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What's in a Margin?
Some observations on the function and content of margins
in medieval literary manuscripts

The question of what is to be found in the margins of certain medieval manuscripts, and what significance those findings may hold, is one that has attracted no little attention, especially when the manuscripts concerned display elaborate illumination.¹ Among literary manuscripts (which may also contain illumination) of a certain standing, marginalia have also long been recognized as constituting repositories for potentially important matter having a bearing on the text and its integrity.² When it comes to the more modest and mundane productions, however, no systematic study of the contents of margins appears as yet to have been undertaken, although much has been noted in an *ad hoc*, sporadic manner; and while such a systematic study lies well beyond the modest ambitions of the present paper, a small contribution may be attempted by discussing some, at least, of the types of information that can be gleaned from a study of the margins of literary manuscripts which do not, in the general run of things, attract much attention. In what follows, I attempt to describe, in an orderly fashion, some of the observations I have made while working with medieval books of this type over the years.

¹ For example, Michael Camille, *Image On The Edge: The Margins Of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

² A good example concerns ll. 44a-44f of the "Wife's of Bath's Prologue". Some editors of Chaucer relegate these lines to a footnote because they do not appear in the 'best' manuscripts, yet they have an air of authority. A plausible explanation would be to suppose that they had been added, perhaps by Chaucer himself, in a margin of a manuscript copy of the *Canterbury Tales*, then incorporated into the body of the text (as is the case with some manuscripts). Of related interest are the marginal glosses found in manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, on which see Graham Caie, 'The Significance of the Marginal Glosses in the Earliest Manuscripts of The Canterbury Tales' in David L. Jeffrey, ed., *Chaucer and Scriptural Tradition* (Ottawa, 1984), pp. 75-88.

Codicologists, that is, those concerned with the study of the physical make-up of the manuscript book, have demonstrated that manuscript margins are deliberate creations which form part of the *mise-en-page* of a medieval text.¹ Once parchment or paper has been delivered to the scriptorium, monastic or otherwise, the scribe sets about preparing his unit of copying, the quire. Sheets are cut according to the type of book to be copied – large sheets for liturgical and service books, much smaller ones for literary manuscripts, and even smaller ones again for books of hours – then folded, pricked and ruled. The action of ruling, both horizontally and vertically, forms what is referred to as the written space of a manuscript page.² By definition, the written space, in the vast majority of surviving medieval books is smaller, indeed often quite significantly smaller in some cases, than the size of the actual sheet: what lies beyond the written space constitutes the margin of the folio. There will be four of them: the inner margin, closest to the binding, known as the ‘gutter’, the opposite outer margin, followed by the upper and lower margins. All can furnish information for the editor and reader alike of a text.

The notion that the creation of margins is a deliberate act in the creation of a manuscript book is given substance also by the comparison of autograph copies of literary compositions with their final (or, at least, later) ‘public’ versions. Autograph manuscripts from the English Middle Ages are something of a rarity, but one, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 1, the Ormulum manuscript, shows graphically how an author, in the process of composition, finds a use for margins which later scribes (in this precise case, there were none) would simply eliminate.³ The margins of this manuscript are very often filled with added text (incidentally providing some insight into the compositional process) which would, in a ‘clean’ copy, have been placed neatly in its appropriate place on the page. Visual presentation, therefore, was clearly a factor in the mind of the scribe preparing an

¹ The most exhaustive study of this aspect of the medieval book known to me is Jacques Lemaire, *Introduction à la codicologie* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1989).

² The technical term in French is ‘la justification.’

³ See the facsimile in C. E. Wright, *English Vernacular Hands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1960), pl. 2.

authorial text.¹ One may also venture the idea that scribes had assigned to margins certain functions which were of central importance to the successful transmission of their texts.

This point may be illustrated by looking at one popular literary genre: the medieval sermon. Sermon manuscripts very often carry information relating to the structure of the text, a fact which may indicate – though absolute proof is difficult to establish – that such manuscripts formed part of the equipment a priest (or preacher) would carry with him in the execution of his pastoral duties. This notwithstanding, it is observable that the divisions (*principales*), the discrete parts of what is sometimes referred to as the ‘university’ sermon, are frequently marked out in the margins, thus: *primum principale*, *secundum principale*, and so on, more often than not in abbreviated form.² With perhaps even greater frequency, the start of an exemplum, an edifying story often used by preachers to impart some moral teaching, will be signalled, usually through the mention, again in abbreviated form, of exemplum itself, or of the word *narracio*, or of the phrase *nota bene*. Though of obvious use to a private reader of such a text, such visible cues would be of equal assistance to a preacher in ensuring that, should his eye stray too far from the matter in hand, he would be able to ‘find his place’ again with some ease. Other points or remarks considered to be worthy of special attention in such discourses are also frequently highlighted by including a sketch of a hand with a pointing finger in the margin.³

¹ It is pertinent to point out that the arrangement of parchment leaves within a quire so as to ensure that, whenever the book was opened, the reader would be facing either two hair sides or two flesh sides, but never one of each, is also a consideration dictated by visual concerns.

² For discussion of ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ sermon structure see Helen L. Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), ch. 6; Siegfried Wenzel, *Preachers, Poets, and the Early English Lyric* (Princeton, 1986), ch. 3. or W. O. Ross, ed., *Middle English Sermons*, EETS 207 (London, 1940), pp. xliii-iv.

³ Since relatively few sermon collections, accompanied by suitable facsimiles, are readily available, I direct the reader to these marginal devices in *Piers Plowman* manuscripts. See *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile of Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Douce 104*, with an Introduction by Derek Pearsall and a Catalogue of the Illustrations by Kathleen Scott (Cambridge, 1992), ff. 60^v, 75^v, 79^v. Also *Piers Plowman: A Facsimile of the Z text in Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Bodley 851*. Introduction by Charlotte Brewer & A. G. Rigg (Cambridge, 1994), f. 127^v.

The divisions which make up the late-medieval sermon are themselves subject to division, creating texts of some considerable complexity. One obvious consequence of this is the enumeration of items which the divisions (or sub-divisions) have naturally created. Examples include the seven deadly sins and their remedies, the five times Christ is said to have wept, or bled; the number of times Christ is said to have appeared to his disciples after his resurrection; the seven prayers traditionally said to make up the Pater Noster, and so on. It is usual in such instances to find the text divided up into individual sections through the use of numbers in the margins.

Marginal notation has a role to play in the organization of a medieval book as a whole, not simply of the individual texts it preserves. This is notably the case of the inclusion of quire signatures and / or catch words.¹ Some manuscripts have both, though it is generally true to say that signatures are an abiding feature of early medieval books, while catch words constitute a somewhat late development. Both serve to indicate the correct place of a quire in the sequence of quires making up the book. Quire signatures order quires numerically, I, II, III, etc., or alphabetically, A, B, C, etc., or a combination of both. Such numbers and letters were placed in the lower margins of either the first or the last folio of the quire as an aid to the binder in the task of maintaining the quires in the correct order. Catch words, by contrast, consist of the inclusion, in the lower margin of the last folio of a quire, visibly distant from the written space, of the opening word or words of the following quire, allowing the binder to make the match, if necessary. Useful though they are, both methods are vulnerable in two ways. First, because binders crop manuscripts frequently, quire signatures and catch words simply disappear in the course of time. Should a medieval manuscript need to be rebound at any time after such loss, the binder would need to be doubly vigilant in proceeding with his work. The other weakness is that of the quire leaves most likely to be lost, through carelessness or accident, it is the outer bifolium (together with the inner one) which most logically answers to that description.

One final point on page lay-out and general aids to the reader should be made. It has been well argued that the manuscript book of

¹ In French, catch words are referred to as 'réclames.'

the fifteenth century, at a time leading up to the appearance of the first printed books, was increasingly tailored to the needs of the reader through the inclusion of elements which would have greatly facilitated his use of the book.¹ A number of these features, common enough in modern book production, were relatively new features in the fifteenth century: the inclusion of a table of contents, indexes, concordances, and so on. Another feature, the running title in the upper margin, does however indicate the functional importance of this part of the page's make-up; it suggests that on the eve of printing the difficulty in navigating one's way round a manuscript book was increasingly felt to be a hindrance in need of a solution.

It is also worth mentioning that in certain types of book, the margins were increasingly viewed as forming an integral part of the text, not merely the repositories of notes commenting in various ways on a text that remained physically distinct. I am thinking of the books associated with the twelfth-century schools of Northern France and the subsequent establishment of universities in which the Masters of the Sacred Page compiled their vast commentaries on a number of important texts.² In such cases the page lay-out called for the text which was to be 'glossed' to occupy the central portion of the page, distinguished from what surrounded it by a different form of script, while the commentary filled the remaining marginal spaces. The resulting text in large measure actually removed the left and right vertical margins altogether. Prominent among such texts are the *Glossa Ordinaria* and the canon law *Decretales* of Gratian, but many university 'text books' followed this practice.³

¹ See Mary A. Rouse & Richard H. Rouse, *Authentic Witnesses: Approaches to Medieval Texts and Manuscripts* (Notre Dame, 1991), pp. 449-66.

² There is a masterly survey of this important subject by Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 3rd ed (Oxford, 1983).

³ On these various points see Smalley, *Study of the Bible*; Christopher Dehamel, *Glossed Books of the Bible and the Origins of the Paris Book Trade* (Woodbridge, 1984), who provides facsimiles of the page lay-out described here; M. B. Parkes, "The Influence of the Concepts of *Ordinatio* and *Compilatio* on the Development of the Book," *Medieval Learning and Literature: Essays Presented to R. W. Hunt*, ed. J. J. G. Alexander and M. T. Gibson (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1976); rpt. in M. B. Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers* (London: Hambledon, 1991), pp. 35-70.

Turning now to another area of interest, marginal comments of a personal nature occasionally crop up, revealing something of the personalities of the scribes. Thus, the Irish scribes who complained of 'thin ink' and a 'difficult text', adding that 'this vellum is hairy' show commendable conscientiousness towards their work, but, in so doing, highlight the poor quality of the materials with which they were supposed to work.¹ Other scribes reveal the extent to which they find the copying of texts burdensome, as does the man responsible for work on Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. On completion of the second part of this work, he expresses his relief thus: *Explicit secunda pars summe fratris thome de aquino ordinis fratrum predicatorum, longissima, prolixissima, et tediosissima scribenti. Deo gratias, Deo gratias, et iterum Deo gratias!*² An even more pointed expression of dissatisfaction is this surprisingly direct statement: *Finito libro reddatur merda magistro.*³ A different mental preoccupation would appear to lie behind the drawing in the margin of f. 11^v of Durham, University Library, MS V.iv.3 where, in the course of an English sermon for the second Sunday of Advent, one finds oneself staring at two mermaids, suitably naked from the waist up! Boredom, perhaps, or wishful thinking may lie at the origin of this decorative feature, since there is nothing in the text to warrant such an intrusion.

On a more serious note, some marginal comments may reflect religious dissension at a time when orthodox and heterodox views on certain issues were angrily debated. One such may be observed in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 806, an inedited collection of English sermons with Lollard leanings. At one point on f. 117r, in a discussion of confession, the preacher urges his sinful congregation to make their confessions before God. The marginal *vera confessione*, looks suspiciously like the type of comment a Lollard sympathizer

¹ I came across these references only at www.regia.org/quill3.htm.

² From Oxford, New College, MS 121, f. 376v, noted by Malcolm Parkes, *English Cursive Book Hands, 1250-1500* (Oxford, 1969), p. xiii and Marc Drogin, *Medieval Calligraphy, its History and Technique* (Montclair, 1980), p. 12.

³ Item 222 of the *Colophons de Manuscrits Occidentaux, des Origines au XVI^{me} Siècle*, compiled by the community of Saint-Benoit de Port-Valais (Fribourg, 1965-82).

might make, since it underlines the view that sacramental confession before a priest is unnecessary, a standard Lollard claim.¹

Finally, one may note that the contributions, often marginal, made by later readers of manuscripts are full of interest since they record the changing currents in the thoughts and convictions authors and writers held in the past. My two examples are taken from an inedited English *De Tempore* sermon cycle extant in Oxford, Bodleian Library, e Musaeo 180 (and other manuscripts) of the late fifteenth century.² The sermon for the first Sunday after the Octave of Epiphany includes an exemplum, taken from the collection known as *The Miracles of the Virgin*, referred to by the title 'The Devil in Service'.³ The story concerns a sinful knight, one of whose servants is a devil in disguise. The function of the devil is to encourage damnable behaviour in the knight. At the end of the story, the devil is forced to reveal his true identity. The text reads:

And anon he spake and seyde þat he was a fende of hell, and was ordende by all þe /39v/ hole councell of hell for to rewle þat kny3te and his men þat were þer present, and to maynteyne hym in his lyvyng, and so for to tempe him to all maner of cursednes, and at þe laste to strangyll him to dethe, and þat his sowle scholde be dampnyd. But þis [kny3te] vsid every day for to sey in þe worchip of our Lady v Aue Maris. And if þe case had fallyn þat þis kny3te had feyled one day, þen þe devyll scholde haue had al his full powere of hym. But for þis devowte prayer þat he contenewally vsyd, þe devyll feyled of his purpose. And so our blessid Lady preservyd hym.⁴

¹ There now exists a Lollard Society. Those interested should go to www.lollardsociety.org/

² The other manuscripts are: Lincoln, Cathedral Chapter, MSS 50 & 51 (one manuscript preserved today in two bindings); Gloucester, Cathedral Library, MS 22, and Durham, University Library, MS V.iv.3, already mentioned in connection with mermaids. An edition of this cycle is to be published in due course by the Early English Text Society.

³ For text and comment on this genre see the edition by Peter Whiteford, *The Myracles of Oure Lady*, ed. From Wynkyn de Worde's Edition, Middle English Texts 23 (Heidelberg, 1990).

⁴ Text is taken from the Lincoln manuscript since this sermon is not present in the Oxford manuscript.

A later reader, evidently irritated by the theological implausibility of the ending, wrote in the margin of the Lincoln manuscript: (f. 38r), *Here begyneth a notabell lye. If he made it wyttynglle hyys damnacyon slepeth not. If he did it of ingnorane (sic) he shall not be esqvesed be cawse he hath heard. Henry H.*¹

That this constitutes a typical Protestant reaction to Marian devotion, so much a feature of fifteenth century popular piety, receives some support from the fact that the following passage, taken from the Palm Sunday sermon, has been highlighted by a distinctively-shaped marginal cue:

Who is thi moder? Þu haste two moders: that one is dampnacion, þat is Eve, and anoþer is saluacion, that is Mary, þe moder of Ihesu. The law of Mary /293^r/ is not an herd law, for sche 3evithe not to every man þat þei haue deseruid, but sche is þe law of mercy and grace for sche 3evithe mercy to every man as hym nedipe (Oxford manuscript).

The same reader, later in his perusal of this sermon collection, used the same marginal doodle to draw attention to this interesting passage in which orthodox and heterodox ideas exist shoulder to shoulder. It is taken from the sermon for the first Sunday after Easter:

And so every cristen creature schall haue his mede of hym þat is moste ry3twyse domesman, if we take repentaunce for owre synnes and then amende vs of owre synfull lyvyng, as the law /3^v/ of God techythe vs, witheowte indulgens and other absolucions solde for wordly wynnng. As seynt Ambrose seythe, and also it is wreton in the law, De Penitencia, distincione prima, Verbum Dei dimittit peccata, et cetera. Ille solus dimittit [peccata] qui sol[u]s pro peccatis nostris mortuus est. 'He only for3evithe synne [þe whiche dyed for owre synnys].' And also seynt Austen seythe, De Con[secrat]ione, distincione quarta, and it is þe law pleyne: Nemo tollit peccata nisi solus Deus Christus qui est agnus tollens peccata mundi. 'No man dothe away synne, but only Crist, þe whiche is a lombe doying away þe synne of the worlde.' Here thiselfe that art vnlernd and lackest a perfit moder wit, then þu seyste that the pope and þese prelatys of the chyrche of God may not for3efe synne. And hereto I answere and sey þis: for vnto the ordur of presthode is commytted potestatem Petri ligandi atque soluend[i] in celo et in terra: 'He hathe þe power of Peter to bynde and to vnbynde in heven and in erthe.'

¹ 'esqvesed' is evidently a form of 'excused', though MED does not record it.

The orthodox writer of the sermon in the Oxford manuscript has unwittingly stumbled on a sermon preserved in a collection of sermons noted for their heterodox leanings.¹ It is possible that the later doodler found some amusement in the mention of *confession witeowte indulgens and other absolucions solde for wordly wynnynge*, a clear reference to another standard Lollard complaint which the orthodox writer failed to seize upon while copying. Only a little later does he react, somewhat vociferously, with his: *Here thiselfe that art vnlernd and lackest a perfit moder wit, then þu seyste that the pope and þese prelatys of the chyrche of God may not foryefe synne*, before going on to cite the appropriate biblical authority for the orthodox view. Such additions and annotations in these manuscripts allow the reader to judge the mood of later (but perhaps not too much later) readers for whom the old pro-Wycliffite position had been by and large turned into one of orthodoxy.

Other additions can be helpful in different ways. For instance, the names of book owners, if not too late in date after the presumed date of the manuscript, may be of assistance to an editor in attempting to localize it.² If localization proves impossible, the information provided may lead nonetheless to the formation of an idea of some or all of the book's post-medieval history; or it may throw light on questions of literary taste as it develops in the early modern period. One prominent name is that of George Davenport, the seventeenth century bibliophile (died 1677), whose collection is intimately associated with the library of John Cosin (1595-1672), bishop of Durham. In this case, the identification of a 'Davenport' manuscript – and there are over sixty

¹ The collection in question is that preserved in Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College, MS 74 (late fourteenth century) and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 95 (mid fifteenth century). Neither has been edited. The complex relationships they display with a number of other English manuscripts are explored by Helen L. Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1993), via the Index. That orthodox and suspect, heterodox material should keep such close company is yet another reminder of the difficulty in locating the dividing line between the two tendencies.

² The paramount importance to Middle English literary studies of the precisely localized manuscript is given much emphasis and illustration by Angus McIntosh, et al. ed., *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English*, 4 vols (Aberdeen, 1986).

of them – helps build up a picture of what attracted such book collectors.

To sum up, even in this brief and highly selective overview of a large subject, some evidence has been forthcoming which suggests that literary scholars have something to gain in not regarding manuscript margins as belonging to the periphery of their professional activities. The contents of margins have a bearing on manuscript fabrication, on textual integrity, on questions touching the evolving functions of books, as well as on the development of literary taste. For these reasons, pursuing this subject may reasonably be thought a desideratum.