English Faculty Publications   English

Noses in Books: Orientation, Immersion, and Paratext

Cynthia N. Malone
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

Recommended Citation

Noses in Books: Orientation, Immersion, and Paratext

Cynthia Northcutt Malone

College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, Minnesota, USA

Paratextual aids to reading in medieval codex books, printed codex books, and Kindle ebooks are compared. Medieval scribes designed paratextual elements that enhanced diverse reading practices, from lectio divina to scholarly textual study. Printers adopted and standardized many elements of paratext, and contemporary readers depend on these elements to navigate printed books. Because familiar paratextual aids to reading are less visible in Kindle ebooks, readers find those ebooks harder to navigate. Development of effective ebook paratext must take into account the needs and practices of readers.

KEYWORDS paratext, codex, manuscript, Kindle, ebook

People of the book have had centuries to develop the human-codex interface: the form and materials of the book, the postures and gestures of reading, paratextual aids to reading. The ebook is still an infant, yet we are already hearing "How E-Reading Threatens Learning in the Humanities" (Baron 2014). It seems mighty early to regard e-reading as a threat. It might be more useful to propose instead that we have not yet developed the screens, page design, and bodily and cognitive practices that would constitute an effective human-ebook interface.

As we develop that interface, we need to ask the same questions that medieval scribes posed in the development of the codex: How do readers plan to use this book? What features of design would help readers use books in these ways?

Medieval scribes created page design for contemplative reading that differed markedly from page design for scholarly reading. Page design for contemplative reading often featured elements that invited the reader to pause and consider. In "Reading and Meditation in the Middle Ages: Lectio Divina and Books of Hours," Laura Sterponi (2008) explains that "[l]ectio divina is a three-step practice that integrates reading (lectio), meditation (meditation), and prayer (oratio) in one devotional activity" (671). As Sterponi points out, elements of design in books of

hours encourage meditative, prayerful reading. These books feature illustrations that "do not strictly illustrate the adjacent text; rather, they comment on it and expand its meaning, thereby offering the reader further suggestions for meditation. Moreover, it can be argued that these illuminations also function as mnemonic devices" (677). In the Bean Book of Hours, for example, miniatures of biblical scenes, illumination, and drolerie supplement the text, and these visual elements arrest the eye and the mind. Figure 1 shows an exquisitely rendered miniature of the Annunciation, and Figure 2 shows a page of text with illumination, decorated initial, and a whimsical head.

Page design for scholarly study supports profoundly different reading practices. Historians of the book have traced the development of the paratext that served scholars and clergy, and readers now take for granted. A codex filled with pages of continuous writing, ("scriptio continua") gave way to a codex whose sections were clearly demarcated. Guglielmo Cavallo (2003) describes the challenge of reading scriptio continua, whose "series of continuous letters made it difficult for an unpracticed eye to discern the limits of individual words and grasp their meaning" (75). Word spaces aided textual study, and Paul Saenger (2003) traces the development of those word spaces, along with punctuation, paragraph breaks, chapter breaks, running headers, and tables of contents. In scholarly works, scribes divided the space of the page to accommodate the text and commentary or other apparatus; Figure 3 demonstrates that spatial division. Taken together, these paratextual features mapped the text, orienting readers in their passage through the work. Readers could locate their place in the text—word by word, clause by clause, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter.

Paratextual aids to reading shaped the design of the printed page; in *Paratext*, Gerard Genette (1997) explores the functions of these textual features in the printed book. Since most 21st-century readers in the West are accustomed to navigating the printed page, many current discussions of ebooks design draw comparisons with print page design. Comparing the digital page with the manuscript page may be more fruitful, however, because both the digital and manuscript brush off some constraints of traditional letterpress printing. The hand wielding the pen can mark any portion of the page, shift from alphabet to image—or construct hybrids, add colour, and so on. The scribal hands that produced the Bean Book of Hours exploit all of these possibilities. In letterpress printing, Malcolm Parkes (1993) notes, "printers were confined by the limitations of the forme" and "lacked a freedom in matters of layout which medieval scribes

had enjoyed" (53). As Figure 4 shows, pieces of wood and metal determine spacing and define margins. Entwining text and image requires insertion of blocks or plates. Adding colour— rubrication, for example, which is helpful in drawing the reader's eye to the beginning of a paragraph or section—is a pain in the neck.

Even though digital design allows freedom from the constraints of traditional letterpress printing, many designers of ebook pages continue to observe conventions that derive from letterpress. For example, ebook design often retains the conventions of spacing in letterpress page layout; even the terminology of "leading," of "en spaces" and "em spaces" persists. Designers of the digital page, like medieval scribes, could create page layout that assists readers in particular kinds of reading. Furthermore, digital page designers can deploy an endless array of marks; they need not limit punctuation to the symbols in a font of type, for example, or retain the ratios that have traditionally governed the size of punctuation marks in relation to the rest of the font.

The market share of the Kindle ebook makes Kindle design a useful case study. Genre and subject govern reading practices and design effectiveness; even within the field of scholarly monographs, for example, works on mathematics, biology, art history, or computer science require page layout and paratext that provide direction and support particular reading practices. This essay focuses on ebook design for extended, linear text, fiction or nonfiction.

Just as scribes attended to the needs of readers, so the developers of ebooks should attend to the needs of 21st-century readers. Those who design the interface need to ask:

- How do readers use ebooks?
- What do readers need in order to use ebooks more comfortably, more effectively? (Or, to ask the question the other way around: What specific features of ebooks annoy, distract, and disorient readers?)

In the case of extended, linear texts, the most basic and urgent issues, by my lights, are issues of orientation and immersion.

Readers who find it more difficult to enjoy, comprehend, and remember texts they read in ebook format are stumbling up against barriers to orienting themselves and immersing themselves in the text. A competent reader oriented in an extended, linear text, could answer a

few straightforward questions: What are you reading? Who wrote it? Where are you in the book? Kindle ebook design provides relatively little assistance in orienting readers.

Orientation in an extended, linear text is typically a precondition for immersion in the text; it is difficult to immerse ourselves in a book when we are uncertain of our place in a plot or in an argument. Consider two idioms that signal orientation and immersion: 1) we sometimes say of readers that they've buried their noses in a book; 2) readers sometimes describe themselves as "lost in a book." We say that someone has buried his or her nose in a book when we mean that the reader is immersed in the book. We use "lost in a book" to describe two very different experiences, one having to do with orientation (actually, with *dis*orientation), and the other with immersion. I am lost in a book when I get disoriented—when I lose my way through unfamiliar form or complex narrative. But, conversely, I am also lost in a book when I am immersed: lost to the world, absorbed utterly in the book. The design of the interface can assist or hinder a reader's immersion and orientation in a book.

Orientation and Immersion: Interface and Anatomy

Human anatomy figures into the adaptation of reader and book, book and reader. The expression, "to bury one's nose in a book," highlights the relationship between the anatomy of the reader and the form of the printed book; the OED (2014) traces the history of this expression in its entry on "nose (n.)": "to bury one's nose in: to become intently occupied with, *spec.* to read studiously or intently; so to have one's nose in: to be engrossed with (esp. a book)" (Phrase 1. d. (d)). That usage, the OED notes, appears in 1652, in Richard Brome's *A joviall crew; or, The merry beggars*: "The foul Fiend took him napping with his nose Betwixt the sheet-leaves of his conjuring Book." (The most recent instance cited in the OED comes from the 1998 Vintage edition of Howard Marks' autobiography, *Mr. Nice*: "She had her nose buried in David Leigh's *High Time*, Lovato's book-of-the-month.") Since the seventeenth century, the OED shows us, sleepy readers' heads have descended toward the page until at last they have inserted their noses into their codex books. The nose fits perfectly, as Figure 5 illustrates.

This is not an entirely fanciful observation: readers often recall the location of a passage within a given page opening: left-hand page, midway down. We recall its location relative to page edges and corners, situated within the planes of the open codex (see Figure 6). What if this mapping function depends on an element of the reading body? What if the nose, inserted into a

book, assists this mapping process? That is, what if the nose functions as compass rose? Again, perhaps this notion is not as fanciful as it sounds. If we experience left and right with respect to the vertical axis of our bodies, perhaps the relationship between facial structure and codex structure helps fluent readers orient themselves.

And what if the flat screen (especially a small, flat screen) and the flow of text across screens vexes efforts at orientation? The shape of a screen may make it more difficult for readers to orient ourselves spatially in ebooks, as Figure 7 suggests.

Orientation: Interface and Paratext

Elements of the centuries-old paratext operate differently in ebooks than they do in printed books. In an ebook, the relative invisibility of these features hinders readers' efforts to orient ourselves in the text. It is worth noting that we are in the ebook incunabula period, and many readers are not yet habituated to using the note-taking, highlighting, and search features in ebooks. Arguably, learning to deploy these features could help readers find and remember their places in ebooks. Even so, the ebook paratext could function far more usefully. Take, for example, "front matter": title page, table of contents, epigraph, dedication, and so on. When a reader opens a Kindle ebook, the screen shows its designated "Beginning," and that designated section of text appears again if the reader opens "Go to" and taps "Beginning." The "Beginning" of the Kindle ebook typically turns out to be the first section of a foreword or first chapter. Readers who wish to enter the book as they would a printed book—through cover, half title, title page, verso, dedication, epigraph, etc.—must summon those elements by swiping backward from that "Beginning."

For example, the epigraph of Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* (2012) resonates powerfully through the text. As Figure 8 shows, however, the "Beginning" of Ian McEwan's *Sweet Tooth* is the first page of Chapter 1. The epigraph would be invisible to the reader who does not swipe backward to find it. Editors and authors frame the text of a printed book with a sequence of paratextual elements; in an ebook, that framing material disappears from view unless a reader makes a habit of checking for "front matter"—and it seems unlikely that many readers make a habit of swiping backward from the "Beginning." As Ellen McCracken (2013) observes in her essay, "Expanding Genette's Epitext/Peritext Model for Transitional Electronic Literature":

Most likely thinking they are making the e-book more convenient for readers, programmers in effect have changed the conventions of viewing important paratexts that some writers count on readers engaging with before reading the main text. For example, writers sometimes play with reality and fiction in the dedication or epigraph, a key textual element that may remain hidden if the reader does not think to click backwards to previous pages. (113-14)

People designing ebooks for Kindle devices report their struggle to make the ebook open at the "beginning" they designate, but no solution currently appears in the Kindle Direct Publishing community forum.

Even if the reader does swipe backward from the "Beginning" to consult, for example, a table of contents in an ebook, it is sometimes decidedly unhelpful. The printed version of *Best American Science and Nature Writing 2013*, edited by Siddhartha Mukherjee, includes a table of contents that lists the authors and titles of the essays and notes the periodical in which each essay first appears (see Figure 9) As Figure 10 shows, the Kindle ebook version of that volume opens not to the table of contents but instead to the Foreword. A reader browsing this book would presumably wish to scan the table of contents to see whose work is included, what topic the articles address, and where the material was first published. Swiping backward from the Foreword to the table of contents, the ebook reader finds only a list of essay titles: no authors, no periodicals (see Figure 11).

Like the front matter, the information in headers common in the codex—author, book title, chapter title—remains invisible until summoned. The gesture of tapping the page summons at least some of that information, but it comes only if called. Presumably, the reader attended to title and author at the moment of selecting the ebook. Does recall of title and author atrophy when each return to the ebook skips past the cover and everything else to the page where the reader left off? Anecdotal evidence suggests that it does; my students and friends, bloggers' postings, and a respondents to survey in a study cited by Naomi Baron (2013) have reported that they are less likely to remember the title and author of an ebook. The writer of the *ebookanoid* blogpost dated April 16, 2012, titled "Do You Remember the Name of the Ebook You Have Just Finished Reading?" highlights the difference between remembering the text and remembering the author and title:

My problem is not around the details of the story line specifically, but the name of both the author and the ebook itself, both of which I find I always forget by the time I have read about 10 pages or thereabouts. I am pretty sure that this is caused by the fact that one misses the reinforcing clues of seeing the cover of any paper book you read every time you pick it up and start reading it. With an <u>ereader</u>, once you are past the title page, you no longer see the title or author's name ever again while reading the ebook – Thus unless it is a particular favourite book of yours, there goes the title and writer's name…..

Covers and headers serve as aids to memory; without those aids, memory tends to fail.

Death of the Author notwithstanding, I would argue for visibility of front matter and headings because readers who do not know what or whom they are reading are disoriented readers. In a text about say, divorce, it matters quite a bit whether they are reading John Milton, Elizabeth Gilbert, or Stanley Cavell. As anyone who teaches literature knows, instilling in readers the habit of referring to writers and works by name (and stamping out the habit of beginning sentences with "They say in here") is difficult enough when the author's name and title are perpetually visible. Readers, in my experience, need all the help they can get with this aspect of orientation. Restoration and enhanced visibility of familiar paratextual features would provide some orientation for readers of ebooks.

Additional horizontal and vertical elements would also help to orient readers in the four-cornered, flat space of the ebook. Shifts in vertical and horizontal spacing are often less obvious in the ebook than in the printed book, and that has consequences for reading. In a codex page opening, the eight points of orientation and two pages of text help readers notice shifts in both kinds of spacing. The white space signifies. When a screen displays less text and half the points of orientation, readers may not notice the shift inward from the left margin that signals an extended quotation. Shifts in vertical spacing raise a similar issue; writers often use extra space to signal a shift in focus, so readers learn to expect a shift when they see that blank space. But here again, with fewer points of orientation visible, readers may not notice the extra line spacing—especially when it happens to appear at the bottom of the screen.

Ebook designers might adopt innovations like those in the printed version of Keith Houston's *Shady Characters* (2013): simple devices, printed in red, that catch the eye of the reader (like rubrication in the medieval codex). A vertical red line emphasizes an indented quotation; red asterisks emphasize a section break. The rubrication is particularly noticeable and

appealing, but these paratextual devices would function quite well even in black-and-white display.

Orientation: Interface and Punctuation

Now I would like to turn the lens to the even smaller elements of the text: punctuation. If punctuation developed to help readers find their place in syntax, in sequences of ideas, and in mode of expression, etc., what should we make of the fact that relatively few people in the US deploy and read punctuation marks in line with the conventions outlined in handbooks? People use apostrophes to mark plurals and possessive pronouns; people use commas to weld together whole sentences. Ebooks were born into this punctuation environment. If we pair this observation with the fact that people apparently find emoticons useful and/or fun in digital modes of communication, we might ask whether it is time to develop a system of punctuation that is both more effective in signaling syntactical relationships and more expressive in signaling affect.

The champions of the interrobang and the ironic tilde are already fighting for affective punctuation, so I want to make a different point: the ebook can serve as a site for adapting and experimenting with punctuation that helps to orient readers at the level of the sentence. Digital design allows limitless play with the size and shape of punctuation marks. Since the designers of the digital page are not limited to metal shapes in a type case, ebook designers can set themselves the same challenge that medieval scribes took up: identifying the difficulties that snag and confuse readers and developing innovations that dispel confusion and provide direction. While punctuation may seem to be the responsibility of the writer and editor, Ellen Lupton, author of *Thinking with Type* (2009), puts the designer on par with the editor in matters of punctuation: "Designers and editors need to learn various typographic conventions in addition to mastering the grammatical rules of punctuation." Ebook designers can play an important part in adapting those conventions to assist readers of the digital page.

Take, for example, the Spanish convention of beginning a question or exclamation with an inverted question mark or exclamation point (adopted, according to Parkes, in the eighteenth century) (56-57). Perhaps English-language readers would find their way through a text more easily if initial punctuation signaled a shift from declarative to interrogative, imperative, exclamatory. Certainly no technological barrier prevents the introduction of inverted marks; if a

writer chose to use that punctuation in an English-language manuscript, would the inverted marks survive the editorial and design process?

Medieval scribes living in monastic communities would have had opportunities to discuss matters of paratext with one another and presumably, in some instances, with clerical and scholarly readers and writers. It is difficult to determine how fully the designers of the Kindle ebook enter into discussions of reading practice, or how carefully they attend to the experiences of readers in matters that are not reducible to Kindle forum postings. Ebook design would benefit from lively discussion between writers, designers, and readers; it would also benefit from research that focuses on the ways in which ebook readers get disoriented and confused. Open discussion and careful research could provide direction for constructing more effective paratextual aids, elements of ebooks that help readers orient themselves, navigate the text, and—in the best sense—lose themselves in books.

Cynthia Northcutt Malone is Professor of English at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University in Minnesota. She teaches literature, writing, and publishing, and her research interests focus at the intersection between book arts and the evolution of the book.

Correspondence to: Email: cmalone@csbsju.edu

References

Baron, Naomi S. 2013. "Redefining Reading: The Impact of Digital Communication Media." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 128, no. 1 (January), 193-200, doi: 10.1632/pmla.2013.128.1.193 (17/7/2014).

Baron, Naomi S. 2014. "How E-Reading Threatens Learning in the Humanities." *Chronicle of Higher Education,* July 14. http://chronicle.com/article/How-E-Reading-Threatens/147661/ (17/7/2014).

Book of Hours. Bean Manuscript 2. Vivarium. Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Collegeville, MN. http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/HMMLCollect/id/4012 (10/10/2014).

Cavallo, Guglielmo. 2003. "Between *Volumen* and Codex: Reading in the Roman World." In *A History of Reading in the West*, edited by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, 64-89. Translated by Lydia Cochrane. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.

"Do You Remember the Name of the Ebook You Have Just Finished Reading?" (2014). *Ebookanoid*, 16 April 2012. http://www.ebookanoid.com/2012/04/16/do-you-remember-the-name-of-the-ebook-you-have-just-finished-reading/ (10/13/2014).

Genette, Gérard. 1997. *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Houston, Keith. 2003. *Shady Characters: The Secret Life of Punctuation, Symbols, and Other Typographical Marks*. New York: Norton.

Luke 3:33-34:6. Vivarium. Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Collegeville, MN. Http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/HMMLCollect/id/9808/rec/8 (10/10/2014).

Lupton, Ellen. 2009. "Punctuation." *Thinking with Type*. http://www.thinkingwithtype.com/contents/letter/#Punctuation (22/11/2014).

McCracken, Ellen. 2013. "Expanding Genette's Epitext/Peritext Model for Transitional Electronic Literature: Centrifugal and Centripetal Vectors On Kindles and Ipads." *Narrative* 21.1: 105-124. doi:10.1353/nar.2013.0005 (23/11/2014).

McEwan, Ian. 2012. *Sweet Tooth*. New York: Doubleday. Print and Kindle editions.

Mukherjee, Siddhartha, ed. 2013. *The Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2013*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. Print and Kindle editions.

 "New Testament in chase." 2009. *Edinburgh City of Print*. 12 November. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:New_Testament_in_chase.jpg (15/10/2014).

"Nose, n." *OED Online*. September 2014. Oxford University Press. http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.csbsju.edu/view/Entry/128408?rskey=VLb2GP&result=1& isAdvanced=false (15/8/2014).

Parkes, M.B. 1993. *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Saenger, Paul. 2003. "Reading in the Later Middle Ages." In *A History of Reading in the West*, edited by Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, 120-148. Translated by Lydia Cochrane. Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press.

Sterponi, Laura. 2008. "Reading and Meditation in the Middle Ages: Lectio Divina and Books of Hours." *Text & Talk* 28.5: 667-689. doi:10.1515/TEXT.2008.034. (9/10/2014).

Cynthia Northcutt Malone, "Noses in Books: Orientation, Immersion, and Paratext"

List of Figures

Figure 1: Bean MS 2. Book of Hours, folio 75v. Paris, mid-15th c. © Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. Used by permission.

Figure 2: Bean MS 2. Book of Hours, folio 76v. Paris, mid-15th c. © Hill Museum and Manuscript Library. Used by permission.

Figure 3: Luke 3:33-34:6. Paris, ca. 1220-30. © 2006 Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. Used by permission.

Figure 4: "New Testament in chase." 12 November 2009. Edinburgh City of Print. Web. 25 November 2014.

Figure 5: Nose into codex: a perfect fit.

Figure 6: Open codex, *The Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2013.* Photo by Beth Vang.

Figure 7: Nose and screen: a less-than-perfect fit?

Figure 8: Ian McEwan, *Sweet Tooth*. Kindle. Photo by Beth Vang.

Figure 9: Table of Contents, *The Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2013*. Print. Photo by Beth Vang.

Figure 10: Foreword, *The Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2013*. Kindle. Photo by Beth Vang.

Figure 11: Table of contents, *The Best American Science and Nature Writing, 2013*. Kindle. Photo by Beth Vang.