Material Approaches to Exploring the Borders of Paratext[1]

Sirkku Ruokkeinen and Aino Liira

Abstract

This paper studies the interplay of text and paratext using late medieval and early modern printed and manuscript sources. We argue that the paratext framework should include a distinction between the abstract and material notions of text, as it is the features of the material text which help identify intersections between text and paratext. Three elements, namely enlarged initials, notes, and type- and script-switches, are analysed to show how paratextual elements are often layered, and may have both textual and paratextual functions at the same time. What results is a complex network of elements in different textual and paratextual relationships.

---

1. Textuality and Paratextuality

1.1 Introduction

Introduced in the 1980's by the French literary theorist Gérard Genette, the term *paratext* refers to a variety of textual and visual elements such as titles, notes, advertisements and prologues, which exist to present the text to readers and guide them in its interpretation (Genette 1997b). The concept, adopted in various fields since Genette, brings to the forefront the relationship between the text proper and these largely marginalized features of the book and offers fresh insights into the research of the textual and the material object alike. However, substantial questions in paratextual theory are still in want of an analytic approach, especially in relation to textual theories. Theoretical considerations on paratextuality are relatively scarce, consisting mainly of scattered case studies focusing on the exploration of textual or material aspects of individual texts, tackling

1. Both authors contributed equally to this work. We would also like to thank Dr. Elise Garritzen for commenting on an early version of this article.

theoretical and terminological issues only when they cause trouble in the interpretation of the chosen materials.[2] Nevertheless, the identification of paratextual matter has major implications for scholars and editors of historical texts, for instance; therefore, we believe that further discussion on the nature of paratextuality is in order.

This article contributes to paratextual theory from the perspective of textual studies. We map the borders of paratextuality by analyzing three textual and visual elements, namely initials, changes in typography/script, and notes, in late medieval and early modern material. The chosen elements overlap with the main text but nevertheless seem to have paratextual functions. Our analysis is based on the investigation of the following set of questions: 1) What is the role of initials as a part of the paratextual typology, considering their double role as text and image? 2) What is the role of typeface/script in identifying paratextual elements? 3) What is the position of notes in the paratextual typology?

We discuss previous contributions to the understanding of paratextuality in Section 1.2. Section 2 presents the primary sources used in this study. In Section 3, we discuss the three questions listed above, and in Section 4 we develop our findings into a theoretical discussion on paratextuality, suggesting that the feature "optionality" and the interplay of function and (visual) form should be given more prominence in defining paratextuality.

1.2 Background

Paratext is divided into two categories, *peritext* and *epitext*, based on the spatial proximity of the paratextual elements to the text (Genette 1997b, 4–5). Peritext refers to those elements within the book which guide the reader in the reading and interpretation of the text. These include, for example, titles, blurbs, and indexes. Epitext exists outside the covers: elements such as advertisements, author interviews, and library catalogues contextualize the work in the textual environment even before the reader encounters the text. Ultimately, both peritext and epitext have the same function: to present the literary work, which Genette refers to simply as *text* (see e.g. Genette 1997b, 1).

---

2. That is not to say that this approach cannot produce significant theoretical contributions. Note, for example, the field of translation studies, where the problematic concept of authorship in paratextuality has been recontextualized in translation (see e.g. Tahir-Gürçağlar 2002; Toledano Buendía 2013).

While some extrapolations of paratextual theory have been made which take into consideration the changing materiality of text, the implications of the changes in book production processes in medieval and early modern times have been mainly studied by historians of early print.[3] Even more scarce are studies that focus specifically on paratextual theory and terminology in the light of historical textual traditions (but see Allen 2010). Further exploration of the theory is needed to clarify the position of the framework in terms of textual studies, manuscript studies and book history, among others.

We argue that addressing paratextuality requires a careful consideration of the notions of *text* and *work*, as their problematic relationship transfers to the relationship between text and paratext. Thoroughly debated in connection to textual criticism and editorial theory (see e.g. Greetham 1999; Tanselle 1989; Shillingsburg 1986), the concepts continue to challenge scholars studying and editing medieval and early modern texts — especially 'non-literary' texts such as utilitarian or scientific writing (see e.g. Varila 2016; Marttila 2014). The variety of definitions for these concepts is compounded in paratextual studies by the fact that Genette's position on the terminology is left somewhat unclear (for critique on this issue, see Rockenberger and Röcken 2010). The definition of text offered by Genette is intrinsically connected with his notion of work: "A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements that are more or less endowed with significance" (1997b, 1). Such a definition, however, proves problematic as it does not take into account that *text* exists on more than one level, the most important of the divisions being that between material and abstract levels of text (see Genette 1997b, 14 for a discussion on the influence of paratext on the materialization of the book; cf. Birke and Christ 2013, 68–69). We believe it most functional to follow Tanselle in making a distinction between *texts of works* and *texts of documents* (1989). The former refers to an abstract or ideal form of the text, and the latter to text in its material state, the specific order of words (and other marks) as preserved on a physical medium (see also Shillingsburg 1986, 46–51). This study focuses on the material level, that is, the texts of documents, and we use the term *codex* to denote the combination of material text and

---

3. Changes in the present-day materiality of the text have been studied by Birke and Christ 2013. For print history, see e.g. von Ammon and Vögel 2008, Barker and Hosington 2013, Smith and Wilson 2011. For pre-print era, see e.g. Mak 2011, Jansen 2014, Ciotti and Lin 2016.

peritext. When necessary, we refer to *work* as a collective of abstract versions of text which has no material existence of its own.

Genette's approach to paratextuality has mainly concentrated on the location and form of individual elements, offering only the most abstract of collective definitions as to the overall functions of paratextual elements: paratext exists to present the text (GENETTE 1997b, 12, 407; for a more thorough criticism of the approach, see STANITZEK 2005, 27–42). Birke and Christ have addressed this gap with three paratextual functions which they use to capture the complexity of relationships between text and paratext (2013). The *interpretive function* refers to the paratexts' functionality in directing and aiding the reader in understanding the work "correctly". The *commercial function* refers to aspects of paratextuality serving the text's distribution and dissemination in the world. Finally, the *navigational function* operates in paratextual elements which guide the reader in the utilization of the textual content.[4] We find this division highly practical and have adopted Birke and Christ's functions in our analyses.

Finally, we wish to point out that Genette's focus is on those paratextual elements which are, more or less, spatially separate from the text, i.e. not located within the main text area (for criticism of this focus, see MERVELDT 2008, 192–93). For example, typography and its relevance to paratextuality have only been briefly touched upon (GENETTE 1997b, 33–36). Stanitzek has connected this issue with Genette's complex relationship with material and abstract notions of text (2005). As reflected by his definition of *text* quoted above, Genette commonly discusses text on the level of ideal and abstraction, dependent on the author, while his description of paratext arises from the perspective of materiality, proceeding from the placement, production, and form of each paratextual element.[5] Because of this approach, elements which appear in the same space as the text fall outside

4. While there are certain paratextual elements which could be considered stereotypically interpretive (prologues, footnotes), commercial (ISBNs, publisher information), or navigational (pagination, indexes), most paratextual elements carry, to some extent, two or all of these functions. Blurbs, for instance, act in commercial functions in promoting the book, but also in interpretive ones, employing literary conventions to contextualize text within a specific genre.

5. This can be seen in Genette's use of the term *allographic*, which originates from a consideration of arts as divided into those which are produced by the artist's own hand, such as paintings (autographic), and those which are somehow mediated, as literature is through text (allographic) (see also MACKSEY 1997, xvi–xvii, n10). The division is especially problematic in the case of autographic footnotes (see Section 3.3).

the categorization. As a result, there is a lack of proper definitions for the borders between paratext and text, and for the processes by which those borders are identified.

2. Materials and Methods

While the history of the printed book has been studied from the paratextual perspective, theoretical considerations of paratextuality in early materials are scarce. Due to the differing methods of production in manuscript and print media, the transition period from late medieval to early modern is an excellent starting point for a more theoretical paratextual discussion. The analysis of paratextuality in this period offers insight to the contemporary understanding of the materiality of texts.

We study three documents in manuscript and two in print form (Table 1). The materials chosen for this study represent genres of history writing: two manuscript copies of the prose *Brut* and one of Ranulph Higden's *Polychronicon*, and printed editions of Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* (1523) and Caesar's *Gallic War* (1565). All materials were accessed using online image collections: the University of Manchester Library Image collections and *Early English Books Online*.[6]

We assume that cues through visual highlighting are central in the identification of paratextual elements. Our approach is informed by Carroll et al. who study the pragmatic functions of visual highlighting in medieval manuscripts (2013). Their model of four visual cues for highlighting discourse organization include color, size, change or contrast in style, and prominence in contrast to the "body text" due to positioning. We assume that paratextual elements are separated from the text through similar visual means. Influenced also by Stanitzek's view of the problems of spatial attributes in paratextuality (2005), we have identified three elements which may be in contradiction to the presupposition of spatial separation, and hence are situated at the border of paratextuality: initials, typography, and notes. Each is discussed in a separate subsection below. Finally, it should be noted that as we are primarily interested in paratextual material that overlaps with text, we have chosen to leave out title pages and tables but have included prologues and dedications in our analysis.

6. *Early English Books Online* provides black and white microfilm digitizations, and hence the use of color in the printed sources is beyond the scope of this study.

Table 1. Primary sources.

Author; Translator	Title / STC	Shelfmark / Call no. of original	Production date	Printer / Scribe
Ranulph Higden; John Trevisa	*Polychronicon*	Manchester, Chetham's Library MS Mun.A.6.90	14th–15th c.	'The *Polychronicon* Scribe'
Anon.; Anon.	Prose *Brut*, 1377 continuation	Manchester, John Rylands Library English MS 102	15th c.	Anon.
Anon.; Anon.	Prose *Brut*, 1415 continuation	Manchester, John Rylands Library English MS 104	15th c.	Anon.
Jean Froissart; John Bourchier	*Chronicles*, STC 11396*	London, British Library G.6242	1523	Richard Pynson
Caius Julius Caesar; Arthur Golding	*Gallic War*, STC 4335	San Marino, Huntington Library 99002	1565	William Seres

*This article studies STC 11396, the first two Books of Froissart's Chronicles. See STC 11397 for Books 3 and 4 (1525).

3. Material Explorations on the Borders of Paratextuality

3.1 Paratextual Functions of Initials

The text-organizing functions of initials — the larger, often engraved, painted, and/or decorated letters at the beginning of a section of text — have been discussed by manuscript scholars at length (see e.g. Partridge 2011, 85; Peikola 2008; Derolez 2003, 48–50 and passim), yet initials have been overlooked as part of paratextual typology. This may be because typographical and visual features only receive a cursory treatment in Genette's (1997b) original formulation (see 3.2 below). However, we view initials as ideal for problematizing the borders of paratext as they perform their functions through both visual and textual, material and linguistic forms. In this section, we explore the paratextuality of the initial through an examination of two early printed books and two manuscripts.

In the *Chronicles*, initials are used to mark chapter and paragraph divisions.[7] There are usually two initials per page, one starting a chapter and another marking paragraph division (see Figure 1). Initials at chapter beginnings are decorated woodcuts of five or seven lines in height. Paragraph divisions are typically indicated with a smaller initial of two or three lines, although some paragraph divisions have an initial up to five lines in height, and some have no initials at all, but simply use type, with or without a paraph (¶). Finally, there are a few three-line spaces reserved for paragraph initials, but with a type set in the middle as a guide letter, possibly due to a shortage of initials of suitable size.[8] The seven-line initials are employed at chapter beginnings only. The five-line initials can appear in chapter- or paragraph-initiating position, but are far less common in the latter. All seven- and five-line initials are decorated woodcuts. The two-line initials are, with a few exceptions, used for paragraph beginnings only: all are plain Lombardic (see Figure 1).

7. Two twenty-leaf samples were studied, ff. 1r–20v and ff. 187r–206v. While the first section consists of the leaves immediately following the front matter, the second sample was chosen randomly from the middle of the codex.

8. In order by size: seven-line initials, 28 tokens (initiate chapters); six-line, 1 (chapters); five-line, 21 (18 chapters / 3 paragraphs); four-line, 1 (chapters); three-line, 5 (chapters); two-line, 22 (3 chapters / 19 paragraphs); additionally, 10 tokens with 3–5 line spaces, type set in the middle (1 chapters / 9 paragraphs); 9 paragraph divisions with no initial, and no space.
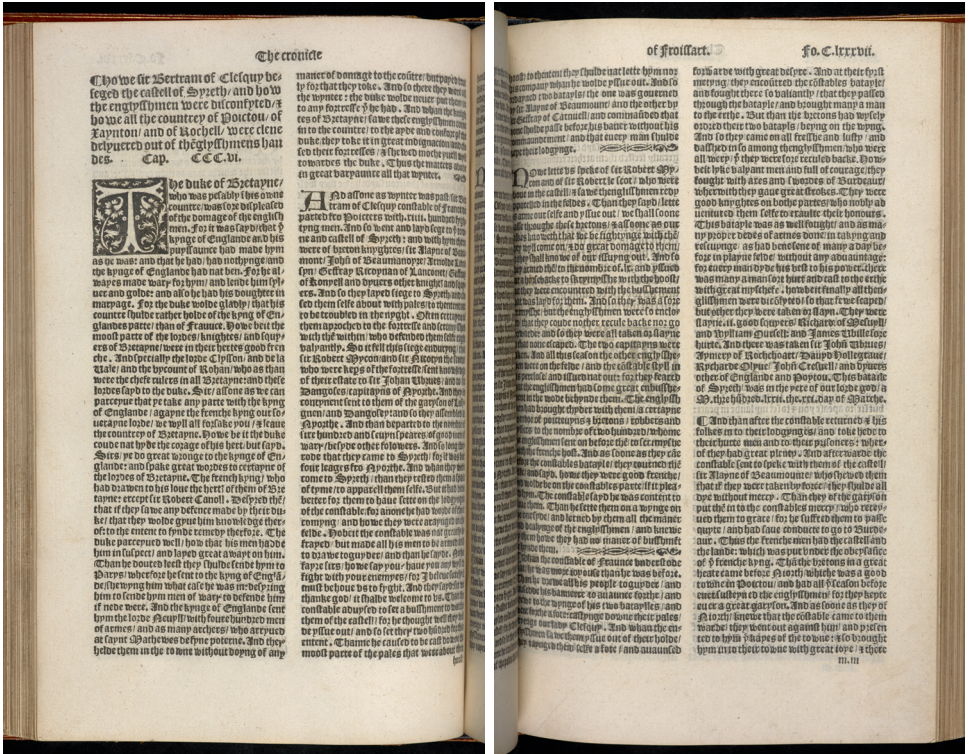
Figure 1. Seven- and two-line initials in Froissart's *Chronicles*, STC 11396, ff. 186v–187r. © British Library Board (G.6242), used by permission.

While the initial program is not necessarily transparent, the initials perform a navigational function in communicating the structure of the text. Previous research on medieval manuscript initials shows that initials can serve two purposes: they signal the beginning of a textual unit such as a book or a chapter, and they may indicate what position that unit has in the textual hierarchy (see e.g. BROWN 1994, 73). Both of these are part of the navigational function. The initial program of the *Chronicles* reveals two different ways in which this function operates. The size of the initial, in interaction with the surrounding paratextual elements and visual features such as chapter titles and the spacing and placing of elements, communicates the importance of the section break (see Figure 1). However, the exact line height of the initial is not significant in establishing paratextual functionality when the immediate textual environment contains initials of the same approximate size. Rather, the navigational function is established

in interaction with other initials. For example, if a five-line initial — usually signaling the beginning of a chapter — is used for paragraph division, a seven-line initial precedes or follows (e.g. ff. 189–190, 195). The use of unusually large initials for paragraph division might indicate the relative importance of the textual content, and hence interpretive functionality, but more likely it shows an understanding of the navigational function of the initial in its immediate textual environment. In other words, the initial can act paratextually, in the navigational function, either as part of a consistent program or in reference to other initials in its vicinity.

Two manuscripts were studied as evidence of late medieval paratextuality: the *Brut* copies MS Eng 104 and 102.[9] In MS Eng 104, the text begins imperfectly at chapter 101. The initial program is consistent: each chapter begins with an initial, almost exclusively of three lines in height.[10] All are in the immediate textual context of rubrics in red ink (see Figure 2).
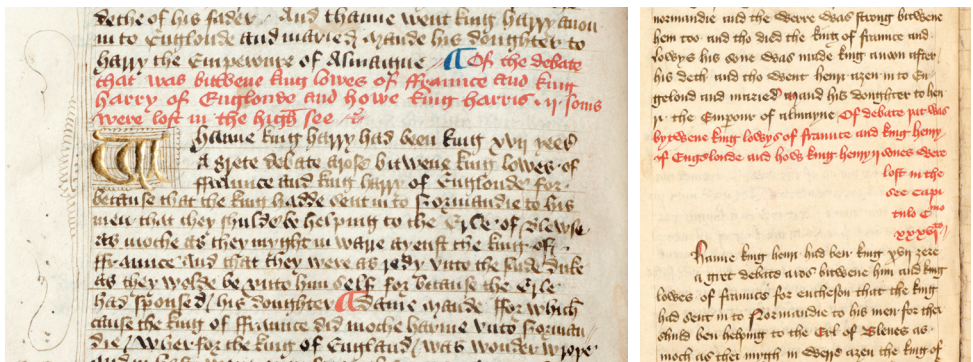
Figure 2. Left: *Brut*, beginning of chapter 136 with a gilded and pen-decorated initial 'W' in 'WHanne'. Manchester, John Rylands Library English MS 104, f. 20v (detail). © The University of Manchester, used by permission. Right: *Brut*, beginning of chapter 136 with the initial 'W' missing. Manchester, John Rylands Library English MS 102, f. 40v (detail). © The University of Manchester, used by permission.

9. Initials were mapped in a selection of 20 folios in each: ff. 1r–20v and ff. 50r–70v in MS Eng 104, and ff. 1r–20v and ff. 40r–60v in MS Eng 102.
10. There are sixty initials in total within the forty leaves; all but one are three lines in height. The only exception is a nine-line 'I' ('It'). The size has not been accounted for by the scribe; the initial has been placed in the margin. This was a standard practice for tall and narrow initials; see e.g. Snijders 2015, 65.

The decoration also follows a consistent pattern: blue ink and gold leaf alternate and each letter is pen-flourished. The pattern is common in the manuscripts produced in this period and gilded initials are not to be interpreted as more important than blue ones. The historical context of the text's production plays a role within the identification of the elements: a reader not familiar with the conventions may be led to misinterpret the structure of the text. Similarly, the form might be misleading if the producer was not familiar with the content. In her study of hagiographical manuscripts, Snijders (2015, 64–65) argues that the size of the space reserved for an initial (measured in lines) is a better way to judge its importance than details of illumination, as the illuminator was not necessarily familiar with the text. Therefore, the empty space may reflect textual hierarchies better than colors or other details of illumination.

An examination of MS Eng 102 allows us to look at the functions of initials based on the size alone, as the initials were never filled in. The text begins imperfectly at chapter 2 (f. 1r); there is no front matter. MS Eng 102 is fairly consistent in terms of initial heights: the scribe has left two-line spaces for most of the initials, although some three-line spaces are found. There are 113 spaces reserved for initials, of which only 14 span three lines.[11] These two- and three-line spaces occur at chapter beginnings, in the immediate context of rubrics in red ink (see Figure 2). There are also blank lines between chapters with a run-over of the rubric at line-ends; the space may have been reserved for decorative sprays extending from the initials. Comparing MS Eng 102 with MS Eng 104 shows that a blank space reserved for an initial is sufficient visual highlighting to fulfill the same navigational function as an initial. Blank spaces for initials and pictures were rarely filled by contemporary readers, and Hardman has suggested that the contemporary reader found the text not only perfectly legible, but that "the pre-rubrication stage of production came to be seen as an acceptable convention in itself" (1997, 45). Filling in the initial seems to be paratextually redundant. It should, however, be noted that neither the initial nor the blank space work alone but in interaction with other visual cues, such as

---

11. Five of the three-line initials are on the same page, f. 3*v*, suggesting that the variance in size is linked to the production process. There are also four tokens of zero space for the initial; two have a guide letter 'I' written in the margin (see note 11). One occurs on f. 58*r*, an inserted leaf copied by a later hand (see MATHESON 1998, 89). There are blank lines between chapters but no space for the initial, leaving the first word as 'Hanne'.

rubrics. The intelligibility of the blank space is largely dependent on these other cues. The paratextual functionality is hence achieved in interaction with other elements within the immediate textual environment.

   With this discussion we aim to show that the initials may carry both navigational and interpretive functions and that these functions may be achieved with or without the initial itself. The immediate textual context influences the interpretation. As the *Chronicles* edition examined above shows, textual hierarchies need to be determined on the basis of the local, immediate context of the page. No initial operates alone but in textual and cultural context with other elements of paratext, and with other initials. While empty space appears to operate paratextually, ascertaining whether it does so even without the support of other paratextual elements within the immediate context would require further investigation.

3.2 The Significance of Typography and Script in the Identification of Paratext

While Genette has noted the "paratextual value" of typography (1997b, 7, 34), its exact position in the paratextual theory is left vague. Consequently, the paratextuality of typography (and, to a lesser extent, script) has been debated in subsequent studies. Stanitzek, for example, classifies typography as paratext, stating that "no text ever has a truly paratext-free moment" (2005, 30).[12] Rockenberger & Röcken take the opposite approach, arguing that "typography could [. . .] be seen as a material *feature* at least of the publisher's peritext and a fortiori as its *prerequisite*, *without* having to count as an element of paratext i.e. peritext" (2010, our translation).[13] In a rare consideration of the issue in manuscript materials, Merveldt concludes that as the incipit functions as a title while sharing spatial, textual

---

12. This is corroborated by Gumbert's (1993, 6–7) observations on the "purposes" of typography, of which he lists three: *semiotic* expression, *structuring* of text, and *aesthetics*. These partially correspond with Birke and Christ's (2013) functions discussed above. While aesthetic purposes perhaps differ in focus from the commercial function, semiotic values and the structuring of the text correspond quite well with Birke and Christ's interpretive and navigational functions, respectively.

13. "Typographie könnte [. . .] als materielle *Eigenschaft* zumindest des verlegerischen Peritextes und a fortiori als *Voraussetzung* desselben erachtet werden, *ohne* damit selbst als Paratext- bzw. Peritextelement gelten zu müssen", Rockenberger and Röcken 2010, 304, emphases as in the original.

and visual space with the text, it must be classified as belonging to both text and paratext (2008). These debates, however, focus on typography on a general level, and we find it more fruitful to shift the focus to *changes* in the presentation of text.[14] Kaislaniemi calls changes in textual presentation *typeface-* and *script-switching* (2017).[15] The terms refer to changes in letterforms; however, other means of highlighting, such as changes of color, underlining, size, and the use of white space, are equally important for our enquiry. In this section, we study two manuscripts and two printed sources to see whether the highlighting of typeface and script indicates paratextuality. We began our analysis by collecting data on highlighted elements.

The *Chronicles* is set in blackletter, with a relatively restricted set of devices used for visual highlighting. Only type-switches to a larger blackletter font are used. Switches can be found on the title page and in chapter titles, incipits, and running titles. The *Gallic War* presents a more complex example, and hence only the first 20 folios were studied.[16] The text is set in a single column of blackletter, with four other fonts used to highlight different (para)textual elements. The title page of the codex is set in a large italic type, as is the title of Book 1. A large roman type is used in the running titles of the dedication. A roman type in a similar type size as the blackletter main text is used to set the dedication, parts of the dedication title, the running titles, and the first line of Book 1. A smaller blackletter is used in the marginal notes.

 Chetham's Library MS Mun.A.6.90 was studied in 20 folios.[17] Copied in anglicana formata, the manuscript features script-switches in rubrics, source references and marginal notes. These switches are to letterforms of bastard anglicana, influenced by textualis, although the switches are not applied consistently but are mixed with the main text letterforms.[18]

---

14. For the influence of typography and script on the presentation of text, see e.g. Mak 2011, 12–14.
15. The term is analogous to *code-switching,* which refers to the practice of switching between languages within a text. Kaislaniemi (2017) examines the correlation between code-switching and script- and type-switching in early modern documents.
16. Ff. [-12]*r*–8*v*.
17. Ff. 35*r*–55*v*. The manuscript contains two shorter texts before the *Polychronicon.* These and the indexes (ff. 19*r*–34*v*) were omitted from the analysis.
18. For discussion on whether bastard anglicana is a separate script or a variation of anglicana (formata), see Derolez 2003, 140. The textualis influences include a loopless 'd', loopless ascenders of 'b' and 'h', and long 's' standing on the line with no descender. The looped anglicana forms are mixed with textualis forms.

Regardless of the mixed forms, these elements are consistently highlighted by the use of red ink.[19] A noticeably smaller bastard anglicana is used in chapter numbers placed in the margins. These appear to be written in a different pen. Interlinear corrections are also copied in a smaller script. However, it is readily apparent that the corrections have been produced in smaller size due to spatial limitations, and their content suggests they are part of the text, not paratext (see 3.3 for further discussion).

Notable in the use of highlighting is its concentration on elements which could be considered paratextually significant even without it. For example, switching appears in such established paratext elements as titles (see GENETTE 1997b, 55–107, 294–318). The *Chronicles* has a larger black-letter font in the chapter and running titles. The *Gallic War,* normally set in blackletter, has a switch to roman type for the dedication — an interpretive paratext also studied by Genette (1997b, 117–43).[20] Highlighting also appears in notes, as in MS Mun.A.6.90. They, too, are discussed by Genette (1997b, 319–43), and a further exploration of the paratextuality of medieval and early modern notes can be found below in 3.3. Visual highlighting is hence used extensively in textual elements which have a paratextual role: it acts in a navigational function, guiding the reader's attention by separating the paratextual matter visually from the text. Highlighting seems to indicate the paratextuality of other elements, rather than carry a paratextual significance of its own.

Highlighting within the main text area is more problematic than that which co-occurs with a spatial separation of the element: the red ink marking source references within the text of MS Mun.A.6.90, for example. The *Polychronicon* contains references to authorities such as Augustine, Isidore, William of Malmesbury, Bede, and Giraldus Cambrensis, sometimes with exact references to books and chapters within their works. Additionally, there are references to Higden, the author, and Trevisa, the translator. In

---

Although not observed within the examined section, a clear case of script-switches to textualis is found in rubrics introducing books, e.g. f. 60r; see CARROLL et al. 2013, 58. This indicates that such script-switches further facilitate navigation within the codex by establishing a hierarchy in a paratextual element.

19. There is some variation in the script size of the rubrics, although the difference is not marked enough to draw any conclusions as to its significance as highlighting.

20. The other primarily interpretational paratext in the *Gallic War*, the prologue, is set in blackletter like the main text, and is hence considered unmarked. See also SUHR 2011, 72.

MS Mun.A.6.90, all such references appear in red ink, with a script-switch to bastard anglicana.[21] We suggest that here the highlighting serves two functions: it helps the reader identify, with a glance, that the text contains a beginning or an ending, a shift in content. In other words, the highlighting serves a navigational function.[22] The highlighting also makes the existence of *auctoritates* within the text prominent; we see this as interpretive. Referencing outside sources is dependent on the text's genre and communicates possible interpretations derived from a wider tradition of production.[23]

Finally, the fact that the dedication to the *Gallic War* is set in a roman type is paratextually interesting: the type-switch distinguishes the dedication from the rest of the text in blackletter, but due to the length of the paratext, the switch to a different typeface is not apparent as a means of highlighting. Rather, the roman type used in the dedication sets the norm against which other paratextual features may be examined. It thus adopts a position otherwise reserved for the main text. Hence the title, running titles, and further switches within the dedication act as *paratext to paratext*.

Our initial hypothesis in this section was that paratextual elements would be marked visually. This seems to be only partially true. Visual highlighting can indeed indicate paratextual functions, but it seems to concentrate on elements which carry paratextual functionality regardless of the script- or type-switch, such as titles and notes. Furthermore, our observations of the corrections in MS Mun.A.6.90 show that visual highlighting does not guarantee that the highlighted element functions paratextually.

3.3 The Paratextuality of Notes in Late Medieval and Early Modern Texts

For a discussion on the borders of paratext, notes provide well suited material due to their fluent nature: there is some difficulty in defining whether notes are a part of text or paratext. Genette defines a note as a "statement of variable length [. . .] connected to a more or less definite segment of text and either placed opposite or keyed to this segment" (1997b, 319). He

---

21. See Section 3.3 for a discussion on Higden and Trevisa's notes.
22. Naturally, the source reference also directs the reader to a text-external source. This, however, is a function of the reference, not of the highlighting. Genette (1997a), views this relationship as one of *intertextuality*.
23. They could also be seen to serve as epitext to the outside texts they reference, but that consideration is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this study.

further comments that notes are optional, meaning that the reader can choose to skip them (Genette 1997b, 324). For Genette, the status of notes is especially problematic in two cases. Original, *authorial* notes he considers as infringing on the text as they contain additional information or explanations. Yet, notes produced by a third party such as the editor often fall "outside the definition of the paratext", as they have not been produced by the author (Genette 1997b, 337). It is unclear what their position in his model is if they are not part of either the text or the paratext. The paratextuality of third-party notes, most notably those by the translator, has been analyzed by translation scholars (see e.g. Toledano Buendía 2013; Lopes 2012; Martin 2006). In the late medieval and early modern context, however, we find the varying material forms of notes more problematic for paratextual theory than the question of their producers.

As medieval manuscripts have rarely been analyzed as part of paratextual typology, it is necessary to begin by considering what textual and visual features could be viewed as *notes* in this context (see, however, Genette 1997b, 320 for a brief consideration of glosses). We do not subscribe to the view of paratextuality being dependent on authorship, nor are we satisfied with spatial separation being a defining feature of notes. We define note as something commenting on another text or a point in the text, usually with some type of visual highlighting to separate notes from the text. This view is influenced by the partially overlapping concepts of *gloss*, *marginalia*, *annotation*, and *commentary*.[24] However, we do subscribe to Genette's idea of optionality: notes can be skipped without the text losing its coherence.

Two primary sources, one printed and one manuscript, were chosen for examination in this section. The 1565 edition of the *Gallic War* (STC 4335) features a number of printed marginalia. Again, we limited our observation

---

24. *Gloss* refers to a translation or clarification of the text, commonly found in medieval manuscripts. It may be one word or several in length, and situated either in the margin or between lines. The definitions of gloss and *marginalia* overlap with those of the note, although the interlinear position is reserved to glosses, while marginalia refers to all kinds of elements in the margins, whether printed, handwritten, or drawn. *Annotation* and *commentary* refer to material additional to the text of the work, typically sharing material space with the text. Annotation may also be used for glosses and marginalia while commentary is a discussion on another work, typically legal or biblical. It should be noted that commentary refers to content, whereas gloss and marginalia concentrate on material elements visible on the page. For definitions for these terms, see e.g. Brown 1994, Beal 2008.

to two 20-leaf sections.[25] Thirty-one printed notes can be found within this 40-leaf sample. All notes have been laid in the outer margins and they are typically tied to the relevant passage of text by an asterisk (*). In a few cases the tie-mark has been set on the previous page or completely left out and the positioning of the marginal note is left to convey the association.

The majority of the notes found are interpretive: they aid the reader by providing translations or explanations.[26] For example, when Book 1 of the *Gallic War* states *the *Heluetians hauing dayly conflict with the Germanes*, the asterisk refers to the margin where it is explained that the *Helvetii* are *Now called Swiszers* (f. 1v). The notes also cover locales, such as *Norinberg* (f. 4v) and *The whole countrey of Fraunce* (f.1r). The sample contains only one note with functions different from those described above. *Alegion*, without a tie-mark, is laid in the outer margin of a passage discussing the recruitment of soldiers, *for there was but one legio[n] at that time in the further Gallia* (f. 5v). Unlike the other marginalia, the item offers no explanation or clarification but serves a purely navigational function. As the text on ff. 5r–5v does not seem particularly interesting or central to the work, the reason for employing a navigational note seems rather to be to refer to the end of the codex (ff. [280]v–[281]r): there the reader can find another note discussing the potentially unfamiliar military term *legion* in greater detail.

The form and contents of the marginal notes in MS Mun.A.6.90 overlap with those discussed above. MS Mun.A.6.90 has 29 notes in the margins within the section examined.[27] Proper nouns such as place names are common, e.g. *mons Syna* (f. 41v), *de Ierusalem* (f. 42r), and *Bactria* (f. 44v), but the notes may also mention themes discussed in the text, for example *No[ta] de p[ro]p[ri]etatib[us] ho[m]i[nu]m i[n] Hibern[ia]* (Note the characteristics of people in Ireland) (f. 48v), *No[ta] de limitib[us] regnorum q[ui] fu[er]unt* (Note the borders of kingdoms that were) (f. 54r).[28] The notes are mostly written in the margins, in red ink, with no tie-marks, and using the same script as in the rubrics (see Section 3.2). Although the content and form of these notes are similar to those found in the *Gallic War*, their paratextual function is different. The notes in MS Mun.A.6.90 repeat the themes and

25. Ff. [-12]r–8v, 138r–158v.

26. *Interpretive* may also refer to paratextual materials which guide the reader to interpret the text in a certain way, or to adopt a certain position towards the text. The notes in the *Gallic War* contain explanations and translations only.

27. Ff. 35r–55v.

28. Abbreviations expanded in square brackets; original punctuation has been retained but place names have been capitalized according to the present-day practice.

proper nouns found in the text and serve a navigational function, provided that the reader knows Latin. This is in contrast to the interpretive notes discussed above in connection to the *Gallic War*. The categorization is not clear-cut, however, as the notes can be seen as having a secondary function as well. If the reader is familiar with the text and/or the themes discussed, the marginal notes in the *Gallic War* could be used as additional navigational aids, whereas the Latin *nota* in the MS Mun.A.6.90 notes highlights the importance of certain themes found in the text, guiding the reader's interpretation.[29]

There is a more complex class of notes, however, found in the English translation of the *Polychronicon*. All manuscript copies of the work feature textual material by both Higden, the author, and Trevisa, the translator, embedded in the text. For example, MS Mun.A.6.90 has textual matter which is attributed to the author and translator by referring to their names in red ink. The capital letter "R" is used for Higden, while "Trevisa" is spelled out in full. The visual representations of the translator and author are hence very similar to those of Higden's sources, which are also highlighted by using red ink (see Section 3.2 for a discussion on the highlighting). Figure 3 contains examples of all: Higden (l. 6), Trevisa (l. 10), William of Malmesbury (l. 4), Bede (l. 11, as part of the rubric), and Alfridus (l.13). Two questions arise: firstly, do the passages attributed to Higden and Trevisa count as notes, and secondly, are they paratextual? To explore this problem, all instances of "R" and "Trevisa" and their referents within the 20-folio sample were examined. The reference to Higden or Trevisa is provided at the beginning of each passage. How the end of each passage is signaled varies, however: occasionally there is a paraph mark, occasionally it is immediately followed by a new passage beginning with "R" and "Trevisa", or with a reference to one of Higden's external sources. The form alone is therefore not helpful in determining whether a passage can be classified as a note as the content must be evaluated to verify its paratextual status.

Following the original paratext framework, any notes by a third party such as the translator would not be classified as part of the text. The contents of Trevisa's notes do not pose a problem in this regard: they explain

---

29. MS Mun.A.6.90 has five additional tokens: these are corrections, which were initially examined because of their similarity to the scribal notes. The corrections appear in an interlinear position, or in the margins with a caret used as a tie-mark, but they fall outside our definition of notes: they do not comment on or add to the abstract text, rather their visual difference from the text occurs on the material level. This is supported by the linguistic difference: notes are typically in Latin and in red, corrections are in English and in black.
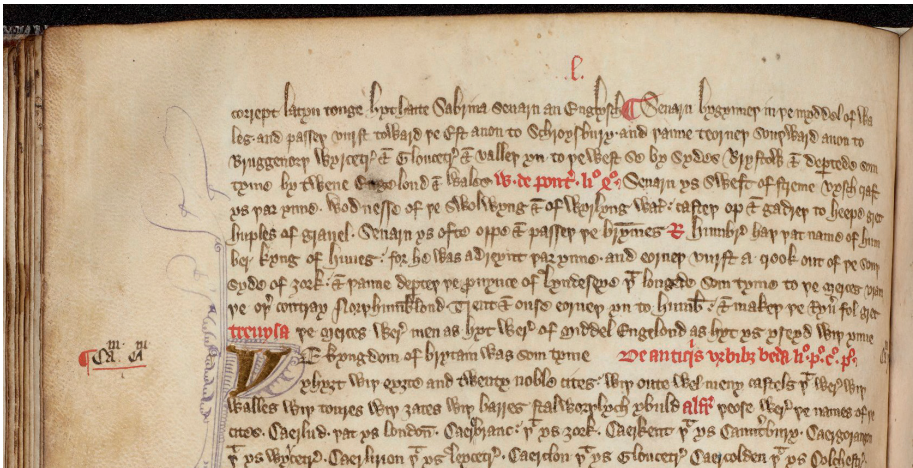
Figure 3. The *Polychronicon*. Manchester, Chetham's Library MS Mun.A.6.90, f. 50v (detail). © Chetham's Library, Manchester, used by permission.

or comment on the preceding text, e.g. *ffenix ys a wond[er] bryd. for al þ[a]t kuynde; ys bote on alyue* (the phoenix is a miraculous bird for there is only one of its kind alive), f. 41*v*.[30] Hence, they match our definition of notes regarding content and visual marking. It is only their placement within the main text area which makes them complex in terms of paratextuality. They serve an interpretive function and differ from marginal notes only in terms of their location. Thus, we conclude that Trevisa's notes are to be viewed as paratext.

The material attributed to Higden contains some notes similarly explaining or commenting on a specific word in the text, cf. e.g. *bote þ[er] ys anoþ[er] Pentapolis in Affrica* (But there is another Pentapolis in Africa), f. 43*r*. However, there are some cases in which the red capital letter "R" precedes a passage that does not fall into our definition of a note: it does not comment on a word, concept, topic or another identifiable part of the text, but introduces new content. For example, on f. 51*r* a reference to Higden immediately follows Trevisa's note on hot baths, but it seems that the reference is given here to indicate that Higden's narrative continues:

þe wat[er] eorneþ vnd[or] eorþe by veynes of bremston [&] so ys yhat
kundlych in þat cours [&] sp[ri]ngþ op in dyu[er]s places of þe cite [&]

30. For a detailed discussion on the contents of Trevisa's notes, see FOWLER 1995, esp. 178.

so þar buþ hote baþes þ[a]t wasscheþ of tet[re]s oþ[er] sores [&] schabbes
treuysa. þey me myȝte by craft make hote baþes for to dure long ynow;
þis acordeþ wel to reson [&] to philosophy þ[a]t treteþ of hote welles [&]
baþes þ[a]t buþ yn dyuers londes, þey þe wat[er] of þis baþe be mor[e]
troubly [&] heuyer[e] of smyl [&] of sauour þan oþ[er]e hote baþes þat
ych haue yseye at Okene yn Almayn [&] at Eyges in Sauoy. þe baþes
in Eyges yn Sauoy buþ as veyr [&] as cleer as eny cold welle streme. ych
haue asayed [&] ybaþed þarynne **R** Claudius Cesar maryede hys doȝt[er]
to Aruiragus kyng of britons þis Claudius Cesar bulde Gloucetr[e] yn þe
weddyng of hys douȝt[er].[31]

Here, the running text by the author is interrupted by Trevisa's note, and
the reference to Higden is used to mark the return to the text rather than
the beginning of a new note. In other words, the reference "R" has multiple
functions, which obscures the marking of notes. It would be possible, per-
haps, to read the highlighted references to Higden and Trevisa as textual
rather than paratextual strategies, separating the author's and translator's
voices from those of Higden's Latin authorities. Similarly, although we
define Trevisa's notes as paratext based on their content, their incorpora-
tion into the main text area guides the reader to regard them as text rather
than paratext. However, the fact that the commentator's name is supplied
allows the reader to view them as separate from the text. This discord of
material and textual messages is a prime example of the complexity of para-
textual relationships. Notes may have interpretive and navigational func-
tions, sometimes a combination of both. Their functionality as paratext
is dependent on a complex interrelation of issues of content, form, and
relationship with the text.

31. "the water flows under the earth by veins of sulphur and is that way heated
naturally, and it springs up in several places of the city, and so there are hot
baths that wash off tumors, other sores and scabs. **Trevisa.** Though men might
make hot baths durable enough, this accords well to reason and to knowledge
that pertains to hot wells and baths that exist in different countries, although
the water of this bath is more turbid and smellier than that of other hot baths
that I have seen in Aachen in Germany and in Aix in Savoy. The baths in Aix
in Savoy are as fair and clear as any cold spring. I have tried and bathed in them.
R. Claudius Caesar married his daughter to Arviragus King of Britons. This
Claudius Caesar built Gloucester for the wedding of his daughter". *Polychroni-
con*, transcribed and translated from MS Mun.A.6.90, f. 51*r*.

4. Redefining the Borders of Paratext and Text

All elements examined in Section 3 above confirm that paratextual functionality is not limited to elements that are spatially separated from the text. Moreover, while neither form nor function alone is sufficient in determining the paratextual status of an element, we maintain that in identifying paratextual elements in medieval and early modern materials, visual highlighting is a strong indicator of paratextuality. Typeface- and script-switches, changes in color, underlining, and spatial separation through space and placement, especially in interaction with one another, help the reader to navigate the page and make decisions as to the functions of the highlighted elements.

Our analyses show that the division into interpretive, navigational and commercial functions (BIRKE and CHRIST 2013) is indeed applicable to a discussion on paratextuality in medieval and early modern materials. We found that both initials and highlighting serve mainly navigational functions by making the structure of the text visible. While initials and highlighting also have some interpretive functions — for example, in the way in which the size and style of an initial guide the reader to gauge the importance of the section following — the principal function of these elements seems to be the navigational one. Marginal notes comprise both interpretive and navigational functions, although the interpretive function must be identified through the content of the note.

We propose that of the three functions identified by Birke and Christ, the navigational function pertains to the use of the physical document, i.e. the material text, whereas the interpretive function pertains to the reception and understanding of the abstract text, i.e. the text of the work. Notable in the three elements examined in this study is the absence of a purely commercial function, which is not particularly surprising since materials from the handwritten era were commonly produced through commission. However, by 1565 and the publication of the *Chronicles*, the commercialization of print production was fully underway. We assume that the lack of commercial functions identified in the paratextual matter relates more to our choice of elements than to a true lack of commercial paratexts in books of this period. As noted above, paratextual elements may serve more than one of these functions simultaneously. For example, decorative elements (e.g. initials) have aesthetic value and may therefore be linked to the commercial function in addition to their primary function (navigational or

interpretive).[32] Furthermore, the relationship of commercial paratexts with text perhaps differs from that of navigational and interpretive paratexts in that both the physical object and the abstract content of the text are being sold and promoted through the use of commercial paratext. Hence, commercial paratext might be more clearly linked to both the document and the work. The relationship between text, work, and paratext would, however, require further study.

Paratext does not always need to be in the immediate context of the text to operate. For example, titles and marginalia may be paratextually related to other paratext. We are led to ask: are prologues and dedications not blurring the lines between text and paratext? By occupying the position usually reserved for text, this paratextual matter can be seen as taking on the functions of text. Considering text through its position as a center around which paratext congregates, however, leads to a circular reasoning which is not particularly helpful in determining paratextual borders. For this objective, we find the concept of *optionality* far more functional. The possibility of defining paratexts through their optionality was presented by Genette (1997b, 324) specifically in the context of notes (see Section 3.3). However, the concept of optionality is also useful in discussing the paratextuality of other elements. A similar phenomenon was identified in our data on initials in Section 3.1: the absence of an initial was not found to be paratextually significant.

The optionality of paratext is intrinsically connected with the materiality of text. Changes to the material representation of a text, or to material paratext such as the initial, do not translate to changes in the abstract text. Should an element be such that it can be omitted in subsequent copies or editions, particularly without the text of the work losing its meaning or coherence, we may speak of paratext. For example, some of the notes discussed above in Section 3.3, explaining or translating text, are unambiguously paratext: they may be skipped, or edited out in future material manifestations of the work. Conversely, when an element cannot be removed but its material and visual realization may be changed, the element may be said to be *paratextual*, but not part of the *paratext*. This is the case with typography and script.

The medieval and early modern initial is problematic for the construction of optionality as a paratext-defining feature. This is because the initial not only operates on the material and abstract levels but contains two messages, textual and paratextual, of which only the latter is truly optional.

---

32. See Gumbert's aesthetic purpose of typography (1993, 6).

Thus, initials cannot be viewed as purely optional but their physical and material form may be altered: an initial may be replaced with another, or replaced with a type. Even the empty space reserved for the initial may convey a paratextual message, and while the material text will suffer an alteration through the missing letter, the abstract text will hardly be affected by this lack.

We conclude that what we are looking at is not a simple text-paratext continuum but a complex network of elements in different textual and paratextual relationships with each other. Ultimately, all paratext influences the text of the work.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of our article is to suggest a wider critical enquiry into what paratext is and what paratextuality means, especially in connection with textual theories. We chose as our starting point the division of text into texts of documents (material) and texts of works (abstract or ideal). In our view, the lack of such a distinction is one of the main reasons for terminological confusion in paratext studies, especially since paratexts are studied across several fields, some of which focus on the work (e.g. literature), others on the document (e.g. book history). With this distinction in mind, and by concentrating on the level of the document as encountered by the reader, we limited the range of variables affecting the borders between text and paratext. However, although we have striven to keep our discussion on the material level of text, we admit that this is not always possible: the material and the ideal are intrinsically linked.

We are convinced that the question of borders between text and paratext, and the complex network of paratextual relations, is highly relevant for the understanding of textuality as well as the processes of book production. Further exploration of paratextuality, keeping in mind the concept of abstract text and the interplay between different textual and paratextual levels, would be beneficial for future enquiries.

Works Cited

Allen, Robert. 2010. "Perpetually Beginning Until the End of the Fair: The Paratextual Poetics of Serialised Novels". *Neohelicon* 37 (1): 181–89.

Ammon, Frieder von, and Herfried Vögel, eds. 2008. *Die Pluralisierung Des Paratextes in Der Frühen Neuzeit: Theorie, Formen, Funktionen*. Pluralisierung & Autorität 15. Berlin: Lit, cop.

Barker, S. K., and Brenda M. Hosington, eds. 2013. *Renaissance Cultural Crossroads: Translation, Print and Culture in Britain, 1473–1640*. Leiden, Boston: Brill.

Beal, Peter. 2008. *A Dictionary of English Manuscript Terminology 1450–2000*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Birke, Dorothee, and Birte Christ. 2013. "Paratext and Digitized Narrative: Mapping the Field". *Narrative* 21 (1): 65–87.

Brown, Michelle P. 1994. *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts: A Guide to Technical Terms*. London: J. Paul Getty Museum.

Carroll, Ruth, Matti Peikola, Mari-Liisa Varila, Janne Skaffari, and Risto Hiltunen. 2013. "Pragmatics on the Page: Visual Text in Late Medieval English Books". *European Journal of English Studies* 17 (1): 54–71.

Ciotti, Giovanni, and Hang Lin, eds. 2016. *Tracing Manuscripts in Time and Space through Paratexts*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.

Derolez, Albert. 2003. *The Palaeography of Gothic Manuscript Books: From the Twelfth to the Early Sixteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press.

Fowler, David C. 1995. *The Life and Times of John Trevisa, Medieval Scholar*. University of Washington Press.

Genette, Gérard. 1997a. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*. Translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.

———. 1997b. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Greetham, D. C. 1999. *Theories of the Text*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.

Gumbert, J. P. 1993. "'Typography' of the Manuscript Book". *Journal of the Printing Historical Society* 22: 5–28.

Hardman, Phillipa. 1997. "Windows into the Text: Unfilled Spaces in Some Fifteenth-Century English Manuscripts". In *Texts and Their Contexts: Papers from the Early Book Society*, edited by John Scattergood and Julia Boffey, 44–70. Dublin: Four Courts Press.

Jansen, Laura, ed. 2014. *The Roman Paratext: Frame, Texts, Readers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaislaniemi, Samuli. 2017. "Code-Switching, Script-Switching and Typeface-Switching in Early Modern English Manuscript Letters and Printed Tracts". In *Verbal and Visual Communication in Early English Texts*, edited by Matti Peikola, Aleksi Mäkilähde, Hanna Salmi, Mari-Liisa Varila, and Janne Skaffari, 165–200. Utrecht Studies in Medieval Literacy 37. Turnhout: Brepols.

Lopes, Alexandra. 2012. "Under the Sign of Janus: Reflections on Authorship as Liminality in Translated Literature." *Revista Anglo Saxonica*, Ser. III, 3: 127–56.

Macksey, Richard. 1997. "Foreword". In *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, by Gerard Genette, xi–xxii. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mak, Bonnie. 2011. *How the Page Matters*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Martin, Alison E. 2006. "Annotation and Authority: Georg Forster's Footnotes to the: Nachrichten von Den Pelew-Inseln (1789)". *Translation and Literature* 15 (2): 177–201.

Marttila, Ville. 2014. "Creating Digital Editions for Corpus Linguistics: The Case of Potage Dyvers, a Family of Six Middle English Recipe Collections". Doctoral dissertation. Helsinki: University of Helsinki. Online: https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/135589.

Merveldt, Nikola von. 2008. "Vom Geist Im Buchstaben: Georg Rörers Reformatorische Typographie Der Heiligen Schrift". In *Die Pluralisierung Des Paratextes in Der Frühen Neuzeit: Theorie, Formen, Funktionen*, edited by Frieder von Ammon and Herfried Vögel, 187–224. Pluralisierung & Autorität 15. Berlin: Lit, cop.

Partridge, Stephen. 2011. "Designing the Page". In *The Production of Books in England 1350–1500*, edited by Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin, 79–103. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Peikola, Matti. 2008. "Aspects of Mis-En-Page in Manuscripts of the Wycliffe Bible". In *Medieval Texts in Context*, edited by Graham D. Caie and Denis Renevey, 28–67. Milton Park, Abingdon: Routledge.

Rockenberger, Annika, and Per Röcken. 2010. "Typographie Als Paratext? Anmerkungen Zu Einer Terminologischen Konfusion". *Poetica* 41: 293–330.

Shillingsburg, Peter L. 1986. *Scholarly Editing in the Computer Age: Theory and Practice*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Smith, Helen, and Louise Wilson, eds. 2011. *Renaissance Paratexts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Snijders, Tjamke. 2015. *Manuscript Communication: Visual and Textual Mechanics of Communication in Hagiographical Texts from the Southern Low Countries, 900–1200*. Turnhout: Brepols.

Stanitzek, Georg. 2005. "Texts and Paratexts in Media". Translated by Ellen Klein. *Critical Inquiry* 32 (1): 27–42.

Suhr, Carla. 2011. "Publishing for the Masses: Early Modern English Witchcraft Pamphlets". Doctoral dissertation. Helsinki: University of Helsinki.

Tahir-Gürçağlar, Şehnaz. 2002. "What Texts Don't Tell: The Uses of Paratexts in Translation Research". In *Crosscultural Transgressions*, edited by Theo Hermans, 44–60. Research Models in Translation Studies. Manchester: Jerome.

Tanselle, G. Thomas. 1989. *A Rationale of Textual Criticism*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Toledano Buendía, Carmen. 2013. "Listening to the Voice of the Translator: A Description of Translator's Notes as Paratextual Elements". *The International Journal for Translation & Interpreting Research* 5 (2): 149–62.

Varila, Mari-Liisa. 2016. "In Search of Textual Boundaries: A Case Study on the Transmission of Scientific Writing in Sixteenth-Century England". Doctoral dissertation. Turku: University of Turku.