Subtexts:

A Systemic-functional Semiotics of English Gothic Misericords

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Introduction

The outline of the proposal for establishing the Global COE for an Integrated Text Science, put forward in 2007, proposed that

> texts constitute their own special configuration. In general, texts consist of pretexts, which are prerequisites for their existence, other related texts, which realize inter-textuality through cross-references among them, meta-texts, which are annotations or interpretations assigned to them, and para-texts, which are titles indicating genres of texts or categories they belong to, as well as their forms and constitutions.

This definition was illustrated by a diagram clarifying the relations involved:

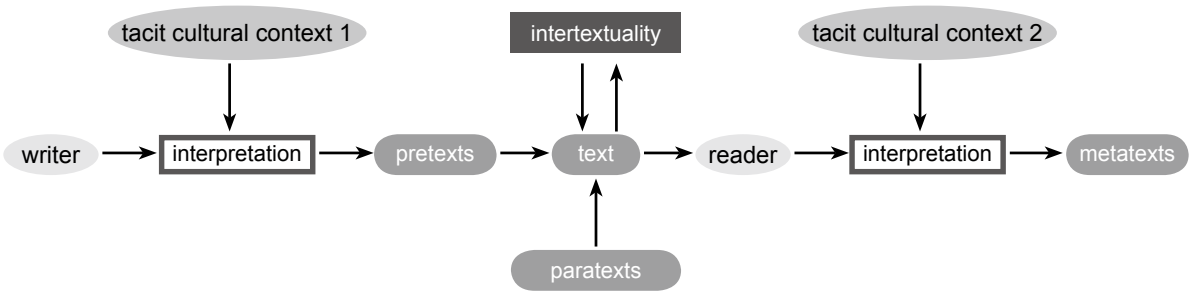

Fig. 1 Factors in an Integrated Science of Texts

Alongside all these elements producing and interpreting texts, I want to argue that "subtexts"—a widely used concept in literary criticism and critical discourse analysis—represent an additional and parallel category of "interpretation", growing out of the "tacit cultural context 1" of the writer, or "tacit cultural context 2 " of the reader—and here we would have to add "speaker" and "interlocutor" for spoken texts and "artist" and "viewer" for painted or sculpted texts. Subtexts are by definition "subversive", i.e they are at odds with the obvious and "official" pretexts of the text's originators.

For example, Shakespeare's "Hamlet"—apart from the major themes of regicide, incest, adolescent protest, disappointed love, and international relations between Denmark and England—

could be seen as having as a subtext the role of play-acting in the politics of family and court life. (Note that this may, but need not, reflect what the playwright intended; as a writer and theatre manager Shakespeare could not help writing-in this professional message). The invasion of Iraq by the USA and her allies, one of the major narratives of our time, —apart from false official stories of "weapons of mass destruction" and semi-true stories of "the war on terror" and "the clash of civilizations"—has been seen as having as a subtext the American dominance of diminishing oil resources and the armaments industries (not an overt political message, but an important aspect of the world's reading of US claims). That is, subtexts are often not consciously intended, but frequently betray hidden intentions. In the rest of this paper I wish to look at the subtexts that can be found by analyzing English Gothic Misericords using the theoretical and methodological approach developed in O'Toole (1994) and exemplified in Figure 1.

Function / Unit	REPRESENTATIONAL	MODAL	COMPOSITIONAL
WORK	Process (action/event/existence/ relation) Theme (religious/magic/civic/ political) Peripeteia (narrative turning-point)	Scale (to human) Mass Equilibrium Palpability 'Address' Modality Message	Volume (relation to space) Proportion (relation to setting) Independence Openness/Closure Fixed/Mobile Cohesion Material
FIGURE	Participants (agents/patients/ existents) Body (anthropomorphic/zoo-morphic/biomorphic/inor-ganic) Act Movement/Stasis Position	Scale Mass Equilibrium Address Line Solidity Relation to Light Characterization Expressiveness Vitality	Relative position in Gestalt Parallelism Static/Dynamic Fixed/Mobile Rhythm Material
MEMBER	Basic Physical Forms (parts of the body/objects natural forms/machine parts/ geometric forms) Drapery	Fullness of Realization (detailed/stylized/attenuated/ abstract) Raw/Polished Stress Factors	Texture Rhythmic Relations Material Qualities

Fig. 2 Functions and Systems in Sculpture

Subtexts in English Gothic Misericords

This shot shows a typical two rows of choir stalls, where monks and priests would celebrate the long and frequent services in the mediaeval church (up to fourteen hours per day, and for most of that time they would be standing up). The front row of seats have been tipped up to reveal the ledge which would provide support for elderly or infirm worshippers who could not remain standing ("misericord": Latin *miserere*, to take pity + *cordis*, the heart). Below this ledge decorative designs were carved and these took on the designation of "misericord". The misericords revealed here are typical in churches in continental Europe, where the ledge was relatively narrow. English Gothic misericords typically have wider ledges, with support designs branching out from the central motif. We have little evidence to suggest that the English monks were much fatter and heavier than those in Belgium and France—like Robin Hood's merry friend Friar Tuck—, but the support designs were standard in Britain:

Fig. 3 Choir stalls in Aarschot Church, Belgium

Fig. 4 Jonah and the Whale (Ripon Minster)

The story from the Bible of the sailors casting Jonah into the sea in order to be saved from a terrible storm is a vivid example of an English misericord, with flower designs on either side providing extra support to the broader ledge above. Apart from the lively Representation of the central drama, I would claim that much of the visual meaning is carried by the Compositional function of symmetry (the matching support flowers on either side, the centrality and symmetry of the ship and the triangle formed by the two figures and Jonah, on the right, as they push him into the waves. The contrasting textures of the wood carving accentuate this compositional meaning: the active participants (the sailors, Jonah and the head of the whale) are all smooth surfaces, the ship is made to look mechanical with its round crow's nest, square poop and matching yardarms, while the raging sea swirls with roughly chiselled rhythms. In terms of the Modal, or Engagement, function of meaning, the viewer is directly addressed by the gaze of the central sailor and the whale's left eye. We are also given a "bird's eye" (or God's eye) view of the event, seeing the ship from above.

I believe another important Modal factor in sculpture is the degree of protrusion from the flat plane of the backing. Misericords are a kind of bas-relief sculpture, but, as we will see, the carvers engage us with figures which catch the light and form rear shadows by being raised from the plane of the seat. Note that the misericord and the ledge and the seat are all carved from a single block of wood, usually oak. The sculpting of forms is even more striking in the depiction of the end of Jonah's maritime adventure:

Fig. 5 Jonah disembarks (Ripon Minster)

The whale's head emerging from the waves and Jonah emerging from the whale's jaws are sculpted in the round, as are the trees on the beach, so that our eye is directly engaged with the central drama being represented.

There even seems to be an intertextual visual joke to engage us in the support designs: on our left we have a kind of hybrid flower/ fruit, with a raspberry emerging from a flower bud, while on the right we have a kind of hybrid rat or mouse whose rear and tail are also a plant stem. We will discover more hybrid categories of living creatures in some misericords to follow. Biblical scenes like Jonah's story are very rare in misericords, even though they dominate the more visible carvings in a church. More often we find scenes of mediaeval domestic life, including signs of marital disharmony:

Fig. 6 Domestic Disharmony (Ripon Minster)

The wife is pulling her husband's beard and raising a jug to hit him, while he raises his hands to protect his head and pull away her hand. Note the vigour of the actions of both the couple: this creates a rhythm which engages both our eye and our emotions, that is, the Modal function. A clockwise circular rhythm of his arms at once frames his face and draws our eye to her actions. This circular rhythm is then mirrored, Compositionally, in the plaited frames of the name crests which form the supports on each side.

Another domestic scene in the Ripon Minster series shows a husband carting his wife along in a small hand-cart. This is one of a number of quite pervasive images which has been traced to a German woodcut of the period, i.e. a two-dimensional image. There are two theories about what the image represents. Some experts have said that it shows the husband carting his wife off to be ducked in a pond—which was a frequent punishment for witches. Others argue that she has got drunk at the Lenten carnival (as the drinking bottle in her hand suggests) and he is taking her home. Whatever is actually being represented, this misericord again manifests a fine mastery of compositional

balance and the skilful wood carving that was the norm in the more public and sanctified parts of the church.

The representation of a fiddler stealing a kiss from a dancing girl at the carnival:

Fig. 7 Carnival Pleasures

engages us with its wonderful energy of figures in motion and the rhythm created by the parallel arms and the swirling skirt. The carnival, of course, is a subversion of the official world of the church and the powers-that-be; here we have a concrete subtext in the context of a Gothic church where every column and every flying buttress strains heavenward, away from earthly pleasures, yet the misericord transports us in an instant to the real lives and pleasures of the common people.

One asks oneself why the Gothic period (12th to 15th centuries) led to such an explosion of church building and decoration. The Norman (Romanesque) period of solid columns, rounded arches and square, crenellated towers seemed to reflect the defensive cast of mind of the mediaeval barons, obsessed with preserving their territorial claims and their control over their peasants. With the enclosures movement and the growth in efficiency of sheep farming and of the wool-growing industry, many farmers and merchants grew wealthy. Spinning and weaving were still done by hand as a cottage industry, but the peasants still had to pay tithes and fees for marriage, baptism and funerals to their parish churches, which became wealthy in direct proportion to the success of their local wool growers. English wool was of very high quality and attracted both trade and craft skills with the Low Countries and France, and the newly rich growers and merchants and clothiers would endow fine churches as a way of gaining social recognition in this life and eternal salvation in the after-life.

The Gothic cathedrals and parish churches in the East of England (East Anglia and Yorkshire) and in the West Country (Devon, Gloucestershire) reflect this sudden growth in prosperity and piety. Their exterior design points to heaven with immense pointed spires; their interior architecture, using new building materials like limestone and new building techniques based around the pointed arch, shares this upward thrust; and every available surface is carved, painted or tiled to celebrate the glory of God:

Fig. 8 Ely Cathedral Nave

Ely Cathedral in the Fen Country of East Anglia, hence nearest to the Low Countries of Belgium and Holland, reveals the transition in styles. The lower columns of the nave form rounded brick-built Norman arches, while the roof and choir, built of limestone, already have the lofty proportions and pointed arches of the Gothic style.

On the other side of the country, the choir screen in Cartmel Priory in Lancashire, although originally an Augustine monastery church, displays the skill and loving care with which the wood carvers set about their work, whether in bas-relief on the columns, tracery in the screens, or the three-dimensional sculpture on the arm rests. The seats below have misericords, like the Green Man:

Figs. 9, 10 Cartmel Priory: Choir Screen and "Green Man" Misericord

Now, why did I choose to focus on the art of the misericord at this COE Conference on *"Identity in Text Interpretation and Everyday Life"*? Firstly, because it is a long time since I analyzed sculpture—which I love (see Chap.3 of *The Language of Displayed Art*). Second, because these church furnishings are a meeting-point for the semiotics of sculpture and architecture—two of the different multimodal meaning systems which I have previously analyzed separately. Thirdly, because I wanted to pay tribute to the work of your COE ProjectDirector, Professor Sato, who has devoted most of his work to the study of mediaeval European texts, and to our host, Professor Amano, who has himself published systemic-functional analyses of Japanese shrines and temples.

And lastly, because all the art works I have analyzed previously have had a single author; —they belong to the canon of art history which assumes that the artist's identity and life experience is relevant to the reading of their work. But the misericord carvers were anonymous. We have hints in church documents that some of them, having carved misericords in one church, say, Exeter Cathedral, were then sought out for similar creations in others, like Norwich or Chester. Although I chose to talk about misericords before I had been informed about the precise theme of this conference, I believe that the analysis of works of art by craftsmen whose identity we don't, and can't, know fits in with my frequent complaint that art history and appreciation is dominated by the biographies of identified personalities—and that that usually distracts us from actually looking at the work itself. Therefore the artist's lack of historical and biographical identity is an advantage that helps us to focus on the details and quality of his "text". (I use the masculine possessive advisedly, since it is most unlikely that any of the wood-carvers were women.) Although we have very few names and little other evidence about the carvers of the misericords, it is almost certain that they were the same craftsmen who had carved all the visible sacred symbols, so what was their motivation for carving the secular, profane and sometimes obscene images in the misericords

themselves?

I want to claim that all three ways of making meaning come into play: Representational, Modal and Compositional (see my chart, Fig. 2). To take the last first, in Compositional terms, the head of this "Green Man" (Fig. 10) is almost perfectly symmetrical—which links up with its experiential architectural function of providing maximum support for the ledge above, which, of course, has to support the rear of a large monk. On the other hand, its side supports are not symmetrical in that one seems to be the head of a lion while the other seems to be some kind of flower: perhaps these represent the fauna and flora over which the Green Man presides. For the Green Man, in many misericords, as well as in woodcuts and many other mediaeval representations, has come into this Christian context from ancient animist pagan times, when the gods dwelt in woods and water and other parts of the natural world. In other words, the Green Man here is as much a pagan survivor—after twelve hundred years of Christianity as the Christmas tree in our modern, supposedly Christian, festival! In Modal terms, this head engages us in a confrontational stare, which is even more direct in the head of the lion to his left.

We can see a similar play of three semiotic functions in some other highly symmetrical misericords such as the one in Ripon Minster where the Green Man has been inverted and turned into a monkey:

Fig. 11 Green Man as Monkey (Ripon Minster)

Here we still have the extreme symmetrical composition to support the ledge and the directly staring eyes which engage us (even upside down!), but the Green Man, while sprouting foliage and flowers from his mouth, as is often the case with this figure, has become a mischievous and potentially disruptive monkey. Even pagan deities are not exempt from mockery!

Fig. 12 The Fox Preaches to the Poultry (Beverley Minster)

Groups of figures often preserve the symmetry which helps to buttress the sides of the ledge above. Here the bodies and tails of the duck and hen stretch out as supports. The fox, however, is central and gazing our way, with an exaggeratedly pious look on his face. The fox is one of the many animals representing human cunning or mischief in misericords, woodcuts and oral tales. He is probably descended originally from the ancient Greek Aesop's and other animal fables, but in mediaeval times he is the protagonist of the adventures of Reynard the Fox which were told and retold in oral narrative and visual forms throughout Europe. Here he is used to satirize the priests who controlled their gullible congregations with Holy Writ.

Pigs, of course, were the commonest of farm animals on peasant smallholdings or common land, and they were often associated with bagpipes. Music, particularly on folk instruments, was seen by the clergy as promoting lust and loose living, and the bagpipes—often made out of a pig's bladder—were particularly base in both their origins and their effects. The bladder was obviously associated with urine and people's lower bodily functions, while the noise they made seemed to suggest wild rustic lovemaking. It was also reputed to induce a desire to urinate. (We should note that doctors in mediaeval times were usually monks or priests and that the main diagnostic for every human ailment was the colour and transparency of the patient's urine, so priests (often as monkeys or foxes) are often shown carrying urine flasks. This playful misericord, then, is quite a complex text with lots of cultural and political subtexts.

Fig. 13 Pigs and Bagpipes (Ripon Minster)

The theme of bagpipes is taken a step further in the side support of a misericord in another famous Yorkshire cathedral, Beverley Minster:

Fig. 14 Bagpiping Monkey (Beverley Minster)

Our witty woodcarver has a monkey as the piper holding a dog's hind legs as the pipes of the bagpipes while blowing down the dog's tail into his body (the bag of the pipes). This adds the reversal of farting to all the other "lower bodily functions" associated with bagpipes.

Apart from mythical animals like preaching foxes and bagpipe-playing pigs, many of the misericords have as their subject hybrid creatures such as unicorns, centaurs, mermaids and mermen. One of the most intriguing hybrids is the "blemya", a race of headless natives described by the Roman writer Pliny as living in India.There are a pair of these as side-supports to one of the misericords in Ripon Minster, where the one on the left, a standing oarsman, has no head, but has large facial features of eyes, nose and mouth as part of the structure of his torso. The right-hand one has no arms or body, but consists of a large head, complete with cap, walking around on a pair of legs.

Sub-texts, Modality and Lower Bodily Functions

The play with hybrid categories brings me to the subtext of my own paper. All the commentaries by art historians and mediaevalists that I have been able to discover concern themselves exclusively with the subject matter of the misericords. Now, the range of subjects and everyday themes is broad and fascinating indeed, and it allows plenty of exploration of links between images and themes across many cultures and media of the period from the twelfth to fifteenth centuries that we are looking at. However, this focus on the purely Representational function of the carvings seriously undervalues the aesthetic sense of Composition of their craftsmen and ignores the Modal elements in their design: these miniature sculptures may be hidden away out of sight for most of the time, but they were made, like all art, for an audience. In fact, we must assume that, however pious the preoccupations of the monks and priests in the choir stalls during a service, they would experience some curiosity and thrill at the profane images when they tipped up their seats—as do we cultural consumers and pious pilgrims, after marveling at the Gothic splendours higher up. I have taken some time, therefore, to stress the Modal and Compositional qualities of each image as well as recognizing its story-line.

Michael Halliday's stress on the Interpersonal function of language is very close to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the dialogic principle, enunciated in Russia fifty years earlier, but suppressed under Stalinism and only rediscovered in the 1970's both in Russia and the West. Bakhtin argued that any text, verbal or visual—indeed, whole narratives like novels—have an orientation to the hearer/ viewer/ reader, that is, as I have tried to show with my stress on Modal and Compositional features of the misericords, the anonymous craftsmen who carved them have a strong sense of the viewer's position and physical orientation. This is intensified by our—and the mediaeval monks'—spiritual position which discovers these secular and often profane images lurking unseen as subtexts beneath the glorious religious decoration of the Gothic cathedral and church. The dialogue is between architecture and sculpture, between holy and profane, between respectable and lewd, between realistic and mythical.

The link with Bakhtin becomes even more germane once we know that Bakhtin's later work (for his slowly produced and long-suppressed doctoral thesis) was on the principle of "carnival" in the mediaeval world as reflected in the writings of Francois Rabelais (see my Bibliography for Bakhtin's "Rabelais and his World", published in the West in 1984). As Bakhtin says,

> The men of the Middle Ages participated in two lives: the official and the carnival life. Two aspects of the world, the serious and the laughing aspect, coexisted in their consciousness….

> In 13th and 14th century illuminated manuscripts … we find on the same page strictly pious illustrations … as well as free designs not connected with the story. The free designs represent chimeras (fantastic forms combining human, animal and vegetable elements), comic devils, jugglers performing acrobatic tricks, masquerade figures and parodical scenes—that is, purely grotesque carnivalesque themes … however, in mediaeval art a strict dividing line is drawn between the pious and the grotesque; they exist side by side but never merge." (Bakhtin, 1968/1984: 96)

The world of Rabelais' novels, like the world around him, Bakhtin claimed, was dominated by those carnival moments when both the spiritual and the secular powers were suspended and the "lower bodily functions", which underpin all our lives, were foregrounded: "the gaping mouths, devouring, swallowing, drinking, the defecation, urine, death, procreation, birth, childhood, and old age."

It appears that in the misericords the dividing line between the pious and the grotesque is often the human rear end. Here, again in Ripon Minster, all eyes, as well as the raised cane, are on the exposed bum, about to receive a blow from the cane in the teacher's right hand. Like all teachers, the priest can not tolerate inattention or laziness, but there is a gusto about his corporal punishment which suggests it is not without its pleasures:

Fig. 15 Caning the Schoolboy (Ripon Minster)

Meanwhile, in the Queen's own chapel at Windsor castle one misericord combines the physical act of defecation with the spiritual act of exorcism, or casting out devils: a fat but fully human monk (male, of course) is evacuating a grotesque devil with the aid of another monk and a devil with a human face. This is a very subversive subtext to find in a monastery chapel:

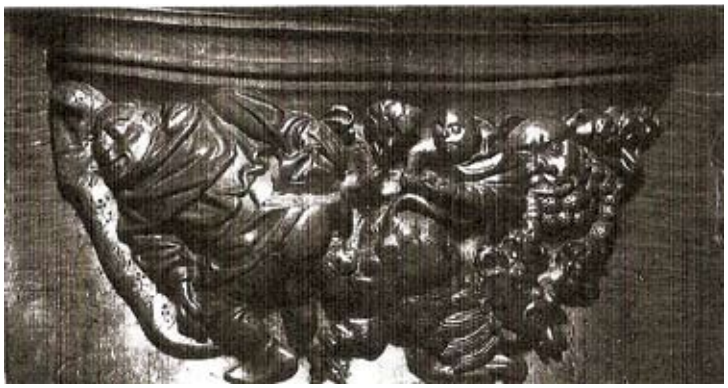

Fig. 16 Monk Evacuating a Devil (St. George's Chapel, Windsor)

Despite the repeated focus, highlighted by Bakhtin, and more recently by Michael Camille (1992), on the "lower bodily functions" in mediaeval art, in the misericord carvings of the English Gothic Churches there is very little preoccupation with sex. It was left to the French craftsmen to introduce a sexual visual pun (Fig. 16), where the eager face of the thirsting woman and the calm satisfaction of the man's face and the thrust of his hips surely betoken fellatio, oral sex. (In case Japanese readers find this erotic metaphor shocking, I would remind them that the whole tradition of *shunga* (erotic woodblock prints), popular and officially promoted throughout the Edo period) was far more sexually explicit.)

Fig. 17 Thirst or Lust?

Fig. 18 Sniffing out Corruption

(Church of St Pierre, Saumur, France)

Conclusion

I will leave it to the witty woodcarver of Saumur to provide the visual postscript to my paper (Fig 17). This misericord has everything: strong, symmetrical support of the ledge, intricate carved texture of hair, fingers and fabric, high contoured carving that catches the light, exposed buttocks—and a nose, wrinkled in disgust, almost in direct contact with the rear of the monk who would occupy this seat in the choir stalls—a self-reflexive image for a very sophisticated art form.

"Subtexts", then, is quite a complex notion in the case of Gothic misericords:

- The carved texts are physically SUB someone's bottom;
- Carved out of a single piece of timber SUB misericord ledge, which is SUB seat;
- Needing the seat to be raised to even be seen, they are SUBordinate texts;
- Having as their subject profane figures and narratives, they SUBvert the essential holiness of the cathedral and its otherwise sacred decorations;
- the survival of unmistakeably pre-Christian pagan stories and imagery after twelve centuries is itself a SUBversion of Christianity
- Their recurrent stress on lower bodily functions SUBverts the spiritual striving of the monk or priest, worshipping with his head and his heart (miseri + cord).
- Their carnivalesque images frequently SUBvert the authority of the powers-that-be—whether monks, priests, princes or quack doctors.

And, let's face it, the whole concept of misericords involves a major deception (or SUBterfuge): the monk supporting himself on the ledge is supposed to be standing for the divine rituals!

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