I’ve written this book both very quickly and very slowly. Almost every word published here was typed over the past two years, yet I also started way back in 1996. Along the way, I almost abandoned this project more than once, as it became more and more difficult to reconcile the original research methods with the growing number of databases, digital image collections, and other networked resources. Once I brought the tension between old archives and new archives into the research, I had the opposite problem: how to stop when the digital landscape keeps changing so rapidly.

This book represents an extended “user journey” through the infrastructure of medieval studies in the early twenty-first century. For those who study medieval literature, it exposes how various modern interventions have influenced our access to texts and thus how we perceive medieval creations. For those who manage collections and libraries, it looks closely at how institutional practices filter back into literary history. And
for those who make and study digital culture, it connects today’s objects to the long history of making and saving books. This book bears witness to a particular moment in the history of digital infrastructure—the lifespan of Parker Library on the Web 2.0, which began on January 10, 2018, and ended on March 3, 2021. Historical research is always bounded by specific modern frameworks to some degree, though rarely with such identifiable precision.

As I worked on this book, I wondered if I could write in a way that recognized that it would have multiple formats, just like the books I study here. This book is at once a bound book made of paper, a collection of digital files in PDF (Portable Document Format), a scrolling digital text-block, and probably some other formats as well. The digital versions can be accessed through devices with varied screen sizes. They might be processed through text-to-speech software. With these formats in mind, I adopted the author-date style of in-text references (Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition). I appreciate how this style keeps the apparatus of scholarship exposed across all formats, and I hope readers will too. This style also helped me write without footnotes, a decision I made in the interests of accessibility and in the spirit of storytelling.

I wondered, too, how this book would appear on digital platforms. In the library catalogue at Dartmouth College, I found that Stanford University Press books appeared with ProQuest Ebooks identified as an “alternate author.” This metadata quirk seems to misinterpret ProQuest’s role while also revealing a truth about how infrastructure creates meaning for texts and books. Platforms do have some of the functions of authorship in that they “authorize” access and structure relationships that condition interpretation. At Dartmouth College, the library catalogue interface is itself a ProQuest product—Ex Libris Alma—which is notorious for listing databases by ProQuest as more “relevant” in search results than books on the library’s own shelves. Here, in the cataloguing of my book about a book, I found yet more evidence of how infrastructure coauthors literary history.

Ironically, printed copies of this book that end up on library shelves have the best chance of long-term preservation—and the best chance of being incomplete. In the interest of longevity, libraries typically purchase
hardcover copies and discard the dustjackets. Here, however, the cover
design by Kevin Barrett Kane of Stanford University Press is integral to
the meaning of the book. Every detail interprets some aspect of the stories
I tell here, as Kevin so generously explained when I inquired (personal
email, August 9, 2021). The background reproduces a piece of paper from
the Special Collections Library at Stanford, rich in texture and unfolded
with the faint suggestion of a cross in the creases, resonant with the theme
of the Holy Grail. The distinctive red accents reflect the color branding
of both Stanford and Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, custodians of
the materials I study here. The main title is set in a font, Trade Gothic, of
nineteenth-century fame, the era when editing and cataloguing created
canons of medieval English literature. The subtitle is set in a font, Adobe
Caslon Pro, that is the perfect amalgam of English print history and digi-
tal design: it is a “revival” of an eighteenth-century typeface by William
Caslon designed by Carol Twombly at Adobe in the very era when digital
manuscripts were first reaching the internet. Those reading this descrip-
tion in a coverless book might find a cover image in various online places,
including the Dartmouth Digital Commons: digitalcommons.dartmouth.
edu/faculty_other/9.

The stories I tell about medieval literature in this book range across
centuries and through many fields of specialization. That breadth has
brought many rewards as I’ve made connections that otherwise would
have remained hidden. At the same time, the venture has brought the risk
of making mistakes in unfamiliar subfields. I’ve spent years becoming an
expert amateur in many different areas: learning new things is, after all,
the essence of research. If I’ve made errors, I hope I’ve left readers enough
clues to find ways to correct them.
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