

**How Not to Get Confused about Textual Terms**  
**Dr. McFadden**  
**ENGL 2323**

•*Manuscript* (abb. MS, MSS plural) – from Latin *manu scripta* ‘written by hand’, a handwritten physical document. The *Beowulf* MS, the Exeter Book, the Ellesmere Chaucer, etc. are all medieval MSS that we may be looking at this term.

The *formal designation* of a MS is usually in the city-repository-shelfmark format: for example, London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv is the formal designation of the *Beowulf* MS. The formal designation indicates the city where the MS is located; the library/archive/museum/etc. where the MS is kept; and the identification that the MS is given in the repository’s particular cataloging system (it can vary from place to place). Terms like ‘the *Beowulf* MS’, ‘the Exeter Book’, etc. are *informal designations*; most scholars will mention the formal designation at least once in their books or articles, but use the informal designation for simplicity’s sake.

With the advent of printing, authors would submit a handwritten version of their works to a potential publisher, and if it were accepted, it would then find its way into print. Even with the rise of typewriters and word processors, the publishing industry still refers to a work under consideration as a ‘manuscript’ (even though it is technically a *typescript*). You may have seen films and TV shows where writer or editor characters are talking about manuscripts they are working on, but they are referring to submitted work in the term’s current sense, not the textual studies sense. **Main point: do not refer to any particular work as a manuscript – it might be in a MS but it is not a MS in itself.**

So what do we call it, then....?

•A *text* is a literary work of some kind – poem, prose piece, play, etc. A MS may contain several texts (e.g. *The Life of St. Christopher*, *The Wonders of the East*, *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, *Beowulf*, and *Judith* are all texts in the *Beowulf* MS). **Scholars will often refer to a MS by one of the major texts in it, e.g. the *Beowulf* MS– don’t be confused by this. If your essays call *Beowulf* a MS, I will assume you are referring to the whole big book, not the individual poem (which is, of course, a text). More on the word ‘book’ later....**

Again, a confusing term from the publishing industry: a book that is used for any kind of coursework is often called a ‘textbook’ or simply a ‘text’. In the discipline of English, we are more precise about how we use the term. We are referring to a literary work, not necessarily the physical book that it is in. ‘Manuscript’ is for the physical medieval/early modern document, ‘text’ is for the work contained in the medieval/early modern document. **While the Damrosch anthology is your textbook in the publishing sense of the word, it is not the MS or the text in the literary sense, should I ask a question like that on an exam.** For example:

Q: “Name the text, author, and MS for the quotation ‘those works which are most necessary for all men to know’.”

A: Preface to the *Regula Pastoralis*; Alfred the Great; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 20.

**Main point: the bibliographic information from the anthology or the edition that your PDFs come from is never going to be the right answer to a question like this.**

•The term *book* sounds very simple but can be tricky in early periods. In classical and medieval literature, ‘book’ is often used for a division in a text (e.g. Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* is made up of five books, each of which is divided into a number of short chapters). Think of a book in this

sense as a major chapter in a text, which may or may not have shorter chapters that we might call sections. Bede's text may have five books, but that does not mean it was circulated in five volumes!

What we think of as the general idea of a book – a binding or linking of some sort connecting pages of various materials that can be turned through – was called a *codex* in the Middle Ages.

**Main point: be careful about calling something simply a 'book'. 'Text' may often be more appropriate. Be aware of the context in which you are using the term.**

•An *author* is the person who actually composes and creates a text. A *scribe* is a person who writes down or copies a text. **An author may be a scribe, but not all scribes are authors.** For example, we don't know who the author of *Beowulf* is (the person who first composed the poem), but we know the text was copied by two scribes because the handwriting in the MS changes at line 1939. On the other hand, in London, British Library, Additional MS 38651, we have drafts of some of Wulfstan's homilies in his own handwriting (what we would call an *autograph MS*), which means that for this particular MS, he was the scribe as well as the author. **Main point: the author creates the bulk of the content, not the scribe, so unless you are specifically discussing some aspect of the copying of the text, refer to 'the author' instead of 'the scribe'.** Many medieval texts are anonymous, so while we can presume the text had an author, we don't always know who it is. As we shall see, though, scribes can have as big an effect on the text we have today as the author did....

•The term *edition* can have a few different meanings. Whenever a book is revised substantially, it may be published under the same title, but with the revision noted (the Damrosch anthology, for instance, is on its fourth edition to include new material). A *critical edition* is the preparation of the original text, usually with notes about the text, revisions and emendations of the text if needed, and with additional apparatus like a glossary, a bibliography, etc. A *diplomatic edition* aims to render what the original MS or text had, word-for-word, while a *facsimile edition* aims to reproduce exactly what is on the page so that it looks like the original. An *anthology* is a collection of multiple texts, either from the same or different authors. It usually has one or more editors who select the content and prepare it for publication. The Damrosch anthology is the main textbook (publishing sense) in this class. **Main point: an edition has an editor, not an author; the editor is commenting on or modifying or reproducing the original text but is not composing or creating it.** If you are actually composing a text, you are an author; if you are preparing an author's text for publication in some way, you are an editor.

I hope this helps you on your exams and essays a bit. These terms have caused a lot of confusion in earlier classes.

BJM