Medieval history writing encouraged some scribes to assemble compilations, others to craft derivative texts, and still others to become scribal authors. The extraordinary number of surviving manuscripts of the Middle English prose *Brut* is comparable to another very different text, the Wycliffite Bible. In both cases, the “author” of the texts is conceptually subordinated to the larger needs and agendas of the texts, and their need to perform their authority while remaining authorless. The Middle English prose *Brut* survives in groups of manuscripts that share various textual features in common, most frequently the point at which the history ends. Thus, there are versions that extend to 1333, to 1377, to 1419, and to 1461, and still other manuscripts that end at any of these dates but otherwise contain substantively different texts. Many manuscripts of the Middle English *Brut* exhibit moments of unique local interest, revisions or emendations of facts, and substantive interpolations, additions, or expansions to make partisan political points. The instability of the text of the *Brut* is not ultimately surprising—history writing invites participation, and encourages sophisticated readers to go beyond simply reading the text at hand.

When scribes become scribal authors, we are confronted with the leap from reader to writer. It is a shift difficult for us to imagine, shaped by the print-culture experiences that still frame our engagements with text, even as they are reshaped by the digital. When physical books arrive in our hands, they arrive bound, printed, static, and complete. We might annotate them, but they do not present the opportunity to revise them. The modern book certainly does not permit us to author a new book within its covers. An obvious analogy to the plurality of textual intervention in manuscripts is the digital realm, where crowd-sourcing and wikis shaped by participating communities are reimagining many historical models of textual production. The content thereby produced, however, is not the same as that seen in texts such as the Middle English *Brut*. There may be collective and individual responsibility for creating digital content, but at no point are we implicated in its transmission. Many people may edit a single page on Wikipedia, but the changes they make are stored, hosted, and propagated from Wikipedia’s servers. The text of a Wikipedia entry may well be the result of the work of multiple individuals, some of whom may even be actively collaborating, but at no point in the digital chain are users responsible for transmitting the content they produce and consume, for putting it to other uses. We may write blogs, comment on the articles and blogs of others, and engage in vigorous discussions on Twitter, but the mechanics of transmission, of how our words get from our fingers to our screens to still other screens, are not part of writing. In being excluded from that step, we are excluded from engaging a text with the responsibilities and opportunities that every medieval scribe confronted.

Medieval scribes read books before they copied them, and they made intelligent judgments about the texts contained in those books. They expressed their opinions in marginal annotations and witty verses. Crucially, though, those opinions also register in which texts they chose to copy, and in how they copied them. Every medieval manuscript is the end-result of a series of political, spiritual, poetical, and decidedly individual decisions about a text. Script and *mise-en-page* are themselves the result of those decisions, even as they condition the subsequent reception of the book. Medieval textuality is thus perpetually a process, an opportunity—though not necessarily an occasion—for intervention. It is precisely as an opportunity, as the site of transformation rather than preservation, that medieval manuscripts are best situated in their textual and historical contexts. Medieval manuscripts perform their meanings, but they typically obscure the transformations underlying the processes through which those meanings were constructed. Manuscripts have long been read as compilations, as the result
of scribes working with an underlying purpose, arranging and anthologizing constituent texts into a more meaningful whole. Such scribal intentionality, however, did not stop at the level of the book.

This book has explored not only the ways in which scribes wrote manuscripts, but more troublingly, the ways in which the very term “copying” is misleading with regards to the wide range of scribal behaviors attested in medieval manuscripts. Although transformations of dialect do not necessarily pose challenges to our interpretations of texts, scribal inventions of the layouts of source texts begin to point to the spectrum of the authorial in which scribal authorship should be understood. Medieval scribes did many things beyond reproducing the texts of their exemplars, and the conceptual certainty we have established by describing medieval texts as “copies” is often unwarranted. Some texts are, of course, copies, even unproblematically so. There are, nonetheless, entire categories of medieval texts for which the legacy of transmission precludes any meaningful understanding of the text that initiated the sequence, of the text we would like to label as the original. The stakes were high for those who wished to be seen as authors, and many sought to prevent the erosion of their authorship by relying upon devices likely to be reproduced by replicative copying: acrostics such as those in Higden’s Polychronicon and Thomas Usk’s Testament of Love, or the identifying prologues in Mannyng’s Chronicle or Laȝamon’s Brut. Yet, if scribes chose more transformative varieties of copying, authorship could be erased.

The anxieties of authors, however, and our own preferences for “better” texts have obscured the self-confidence of scribes. Chaucer could write his Retractions, and assert his authorship of his texts while performatively rejecting the responsibility for, and moral implications of, his “worldly endytinges.” Scribes, however, cannot write retractions. Scribes cannot disentangle themselves from the worldly, physical forms of the texts in their hands. For a relatively brief period this unity was the site of exploration and experimentation rather than liability. There was a moment between the corporate imagination of primarily monastic literacy in England in the twelfth century, and the commercialization and professionalization of scribes and the book trade from the later fourteenth century. In that space, regional vernacular composition thrived, and a remarkable number of texts were produced, texts that expanded the idea of the literary and with it the authorial. Many of those texts were conventionally authored, but many more were the work of scribal authors, not bound by convention or intention to copy without alteration or invention. Instead, scribes found their own voices and
wrote new texts. Their voices can resemble, sometimes to the point of being almost indistinguishable, those of the texts that were the starting points of scribal authorship. But they are nonetheless the voices and the hands of medieval scribes, scribes who themselves transmitted, read, and wrote medieval texts.