“Twice-Written Tales: 
Scribal Intentionality Captured through Scribal Inattention in Old English Manuscripts” 
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Words are the lifeblood of old philology, of course, and have been well served by print editions that can present a text with variants neatly gathered in the lower register. Other aspects of scribal performance – spacing and choice of letter form, choice of abbreviation and size of script, point of line break and space between words – has been less well served until the recent explosion in high-quality, highly-circulated facsimiles enabled through the internet revolution. Mise en page is now wonderfully accessible through digital images of even many low-status manuscripts, with more coming online all the time. But what does it all mean? What does page layout and script choice and line break contribute to an understanding of a medieval work? Does it, indeed, mean?

One conundrum is understanding how much of scribal layout is conscious, carefully considered, meaning-making and how much results from the pragmatics of the medium and the unconsidered consequences of training, exemplum, and materials. Consciousness of craft (on which see Sennet 2008) suggests that the answer is always mixed, that media affect performance – i.e. the cut of the quill, the nature of the parchment, as well as the layout in the exemplum – and yet materialist determinacy is always insufficient – scribes choose what to put where, what strokes to use, what spacing to adopt, how to fit text into layout and how and whether to clean up any errors. This paper will shed new light on this conundrum of scribal intentionality by considering an under-utilized resource: instances where the same scribe inadvertently recopied the same passage. Such twice-written passages provide a tightly controlled case-study for considering scribal variability.

I will consider in this paper two Old English examples drawn from scribes writing insular minuscule at the end of the tenth century. The scribe of the Exeter Book copied one Old English riddle twice in two different places in his miscellaneous collection of Old English poetry. Riddle 30a (on fol. 108r) is broadly similar to Riddle 30b (on fol. 124v) and some have argued that it is drawn from the same exemplum (although this is open to debate). While the double texts have been repeatedly read for their textual variance (e.g. the perceptive reading of Liuzza 1988), the implications for thinking about layout are only explored by Doane 1998, and I will go further in exploring the potential for understanding scribal intent. I will augment these suggestions by looking at a case where another scribe was certainly drawing on a single exemplum, a cancelled but not erased dittography in Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies in MS BL Royal 7 C. xii, a manuscript copied apparently under Ælfric’s own guidance at Cerne Abbas, Dorset.

This paper will examine manuscript as medium by providing insight into the thought process of medieval scribes as they laid out, and then laid out again, these Anglo-Saxon texts.