

“Terrible Letters”: Bad Handwriting and its Implications, 1020–1220

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This essay takes as its central point of investigation the modern cliché of “bad handwriting” and investigates this in the contexts of what present-day palaeographers have inherited from their foundational predecessors, and in terms of what the phrase might have indicated in different medieval moments of textual production. The essay opens with a reminder that in preprint western culture the role and practices of the scribe were fundamental to information transfer and the making permanent of knowledge and socio-intellectual aspiration. This reminder comes in the form of the close analysis of a sermon of Pope Innocent III, raising the profile of the scribe, which runs counter to some of the ways in which scribal activities have subsequently been described and judged by modern scholars. Thinking about what might constitute poor or terrible handwriting leads to analyses of late and early medieval statements on writing from the Paston Letters and Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*. Both sources show a very different understanding of the nature and consequences of bad handwriting.¹

Keywords: Medieval scribes; palaeography; manuscript aesthetics; Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History*; the Paston Letters

In a sermon of fundamental significance given in 1215, Pope Innocent III opened the Fourth Lateran Council with a call to arms for the salvation of souls. There are multiple troubling and problematic aspects to this sermon that need to be acknowledged, chief among them the demonization of Muslims and the instigation of the Fifth Crusade. The sermon sought to rouse and to motivate, and not just for the reclamation of the eastern lands of the Mediterranean, but also for the proper persuasion and mediation of the priestly role. Within the sermon, an extended exegesis of Ezekiel Chapter 9 raises the profile of the late medieval clerical scribe in a passage that discusses the prophecy of the “man dressed in linen” who is to mark a Tau on the foreheads of those who will be saved from six retributive men with weapons of destruction in Ezekiel’s vision (Vause and

¹ I am honoured to have had the opportunity to deliver this paper as the inaugural Patricia Shaw Lecture to the SELIM conference at the Universidad de La Rioja in Logroño in September 2022, organized brilliantly by Professor Roberto Torre Alonso. I am thankful to the audience members for their comments, and I am deeply grateful to the two anonymous readers for this journal, whose meticulous and thoughtful comments and suggestions are much appreciated.

Frank 2004, 51–63).² Those marked by the “man dressed in linen” are effectively saved from the imminent massacre, and the resonance of this exemplum at a time of Crusade would have been significant. Innocent further explains to the hundreds of assembled Council dignitaries and prelates:

The “man dressed in linen, who had the ink-horn of a scribe at his loins,” should be the preacher—a man robust in virtue like the man of whom the Scripture says, “There was a man in the land of Uz, named Job. This man was blameless and upright, fearing God and shunning evil.” “Dressed in linen,” that is, dressed with honest habits and good works, as is said in another place, “Always see that your garments are dazzling white”; that is, let your works be pure. For the “linen” from which the priestly vestments were made, according to the Law, designates cleanliness and honesty because of the radiance to which it is brought by maceration of the flesh, and by contrition. The “scribe,” preeminent and supreme, is the Holy Spirit, the finger of God, who wrote the tablets of the Testament. Of him the Psalmist says, “My tongue is the pen of a scribe writing swiftly.” The “ink-horn” of this scribe is the gift of knowledge from which the “ink” of doctrine is brought forth by the “pen” of the tongue to be written on the parchment of the heart. The “loins” are the center of our desires. So the Lord commands, “Gird your loins,” and the Psalmist prayed to the Lord, “Purge my loins and my heart.” This all means that he who has “the ink-horn of a scribe” is the one who, by the gift of knowledge given him by the Holy Spirit, restrains and moderates the desires of the flesh in himself so that his way of life is not discordant with his teaching, lest it will be said to him, “Physician, heal yourself [.]” (Vause and Gardiner 2004, 51–63)³

This sermon was written into London, British Library, Harley MS 104, folio 196r, column B, line 44 to folio 196v, column A, line 3 and a version is edited by Quaresimo (1639, 379–80). The manuscript itself is a collection of religious texts from England, from the first quarter of the thirteenth century. The sermon exists as the final item copied on a singleton added after a blank verso in script that, in my opinion, is contemporary with or just a little later than the sermon itself. Its appearance in Harley 104 is unsurprising on the one hand, given the clerical impulse of the manuscript, but also suggests a close relationship between this codex and those whose duty it was to disseminate the principles of the pope and the dicta of the Fourth Lateran Council. There is a focus in the codex on pastoral care, which is comprehensive; it contains Gregory’s *Pastoral Care*; Innocent III’s *De Missarum Mysteriis*; Richard of St Victor’s *Allegoriae Novi Testamenti* and *De Oratione Dominica* and works of the great English theologian and Archbishop of Canterbury from 1206—Stephen Langton, who died in 1228.⁴

² Now as to the spiritual passover the Lord said “to the man dressed in linen, who had the ink-horn of a scribe at his loins, “Pass through the center of the city and mark Tau on the foreheads of the men who sigh and mourn over all the abominations being committed within it”. Then he said to the six men who had the weapons of destruction in their hands, “Pass through the city following him, and pierce through and through all on whom you do not find the Tau. Let your eye spare no one and begin at my sanctuary!”.

³ In my lightly edited form, the Latin reads: “Scriptor autem egregius et supremus . / spiritus sanctus est, digitus Dei, de quo scripte fuerunt due tabule testa/menti . De quo dicit Psalmista [Psalm 44]: Lingua mea. calamus scribe et cetera [*velociter scribentis* in edition]. Huius scriptoris / atramentarium .est donum scientie, de quo per calamum [*lingue*] scribe atramentum / doctrine presentium. et in cordis superscribitur percameno . In renibus / autem sedes est desiderii . de quibus dominus precipit dicens: Renes / vestros accingetis et Psalmista orabat ad dominum . Ure renes meos / et cor meum . Ille igitur habet atramentum scriptoris, ad renes per donum / [folio 196v, column A] scientie aspum sancto donatum . qui desideria carnis chohibet et restringit, ut vita non discrepet a doctrina, ne sibi dicatur: ‘Medice cura teipsum’”.

⁴ The manuscript in its entirety is digitised on the British Library website.

This manuscript is important for many reasons, not the least of which is its clear significance for understanding the renewed emphases on the role of priest as mediator and pastoral guide during the papacy of Innocent III (1198–1216). Harley 104 exhibits an overall unity of functions as a book for those caring for souls. It is also a significant codex because its contents and script permit a close dating of production. For those working on script from the earlier thirteenth century, when hands were so varied, Harley 104’s internal data provides insight into its compilation between 1206 and 1220. Valuable palaeographical evidence for the dating of particular elements of script, such as the crossed Tironian *nota*, barred capitals, and looped ascenders is evident. Script and scribal activity are key to this manuscript’s agenda-setting contents. Innocent’s sermon emphasises the primary importance of the scribe in transmitting the word of God and that underscores and validates the activities of a scribe as they go about their work. In the sermon, as it is edited, the pope’s allegory of scribal signification, motivation, tools, and activity reads:

Huius scriptoris atramentarium est donum scientie, de quo per calamum *lingue* atramentum doctrine presentium et in cordis superscribitur percameno.

The “ink-horn” of this scribe is the gift of knowledge from which the “ink” of doctrine is brought forth by the “pen” of the tongue to be written on the parchment of the heart.

But at folio 196r of the Harley 104 version of the sermon, the scribe’s up-to-the-minute inclusion of Innocent’s sermon further promotes the work of writing by means of two lexical variants. Here, the passage is rendered in Harley 104 as:

Huius scriptoris / atramentarium est donum scientie, de quo per calamum *scribe* atramentum / doctrine profertur et in cordis superscribitur percameno.

The “ink-horn” of this scribe is the gift of knowledge from which the “ink” of doctrine is to be made public by the “pen” of the scribe and to be written on the parchment of the heart.

These unnoticed lexical alterations in the Harley 104 sermon—from *lingue* to *scribe* and *presentium* to *profertur*—may be deliberate nods to the written delivery of the sermon in Harley 104, as opposed to the oral delivery of the original sermon by Innocent. The occurrence of *scribe* may also conceivably be dittographic error, but nevertheless it raises the profile of the scribe as the mediator of the message, rather than the preacher, whose evanescent sermonised urgings are not permanent as are the written words of the scribe. It casts the *writer* as the intercessor and the harbinger of God’s message and this, as is well documented, was the key for Innocent III throughout his career: the emphasis on the priests and prelates of the church being those whose mediation was essential for the proper care of individual souls. This sermon in Harley 104, inscribed into a manuscript aimed at those responsible for pastoral care, and with its highlighting of the public role of the scribe, tells us of the volume’s particular relevance in the post-Lateran IV decades.

The scribe is the mundane instrument of the “finger of God” for Innocent III in his reminder of those whose jobs are to save souls—to preach and hear confession, to warn and encourage. Here, the scribe and the priestly intercessor appear as one and the same in the core promulgation of Christianity. This essay will focus on the significance of this most fundamental of medieval figures—the scribe, as well as on the products of these writers in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. I shall consider how modern scholarship

delineates the work of medieval scribes, often judging their efforts to be clumsy, inexpert, unskilled, and *not* good. These are some of the definitions of *bad handwriting* that will be addressed. I shall investigate how scribes and their writing were conceived of in the medieval period—like this early thirteenth-century example in Harley 104; and explore briefly how present-day scholarly practices do not always adjudicate early writing practices sensitively, fairly, or convincingly. This matters now in our current age of the digital aspect and in our position between the foundational scholarship we have inherited and the ways we move forward as researchers.

“Not good handwriting”

In his evaluation of script in the twelfth century in his 1957 *Catalogue of Manuscripts*, Neil Ker emphatically declared that: “Much writing of the twelfth century in the vernacular is not good” (xxvii). If such handwriting is “not good”, one can presume it to be “bad”. This aesthetic is, as I have shown elsewhere, based on an unspoken assumption that calligraphic principles can be applied to medieval writing. Of course, they could be, but there is no explanation about what these principles are for twentieth- and twenty-first-century palaeographers. What, therefore, does it mean to Neil Ker for writing to be “bad”? One could argue, as I do, that “bad handwriting” can only ever be that which fails to do its job of communication. Since medieval scribes are generally legible communicators—especially to the trained eye, how can their writing be thought of as “bad”?

The word *bad* itself is not used by Ker, except in the adverbial “badly”, which, almost entirely throughout the 646-page *Catalogue*, refers us to the fire-damaged Cotton codices or to those books that have suffered the damage of time and neglect. This is with two exceptions: Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 708, an inscription from the second half of the eleventh century, “badly written” by the main scribe at the end of a Latin *Pastoral Care* given by Leofric to his cathedral at Exeter (Ker 1957, 379). We might assume from this that the whole manuscript is badly written, but with his typical terseness, Ker does not comment on the Latin that forms the majority of handwriting in the codex. The second exception is the eleventh-century Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Eng. Bib. C. 2, a fragment of four leaves of the Old English Gospels, which is written using a “handsome but clumsy script” with “occasionally badly formed high e ligatures” (Ker 1957, 322. See also 75 and 217). Here, “badly formed” is an opaque description: what does a badly formed high e ligature look like? On the folios of MS Eng. Bib. C. 2, e is ligatured with r, g, s and n, and is high most often in the Old English grapheme ash. It is consistently rounded and clear, so it is difficult to discern to what Ker might be referring.

In Ker’s palaeographical idiolect he generally avoids “bad” as the antonym of “not good”. But, as I have discussed at length, Ker and many English-language palaeographers since the later nineteenth century have promulgated an unexplained aesthetic in their description of scribal efforts (Treharne 2021, 54–58; Treharne 2012, 261–83; Treharne 2011, 303–12). It is the imposition of an inherent value judgement where systematicity is absent and subjectivity is explicit but usually inexplicable; and it is very much part of a mode of description that was and is typical in manuscript studies.

One such example is Ker’s description of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F. 4. 32, the famous “Classbook of St Dunstan” (1957, 355). A quire inserted as folios 10–18 contains an eleventh-century Old English account of the Invention of the Cross and there

are also added lines of Old English on folio 47v that Ker calls “scribbles”: “her segð hu se halga apostol Paulus lærð ælcum mæssepreoste þe godes folce to lare byð gesett / þæt he beo pær” (“It says here how the holy apostle Paul teaches each mass priest who is appointed for the instruction of God’s people. He should be aware of it.”). As a related aside, “scribbles” is another word that requires attention, because of its contemporary pejorative connotations. Recent work by Haruko Momma helpfully addresses the positive function of short notes: “Old English scribbles remind us that intellectual activities, after all, took place in a physical world...[and] invite us, from the distance of a millennium, to join the network of interpretation.” (2019, 10). Momma rightly suggests that scribbles are useful and important testimonies to a wide range of activities. I would argue further that the label itself with connotations of carelessness, thoughtlessness, scrawl and haste, demeans the actions of those engaged in literary communities in the medieval and early modern periods, for whom just to scribble entailed quite some effort. Indeed, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*, the word *scriblen* was first recorded in the fifteenth century in the Paston Letters, where it does not seem to have a pejorative connotation at all; rather it is just an acknowledgement of haste and brevity in the composition of letters.

There can be no doubt of the negative implication of Ker’s description of the hand of the Invention of the Cross Homily in Auct. F. 4. 32, though. It is for Ker “an ugly angular script”. As if by way of explanation, Ker’s typical commentary on key graphic features expands on this brusque judgement, providing the detail that “**a** and **h** are caroline in form: round **s** occurs: descenders curve to the left or are serifed at the ends” (1957, 355). But in looking at the script of the homily itself, which is now available at the Bodleian Library’s website, it is clear that Ker is overemphasizing particular elements of the hand of the homily even though that is the *only* hand to which he can be referring in his description.⁵ The hand irregularly employs Caroline **h**, and the **a** is not a fully-formed Caroline; it occasionally has a small stroke upwards from the arguably single-compartment insular form of **a**. None of the features could easily be described as “angular”. Still, Ker’s description intimates that “angularity” is to be collocated with “ugly”, and this value-laden derogation has the potential to mar scholars’ understanding of what they are looking at here—a rounded English Vernacular Minuscule. At all times in relation to medieval script, it is also helpful to be mindful that the ability to write *at all* represented lengthy training and access to materials and necessary resources. Writing required effort and *techne* on the scribe’s part, and the knowledge of the hierarchy of textual elements to facilitate the transmission of information. Inexplicably negative (and in this case probably erroneous) descriptions like Ker’s of this hand, but also more broadly, impact the scholarly reception of manuscripts and their scribes.

The ugliness of writing

What are the implications of this kind of terminological use? It continues into scholarship now, both by way of unquestioning quotation of Neil Ker’s conclusions and in the output of early cataloguers; and in the new research of palaeographers who have worked in this same tradition and absorbed it. It is not the findings of the research—the datings, localization, analysis of letterforms, codicological evaluation, and perhaps

⁵ See the description and images at folios 10-18 of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F. 4. 32: <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/783d604c-a873-4d64-967a-8140cc0eafa5/>.

editing or cultural investigations—that are problematic. It is what the terminology itself implies. What does it mean, for example, to be “without character” as London, British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius C. iii, ff. 11-85, is described (“A round hand, without character,” Ker 1957, 285), or to be “small, ill-formed” (London, British Library, Harley MS 6258B, Ker 1957, xix); or, presumably *worse*, “rough and ill-formed” (London, British Library, Burney MS 277, fol. 42, Ker 1957, 171). What ought we to understand by “rough”, or by “angular”, “stiff”, or “heavy”? If something is “stiff” and “irregular”, as is London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. vi, fols 2-77, a mid-tenth-century manuscript possibly from St Augustine’s, Canterbury (Ker 1957, 269) does it imply that “irregular” equates to “uncalligraphic” (the Worcester manuscript, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 265 is “irregular and uncalligraphic”) and so is a hand in London, British Library, Cotton MS Faustina B. iii, from Canterbury, Christ Church (Ker 1957, 196–197). The term “stiff” is collocated with “rather ugly” in Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk. 5.16, an eleventh-century manuscript of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, but the hand is not “irregular” in this case; rather, it is “regular, stiff, and rather ugly” (Ker 1957, 399). This is the hand of Hemming, the well-known Worcester Cartulary scribe.

Ker’s scholarship—his remarkable eye and precision, his exceptional palaeographical skill, which is unsurpassed in the field of Early English studies—does not mean that his discursive material is beyond question. Of course, he does not operate in a vacuum either backward in time or forward. M. R. James, in his descriptions of Cambridge Corpus Christi College, judges hands to be “ugly” more than two dozen times: manuscripts are “in an ugly current hand”; “an ugly and much contracted hand”; “a clear rather ugly hand”; and there’s a whole manuscript that is “a very shabby ugly little book” (James 1909–12). Ker’s own mentor, the wonderful and intuitive scholar Kenneth Sisam, also deployed critical descriptions of “clumsy” or “slovenly” hands (Sisam 1959). Their close colleague, the palaeographer Noël Denholm-Young, similarly uses aesthetic terms in his introductory history of script (“Southern script in the age of the Danish invasion is not beautiful” and “the best examples of Insular script are rivalled by the beauty of the invading Caroline minuscule”), but Denholm-Young becomes less subjective in the actual descriptions that accompany plates (1964, 15). Other influential proponents of the aesthetically-impelled description are the great early twentieth-century palaeographers, who effectively founded the modern Anglophone field—Edward Maunde Thompson and E. A. Lowe. To work through their *Catalogues* and *Handbooks* is to experience the sharp eye of the expert and connoisseur at every turn. If this were a declared methodology, understood to be derived from the art-based world of calligraphy and penpersonship, that would be one thing, but it is not usually a clearly stated *modus operandi*. It is one that present-day scholars must guess alongside, or unfortunately and even unconsciously adopt or repeat (Crick 2018, 281–302; Coulson and Babcock 2020, *passim*).

It is not usually a clearly stated *modus operandi*. In one or two examples of this genre, the author does make it clear what they are doing, and it is here that epistemologically troubling descriptors emerge. Edward Maunde Thompson, described by his *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* biographer, Michael Borrie, as a founder of the “modern scientific discipline of palaeography” (2010), published his influential *An Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography* in 1912, nineteen years after the earlier less extensive version, a *Handbook of Greek and Latin Palaeography*. Borrie describes the *Introduction* as “still among the best initiations into the subject”, and it really is. It is possible to use only Maunde Thompson even now and acquire an excellent start in

palaeography. But, as several following examples show, value judgements abound and must surely be influenced by the aesthetic that had emerged in culture and fine-arts practice during the second half of the nineteenth century (Treharne 2012).

In his earlier volume, a *Handbook of Greek and Latin Palaeography*, published in 1893, Maunde Thompson described the hand of London, British Library, Stowe MS 34, the *Vices and Virtues*, as “a rough but strong hand...founded on the charter-hand of the time” (1893, 287–88). In the later, much expanded, and revised *Introduction to Greek and Latin Palaeography*, published by Clarendon Press in 1912, Maunde Thompson included, in addition, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius MS 1—the later twelfth-century *Orrmulum*. In the *Introduction*, it is the *Orrmulum* not Stowe 34 that is described as “rough, but strong, and is the work of a writer who could use his pen effectively and with simple uniformity, but without any attempt at beauty”. In this palaeographical volume, Stowe 34 is “another example of a strong, unadorned style”, and “again [it] is writing of the charter-hand type and, like the *Ormulum*, displays the *virile* strength which is so conspicuous in the cursive hands of this period” (Maunde Thompson 1912, 476).

In contrast, the contemporary *Ancrene Wisse*, contained in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402 (see Figure 1), is described on these same pages of the *Introduction* as “pretty and regular” (Maunde Thompson 1893, 287–88). Within the extensive volume, the *only* occurrence of “pretty” as a descriptor is this: reserved for a competent Gothic hand that just happens to be writing a text focused on and written for women. Is this a coincidence? It is juxtaposed precisely with the masculinized language describing *Orrmulum* and *Vices and Virtues*, where the writing is “strong”, the script “vigorous”, and the hand demonstrates “virile strength” underscoring, quite emphatically, gendered assumptions about scribal personnel and performance that are still completely (and erroneously) embedded in palaeographical description and evaluation. Looking back more than a century, it is clear what assumptions contemporary scholarship has inherited.

Maunde Thompson’s influence was felt not just in the foundation of the field through his role as Principal Librarian at the British Museum, founding fellow of the British Academy, author, and widely honored scholar, but also as the instigator of the Palaeographical Society in 1873 with E. A. Bond. Palaeography could hardly have been taught without the volumes of plates that Society and their successors in the New Palaeographical Society published, but, at the same time, those plates were how scholars learned about manuscripts, how they were taught to conceive of possibilities and categories of scripts, and how generations of students acquired the ability to describe, discern, and identify form, function, and facture. Palaeographical evidence was necessarily presented selectively to students, through the supply of plates (which can now be seen not to present the story fully). But it is not just the descriptive terms applied to scribal effort that can often be tested and found wanting. Significantly, through the availability of Open Access digitizations it is possible to recognise how the provision of one or two palaeographical plates skews the available evidence, and especially in the classroom, where simplification is essential to develop skills. In addition to this, though, the consequence of a persistently aesthetic-based approach to manuscripts has been the sustained derogation of the endeavours of scribes who do not make the (modern) grade. Innocent III’s words in his sermon—as well as the actions of senior prelates who were themselves scribes and correctors—demonstrate clearly how important and valued medieval scribes and their endeavours were, yet it seems easy to critique their efforts based on modern criteria that are simply not appropriate.

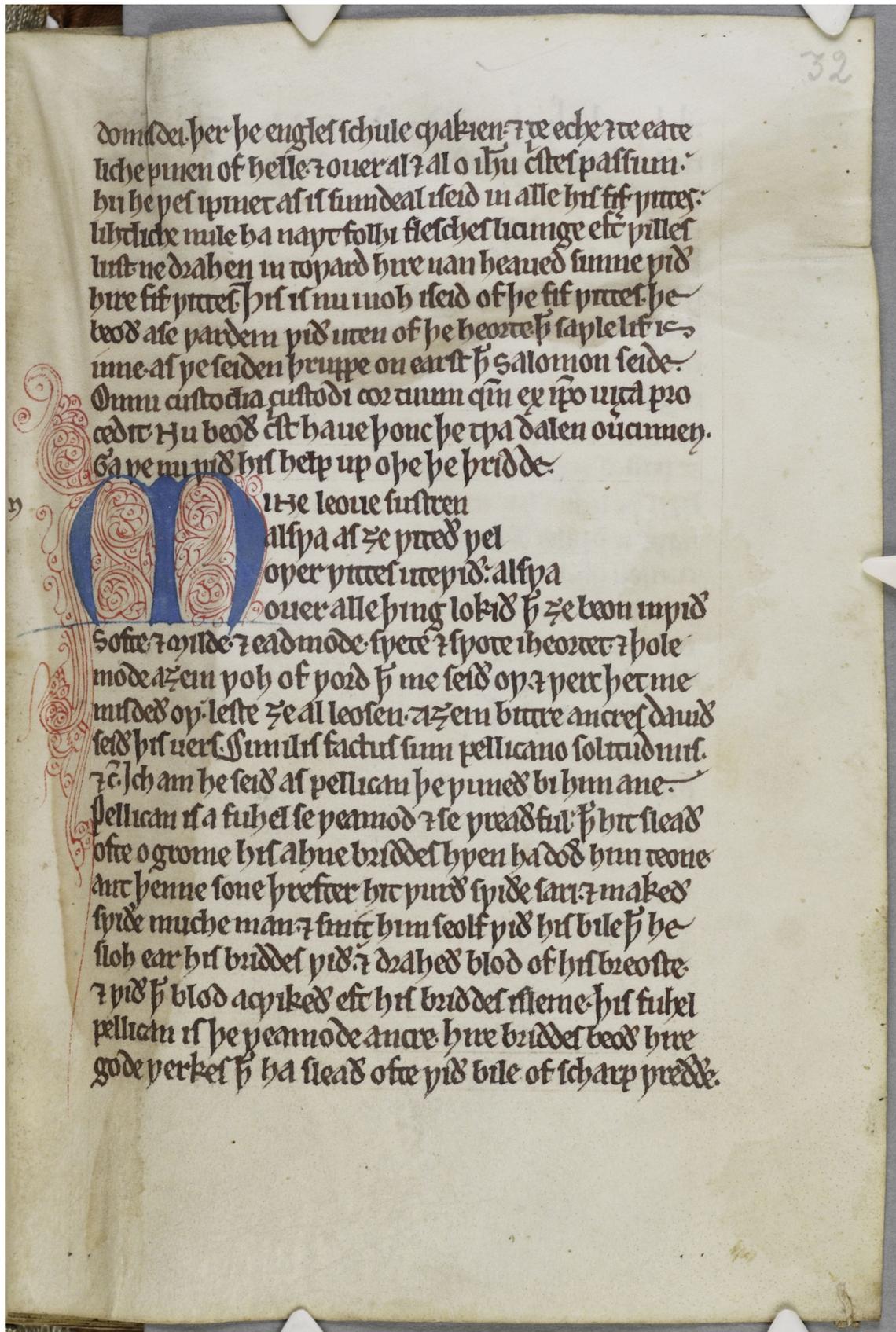


Fig. 1. Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, fol. 32^r. By permission of The Parker Library, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.

The implications for how scholars regard the works of scribes are serious in relation to a realistic assessment of their work on their own terms. There may also be negative consequences for scholars of working with hands described as “less good”, “clumsy”, or “uncalligraphic”? Do these judgements seep into scholars’ responses to the manuscripts, their texts, the ways in which one imagines institutional resources are given over to the production of texts, to the training and competencies of scribes?

Present-day scholarship reveals considerable change in some of the fundamental tenets of manuscript studies. This is partly because of the digital possibilities that can have the greatest and most field-altering effect: assessments of script and codicological make-up read alongside the foundational catalogue and guides in the field reveal how necessary is the reevaluation of dating criteria; elements of *mise-en-page* such as pricking and ruling patterns; and considerations of scribal training and writing practices. There is nothing wrong with raising the issue of calligraphic expertise; but it cannot be used as the *basis* for description of medieval script. It diminishes the status of the everyday work of scribes—the pragmatic writing that is fundamental to information transmission. Scribal work was specialized; much more difficult to access than writing is now; and aspects of skills acquisition—the sliding scale of amateurism to professionalism—are an important and poorly understood area of researching literate communities in the long medieval period.

To assess all scribal effort through an unstated aesthetic of “beauty” and to find scribes *wanting* in comparison with the efforts of, say, the writers of de luxe books is thus the equivalent of adjudicating someone’s painting of a house in the light of the quality and endeavour of Pablo Picasso. One can paint a house perfectly and with excellent effect, but not be able to put brush to canvas at all. These are different exercises requiring different skills and to different effect.

Bad handwriting

What might a medieval understanding of *bad handwriting* be? Expressions of concern about handwriting seem rare, and especially before the High Middle Ages. In a Paston Letter written in 1467, James Gresham writing to his cousin Symond Damme, tells him that (with my translation):

Cosyn, an noon after this was wretyn, had I knowelage of the massageris comyng to London berar of this, and I had thought to have wretyn the letter above wretyn newe, by cause of the foule wrytyng and interlynyng, but now I lakke leyser. (Gairdner 1904, IV. 282)

Cousin, immediately after this was written, I found out about the messenger bearing this letter to London, and I had considered writing the above letter out newly again because of the messy writing and interlining, but now I lack the leisure.

At this point, in the second-half of the fifteenth century, when a good number of educated gentry like the Pastons could write for themselves, alertness to the need for legibility is expressly shown. Consideration of the recipient and desire for their good opinion is evinced from this letter, but of greater importance is the exigency of getting the letter sent, despite the “foul writing and interlining”. The letter Gresham sends is a layering of his original with additional news that came later. His concern about the appearance of the letter intimates anxiety about how messiness or bad writing is perceived. This preempts later writing manuals, but perhaps a much longer-standing tradition, of

conflating bad handwriting, untidy script, or presentation, with a lack of care or a lack of personal standards. It can go further than standards, too. As James's letter makes clear, the presentation is nothing to do with lack of care or thought and everything to do with practicality and haste.

Haste is a perennial concern for the Pastons and there is a refreshing honesty about the activity and limitations of writing. In Margaret Paston's letter to her husband in September 1443, she mentions the pain John is currently in, asking him to write as quickly as he can "if writing is not painful for you", acknowledging "writing is not easy for you". For her part, she reveals she does not have time to write even a fraction of what she would say if she could speak with her husband. "Haste" and "leisure" are forever in opposition:

I pray yow hertely that [ye] wol wochesaf to sende me a letter as hastely as ze may, yf wryhyn be non dysesse to yow, and that ye wollen wochesaf to sende me worde quowe your sor dott. Yf I mythe have had my wylle, I xulde a seyne yow er dystyme; I wolde ye wern at hom, yf it wer your ese, and your sor mythe ben as wyl lokyth to her as it tys ther ze ben, now lever dan a goune zow it wer of scarlette. I pray yow yf your sor be hol, and so that ze may indur to ryde, wan my fader com to London, that ze wol askyn leve, and com hom wan the hors xul be sentte hom a zeyn, for I hope ze xulde be kepte as tenderly herr as ze ben at London. I may non leyser have to do wrytyn half a quarter so meche as I xulde sey to yow yf I mythe speke with yow. I xall sende yow a nothyr letter as hastely as I may. I thanke yow that ze wolde wochesaffe to remember my gyrdyl, and that ze wolde wryte to me at the tyme, for I sopose that wrytyng was non esse for yow. All mythe God have yow in his kepyn, and sende yow helth. Wretyn at Oxenede, in ryth grete hast, on Sent Mikyllys Evyn. (Gairdner: II.56-57)

I beseech you heartily that you will guarantee to send me a letter as quickly as you can, if writing is not a pain to you, and that you will guarantee to send me word when your pain diminishes. If I might have had my way, I should have seen you before this point; I wish you were at home, if it were easy for you, and your discomfort would be as well looked after here as it has been there, and I should rather have that than a gown though it were of scarlet. I pray you, if your sickness be healed, and so that you may endure the ride, when my father comes to London, you will ask leave and come home when the horse shall be sent home again, for I hope you should be looked after here as you have been in London. I do not have the leisure to write half a quarter as much as I should say to you if I might speak with you. I shall send you another letter as hastily as I can. I thank you that you would guarantee to remember my girdle and that you would write to me at that time, for I suppose that writing was not easy for you. May almighty God have you in his care and send you health. Written at Oxford, in really great haste, on Saint Michael's Eve.

While haste becomes something of a motif to excuse brevity or a level of untidiness in the mind of the writer, it emphasizes how much trouble went into writing—both physically as an act of labour and as a means of expressing desire for the conversation of the other. For Margaret, haste is also motivational: a means to inspire her to write again.

It is the case that while driving the writer forward, it seems preferable as Gresham states, to have leisure to write. Haste is thus criticized in Reginald Pecock's fifteenth-century *Reuele of Crysten Religioun*: "Bettir it is a man to learne write slowli and..morously [slowly] in keping þe reulis whiche þe crafte of writing techip..þan for..hast to bringe forþ myche lettir of writing" ("It is better for a person to learn to write slowly and deliberately in keeping the rules which the craft of writing teaches than

through haste to produce many letters in writing”) (Greet 1927). But here, writing slowly is desirable, particularly while the scribe is learning the rules of the craft.

So, when haste is *also* criticized in present-day medieval scholarship, it seems perhaps unsympathetic to the efforts of medieval writers. The need to focus and concentrate when writing (even in haste) is stated in the late Middle English *Book of Sydrac the Philosopher* (a translation of the thirteenth-century Old French *Livre de la fontaine de toutes sciences*). The writer recognizes: “Þe moost trauaile þat is...is writing of alle þat be, For he þat writeþ may not see Þe while he is aboute writing, Ne here to speke...Ne þenke, ne listene, ne noght ellis do” (*Middle English Dictionary*, 4861–3). Daniel Wakelin in his excellent study on *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft* is uncomplimentary about haste:

Disengagement might be suggested by one book for which the quality is poor but which looks like a piece of freelance copying by somebody hard up. It is a scraggy and meagre medical book by a scribe who announces that he is a Cambridge student called Simon Wysbech and that he produced it for one Robert Taylor of Boxford. His carelessness is evident in his very current handwriting, done quickly with many ligatures between letters, varying from moment to moment in spacing and aspect, and with the lines unruled. (2014, 134)

Here, one might argue that Wakelin conflates currency of handwriting and quickness with carelessness and poor quality. Speed is equated with a moral failing—carelessness. And this is an interesting *comparandum* with the “clumsy” or “slovenly” or “ill-trained” hands of scribes that earlier palaeographers decry. This comparison of hasty or untidy writing with thoughtlessness or poor effort really smacks of the emergence of a whole panoply of works that associate less good handwriting with less good moral character.

In many writing manuals from the Early Modern period onwards—indeed, in modern forensic graphology or graphonomy—there is a deliberate linking (a very speculative and tenuous linking) of bad handwriting with psychopathy and sociopathic behaviours. Recent studies suggest that “[f]rom a graphologist’s point of view, the writing of a psychopath can generally be described as relatively conformist, rather banal, with little rhythm, stiff, monotonous and abounding in abnormalities” (Kowal and Gupta 2021, 1052–58; but see Gawda 2019). Is this what Ker means when he describes a hand as “without character”? Those of us who cannot maintain writing on a straight axis when working with blank paper show signs of a “lack of moral adjustment, inconsistent attitudes”; while forward-slanting writing indicates (notionally) “hysterical, impulsive, fanatical and obsessive” traits (Kowal and Gupta 2021, 1054–55).

Irregular handwriting, overlarge, oversmall, tilted: bad or different handwriting has been judged detrimentally in the last few hundred years from the aesthetic, the so-called forensic, and the moral angles. For the medieval specifically, there can be little more evocative to demonstrate the perils of bad handwriting than a wonderful story in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica*. It shows a dramatic side to bad handwriting that casts us into an eternity of agony (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 501).⁶ In his account of a vision of a

⁶ The immediate context in Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History* reveals: “It happened quite the contrary with one in the province of the Mercians, whose visions and words, and also his behaviour, were neither advantageous to others nor to himself. In the reign of Coenred, who succeeded Ethelred, there was a layman in a military employment, no less acceptable to the king for his worldly industry than displeasing to him for his private neglect of himself. The king often admonished him to confess and amend, and to forsake his wicked courses, before he should lose all time for

Mercian soldier and dear friend of King Coenred around 706CE, Bede tells us that the man had left it too late to repent of his luxurious lifestyle:

Ac docendum rex intraret, clamabat statim miserabili uoce: "Quid uis modo? Quid huc uenisti? Non enim mihi aliquid utilitatis aut salutis potes ultra conferre". At ille "Noli", inquit "ita loqui: uide ut sanum sapias". "Non," inquit, "insanio, sed pessimam mihi scientiam certus prae oculis habeo". "Et quid," inquit, "hoc est?" "Paulo ante", inquit "intrauerunt domum hanc duo pulcherrimi iuuenes et resederunt circa me, unus ad caput et unus ad pedes; protulitque unus libellum perpulchrum, sed uehementer modicum, ac mihi ad legendum dedit; in quo omnia, quae umquam bona feceram, intuens scripta repperi, et haec erant nimium pauca et modica. Receperunt codicem, neque aliquid mihi dicebant. Tum subito superuenit exercitus malignorum et horridorum uultu spirituum, domumque hanc et exterius obsedit et intus maxima ex parte residens impleuit. Tunc ille, qui et obscuritate tenebrosae faciei et primatu sedis maior esse uidebatur eorum, proferens codicem horrendae uisionis et magnitudinis enormis et ponderis pene inportabilis, iussit uni ex satellitibus suis mihi ad legendum deferre. Quem cum legissem, inuenio omnia scelera, non solum quae opere uel uerbo, sed etiam quae tenuissima cogitatione peccaui, manifestissime in eo tetricis esse descripta litteris. Dicebatque ad illos, qui mihi adsederant, uiros albatos et praeclaros: "Quid hic sedetis scientes certissime quia noster est iste?" Responderunt: "Verum dicitis; accipite, et in cummulum damnationis uestrae ducite". Quo dicto statim disparuerunt; surgentesque duo nequissimi spiritus, habentes in manibus uomeres, percusserunt me, unus in capite et alius in pede; qui uidelicet modo cum magno tormento inrepunt in interiora corporis mei, moxque ut ad se inuicem perueniunt, moriar, et paratis as rapiendum me daemonibus in inferni claustra pertrahar".

When the king came to visit and teach him, he called out with a miserable voice, "What do you want now? Why did you come here? For you cannot do anything more for me or to benefit me beyond this". [Coenred] answered, "Do not speak like that; act as if you are a man of sound mind". "I am not mad", replied he, "but I certainly have all the worst of my wicked conscience before my eyes". "And what is that?" asked the king. "A little while ago", he said, "two very handsome young men came into this room, and sat down by me, one at my head, and the other at my feet. And one of them brought out a beautiful little book, but exceedingly small, and gave it to me to read, in which I found all the good things that I had ever done, and these were very few and trifling. They took back the book and did not say anything to me. Then suddenly an army of evil and horrible spirits appeared, encompassing this house outside, and filling it within with the most part. Then he, who, by the darkness of his dark face, and his sitting above the rest, seemed to be the most important of them, producing a book of horrible appearance and of enormous size, and of almost unbearable weight, ordered one of his followers to bring it to me to read. When I had read it, I found all the crimes I had ever sinned, not only in word or deed, but even in the slightest thought, within it most clearly inscribed in hideous letters; and he said to those excellent men in white, who sat by me, "Why do you sit here, knowing for sure that this man is ours?" They answered, "You speak the truth; take him and bring him to the heap of the damned". This

repentance and amendment by a sudden death. Though frequently warned, he despised the words of salvation, and promised he would do penance at some future time. In the meantime, falling sick, he was confined to his bed, and began to feel very severe pains. The king coming to him (for he loved the man), earnestly exhorted him, even then, before death, to repent of his offences. He answered, 'He would not then confess his sins, but would do it when he was recovered of his sickness, lest his companions should upbraid him of having done that for fear of death, which he had refused to do in health.' He thought he then spoke very bravely, but it afterwards appeared that he had been miserably deluded by the wiles of the Devil".

said, they immediately disappeared, and two most evil spirits rising up, having daggers in their hands, struck me, one on the head and the other on the foot. These strokes are now creeping into the interior parts of my body with great torment, and as soon as they come together I shall die and as the demons are all ready to carry me off I shall be dragged down into the gates of hell”.⁷

The “hideous letters”—the bad handwriting—of the devil’s book give rise to the title of this essay. There is considerable significance to this narrative, particularly in relation to books, legibility, and the role of the written word in salvation. Sharon Rowley’s sensitive reading of part of this scene discusses the use of “uomeres”, which means “ploughshares”, “daggers” (*handseax* in Old English), but also, as Rowley notes, through patristic connotation “uomeres” means “a style for writing with”. Rowley suggests the possibility that: “Bede’s close contemporaries were reading this episode as being about writing and commentary as well as about demons and damnations” (Rowley 2009, 172). She further notes that the “*vomeres* work through the thane’s body as if on a wax tablet, the thane theoretically becomes a text as legible as the books shown by the angels and demons”. Similarly, the Old English Bede is demonstrating the role of writing in salvation:

Ða cleopode he sona earmlicre stæfne: “Hwæt woldest ðu oðþe to hwon come ðu hider? Forðon ne meaht ðu me nu ofer ðisne dæg ænige helpe ne geoce gefremman”. Cwæð he se cyng: “Ne wille ðu swa sprecan; geseoh ðæt ðu teola wite”. Cwæð he: “Ne wede ic: ah ða wyrrestan ingewitnesse me ic geseo, 7 fore minum eagum hæbbe”. Frægn se cyng hiene hwæt ðæt wære. Cwæð he: “Ær hwene ðu come, eode inn on þis hus to me twegen geonge men fægre 7 beorhte, 7 gesæton æt me, oðer æt minum heafde, oðer æt minum fotum.⁸ Ða teah heora oðer forð fægre boc 7 swiðe medmicle 7 me sealede to ræðanne. Ða ic ða boc sceawade, þa mette ic ðær awriten ealle ða god ða ic æfre gedyde. Ah ða wæron swiðe feawe 7 medmicle. Ða noman heo eft ða boc æt me 7 me noht to cwædon.

Ða com her sæmninga micel weorud werigra gasta, 7 wæron swiðe ongrislicum heowe 7 ondwlíotan. 7 ðis hus utan ymbsætan; innan of mæstan dæle sittende gefylðon. Ða wæs heora sum þeostran onseone 7 þæm oðrum egeslicran, se wæs setles eldest; 7 me ðuhte 7 gesegen wæs, þæt he heora aldor beon scolde. Ða teah he forð boc ongrysliecre gesihðe 7 unmættre micelnisse 7 lytesne unaborendlic byrdenne; sealde ða anum his gefereana 7 heht me beran to ræðanne. Mið ðy ic ða þa boc raedde, ða gemette ic on hiere sweartum stafum 7 atolecum sweotole awritene eall ða man ðe ic æfre gefremede; 7 nalæs ðet an þæt ic on weorce 7 on worde, 7 eac hwylce þæt ic on þæm medmestan ge ðohte gesyngode, ealle ða wæron ðær on awritene. 7 ða cwæð se aldor þara wergra gasta to ðam fæggran monnum 7 ðam beorhtan ðe me æt sæton: “To hwon sitton ge her? Hwæt git cuðlice witon, þæt þis is ure mon. Ondswædon heo: ‘Soþ gesæcgað; ah onfoð hiene 7 in heapunge eowerre niðerunge gelædað. ðy cwæde heo instæpe from minre geshihðe geweoton. Ond þa wæron arisende twegen ðara atolra gasta; hæfdon hondseax on heora hondum; slogon mec ða, oðer

⁷ My translation. Latin and Old English versions are given here because these are, in essence, distinct works. For the use of *vomer* as a stylus, see Lewis and Short’s *A Latin Dictionary* (1879). Isidore, *Etymologies*, Book VI, ix: “Afterwards it was established that they would write on wax tablets with bones, as Atta indicates in his *Satura*, saying (12): ‘Let us turn the plowshare and plow in the wax with a point of bone’. The Greek term *graphium* is *scriptorium* in Latin, for [Greek letters] is ‘writing’”.

⁸ One is reminded here, with an ironic twist, of John 20:12, the two angels who sit in Christ’s sepulchre after his resurrection: (from London, British Library, Royal MS 1. A. xiv: “7 geseah twegen ængles sittan mid hwiton reafe. enne æt þam heafde. 7 oðerne æt þam fotum. þær þas hælendes lich aleyd wæs” (“and saw two angels sitting with white clothing, one at the head and the other at the foot there where the saviour’s body had been laid”).

in heafod, oðer in fet. 7 ða wunda nu mid micle sare tintrego togædre swicað in ða innoðe mines lichoman; 7 sona ðæs ðe heo togædre cumað, þonne swelte ic; 7 ða dioflu gearwe bidað, hwonne heo mec gegrypen 7 to helle locum gelæde.⁹

Then he immediately cried out in a wretched voice: “What do you want and why did you come here? After this day you cannot give me any help or support”. The king said: “Do not speak like that; see that you are in your senses”. He said: “I am not mad; but I see for myself, and have seen before my very eyes, the worst consciousness”. The king asked what that might be. He said: “Just before you came, two fair and bright young men came into this house to me, and sat by me, one at my head and the other at my feet. Then one of them brought out a fair book—and very small—and gave it to me to read. Then when I was showed the book I found written there all the good works I had ever done. But these were very few and slight. Then they took the book back from me and said nothing to me.

Then there suddenly came here a great army of accursed spirits that were of very dreadful shape and appearance. And they surrounded this house outside; and the larger part of them sat down inside and filled the house. One of them had a dark appearance and was more terrible than the rest, who was the chief of those who sat; and it seemed and appeared to me that he was their head. Then he drew forth a book of dreadful appearance and monstrous size and almost intolerable weight; this he gave to one of his companions and asked him to bring it to me to read. Then as I read the book, I found in it, written clearly in black and terrible letters, all the sins that I ever committed; and not only all my transgressions in deed and in word, but even in my slightest thought, were—every one—written there. Then the head of the accursed spirits said to the fair and bright men who sat by me: “Why do you sit here? Surely you know well that this is our man?” They answered: “You speak the truth; but take him and carry him away to fill up the measure of your damnation”. With these words they vanished at once from my sight. Then two of the dreadful spirits rose up, having daggers in their hands; and they smote me, one in the head and the other in the feet. And now the wounds are penetrating me with great pain and torment together and as soon as they unite I shall die; and the devils are waiting, ready for the time to seize me and carry me to the prison of hell”.

Shortly after this the thane dies *in his sins*. Bede explains the books as being sent by God and reminds his audience that sins “do not flow idly into the wind, but are all reserved for the judgement of the supreme judge, and are shown afterwards to us at the end, either by the friendly angels or by our enemies”. Bede closes by saying “Þis spell ic leornade from Pethelme ðæm arwyrðan biscope, ond ic hit for þære hælo, ðe hit leornade oðþe geherde, hlutturlice awrat 7 sægde” (“I learned this story from the worthy bishop Pethelme, and for the saving of those who should read it or hear it, I have written it down and related it plainly”).

The importance of the book, and especially a book that is effectively a *Liber Vitae*—the Book of Life named in Revelation 13:8—is clear in this chapter both in the vision, the exegesis of the vision, and the closing statement by Bede, which emphatically highlights the role of *his* book in the salvation of souls. As the thane’s inscription into the two non-mundane books leads to his inevitable damnation (too little too late) so Bede’s book and his bookish “spell” ensure the moral improvement of the reader-listener. For this thane, it is not the act of reading that creates his problem: he is able to overcome the difficulties of size, heft, and form to *read*, dismally and fatally, his own record of words, thoughts,

⁹ Old English Bede: Sweet’s Bede 440, 5; *Dictionary of Old English*: Bede 5 14.440.2: “mid ðy ic ða þa boc rædde, ða gemette ic on hiere sweartum stafum & atolecum sweotole awritene eall ða man ðe ic æfre gefremede”.

and deeds—no matter how slight or trivial. The signification of the books, though, especially the overtly visual monstrous *liber mortis*, emerges through the letterforms, which are themselves the apotheosis of “bad handwriting”:

Mið ðy ic ða þa boc raedde, ða gemette ic on *hiere sweartum stafum 7 atolecum sweotole awritene* eall ða man ðe ic aefre gefremede; 7 nalæs ðet an þæt ic on weorce 7 on worde, 7 eac hwylce þæt ic on þaem medmestan ge ðohte gesyngode, ealle ða wæron ðær on awritene.

Quem cum legissem, inuenio omnia scelera, non solum quae opere uel uerbo, sed etiam quae tenuissima cogitatione peccaui, *manifestissime in eo tetricis esse descripta litteris*.

In the Old English, the “*tetricis...litteris*” of the Latin is expanded to “*sweartum stafum* and *atolecum*”; that is, “hideous letterforms” become “dark and loathsome” or “dark and deformed” or “letterforms that are dark and terrible to look upon”. Here, “bad”, dreadful, sin-filled writing embodies the thane in the body of the book; the immorality of his life is inherent within the letters themselves. He himself becomes a document (Rowley 2009, 172)—but one that is simultaneously written from head and foot, like a charter, since charters, and particularly chirographs, have a head and a foot (Brooks 2014, 40)—when the knives or styli of the demons pierce him at top and toe, injecting metaphorical ink to penetrate his body that inscribes him into eternal misery and death. The invisibility of the stylus—those daggers that pierce the flesh of the sinner—are as scratch glosses to a manuscript augmenting the visible body of the man-as-text.

To what more could this description refer? Bede gives up further examples in his writing of “the lying pen” and “wicked writings”. Both occur in the *Letter to Egbert*: “For how can it be accounted a misdeed, that the unjust decrees of former kings should be set right by the correct judgment of princes better than they? or that the lying pen of unrighteous scribes should be destroyed and nullified by the discreet sentence of wiser priests, according to the example of ancient history...” and *wicked writings* [of charters given for falsely founding monasteries] “for they not only do not take care to annul such unrighteous decrees by righteous ones, but rather do all in their power to confirm them by their own subscriptions, as we have said before, prompted by the same love of money to confirm those wicked writings, as the purchasers themselves were to buy such monasteries” (Giles 1843, 138; Shimomura 2006, 49–52). That Bede’s concern about the *liber vitae/liber mortis* had an impact in early England is undoubted. The *Historia ecclesiastica* was very widely known in its Latin and its Old English manifestations (Rowley 2011). In his sermon—*De doctrina apostolica*, Ælfric comments:

He het þa ræcan me to rædenne þa boc, and ic þæron geseah mid *sweartum stafum awritene* ealle mine synna þe ic sið and ær gefremode ... on þære atelican bec. (Pope 1967–78, II. 622–35)

He commanded me to fetch and read the book, and I saw therein written with dark letters all my sins that I have done and performed before...in that hideous book.

This must surely derive from Bede. The passage reinforces the idea of “dark letters” underscoring the terrible sight of a book that lists the sins of the soul about to be judged. It is well known how significant Ælfric considered the issue of *good* writing—accurate and careful copying, and especially of his work. In his *Preface* to his *Grammar*, Ælfric hopes his work is not subject to a poor copyist—an *unwritere*:

Ic bidde nu on Godes naman, gif hwa þas boc awritan wille, þæt he hi gerihte wel be ðære bysne for ðan ðe ic nah gewæld; ðeah hi hwa to woge gebringe ðurh lease wrietas and hit bið þonne his pleoh na min. Micel yfel deð se unwritere, gif he nele his woh gerihtan. (Wilcox 1994)

I now ask, in God's name, that if anyone wishes to copy this book, that he rightly corrects it according to the exemplar, for I do not have that power; if someone should bring it to error through inaccurate scribes, it is then his problem, not mine. The un-writer does great evil if he does not correct his error.

The *unwritere* promulgates “micel yfel” if the work is not accurate, giving a very clear idea of what constitutes *bad writing*. But, as has been discussed throughout this essay, “bad” writing constitutes a variety of modern and medieval responses to script and textual production. The distinction between the “bad”—corrupt, devilish, and eschatologically significant—writing of the medieval period, and that of the contemporary palaeographer criticizing the rough and ugly hands of scribes with an inappropriate calligraphic aesthetic has, interestingly, a similar outcome. It is to warn readers of the potential sin inherent in the book: either the record of one's own sins, or the witnessing of poor-quality work.

That “less good” hands suffer consequently seems not to be the point—but it should be. Those scribes' efforts might have been the very best that they could do with the training and resources they had to hand, and the individuals whose work we witness might have been the *best* scribe that an institution could put forward for the required task at hand. As such, our subjective adjudications, unsubstantiated and unsympathetic, should be dispensed with, unless there is a clear statement of calligraphic principle in description. Palaeographers and manuscript scholars must engage in a more conscious recognition that our own hyperliteracy simply cannot be usefully applied retrospectively in the way that has been relatively common among manuscript scholars for the last 150 years. For medieval writers, bad writing existed, but it had little to do with a subjective aesthetic, and everything to do with misinformation and representation of sin.

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