

Practices of Commentary

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Inhalt

<i>Christina Lechtermann and Markus Stock</i> Introduction	I
<i>Stefanie Brinkmann</i> Marginal Commentaries in Ḥadīṭ Manuscripts	6
<i>Walid A. Saleh</i> The Place of the Medieval in Qur'an Commentary A Survey of Recent Editions	45
<i>Jeannie Miller</i> Commentary and Text Organization in al-Jāhiz's Book of Animals	55
<i>Simon Whedbee</i> The Pedagogy of Twelfth-Century Cathedral School Biblical Commentaries Peter Comestor's Lectures on the Gospel of Luke	87
<i>Anthony J. Fredette</i> Medieval Commentary on the <i>Thebaid</i> and its Reception Preliminary Observations	104
<i>Suzanne Conklin Akbari</i> Ekphrasis and Commentary in Walter of Chatillon's <i>Alexandreis</i>	122
<i>Jennifer Gerber</i> About Form and Function of German Vernacular Commentaries	139
<i>Christina Lechtermann</i> Commentary as Literature The Medieval ›Glossenlied‹	160
<i>Daniel Dornhofer</i> Performing Commentary Preaching the Apocalyptic Drama in Early Modern England	181

<i>Christine Ott</i>	
Veils and Naked Words	
Girolamo Benivieni's Self-Commentaries	199
<i>Philip Stockbrugger</i>	
Mirroring Authorization in Torquato Tasso's <i>Rime Amoroze</i>	218
<i>Magnus Ulrich Ferber and Philipp Knüpfner</i>	
Letters as Comment on Commentary	
The Annotations in <i>Hymnos Callimachi</i>	
by Nicodemus Frischlin (1577) and Bonaventura Vulcanius (1584)	238
Abstracts	259
Notes on Contributors	265

Introduction

Commentaries have accompanied sacred, cultural, legal, and literary texts since antiquity, serving to justify and stage these texts' relevance and canonicity. As an »enhancement« of written form and as a special »institution of reappropriation«, commentaries have been instruments for the transmission of legal and religious norms and values, as well as purveyors of ancient knowledge that was to be preserved verbatim, and yet kept open for future communication.² In this context, commentary acts as a means for constituting and stabilizing traditions: it endows them with dignity, and introduces new thoughts while claiming to enhance the understanding of old ones. By lionizing the accompanied text as an object of prestige and status, commentary generates the source for its own validity. At times, commentary may even attain a sovereignty of interpretation that can supersede or push aside any original intentions of the text. Thus, the study of commentary is key to describing aspects of authority, institutionality, creativity, and textual empowerment.³

Especially in premodern cultures, commentaries do not only »serve« the text they accompany, but also tend to follow their very own interests. In many instances, they operate as segues into other thematic contexts, allow for polemics, exploit the commentarial licenses to pursue particular aims, and loosen coherent structures in a variety of ways.⁴ Despite these diverse functions of commentary,

1 Jan Assmann, »Text und Kommentar. Einführung«, in: id. and Burkhard Gladigow (eds.), *Text und Kommentar. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation IV*, München 1995, pp. 10, 22. Cf. Wolfgang Raible, »Arten des Kommentierens – Arten der Sinnbildung – Arten des Verstehens. Spielarten generischer Intertextualität«, in: *ibid.*, pp. 51-73.

2 Cf. for example: Jan-Hendryk De Boer, »Kommentar«, in: id. (ed.), *Universitäre Gelehrtenkultur vom 13. bis 16. Jh. Ein interdisziplinäres Quellen- und Methodenhandbuch*, Stuttgart 2018, pp. 265-318.

3 Glenn W. Most, »Preface«, in: id. (ed.), *Commentaries – Kommentare*, Göttingen 1999, pp. VII-XV; Michel Foucault, »The Order of Discourse. Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France, given 2 December 1970«, in: Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, Boston and London, 1981, pp. 56-58; id., *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, London 2001, pp. 72-75, 114-118.

4 Cf. Karl Enenkel and Henk Nellen, »Introduction. Neo-Latin Commentaries and the Management of Knowledge«, in: id. (eds.) *Neo-Latin Commentaries and the Management of Knowledge in the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period (1400 – 1700)*, Leuven 2013, pp. 1-76, pp. 3 f., 11 f.; De Boer (as note 2).

most researchers assume at least one aspect to be constitutive for nearly all forms of commentary: that of secondariness and belatedness. Hence, commentaries appear as subordinate textual elements added at a later time that mediate between the primary text and its (later) recipients from a third position, explaining difficult grammar, staking out a specific semantic scope, interpreting the earlier text – perhaps even in a fashion deemed contrary to the original intention. In this sense, Grafton, for instance, speaks of the commentator as a »parasite«.⁵ Such an ontological definition of commentary as a subsequent text, however, largely ignores textual phenomena that benefit from the power and interpretive potential of commentarial gestures without necessarily occupying a subsequent (»parasitic«) position. It ignores above all (vernacular) narratives, songs, and poems that make use of commentarial gestures in a creative way, deriving their prestige or simply their very particular form of (in-)coherence from their status as alleged commentary. And it ignores texts that stage themselves as being worthy of commentary aside from the dominant realms of canonical texts.

While commentaries that match a more ontological definition have received some attention in cultural, literary, and media history, some other related textual phenomena have been, exceptions notwithstanding, excluded from the mainstream-research on commentary. These are texts which surround themselves with commentary that is neither belated nor from a different author's hand (i. e. self-commentary) or which use commentarial forms in their very specific ways that go beyond what might be called the usual genres of commentary. In this volume, we have tried to conceive of commentarial forms as a continuity, thereby thinking about commentary in a broader sense. Of course, premodern commentary is first of all a specific practice and dominant genre employed by elites, from theologians to philosophers and masters of law or the liberal arts. Yet, this does not necessarily imply that it has no influence on the making and »self-fashioning« of vernacular literature and textuality.⁶

If we think commentary not in an ontological way, i. e. as a textual or visual entity following and explaining another entity already existing, we can turn to its productive aspects and the special relation it establishes – that is, to its operational dimension. The gesture of commentary draws a distinction between the

5 Anthony Grafton, »Commentary«, in: id., Glenn W. Most, and Salvatore Settis (eds.), *The Classical Tradition*, Cambridge MA., London 2010, pp. 225-233, here p. 226.

6 A connection of commentary and vernacular literature has already been proposed most prominently by Paul Zumthor, »La glose créatrice«, in: Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani and Michel Plaisance (eds.), *Les commentaires et la naissance de la critique littéraire. France / Italie (XIVe – XVIe siècles). Actes du Colloque international sur le Commentaire Paris, Mai 1988*, Paris 1990, pp. 11-18, and by Christoph Huber, »Formen des »poetischen Kommentars« in mittelalterlicher Literatur«, in: Most (as note 3), pp. 323-352.

commentary and the commented and thus creates both the subject and object of commentary. This gesture does not only create two texts by relating them to each other, but also claims a hierarchy between them, bestowing the *textus* with dignity, canonicity, or even sacredness and thus – as Assmann has put it – creating a ›cultural and holy text‹.⁷ But to do so, commentary does not necessarily have to be ›really‹ secondary, it only has to participate in the gesture or – to be more precise – in one of the differentiating and relating gestures of commentary.

The operational dimension of commentary could be described as a form of deictic gesture, referring to a part of a text or to an enunciation. This gesture might be very explicit (for example ›that means‹, ›this word is ancient‹, ›the commentary to follow is about the *Song of Songs*), it might be brought about by any form of index marker – like a number or an initial from the *textus* repeated by the commentary, or a lemma – or it might be implicit (for example, by putting a commentary on the margins next to the part it is meant to explain; or by providing the *textus* in red ink and having the [continuous] commentary follow in black). By this deictic gesture, both a relation and a differentiation is established and both texts are first of all constituted.⁸ A special feature of this deictic gesture is that it does not point to anything outside of media, but towards the process of mediation itself: it points towards the words, the sentences, the narration, explaining how they make sense, in which way they can be understood to symbolize, or what they imply. It might be part of the ›empowerment‹ of the commentary that it puts the process of mediation on display, that it shows (or at least claims to know) how the word, the sentence, the text or narration ›work‹, where their traditions are rooted, what the text has (allegedly) left out, and what it ›actually‹ wanted to say.⁹

Such a notion of commentary does (of course) not exclude commentaries which are indeed generically secondary (such as the *Glossa ordinaria*) but permits us to take a new look at what the different forms of commentary do. If we also adopt an operative approach for these seemingly ›typical‹, ›secondary‹ examples we might be able to establish a perspective in which the actual codex is explored in a way that not only considers the formation of the manuscript or its reception as a process, such as in teaching or preaching, but that also takes into account the processuality of the codex itself. If we stress the idea of a relational structure established by commentary we can observe how the text (on each page and/or

7 Assmann (as note 1).

8 Perhaps one could think of this act as a ›transcriptive‹ process, that constitutes the *textus* (as a semiotic as well as material text) and the commentary at the same time. Cf. Ludwig Jäger, »Transkriptivität. Zur medialen Logik der kulturellen Semantik«, in: id. and Georg Stanitzek (eds.), *Transkribieren. Medien/Lektüre*, München 2002, pp. 19-41.

9 Cf. Most; and Foucault (as note 3).

in the codex as a whole) is newly defined by commentary – and vice versa: how, for example, the demarcation of textual boundaries is staged, how they emerge from the (paratextual) gestures of reference and thus metaphorically or literally form the margins of a text.¹⁰ We could describe relations that put the *textus* at the centre (as in the *textus inclusus* with bracketing gloss), staging its significance in a spatial way.¹¹ We could also describe relations that shatter the coherence of the *textus* (as in a continual commentary), staging its literalness and wording, or a form of commentary that refers to an absent *textus* staging its virtue as a canonical or holy text. We could perhaps understand better how the commentary takes part in the constitution of a text – and of course this would offer further arguments, as to why they cannot simply be neglected in any close reading that is concerned with a historical concept of ›text‹. If we consider commentary as a historical practice and a quotable gesture in this way, not only the operativity of the (very tangible) commentary on the page could come into view, but also the ways in which its operational core is used in a multiplicity of polemic, subversive, or creative ways that extent from very personal dispute to questions of status and even – in a broad sense – to premodern forms of textual politics.

This issue of *Zeitsprünge* presents papers inspired by a conference that brought together scholars from the University of Toronto and Goethe University of Frankfurt a. M. in December 2018 at the University of Frankfurt. It marked the beginning of a cooperation, which resulted in a second conference on this topic at the University of Toronto in 2019, funded by the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and will be continued as a *Program for Project-Related Personal Exchange* (PPP) funded by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), in conjunction with funding from the University of Toronto. We would like to thank the DAAD, the *Dr. Bodo Sponholz-Stiftung für Wohlfahrt, Kunst und Wissen*, the *International Office* of the GU, the *Vereinigung von Freunden und Förderern der Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität*, and the University of Toronto for their generous support that enabled us to organize the first conference and thus form this international and transdisciplinary collaboration.

Like the conference, this issue unites papers on a variety of subjects, offering a multitude of theoretical approaches to and exemplary readings of medieval and early modern practices of commentary from the point of view of Arabic,

10 Compare, for example, Genette, who already stressed the blurred boundary between paratext and metatext: Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, trs. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, Lincoln 1997, pp. 7 f.

11 Cf. Meinolf Schumacher, »... der kann den text und och die gloß. Zum Wortgebrauch von ›Text‹ und ›Glosse‹ in deutschen Dichtungen des Spätmittelalters«, in: Ludolf Kuchenbuch and Uta Kleine (eds.), ›Textus‹ im Mittelalter. Komponenten und Situationen des Wortgebrauchs im schriftsemantischen Feld, Göttingen 2006, pp. 207-227.

Latin, Jewish, English, German, and Romance Studies. They try to highlight the role that the study of commentary can play in a historical understanding of premodern and early modern textuality, epistemology, and mediality. The articles have been organized in a more or less chronological order, expanding from the 7th-century Ḥadīth collections (Brinkmann) and Qur'an Commentary (Saleh) to late 16th-century humanists' correspondence (Ferber / Knüpfper). They discuss commentarial forms connected with al-Jāhīz's *Book of Animals* (Miller) as well as with Torquato Tasso's *Rime Amoroſe* (Stockbrugger). They investigate verbal commentaries delivered in the medieval classroom and transcribed into manuscripts (Whedbee) or voiced from the pulpit of preachers in Early Modern England (Dornhofer). They scrutinize the way commentaries shape the retelling of a certain *materia* (Fredette) and analyze the relationship of ekphrasis and commentary (Akbari) or the commentarial dimension of the narrator's voice (Gerber) in Latin and vernacular epic. And they show how commentarial forms participate in the making and presentation of late medieval gloss songs (Lechtermann) and how self-commentaries convey a spiritual meaning to Italian love poems and at the same time take part in the public debate (Ott).