



Dr Alanna Skuse

## Surgery and Selfhood: Lessons from Open Humanities Publishing

This case study from the winner of the **University of Reading Open Research Award 2021** shows how Open Access monograph publishing can help increase the reach of humanities research. It also considers some of the barriers to Open Access publishing, and how these might be overcome.

*Surgery and Selfhood in Early Modern England: Altered Bodies and Contexts of Identity*<sup>1</sup> is an Open Access monograph published in 2021. It is the product of a Wellcome Trust-funded postdoctoral fellowship (2016-2019), which investigated what happened to people of the period 1550-1750 when they experienced life-changing surgeries such as amputation, mastectomy, or facial surgery. This work draws on historical, medical and literary texts. It provides valuable new interpretations and collations of historical material, including the first examination of phantom limb syndrome in this period and the first analysis of representations of early mastectomy survivors.

The Open Access status of this research has proved vital to integrating the academic and public-facing aspects of my work. Non-academic articles I have written link to free copies of my books. As a result of the readership generated I have been able to acquire a literary agent and am currently in the process of securing a trade book deal.



Detail from *A verger's dream: Saints Cosmas and Damian performing a miraculous cure by transplantation of a leg*. Attributed to the Master of Los Balbases, ca. 1495. **Wellcome Collection. Public Domain Mark.**

Every article arising from this project has been published Open Access. This has highlighted some difficulties of Open Access publication – in the humanities, a relatively small number of journals offer Open Access provision and this restricts publishing avenues. But my experience also illustrates opportunities in this area. In 2020, two of the five 'most read' articles in *Social History of Medicine* were authored by me, with a combined readership of over 30,000. My first Open Access monograph, *Constructions of Cancer in Early Modern England* (2015) has been downloaded over 17,000 times.



A. Paré, La manière de traicter les plaies. **Wellcome Collection. Public Domain Mark.**

which is exceptional for a humanities monograph.<sup>2</sup> *Surgery and Selfhood* has reached a far wider audience than would otherwise have been the case, with over 1,700 readers in 3 months.

The Open Access status of this research has proved vital to integrating the academic and public-facing aspects of my work. For example, non-academic articles I have written link to free copies of my books.<sup>3,4</sup> Insights from public engagement events I organised during my postdoctoral fellowship directly influenced my research, creating a moral imperative for making that research freely available. As a result of the readership generated for both my Open Access and non-academic work, I have been able to acquire a literary agent and am currently in the process of securing a trade book deal.

Since I published *Surgery and Selfhood*, the Wellcome Trust **no longer pays Article Processing Charges for subscription journals** with an Open Access option ('hybrid' journals), unless they are part of a 'transformative agreement', where the cost may be subsidised through a Wellcome block grant – but only to certain universities (Reading is not one of these). This policy follows the **Plan S Principles**, which seek to achieve full and immediate Open Access to all peer-reviewed research outputs. Plan S is supported by a coalition of funders including UKRI, which is expected to implement its principles for both articles and monographs in the **new UKRI Open Access policy**, due 2021. **Open Access to monographs** is also likely to be required for the next Research Excellence Framework.

These policy conditions pose substantial challenges to the humanities, where 90% of all scholarly journals are 'hybrid'. **The British Academy has expressed concerns** that they could lead to *less* Open Access publishing in the humanities. Moreover, early career, independent and precariously employed researchers are likely to be the most affected: they need to publish compete for positions in a difficult job market, but may lack access to institutional support and funding.

In light of this I have assumed the role of **Open Research Champion** at the University of Reading to help others navigate the process of making their research accessible. I have also taken up a role in the Early Career Researcher Forum of the UKRI, advocating for funders to recognise the differing needs of scholars in the sciences and the humanities when formulating Open Access requirements.

### Open at a glance

- Publishing Open Access monographs has increased the reach of research beyond the traditional print-only format
- Open Access availability has facilitated and driven engagement with non-academic audiences
- There is a limited range of publication venues in the humanities, and not all scholars have access to dedicated funding: funders' policies need to recognise these challenges

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### References and further information

1. Skuse, A. (2021). *Surgery and Selfhood in Early Modern England: Altered Bodies and Contexts of Identity*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108919395>
2. Skuse, A. (2015). *Constructions of Cancer in Early Modern England*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137487537>
3. Skuse, A. (2021). 'This 400-year-old botched nose job shows how little our feelings about transplants have changed'. *The Conversation*. <https://bit.ly/378ILGJ>  
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