

INTRODUCTION

Pictorial Paratexts



*Sed quia auctoritas cereum habet nasum, id est
in diversum potest flecti sensum, rationibus roborandum est.*

But because authority has a nose of wax, that is, the sense can
be bent in various ways, it must be fortified with arguments.¹

In his classic study, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gérard Genette devotes a chapter to “The functions of the original preface,” in which he notes that “the original preface has as its chief function to ensure that the text is read properly.”² He immediately goes on, however, to observe that “This simplistic phrase is more complex than it may seem, for it can be analyzed into two actions, the first of which enables – but does not in any way guarantee – the second. These two actions are to get the book read and to get the book read properly.”

In further analyzing these purposes, Genette engages in a kind of discourse that would have been familiar students of Latin literature in the Middle Ages, the *accessus ad auctores*. These were standardized introductions to an author or a body of work; in their developed form (known to scholars as the “C-type”), certain topics had to be touched upon: a work’s *titulus* (title), the *nomen auctoris* (name of the author), the work’s *intentio* (intention), the *materia libri* (subject matter), the *modus tractandi* (didactic method), the *ordo libri* (arrangement of parts), the work’s *utilitas* (utility), and *cui parti philosophiae supponitur* (to which branch of learning the work contributes).³ The organization of Genette’s own book follows a similar pattern: the table of contents – itself a means of indicating the *ordo libri* that in medieval manuscripts, at least those made prior to the thirteenth century, represents the exception rather than rule – lists chapters on, among other topics, “The Name of the Author,” “Titles,” “Dedications and Inscriptions” (a section that would have been of particular interest to medieval book makers, whose manuscripts are filled with both such devices), “The Prefatorial Situation of Communication,” and the above-mentioned chapter on functions.

I too wish for this book to be read and to be read properly. But in engaging in this form of intertextuality, my purpose, dear reader, is also twofold or, if you prefer, double-faced. On the one hand, in quoting a critic as eminent as Genette, I flatter myself, and by implication you, by suggesting that my arguments, whatever their merit, are in some way worthy of such an association. The three of us join a circle comprising author, critic, and reader. In some ways, this too is the function of some medieval author portraits, especially those that come in the guise of dedication images.⁴ In these images, the various creators of the work, whether the patron, scribe, or, least often, the illuminator, and sometimes all of them together, present it to the author, who in such cases is usually a saint, or join the author in presenting the book to Christ or Mary. Ostensibly a gesture of reverence and humility, the act of dedication in fact elevates the progenitors of the copy in question and sanctions or, better put, sanctifies their work, which can include the production of all manner of paratextual elements, including prologues and glosses, not to mention a program of illustration that supplies a commentary of its own and that simply by virtue of its inclusion shapes the structure and hence the reception of the manuscript book and lends it its own unmistakable character.⁵

Within these loops, whether medieval or modern, linking production and reception, writing and reading, the locus of authorship shifts from one person to another. In the case of this book, it passes from Genette – not simply the individual who wrote a particular book, but also, a separate matter, an authority on the subject of paratexts by virtue of the status accorded his text – to me as the progenitor of this book on pictorial prefaces to twelfth-century commentaries, a topic on which, by offering my own commentary, I could perhaps be considered as much a parasite as an authority of my own. I nonetheless venture to provide two correctives to Genette’s authoritative account, neither of which I am the first to make. The first relocates some measure of innovation in terms of attitudes towards human authorship and, with it, attitudes towards authority, to the High Middle Ages as opposed to modernity.⁶ Concomitant shifts involve greater emphasis on Latin as opposed to vernacular literature, and on manuscript as opposed to print culture.⁷ The second corrective involves vesting the visual, which Genette ignored, with some measure of agency in the articulation of these novel claims. To the extent that visualization has been associated with vernacularization, this corrective represents an amplification of the first.⁸

The epigraph with which this introduction opens, a famous passage from a polemic by Alain of Lille against heretics, testifies to the extent to which medieval authors, far from slavishly following authority, were aware of the ways in which, like statistics in the present, they could be manipulated to serve a particular line of argument. Authority was malleable; the *moderni* were more than capable of asserting themselves over and against the *antiqui*.⁹ The epigraph is a device to which Genette also devotes an entire chapter and that he identifies in its most common form as an allograph, that is, “attributed to an author who is not the author of the work.”¹⁰ Genette also distinguishes between the *epigraphed* (that is, the author of the quotation), the *epigrapher* (the author who chooses said quotation to preface his or her own work) and, not least, the *epigraphe*, as he puts it “the potential reader and, in practice, every real reader” (in other words, you, the

reader of this book).¹¹ Flattery is among the oblique functions of the epigraph identified by Genette, which include elucidating “not just the text but the *title*,” “commenting on the *text*,” but also that of indicating without permission both that “the basic message is not the message presented as basic” and that of “indirect backing,” as if to say, to paraphrase Genette’s example, “I dined with Genette last night.”¹² This, in turn, is closely connected to a further oblique function, which Genette calls the “epigraph effect”: “The epigraph in itself is a signal (intended as a *sign*) of culture, a password of intellectuality. While the author awaits hypothetical newspaper reviews, literary prizes, and other official recognitions, the epigraph is already, a bit, his consecration. With it, he chooses his peers and his place in the pantheon.”¹³ I would, of course, immediately disclaim any such intentions of my own. All I would do, in keeping with this book’s focus on pictorial prefaces, is note that the ways in which they quote older images, also without permission and in ways that put them to new purposes, could also be construed as a form of “consecration,” a way of invoking forms of sacred sanction and authority. In this context, influence need not be framed in terms of anxiety, as did Harold Bloom, but rather of a confidence and conviction that in some cases border on chutzpah.

In Genette’s application of the term, the concept of paratext applies first and foremost to printed books. Modern conceptions of authorship are inextricably bound up with conceptions of copyright, rooted in the commodification of literature.¹⁴ Recent scholarship, however, has eroded the distinction between print and manuscript culture, given that print editions were hardly uniform and that within print runs individual copies could accrue content in any number of ways, including the addition of glosses in the form of marginalia.¹⁵ Nonetheless, and for a host of reasons, manuscripts present a different set of problems requiring different definitions. No matter how many efforts were made to produce uniform copies, an approach of which the *pecia* or piece system adopted at medieval universities represents the most resolute expression, each manuscript by necessity remained a distinct object in which, depending on the care and self-consciousness with which it was produced, each aspect of its physical presentation effected the presentation, perception, and reception of the text or texts it transmitted.¹⁶ The cumulative effect of the additive apparatus of interpretative aids, originally developed as accompaniments to the reading of the Bible and of normative classical texts (especially of poets such as Virgil, Ovid, and Horace), but eventually extended to a privileged cadre of vernacular authors (most notably Dante) was to carve out space on the surface of the page for the contingent voices of modern readers who, in expressing their own opinions, informed by the light of reason and their own historical circumstances, made writerly reading into an independent form of authorial expression.¹⁷

Although Genette’s book focuses exclusively on printed books and excludes illustration from consideration on the basis of what he professes, with false modesty (another medieval topos), to be the lack of expertise of a “plain ‘literary person’,” his analysis provides compelling analogies for medieval authorial practice and hence offers a powerful set of tools for the study of medieval paratexts, prefaces and prologues, whether in verbal or visual form.¹⁸ So exclusive is Genette’s focus on literature, however, that he entirely overlooks a genre of obvious relevance

to both his and my own critical enterprise, namely, frontispieces. Indeed, just as the argument has been made that it was in the Middle Ages that modern understandings of authorship first came into being, so too, it was in the same period that, in addition to the codex itself, all manner of paratextual forms we now take for granted, from the table of contents and the index to the footnote and cross-reference, were first introduced onto the surface of the page as the primary space in which the reading and reception of texts were enacted. One could even argue that, although usually placed at the back rather than the front of a volume, the photographs of authors that sometimes accompany blurbs – another form of paratextual framing that, in addition to their obvious commercial function, serves both to flatter the author’s vanity (often with an outdated picture) and to create a sense of authorial presence – are but distant descendants of another medieval form that is very much the focus of this book: the author portrait.¹⁹

Genette’s book *Paratexts*, whose original French title, *Seuils* (thresholds) not only characterized its subject matter but also, as noted by Richard Macksey, offered “a sly wink at his long-time publisher, Editions du Seuil,” leaves to one side a further element within Genette’s poetics of transtextuality, what Macksey, following Genette, identifies as “metatextuality,” which he, Macksey, quoting Genette’s *Architexte*, defines as follows: “The transtextual relationship that links a commentary to ‘the text it comments upon (without necessarily citing it)’.”²⁰ Never mind that in quoting the author of Genette’s forward I am indulging in a form of meta-metatextuality: this book takes as one of its subjects, not author portraits in medieval manuscript as a whole – a topic that, in addition to being vast, has already received considerable attention – but rather portraits of the authors of commentaries, a subgroup of this important genre that, at least in my view, holds out particular promise.

With one exception, this subset of the much larger set of author portraits – authors of religious, secular, Latin, and vernacular works – together with the other images attached to them has never been the subject of an independent study.²¹ In addition to including among the most interesting and complex examples of the genre, they are also of interest because of their inherently self-referential character. As pictorial paratexts attached to textual paratexts, they are, in effect para-paratexts. Such portraits and related picture cycles construct representations not of “original” authorship (to the extent that metatextuality even allows for such a thing, witness the extent to which I in this introduction am relying on Genette), but rather of the inherently parasitical and paradoxical form of authorship constituted by the commentary.

“Glosynge is a glorious thyng” declares the friar in Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale* (*Canterbury Tales* 3.1793).²² To generalize in ways that are somewhat problematic, whereas glosses, often focused on lexical and grammatical questions linked to a close reading of the text, had represented the predominant form of commentary, whether on scripture or on classical texts, through the eleventh and well into the twelfth century, over the course of the latter, more discursive forms of scholarship increasingly asserted themselves. The shift reflects a profound change in the nature of schooling and pedagogy per se: a transition from the monastic classroom, in which texts were subject to close analysis, meditative reading, and debate, to classroom lectures from set texts of which, at least in principle, students possessed uniform copies.²³ One

could even go so far as to argue, as some have, that the independent book trade in Paris first emerges around the need to satisfy the demand for such text books, the very idea of such a book being dependent on their being thought of as a fixed text to which others can refer in texts of their own.²⁴ The locus of debate moves from aural argument to the written (not yet printed) page. Full-fledged commentaries were written from the patristic period onward, but in the context of classroom study, it was over the course of the twelfth century that continuous, discursive commentaries, of which the most famous, Peter Lombard's *Sentences* (*Libri quattuor sententiarum*) itself spawned countless commentaries of its own (another form of para-paratext), largely supplanted glosses, works that (at least in principle if not always in practice) more modestly annotated the principal text.²⁵ Although rooted in past practice, the shift marked by the new form of commentary indicates a fundamental change not only in reading practices but also in attitudes towards authorship.

Marginal glosses ran the gamut from informal, spontaneous notations to carefully scripted commentaries.²⁶ In a manner intrinsic to academic traditions, one commentary could spawn yet others. No reader who felt compelled to do so was constrained from adding to the margin a simple manicule (a hand with a pointing finger), the medieval equivalent of a nota bene marker, both as a record of his own reading and an indicator to others.²⁷ Such pointers represented the reader taking the opportunity to respond to the author, whom medieval author portraits very often depict employing a codified array of gestures or their own so as to drive home their points, lending definition to the very idea of a "handbook."²⁸ Glossing and reading remained interconnected activities.²⁹ Far from finished and authoritative products such as might be found in standard editions of Chaucer or Shakespeare intended for the modern classroom, glosses might rather be viewed as snapshots and secondary records of ongoing conversations conducted in the classroom. Although glosses could be added spontaneously to any book, very often they formed part and parcel of the core text that was being copied. In such books, a paratext constitutes part of the text from the very beginning, to which subsequent additions represent a second order of paratexts.³⁰ Thus, by the twelfth century, certain texts traveled with companion commentaries, albeit in flexible and, given the vagaries of manuscript production, changeable forms.

One reason why the pictures prefacing glosses and commentaries hold out such promise is that they permit the authors of such texts or – given that in almost all cases one is dealing with manuscripts made not by or at the author's behest – a particular reader or community of readers to make claims for the authority of the commentator over and against the original text in ways that the originary author (in the case of the Bible, a divinely inspired prophet or visionary) could not or did not make in the first instance. Images authorize authorship. To give an example – one that will be discussed in depth in Chapter 4 – Gilbertus Universalis (d. 1134), a rhetorician who later became archbishop of London, claims in his widely read gloss on the Book of Lamentations that its author, the prophet Jeremiah, was, like Gilbert, a skilled rhetorician. Genette would no doubt have been pleased to know that Gilbert's authorial identification remained fluid: named "Universal" (in a manifestation of the paratextual mode

that deals with name of the author) on account of the admiration in which he was held, Gilbert, who did not hesitate to adopt for himself his admirers' epithet, is also referred to in contemporary sources as Gilbert of Auxerre, Gislebertus and, in one of the manuscripts discussed in these pages as Gregorius.³¹ Gilbert's reading of Jeremiah as a rhetorician represents more than a kind of authorial narcissism; it serves, in ways that are taken up and elaborated in the pictorial prefaces prefixed to some copies of Gilbert's gloss, to justify the application of classical learning to the study of scripture, an approach the appropriateness of which had been the topic of bitter debate from the earliest Christian period. If Jeremiah himself was a "divine rhetor," to use Gilbert's own term, then Christian commentators who analyzed Scripture using rhetorical terminology and categories were not borrowing from the Greeks and Romans but rather from the wellspring of their own tradition.

In contexts such as this, prefatory images can be seen to serve a polemical function. Compared to those manuscripts discussed in these pages, far more copies of the works in question contain no significant decoration whatsoever; they remain resolutely textual in ways that strike the art historian as spartan. Precisely because they remain rare, however, pictorial prefaces to such works are revelatory. As exceptions to the rule, they represent self-conscious interventions that pull out various pictorial stops in order to shape the reader's perception of the text as well as its author. They are, in brief, commentaries of their own that work both in concert with the commentaries to which they are attached but also, at times, in ways that go beyond anything that the commentator himself authored or authorized.

The purpose of this book, then, is less to provide a survey of extant examples than to discuss a few salient instances in sufficient depth to demonstrate that these images, no less than the commentaries that they accompany, are themselves profoundly searching, inventive, and intelligent. The images do not merely illustrate or exemplify pre-existing understandings of authorship, they help to shape them at the very moment at which a particular historically situated set of ideas about authorship was itself coming into being.