

Plotting Early Modern Paratext

1. Overview

Paratexts are these boring and marginal elements surrounding the main text that interests us. They are, moreover, a problem and a nuisance for the digital humanist. In any attempt for text mining, you should beware lest they mislead you; Run any of the Gutenberg.org texts through text analysis tools, and you will find “project”, “work”, “donation”, “license”, and “copy” whether they are the output of the analysis of Plato, Kafka or Melville. Formulaic, repetitive and unoriginal paratexts skew our results when we wish to perform automatic authorship recognition; they burden our bags-of-words with meaningless junk when we embark on text analytical studies. Publisher marketing material will mischievously meddle when we attempt to analyze networks of influence[1]; other non-authorial paratexts will muddy our geographical and temporal data when we try to map our corpus. If indeed our data should be understood as *capta* [2], selectively taken and reconstructed, then the paratext should often be the *iacta*: the trash, the parts that should be thrown away in the process of clearing and well-forming our *capta*.

There are, however, various ways to look on trash. Examining dustbins, as we learn from any procedural dramas, is proper procedure in a forensic investigation of a crime scene. Archaeological treasures may be found in ancient garbage heaps. In the same way, a marginal, boring and interfering bit of trash-text can in fact tell us more than any other portion of the text it accompanies. They can tell us about the episteme and culture of our times and places; about the social networks, the communities in which artistic and scholarly work is embedded. We can learn from them on the financial aspects of intellectual life work; about our values, beliefs and assumptions regarding art, knowledge and science. The concepts, verbs and metaphors that we use in paratexts make the framework in which we are expected to discuss, write and think, as authors, artists or academics. We are taught and trained to intellectually and aesthetically act through them, we are often graded according to how we master them, we judge and are judged by them. They sometimes become such second nature to us, that we may mistake them for basic scholarly procedure, primary categories of thought, or of rational human communication. But history of the book can teach us that this is far from the truth; paratexts and the concepts we find in them are deeply embedded in their social and cultural context, and they too have their histories.

Compare, for example, the paratextual keywords “project” and “progress”, “share” and “explore” which appear at the opening of this proposal, with this parallel list of paratextual keywords of early modern English: “God”, “duty”, “service”, “honor”, “zeal[e]”, “pardon” and “protection”. Each of these words calls for semantic and pragmatic explorations of their function in the text; from their conjunction one reconstructs a literary, scholarly and intellectual world entirely different from ours.

2. Paratextual Studies

The interest in paratexts and what they may teach us arose in the middle of the 20th century first and foremost in literary studies. Even before it was introduced under the umbrella term of 'paratext', several monographs were dedicated to prefaces, prologues and dedication letters in the work of certain authors, or in a certain period [3][4][5] [6] . In those works, forwards, prefaces, and dedications were read as a window to literary culture and relations. In Paris of the 70's, they were beginning to be treated as a Genre, as a structural category for literary analysis[7]; but the most systematic and influential work on the subject was that of Gerard Genette, who was also the one to coin the term.

"Paratexts", as explained on the dust-jacket to Genette's book, translated to English by that name, "are those liminal devices and conventions, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher and reader"[8]. Genette offered a rigorous and extensive analysis of various parts and sub-sections of paratexts. As a structuralist, he was not interested in the diachronic aspect, in the history of paratexts. In the decades that followed, however, several studies were dedicated to diachronical aspects of paratexts, and offered interesting interpretations of historical forms of paratexts; reading, for example, renaissance prefaces as negotiations of textual authority between the early model of church authority and the modern, scientific arena of the public sphere[9]; explaining the shift from dedicatory epistles to letters to the reader in the prologues to English Drama as marking the shift from the institution of patronage to market economy[10]; reading paratexts of Francophone literature as a source for cultural history of colonialism[11]; examining paratextual practice in Hungary before and after 1989 in the context of the political ideological changes[12] or dedicating an entire monograph to the curious history of the footnote[13]. The study of paratext has developed along the 20th century various turns - from Marxist interpretation to structuralism, to the cultural turn. Now enter the digital age, and time has come for the digital turn in paratext studies.

Paratext in the Digital Humanities

What can the digital turn in the humanities mean for paratexts, and how can awareness to paratextual phenomena contribute to the digital humanities? Vital developments in the intersection of these fields are already apparent: In digital manuscript studies, paratextual elements are coming back to the front of the stage: digitization often enables us to see them better. Moreover, the return of the image to the field of textual studies enables us to treat each text with its unique paratexts individually in a way that we couldn't have done in the time of the printed book. The renewed interest in the history of the book, which ensued as we see this history changing in front of our eyes, gives a special place to paratexts too. Indeed, The Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) guidelines devote ample attention to various paratextual elements, whether they are conceived as front, body or back matter[14]. At the same time attempts are made to further perfect a model for the representation of various paratextual aspects in digital critical editions, with a focus on being attentive to manuscript tradition and tensions between the theorization of paratextuality and

other structures in an annotated text [15]. Finally, a recent project dedicated mainly to typography in title pages shows the potential that annotation of paratextual elements have for their analysis at the corpus level [16].

The project that I hope to present in Chicago joins these latter endeavors and builds upon it, to explore a corpus of paratexts of Early Modern English literature with a focus on the diachrony of various types of paratext and on their language. I will show how text analysis of paratexts, and visualizations of its results, may help us to re-visit previous hypotheses in literary and historical studies, and raise new questions that may provide new insights on our intellectual and conceptual history. With this in mind, I will try to add to the development of outlines for best practice in corpora construction with relation to the paratext.

References

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