The concept of paratext – introduced by the French structuralist Gérard Genette in the 1980s – refers to the various verbal and visual elements that surround the ‘main text’ of a book, directing the reader’s perception of its message (the foundational work is Genette 1987; for recent developments, see e.g. Birke & Christ 2013). In addition to providing guidelines for interpretation (e.g. titles, prologues, epilogues), paratextual elements help the reader to navigate the material book (e.g. rubrics, indexes, tables of contents). They may also serve to promote the interests of book producers commercially or otherwise (e.g. blurbs, title-pages, errata lists).

The current decade has witnessed an increasing and fruitful application of the paratextual framework to the study of early modern printed texts and their communicative practices (e.g. Smith & Wilson eds 2011; Meurman-Solin & Tyrkkö eds 2013, Pt. III). Applications to medieval texts transmitted via the manuscript medium, however, are still rare (e.g. Poleg 2013, Ch. 3; Liira 2014). Challenges are brought about, for example, by the heavy authorial emphasis in Genette’s original formulation and its underlying idea of a clearly discernible moment of publication. The ‘bespoke’ mode characteristic of medieval manuscript production, based on individual negotiations between makers and users of books, also adds a complicating layer to the model originally based on the ‘speculative’ production of printed books for the commercial market.

Acknowledging these challenges and responding to them, my paper addresses the opportunities that paratextual elements may offer for the study of Middle English manuscript texts. I seek to demonstrate that the concept of paratext has the potential to increase our understanding of the communicative functions that underlie the ‘framing’ or ‘packaging’ of medieval manuscript texts for their readers. Research into paratexts may also aid us in discerning broader patterns in a work’s textual transmission. It is not simply the presence or absence of a paratextual element that matters, but more the variant forms of the same paratext and the combinations of different paratexts attested across the manuscripts of a given work.

The materials I use to illustrate my arguments include both ‘interpretive’ and ‘navigational’ paratextual elements, especially prologues and various types of paratext in the form of a table or a calendar. The main focus will be on late Middle English manuscripts containing religious prose, but I will also address some scientific/utilitarian writings and some more ‘literary’ compilations. The paper is informed by my earlier research into paratextual elements of the Wycliffite Bible and some related manuscripts (e.g. Peikola 2009, 2015), and the ongoing work of
the *Framing Text: Early English Paratextual Communication, 1400–1600* team at the University of Turku.

References


