

Chapter 3

HENRY SUSO AND AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

The Problem: The General Public Fallacy

Now that we've gotten about halfway through this book, there's something I'd like to get off my chest. It's about one of my pet peeves: two little words that come up often whenever medievalists today talk about public engagement: "General Public." Perhaps you've heard this term before, and maybe you've even used it yourself. For a little while now, medievalists have used it a lot when talking about how to solve the current crisis; if we want to stop the field's inevitable slide into oblivion, so it goes, we need to make our work accessible to the "general public." I've especially noticed these words in grant proposals, book descriptions, and the "about" pages on digital resources, right at the point when the creators discuss what kind of impact they'd like their project to have. Usually, it sounds something like this: "While this book/project/digital resource will be most useful for scholars, it will also appeal to the general public."

Now, you might be wondering, what's the problem with that? Isn't bringing medieval studies out of the academy and into the lives of the "general public" what this whole book is about? It's a fair question, and I do have to say that, on a certain level, the growing presence of the "general public" in medieval studies is a good thing, because it means that, at the very least, more medievalists are taking the challenge of building productive connections with non-academic audiences more seriously than in the past. And yet, that phrase still gets on my nerves; every time I hear a medievalist use it (or any of its relatives like the "general audience" or "general readers") in the context of public engagement, I cringe inside like someone's scratching their nails on chalkboard. The reason why has nothing to do with the intentions of whoever is using the term, which are usually good. Instead, it has to do with the fact that, from a public engagement standpoint, the "general public" isn't nearly as helpful as it sounds. In fact, I think the field's increasing reliance on this term does way more harm than good.

In this chapter, we'll take on this roadblock by exploring all the ways that this deceptive concept is preventing medievalists from developing content that will truly make an impact on any audiences outside of academia.

We'll be able to see that more clearly in comparison with the medieval solution, which generally avoids the temptation to reach *everyone* by focusing on gradually building relationships with much smaller audiences. Finally, I'll explain how I found myself unknowingly following that same medieval approach in the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, as my department looked to develop digital resources that would help our consortium in a time of great need.

For the most part, when academic medievalists say, “general public” to describe the audience they hope to reach, what they really mean is “anyone who isn’t an academic.” This sounds like a fine idea—and it is, at least at first—but let’s see what happens if we push on that concept just a little bit. Who belongs to the general public? What do they like? How do they prefer to consume their content? If we define our preferred target audience as “not academics,” questions like these—which are essential for effectively reaching this “general public”—become impossible to answer, because there are simply too many ways to answer them. The “general public” contains an enormous variety of people who differ wildly in terms of age, race, gender, sexual orientation, personal interests, religion...the list goes on. As if that weren’t enough, those demographic categories intersect in a nearly limitless number of combinations, like “white retirees in rural communities,” “Black high school students in Chicago,” “18–25-year-old males of South Asian descent,” “mid-career female investment bankers,” and so on.

This is what bugs me about the “general public.” From a public engagement perspective, it has so many possible meanings that it really has no meaning at all. As such, it does not actually help us grow the field in the ways we want. On the contrary, I believe it’s actually holding us back, in the form of what I call the General Public Fallacy. This roadblock is a trap that lures in well-meaning medievalists who want to save their field with promises of being able to connect with broader audiences outside the academy, but in reality, it saddles them with an overly vague concept of a target audience that obscures all the things you need to know and the work you need to do to reach it successfully. Without this knowledge, medievalists who aim for “the general public” quite often end up producing work (whether in print or online) that looks and sounds a lot like a scholarly publication (there’s Genre Dependency again!), only without as many pages, footnotes, and jargon. This kind of work is, to be sure, more accessible than your standard scholarly publication, but it’s also rather aimless, not specifically geared towards any one audience in particular. Not surprisingly, these attempts haven’t really moved the needle all that much in how audiences outside academia imagine the field.

All that has left us in a situation where it seems that the best we can do is just keep throwing slightly more accessible content at the “general public,” hoping that it will somehow convince everyone that medieval studies matters. That’s certainly not out of the realm of possibility, considering the number of things (both the good and the ridiculous) that have become cultural phenomena just because someone put them “out there.” But the odds of that are slim. By staying on this path, we might get some more non-expert eyes on what our field does, but the impact is still pretty minimal. At best, employing the General Public Fallacy is more like buying a lottery ticket than making a serious attempt to grow new audiences for medieval studies. Because of that, the recent increased effort to reach the “general public” has given us little more than a growing anxiety about why potential audiences and stakeholders outside of academia still don’t seem to understand why what we do is important.

So, does this mean that we should just give up trying to reach non-academic audiences? Certainly not, we just need to do it the right way, and that starts by opening our eyes to what it really takes to make our work appealing and interesting outside the so-called ivory tower. And make no mistake, there *is* a right way to do this. In fact, it’s going on all around us in the marketing and communications departments found in basically any business or institution in the private and public sectors.¹ And as my colleague Dr. Rebecca L. Fall has taught me, it’s even happening in some corners of academia, especially in the fields of theatre and media studies, whose practitioners’ livelihood depends on building and sustaining audiences who will buy tickets to their performances.² For these professionals, details matter. Rather than putting things out there and hoping for the best, they want to know everything they can about smaller subgroups within the “general public”: who they are, what they do, their likes, their dislikes, and so on. This knowledge, in turn, helps them develop strategies and initiatives to which those audiences are more likely to respond positively. If we really want our work to mean something outside the academy, we need to get this knowledge for ourselves. But can we even do that without hiring a marketing firm? I think so. After all, that’s precisely what our medieval predecessors did.

¹ Palmer, *Introduction to Marketing*.

² Cf. Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse”; Sedgman, *The Reasonable Audience* and “Audience Experience in an Anti-expert Age”; Bennett, ed., *Theatre Audiences*; Eagleton, “Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Reception Theory”; and Hohendahl, “Introduction to Reception Aesthetics.”

The Medieval Solution: Audience Development

You might think that something like the General Public Fallacy might be appealing for intellectuals in medieval Europe, considering the fact that they lived and worked in a society that was divided (by law, no less!) into church (*ecclesia*) and not-church (*saeculum*). But, as we've already seen with Peter Damian and Hildegard, those spheres were never as sharply divided in medieval Europe as they might seem to us. More importantly, though, elite intellectuals knew perfectly well that both the ecclesiastical and secular spheres contained within them a plethora of smaller, more narrowly-defined audiences that differed significantly in terms of education, wealth, status, geography, language, custom, gender, age, devotion, and more. Getting their message out to such a diverse group of publics would take a lot more than just wishful thinking. To be specific, it took something that I call Audience Development.

Broadly speaking, Audience Development is about filling in all the details that the General Public Fallacy glosses over. That is, it's about learning everything you need to know in order to, as much as possible, ensure that a particular audience will be receptive to whatever content you share with them. Unlike the General Public Fallacy, Audience Development offers no shortcuts; it's probably best understood as a process, one that takes time, effort, and patience to see all the way through. It's also much smaller in scale, usually focusing on a single, well-defined audience instead of everything at once. Medieval intellectuals were ready for all that, however, thanks to their training. Classical rhetoric, which was ultimately based on the context of a legal case tried before a jury, taught them that a good orator always needed to focus on a specific audience—understanding who they were, what they liked and didn't like, and so on—if they were going to effectively convince them of anything.³ Professional intellectuals in the Middle Ages took that to heart, and most of them probably would have agreed with our old friend Peter Damian's comment that, "An arrow is fired more truly if a target is set up for it" (Ep. 1, 1:67). That ability to isolate and cultivate smaller audiences became even more important as medieval society grew steadily more complex and diverse after the twelfth century, which created ever more potential audiences that needed to be served.

This was no doubt a major challenge, but the evidence suggests that medieval intellectuals were up to the task. We know that not just from their

3 Cf. Cicero, *De inventione*, ed. Greco, 100, and Pseudo-Cicero, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, ed Müller, bk. 4, chap. 15, §22; bk. 4, chap. 29, §39.

own work, but from how much time, money, land, and goods were donated to the Latin Church by laypeople of all kinds. Now certainly the church's ability to provide access to salvation had a lot to do with all that money rolling in, but I think it's important to note that, on the whole, intellectuals didn't take that for granted. As we've already seen, they spent an enormous amount of time and effort reaching out to people beyond the academic elite by writing to them, preaching to them, administering sacraments to them, making books for them, visiting them, teaching them, and lots more besides. They put in all this effort because they understood that the material support they needed wouldn't come unless they were willing to put in the work to get it.

For us, that work can be hard to see a lot of the time; medieval intellectuals had internalized Audience Development so well that they saw no need to spell it out. But, as usual, there were some elite intellectuals who were more open about how they built productive connections with certain audiences, and, accordingly, their work shows all the steps of the Audience Development process particularly clearly. In this chapter, we'll talk about one of the most enthusiastic medieval audience developers I know, one who spent decades growing and nurturing a relationship with an audience that ended up making a much broader impact than he initially expected. Through his example (a very appropriate term, as we'll see), you will get a better sense of everything that goes into Audience Development...including how it can make *your own* work better.

The Model: Henry Suso

Our model for this chapter is Henry Suso (1295?–1366), a Dominican friar who lived and worked in what is now southern Germany and Switzerland. He lived in tumultuous times, to say the least. The first two-thirds of the fourteenth century saw, among other things, theological controversies, dramatic political instability caused by infighting between the Holy Roman Emperor and the papacy and, oh, a cataclysmic plague that devastated everything in its path. Faced with all that, many people throughout Europe quite understandably became interested in turning away from the apparently crumbling world to develop their inner spiritual lives.⁴ That interest fit into a longer tradition of medieval people (especially women) trying their hand at living a holy life *outside* of traditional religious institutions. In the fourteenth-century German lands, this movement gained so many adherents and spawned

4 Cf. Tobin, "Introduction," 14–15, and Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*.

so much religious cultural production (texts, images, practices, and so on) that later scholars gave it a special name: *die deutsche Mystik*, or “the German mysticism.” Led by highly-trained intellectuals (mostly from the Dominican order), this movement was marked by a general desire to surrender one’s self to the divine or striving for as much spiritual perfection as possible. It was *exceedingly* popular with pretty much everyone in the German lands. Men and women, vowed religious and laypeople, highly-educated scholars and amateur novices, and more tried to leave their troubled world behind by seeking the Godhead in a variety of ways: contemplating divine mysteries, reading devotional literature, listening to sermons, commissioning art, and lots more.⁵

Henry Suso is probably best known for being one of the leading male figures of *die deutsche Mystik*.⁶ Like many in his time, Suso was deeply interested in obtaining a special, intimate relationship with God, which, in broad strokes, came from detaching oneself from the cares and worries of the world to (hopefully) experience a close relationship with the divine, or at the very least, an understanding of what such a relationship would be like (6).⁷ He liked to describe himself as the “Servant of Eternal Wisdom,” and was famous among his contemporaries for his command of mystical theology, his many religious visions, and his seemingly superhuman feats of asceticism. His writings were well-known in his own day, especially in southern Germany and Switzerland, and went on to influence the devotional lives of professional academics as well as ordinary laypeople for centuries after his death.⁸

Suso was without question a product of elite intellectual culture; as a young man he was one of the few chosen to study at the famous Dominican *studium generale* at Köln, an elite finishing school dedicated to creating highly-skilled professionals who would guide the intellectual and spiritual development of future generations of the Order of Preachers.⁹ Suso proved to be an excellent teacher, and not just of his fellow Dominicans; he was widely recognized—and sought out—by religious and secular audiences

5 Cf. McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, and Haas, *Sermo mysticus*.

6 Cf. Filthaut, ed., *Heinrich Seuse*; McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 195–239; and Enders, *Gelassenheit und Abgeschlossenheit*.

7 This and all other Suso references in this chapter indicate the page in Heinrich Bihlmeyer’s critical edition of Suso’s German works.

8 Bihlmeyer, “Einleitung,” 3*. On Suso’s works cf. Tobin, “Introduction,” 26–51, and Ruh and Haas, “Seuse, Heinrich, OP.”

9 Cf. Tobin, “Introduction,” 21–22, and Ruh, *Die Mystik des deutschen Predigerordens*.

alike for his ability to effectively teach profound theological ideas and guide devotional activities. But despite his credentials, Suso didn't think of himself as a university master or a profound mystical authority. "To me," he later wrote, "it appears that I am [God's] cart-driver; and, with my robe rolled up, I drive into puddles to drag people out of the deep muck of their sinful lives and bring them to beautiful things" (385).

This, obviously, paints quite a different picture from what we might expect from an elite intellectual in medieval Europe. And, for his part, Suso preferred not to be thought of that way; he deliberately turned his back on the way theology was learned and taught in the schools in favour of something more effective with less-educated audiences. In the first place, that meant doing most of his writing and teaching in German rather than Latin. It also meant avoiding complex argumentation and dense commentary in favour of teaching in what he described as "a model-making fashion" (*mit gebildener wise*) (3). Yet, unlike most other authors of his day, his writings were deeply personal, expressing his own strong emotions and physical experiences as he explored theological and mystical ideas.¹⁰ This helped him develop a style that brought his work to life for his readers by incorporating dialogues, personal anecdotes, and plenty of borrowed language and structure from popular vernacular literature like courtly romances.¹¹

Medievalists today have a lot to learn from this "cart driver." In particular, Suso is ideal for helping us understand how we too can roll up our sleeves and do the work necessary to develop enthusiastic and supportive audiences outside the academy. Instead of putting his ideas out there in the hopes that someone, somewhere would pick up on them, Suso met his target audience where they were, so he could lead them to where he believed they should go. And he could only do *that* through his strong commitment to Audience Development, which (luckily for us) he made sure to talk about in detail in his surviving work. Thanks to that, we know that Suso succeeded not because he knew a lot of theology, read a lot of literature, or put himself through an extraordinary amount of suffering, but because he knew what he had to do to find, understand, and, ultimately, *serve* his audiences in the ways that they needed.

¹⁰ Bihlmeyer, "Einleitung," 148*.

¹¹ Cf. Ruh and Haas, "Seuse, Heinrich, OP," 1124; Molinelli-Stein, "Seuse als Schriftsteller"; and McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 299–365.

Henry Suso and His Audience

The best source we have for Suso's Audience Development is *The Exemplar*, a collection of his most important vernacular works that he revised in the few years before his death. It contains "four good books" (*vier gûtu bûchlû*): *The Life of the Servant*, *The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, *The Little Book of Truth*, and *The Little Book of Letters* (3). The title of this collection was a deliberate choice: he wanted all four books to "provide for the good-hearted a clear path to heavenly truth, and for the right-minded the true path to the highest kind of blessedness" (6). But who was supposed to follow that model? Suso himself didn't give a clear answer; all he says in the prologue is that "it was God's good will that it be shared far and wide with all good-hearted people who, with the right mindset and an almost-painful yearning, desired to have it" (6).

If it sounds to you like Suso is treading very near to General Public Fallacy territory, you're not alone. He certainly does leave the door open for thinking that anyone (who can understand German, anyway) could be the target audience for *The Exemplar*. However, Suso scholars are quite certain that they know exactly who his original target audience was: Dominican nuns. Their confidence comes from a variety of internal and external evidence. In terms of numbers, Dominican sisters are mentioned directly or indirectly more than any other (human) figure throughout the different books in the *Exemplar*, a clear sign that he expected them to be reading it. The constant use of images throughout the surviving manuscripts of the work—including a series of illustrations almost certainly developed with Suso's involvement—is also a vital clue, as that practice was important for the instruction of nuns in medieval Germany.¹² Then there are the manuscripts; of the fifteen complete copies of *The Exemplar* to survive from the Middle Ages, ten of them were created for use in Dominican convents, and the quality of those manuscripts gives us some indication of how the nuns felt about Suso.¹³ Take for instance, a beautiful copy of *The Exemplar* now in the collection of the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel that was made for an unknown Dominican convent (possibly in Nürnberg) in 1473.¹⁴ Everything about the book—its large size; its fine wooden, leather-bound covers; over one hundred large initials decorated by colourful pigments and

¹² Hamburger, "The Use of Images."

¹³ Blumrich, "Die Überlieferung der deutschen Schriften Heinrich Seuses."

¹⁴ Henry Suso, *Heinrich Susos Buch genannt der Suse*, Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 78.5 Aug. 2°, fol. 38r.



Figure 3. Portrait of Henry Suso from a fifteenth-century copy of the *Exemplar*.
 Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Cod. Guelf. 78.5 Aug. 2°, fol. 38r.
 Available online <http://diglib.hab.de/?db=mss&list=ms&id=78-5-aug-2f>.
 Courtesy of the Herzog August Bibliothek.

goldleaf; and nearly two dozen rich illustrations that sometimes take up a full page—was clearly meant to impress. I can confirm that this book still stops people dead in their tracks in the reading room, a clear sign of the high regard the sisters who commissioned it must have had for its author, even more than a century after his death (Fig. 3).

Clearly, the relationship between Suso and Dominican nuns in the southern German lands was something special. Indeed, to hear Suso tell it, it's impossible to imagine the *Exemplar* existing at all without them, or one in particular, at least. Her name was Elsbeth Stigel, a member of the convent of Töss in Winterthur (present-day Switzerland), and Suso considered her his most important "spiritual daughter."¹⁵ So important, in fact, that in the prologue to the *Exemplar*, Suso rather remarkably claims that half of his "four good books," *The Life of the Servant* and *The Little Book of Letters*, owe their existence to her. Of the two, the story of the *Life*'s creation is the more dramatic, and, as we'll see, far more useful for thinking about Audience Development.

Suso tells us the *Life* was originally a set of notes Stigel had secretly compiled from a series of conversations with him about his past experiences, especially the ones that related to his special relationship with Eternal Wisdom. When Suso found out what she'd done, he was horrified, and demanded she hand all her notes over so he could destroy them. Before he could burn everything, though, a "heavenly message from God" commanded him to save the rest, most of which, he asserted, remained "as she wrote it with her own hand," albeit with some "good teachings" added by Suso later on (7–8). This is a remarkable claim of collaborative authorship, to be sure, and scholars have debated how seriously to take it for decades, with all agreeing that we will probably never know for certain how much, if any, of the *Life* as we have it was Stigel's work.¹⁶ We *do*, however, know two things: 1) Suso wanted his contemporary readers to believe that the *Life* was, at the very least, co-authored by a Dominican nun and 2) those same medieval readers had no reason to think otherwise.

This makes the *Life* the most important text for understanding Suso's approach to Audience Development, because it has the most to say about his relationship with the primary public he served. As such, it has all the details about what he had to do to build and maintain that audience, so it will be our focus for the remainder of this chapter. Before getting into that, however,

¹⁵ On Stigel's life, see *Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Wachinger (1995), 219–26.

¹⁶ Tobin, "Henry Suso and Elsbeth Stigel."

we need to talk about some, shall we say, quirks about this text. Despite its name, the *Life* should not be taken as a totally accurate, autobiographical account of Suso's own life; it is perhaps better thought of as an "auto-hagiography" that was meant to teach important lessons about sanctity and devotion to fourteenth-century audiences.¹⁷ In fact, Suso deliberately avoided using the first person at all in the work; referring to himself (or, if you like, the literary figure standing in for himself) as "the Servant" (*der Diener*), most likely to make it easier for his future readers to see themselves on the path of progression to spiritual understanding that the text lays out.¹⁸

So...is this authorship situation a problem? Does it mean that the Audience Development model we find in this text is all just a product of Suso's imagination, and didn't ever really happen? And does *that* mean that Suso's example won't help us overcome the General Public Fallacy? I don't think so. Whether Suso himself actually followed through on any part of the process we'll talk about below (and, for what it's worth, I'm convinced he did), it doesn't make it any less valuable for our purposes. After all, Suso meant for the *Life* to teach people how to do things by giving them useful, legible models to follow, which is precisely what we're looking for in this book.¹⁹ In other words, the whole point of the text was to lay out all the practices and assumptions that experts often leave unsaid, but that beginners like us need spelled out in plain detail. That brings us back to Stigel (or, if you like, the literary figure standing in for Stigel), and Suso's claim of authorship for her. Whether she actually wrote any part of the *Life* or not, medieval readers of the text would have seen in her proof that Dominican sisters—again, *Suso's target audience*—played a major role in shaping his elite, intellectual production. In that sense, the story of Stigel's authorship is basically the desired outcome of Audience Development—an enthusiastic and capable audience member who can appreciate, engage with, and even participate in a particular field. The rest of the text, then, explains the meticulous, gradual, and intensive method Suso put into practice to make that happen. And all it takes are five easy steps!

¹⁷ Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls*, 6.

¹⁸ Cf. McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 196, and Williams-Krapp, "Henry Suso's Vita."

¹⁹ Bernhardt, *Figur im Vollzug*.

Step I: Commitment

Trite as it may sound, the first step in Audience Development according to Suso is to really, truly *want* to do it. He began his process by thinking—constantly and with great effort—about what audiences were out there and how they might respond to his work. That wasn't particularly common in the fourteenth century; Suso himself noticed a dip in the piety and dedication within the Dominican Order in his day, so he probably knew more than a few friars who didn't feel it was worth their time to think about other audiences.²⁰ Indeed, it wasn't inevitable that Suso would either; he began his serious spiritual life at eighteen when he resolved to make “a constant effort to earn an enduring experience of a loving union with eternal Wisdom,” which he did initially by keeping himself apart from other people as much as he could to focus on his own progress (11). But after doing that for a long time, “he was charged by God through all kinds of revelations to strive now for the salvation of his neighbours” (63). From then on, he could no longer enjoy the company of his heavenly beloved unless he was thinking about how to serve other people.

Divine commands aside, Suso had other reasons to care about audiences. One was a painful personal experience. In 1330, he was summoned before a chapter of the Dominican order to answer accusations that his writings (most likely *The Little Book of Truth* and maybe some others) contained heretical teachings, and though he was not condemned, the humiliation that came from what he felt were misreadings of his work stayed with him for the rest of his life.²¹ Another reason was his preferred form of spiritual life; enduring a seemingly endless series of physical, mental, and spiritual sufferings to attain true detachment. For him, these acts were just the necessary first step on a path towards a union with Eternal Wisdom, but he worried that external observers would be more likely to see them as “sharp thorns that pierce all the way through flesh and bone,” which would discourage them from pursuing the spiritual life on their own (90).

With all this in his mind, it's no surprise that Suso cared deeply about audiences and how they responded to his work throughout his career. That concern comes out clearly in the *Life*, which is filled with anecdotes about individuals and groups giving him (mostly positive) feedback on his teachings, writings, and way of life. Some of those reviews even came directly from God. For example, a Dominican nun named Anna told Suso about mul-

²⁰ Bihlmeyer, “Einleitung,” 96*–100*.

²¹ Cf. Tobin, “Introduction,” 23 and 33, and Künzle, “Einführung,” 30.

tiple visions in which God confirmed his pastoral work and dedication to suffering were indeed helping bring other people to salvation (63–64). References like these were more than just confirmations that Suso was doing good work; they were a reminder that his audiences were not abstractions, but real, living people who could, based on their reactions, have a decisive impact on the successful attainment of his spiritual goals.

That was certainly on his mind as he was compiling the *Exemplar*. In the prologue, we learn that Suso's original plan for the work was to lock it away until after his death, when it would (we must assume) be "put out there" to what one could rightly call a "general public." In the end, however, he decided to scrap that plan and disseminate the book himself, because:

It could well have been the case that, after his death, the book would have found its way to men who were tepid or fallen away from God's grace, who would have made no effort to share it with those desiring to praise God, sending it into oblivion having done no good at all. It could also have happened, that it would have first come to those who are blind to the truth or had spiteful minds, who out of the wickedness in their hearts would hide it away, as has often happened before (5).

This confirms that Suso's desire for Audience Development came from his concern for his neighbours; he was extremely worried about the harm that would be done—to his work, his reputation, and, most importantly, to the spiritual fates of his neighbours—if it ended up before the wrong audiences. That was more likely to happen if he just released *The Exemplar* to a "general public" and hoped for the best, so he chose to take the surer thing and put in the effort to get his work in front of the right people first. Turns out, he chose wisely.

Step 2: Identification

After all that careful thinking about what audiences he could serve, it was time for Suso to choose one. But why did Suso settle on the Dominican nuns as his target audience? One might say that the decision was made for him, since the spiritual direction of the sisters had been (by papal command, no less) the responsibility of the friars since the thirteenth century.²² However, this didn't mean that Suso would inevitably choose to work mainly in Dominican convents. The sisters were far from the only audience Suso would have served in his capacity as a friar, nor were they the only ones to merit a mention in his works. Indeed, the *Life* shows Suso interacting with

22 Tobin, "Introduction," 16 and 24.

people across the social spectrum: wealthy noblewomen, poor travellers, other Dominican friars, townspeople, a knight and his squire, and even a self-acknowledged murderer and his girlfriend. Any one of these audiences (well, probably not the murderer) could have been the audience he chose to develop a close relationship with, so what was it about the nuns that drew his attention?

For one thing, there were an awful lot of them. The Dominican province of Teutonia, which included southwestern Germany and Switzerland, contained more convents (sixty-five) of the order than any other province in Europe, so there was a real need for friars to take up the charge of working with them.²³ Another selling point was that the sisters tended to be highly competent for spiritual instruction; most of them came from noble or urban families, and were usually able to read and write, at least in German, even before they entered the convents.²⁴ Because of that, the sisters could become active participants in devotional work, even to the point of making their own texts. Multiple convents created so-called “sister books” (*Schwesternbücher*), which gathered together autobiographies of members of the convent that functioned as devotional models for future generations.²⁵ Elsbeth Stigel herself took part in compiling one such book for her community of Töss, most likely in collaboration with her sisters, which Suso himself called “a very good book” (*ein vil gût bûch*) (97).²⁶ Finally, Dominican sisters were enthusiastic participants in *die deutsche Mystik*, having already developed a fairly sophisticated practice of mysticism without the assistance of the friars.²⁷ As such, it is safe to assume that many of them possessed the same confidence in their religious abilities that Stigel expressed to Suso in the early days of their relationship: “My desire is...to live a holy life, and for that I have the courage to properly and rightly pursue it...be it through...suffering, death, or whatever it is...whatever painful thing you have the courage to tell me to do, I will do it with the help of God’s strength” (98).

These factors combined to make the Dominican sisters the ideal audience for Suso’s brand of spiritual cart-driving: they had a clear need for his services, they were competent enough to pursue a mystical spiritual life,

23 Grundmann, *Religiöse Bewegungen*, 313–14.

24 Folini, *Katharinental und Töss*, 339.

25 Tipka, “Subjekt und Text.”

26 On Stigel’s *Schwesternbuch*, see *Verfasserlexikon*, ed. Wachinger (1995), 223–24, and Grubmüller, “Die Viten der Schwestern von Töss und Elsbeth Stigel.”

27 Peters, *Religiöse Erfahrung als literarisches Faktum*.

they were untrained enough that they still required guidance from a professional like him, and they had the conviction necessary to endure the long road towards “supreme happiness” with the Godhead. Suso clearly had a lot to offer an audience like this, but, just as important, he also understood that the sisters had a lot to offer *him*. As active students, interlocutors, and even devotional partners, Dominican nuns themselves could exert a significant, positive influence on the religious life and work of their spiritual directors.²⁸ This certainly was the case for Suso and Stigel; near the end of the *Life*, he remarked that “I have never had anyone who could, with such tenacious effort and devotion to God, help me complete my books, as you did” (109). This settled it. If Suso wanted the world to get the most out of his intellectual and spiritual expertise, the Dominican nuns of Teutonia had to be his main audience.

Step 3: Relationship-Building

His choice made, Suso then had to turn to actually creating a relationship with the Dominican nuns. This was a big challenge; just because the sisters *seemed* like the ideal audience for him to prioritize did not automatically make them a *receptive* one. That was only likely to happen if he was able to build a proper relationship with them, which required more than wishful thinking from afar. As with a great many relationships even today, the key was for him to *be there*. From the sources we have, it’s clear that Suso made sure he was a regular physical presence for his spiritual daughters in all the ways a friar was allowed to be: he celebrated mass with them, heard their confessions, preached sermons before them, answered their questions, talked about readings, and provided other general spiritual guidance.²⁹ But all of this was just a base-level form of engagement; more would be required to get the kind mutually-beneficial *spiritual* relationship he was looking for.

For Suso, that meant the intimate conversation, a type of interaction that suited his emotional and personal approach to spiritual direction very well indeed. Appropriately enough, we see conversations happening constantly in the *Life*, with human and divine interlocutors alike.³⁰ The dialogue format had a long history in Christian religious thought, of course, but Suso’s use of it was unique in the sense that his dialogues seemed like conversations actual humans would have. Alongside quotations from theological authori-

²⁸ Grundmann, “Die Frauen und die Literatur im Mittelalter.”

²⁹ Michel, “Heinrich Seuse als Diener,” 282.

³⁰ Enders, *Gelassenheit*, 223–45.

ties and citations from Scripture, a chat between Suso and his spiritual children featured poetry, music, jokes, wordplay, references to shared memories, stories, and romance tropes, among other things. At the same time, Suso knew how to approach conversations with a high level of emotional intelligence, especially when the sisters were distraught. For instance, he recalled a time when a number of women (some of them Dominican nuns) who were held “captive” by fear and other troubles came to him for help. Before doing or saying anything else, “he openly wept with them in their fear and distress” and comforted them, a display of genuine empathy that helped the women eventually break free from their troubles after their conversation (116–17).

Even with all this, however, relationship-building was not always easy, and Suso often had to show persistence and resourcefulness to get through to a tougher audience. But once again, the conversation was key to his success. One of the best examples of this from the *Life* involved a beautiful young Dominican nun who had not, shall we say, fully committed to her vocation, being more interested in hanging out with her noble friends than living an austere, focused spiritual life. For precisely that reason, she had no interest talking to Suso, and avoided him at all costs whenever he came around her convent. When he finally did approach her and “tactfully” tried to start a conversation, the nun angrily shut him down and drove him off. Humiliated but not defeated, Suso developed a new plan straight out of a romantic comedy: asking one of the nun’s friends to make up some excuse for her to go into the guest house where he was staying so he could talk to her alone. Once he did, Suso turned on the emotion, sighing deeply before making an extremely flattering pitch (just to give you an idea, here’s how it started: “Ah me, my beautiful, gentle maiden, chosen by God, how long will you let your lovely, beautiful body and your fine, tender heart belong to the devil’s cruelties?”). Immediately following their conversation, the nun dismissed her noble friends from her company and committed herself to seeking true detachment (135–8).

Step 4: Listening

As deeply meaningful (and even enjoyable) as these intimate spiritual relationships could be, though, Suso understood that they were only another step on the way towards developing his audience. The next step was to get a clear sense of what the Dominican sisters actually wanted to get out of the relationship for themselves, since that would guarantee his work would have the positive impact he hoped for. It was probably natural for Suso to think about what people wanted from him, since the *Life* includes a great

many anecdotes of people, sometimes complete strangers, coming to him out of the blue to ask for some kind of spiritual service. However, it's important to note that very few of those anecdotes have the same level of detail as the requests from nuns. These often appear as full-bodied conversations, in which the sisters express their wants and needs in their own voices. Not surprisingly, no sister does this more frequently or more in-depth than Stagel, and her exchanges with Suso are probably the best evidence we have for what a good listener he was.

As Suso described, Stagel had demonstrated a strong sense of initiative well before she knew him. She was like "the hard-working bees" in that she "wrote down whatever she was able to find that could lead her and others to practice holy virtues" (96). She carried those strong, intentional work habits into her relationship with Suso, always coming prepared with specific questions and clearly-articulated goals for what she wanted to get from his expertise at any given time. Indeed, she decided to reach out to him in the first place because she had heard about some "high-falutin' and sagacious ideas" that interested her, and she somewhat brazenly requested that Suso "write her something about these aforementioned ideas without any kind of background" (97).

Though Suso (as we'll see in a bit) declined to do precisely that, this first exchange set the tone for the rest of their spiritual relationship, as Stagel continued to request specific services like receiving consolation at a tough time, learning the difference between false and real detachment, or an explanation of the Trinity (114, 158, 191). As if that weren't specific enough, she was not shy about telling him *how* she wanted to learn from him, either. In Suso's telling, all the rhetorical and pedagogical strategies we see in the *Exemplar*—Suso's own experiences, "models for imitation" (*bildgebender glichnus*), and brief, uncomplicated summaries of complex ideas—were at some point specifically requested by Stagel, so that Suso's teachings would, as she put it, "last longer in [her] unhealthy mind" (99, 190–91).

It might be easy to characterize Stagel's assertiveness here as a token of Suso's esteem for her, were it not for *where* in the *Life* they show up. We begin to see these details in chapter 33, which scholars agree marks the beginning of a second part of the text. At this point Suso replaces himself (or the Servant) as the main focus of the narrative with Stagel, who goes on to follow the ideal model of spiritual progression laid out in the first part.³¹ It's here, in other words, that Suso expects the *Life's* readers to start actively

31 Hamburger, "Medieval Self-Fashioning."

imitating the things that Stigel does, which means that he wanted *all* of his readers, but especially Dominican nuns, to also be prepared to tell their spiritual directors exactly what they wanted from them.

Step 5: Serving

By this point, Suso had put in so much work to develop his target audience that it might be easy to forget that he hadn't actually shared any expertise yet. This was, of course, no accident; after the previous four steps, he wasn't in a position to do so successfully until this point. Now he knew for certain that Stigel and other Dominican nuns had the following interests: pursuing a "holy life" based on "true detachment," thinking about lofty intellectual concepts discussed by elite thinkers, and performing acts of asceticism. What's more, he also knew that they preferred to learn about those subjects through intimate conversations, letter exchanges, and models they could visualize and imitate. Armed with this knowledge, he knew exactly what parts of his expertise to share with them *and* how to do so in a way the nuns were sure to like.

Often, Suso simply gave the nuns precisely what they asked for. Usually that meant providing them with information about certain ascetic practices that would help them on their way towards mystical understanding, many of which he had used himself when he was a beginner. One example was a morning greeting he would customarily give to Eternal Wisdom; the *Life* included a full description of this greeting; what words he said, what he was physically doing (a physical prostration) when he delivered it, the short prayer he said afterwards, and even a reference to one of his other works (*The Little Book of Letters*) where that prayer could also be found (18). The sisters also asked for many religious texts, which was a bit more complicated, but Suso did his best to accommodate them. The trick was to give them enough so that they felt they got what they wanted, but not so much that anybody would get in trouble. For example, because the sisters were keen on learning from Scripture, Suso filled his works with Scripture quotations (and their accompanying explanations) as much as possible, so that they could justifiably say that Suso gave them a stronger command of the Bible than they'd had before.³² At other times, Suso created new texts for the sisters by excerpting or summarizing longer, more difficult ones. He sent both kinds to Stigel at various times, like a copy of sayings of the Desert Fathers and excerpts from theological writings about obtaining unity with

32 Michel, "Heinrich Seuse als Diener," 286–87.

the Godhead, which reads much more like a miniature treatise than the rest of the *Life* (104–7, 184).

Suso also shaped how he expressed his knowledge based on the nuns' pedagogical wishes. When he did finally get around to discussing the "high-falutin'" theological concepts Stagel originally requested, he made sure to do so gradually and in an orderly fashion as she had asked him to do, sending her a concise, thoroughly sign-posted "good breakdown" (*gûten underscheide*) of three kinds of detachment that "you can understand from now on" (*du nu fûrbaz merken*) (163). And of course, as we've seen, Suso gave Stagel and the other nuns all of the "visible models" (both textual and visual) they could handle from Scripture, the lives of the saints, and his own experience (35–36). But plenty of elite intellectuals could heap up examples; Suso's were different because he used his literary gifts to bring them to life, making them more like the intimate, in-person conversations everyone enjoyed so much throughout the *Life*. For instance, he filled a description of how he performed the stations of the cross with intense, physical details about what happened when he "met" Mary along the way so that the nuns could also see her tears, hear her sighs, and witness the sorrow on her face as if they were standing before her (35–36).

Of course, any good teacher knows it is not a good idea to *always* give students exactly what they want or expect, and sometimes Suso had to serve his favourite audience by telling them "no." In fact, that was how his spiritual instruction of Stagel began. When she first approached him to get expert-level instruction on some "sagacious" theological ideas without the proper instruction first, alarm bells went off for Suso. He knew well that many others (including seasoned professional scholars with more formal education and training than Stagel would ever get) had taken those ideas and run with them to questionable places that led to confusion, controversy, and, sometimes, heresy.³³ That, however, put him in a difficult spot: if he flatly refused her request, she may well have just gone to some other spiritual director with less scruples than Suso or, perhaps worse from his perspective, she would stop trying to pursue divine understanding at all. Either of those things would have to count as an Audience Development failure, so Suso avoided them both with a well-crafted response that acknowledged she was doing the right thing: "You recently told me about some lofty ideas...which you handled very delicately, as you should." Then he explained why he could not grant her request: "You seem like you are still a young and inexperienced

33 Lerner, *The Heresy of the Free Spirit*.

nun.” Finally, he provided her with information on how she could eventually get what she wanted: “it’s better for you to know how to start at the beginning...[with] ascetic practices and good examples of the holy saints” (98–99). In this way, Suso made sure that, even though he didn’t give Stigel what she specifically requested, he was still providing her with the service she had asked for.

To be sure, Suso was not always successful in his interactions, even with Dominican nuns. Overall, though, between the evidence from the *Life*, the broad circulation of manuscript copies of his writings, and the popular cult that began after he died, I think we can say with confidence that the man knew how to develop an audience. So how did he do it? First, he started with the determination that bringing his work to other audiences was essential. Next, he thought carefully about what specific audience would allow him to have the biggest impact, both on the audience and on his own work. Then, he steadily built a relationship with that audience, which gave him a solid sense of what that audience’s interests and preferred content formats were. That then helped him shape his expertise into a product that was sure to find a positive reception. The bottom line is this: Suso was able to serve Dominican nuns like Elsbeth Stigel so effectively because he knew them so well—who they were, what they could do, what they were interested in, and how they liked to learn. At the same time, his “spiritual daughters” also knew *him*, because he had worked so hard to be present with them and share his own feelings as much as possible. All of this created a powerful sense of mutual trust that benefited all parties, including, lest we forget, *The Exemplar* itself, which, thanks to Suso’s tireless dedication to Audience Development, had the right audience to bring it into the world.

Embracing the Smaller Audience

It is, I hope, clear how *radically* different the model of Audience Development we find in Henry Suso’s *The Life of the Servant* is from the General Public Fallacy. Rather than trying to aim his work at the entire non-professional world at once, Suso started with a very clearly-defined audience (Dominican nuns) and worked diligently to build a productive and trusting relationship with them that, in turn, shaped how he shared his expertise with them. And in the end, everybody won: sisters like Stigel got the spiritual guidance they were looking for, and Suso was able to bring more people up from the “mire” into a holy life. On top of that, the strength of the relationship he built with his core audience was a key factor in spreading his expertise to other audiences as well. As the sisters discussed, shared, and copied Suso’s works, more and more people (visitors, donors, family members, and so on) came

into contact with them, helping to grow his reputation and create connections with different audiences that came to appreciate his work. In the end, it's mostly thanks to the sisters that Suso became the most widely-read of the major figures of *die deutsche Mystik* during the Middle Ages.³⁴ In other words, Suso "went viral" in the way that a lot of medievalists today hope to do, but only because he had steadily and meticulously developed a smaller, more narrowly-defined audience first.

To be clear, Audience Development is not always nice and linear like this. In fact, it wasn't even that way for Suso. There were starts and stops, and plenty of "two steps forward, one step back" going on, and that would be true today, too. Audience Development is, as it was for Suso, a constantly ongoing, flexible process that can start at different levels, sometimes skip a step or two, repeat the same step multiple times, or start over completely. What I've done here is order all of these different aspects of Audience Development into a progressive sequence (in a "model-making fashion," you might say) so that you can visualize the whole process, from first wanting to bring your work to others to successfully doing so. Depending on who you are, what your abilities are, and what you want your work to do, your experience of this process may be very different. But, trust me, it can work.

I saw this firsthand back in the late spring of 2020, when, along with everyone else, the Center for Renaissance Studies at the Newberry was trying to figure out what to do about the first full academic year in the age of COVID. That meant knowing what was going on with our consortium, because serving the needs of the faculty and graduate students in our consortium is literally the main reason why the Center was founded in the first place. Not only that, we knew that we had a degree of flexibility that our colleagues at universities didn't, so we always try to make sure to use that to get our constituents what they need. So, that spring, our director, Dr. Lia Markey, diligently reached out to friends and colleagues in the academy to get a sense of how we could help them in the year to come. What she learned was that everyone, anticipating (correctly, as it turned out) that Zoom would be a major factor in however the year went, was looking for digital things to do with their students. In particular, they were looking for YouTube videos that were short (around 5 minutes), included a lot of images, and were based on actual medieval or early modern objects to use in their (likely virtual) classes. So, we all decided that was exactly what we would make.

34 McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 195.

I volunteered to try and put together a prototype that would help us learn whether or not this was something we could actually pull off.

This turned out to be *much* easier than I expected. Within the week, I had developed, practiced, and recorded a presentation on Gregory of Tours' account of the impact of plague in the city of Marseilles in 588. That recording became the first entry in a series of videos called *Learning from Pre-modern Plagues*, which you can now find on the Newberry's official YouTube channel.³⁵ When the fall term came, just as we had hoped, our faculty and graduate students reported using the videos right away in their classrooms, and we were glad to hear they were working exactly as our instructors had hoped. But then, to our surprise, we learned that other audiences, including many outside of academia, were also watching, enjoying, and learning from the videos, as well. As of July 7, 2025, the videos have collectively received over twenty-three thousand views and counting.

I remember being impressed at how easily my *Learning from Premodern Plagues* video came together, but, upon further reflection, it was not all that surprising. The experience was so seamless and effective because we knew exactly what to do. That knowledge came from the fact that we knew our audience so well, thanks to the hard work we had put into getting to know them and understanding what they wanted over a long period of time. When I sat down to start planning out the proof-of-concept recording, I already had detailed knowledge of who the intended audience was (university instructors and their students), what that audience needed (digital videos), and precisely what format it should have (short, image-based). All of this helped me to resist falling down rabbit holes, getting lost in needless details, or getting too much into my own head. Lia's advance research had already laid out all the dots, all we had to do was connect them. And once we did, we very quickly found that other people beyond our original audience wanted to join in.

Though none of us realized it at the time, the story of creating *Learning from Premodern Plagues* followed Henry Suso's model for Audience Development almost to the letter, which is why I'm confident that the model can work for other medievalists, too. It will, of course, not be that easy; as Suso knew, developing an audience properly takes a lot of effort, dedication, and persistence. No question, it sure would be easier if some medievalist could produce one book, TikTok video, or podcast that would immediately con-

35 https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLA6qRZ3gfQFbmaJ-aaaM_OZdVU2ohF1hA&feature=shared.

vince the mythical “general public” to love medieval studies. After all, there is a reason so many people still play the lottery. But, given the crisis we’re facing, our field doesn’t need lottery tickets, it needs sure things. And Audience Development can get us those sure things if we’re willing to put in the work.

I know that sounds daunting. One of the biggest challenges of Audience Development is that it can take a long time before we can see visible evidence that it’s working. That, in part, is why the General Public Fallacy is so enticing; it would be much better to just get everyone on board with medieval studies at once, right? So, I want to finish this chapter with one way that Audience Development makes the work of building productive connections with audiences easier: it gives us permission to *start small*. That is to say, there’s no need for us to try and reach the biggest possible audience right away; instead, like Suso, we should try to get to that point by reaching as many more narrowly-defined audiences as we can. If more medievalists commit themselves to developing small audiences as Suso did, before you know it, we’ll have collectively added a pretty large audience to the fold. To put it another way, the smaller audiences we’re able to develop, the bigger medieval studies’ base of social and financial support becomes. At a certain point, we should be able to see that in (hopefully) more undergraduate enrollments, more graduate students, and more non-academic members in organizations like the Medieval Academy. And if we can keep that up, administrators and funders eventually will *have* to take notice.

So, by all means, please do understand how important it is to make your work accessible to an audience that isn’t academic, but don’t let that understanding fall into the General Public Fallacy when you do. Instead, be like Henry Suso and hop out of your cart, roll up your robe, and go pull a well-defined audience out of the mud and into what’s medieval.

