

INTRODUCTION: COMMENTING AND COMMENTARY AS AN INTERPRETIVE MODE IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

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Commenting and commentary have been among the most important modes of scholarly engagement in nearly all script cultures across time and space. Practices of commentary, it turns out, are at the core of mediation processes, and they not only rely on language to engage in such processes, but often make use of images, marginal doodles and signs, or diagrams as well. Commentary as a genre and as an activity not only exercises immense cultural power over knowledge and over communities of knowers, but also shapes, controls, disseminates, and augments worldviews and worldmaking, both by authorizing and by critiquing canonical texts and the layers of earlier commentary that have accrued to them. As a literary, scholarly, and cultural form, commentary also emblemizes the way in which the humanities engage with the world, and studying earlier, historical layers of this practice can become a moment of self-reflection for scholarly activity today. Both printed and increasingly, online, comment and commentary continue to be among the ways in which university-born debates are carried into societies and research results are communicated. In their knowledge-managing function, commentaries confront texts with sustained second levels of themselves, sometimes audaciously pushing the interpretive limits of the source text, other times constraining the hermeneutic horizon to ensure orthodoxy. This capacity of commentary to both transgress and limit gives it its extraordinary power.

For European cultures and the scholarly disciplines they have supported over centuries, many of the roots of commentarial practices can be found in medieval and early modern discourses, which themselves often build on classical models. The papers in this special issue reflect how various social, literary, and religious

practices involving the act of commenting intersect the genre of commentary as a stable phenomenon in select European cultures of the Middle Ages and the early modern era. They also reflect the specific conditions of commentary in a time before and during the initial phase of print in Europe, especially the materiality of commentarial practices and their specific ways of utilizing the manuscript and print page as a site of intermedial and intertextual relationality. The collaboration documented in this special issue has been made possible through generous funding from the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD). It is part of a larger interdisciplinary and international research group which emphatically takes a global perspective on commenting and commentary,¹ and from which we have taken many cues for this *Glossator* issue.

The central topics of this issue touch on key methodological and theoretical concerns of humanistic inquiry more generally. In many premodern contexts, “text”—in its emphatic sense as an authoritative, legally binding, or sacred document—is first and foremost constituted by its interaction with the commenting “gloss,” an interaction that is frequently visible on the manuscript page itself. This relationship has been theorized in general literary and cultural theory² as well as in the historical study of classical antiquity³ and

¹ See <https://globalcommentary.utoronto.ca/>.

² Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse,” trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London: Routledge, 1981), 57–78; Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Fill up Your Margins! About Commentary and ‘Copia,’” in *Commentaries – Kommentare*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 443–53; Glenn W. Most, Preface to *Commentaries – Kommentare*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), vii–xv; Jan Assmann, “Text und Kommentar: Einführung,” in *Text und Kommentar: Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation 4*, ed. Jan Assmann and Burkhard Gladigow (Munich: Fink, 1995), 9–34; David Kästle-Lamparter, *Welt der Kommentare. Struktur, Funktion und Stellenwert juristischer Kommentare in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

³ Francesca Schironi, *The Best of the Grammarians: Aristarchus of Samothrace on the Iliad* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press,

the various medieval European vernacular⁴ and Latin literatures.⁵ It should also be mentioned, even though this is beyond the scope of this particular special issue, that this new focus on commentary responds to a renewed interest in commentary in Arabic and Islamic Studies as well as South Asian Studies. In Islamic Studies, a new turn to commentary accompanies the field's radical reassessment of what constitutes the canon.⁶ In South Asian Studies, recent research has

2018); Ineke Sluiter, "The Violent Scholiast: Power Issues in Ancient Commentaries," in *Writing Science: Medical and Mathematical Authorship in Ancient Greece*, ed. Markus Asper (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 191–213.

⁴ Meinolf Schumacher, "...der kann den text und och die gloß." Zum Wortgebrauch von 'Text' und 'Glosse' in deutschen Dichtungen des Spätmittelalters," in *Textus' im Mittelalter. Komponenten und Situationen des Wortgebrauchs im schriftsemantischen Feld*, ed. Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Uta Kleine (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 207–27; John Dagenais, *The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the Libro de buen amor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Catherine Brown, "Scratching the Surface," *Exemplaria*, 26, no. 2–3 (2014): 199–214; Rolf Bergmann and Stefanie Stricker, *Die althochdeutsche und altsächsische Glossographie. Ein Handbuch*, 2 vols. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009).

⁵ Alastair J. Minnis, "Late-Medieval Vernacular Literature and Latin Exegetical Traditions," in *Text und Kommentar: Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation 4*, ed. Jan Assmann and Burkhard Gladigow (Munich: Fink, 1995), 311–31; Ralph Hanna et al., "Latin Commentary Tradition and Vernacular Literature," in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism. Vol. 2: The Middle Ages*, ed. Alastair J. Minnis and Ian Johnson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 363–421; Rita Copeland, "Gloss and Commentary," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Latin Literature*, ed. Ralph Hexter and David Townsend (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 171–91; Jan-Hendryk De Boer, "Kommentar," in *Universitäre Gelehrtenkultur vom 13. bis 16. Jh. Ein interdisziplinäres Quellen- und Methodenhandbuch*, ed. Jan-Hendryk De Boer (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2018), 265–318.

⁶ Walid A. Saleh, "The Gloss as Intellectual History: The Ḥāshiyas on al-Kashshāf," *Oriens* 41, no. 3–4 (2013): 217–59; Thomas Bauer, "'Ayna hādhā min al-Mutanabbī!' Toward an Aesthetics of Mamlūk

shown the significance of commentarial practice for intellectual innovation in Sanskrit hermeneutic practices.⁷

These are just some examples of the centrality of research on commentary practices across the humanistic fields, and many others could be added.⁸ And yet, they also point to a glaring lacuna in current research: despite the growing interest in commentary as an object of study and as a lens through which to refine methodologies in many different fields of research, and despite the fact that multidisciplinary volumes have provided interdisciplinary groundwork,⁹ much is left to be gained from the interdisciplinary

Literature,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 17, no. 1 (2013): 5–22; Thomas Bauer, “In Search of ‘Post-Classical Literature.’ A Review Article,” *Mamlūk Studies Review* 11, no. 2 (2007): 137–67; Robert Wisnovsky, “The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in Post-classical (ca. 1100–1900) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies. Supplement* 83 (2004): 149–91; Stefanie Brinkmann, “Marginal Commentary in Ḥadīṭ Manuscripts,” in *Theories and Practices of Commentary*, ed. Christina Lechtermann and Markus Stock, *Zeitsprünge* 24, no.1/2 (2020): 6–44.

⁷ Lawrence J. McCrea and Parimal G. Patil, “Traditionalism and Innovation: Philosophy, Exegesis, and Intellectual History in Jñānaśrīmitra’s Apohaprakaraṇa,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 34, no. 4 (2006): 303–66; Elisa Freschi and Philipp A. Maas, ed. *Adaptive Reuse: Aspects of Creativity in South Asian Cultural History* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2017); Ajay Rao, *Re-figuring the Ramayana as Theology: A History of Reception in Premodern India* (London: Routledge, 2015).

⁸ See, for Jewish Studies, Elisabeth Hollender, *Clavis Commentariorum of Hebrew Liturgical Poetry in Manuscript* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). For Buddhist Studies see Amanda Goodman, “A Multilingual Manuscript from Dunhuang: P3861,” *Blog, Practices of Commentary: SSHRC Insight Grant, University of Toronto (2020–2025)*, <https://globalcommentary.utoronto.ca/?p=335#more-335>.

⁹ Alastair J. Minnis, Alexander Brian Scott, and David Wallace, eds. *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c. 1100 – c. 1375: The Commentary Tradition*. Rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991); Glen Most, ed., *Commentaries – Kommentare* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999); Jan Assmann and Burkhard Gladigow, eds., *Text und Kommentar: Archäologie der literarischen*

study of commenting and commentary as an interpretive mode. In other words, the highly specialized nature of the study of individual medieval and early modern commentary traditions has tended to produce work that is siloed, and the possibility of exploring methodological and conceptual linkages between disciplines may reshape commentary studies in decisive ways. Thus, our reassessment of commenting and commentary as an interpretive mode and of its historical emergence builds on these findings in a variety of fields.

The formulation of our goals was a multidirectional and collaborative effort, growing out of a long-term engagement linking colleagues from the University of Toronto and the Goethe University of Frankfurt with a variety of scholars in many fields, in order to address how the methodological and theoretical approaches to the study of commentary rooted in one scholarly tradition can be used to initiate conversations with other traditions. Among the most enlightening findings of this special issue are that medieval and early modern European commentaries (in a very broad sense) are among the creative scholarly and literary practices and conventions that can fruitfully be examined both from within certain disciplines and comparatively; that they are a prime object to explore the historical relation of scholarly and vernacular languages and discourses; that they tend to hold a central role in teaching and instruction; that they contribute to the establishment of authorial voices in literary and scholarly discourses; and that they are key in assessing and repositioning canonical texts and traditional interpretations. It becomes obvious that commentary as a collective practice creates communities of knowledge, sometimes over many generations. And while we study medieval and early modern commentaries in their written form, whether on vellum or on paper, they emerge from oral practices and radiate back into the communities and situations of their provenance. In that sense, they have always possessed a multimедial form. At the same time, though, they seem to remain closely connected to scripturality and to the archival function of script that allows them to produce layers upon layers of commentary on earlier texts, including on previous commentaries, at times

Kommunikation 4 (Munich: Fink, 1995); David Kästle and Nils Jansen, eds., *Kommentare in Recht und Religion* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Christina Lechtermann and Markus Stock, eds., *Theories and Practices of Commentary*, *Zeitsprünge* 24, no.1/2 (2020).

restricted by a certain mise-en-page, at times expanded by pictorial means. In this way, writers and teachers use commentary to organize and resolve fundamental problems; to assert hierarchy and authority; to challenge that authority; to impose an interpretive voice; and to create that voice, uncomfortably positioned between the authority of an author and the secondarity of a glossator or illuminator.

It also turns out that commenting and commentary, often sitting at the intersections of traditional disciplines, are always in danger of being a central focus of none of them. The aim of this interdisciplinary issue is to bring some of these disciplinary perspectives together to interrogate practices of commenting and commentary from different textual, artistic, and sociohistorical angles. Its contributions touch on the fields of Book History, Art History, German Studies, Italian Studies, Philosophy, Religion, and Intellectual History, illuminating why and under what conditions certain reading and exegetical practices were so startlingly widespread and tenacious across cultural and temporal boundaries, how the materiality of manuscripts and books supported certain commentarial practices, and how intertextual and intercultural networks of thought and literature were created by utilizing such practices and modes of commentary.

The opening articles in this special issue address foundational material aspects of commenting in medieval manuscript culture, presenting interdisciplinary research on layout, mise-en-page, and the material of commentaries that enables us to delve deeper into the history of information technologies and the multiplicity of visual ordering formats. Erik Kwakkel's article "The Pro-Active Scribe: Preparing the Margins of Annotated Manuscripts" presents an overview of manuscripts prepared for central and late medieval school and university contexts, taking the compendium of the *Corpus vetustius* as an example. As Kwakkel can show, scrutinizing the manuscript pages for traces of preparation tells us a lot about a scribal economy of commentarial space on the page. Even before the first word is written, the layout of columns and marginal spaces decide how much room is left for commentary to be added to the canonical school text, room that might be filled by students, or by commentary that in itself has become canonical. Thus, the study of layouts of manuscript pages for traces of the pre-inscription structuring work that is done to them is foundational to any

understanding of the workings of commentary in medieval universities.

Equally reflecting on the *mise-en-page*, but using three examples from an earlier period than Kwakkel, Kristin Böse (“Thinking from the Margins: Opening and Closing Illuminations and their Commentary Functions around 1000”) studies some Christian European manuscripts with extraordinary illuminated pages at the beginning and/or end. She argues that the first (and occasionally last) pages of these manuscripts provide spatial and material commentary by creating liminal spaces both between the codex and the cover as well as between the text and its broader contexts of production and reception. The folios with purple fields at the front of Ottonian Gospels act as contact zones between the codex and its users by representing incarnation and inspiration, enacted and re-enacted with each opening of the manuscript. Letter labyrinths in northern Iberian manuscripts, especially at the front of biblical commentaries, present a model of coding and decoding that reflects a divine order necessitating both reading and viewing. Finally, in the English Benedictinal of Æthelwold, connections between the first and last illumination establish a relationship between the heavenly and earthly church enacted in the codex itself. Together, the illuminated openings indicate that medieval creators and readers understood codices as “relationally structured objects” that correlated different times and spaces and were activated by a viewer. These illuminations functioned as paratexts providing unique insights into authorship, production, and reception of the codex.

In “Reading Texts Within Texts: The Special Case of the Twelfth-Century Lemmata,” Drew Hicks uses William of Conches’ *Glosae super Priscianum* to consider lemmatized commentary as a cultural technique. Steering clear of the anti-hermeneutic extremes of German Media Theory, Hicks uses lemmata to argue for the nuanced consideration of the discursive practices, material conditions, and hermeneutic commitments that underlie commentary. He describes the material complexity of twelfth-century lemmatization through both a classification of the different types of lemmata (localization, contextual, construal, lexical), and a discussion of how hyper-abbreviation and compression point to the necessity of a separate copy of the base text. In addition, the lemmata reveal textual complexity, where different variants lead to

multiple interpretations, to which William of Conches refers in ways that betray a classroom setting for the commentary.

Christina Lechtermann (“The In-/Coherences of Narrative Commentary: Commentarial Forms in the *Anegenge*”) argues that commentarial practices shape vernacular textuality even in genres that are not commentarial in the strict sense of the word. Using the twelfth-century German *Anegenge* (“The Beginning”) as an example, Lechtermann shows how commentary as an argumentative and textual strategy borrows the authority of Latin learnedness to enhance the validity of arguments on salvation history in this vernacular text. Commentarial passages frequently interrupt the narration of this poem about redemption and salvation. The text constantly shifts between telling and explaining, postulating a pre-text which the commentarial passages themselves both evoke and to which they point. Commentary thus evokes and explains selective elements of salvific history as expounded in the narrative sections of the poem, as if the commentaries are lemmata of a pre-text. By borrowing this authorizing technique, the whole text gains authority and validity despite the fact that it is not written in the language of learnedness and knowledge, Latin. In addition, the three tract-long commentaries at the beginning, middle, and end of the *Anegenge* present their own interpretation of salvific history that emphasizes divine right and justice to give the narrative its driving force and coherent structure.

The remaining papers illuminate, among many other things, canonization mechanisms through meta-commentaries and auto-commentaries, which often serve as prime means to stabilize (or destabilize) certain readings and interpretations of texts central to cultural inventories of societies. Indeed, in a more general sense, commenting and commentary have the potential of being both conservative/conservatory and innovative modes of interpretation. The papers also relate to Lechtermann’s in that one of their foci is the authorizing function of commentary.

Indeed, as Elisa Brillì shows for the arguably special case of Dante, the self-authorizing function of auto-commentary, which is born out of medieval practices, shapes the self-fashioning of the poet. In “Dante’s Self-Commentary and the Call for Interpretation,” Brillì argues that Dante’s self-commentary creates and stabilizes Dante’s poetic self-fashioning. Brillì sets out the complicated relationship between poetry and commentary in Dante’s literary work, making the case that the self-commentary exists in a bi-directional

relationship with the poetry, since it manipulates and creates new meanings, especially a continuity between past and present while also abstracting the works into entities that can stand on their own as their own genre. Brilli can thus sketch a picture of evolving uses of commentary in Dante's oeuvre. While this has long been established for the *Vita nova* and its commenting passages, Brilli shows that even the *Commedia* uses self-commentary, both in the form of dialogues with other characters and Dante's direct comments to the reader. Thus, Dante's strategy of self-legitimation through commentary, and his accompanying self-fashioning as a learned poet, is visible throughout his work. In this sense, Dante's self-commentary not only creates the true poet, but also aims to create a new kind of vernacular poetry, in close proximity and dialogue with learned disciplines and genres, such as classical literature and philosophy as well as medieval theology and philosophy.

The concluding three papers deal with aspects of commentary in early modern Humanism in Italy and Germany. Christine Ott and Philipp Stockbrugger ("Spiritualizing Petrarchism, 'Poeticizing' the Bible: two Counter-Reformation Self-Commentaries") consider Gabriel Fiamma's and Jean de la Ceppède's use of self-commented poetry to educate and elevate their readership. Building on scholarly conceptions of self-commentary as self-fashioning and guiding interpretation, Ott and Stockbrugger consider the motivations of the commentators and how they attempted to manage the reception of their texts by eliminating potential ambiguities. Through this technique, Fiamma is able to claim superiority over poets such as Petrarch, while arguing that his apparently Petrarchan language is, in fact, biblical. La Ceppède, however, attempts to spiritualize poetry and bring it back to what he understands as its biblical roots, while rendering explicit even simple theological concepts and hiding his profane sources. For both authors, their commentaries authorize their use of lyric and emotional registers, and both reveal and support their own orthodoxy.

In "The Power of Glosses: Francesco Fulvio Frugoni's Self-Commentary and Literary Criticism in the *Tribunal della Critica*," Andrea Baldan studies the relationship between the different "informational spaces," namely the self-commentary of the gloss in Frugoni's own voice, and the narrative from the point of view of Saetta, Diogenes's dog. The glosses help Frugoni guide the interpretation of the text and present the fictional narrative as

reliable. After considering the different functions of the glosses (biographical, theoretical, exegetical, and subjective), Baldan turns to how Frugoni expresses his views of literary criticism through an interrelationship of text and gloss. This leads Baldan to argue that the glosses act as hypertexts, in which the glosses transcend a linear and confined text. Readers must choose to follow the glosses to cross-reference text and gloss from several different sections to uncover Frugoni's full meaning. Thus, the glosses act as a structure in and of themselves, which both supports and remodels the text in a "non-hierarchical interdependence."

Like Baldan, Magnus Ferber also focuses on an aspect of the early modern Humanist reception of classical sources. His "Commenting on a Purged Model: The *M. Valerii Martialis Epigrammaton libri omnes novis commentariis illustrati* of the Jesuit Matthäus Rader (1602)" argues that Rader's commentary on his own cleansed edition of Martial uses a "double strategy" of making it an appropriate Jesuit school text, while also bringing it up to the standard of classical philology for scholars. Ferber shows how the commentary presents Rader's version as the "pure" Martial, and sometimes attempts to limit the possible interpretations of epigrams that are deemed inappropriate. Equally, Rader provides the kinds of philological discussion expected for the intellectual period of Late Humanism. This flexibility of approach meant Rader was able to withstand criticism both from the Jesuit order, for dealing with obscene literature, and from intellectuals and other authors, for neglecting parts of the text in his commentary.

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