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Postcards from the edge: an overview of marginalia in Icelandic manuscripts

There are about 1000 Icelandic vellum manuscripts preserved from the middle ages, the oldest from the mid 12th century, and perhaps 20,000 younger paper manuscripts, the bulk of them dating from the 18th and 19th centuries.¹ While not a huge number, it is nonetheless impressive considering that the population of Iceland never went much over 50,000 until the beginning of the last century, and that the manuscripts we have today represent only a very small proportion – probably less than 10% – of those actually produced.

The culture of the book came to Iceland in the wake of Christianity, and Icelandic manuscripts therefore resemble in most respects their (western) European counterparts. They are somewhat unusual, however, in that the great majority are written in the vernacular, rather than Latin, and their subject matter tends to a greater extent than on the continent to be secular rather than religious. In terms of their physical form, they tend to be smaller, darker, with fewer illuminations and more abbreviations – all of these presumably owing to Iceland being a poor community on the very edge of the civilised world.

The practice of leaving room in the margins for embellishment or for the addition of commentary, or simply to create an optically satisfying balance between written and white space, began in late antiquity and was firmly established by the middle ages.² The amount of space that was left generally varied depending on how lavish the book was meant to be – unused space as an indication of pecuniary strength, as Thorstein Veblen might have said. In Icelandic manuscripts, all but the most lavish made do with fairly narrow margins, but even such space as was left rarely remained white (or in this case brown) for very long.³ There are probably very few, if any, Icelandic manuscripts which are entirely devoid of marginal notes of one kind or another. I don't know, and therefore won't claim, that Iceland holds the world record in marginalia, but it certainly wouldn't surprise me, given a highly literate secular population⁴ coupled with general poverty and the expense of vellum, and even, when it

¹On Icelandic manuscripts generally, see Halldór Hermannsson, *Icelandic Manuscripts*, *Islandica* XIX (Ithaca, N.Y., 1929); Jón Helgason, *Handbrútasþjall* (Reykjavík, 1958); and Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Skrifaðar bækur', *Munnmenntir og bókmenning*, Íslensk þjóðmenning VI, ed. Frosti F. Jóhannsson (Reykjavík, 1989), pp. 57-89. Major manuscript collections are found in Reykjavík (Landsbókasafn, Stofnun Árna Magnússonar), Copenhagen (Det Arnamagnæanske Institut, Det kongelige Bibliotek) and Stockholm (Kungliga Biblioteket), for which the published catalogues are, respectively, *Skrá um handritasöfn Landsbókasafnsins*, ed. Páll Eggert Ólason et al. (Reykjavík, 1918-1996), I-III, aukabindi I-IV; *Katalog over Den arnamagnæanske Håndskriftsamling*, [ed. Kr. Kálund] (Copenhagen, 1888-1894), I-II; *Katalog over de oldnorske-islandske Håndskrifter i Det store kongelige Bibliotek og i Universitetsbiblioteket*, [ed. Kr. Kálund] (Copenhagen, 1900); and *Katalog öfver Kongl. Bibliotekets fornisländska och formorska handskrifter*, ed. Vilhelm Gödel (Stockholm, 1897-1900).

²Geoffrey Ashall Glaister, *Encyclopedia of the book* (New Castle, Delaware & London, 2nd edition 1996), pp. 315-16.

³Under the rubric 'marginalia' I include not only matter added in the margins, but also other types of additions extraneous to 'the text' (scribal colophons, for example, which are generally within the text block but are not part of the text as such). Thus I also include flyleaves and leaves originally left blank, for whatever reason, on which names, dates and scrawlings of various kinds came to be written, often many times over.

⁴From early on literacy was commonplace among 'ordinary people', in a way unparalleled in the rest of Europe; see Loftur Guttormsson, 'Læsi', *Munnmenntir og bókmenning*, pp. 117-144.

reached Iceland in the 16th century, paper – there were, in other words, a lot of people who could write in Iceland, and very little to write on.⁵

Despite their ubiquitousness, marginalia in Icelandic manuscripts have received little scholarly attention. Even in the introductions to scholarly editions and facsimiles,⁶ where there are very detailed descriptions of the manuscripts, including the marginalia, one often finds that only those marginalia which are deemed to be ‘of interest’ are mentioned, and the rest left out, the idea being that marginalia are only ‘of interest’ if they can provide evidence on the identities of scribes and on the time and place of writing, or to trace the subsequent history of the manuscript – and indeed owners’ and/or readers’ names do constitute a large part of the marginalia we find. But I would argue that any piece of marginalia is, at least potentially, of interest, in that it can tell us something about the way in which a book was used. What follows is an attempt at an overview of marginalia in Icelandic manuscripts, both medieval and post-medieval – notes, as it were, toward a typology. There are several criteria on which such a typology could be based. One obvious distinction is between marginalia written in the same hand(s) as the main text and those added by later readers; another is between marginalia which pertain in some way to the text and those which do not; finally, marginalia can be categorised on the basis of the nature of the material. None of these criteria is sufficient in and of itself, and all three should ideally be kept in mind.⁷

Types of marginalia:

There are, to begin with, marginalia with no obvious meaning, nib trials, doodling and so on, where there are no words or letters as such. These are common and while perhaps not worthy of much comment in themselves do at least show that the manuscript page was in no way ‘inviolable’. Alphabets, either in their entirety or simply the first few letters, are also very common; generally these too have the appearance of pen-trials, but some appear to be attempts at writing by those just beginning to learn that skill.

In AM 429 12mo, a vellum manuscript from the late 15th or early 16th century containing legends of female virgin martyrs, all originally translated from Latin, there is an originally blank opening which appears to have been used for a writing lesson. On the verso page, there is written in a practised hand the complete alphabet followed by the phrase ‘J nafne fœdur og sonar og anda heilags Amen’ (In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, amen), which is copied on the recto page in the hand of a child. On the top of the verso, another hand, also apparently that of an adult, has written: ‘þetta er bok Guðrunar að leika sér að þú hun rifnar ei þó ostíllt síe með færad’ (this is Guðrún’s book to play with, because it doesn’t rip even though it is handled roughly). Whether Guðrún was the name of the child who was learning to write, or indeed who she might have been, is unknown.

Presumably also pen-trials or practice are the many preambles to letters and similar formulae found in the margins of manuscripts; especially common are the salutation formulae of letters or introductory phrases of legal documents, such as ‘Öllum mönnum þeim er þetta

⁵There is evidence for the presence of wax tablets for writing on in the medieval period, but only one specimen has even been found, to my knowledge. It might be added that rock in Iceland is either igneous or sedimentary, and thus unsuitable for carving; there are few trees, although fairly plentiful supplies of driftwood, but carving on wood, or at least carving letters, was not common.

⁶The introductions to the volumes in the series *Manuscripta Islandica* (Copenhagen, 1954-1966), *Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile* (Copenhagen, 1958-1993) and *Íslensk miðaldarahandrit* (Reykjavík, 1981-), for example, usually provide detailed information on marginalia.

⁷See Marilena Maniaci, *Terminologia del libro manoscritto*, ristampa corretta (Milano, 1998), pp. 223-35.

bréf sjá eða heyra...’ (All those who see or hear this document...). The same applies to the many out-of-context sentences found as marginalia, which are frequently the opening lines of some other work, a law text, for example, or a well-known poem or hymn (poems and hymns written in their entirety and dealt with below). In the vast majority of such cases there is no connection between these marginalia and the main text.

Sometimes, however, a name, word or phrase from the text is simply copied in the margin for no apparent reason other than as a pen trial, or perhaps as an exercise. Occasionally it seems an attempt has been made to imitate the script of the exemplar. A word can also be repeated in the margin because the writing in the text itself is unclear, through physical damage, scribal correction or some other reason.

Words or phrases written in the margin can also be corrections to the text, where an obvious (or perceived) error or omission has been corrected in the margin by the scribe or by a later reader. Readers, or scribes copying the text, who have access to another exemplar or exemplars sometimes also ‘correct’ readings which are not apparently erroneous, by adding variant readings in the margin or above the line.

It is not uncommon to find paratextual features such as headings and other indications of divisions in the text added by scribes or readers in the margin. Names of important figures and dates of important events are also found; this is especially true, for obvious reasons, of sagas with a firm basis in history, such as the sagas of the kings of Norway (*konungasögur*).

Occasionally these paratextual features contain more than mere titles, names and dates. GKS 1002 fol., for example, is a large, two-volume collection of romances (*riddarasögur*), mythical heroic sagas (*fornaldarsögur*) and the younger, more fantastic, sagas of Icelanders (*Íslendingasögur*) dating from the 17th century. The scribe, Páll Sveinsson, has added numerous notes in the margins, generally indicating where a particular section (*þáttur*) begins. Occasionally he marks other important points in the narrative.⁸ On f. 56r, next to the passage where the great Icelandic hero Grettir is killed, he writes: ‘hier er vijg Grettis eitt hid armasta nijdjings verk sem vnnid hefir verid’ (here is the slaying of Grettir, one of the most vile and treacherous deeds ever done). On 152v he indicates the point in the late medieval romance *Sigurðar saga þögla* where Sigurðr, in the guise of a swineherd, deflowers the haughty and obstreperous ‘maiden-king’ figure Sedentiana, writing in the margin ‘nú for pijkan hennar Sedicianu’ (now goes Sedicianu’s maidenhood’). In modern Icelandic ‘píka’ is an extremely rude word for the female pudendum, but is originally a borrowing from Scandinavian (Danish *pige*) meaning simply ‘girl’, ‘maiden’ (used, apparently without a blush, in *Guðbrandsbiblíá*, the first complete translation of the Bible, printed at Hólar in 1584); its meaning here is clearly midway between the two, and shows how the development may have taken place.

Perhaps the most common form of marginalia, as was mentioned above, are personal names. There are literally thousands of names written in the margins of Icelandic manuscripts, a surprisingly large number of them of identifiable persons (on the basis of other documents such as diplomas and legal documents of various kinds, parish records etc.). The bulk of these names may be assumed to be signatures, and indeed many are followed by the formula ‘með eigin hendi’, often abbreviated ‘m.e.h.’, or its Latin counterpart ‘*manu propria*’. These sometimes have an additional self-deprecating phrase commenting on the quality of the script, as in AM 75 a fol., a manuscript of *Ólafs saga Haraldssonar*, where on f. 11r there is written

⁸I am grateful to Herbert Wäckerlin for bringing these to my attention.

‘Þórdur Guðmundzð mijn Eiginn hand þo jila sie’ (Þórður Guðmundsson, my own hand, however bad).

Such ‘signatures’ may not always be trustworthy, however; in Stock. perg. 4:0 nr 18, a vellum manuscript from around 1300, on f. 34v, at the point where the saga of the legendary Viking king Hrólfur Gautreksson breaks off (defective), some wag has written: ‘Hrólfur Gautreksson med eigin hendi’.

Most of these names are normally assumed to be those of the manuscripts’ owners, although a person who has borrowed a book will sometimes express in writing his gratitude to the book’s actual owner for the loan (something which would not be terribly popular today, one suspects). In AM 325 VI 4to, also a manuscript of *Ólafs saga Haraldssonar*, there is written on f. 27r: ‘eg einar þorbiærnar son hefi lesit þessa bok ut þackar ec ydur firir landid [sic, read landi]’ (I Einar Þorbjarnarson have read this entire book; I thank you for the loan).⁹ On the first page of AM 61 fol., which contains the sagas of the two Olafs (Tryggvason and Haraldsson), a hand from ca. 1600 has written: ‘Gvd stirke þann s[e]m þessa bok aa seg[er] biarni Þordar son’ (God strengthen him who owns this book, says Bjarni Þórðarson); it is not known who Bjarni Þórðarson was, but he is not believed to have been one of the manuscript’s owners, and is thus presumably thanking its owner for the loan of it.¹⁰

In addition to their names, owners sometimes write various formulaic expressions concerning ownership. One of the most common is the phrase ‘N.N. á þessa bók með réttu’ (N.N. rightfully owns this book); there are several variations and additions. In AM 75 a fol., mentioned previously, one owner has written: ‘Þessa bök á sera Hallur hall(uardsson) j Mødrudal, Enn einginn annar huer sem það Bannar MDLXXXIII’ (The rev. Hallur Hallvarðsson at Mødrudallur owns this book and no one else, whoever may deny it, MDLXXXIII). Sometimes these phrases are from the book’s point of view, as it were, e.g. ‘N.N. á mig’ (N.N. owns me). These phrases can take the form of short verses containing an owner’s name and perhaps a warning against the ‘non-return’ of the book. One of the more common is ‘N.N. á mig, vel máttu sjá mig, upp máttu taka mig, ekki mun það saka þig’ (N.N. owns me, you may look at me, you may pick me up, it won’t harm you’), found e.g. in Uppsala, De la Gardie 11, p. 92, from ca. 1300.

One sometimes encounters names written using cyphers of various kinds, chiefly in colophons but occasionally also in marginalia; the most common involve either moving up (or down) one letter in the alphabet (i.e. b for a, c for b, d for c etc.), or replacing the vowels with the consonants standing nearest to them, an example of which is found in AM 61 fol., f. 52: ‘olafur einars son mætte lfðb þftta [which should presumably be þfttb] sfm hkfr fr klprbt’, i.e. ‘olafur einars son mætti lesa það sem hier er klorat’ (Ólafur Einarsson might read what is written here). Names and comments are occasionally written backwards too, presumably with the same intent. The scribe Tómas Arason, mentioned again below, writes his name backwards (‘Samohr’) in two places in the manuscript AM 510 4to, and in the upper margin of f. 42v in AM 156 4to, a copy of *Jónsbók* from the 14th century, he has written: ‘Samohr ara nos áá gim lev uttam’, i.e. ‘Thomas ara son áá mig vel mattu [sia mig]’.¹¹

There is a small but significant number of marginalia which are comments on various aspects of manuscript production, written by the scribes themselves. Comments on working conditions include the following, found in the margin of AM 433 a 12mo (ff. 16v-17r), a

⁹Oscar Albert Johnsen & Jón Helgason (eds.), *Den store Saga om Olav den Hellige* (Oslo, 1941), p. 933.

¹⁰Ólafur Halldórsson (ed.), *The Great Sagas of Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf the Saint, AM 61 fol.*, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile XIV (Copenhagen, 1982), p. 25.

¹¹Ólafur Halldórsson, *Helgaféllsbækur fornar*, *Studia Islandica XXIV* (Reykjavík, 1966), pp. 25-6.

manuscript from ca. 1500 containing *Margrétar saga*, the vita of Margaret of Antioch, where the scribe has written 'Nu þiki mier langt einum saman j skrif stofunni' (now it seems to me a long time alone in the scriptorium).¹² A similar comment is found in AM 243 a fol., a 15th century manuscript of the Norwegian *Konungsskuggjá*, or 'King's mirror'; at the end of the text on 43v a hand of about the same date as the codex, but apparently not that of the scribe, has written: 'Þuiad vier Werdum ad taka huilld epter langa mæd[u]' (because we need to take a rest after a long trial).

In AM 466 4to ('Oddabók'), a manuscript of *Njáls saga* from the 15th century, the scribe has written in the lower margin of f. 26r: 'Jlla giorir þu uid mig dori þu gefur mier | allðri fiskin nogan, frændi min' (You treat me badly, Dóri [a nickname for Halldór]; you never give me enough fish, my kinsman). Oddly, this phrase is written twice, almost certainly in the same hand; lower down, on the very edge of the page, is written in smaller letters 'jlla giorer þu vid mig dore minn þu gefur mer allðri fiskinn nogann'. It's impossible to tell which of the two came first. Nor has it been possible to identify the scribe or his niggardly kinsman and employer 'Dóri'.

Scribes sometimes make comments on the exemplar, for example noting lacunae, as in AM 61 fol. 67v, where the scribe has written in the margin 'her var or blad' (here a leaf is lacking); this sort of thing can obviously be very useful to later scholars.

Comments on the exemplar can occasionally be of a more personal, less scholarly kind. In the manuscript 'Oddabók', mentioned above, there is a note on f. 51v seemingly in the hand of Páll Sveinsson (17th cent.), who is believed to have copied the text: 'Fä þä omak so driüg sem þü ert | þad mun þeim þikia sem efter þier klorar' (be damned, great long thing you are; that's what those think who make a copy of you).¹³

Scribes often make comments on their own script, sometimes in the margin and sometimes as a colophon or addition to the text, and often in verse.¹⁴ In AM 152 fol., an early 16th-century vellum, the scribe has written on f. 96v: 'Kringt er mér at klóra rangt, ek klifa þat um mitt skrif' (It's easy for me to write incorrectly; I bewail this in my script). In AM 128 4to, f. 85, the scribe has written: 'Lioth er letvr mitt ef litvr a þat mey hvit' (My writing appears ugly if looked upon by a fair maiden); similar couplets are found in several other manuscripts.¹⁵ AM 604 a-h 4to, known as *Staðarhólsbók*, is a collection of *rímur* (metrical romances) from the first half of the 16th century – it is, in fact, the largest and most important collection of *rímur* from the medieval period, but is also noteworthy for its extensive marginalia, which chiefly comprise proverbs (about which more will be said below). Scattered throughout there are also some three dozen marginal notes where the scribe, Tómas Arason, complains, often in verse and often addressing himself in the third person, about his ink, his eyes, the cold, but mostly – and completely without justification – his own handwriting.

¹²Stefán Karlsson, 'Kvennahendrit í karlahöndum', *Sögur af háaloftinu, sagðar Helgu Kress 21. september 1989* (Reykjavík, 1989), pp. 75-80.

¹³D. Slay, 'On the origin of two Icelandic manuscripts in the Royal Library in Copenhagen', *Opuscula I, Bibliotheca Arnamagnæana XX* (Copenhagen, 1960), pp. 143-50, at p. 148.

¹⁴Stefán Karlsson, 'Skrivaverser: Island', *Kúltúrhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder* (Copenhagen, 1956-78), XV, cols 692-93.

¹⁵Agnete Loth, *Reykjahólabók: Islandske helgenlegender*. Editiones Arnamagnæanae XV-XVI (Copenhagen 1969-1970), I, p. xli.

On such is on p. 63, where Tómas has written: 'Ljótlega fer nú loðin skrift, ljós ok klesst fyrir bauganift' (Ugly is this fuzzy writing, pale and clotted/sloppy to women).¹⁶

One very common verse of this type, still known to every school-child in Iceland, is:

Skrifin mín er stafa stór
stílað illa letur
það er eins og kattar klór
eg kann það ekki betur

(I fear my script is large and fat,
formed badly every letter;
it's like the clawmarks of a cat;
I can't do any better.)

There is, compared to many other places, a lot of weather in Iceland, in that the weather can vary considerably within a short space of time; the weather was also, in previous times at least, of greater importance in Iceland than in many other places, in that a long cold spell or some extra days of rain could result in hunger. It is not surprising, then, that comments on the weather are found with some frequency in Icelandic manuscripts, either as marginal notes, or as part of scribal colophons. In AM 696 VI 4to, which comprises four early 17th-century fragments of the Icelandic translation of the *Lucidarius*, there are several such comments. In the lower margin of f. 1v, for example, a hand has written 'J aprílís manvdi snemma a svnnvdag var js j rekí með uedri miclv a nordan er' (in the month of April early one Sunday there was sea-ice driven by a great storm in the north).

As was mentioned above, there are many examples of proverbs written in the margins of manuscripts; they are in fact our chief source for proverbs from the late medieval period; so much so that one collection, found in the margins of the manuscript AM 604 4to, mentioned previously, has been edited separately.¹⁷ Another important collection, as yet unpublished, is found in the manuscript Rask 72a, a copy of *Jónsbók* from around 1500, which in the margins contains, in the words of the catalogue 'talrige, dog temlig [sic] intet-sigende skrifer-fraser' (numerous, though rather meaningless, phrases).¹⁸

Other manuscripts make do with one or two, such as that found in AM 595 4to, 1v 'Smidurinn hefur þuj teijngur ad hann vill ecki brenna sijnar fíjngur' (The smith uses tongs because he doesn't want to burn his fingers).¹⁹ The collections are obviously one thing, but these stray proverbs are presumably exercises and pen trials, the way we might write (or type) 'The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog' or something similar.

Invocations of various kinds are also common, and there are thousands of examples of 'Ave Maria', 'Drottinn' (Lord), 'Jesus', 'Guð faðir' (God [the] father) etc., both in Icelandic and Latin. Also things like 'Nu Bid eg Gud þu Nader Mig' (Now I ask you God to show me mercy), this example from AM 61 fol., from the 17th century.

Blessings are common too, where people are praised or blessed for one reason or another. In AM 66 fol., the collection of kings' sagas known as *Hulda* ('the hidden one'), f.

¹⁶Kr. Kálund, 'En islandsk ordsprogsamling fra 15de århundrede', *Småstykker* (København, 1884-1891), pp. 131-184, at 176-79; Kr. Kálund, 'Til forståelse af "en islandsk ordsprogsamling fra 15de århundrede"', *Arkiv for nordisk filologi* IV (1888), pp. 186-190; Jón Helgason, 'Nokkur íslensk handrit frá 16. öld', *Skírnir* CVI (1932), pp. 143-68.

¹⁷Kr. Kálund, 'En islandsk ordsprogsamling fra 15de århundrede', *Småstykker*, pp. 131-184.

¹⁸Kr. Kálund, *Katalog over Den arnamagnæanske Håndskriftsamling*, II, 544.

¹⁹Jakob Benediktsson (ed.), *Catilina and Jugurtha by Sallust and Pharsalia by Lucan in Old Norse: Rómverjasaga AM 595 a-b, 4to*, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile XIII (Copenhagen, 1980), p. 17.

74v: 'Gud were með þier minn gode vin Þordur Arnna sonn' (God be with you my good friend Þórður Árnason). In AM 325 VII 4to, comprising eight fragments of Ólafs saga Haraldssonar from a codex from the 13th century, there are many such marginal blessings from the 16th or 17th century, including, on f. 31r: 'Fridur sie með yður nu og jafnann minn gode vin ketill ketilsson' (Peace by with you now and always, my good friend Ketill Ketilsson). On f. 3r in the same manuscript there is the rather sweet exchange between a man and wife: 'Gud vere með yður bonde min ok gefi yður lif ok lucku' (God be with you, my husband, and give you life and good luck) and 'Gvd geymi yður hvstrv min' (God protect you my wife).²⁰

The converse of this, curses, are also found, although far less commonly; one example is AM 350 fol., known as 'Skarðsbók' or 'Codex Scardensis', where on f. 95r a 15th-century hand has written: 'Þordur thorstæinsson æinn krathin bofwe ek vil suo heill Path er Sath' (Þórður Þorsteinsson, a wicked scoundrel, upon my soul! That is true.) Unfortunately neither the writer nor the object of his disaffection is identifiable. The inspiration for this outburst seems to come from a comment written lower on the same page in another hand: 'Ek uil suo heill ath ormur er einn bofi' (Upon my soul, Ormur is a scoundrel); this can only be a reference to Ormur Snorrason (14th cent.), the first known owner of the manuscript, who gave it to the church at Skarð (whence it derives its name); Ormur's name appears in various places in the manuscript.²¹

Another curious outburst is found on f. 60v of AM 180 a fol., a manuscript of *Karlamagnús saga* from the 15th century, where some disaffected person has written 'Jon skítur min' (Jón my shit[?]).²²

There are a lot of verses and verse-fragments, and occasionally even whole poems, found in the margins of Icelandic manuscripts, a significant proportion of them preserving things which are not attested elsewhere. Indeed one whole genre may be said to exist chiefly in the margins of other types of literature – short love lyrics, which were never collected or written down in their own right.²³

But it is not just love lyrics; the first lines of (Lutheran) hymns are also commonly found in margins, and occasionally complete hymns. Some of these are not known elsewhere, or are known in different versions, suggesting that these were independent translations (from German or Danish).

AM 61 fol., mentioned previously, contains lots of marginalia, both in the scribe's hand and in other later hands. Among other things there are, on 69v, 71r and 72r, seven strophes from an otherwise unknown poem (*drápa*) on Ólafur Tryggvason. Parts of the poem are now scarcely legible, as somebody, almost certainly Professor Finnur Jónsson, poured water on them in order to make the writing stand out more clearly, and many readings are now based entirely on what he claims to have been able to read.²⁴

²⁰Oscar Albert Johnsen & Jón Helgason (eds.), *Den store Saga om Olav den Hellige* (Oslo, 194), pp. 939-40.

²¹Jónas Kristjánsson, Ólafur Halldórsson & Sigurður Lindal (eds.), *Skarðsbók: Codex Scardensis: AM 350 fol.* (Reykjavík, 1981), pp. 12-13.

²²Eyvind Fjeld Halvorsen (ed.), *Karlamagnús Saga and some Religious Texts. AM 180 a and b fol.*, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile XVIII (Copenhagen, 1989), p. 14.

²³M. J. Driscoll, 'Love poetry: West Norse', *Medieval Scandinavia: An encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York, 1993), pp. 396-98; examples can be found in Jón Samsonarson (ed.), *Kvæði og dansleikar* (Reykjavík, 1964).

²⁴See Finnur Jónsson (ed.), *Den Norske-Islandske Skjaldedigtning* (København, 1912-15), A II, pp. 462-63; Ólafur Halldórsson (ed.), *The Great Sagas of Olaf Tryggvason and Olaf the Saint, AM 61 fol.*, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile XIV (Copenhagen, 1982), pp. 22-27; Ólafur Halldórsson (ed.), *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* (Copenhagen, 1958-2000), III, pp. Xxxii-xxxv.

Although I have said that all marginalia are potentially 'of interest', this is not to claim that all marginalia are equally interesting. Comments by scribes, mentioned above, are an important source of information on manuscript production. Comments by readers, on the other hand, are an important source of information on manuscript consumption and how the texts were received. Often these comments are simple statements on a saga's quality, a short review, as it were, such as that found in AM 180 b fol., f. 10r, top margin: 'Bærings saga er Hin Skemtilegazta Saga' (*Bærings saga* is a most entertaining saga).

Comments on individual characters, in particular villains, are sometimes found, such as that on f. 121v in the large and richly (by Icelandic standards) illuminated codex *Flateyjarbók*, in the part of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* where Ólafur is explaining how the wicked Queen Gunnhildr had tried to have him killed, where someone unable to restrain himself has written: 'Suej þier húsfreya' ('Fie upon you, housewife').

AM 421 12mo is a Danish prayer-book from the early 16th century – just before the Reformation; I include it here because there are several marginal comments of a satirical kind in a 17th-century, i.e. post-Reformation, Icelandic hand, possibly that of Páll Hallsson (d. 1663), a clergyman who served as librarian to Jørgen Seefeld, in whose collection the manuscript was kept. On f. 106v, below a miniature of St. Maurice, for example, Páll, or someone, has written 'Sanctum Sanctorum & Snip Snap Snorum'.

Under the heading of 'reader's comments' one might also wish to consider the case of 'negative intervention', where a reader has rubbed out, defaced or altered parts of a text, generally because they were felt to be offensive. One example of this is in Stock. perg. 4:o nr 18, f. 52r, where some prudish reader has erased the word 'baki' (back), thus altering the sense, which has suggestions of homosexuality.²⁵ In AM 586 4to, the principal manuscript of the older version of the mythical-heroic *Bósa saga*, three fabliau-like episodes in which the hero seduces a series of farmers' daughters have been rubbed out. Fortunately, the scenes are found in other, closely related manuscripts.²⁶ The obscene poem 'Grettisfærsla', found in AM 556 a 4to, ff. 52r-53r, received similar treatment, but here we are not so fortunate, in that this is the only extant copy; parts can still be read in ultra-violet light, but in the 19th century some reagent, probably tincture of gall, was poured on the first leaf in an (unsuccessful) attempt to bring out the script, rendering it totally illegible now.²⁷

One curious example of erasure is AM 325 II 4to, a manuscript from the early 13th century preserving the only extant copy of the early history of the kings of Norway known as *Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum*. Throughout the manuscript single words and short phrases have been erased. Apart from one or two instances these do not appear to be corrections, nor have the spaces been filled in with other words. The deleted words can, for the most part, still be made out, a few with the naked eye, the remainder in ultra-violet light; curiously, their presence would in general not alter the sense, and it is as if someone, as a sort of exercise or diversion, has gone through the text and removed, like a modern copy-editor, anything which struck him as superfluous.²⁸

²⁵Bjarni Einarsson (ed.), *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue. Perg. 4:o Nr. 18 in The Royal Library, Stockholm, Early Icelandic Manuscripts in Facsimile XVI* (Copenhagen, 1986), p. 14.

²⁶Otto Luitpold Jiriczek (ed.), *Die Bósa-Saga in zwei Fassungen nebst Proben aus den Bósa-Rímur* (Strassburg, 1893); these passages are omitted in a number of younger paper manuscripts, and in the *editio princeps*, Olof Verelius (ed.), *Herrauds och Bosa Saga* (Uppsala, 1666), examples of self-censorship.

²⁷Ólafur Halldórsson, 'Grettisfærsla', *Opuscula* 1, pp. 49-77.

²⁸Bjarni Einarsson (ed.), *Ágrip af Noregskonunga sögum*, Íslenzk fornrit XXIX (Reykjavík, 1984), p. vi.

Occasionally, the marginalia constitute texts in their own right, the importance of which is no less, and perhaps greater, than that of the 'main text'. One example of this is the document Þí XLVIII, in the National Archives of Iceland (Þjóðskjalasafn Íslands), which is a ledger, containing the accounts, written primarily in Danish, of a merchant in Straumfjörður, Mýrarsýsla, western Iceland, for the years 1812-14. The texts of three sagas have been written in whatever space remained, with the title of the saga or name of the hero written over each section of text, and the sections surrounded by a coloured border, drawn with red or blue crayon. Many leaves have been removed, presumably because they were full. The scribe is one Brynjúlfur Oddsson, who has written his name in several places throughout the manuscript, including several times in different scripts on the first page, where there is also found written 'Brinjulfur OddsSon á þessa bók með ríetttrú [sic]' (Brynjúlfur Oddsson rightly owns this book). Following the last item is written 'þessa Sögu á kona Mýn Guðrún Sigmund[s]dóttir á Rúffeyum Endað ad Skrifu hana Arid 1865 af Brnjúlfvi OddsSyni' (This saga belongs to my wife Guðrún Sigmundsdóttir, Rúffeyjar; the writing of it completed in the year 1865 by Brynjúlfur Oddsson). As it happens, we know a little bit about this Brynjúlfur. He was a poor cottager, living on a group of four small islands in Breiðafjörður in the western part of Iceland, and with a large household which needed both to be fed and entertained. Paper was presumably simply a luxury he couldn't afford, and so he had to make do with what he could find.²⁹

Such 'recycling' was common, and one often finds among the leaves of 19th-century manuscripts envelopes, legal forms, printers' proofs and so on. Writing, as I said in the beginning, was part of everyday life in Iceland in a way largely unknown in most of the rest of Europe until recent times. Perhaps because of this, books were often treated in a way we might now regard as cavalier; not only were they – literally – 'read to bits', but they were themselves frequently also 'recycled' – vellum leaves were removed and used for dress patterns, shoe-linings, stiffening for a bishop's mitre, and the wooden boards between which they were bound (themselves often 'recycled' from barrels, boxes and other imported objects, wood being rare in Iceland) were apparently used as chopping blocks, for preparing snuff. But not least, as we have seen, they were used for writing, the margins and any blank leaves filling up with jottings of every kind. The bulk of the marginalia in Icelandic manuscripts are thus not 'dialogues with the text' in any real sense. And yet, they reveal, precisely in their 'irreverence', an attitude toward texts. We have in one manuscript (AM 75 c fol.) something resembling a shopping list (salt, needles, thread), in another ('Codex Trajectinus', Utrecht Universiteitsbibliotheek MS 1374) a long list of people, almost certainly the members of a household, many referred to by nicknames (Imba, Manki, Tobba, Steinka, Sigga), while in a third (AM 586 4to) there is what appears to be the remnants of a party game: on one page is written 'þetta hef eg skrifad blindandi Brniolfur Jonsson' (I have written this blind[fold]ed, Brynjólfur Jónsson), in such a way that it might well have been written by a man who was

²⁹M. J. Driscoll, *The unwashed children of Eve: The production, dissemination and reception of popular literature in post-Reformation Iceland* (London, 1997), pp. 69-70.

blindfolded, and at the bottom of the facing page it says 'nu skal briniolf lataz blinda' (Brynjólfur will now be blind[fold]ed) – these are things essentially ephemeral, but which, unintentionally, have achieved a kind of permanence. They are like snapshots of people, caught at their most unguarded. Or indeed, like postcards.