What Is an Author?
Old Answers to a New Question

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Abstract Premodern sources mainly depict authors as textual transmitters rather than original creators. To treat these figurations of authorship as meaningful in their own right, one has to overcome a series of methodological hurdles. The polarized image of the author as either creative God or passive scribe must be replaced by a focus on the middle ranges of literary agency, which in turn requires theoretical elaboration. Premodern tropes of authorial activity, such as the metaphor of authorship as textile labor, gain a much fuller range of complexity and nuance when they are read with an eye to authorial mediation. Further, conceptualizing authors as mediators proves a better framework for writing the history of authorship, as it clarifies synchronic tensions and diachronic developments that unfolded within this frame. It also reveals that the modern ideal of authorial originality came about not as a radical break with the older ideal of authorial mediation but as a modification and rearrangement of its constitutive terms.

Keywords authorship, agency, mediation, premodern literature, weaving

The premodern author poses a methodological problem. In premodern sources, authors are most often attributed neither full control nor complete passivity in relation to their works; instead, they are depicted as, say, weaving anew existing threads of tradition or reworking texts received half-finished from elsewhere. This constitutes a curious problem for historians of literature, for despite the widespread recurrence of authors depicted as textual mediators rather than original creators, we lack a methodologically apt approach to study the partial linguistic agency involved in such mediations.

Depictions of authors as poised midway between the text and its "actual" origin can be traced back to the very root of the concept of the

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author. The first authors known to us, those studied in the schools of Babylonia and Assyria long before Homer, were described either as relaying words revealed to them in dreams by a god or as binding the tangled threads of received material into new compositions (Foster 1991; Wee 2015: 251–55). Similar figurations of authorship, as mediation rather than original creation, abound throughout literary history, though they appear in many guises and with many different connotations. The notion of inspiration, for example, relocates intention, agency, and self-knowledge away from the writer, leaving inspired authors with only partial access to their own words. In the European Middle Ages, the ideal of authorship lay in the rediscovery, translation, and popularization of forgotten older works, a role that assigned authors an honored but not a primary place in literary tradition (Bohler 2006). If no forgotten manuscript was forthcoming, the trope became a necessary fiction, employed to conceptualize the activity of authorship within a well-known frame.

The question is how to approach such situations today. It cannot suffice to gauge the roles of premodern authors only through their distance from one of the two models of authorship prevalent today, the Romantic and the poststructuralist. It is clear that the partial agency attributed to most premodern writers falls short of the now-dominant ideal of the author, shaped as it is by eighteenth-century demands of absolute originality. The theoretical debates of the 1960s did much to undercut this ideal, with Roland Barthes (1967) claiming to overthrow the tyranny of the "Author-God" and Michel Foucault (1969) analyzing the function of authors not as creators but as discursive principles of classification. I will not quarrel with their conclusions but only state that these views do not aid us much in analyzing the various medial roles attributed to premodern authors.

As Andrew Bennett (2005a: 66) argues, "One of the problems with debates concerning the death, life, resurrection and rebirth of the author that have raged in literary theory and criticism since the late 1960s is their unsatisfactory polarization." The oscillation between extremes has problematic consequences for historiography, since both models preclude the study of premodern notions of authorship on their own terms. The author of the theoretical debates is either dead or alive—god or scribe, tyrant or mere function—while actual premodern authors are most often depicted in a "middle" position: inspired but not

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passive, indebted but not shackled to tradition. If we are to study the significance and structure of such medial depictions, neither theoretical extreme seems promising. An author claiming medial agency can be described as "not quite" an author in the modern sense, or as a principle of discursive organization in Foucault's sense, and while neither claim is wrong, neither allows us to study the historical case on its own terms. In short, our methodological options have been limited by theoretical polarization.

Merely asserting a middle ground between the extremes of agency underestimates the methodological challenges involved in studying it. Unless the wide variety of middles is described, we risk reverting to a new binary: between binary and nonbinary notions of authorship. Instead, we have to treat nonbinary depictions of authorship not just as "not binary" but also as multiple and complex in individual ways. To Plato, divine inspiration meant that human authors had no individual importance; to the Romantics, it meant the exaltation of poets to superhuman status. We must avoid reifying a medial model of authorship as if it were a single thing, and treat it as a shifting and dynamic frame of investigation.

Further, the difference between authorship as mediation and authorship as original creation does not fully overlap with the difference between premodern and modern notions of authorship. Rather, the modern emphasis on originality came about not as a radical break with the common premodern focus on transmission but as a gradual rearrangement of already existing terms and tensions within the concept of authorship. Indeed, some premodern authors, such as Ovid, arrogate for themselves an extreme degree of agency. To be more specific, then, my claim is this: a model of authorial agency as mediating, nonbinary, and partial is a better starting point for writing the history of authorship than the now-dominant model of authorship as original creation, since it takes in more variation, complexity, continuity, and change.

An engaged investigation into the history of authorship therefore requires that we answer a number of questions following from the claim of partial agency. Is "partial agency" even a meaningful theoretical concept? What does such a middle position look like in practice? How can we study it? What does it tell us? How would a focus on partial agency affect the historiography of authorship? These are the questions I set out to address below. On the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of

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Foucault's seminal essay "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" ("What Is an Author?"), it is high time to reexamine the various premodern answers to his question.

The Study of the Historical Author

In the thirteenth century Saint Bonaventure provided a classification of four ways that a man could make a book. One copying an existing work was a scribe; one copying from multiple sources, a compiler; one copying existing works but adding his own explanatory remarks, a commentator. Finally, one who copied the words of existing texts and then added his own, but with the latter in the primary place, was an author (Bonaventure 2014: 14–15, book 1, foreword, question 4).

In modern scholarship the list generally provokes one of two reactions. The first is to note that there is no extreme at the end of the list to match the modern notion of the author as pure creator, since even Bonaventure's fourth role transcribes and reacts to the words of others. The possibility of radically original composition is simply not entertained (e.g., Schwermann and Steineck 2014: 7). The second reaction is to remark that the activity of the author is not qualitatively separate from that of the scribe. J. A. Burrow (2008: 29), for example, observes that "Bonaventure's scheme combines into a single continuum two functions which seem fundamentally different to us: composition and the making of copies." Neither reaction is wrong, but they still illustrate the methodological challenges in current studies of the historical author. They register nothing so much as the distance between Bonaventure's agential continuum and the modern preference for agential antitheses, by propping up two models of authorship: his spectrum, our binary. Consequently, they fail to take his subdivisions as meaningful in their own right. The premodern conceptualization of authors is approached only through its distance from our current nonmedial ideal of authorship, and in that process we lose a way of measuring, cataloging, and describing the middle ranges of authorial activities in all their variety.

This polarization is largely due to the aftereffects of Romanticism and deconstruction, which have produced two main approaches to the historiography of authorship. The Romantic approach, prevalent in the study of English literary history, is organized around the notion of

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the modern author, defined by principles of originality, ownership, and ethical accountability. While the ideal has been forcefully critiqued, it still serves as the focal point in investigations driven by a narrative of emergence. Scholars seek to track the processes by which, somewhere between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries, the still-familiar notion of the author first appeared. Many explanations have been proposed to account for the development—discursive, juridical, economical, technological, ideological—revealing that the modern author is no historical universal but a constructed ideal specific to recent centuries (see, e.g., Dobranski 2014; Eisenstein 2009: 121–22; Pask 2005; Woodmansee 1984: 425).

However, this kind of study still takes the modern author to be the natural center of investigation. In the endless retracing of the steps that led from Shakespeare to Shelley, the appearance of the modern author is made the most important event in the history of authorship, to such an extent that Milton, for example, has been named "the first author" (Bennett 2005a: 30)—not the first modern author but the first author, pure and simple—as the emerging ideal is taken to define not just a portion of the history of authorship but its center, direction, and goal. The "weak" premodern author is then relegated to a prologue to the seventeenth century, where early intimations of later developments may be found but whose significance derives primarily from their relation to and distance from that subsequent ideal. In the teleological narrative of emergence, the partial agency of premodern authors is studied only as an embryonic stage from which the full agency of modern authors later sprang.

The second approach is organized around the poststructuralist notion of the "author function." Foucault (1969) described authors not as the creative principle behind a given literary text but as an organizing principle produced around and by the texts themselves. The Foucauldian author groups, delimits, and qualifies the textual unity of literary works. Christian Schwermann and Raji C. Steineck (2014) turn Foucault's theoretical insight into a historiographical method by cataloging the roles that can be ascribed to authors. They present the author as a "composite of textual functions" such as discursive organization, ethical accountability, and creative origination. But their method also evaluates the medial role of historical authors through its distance from

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the full set of characteristics attributed to authors today. Schwermann's implementation of the method reveals that the composite of functions essentially serves as a checklist of expectations that a given author may or may not meet. In his analysis of early Chinese bronze inscriptions, Schwermann (2014: 39) argues that the author function was not held by a single person but was distributed among the donor, the composer, the calligrapher, and the caster of the inscription. He thereby makes the functions that he attributes to the author on purely theoretical grounds the primary object of historical research, meaning that they can be detached from any person actually identified as the composer of the text in the original sources.[1] Once more the role of authors is defined in advance with reference to a modern understanding of the term, and the historical evidence is then gauged in relation to the present definition.

In short, too often the historiography of authorship consists in noting the distance of a specific case from a contemporary idealized position, so that we end up fixing the significance of authorship beforehand. I do not mean to imply that the approaches are not valid; both are certainly legitimate on their own terms. But those terms are a modern construct that obscures the role of authors as portrayed in premodern texts. If we wish to understand the role of historical authors as anything more than a deviation from their contemporary counterparts, we have to move beyond these teleological approaches, and to do that, we have to move beyond the polarized concepts of agency that produced them.

The Middle Ranges of Agency

In 1992 Seán Burke (2008) published a counterargument to a conclusion often drawn from the essays of Barthes and Foucault, namely, that authors should be excluded from the study of literature. Against this view Burke points to the myriad theoretical complications that would follow from this omission. While he does not reject the claim that subjects are constituted through the workings of discourse, he argues that there is a crucial difference between the constitution and the full determination of agency. Authors can be created by discourse while also being, in turn, the creators of new texts. Burke proposes, rather than an author "dead"

[1] For a similar approach, see, e.g., Van de Mieroop 2016: 19–25.

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on arrival into discourse, an authorial agency that is neither authoritarian nor nonexistent but limited and dialogic (see esp. 167).

While I am sympathetic to Burke's proposal, this seems to me a facile compromise. To state that there must be some position midway between the extremes of agency is necessary but insufficient; merely positing a middle ground risks underestimating the challenges of studying it. In his counterclaim Burke glosses over a series of important problems. Does the view that subjects hold limited agency in relation to the linguistic structures that constitute them make theoretical sense? And if such a middle ground is indeed possible, how was it realized in its historical variability? In short, if the study of historical authors is to be viable, we need an understanding of agency that is more nuanced both theoretically and historically.

For that reason I turn to the theory of nonbinary agency developed by the queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Sedgwick (2003: 10) first employs the phrase *middle ranges of agency* in *Touching Feeling* as part of her "project of getting away from dualistic modes of thinking" and toward more spatial, gradual, and textile notions of power and affect. She emphasizes the importance of thinking in finitely many values, that is, of working with a number of analytic categories greater than two and less than infinite. However uncontroversial that may sound, she points out that in the humanities scholars often propose binaries, critique binaries, or replace binaries with a stream of infinite and amorphous variation, but they rarely engage in the subdivision of infinity into a definite number of categories (108–12). The scholars who note that Bonaventure subdivides authorial agency into a spectrum and not a binary without further scrutinizing his four categories are an example of the problem. What is lost by disregarding such graduations, argues Sedgwick, is a sense for the middle grounds between the binary and the infinite—a tragic loss, for it is "only the middle ranges of agency that offer space for effectual creativity or change" (13).

Sedgwick (2012) returns to the middle ranges in *The Weather in Proust*, in which she critiques a Freudian understanding of agency that equates power with omnipotence. The Freudian child desires but fails to achieve omnipotence, and in that failure lies oedipal maturity. By contrast, the psychological development proposed by Melanie Klein envisions a child who both desires and fears power, since it is perceived as

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inherently destructive. Accordingly, the discovery of a kind of power that sidesteps an "all-or-nothing understanding of agency" (130) is experienced as a relief, not a disappointment:

> The sense that power is a form of relationality that deals in, for example, habits, negotiations, and small differentials, the middle ranges of agency— the notion that you can be relatively empowered or disempowered without annihilating someone or being annihilated, or even castrating or being castrated—is a great mitigation of that endogenous anxiety, although it is something that requires to be discovered over and over. (20)

Our travails in approaching authorial agency as neither the free expression of a genius nor the mechanical copying of a scribe may thus be related to a psychological structure that makes it difficult to distinguish omnipotence from agency. As Sedgwick notes, the fantasy tends to persist and so has to be overcome again and again—even a Kleinian child keeps reverting to a Freudian imaginary of power. The persistence may be related to the structure of most Indo-European languages. Sedgwick claims that the distinction enforced by grammatical transitivity between subject and object splits our conception of agency into power and passivity, making it "almost impossible for any language user to maintain a steady sense of the crucial middle ranges of agency" (79). (One wonders if the theory of authorship would truly have been different if it had been written in an ergative language, in which the distinction between subject and object is structured differently.)

Grammar and Freudian fantasies thus conspire to make us equate agency with omnipotence, and the equation has plagued the heavily polarized theory of authorship. That the issue of the subject-object dichotomy applies to the theory of authorship is illustrated by Foucault's (1969: 76) description of his own earlier work in the introductory remarks of "Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?" as "ce qu'il m'est arrivé autrefois d'écrire." The idiomatic expression, difficult to translate exactly and omitted from the English translation, presents the act of writing as something that has descended on Foucault from elsewhere, as a strangely passive kind of activity: literally, the writing has "arrived to him." Foucault is not the sentence's subject but its indirect object. The syntactic discomfort of the phrase registers an unease about positioning authors as the unambiguous agents of their writing.

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In fact, Sedgwick (2012: 79) argues that the notion of authorship is not just one example among many of the difficulty of middle ranges but a particularly drastic example, since the materiality of writing engenders the fantasy of "all-or-nothing understanding of agency." Skilled writers are "liable to develop such grandiose illusions of magical omnipotence in relation to language—exactly because, unlike making things, speech and writing and conceptual thought impose no material obstacles to a fantasy of instant, limitless efficacy." That is, because the movement of pen on paper or fingers on keyboards is experienced as effortless and immediate, authorship comes to be perceived as unhindered agency. The question, then, is how to perceive it differently.

One may find an instructive counterpoint to the illusion of authorship as effortless immediacy in the theory of writing proposed by Jacques Derrida. By setting down his words in writing, argues Derrida (1967: 227), the author inevitably enters "a logic where his discourse cannot, by definition, completely dominate the system, its regularities and idiosyncrasies. He can use it only by allowing himself to be—in a certain fashion and up to a certain point—governed by the system" (une logique dont, par définition, son discours ne peut dominer absolument le système, les lois et la vie propres. Il ne s'en sert qu'en se laissant d'une certaine manière et jusqu'à un certain point gouverner par le système). Derrida's account of authorship yields a kind of agential Möbius strip: authors use language by being used by language; they are governed by the system of writing but only insofar as they allow themselves to be thus governed. Within the loops of this logic, it becomes difficult to talk about agency in any clear terms. What is most vexing about the passage is the crucial indeterminacy at its heart. Granted that authors cannot "completely" dominate writing, does it then follow that they can dominate it a bit? Conversely, if authors are governed by writing "in a certain fashion and up to a certain point," what fashion might that be? And how can we describe that "certain point" more fully, beyond merely stating that it is neither absolute nor nonexistent?

In much the same way, Sedgwick's insistence on working with finitely many values is both theoretically refreshing and practically frustrating. How exactly should we go about measuring nonbinary values in literary history? We risk reifying nonbinary agency as a single category if we do not emphasize its full variety and complexity—premodern authors are

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ascribed very different kinds and degrees of activity, even if all of them should fall somewhere between omnipotence and passivity. But how do we deal with that variety in meaningful terms? It would, after all, be nonsensical to draw up a universal scale of authorial agency—one imagines Milton awarded a score of 7.83, beating Homer's 2.54, though closer to Hesiod's 5.21. But what then?

Visions of Authors

In this essay I am interested not in the actual circumstances of premodern authorship but in how those circumstances are depicted in our sources. Accordingly, I would propose that we approach the medial agency of authors with a focus on evocative images that disrupt our modern assumptions about the term. Alexander Beecroft (2010: 18, 2) calls attention to the importance of ancient "scenes of authorship," descriptions of authors that may reveal little about their actual biographies but instead disclose an "implicit poetics" behind the text, a larger cultural system determining how literary composition was depicted. Beecroft builds on the work of Barbara Graziosi (2002), who insists that ancient accounts of authors' lives are interesting regardless of their veracity. Homer's blindness, for example, should be approached not as a purported fact for historians to assess but as a "powerful symbol" to be unpacked (238). Likewise, Rita Felski (2003: chap. 2) has written a history of feminist literary criticism through a series of "allegories of authorship." These "potent, densely packed metaphors," by which feminists over the past fifty years have conceptualized authors, reveal more about the intellectual mood in which they were produced than about the historical reality they sought to describe (59).

Graziosi, Beecroft, and Felski share a distinctly historical sensitivity to their sources. They all take the obliqueness and the richness of the metaphors as a starting point for examining the implicit assumptions compressed into the deceptively simple figure of the author. Using a similar approach to the mediality of premodern authors, Julia Rubanovich (2009: 130, 131) presents four key metaphors of authorship in medieval Persian prose. An author can present himself as a bride dresser, who has found a book languishing in obscurity and adorned it anew so that it may marry its reader; or as a merchant, who sells the book

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to his patron, having acquired it from elsewhere, or asserting that he never works with "borrowed capital"; or as a gardener, who either tends trees planted before his time or resolves never to smell flowers "previously sniffed and touched upon"; or as one who names a child, either as its true father or as a teacher who adopted it and brought out its qualities. The metaphors all negotiate a tension between views of authorship as original creation and as textual transmission. Their internal graduations (from bride dresser to father) and their individual ambiguities (e.g., the merchant as retailer and as craftsman) map out a field of medial positions. Rubanovich's study illustrates how we can employ metaphorical figurations to examine nonbinary ranges of authorial agency without reducing them to either dichotomies or inflexible taxonomies.

Sedgwick's discussion of agency springs from her reading of Proust and his portrayal of the figure of the genie. It may not be unreasonable to suggest that we take those "ontologically intermediate, tutelary spirits" as our guides in thinking about authors (Sedgwick 2012: 20). Crucially, this would replace the limitless power of the genius with the localized agency of the genie. "For all their extraordinary powers," writes Sedgwick, "genii are caught up, like people, in the cycle of strength and weakness, death and rebirth. Genii are especially prone to get entrapped in objects" (18–19). Those statements work just as easily as descriptions of authors, dead and reborn as they have been in literary theory. Their sometimes extraordinary literary skills do not amount to omnipotence, as attested by the frustration, the agonizing, and the alternation of setbacks and breakthroughs commonly reported by authors. Further, authors are bound to objects with an insistence bordering on the magical: they are bound to their books, which create their authorial image and thus a series of expectations and discursive operations by which they are entrapped. If Sedgwick's concept of "middle ranges" resists the conflation of agency into omnipotence and passivity, Proust's genii present medial agency in a way that makes it more than just "not binary."

Weaving Vowels

In this section I zoom in on one particularly common and complex trope of medial authorship: the weaving of words. The idea of authorship as textile labor is ubiquitous in literary history. It is found in fourteenth-

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century India, where the poet Namdev writes of abandoning a family of tailors to pursue a different kind of stitching (Novetzke 2003), and in sixteenth-century England, where the poet Isabella Whitney describes her authorship as needlework (Trettien 2015). It is found in Cicero, in Callimachus, and in Cynewulf, the Old English poet (*Ad familiares* 9.21; *Aetia* 26; and *Elene* 1237–39, respectively). It is found embedded in the literary vocabulary of many languages. Latin gives us the word *text*, meaning "woven," and *carmen*, both "a song" and "a carding instrument." Greek gives us *rhapsody*, meaning "a song sewn together," and *hyphos*, both "a web" and "a text." Arabic has the roots *ḡ-z-l*, related to sewing things together and composing love songs, and *n-s-j*, related to weaving and writing poetry. In the *Odyssey* both Calypso and Circe sing while weaving (5.61–62, 10.221–23), and some have suggested that the association springs from the rhythmic quality of both activities (Sanga 1995: 112). The metaphor of weaving can be traced back to the earliest authors, those from ancient Iraq. The very first author known to us, the Old Akkadian high priestess Enheduana, is referred to as a "weaver of tablets" (lú dub zú kéše-da) (*Temple Hymns* 543; see Sjöberg and Bergmann 1969: 49).

The conclusion to one of Enheduana's works, an anthology of hymns to Sumerian temples, states that with the composition of that text, "something has been created that no one had created before" (niĝ_2 u_3-tu na-me lu_2 nam-mu-un-u_3-tu) (*Temple Hymns* 544). However, Enheduana probably composed the hymns not from scratch but from collected and reworked older material. So how can she claim that the result was unprecedented? An answer may be found in the logic of weaving. Weaving authors do not produce their threads from nothing, spider-like, but take up existing materials and arrange it anew. Unlike the ideal of Romantic originality, the resultant "newness" is not a radical break with what came before but a unique patterning of older threads. Another author from ancient Iraq, Esagil-kin-apli, notes that he worked with materials that "since the days of yore had not been fastened in a new 'weave,' but lay tangled like threads" (ša ultu ulla ṣarâ lā ṣabtū u kīma qê etgurū; see Wee 2015: 253–54). The image places Esagil-kin-apli midway between past and future, stressing both the innovation of his work and its connection with "the days of yore." Here originality and tradition are not opposite forces but are composed of each other.

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Despite the ubiquity of weaving authors, I do not claim that the trope had the same meaning and function in all periods in which it appeared. It meant something very different in the context of Homer's oral craftsmanship than in the context of Callimachus's textual scholarship. However, the image is a good starting point for cross-cultural comparisons. Its historical recurrences and textual resonances reveal a good deal about what authorship was thought to be at any one time. One striking example comes from Dante, who in the *Convivio* (*Banquet*) makes weaving central to the definition of authorship. He derives the Latin word for "author," *auctor*, from the verb *auieo*, "to tie words together," commenting that the verb displays its own meaning, since it is composed of nothing but vowels, the sounds that tie words together. Further, the arrangement of the vowels also forms a tie: "Beginning with A, it then turns around to U, and goes straight through I into E, then turns around again and comes back into O, in such a way that it truly portrays this figure: A, E, I, O, U, which is the image of a knot" (Cominciando dall'A, nell'U quindi si rivolve, e viene diritto per I nell'E, quindi si rivolve e torna nell'O: sì che veramente imagina questa figura: A, E, I, O, U, la quale è figura di legame) (*Convivio* 4.6.4; Alighieri 2018). Dante pictures the vowels arranged alphabetically and the word *auieo* as a thread running through them, twisting and turning to yield a knot. The foundational elements of language make poetry a kind of weaving, and the author emerges as if by necessity from an inner logic of letters and lines. Dante further argues that weaving words is vital for the survival of language. Like all things, the vernacular wants to continue existing, and to do so, it must achieve greater coherence so as not to fall apart. And "more stability it can have only by binding itself together with rhythm and with rhyme" (più stabilitate non potrebbe avere che [in] legar sé con numero e con rime) (*Convivio* 1.13.6). The creation of poetry is thus the outcome of a desire innate to language. Dante's authors, like Derrida's, do not so much use language as allow themselves to be used by it, submitting to the words' own will-to-weaving.

When authors take up the threads of tradition to arrange them anew, they thus find them not lying inert but imbued with a certain force. In "The Textility of Making" Tim Ingold (2010) opposes a common but to him misleading model of creativity, in which making is viewed as the imposition of a form preconceived in the maker's mind onto a passive

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material. In the act of weaving, by contrast, the maker necessarily contends with forces within the material itself, since the threads offer a resistance without which the finished textile would fall apart. The hooks of the threadwork hold each other in place, and if the material were truly passive, the act of creation would be impossible. Conceived of as weavers, authors cannot exert their full agency onto passive words but must immerse themselves in a preexisting dynamic of forces, "in an ongoing generative movement that is at once itinerant, improvisatory and rhythmic" (91; cf. Sedgwick 2012: 83).

Dante did not engage in the "generative movement" from the outside but was literally born into it. He was born because his parents fell in love, and they could fall in love only because language tied them together in conversation: "The vernacular was a bond between my parents, since this was what they spoke. . . . It is therefore clear that it contributed to my generation, and that it is a partial reason for my existence" (Mio volgare fu congiungitore delli miei generanti, che con esso parlavano. . . . Per che manifesto è lui essere concorso alla mia generazione, e così essere alcuna cagione del mio essere) (*Convivio* 1.13.4). Dante depicts himself as an outcome of the will-to-weaving that he identifies in language: having bound his parents together, it has produced a poet who will in turn bind words together through meter and rhyme. At once weaving and woven, Dante's agency is thus determined by his position between linguistic desire and poetic creation; he acts as a participant embroiled in a broader, self-perpetuating generative movement.

In the *Divine Comedy* the historical width and weight of that movement is dramatized through the double figures of Virgil and God. Both are positioned as the author's author, representing the double influence negotiated by Dante: Christian and classical. To Virgil, Dante says:

> You are my teacher and my author,
> you alone are the one from whom I took
> the beautiful style for which I am renowned.
>
> [Tu se' lo mio maestro e'l mio autore
> tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
> lo bello stilo che m'ha fatto onore.]
> (*Inferno* 1.85–87; Alighieri 1966–67, vol. 2)

When Dante speaks, Virgil speaks through him, so that he is not the sole author of his poems. As with Esagil-kin-apli, there is a double movement

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of self-assertion and self-effacement here, since Dante both highlights his own renown and exposes the historically mediated nature of all literary esteem (Ascoli 1992).

But Virgil's original influence is in turn shown to be yet another medial modification of an even more fundamental kind of authorship. Progressing into Paradise and so leaving Virgil behind, Dante is quizzed by Saint John about his goals. He replies that he desires nothing but God's love, for God is "Alpha and O of all the writing / that Love has read to me, lightly or loudly" (Alfa e O è di quanta scrittura / mi legge Amore o lievemente o forte) (*Paradiso* 26.17–18). Dante refers to God by the conjoining of two vowels—incidentally, perhaps metonymically, the first and last of *auieo*. I have noted that for Dante, vowels represent the force binding words together, making God, "the true author" (verace autore) (*Paradiso* 26.40), an ontological realization of that principle of interconnectedness. The result is a distinctly literary kind of omnipresence, represented through the building blocks that pervade all writing.

God thus becomes the name for a desire inherent in language and literature whose generative force ties letters to letters, words to words, and parents to parents, forming the ultimate precondition for all authorship—which, in this admittedly extreme perspective, is necessarily always medial. Dante refers to Virgil as his author in lines 85–87 of the first canto, and in lines 85–87 of the last canto he gazes into the light of God and sees there, "bound with love into one volume, / all that seems spread out across the world" (legato con amore in un volume, / ciò che per l'universo si squaderna) (*Paradiso* 33.86–87). The implicit claim is both humbling and hubristic, and magnificently so. The agency of weaving authors is made a minute mirror of nothing less than divine presence, separate from it in the maximum degree but not in kind (Ascoli 1992: 64).

Far from the radical separation of the Romantic "lone genius," Dante's weaving authors thus emerge from and participate in a global interweaving of words. Each thread of the text carries both the weight of past literary tradition and a rhythmic forward force, a generative desire embedded in the structure of language. I would stress that a notion of medial agency is crucial for a full appreciation of this model of authorship. If we take weaving authors either as shackled to their threads or as free and unbounded creators, we miss the defining complexity of the

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metaphor. Barthes (1967), for example, argues that "the text is a tissue of citations" and therefore that the "only power [of the author] is to combine the different kinds of writing, to oppose some by others, so as never to sustain himself by just one of them." This seems to me a willful misuse of the word *only*. In the recombination of writing lies a powerful creative potential, and, as emphasized by Enheduana, the author arranging older threads anew still creates something no one created before. The other extreme is to take weaving simply as a metaphor for pure creation, forgetting that the threads of the trope are imbued with both historical weight and a force of their own, leaving weaving authors entangled in a negotiation with their material.

In culture after culture the position midway between history and creation is held to be the defining space of authorial activity. However, each culture represents that position differently: medial authorship can carry various implications and be imbricated in various discursive negotiations. To me, writing a history of authorship essentially means tracking the development of such differences and following the unfolding of tensions and transformations within the frame of medial agency. But what might such a history look like?

A History of Multiple Middles

An understanding of authors as primarily transmitters of texts is a far better frame for writing the history of the term than a focus on authors as original creators. First, the frame is more inclusive geographically and historically: the metaphor of weaving authors alone lets us compare literature from ancient Iraq, medieval India, and Renaissance Italy. Second, many turning points in the history of authorship concern the status and the configuration of a specifically medial position. For example, Bennett (2005a: 36) writes that the history of authorship revolves around a tension between two views, of the author "as divinely inspired, as sacred, as a seer, on the one hand, and as a craftsman of words whose allegiances and influence extend only to his power over language, story, and rhetoric itself, on the other." Crucially, both visions assign authors a medial role. I have shown how weaving authors, as craftsmen of words, engage with existing material, and likewise how vatic poets receive their words from elsewhere. Because a model of authors

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as intermediaries encompasses both sides of the divide, it can aid us in describing the tension between them and the transformations they underwent. This in turn leads us to recognize the wide historical variety within the concept of the author, both synchronically and diachronically. In this section I want to sketch out what a history of authorship based on such a model would look like.

The notion of inspiration illustrates the two advantages. First, like weaving authors, inspired poets are found across a multiplicity of cultural contexts, dramatically expanding the reach of the history of authorship. One may again invoke Enheduana, who writes of her nocturnal communion with the goddess Inana, or turn to Homer, who like Foucault portrays himself as not the subject but the indirect object of his own words: "Speak to me, Muse, of that ever-twisting man" (ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον) (*Odyssey* 1.1; Homer 1995). Or one may note the topos of authors claiming inspiration from dreams: Coleridge dreaming of Xanadu; the Old English poet Cædmon receiving his eloquence in a dream; or another author from ancient Iraq, Kabti-ili-Marduk, who transcribed the *Epic of Erra* from a dream.

Second, inspired authors are a key site of historical contestation. In Plato's *Ion* Socrates describes authors as iron rings hanging from a magnet, representing the power of the god by which authors are enthused. From the authors' rings, then, hang the rings of the rhapsodes who dramatized their poetry. The force of the god flows through the composing author, the performing rhapsode, and the enraptured audience, animating each in turn. A more striking instance of premodern authors being assigned an intermediary agency can hardly be found. However, here it does not exalt but criticizes authors, relocating literary accomplishments away from their human creators, in keeping with Plato's denigration of poets in the *Apology* (22a–c) and the *Republic* (3.386a–398b).

Inspiration can thus be invoked both to glorify and to deprecate authors, but again, the divide is best understood as a tension within the frame of medial agency. In a nutshell, the history of authorship is an account of how diachronic developments rearranged, transformed, and reevaluated such tensions. We might consider, for example, the contrast between Plato's inspiration and that depicted two millennia later in Caravaggio's *Inspiration of Saint Matthew* (fig. 1), in which the body of the

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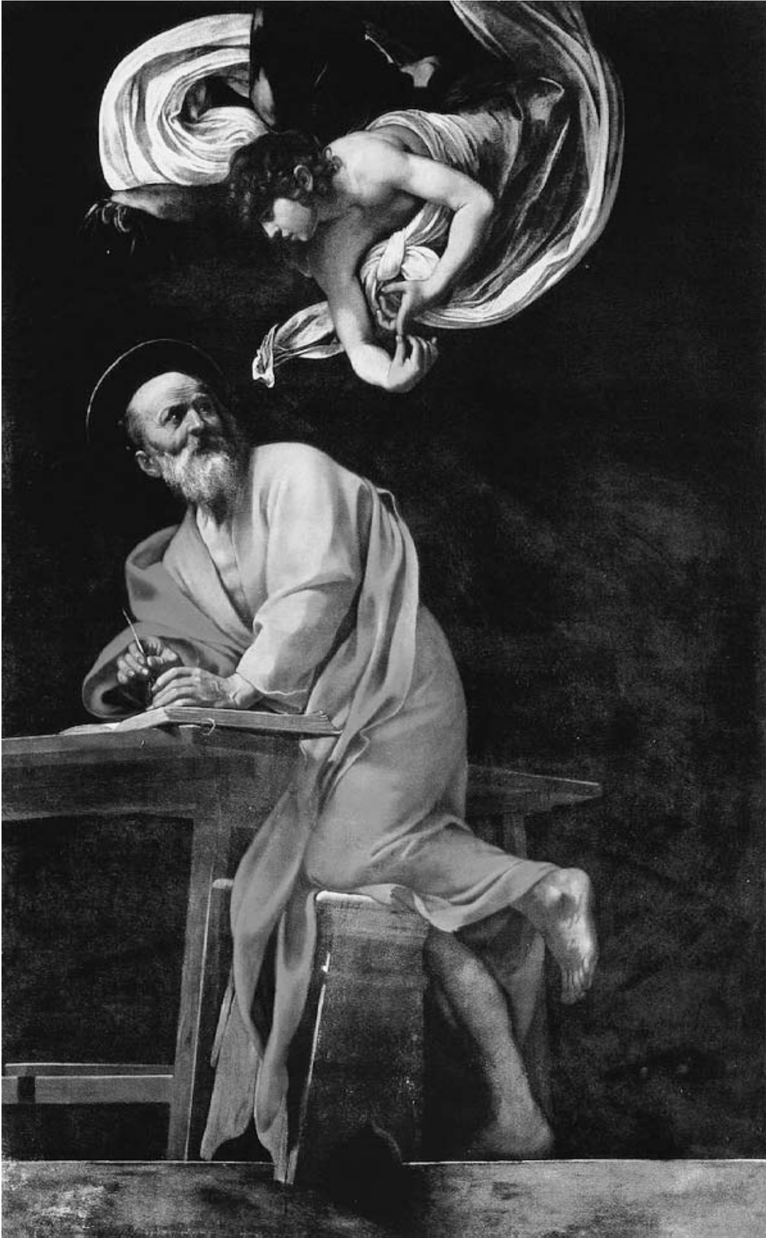

Figure 1. Caravaggio, *The Inspiration of Saint Matthew* (*San Matteo e angelo*), 1602. Église Saint-Louis-des-Français. Courtesy of the Pieux Établissements de la France à Rome et à Lorette.

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aged apostle is contorted by his attempt to write and listen simultaneously. The twisting of his body—his face turned to the angel above him, his body launched upon the desk—places him at the focal point of the painting, and the orange of his cloak radiates against Caravaggio's characteristically black background. Here, to be placed in a medial position is to appear at the center of the action, in keeping with the Renaissance ideal of human individuals positioned at the center of the natural world. In different periods with different notions about the status of the human subject, the same trope may be used for opposite ends.

The gradual displacement across centuries of the meaning of medial agency resulted in the coexistence of contradictory demands for authors to negotiate. Danielle Bohler (2006) argues that in their self-presentations medieval French authors alternate between two poses, profile and frontal. The profile pose identifies authors turned toward the past, discovering a manuscript in an obscure corner of the library, translating it, and so bringing it to deserved fame. The frontal pose indicates that the narrative does not assign them a subservient role, since they still assume a dominant speaking position. The interplay between poses enables authors to reconcile the double expectations of self-effacement and self-assertion—a tension I have noted also in Dante, who makes himself both central to the persistence of his language and a mere by-product of its desire.

It was this kind of negotiation within the frame of medial agency that produced the modern understanding of authors as originators. No radical break with prior conceptions, the ideal of the author as an original genius came about through the gradual dislocation of terms and tropes already in place. One such term, as remarked by Bianca Del Villano (2012), was *invention.* Etymologically derived from *invenio*, "to find," the term originally denoted the recovery and rearrangement of older material but over time came to mean the opposite—artistic creation *ex nihilo.* Del Villano shows how, during the eighteenth-century shift in the authorial image, critics began to use previously prized metaphors of authorship to denigrate nonoriginal writers. Whereas theatrical adaptation, for example, had once been awarded a dignified status, it was now seen as mere entertainment, and the metaphors used to describe it were recast accordingly. Del Villano quotes a passage from George Colman's *Man of Business* (1774) that unravels the image of weaving authors. Of a more successful colleague, the character of the Author complains that

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His play to-night, like all he ever wrote,
Is pie-ball'd, piec'd, and patch'd, like Joseph's coat;
Made up of shreds from Plautus and Corneille,
Terence, Moliere [*sic*], Voltaire, and Marmontel;
With rags of fifty others I might mention,
Which proves him dull and barren of invention.
(quoted in Del Villano 2012: 180)

Once a point of pride, engagement with the threads of tradition is here made an object of scorn, and lack of "invention" means lack of originality. The modern ideal of authors thus did not come into being as an entirely new vision of authorship but was constructed through the reversal and transformation of an ancient metaphorical frame. As it was constituted by the negation of older terms and tropes, the new ideal remained within their conceptual range. Recognition of the historical breadth and persistence of the medial frame thus serves as a counterpoint to the narrative of teleological emergence described above. The modern ideal of authors should be taken not as the "true" vision of authorship finally emerging from a premodern mess in the eighteenth century but as one modification among many (if a particularly radical one) in the terms of authorial mediation. Placed within this much larger history, rather than treated as an exception, the modern ideal can more clearly be seen as the result of an evolution of its constitutive terms.

Colman's reference to Plautus and Terence is revealing, if somewhat ironic. In the prologue to *The Woman of Andros*, Terence in fact defends himself against an accusation very similar to that leveled by Colman's Author: that he did not compose an original play but adapted it from Menander.[2] Terence (2001) points out that he is not alone in doing so: the same may be said of Naevius, Ennius, and Plautus, "whom our [Terence] takes as his models," or literally, "as his authors" (quos hic noster auctores habet) (l. 19). The tension between adaptation and original composition goes back all the way to antiquity, and a figure like Plautus may be summoned both as an author whose original plot has been shamelessly adapted and as himself a model adapter, the author's author, whose practice of emulation Terence sets out to emulate. The Romantic emphasis on authorial originality thus arose from within a

[2] I thank the reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.

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matrix of reinterpretations: much older tensions were rearranged into new configurations. The frame of mediality is therefore a good starting point for studying the modern emergence of authorial originality, but, as shown above, a focus on originality is conversely a poor starting point for understanding premodern mediality.

The tension between originality and mediation did not end with the establishment of the Romantic ideal of authorship. As Bennett (2005a: 55) notes, the Romantics "both inaugurated a certain sense of authorship and, at the same time, in the very same breath, announced the author's imminent demise." Exalted to superhuman status, a genius in touch with creative forces beyond the common ken, the Romantic author was also strangely impersonal. Geniuses create original works, yet that originality springs not from their own conscious selves but from something inside them that they themselves cannot access (Bennett 2005b). The force of original genius thus elevated idealized authors but also left them without a full understanding of their own works. In an 1803 letter William Blake (1982: 728–29) asserted that he wrote *Milton* "from Immediate Dictation twelve or sometimes twenty or thirty lines at a time without Premeditation & even against my Will." Once again, the claim of inspiration can lead just as easily to self-effacement as to elevation, and even Romantic originality can be framed as a form of mediation.

The inherent tension meant that by the end of the nineteenth century the status of the author could be reversed again, in what Robert Macfarlane (2007) describes as a resurgence of the older sense of *inventio*, as rediscovery and rearrangement. Whereas Edward Young in *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759) had advocated that authors cut themselves off from tradition, so their minds might become unobstructed conduits of the originality residing within them, T. S. Eliot (1919) in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" employed the image of authors as conduits to reach the opposite conclusion. Authors should fully immerse themselves in literary tradition so their minds can catalyze the fusion of tradition with emotion. The good poet, according to Eliot, differs from others not by "having 'more to say,' but rather by being a more finely perfected medium in which special, or very varied, feelings are at liberty to enter into new combinations" (72). Both Young and Eliot portray authors as crucibles and not sources of literary creation: their minds are the loci where inhuman forces meet to become poetry. But

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within the frame of medial agency, tradition can be figured as both the essence and the opposite of originality.

In short, the medial role most often attributed to premodern authors is not categorically separate from that of the Romantic ideal. The view of authorship as involving the middle ranges of agency pervades literary history, encompassing and permeating even the radical shifts of the eighteenth century. Historical tensions and transformations unfold within the agential frame and prove easier to track with a focus on the metaphorics of mediality than with an eye always turned, teleologically, to a specifically modern configuration of authorship.

Conclusion

I would like to end by highlighting one advantage and one challenge that follow from a focus on the partial agency of premodern authors. The advantage is that the focus disturbs the masculinist bias of the history of authorship. Whereas the ideal of originality has persistently been associated with notions of maleness and fatherhood, the matter is less straightforward with medial authors. For example, the medieval French author Jean de Meun, who portrays authorship as an act of literal castration (Nichols 2016: 92–93), metaphorically cuts off and gains control of the genitals of a god, representing divine inspiration. This rather extreme instance of authorial mediation retains the association between maleness and creativity but also severs creativity from the actual male body.

Another example is a trope common to fin de siècle English literature, in which authors, typically women, are portrayed as mediums in the literal sense: communicating with otherworldly spirits and relaying their words to the mortal realm. The image is often combined with that of the "typewriter," a female secretary whose expert fingers have become the perfect vehicle for a male employer—alive or dead. It is a vision of female authors that at first seems to present them as mere passive vessels. But as several scholars have shown, the image was repeatedly used to articulate female literary agency. The secretary transmitting the words of a dead employer could take control of a voice whose power and authority had otherwise been denied her (London 2005; Scherzinger 2010; White 2016). The metaphorics of mediation can thus derail expected

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constellations of gendered creativity. The trope of weaving likewise lends itself to the feminization of authorship, as textual labor has been associated with women in many (though not all) historical periods (see, e.g., Hyer 2016: 137–38; Karanika 2014: 4–5, 25–28).

Further, the broader geographic and temporal reach of the medial frame leads to the inclusion of more female authors, making neglected figures like Enheduana—the very first author, after all!—far more central to the history of authorship. Another revealing example is the twelfth-century Breton poet Marie de France. In her lay *Guigemar* she proposes to take a story that was commonly recounted among the Bretons and make of it a new version more suitable for its quality, since "whoever has good material for a story is grieved if the tale is not well told" (ki de bone matire traite, / mult li peise, se bien n'est faite) (*Guigemar* 1, in France 2003: 43). But because she frames her agency as the reworking of older material rather than original composition, she is often denied the title of author, presented instead as a translator or versifier.

This leads me to the second point, the challenge of differentiating between "authors" and other agents of literary production—adapters, translators, editors, compilers, copyists, and so on. A view of authors as intermediaries complicates the easy separation of authors from others, which is often made on the basis of a dichotomy between the "true originator" and the various other participants in literary production. For instance, Wai-Yee Li (2017: 361–63) states that in the ancient Chinese context "the line between author and editor can . . . be nebulous," citing the example of Confucius, who writes that "I transmit and do not create; I trust and love the ancient" (述而不作, 信而好古) (*Analects* 7.1, translation by Beecroft 2010: 44). As Beecroft points out, the word "transmit" (*shu,* 述) does not refer to a passive transfer of knowledge but has a deeper resonance. It refers to a sense of reenactment and reinstantiation through performance, securing the continuity of tradition and so inviting repetition. In short, Confucius is saying that his work brings old texts into new existence, rather than creating them for the first time. But are we to take that kind of transmission as authorship or editorship?

Both Plato's metaphor of the iron rings and Bonaventure's list of roles explicitly juxtapose authors with other kinds of textual transmitters. The line between the various roles therefore cannot be taken for granted

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across periods: it was negotiated differently in different contexts. But as modern scholars, we should be aware of the values and assumptions we impose on our sources by assigning the title of author to some figures and not to others. Konrad Hirschler (2006: 43), for example, insists on using the term *author* to refer to medieval Arabic historians, noting that "the modern image of many medieval religious scholars as non-creative compilers of already existent information, which they merely rearranged without much originality, is closely linked to the more general idea of stagnation in the Islamic lands in this period."

I certainly have no intention of determining how the line between authors and others should be drawn in contexts as disparate as those of medieval Brittany and ancient China. The decision must be made on a case-by-case basis so as best to reflect the conceptual structure of the sources in question. But I do insist that we cannot deny the title of author to premodern figures simply because they are portrayed as textual mediators and not original creators. A broader view of literary history reveals that the idea of authors as intermediaries is the rule rather than the exception; accordingly, it is a much better point of departure for understanding the history of authorship in all its complexity.

Sophus Helle is a doctoral student at Aarhus University working on the invention of authorship in ancient Iraq. He has published articles on ancient Iraq and Babylonian literature in journals such as *Postcolonial Studies* and the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*. He has translated the *Epic of Gilgamesh* into Danish in cooperation with the poet Morten Søndergaard.

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