

A medieval manuscript illustration depicting a scholar in a brown robe and red cap seated at a wooden desk, writing in a book. He is surrounded by five students in various medieval attire, including a green cap, a red tunic, and a grey tunic. The background is a solid blue color.

OXFORD

THE VISIBLE TEXT

Textual Production and Reproduction from Beowulf to Maus

THOMAS A. BREDEHOFT

OXFORD TEXTUAL PERSPECTIVES

The Visible Text

*Textual Production and Reproduction
from Beowulf to Maus*

THOMAS A. BREDEHOFT



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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.
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First Edition published in 2014

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2013942188

ISBN 978-0-19-960316-9 (hbk.)

978-0-19-960315-2 (pbk.)

Printed by

CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CRO 4YY

SERIES EDITORS' PREFACE

Oxford Textual Perspectives is a new series of informative and provocative studies focused upon texts (conceived of in the broadest sense of that term) and the technologies, cultures, and communities that produce, inform, and receive them. It provides fresh interpretations of fundamental works, images, and artefacts, and of the vital and challenging issues emerging in English literary studies. By engaging with the contexts and materiality of the text, its production, transmission, and reception history, and by frequently testing and exploring the boundaries of the notions of text and meaning themselves, the volumes in the series question conventional frameworks and provide innovative interpretations of both canonical and less well-known works. These books will offer new perspectives, and challenge familiar ones, both on and through texts and textual communities. While they focus on specific authors, periods, and issues, they nonetheless scan wider horizons, addressing themes and provoking questions that have a more general application to literary studies and cultural history as a whole. Each is designed to be as accessible to the non-specialist reader as it is fresh and rewarding for the specialist, combining an informative orientation in a landscape with detailed analysis of the territory and suggestions for further travel.

Elaine Treharne and Greg Walker

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The conception and composition of this book has followed an unusual course, and I suspect that even I do not remember all those friends and colleagues who have contributed to it. The following folks, however, have made individual contributions that deserve to be spelled out specifically. So:

Thanks to Elaine Treharne, for giving me the confidence and encouragement to write it in the first place, though it has taken me far outside my comfort zone. Thanks to Harold Forbes, at the WVU library, for granting me such easy access to that university's set of Shakespeare folios. Thanks to Ryan Claycomb, for without his timely intervention, much of the argument would have taken a radically different form. Thanks to Pat Conner, who graciously allowed me to bend his ear about virtually all the ideas contained herein, as well as about other topics, over many cups of coffee. Thanks also to Brian Luskey and Kate Staples, for their useful responses to a messy early draft of two chapters. And a somewhat more diffuse but no less heartfelt thanks to Dan Donoghue, Siân Echard, Janet Ericksen, Martin Foys, Erin Jordan, Michael Kramp, Chris Jones, Drew Jones, Stacy Klein, Roy Liuzza, Leslie Lockett, Jo Story, and Elizabeth Tyler, for friendship and fellowship at conferences, or in your homes, or over email, and in other ways: your support and scepticism both have profited this book. Thanks in every possible way, as well, to Rosemary Hathaway, whose patience and support through these six stressful years (some parts of which have been focused on this book) have been worth all the rest.

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Introduction

Among the many Anglo-Saxon treasures of the British Museum is the small eighth-century whalebone chest now usually known as the Franks Casket. Intricately carved on all four sides as well as on a top panel, the Casket shows scenes from Christian history, from Germanic legend, and from the Bible, attesting to the complex cultural forces operating in Anglo-Saxon England at the time; each of the four sides includes written material, in either English runes, Latin letters, or both, generally relating to the accompanying images. The right-hand side of the Casket features a puzzling set of cryptic runes, seemingly involving a vowel-substitution cipher of some sort: where we might expect to see vowels there only appear to be more consonants. The cipher was, it is widely agreed, 'solved' in an important 1900 essay by Arthur Napier, who identified cryptic forms of the Old English vowels 'a', 'æ', 'e', 'i', and 'o'.¹ Napier's solution was widely adopted and forms the basis for the standard edition of the text in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*:

Her Hos sitæþ	on hærmbergæ
agl[.] drigip,	swæ hiri Ertæ gisgraf
særden sorgæ	and sefa tornæ.

¹ Arthur Napier, 'Contributions to Old English Literature: 1. An Old English Homily on the Observance of Sunday. 2. The Franks Casket', in W. P. Ker, A. S. Napier, and W. W. Skeat, eds., *An English Miscellany presented to Dr F. J. Furnivall* (reprint edn. New York: AMS, 1969), pp. 355–81.

(‘Here sits Hos on the harm-barrow; she endures *agl[.]*, as Ertæ appointed to her a sore-den of sorrows and troubles of mind.’)² Napier literally made the cryptic text legible, but a damaged letter and some difficult words have meant that its meaning has remained an open question in some ways.

For over a century, scholars studying the Casket have read the cryptic right-hand text with the aid of Napier’s solution, but it now appears to be the case that Napier’s solution was incomplete. In a recent essay, I have shown that an additional cryptic rune-consonant should be read as the vowel ‘u’, changing three characters previously understood as ‘r’.³ Although one resulting word, ‘sæuden’, remains difficult to construe, the prepositional phrase ‘on hærmbergæ’ should now be read ‘on hæum bergæ’ (on the high hill) and the otherwise unknown proper name ‘Ertæ’ can now be properly read as ‘Eutæ’, seeming to reference the tribal name of the Jutes recorded in the Venerable Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* as well as in the poem *Beowulf*. Although not all modern scholars assent to an origin for *Beowulf* in Bede’s eighth-century Northumbrian milieu, the Franks Casket’s date and Northumbrian dialect open the door for a reinterpretation of this puzzling bit of verse in just such a context.

I begin with this example because it exposes a central problem in the very process of what we know as reading, which can be understood as a process for decrypting the mysterious signs we call letters into meaningful language. Once Napier had done the initial work of decoding the Casket’s cryptic runes, later generations of readers could well argue about the meaning of the language that Napier had found within the inscription, but once it had been read, scholars effectively ceased to look at the runic material itself, preferring to read through it to the bit of language they understood it to conceal. What this example teaches us so clearly is that we often conceptualize reading as an operation that is somehow directly opposed to seeing: although we must of course see a text that we read (and I refer here only to the common case, and pass

² George Philip Krapp and Elliott V. K. Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* [ASPR], 6 vols. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931–53), vol. 6: *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, p. 116. The translation is mine, as are all translations into Modern English throughout, unless otherwise noted.

³ Thomas A. Bredehoft, ‘Three New Cryptic Runes on the Franks Casket’, *Notes and Queries* N.S. 58.2 (2011), 181–3.

over exceptions such as Braille writing), the very process of reading assigns importance or significance not to the visible aspects of letters, but to the linguistic entities that lie behind them. Once we reach beyond the visible signs to their linguistic meanings, we feel free to discard or ignore the visible component. The visible aspect of the text is treated as a veil that conceals the meanings that we hope to find within texts, and what a cryptic text like that on the Franks Casket does is to call our attention as readers to the veil itself; here we must see as well as read.

It will be one of my central contentions in this book that we must always see as well as read, whether the text in question is overtly cryptic or not. Further, the notion that the visible component of text is able to be discarded or ignored or bypassed must be understood as an ideological position. Seemingly one of the central underpinnings of our entire practice of literacy, this ideological principle is, like writing itself, something that Jacques Derrida would label as a *pharmakon*—a drug—neither medicinal remedy nor poison, although having the potential to partake of both.⁴ Writing's ability to serve as a representation of language, Derrida insists, is always accompanied by a *supplément*, an irreducible difference, or gap, or deferral, falling between the written text and its supposed linguistic content. The three 'u's conventionally (and I believe incorrectly) read as 'r' in the Franks Casket text remind us that what is lost when we cross the gap between seeing and reading can sometimes be very important indeed. But the truly important lesson here will not allow us to merely let the new reading of the Casket replace the old; rather it should remind us that reading, as a strategy or practice, must always lose something in that gap. Seeing cannot simply be a remedy (or even a *pharmakon*) for reading, it is important to recognize, as seeing no doubt leaves its own gaps and *suppléments*, but seeing while we are reading can help us recognize the play in the text.

To put it in other terms, whenever we read, we must simultaneously remain conscious of our visual experience of a text. To do so, I believe, means that we must attend closely to what it is, exactly, that we mean by the word 'text'. In this book, where I will cover materials ranging from Anglo-Saxon manuscripts and inscribed objects like the Franks Casket to modern contemporary comics works like Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan*,

⁴ Jacques Derrida, 'Plato's Pharmacy', in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61–171.

it will become clear quite quickly that any definition of text we might choose to use necessarily leaves its own irreducible gaps and problems. To choose a definition, or even to attempt to arrive at one, is to surrender the game in some fashion, to limit the possibilities of the very project at hand, which is to articulate the necessity of both reading and seeing: defining precisely what is a ‘text’, I suspect, is always to return us to a paradigm of reading. Instead of offering a singular definition of ‘text’, then, I will offer a dual definition in order to indicate the nature of my arguments as we proceed through the chapters of this book: on the one hand, as we shall see, a text is a media object, that which is reproduced or otherwise caught up within an economy of reproduction; on the other hand, a text must be understood as that which is bounded and defined by paratext. Much of the history that my own book will attempt to trace can be understood as what falls in the gap between and beyond these two competing definitions.

Textual media and the logic of the copy

As part of his fascinating close reading of Plato’s *Phaedrus*, Derrida both articulates and undermines what we can conveniently label ‘the logic of the copy’ or ‘the logic of copying’. In those domains where the logic of the copy operates, one understands that by its very nature the copy is always a failure, and what it fails at specifically is to be identical to what it attempts to reproduce. Derrida, primarily concerned with ideas that swirl around writing as a secondary phenomenon, an implicit or explicit attempt to represent speech or language, suggests that the ideological content of the logic of the copy misunderstands or misrepresents the play that characterizes writing: ‘Having no essence, introducing difference as the condition for the presence of essence, opening up the possibility of the double, the copy, the imitation, the simulacrum—the game and the *graphē* are constantly disappearing as they go along.’⁵ Thus, for Derrida, critiques of writing that characterize it as a failure simply reinscribe a claim that is essentially ideological in nature. Yet if one can step outside of that ideological formation, writing need not be a failure and

⁵ Derrida, ‘Plato’s Pharmacy’, p. 157.

what we might be inclined to call a text need not be seen as a copy or representation of anything at all, but can rather be a thing in itself.

In principle, Derrida's insight allows us to distinguish between scripts that are subject to the logic of the copy (texts, media) and those which are not, although we do not have any equivalently convenient label for the latter category; I will generally call such items textual artefacts or productions. The act of distinguishing between texts and textual artefacts, however, seems difficult, especially when our most basic notion of reading means, of course, to use the script to grant us access to its linguistic contents: in its most basic formation, and perhaps even in its historically originary formation, reading means reading aloud, and reading aloud explicitly generates language itself. In other words, the act of reading (aloud) appears always to position the script as medial: certainly the script lies outside the reader, and to the degree that it also lies outside the writer, the script seems inherently medial.

Yet from a very early stage indeed, some scripts clearly exploit the gap or *supplément* between their written form and the linguistic content they generate or contain. To return to the example of the cryptic inscription on the right-hand side of the Franks Casket, Napier's conventional reading of the second verse as 'on hærmbergæ' ('on the harm-barrow') and my own revised reading of the same verse as 'on hæum bergæ' ('on the high hill') both accomplish the work of translating the carved or inscribed runes into speakable language. Lost in both translations, of course, whether we put them into speech or alternative alphabets, are the visual similarities and differences between the two r-shaped runes that lead to the different readings. Yet those similarities and differences are an essential component of the Franks Casket, and the operation of turning the inscription into either speakable language or a non-runic alphabet must either erase the differences (Napier's reading) or the similarities (my reading). In short, the process of reading this passage insistently treats the Franks Casket's cryptic text as medial: to read the cryptic text (aloud) means to treat the inscription as standing between us and a piece of language that can be vocalized or transcribed.

Let me rephrase that. The act of reading the cryptic passage means to treat it as a media object, a text, despite the ways in which doing so essentially demands a misrepresentation of the Casket itself. That is, the Casket is not a media object, it is not (or not merely) medial, lying between us and a piece of language that we hope to access. The runes of the Franks

Casket, rather than functioning representationally, through the logic of the copy, function as the thing itself, the real. Solving the cipher of the Casket is precisely the act that allows us to treat it as medial, to literally make it into a text; before it is solved, or when we wish to focus on the act of solution, it is, essentially, not a text at all. This claim, of course, merely restates the definition of text I am currently exploring: a text is a media object, subject to the logic of the copy, both attempting to represent a passage of language and necessarily failing at that attempt. The fact that the cipher has been encoded onto the Casket by an author figure, like the fact that the Casket is positioned medially between readers and that author figure, cannot be denied; but the Casket as an object, and its script as a cipher, is more than and different from an artefact subject to the logic of the copy. By solving the cipher and (hence) reading the text, we subject it to the logic of the copy: and thus we do a kind of violence to what it is. The creator of the Casket, of course, demands that violence from us, by requiring us to solve the cipher; he or she is playing with us.

But as this very example confirms, the idea of a text as a media object, something subject to the logic of the copy, is an ideological position that does not apply in all times and places, or to all scripts or inscriptions; one of the most surprising consequences of bringing Derrida and the Franks Casket into dialogue may well be the recognition that the Casket's very kind of play also serves as a critique of this most familiar (to us) ideology of writing. In many times and places, the logic of the copy has indeed dominated the books and written materials that make up our objects of literary study, but it has not always been dominant, and the operation of the logic of the copy is very much in need of historicization.

Text and paratext

An alternative model for defining what exactly is a text is, one must admit, especially closely concerned with works of literature. The focus on the literary, however, is necessary: one of the things that literary objects do most consistently is to challenge or address the very categories that make textual activity possible, and histories of the book must always attend to literary history. This second partial definition for 'text' involves the tension between text and paratext, although just where the

boundary between the two lies is not always certain. As described by Gérard Genette in the opening to his massive survey of paratextual forms,

the paratext is what enables a text to become a book and to be offered as such to its reader and, more generally, to the public. More than a boundary or a sealed border, the paratext is, rather, a *threshold*, or—a word Borges used apropos of a preface—a ‘vestibule’ that offers the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back.⁶

Genette, while especially concerned with books and publishers in the print era, acknowledges that paratexts have functioned variously across time, and that they might apply as well to much shorter texts than those which make up books. But even in his incredibly brief introductory list, ‘an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations,’⁷ Genette signals to readers just what paratexts are as well as what they do: paratexts do the work of identification, location, contextualization, and definition that give a text its unique identity.

Genette’s further association between paratexts and the process of publication—which implies, of course, reproduction of the text, marking it explicitly as subject to the logic of the copy—reveals the surprising interdependence of my ‘paratextual’ and the ‘media’ definitions of text. Even more surprising, perhaps, is the extraordinarily long history of this association between paratextual apparatus and textual reproduction, as we shall see in Chapter 1. Texts tend to be accompanied by paratexts *and* to participate in an economy of reproduction that positions them as medial, and this connection existed long before the invention of printing.

An example can clarify what is at stake here. In many contexts, the familiar phrase ‘To err is human; to forgive, divine’ functions as a proverb, a frozen expression communicating a bit of conventional wisdom. Conversely, to identify it as line 525 of Alexander Pope’s *Essay on Criticism* is to associate it with a powerful set of paratexts: an author’s name, a title, and a set of boundaries denoted here by line numbers. Further, to identify it as a quotation explicitly places it within the realm of reproduction: a quotation is always a (partial, thus faulty) copy for which there is an identifiable, authoritative original. In a very real sense, however,

⁶ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 1–2.

⁷ Genette, *Paratexts*, p. 1.

the deployment of this phrase as a proverb takes place outside the logic of the copy: as a proverb, it functions as the thing itself, not merely as a reproduction of some 'original' version of itself. Likewise, as a proverb, 'To err is human' has no author; as conventional wisdom, it is the common property of us all, and in popular discourse it does not function as a quotation from Pope, regardless of its probable origin. Our ability to trace the history of 'To err is human' merely exposes our ability as readers to make the proverb into a text—precisely by associating it with a suite of paratextual materials. While there is, at some linguistic level, no difference between 'To err is human; to forgive, divine' when used as a proverb and when used as a quotation from Pope, the paratextual and medial issues addressed here make it worthwhile indeed for us to label the differences that do exist, and those very paratextual and reproductive issues indicate that only the quotation actually functions as a text.

This process of making something into a text by associating it with a title, an author's name, and other paratextual apparatus has been an exceptionally useful strategy for authors, book makers, publishers, and literary readers through the centuries, and I have no intention to deny either its usefulness or its power.⁸ But it seems important to note that a process that makes things into texts must, indeed, start with raw materials that are not in fact texts. What an understanding of how texts are defined by their paratexts allows us to do is to recognize texts when we find them, as well as at least tentatively identify some things (like the proverb version of 'To err is human') that might appropriately be understood as non-texts, at some level. While contemporary literary and cultural studies might feel comfortable with seeing everything as a text, it is important to be explicitly aware of when something is a text by its very nature, and when it is that we make something into a text for our own convenience and purposes.

A first effort

My discussion so far has been brief, but it has attempted a great deal: to insist on the necessity of seeing as well as reading; to note that reading

⁸ On the author's name in particular, see Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?', in Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), pp. 101–20.

as a strategy serves to make whatever it consumes into texts; and to suggest that a text is a specific kind of textual object (for lack of a better term) that generally operates as subject to the logic of the copy, or is accompanied by a defining paratext, or both. These claims, of course, are interlinked, enchained one from another, and they stand at the heart of the analysis that will be used throughout my book. As such, I think it is useful here to work out some of the implications of these starting points in some detail in order to clarify the directions later chapters will take. At the risk of seeming perverse, I shall consider three examples, from quite different ends of the tradition of English letters; my examples are all linked to one another by their use of retrograde letters.

Retrograde letters, of course, ‘walk backwards,’ and my first example of retrograde script also derives from the Franks Casket (Figure 1), which I discussed in some detail above. In addition to the right side, where the runic script is obscured for readers by the use of a complex set of cryptic runes in a vowel-substitution cipher, the front side of the Casket exhibits a text that (according to the conventional reading) extends through the four panels surrounding the central images, beginning at the upper left, continuing down the right-hand side, proceeding in retrograde fashion across the bottom panel, and then (abandoning the retrograde orientation of the characters) back up the left-hand panel.⁹ The images show, on the left half, a scene from the Germanic legend of Weland the smith (in which Weland offers his captor a drinking cup), and on the right, the Christian Adoration of the Magi. The poetic passage seems to have nothing to do with these images, however, and reads, according to the standard transcription, as:

Fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig;
 warþ gasric grorn, þær he on greut giswom.
 Hronæs ban.

(‘The fish threw water onto the mighty mountain; the gusher-powerful one grew sad where he swam upon the gravel. Whale’s bone.’ The entire

⁹ On the right-hand side and left-hand side of the three-dimensional Casket, runic texts in the bottom panel appear inverted, but not retrograde (that is, the script reads left to right when the box itself is inverted). On the right-hand side, of course, the result is both inverted and cryptographic text. The back side does not have a continuous text panel across the bottom.



FIG 1 The Franks Casket, front panel.

Image courtesy of the British Museum. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

second poetic line stands as the retrograde portion.)¹⁰ Structurally, the text seems almost to be riddle and answer, with two lines of poetry, followed by a two-word, non-metrical phrase presented at the end, apparently as a kind of summation. Yet the words ‘whale’s bone’ in the fourth panel are usually taken as a reference to the material of the Casket itself, and they seem to have no clear reference to the poetic lines, other than that the fish of the poem and the whale must be the same. Likewise, the poetic lines themselves do not really seem like a riddle, although ‘gasric’ is a problematic word, and there is some uncertainty over subject and object in the first clause. The real riddle would seem to be the relationship among the parts: the Germanic and Christian stories in the images; the poetic lines; the explicit presence of the ‘solution’ to the riddle in the words ‘whale’s bone’.

It is at least possible, I suspect, that the solution to the riddle posed by the Franks Casket’s front side is not ‘hronæs ban’ but ‘hronæs bana’: ‘whale’s slayer’, or, somewhat more archaically, ‘whale’s bane’. Such a

¹⁰ Krapp and Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ASPR, vol. 6, p. 116.