithfulness to the Benedictine ideal, led resistance to reform (thus very much engaging with the political world outside the enclosure) and in the process made themselves the prime targets for Dissolution.

Whereas Thompson considers English monasticism and attitudes to enclosure in a diachronic panorama, Edmund Wareham's chapter consists of a detailed study of the paradoxical dynamics between enclosure and opening in a group of convents in northern Germany in the fifteenth century. These convents were part of the contemporary reform movement advocating a return to strict enclosure for nuns, yet reveal a close engagement with the society around them which, in the case of the convent of Lüne, has left tangible traces in the form of extensive correspondence. In his chapter, Wareham situates these Lüne letters, written in a mix of Low German and Latin, within the context of fifteenth-century concerns about how to access God's mercy. Written by enclosed nuns, the letters maintain a link with the outside world, often in very pragmatic ways, while simultaneously reflecting on their enclosed status and role in society. Wareham argues that references to the convent as 'closed' rather than 'open' reflect the introduction of fifteenth-century monastic reform, focusing on obedience and strict enclosure. While nuns were therefore excluded from a culture which, in Gumbrecht's terms, placed particular importance on visual participation and presence, their letters are a way of transcending spatial and temporal distance. At the same time, the nuns reflect on the fact that enclosure allows them a special openness to Christ, which they in turn communicate to others. This link between presence and openness was reinforced when devotional images were attached to these letters — most poignantly when the image sent is that of the open, wounded heart of Christ.

While late medieval convents thus provide examples of a physical seclusion that paradoxically enables greater exploration of vulnerability, yet also connectedness, within a framework which prioritizes the collective, the monastic experience is often contrasted with early humanist individuality. In the last chapter in this section, Oren Margolis undermines such binary oppositions by exploring the significance which open books play in humanist portraiture. In his exploration of a Holbein portrait of Hermann von Wedigh, in which the sitter is portrayed holding a half-open book, Margolis argues that the book is a potent simile of the work of art. Noticing that unlike the Steelyard portraits, with which it has sometimes been associated and which depict their sitters with business letters or bills, this portrait foregrounds

a book, Margolis rejects the assumption that it might be a Lutheran Bible. He argues, instead, for an association with Erasmus of Rotterdam, whose humanist circle of friends Holbein joined in Basel. In evoking Erasmus, the book thus foregrounds Holbein's own authority as an artist and author. Margolis draws attention to the unusual state of the book, with one clasp fastened, the other opened, and the slip of paper protruding from it. By identifying the text as an Erasmian adage, Margolis inserts Holbein into a context in which reading is a process of creative tension between interpretative openness and a need for concealment. At the same time, viewing the portrait thus becomes an act akin to that of a sharing of the self in reading, indeed a shared reading such as occurs between humanist friends.

The chapters of this volume present medieval conceptions of openness which complement Eco's focus on the 'open work' as an aesthetic whole, allowing for multiple, though not necessarily infinite ways of reading (Byrne, Giusti, Margolis). Yet it is striking how often premodern contexts evoke a sense of incompleteness — even in works, like Augustine's *Confessions* and Dante's *Comedy*, that are usually associated with completion (Giusti, Crisafi), or in the humanist circles with which Holbein was associated (Margolis). While the binary opposition of inclusion and exclusion can serve to support a stable sense of identity and textual authority (Byrne, Thompson), the more common mode is one of fluidity, embracing motion, porous boundaries, and shifts which challenge notions of fixity, whether linguistically, in code-switching between Latin and the vernacular (Wareham); on a textual level (McMahon, Matthews, Suerbaum); by breaking aesthetic norms (Suerbaum, Wolf, Wareham); or experientially, by preferring a sense of vulnerability and becoming to enclosed or stable ontological conceptions of self (Gragnolati-Southerden, Otter, Sacco, Sutherland, Wolf). Often, the chapters show a culture where these forms of openness coexist with forms of enclosure and containment, in a creative tension that unsettles binaries and clear-cut distinctions. At the same time, they illustrate the extent to which modern conceptions of open or closed aesthetic or societal norms have influenced readings of the medieval material which may be unduly reductive (Matthews, Suerbaum, Gragnolati-Southerden). Finally, they demonstrate the significant role which gender plays in these explorations: the examples

discussed in the volume illustrate repeatedly how reading as contemplation rather than rapture allows a model of womanhood which is both spiritual and intellectual — in a fitting tribute perhaps to the *spiritus loci* of Somerville College as a former women's college.

The current volume is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration which had its origins in the medievalist community at Somerville College, but has since then opened out to encompass a larger group. What has remained the same, across the volumes *Aspects of the Performative in Medieval Culture*,¹³ *Polemic: Language as Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Discourse*,¹⁴ *Medieval Temporalities: The Experience of Time in Medieval Europe*,¹⁵ and *Openness in Medieval Culture*, is a sense of open dialogue across subject boundaries, periods, and languages.

The project took shape at an initial workshop held in Somerville College on 25 June 2016 — a day of contrasts etched into the memories of many participants, when the large-scale political results of the Brexit referendum, opting to erect new boundaries, stood in stark contrast with the sense of solace derived from multilingual dialogue about a shared cultural space. It was this sense of openness which imbued our conference in Berlin in July 2019, when we enjoyed the hospitality of the ICI Berlin as a congenial location for intellectual exchange and convivial encounter. When editing the final versions of these papers during the pandemic, the echoes of those conversations provided a different form of solace: a reminder that scholarship can create a sense of community and open up horizons even during a lock-down.

13 *Aspects of the Performative*, ed. by Gragnolati and Suerbaum.

14 *Polemic: Language as Violence in Medieval and Early Modern Discourse*, ed. by Almut Suerbaum, George Southcombe, and Benjamin Thompson (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

15 *Medieval Temporalities: The Experience of Time in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Almut Suerbaum and Annie Sutherland (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2021).

Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, 'Introduction: Medieval Openness', in *Openness in Medieval Europe*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati and Almut Suerbaum, Cultural Inquiry, 23 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 1–21 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-23_01>

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