Much Ado About a Footnote?

The Development and Function of the *Ḥāshiya* in the Islamic Intellectual Tradition

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Introduction

Few things captured the perceived decay of Islamic learning in the eyes of modern reformers like Muḥammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) more than the *ḥāshiya*. For them, the shelves of al-Azhar groaned not under the weight of knowledge, but beneath the dead hand of the *ḥāshiya*, which they viewed as a scholastic labyrinth that turned critical thinking into memorization and "crippled the academic capacity of students."[1] But what exactly is a *ḥāshiya*, and how seriously should we take these grave indictments against it? In what follows, we will examine the history and function of this literary form, shedding light on a practice that was once a defining feature of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

From novels to textbooks and everything in between, books today conjure a rather uniform image in the mind of the modern reader: a self-contained monograph, authored by a single individual, neatly confined to a specific genre or discipline. Premodern manuscripts, however, operated under an entirely different set of expectations. A particularly illustrative example lies in what scholars now term a manuscript's *paratext*, that is, all the content external to the main text but nonetheless integrally bound to it. These elements were essential components of the manuscript's identity: they included reading attestations (*samāʿāt*), scribal colophons, ownership marks (*tamalluk*), and endowment seals (*waqfiyyāt*). Taken together, these features provide invaluable insight not only into a manuscript's provenance but also into the scholarly and social environments through which it circulated.[2] Of particular interest for us is one such paratextual form: the *ḥāshiya*, or marginal gloss.

1. ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr Marzūq, "Preface," in Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Waḥy al-Muḥammadī* (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2005), 4.

2. On the paratextual components of an Arabic manuscript, see Adam Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts A Vademecum for Readers* (Brill, 2009).

A new journal by yaqeen

Known by various terms (*ḥāmish*, *taʿlīqa*, *ṭurra*), the *ḥāshiya* (pl. *ḥawāshī*) linguistically refers to that which is on the margins.[3] Arabic lexicons describe the *ḥāshiya* of a garment as its outer hem and the *ḥāshiya* of a royal entourage as those who stand on the periphery.[4] Even in hadith literature, we encounter this usage: the Prophet (upon him peace) is reported to have prayed by the *ḥāshiyat al-maqām*, i.e., the side of the *maqām Ibrāhīm*.[5] From the various methods of glossing a text, a *ḥāshiya* was written along the margins and was often secondary to the base text, whereas a *sharḥ* was an independent and detailed line-by-line commentary beneath the base text.[6] As its name suggests, a *ḥāshiya* may appear as little more than marginalia: peripheral both literally and intellectually. But in the Islamic scholarly tradition, the *ḥāshiya* was often anything but marginal.

A *ḥāshiya* could take a number of forms. Sometimes it appeared as scattered glosses or interlinear comments in between the text (*bayna al-suṭūr*). Other times, it developed into a relatively lengthy commentary, each instance varying in terms of the authorial voice asserted by the glossator.[7] Some offered mere citations or clarifications; others exercised independent reasoning, turning the margin into a discursive space in its own right. Indeed, the value of a *ḥāshiya* could grow to such an extent that it eclipsed the primary text altogether. In certain cases, these glosses became the true focus of scholarly attention, giving rise to the phenomenon of super-glosses (*ḥāshiya ʿalā al-ḥāshiya*) in which entire commentarial traditions would orbit around what was once peripheral notes (see Figure 1). If a first-order *ḥāshiya* constitutes a gloss, and a second-order *ḥāshiya* serves as a super-gloss upon the first, then what are we to make of third- or fourth-order commentarial layers? English, with its lexical economy in this domain, offers no elegant equivalents. As Robert Wisnovsky wryly observed, terms such as "superdoopergloss" or "superdooperpoopergloss" are unlikely to achieve scholarly traction.[8]

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3. There are nuances and regional variations in the usage of these terms. For instance, a *ḥāmish* is described as a loan word, foreign to Arabic (*muwallad*). See Raḍī al-Dīn al-Saghānī, *al-Takmila wa-l-dhayl wa-l-ṣila* (Maṭbaʿāt Dār al-Kutub, 1979), 3:527.

4. Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Tāj al-ʿarūs min jawāhir al-Qāmūs* (Al-Majlis al-Waṭanī li-l-Thaqāfa wa-l-Funūn wa-l-Ādāb, 2001), 37:436.

5. *Sunan al-Nasāʾī* (Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 2001), 1:410, no. 836.

6. On the definitions of marginal commentaries, glosses, and scholia, see Stephanie Brinkmann, "Marginal Commentaries in Ḥadīth Manuscripts," *Zeitsprünge* 24, no. 1 (2020): 14–19.

7. Brinkmann, "Marginal Commentaries in Ḥadīth Manuscripts," 34.

8. Robert Wisnovsky, "The Nature and Scope of Arabic Philosophical Commentary in post-Classical (ca. 1100–1900 AD) Islamic Intellectual History: Some Preliminary Observations," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 47, no. 83 (2004): 160.

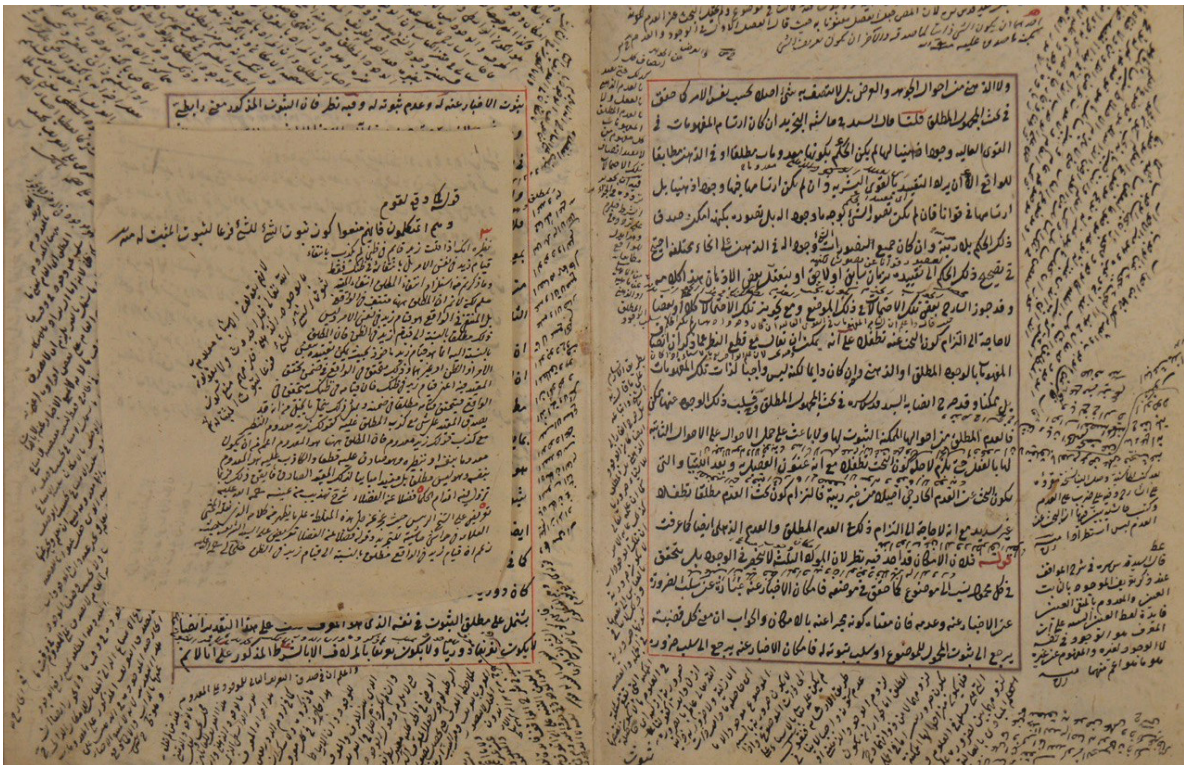

Figure 1: The *ḥāshiya* of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Dawwānī on *Tajrīd al-ʿaqāʾid*. The marginal and interlinear *ḥāshiyas* were so copious that a card (*juzāza*) was added to complete them. Fayḍ Allāh Effendi, no. 1110, folios 7–8.

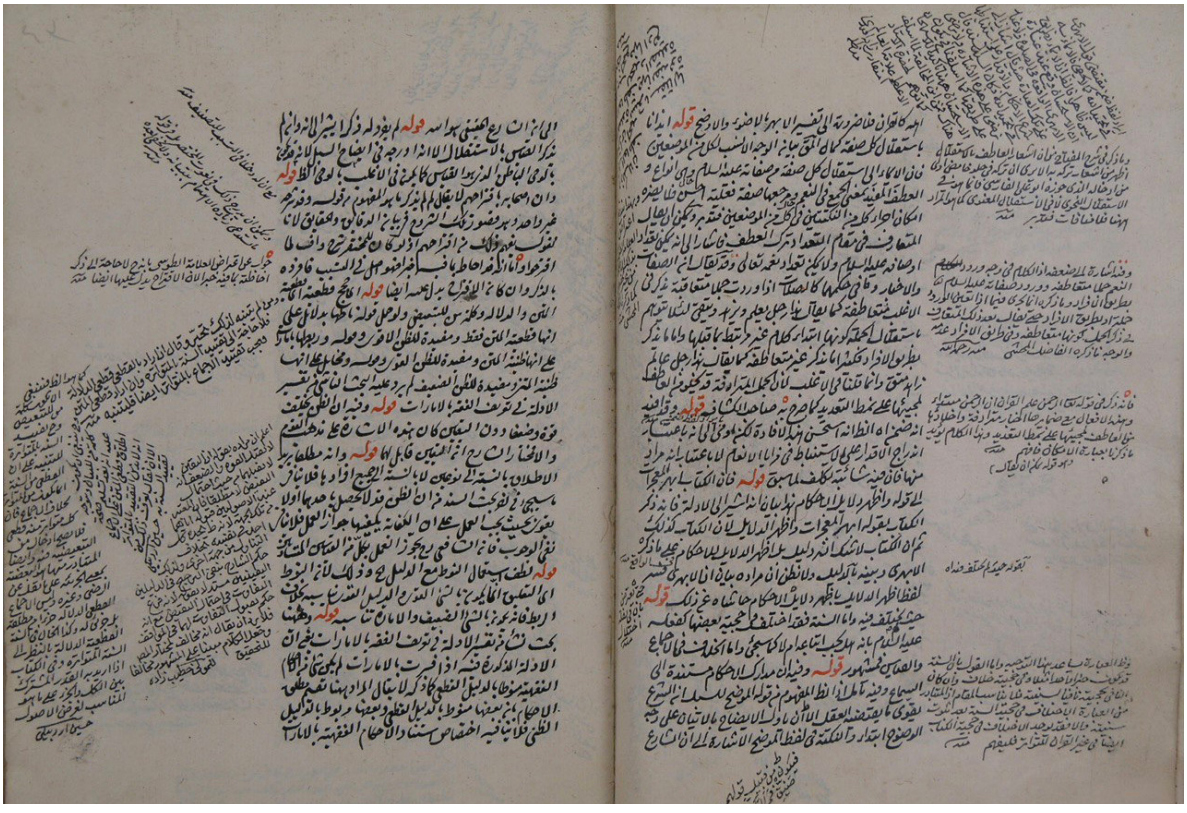

Figure 2: An example of a fourth-degree or "superdooperpooper" gloss: Afḍal Zādah's gloss on his own gloss on al-Jurjānī's gloss on al-Ījī's gloss on Ibn al-Ḥājib's legal primer. Fayḍ Allāh Effendī, no. 597, folios 42–43.

To illustrate the layered architecture of the *ḥāshiya* tradition, consider the following excerpt from the legal primer of the seventh-century Kurdish jurist Ibn al-Ḥājib, along with a series of glosses that developed around it (see Figure 2):

> **Author** (Ibn al-Ḥājib; d. 646 AH): And it is confined to preliminaries (*mabādiʾ*), scriptural proofs, prioritization, and *ijtihād*.
>
> **Glossator** (al-Ījī; d. 756 AH): "It is confined to," i.e., this primer or the science of legal theory is confined to four areas.
>
> **Super-Glossator** (al-Jurjānī; d. 816 AH): "This primer or the science of legal theory is confined to," i.e., the antecedent in the words "it is confined" can refer to the present primer, which was alluded to in his earlier words "that I summarized…" or it refers to the science of legal theory…If the antecedent refers to the primer, which is a preferred reading, there is no need to offer an alternative explanation.
>
> **Third-Degree Glossator** (Afḍal Zādah; d. 908 AH): "there is no need to offer an alternative explanation" because all three antecedents in the phrase "*lā yaṣudd al-labīb ʿan taʿallumihi ṣādd wa-lā yaruddu…*" refer to the primer itself.
>
> **Fourth-Degree Glossator** (Afḍal Zādah): Someone who studied this book with me posited that one of the two phrases (viz., "there is no need to offer an alternative explanation" and "there is no objection") is redundant because each of them convey the same meaning. I said: There is no contention here if we assume the antecedent in "confined to" refers to the primer…

How many *ḥāshiya*s were ever written? The short answer is: we will never truly know. Several factors preclude a definitive accounting. By their very nature, *ḥāshiya*s were often composed in an *ad hoc* fashion: scribbled in the margins of manuscripts, appended informally to existing texts, or transmitted within localized scholarly circles. As a result, countless marginal glosses remain scattered, uncatalogued, or even lost. To offer some indication of the scale involved, one may consult al-Ḥabshī's catalog of glosses and commentaries. Even in its limited scope, the catalog enumerates approximately 4,500 works explicitly titled *ḥāshiya*.[9] This figure, however, represents only a fragment of the broader tradition and is almost certainly dwarfed by the true number of marginal glosses.

9. ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad al-Ḥabshī, *Jāmiʿ al-shurūḥ wa-l-ḥawāshī* (Dār al-Minhāj, 2018), 5:530–589.

History

Perusing the vast corpus of manuscripts at our disposal, one quickly observes that a significant proportion of them are adorned with *ḥāshiya*s. A notable exception, however, lies in Qur'anic manuscripts. While many modern *maṣāḥif*, such as the 19th-century edition produced by Aḥmad ʿAlī Sahāranpūrī in India, contain extensive marginalia detailing the principles of Qur'anic orthography (*rasm*) and variant readings (*qirāʾāt*), this is the exception rather than the rule.[10] A cursory glance at the earliest extant Qur'anic codices reveals an almost total absence of marginal notes.[11] Some early Qur'anic manuscripts were written so densely that no space was left in the margins, making the presence of *ḥāshiya*s inconceivable altogether.[12] This is perhaps unsurprising. Some scholars actively discouraged the inclusion of extra-textual material in the *muṣḥaf* as the sanctity of the Qur'an necessitated, in their view, a manuscript free from the textual interjections that characterized other genres.[13]

The margins transform into vibrant arenas of scholarly exchange. The *ḥāshiya* is not merely a footnote to the tradition—it is often its beating heart.

Outside of the Qur'an, however, the landscape is entirely different. Manuscripts across virtually all branches of the Islamic sciences are replete with *ḥāshiya*s. Even in disciplines typically regarded as marginal or eccentric (e.g., romance literature and the occult sciences), one finds marginal notes scattered across the folios.[14] Arabic lexicographers, too, frequently reference the *ḥāshiya* of earlier grammarians, treating these glosses as legitimate sources of linguistic insight.[15] But it is when we turn to the central fields of Islamic knowledge, viz. *ʿaqīda*, *tafsīr*, *fiqh*, and hadith, that the true intellectual heft of the *ḥāshiya* becomes fully manifest. Here, the margins transform into vibrant arenas of scholarly exchange. The *ḥāshiya* is not merely a footnote to the tradition—it is often its beating heart.

In the realm of Qur'anic exegesis, the significance of the *ḥāshiya* genre becomes particularly evident when we consider its development around seminal *tafsīr* works such as *al-Kashshāf* by al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538 AH) and *Anwār al-tanzīl* by al-Bayḍāwī (d. 719 AH); the latter alone has over a staggering three-hundred glosses written on it, let alone super-glosses.[16] After the seventh century AH, the genre of the *ḥāshiya* began to reshape the very trajectory of *tafsīr* literature.

10. On the Sahāranpūrī *muṣḥaf* project, see Muntasir Zaman, https://www.qalamresearch.com/blog/the-sahranpuri-print-of-the-quran (accessed April 14, 2025).

11. See, for instance, https://corpuscoranicum.de/en/verse-navigator/sura/1/verse/1/manuscripts (accessed April 14, 2025).

12. Marijn van Putten, "Textual Criticism of the Quran," in *The Comparative Textual Criticism of Religious Scriptures*, ed. Karin Finsterbusch, Russell Fuller, Armin Lange, and Jason Driesbach (Brill, 2024), 155.

13. On the debates surrounding the exclusion of extra-Qur'anic material from the *muṣḥaf*, see Musāʿid al-Ṭayyār, *al-Muḥarrar fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-l-Maʿlūmāt al-Qurʾāniyya, 2008), 229–234.

14. See, for instance, Ibn al-Naḫḫās, *Mukhtaṣar mashāriʿ al-ashwāq* fol. 12r. Sulaymāniyya no. 555; *Muntakhabāt li-Shams al-Maʿārif li-l-Būnī*, fol. 49r. Aḥmad Pāshā no. 350.

15. See, for instance, Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-ʿarab* (Dār Ṣādir, 1414 AH), 12:192.

16. Samuel J. Ross, "What Were the Most Popular *tafsīr*s in Islamic History? Part 1: An Assessment of the Manuscript Record and the State of *tafsīr* Studies," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 25 no. 3 (2024): 6.

Figure 3: On the right is a *ḥāshiya* on a plague invocation, instructing the reader to inscribe specific letters on the cover of his copy to miraculously enhance his knowledge—based on the occult science of letterism. On the left is a marginal note providing a date for a passage on dream interpretation. Aḥmad Pāshā, no. 350, folios 64–65.

The act of writing a *ḥāshiya* on a canonized *tafsīr* became, within the madrasa networks, a means for scholars to articulate their own perspectives, engage critically with authoritative interpretations, and establish their academic credentials. When we think about prominent *tafsīr*s, some may imagine *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* or *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī*. Notwithstanding the merits of those works, it is essential to recognize that for over six centuries during the post-classical period spanning the 13th to 19th centuries, the *tafsīr* tradition was overwhelmingly channeled through the *ḥāshiya* genre. In terms of both volume and intellectual engagement, *ḥāshiya* writing, particularly on *al-Kashshāf* and *Anwār al-tanzīl*, came to dominate exegetical discourse across the major centers of Islamic intellectual life: the Ottoman, Mughal, and Safavid empires. It was only with the advent of modernity and the rise of *tafsīr* works like Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī's *Rūḥ al-maʿānī* (completed in 1854) that we begin to see a shift away from the *ḥāshiya*-centered model of exegesis.[17]

A comparable trend can be observed in the field of hadith. While monumental commentaries, such as Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's (d. 852 AH) *Fatḥ al-bārī*, dominate the scholarly spotlight, the *ḥāshiya* tradition has played a quieter yet no less vital role. Al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911 AH) *ḥāshiya* on

17. See Walid Saleh, "Periodization in the Sunni Qur'an Commentary Tradition: A Chronological History of a Genre," in *Practices of Commentary: Medieval Traditions and Transmissions*, ed. Amanda Goodman and Suzanne Conklin Akbari (Amsterdam University Press, 2023), 58–60.

Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī is an illustrative example of scholarly minimalism, an exercise in precision where less is more.[18] By the 18th and 19th centuries, the production of *ḥāshiya*s on the six canonical hadith collections had become prolific, with figures like Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sindī (d. 1138 AH) and Aḥmad ʿAlī Sahāranpūrī (d. 1880) emerging as key contributors. These glosses served not merely as footnotes but as points of critical engagement, clarification, and pedagogical mediation within the hadith sciences.[19]

In the domain of Islamic law (*fiqh*), the centrality of the *ḥāshiya* becomes even more pronounced. Within the Shāfiʿī school, for instance, legal authority was effectively channeled through the works of a small number of authoritative jurists, most notably al-Nawawī (d. 676 AH) and al-Ramlī (d. 1004 AH). As a result, subsequent scholars were compelled to situate their contributions in relation to these canonical texts. Through glosses and super-glosses, jurists carved out space to express legal nuance while remaining within the orbit of established precedent.[20] The Ḥanafī school, particularly in its later centuries, displayed a somewhat similar pattern. Here, scholarly creativity often emerged through treatises (*rasāʾil*), standalone discussions on specific legal questions or themes. Yet, much of this intellectual output found its way into the sprawling *ḥāshiya* tradition as well, especially in the works of the doyen of Ḥanafī scholarship, Ibn ʿĀbidīn (d. 1836), whose gloss on *al-Durr al-mukhtār* synthesized vast swathes of legal commentary and debate. His *ḥāshiya*, *Radd al-muḥtār,* became the definitive legal reference for subsequent Ḥanafīs.[21]

Turning to the rational sciences (*maʿqūlāt*), we find the *ḥāshiya* genre no less vibrant. A striking case in point is the remarkable afterlife of Muḥib Allāh al-Bihārī's (d. 1707) logical primer *Sullam al-ʿulūm*. Despite being a concise tract on Aristotelian logic (or rather "of" because of its brevity), the *Sullam* became, paradoxically, a site of expansive scholarly activity. Its very conciseness invited elaboration; dozens of *ḥāshiya*s, spanning Arabic, Persian, and even Urdu, were written upon it in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These marginal glosses often served multiple purposes: some functioned as pedagogical tools clarifying dense points of logic for students in the madrasa system; others ventured into philosophical ruminations far beyond the limits of the base text. The *ḥāshiya*, then, was not simply an interpretive aid; it became a performance of scholarly erudition and intellectual participation in an ongoing tradition. The cumulative result is a kind of superstructure of thought—a layered intellectual edifice where the margins reshape and redirect its meanings.[22]

18. Joel Blecher, *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary Across a Millennium* (University of California Press, 2018), chapter 8.

19. Muntasir Zaman, "Hidden in the Margins: Contesting Legal Authority in Marginal Hadith Glosses," *Islamic Law and Society* (published online ahead of print 2025).

20. Ahmed El Shamsy, "The Ḥāshiya in Islamic Law: A Sketch of the Shāfiʿī Literature," *Oriens* 41:3–4 (2013): 289–315.

21. Samy Ayoub, "Creativity in Continuity: Legal Treatises (*al-rasāʾil al-fiqhiyya*) in Islamic law," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 34:3 (2023): 307, 315–17. Ibn ʿĀbidīn labels *Radd al-muḥtār* and *Minḥat al-khāliq* as *ḥāshiya*s despite their uncharacteristic length compared to other *ḥāshiya*s. See Ibn ʿĀbidīn, *al-ʿUqūd al-dariyya fī tanqīḥ al-Fatāwā al-Ḥāmidiyya* (Dār al-Maʿrifah, n.d.), 1:2.

22. Asad Q. Ahmed, "Post-Classical Philosophical Commentaries/Glosses: Innovation in the Margins," *Oriens* 41 (2013): 317–348.

Function

The most immediate function of a *ḥāshiya* is, of course, exegetical: to elucidate the meanings of the base text. Thus, when an obscure term appears, such as an unusual usage in a legal manual or a philosophical treatise, it is in the margins that we often find its interpretation clarified. But the role of the *ḥāshiya* extends far beyond simple commentary. These marginalia stand as markers of intellectual development, instances of peer review, and repositories of scholarly curiosities that defy neat categorization.

In pushing back against the common narrative of post-classical Islamic intellectual stagnation, Khaled El-Rouayheb highlights the glosses of al-Dawwānī (d. 918 AH) and al-Isfarāyīnī (d. 945 AH) on theological, philosophical, and other texts. These glosses are not mere echoes of tradition but dynamic sites of *taḥqīq* (rigorous verification and critical engagement) as opposed to *taqlīd*, rote imitation. In this view, the *ḥāshiya* emerges as a vibrant forum of intra-scholarly discourse, where inherited knowledge is continually tested and refined.[23] Thus, we find al-Isfarāyīnī in his *ḥāshiya* critically engage the commentator Mullā Jāmī (d. 898 AH) on most issues (*akthar al-mawāḍiʿ*).[24] The methodology of the glossators of critically engaging the base text is noteworthy: their verification "straddles tradition and scholarly factionalism, on the one hand, and independent reasoning and verification, one the other, in a complex fashion."[25]

The canon is not read uncritically; it is scrutinized, questioned, and rearticulated in the very margins that surround it.

Indeed, the *ḥāshiya* functions as a mechanism of checks and balances. While such critical interventions could theoretically be performed through full-length commentaries or independent treatises, the marginal note offers a unique proximity to the text. It allows the scholar to engage with the primary material in real time, at the point of reading. Unlike ecclesiastical traditions such as Catholicism, Sunni Islam lacks a central magisterium; claims to knowledge stand or fall by their evidence and their reception within a community of learned discourse. The *ḥāshiya*, in this context, becomes the space where consensus is built or challenged. In every intellectual discipline, we find no shortage of revered texts. But reverence does not preclude critique. The canon is not read uncritically; it is scrutinized, questioned, and rearticulated in the very margins that surround it.[26]

23. Khaled El-Rouayheb, *Islamic Intellectual History in the Seventeenth Century: Scholarly Currents in the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb* (Cambridge University Press, 2015), 29–34.

24. Ḥājjī Khalīfa, *Kashf al-ẓunūn* (Maktabat al-Muthannā, 1941), 2:1372.

25. Ahmed, "Post-Classical Philosophical Commentaries," 346.

26. See, for instance, Ross, "What Were the Most Popular *tafsīr*s in Islamic History?," 31.

Figure 4: Anwar Shāh al-Kashmīrī's copious marginal and interlinear gloss on *Āthār al-sunan*. Author's personal facsimile of the unpublished notes, reproduced by al-Majlis al-ʿIlmī with the title *al-Iṭḥāf li-madhhab al-Aḥnāf* in 1933.

Even in the modern period, the tradition of the *ḥāshiya* continues to assert its vitality of peer-review. Consider, for instance, the extensive *ḥāshiya* of Anwar Shāh al-Kashmīrī (d. 1933) on *Āthār al-sunan*, a short work on the hadith evidence of the Ḥanafī school.[27] Al-Kashmīrī's gloss constitutes a sophisticated legal and hadith-critical intervention that engages with the original text. The same can be said of Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī's (d. 1952) personal *ḥāshiya*s scattered across the pages of *Fihris al-fahāris*.[28] What's striking in both cases is that the glossator and the base text author are contemporaries or near-contemporaries, indicating that the *ḥāshiya* was not limited to classical authors commenting on medieval canon, but continued to operate as a living form of scholarly dialogue. Even though these works were not formally printed or disseminated, they exemplify the enduring relevance of marginalia as a space for critical engagement and interpretive creativity.

27. Muḥammad Dhīshān, "Ḥaẓrat ʿAllāma Anwar Shāh Kashmīrī awr ḥashiya *Āthār al-Sunan*," *Māh Nāmah-yi Dār al-ʿUlūm 101* no. 10 (2017), 2-10.

28. Muḥammad Āl Rashīd reproduced al-Kawtharī's scattered marginal glosses on *Fihris al-fahāris* (roughly ten glosses in total) in *al-Imām Zāhid al-Kawtharī wa-ishāmātuhu fī ʿilm al-riwāya wa-l-isnād* (Dār al-Fatḥ, 2009), 74–84.

A particularly vivid example of the *ḥāshiya* serving as a mechanism for peer review is found in the case of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Būṣīrī's (d. 840 AH) *Itḥāf al-khiyara al-mahara*, a hadith compendium on the unique narrations across ten *Musnad* collections. In the colophon of his work, al-Būṣīrī invites his readers "to verify (*yuḥaqqiq*) and amend any errors, so as to partake in the divine reward."[29] This invitation did not go unanswered. His younger contemporary, the towering hadith scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī accepted the offer—literally, on the margins. Throughout a surviving manuscript copy of *Itḥāf*, one finds *ḥāshiya*s penned by Ibn Ḥajar, in which he corrects and challenges al-Būṣīrī's claims. What makes this case especially intriguing is the visibility of an actual dialogue unfolding on the folios. In multiple places, one can see Ibn Ḥajar's marginal note asserting that a given hadith should not be included, only to find that al-Būṣīrī later scratched it out, evidently reconsidering its validity based on Ibn Ḥajar's comment (see Figure 5). In this interaction, we witness not just a correction of textual error, but a rare glimpse into the living tradition of peer review as it played out in real time—a premodern version of "tracked changes." In one marginal note, Ibn Ḥajar writes with some frustration: "Brother, this quote is verbatim my words from *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*; you took my very own words and then used them to refute me!"[30] Yet, even in his own rejoinders to Ibn Ḥajar, al-Būṣīrī remains respectful, referring to him as "our teacher, the hadith expert" (*shaykhunā al-ḥāfiẓ*).

29. Shihāb al-Dīn al-Būṣīrī, *Itḥāf al-khiyara al-mahara* (Maktabat al-Rushd, 1997), 10:531–532.

30. Al-Būṣīrī, *Itḥāf al-khiyara al-mahara* (Dār al-Waṭan, 1999), 5:80, note 5.

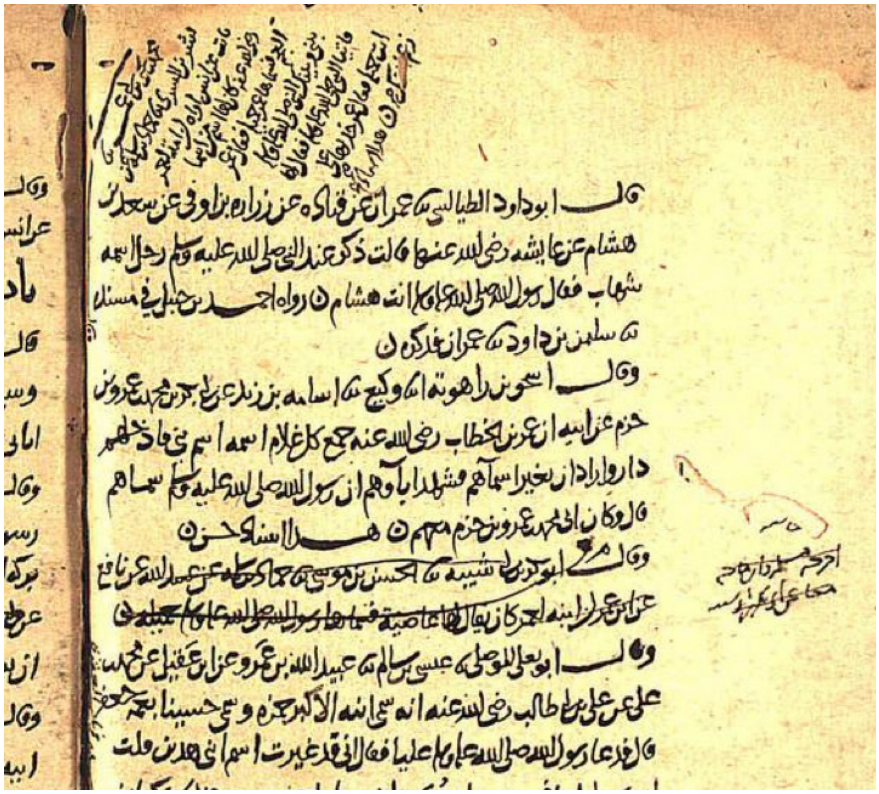

Figure 5: On the right, Ibn Ḥajar's *ḥāshiya* noting that the hadith should not be included in the book. Note that the hadith in question was then scratched out by al-Būṣīrī. Jār Allāh Effendi, no. 252, fol. 52v.

Far from being a static object, a premodern text remained alive through continual glossing and super-glossing, its meaning shaped not only by its author but by generations of scholars who engaged with it line by line.

Beyond intellectual development and peer review, *ḥāshiya*s serve other important functions. From a reader's perspective, they often contain unique curiosities and rare views not found elsewhere in the glossator's broader corpus. The curator of the Egyptian National Library, Sāliḥ al-Azharī, collected numerous such tidbits from the institution's rare manuscript holdings as well as other libraries.[31] There are also cases where *ḥāshiya*s functioned as instruments of reform. For example, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Sindī's *ḥāshiya*s on the canonical hadith collections go beyond simple clarification; they form part of his hadith-based "internal critique" of the Ḥanafī school. Likewise, the hadith glosses of nineteenth century scholars in India offer several examples of attempts to institute reforms grounded in hadith, reflecting what they deemed to be crucial corrective measures in the region.[32] In addition to its interpretive value, the *ḥāshiya* also played a crucial role in textual preservation. In an era when books were laboriously copied by hand and access to complete works was limited, the *ḥāshiya* often became a vessel for safeguarding otherwise inaccessible material. Snippets from once-lost books survived only because they were embedded in marginal glosses. A case in point is Shihāb al-Dīn al-Shilbī's (d. 1021 AH) *ḥāshiya* on *Tabyīn al-ḥaqāʾiq*, a major Ḥanafī legal commentary, which preserves numerous quotations from the once inaccessible writings of Amīr Kātib al-Itqānī (d. 758 AH).[33] In such cases, the margins became a kind of textual archive, sustaining voices and ideas that might have otherwise disappeared.

The *ḥāshiya* offers a compelling example of how the afterlife of a book was once embedded within the very structure of its transmission. Far from being a static object, a premodern text remained alive through continual glossing and super-glossing, its meaning shaped not only by its author but by generations of scholars who engaged with it line by line. Unlike modern academic practice—where an author might receive comments from peer reviewers, incorporate suggestions, and publish a finalized version—premodern works often carried with

31. Ṣāliḥ al-Azharī, *al-Taqyīdāt al-shahiyya min ẓuhūr wa-ghawāshī wa-ḥawāshī al-nusakh al-khattīyya* (Dār al-Bashāʾir al-Islāmiyya, 2016).

32. Zaman, "Hidden in the Margins," 11–27.

33. See, for instance, Shihāb al-Dīn al-Shilbī, *Ḥāshiyat al-Shilbī ʿalā Tabyīn al-ḥaqāʾiq* (Būlāq, 1314 AH), 4:47, 70, 71, 79, 239, 278.

them the traces of ongoing critique in the margins themselves.[34] The *ḥāshiya* thus functioned as both commentary and review, preserving the full scope of the glossator's engagement rather than filtering it through an editorial process. In contemporary scholarship, the closest parallel might be the book review. Recent initiatives represent notable, if still limited, efforts to reintroduce elements of reader-response into contemporary academic discourse. In the life sciences, PubPeer offers a platform for post-publication peer review, allowing scholars to publicly critique and comment on published work.[35] Academia.edu has experimented with social features such as paper annotations and threaded discussions. In many ways, these contemporary efforts recall the practice of writing *ḥāshiya*s.

As noted in the opening, the scholasticism associated with the *ḥāshiya* tradition was not without its critics. Detractors raised concerns that such commentary often emphasized performance over substance, privileging rhetorical display and intricate linguistic hairsplitting at the expense of broader conceptual engagement. Others pointed to its tendency to reinforce parochial modes of discourse, establish rigid hierarchies of authority, and draw intellectual attention away from earlier, often more foundational, works. For them, glossators appeared mired in the gravitational pull of the base text, and then the super-gloss, circling endlessly around minor points that could feel pedantic or even diversionary.[36] While each of these critiques contains a measure of truth; as is often the case, even the most laudable practices, taken to excess, can produce unintended consequences and provoke frustration that swings toward overcorrection. At its core, however, the *ḥāshiya* was simply that: a space in the margins. Its value lay not in the format itself, but in the hands of the one who filled it. In some cases, it offered little more than repetition or digression; more often, it opened new lines of thought and preserved insights that might otherwise have been lost. Its significance, therefore, was contingent, not inherent.

Conclusion

In Islamic intellectual history, *ḥāshiya*s were anything but marginal. They served as vibrant sites of scholarly contribution, critique, and creativity. Far from being passive footnotes, *ḥāshiya*s offered a dynamic medium through which generations of scholars engaged the tradition, often in real time, as seen in the exchange between al-Būṣīrī and Ibn Ḥajar. Whether in the rational sciences through glosses on works like *Sullam al-ʿulūm*, in law through the super-glosses

34. To be sure, books in the premodern Islamic tradition also underwent multiple stages of drafting and refinement, commonly distinguished as a *musawwada* (rough draft) and a *mubayyāḍa* (final copy).

35. "Scientific Peer Review Is Broken. We're Fighting to Fix it with Anonymity," *Wired*, December 10, 2014, https://www.wired.com/2014/12/pubpeer-fights-for-anonymity/ (accessed April 26, 2025).

36. See Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics* (Princeton University Press, 2020), chapter 2.

on juristic primers, or in hadith through reform-oriented marginalia, the *ḥāshiya* genre became a cornerstone of scholarly practice. *Ḥāshiya*s acted as tools for clarification, verification (*taḥqīq*), peer review, and even subtle reform. They were a means for scholars to assert their intellectual voice, correct canonical texts, and respond critically while remaining within the framework of tradition. This form of writing, whether concise, expansive, critical, or deferential, allowed for continuity and contestation in equal measure. Thus, to label *ḥāshiya*s as marginal is a misnomer; they were, and remain, central to the unfolding of the Islamic intellectual tradition.

The practice of annotation, glossing, and scholia was by no means unique to the Islamic intellectual tradition. The Latin West, for instance, developed its own scholastic glossing practices on authors such as Martianus Capella, Prudentius, and Virgil.[37] That said, the *ḥāshiya* emerged as a uniquely expansive and enduring genre. In terms of its temporal longevity, geographical spread, and multilingual application across Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, and beyond, the *ḥāshiya* tradition developed with a scale and formalization that finds few true parallels elsewhere. While there are valid concerns about the pedantic hairsplitting and excessive scholasticism found in the *ḥāshiya* genre, such critiques speak more to the contexts in which *ḥāshiya*s were employed to serve particular objectives. Ultimately, a *ḥāshiya* is only as innovative (or conversely, as derivative) as its glossator.

In a broader sense, one might even conceptualize the entirety of fourteen centuries of Islamic intellectual production as a *ḥāshiya* on the two foundational sources: the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. Each generation, as it grappled with new social, political, and economic circumstances, produced not only fresh interpretations but also meta-commentaries on the intellectual legacy it inherited. The Muslim *umma*, in this framing, becomes a transhistorical community of glossators: constantly annotating, amending, and expanding upon the divine and prophetic core. Just as *ḥāshiya*s in premodern manuscripts framed and interacted with canonical texts, so too does the modern scholarly enterprise engage in what might be seen as a super-*ḥāshiya*: a gloss upon the tradition of glossing itself. This recursive process evidences the dynamism of Islamic thought: rooted in scripture, but ever responsive to context.

37. Sinéad O'Sullivan, "Text, Gloss, and Tradition in the Early Medieval West: Expanding into a World of Learning," *Journal of Medieval Latin* 11 (2017), 3–24.