

## FURTHER SPECULATION ON MARGINAL .R.

THE MARGINAL notation .r. (or .R.) occurs in a variety of Irish manuscripts produced from the eleventh century on and largely containing Old and Middle Irish saga material. *Lebor na hUidre* (LU), the Book of Leinster (LL), British Library Egerton 93, and Codex Vossianus all have examples of this usage, though many of them are not obviously independent of one another.<sup>1</sup> Windisch associated the notation with Irish *roscad* in the sense of 'archaic poem',<sup>2</sup> but Thurneysen rejected this idea in favour of an equation with the term *retoiric*, partially on the grounds that the latter word was attested in the sense 'archaic poem' earlier than was *roscad* in the surviving manuscripts known to him.<sup>3</sup> In his important 1966 article, 'On the use of the term *retoiric*',<sup>4</sup> however, Proinsias Mac Cana demonstrated that Thurneysen's argument that the marginal notation .r. derived from an existing term of art borrowed from the Latin term 'rhetoric' was hard to sustain when all the evidence was taken into account and that *rosc* or *roscad* were more likely candidates. While Professor Mac Cana's article goes far beyond the scribal use of marginal .r. to discuss in illuminating detail the more important issue of historical genre distinctions in early Irish poetry, I am concerned here with the rather narrower matter of the possible origins of this particular marginal abbreviation. Professor Mac Cana sums up his arguments as follows: 'First of all, there is nothing to suggest that *retoiric* was used as a term denoting a particular form or *genre* in Irish literature before the eleventh century. Secondly the abbreviation .r. seems to occur rather infrequently outside of LU and LL, and it may well have been the former manuscript which first gave it extended application as a marginal indicator. In any case, there is no good reason to believe that this .r. originally referred to the word *retoiric*; instead all the weight of evidence points to *rosc* (*roscad*) as the term abbreviated'.<sup>5</sup> These conclusions have, I think, been generally accepted and I will not rehearse all the arguments in their favour here. I would, however, like to reopen the question of the possible origins of marginal .r., starting from Mac Cana's observation that 'it is employed in the most arbitrary fashion and it is obvious that the scribes had no very clear conception of its function'.<sup>6</sup>

The first thing to consider is the actual appearance of .r. in the two manuscripts in which it figures most prominently, LU and LL. Neither

<sup>1</sup> P. Mac Cana, 'On the use of the term *retoiric*', *Celtica* 7 (1966) 65–90, p. 69 and *passim*.

<sup>2</sup> E. Windisch and W. Stokes, *Irische Texte mit Übersetzungen und Wörterbuch* (Leipzig 1880) 748.

<sup>3</sup> *Die irische Helden- und Königsage* (Halle 1921) 54–6.

<sup>4</sup> *Celtica* 7 (1966) 65–90.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 89.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

manuscript is exactly crawling with marginalia. Aside from *.r.* (and its variants *.R.* and  $\emptyset$  in LL and *.l.r.* in LU) most are easily interpreted textual corrections, titles of some kind, or designations of speaker. What is tantalizing about the use of *.r.* is that it is not, like the other marginalia in these manuscripts, directly understandable, even though it seems to have been used in a somewhat methodical way by at least one scribe. That it does, as part of its significance, mark both direct speech and several kinds of verse is incontrovertible and it is this marking that has powered the discussions of its use so far. There are two instances in LU, however, in which *.r.* is used to mark things which are demonstrably not *rosçada* in any prosodic sense, but which are set off both visually and linguistically from the surrounding prose text. The first of these, an *.r.* in a small box in the left margin at LU, p. 56 a 15,<sup>7</sup> is the list of places passed by the Men of Ireland on their way to Cooley in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. The list is in two columns filling the bottom two-thirds of column *a* of p. 56 and is surrounded by a double-line box border which also divides the two small columns of placenames. The box was evidently drawn after the text was written, as it is extended horizontally twice in the lower right column to accommodate the final sentences, *Finit a titulrad incipit in scél iar n-úrd*, which are squeezed into the remaining bit of column *a*. The squeezing is perhaps explained by the scribe's desire to begin the 'story proper' at the head of column *b* (at the top of which is a boxed repetition of the incipit and a decorated capital). The boxed list is arranged with one placename per line in each small column and, owing to the variation in syllables per name, cannot be reconstructed into any metre. The columnar arrangement does create a marked anaphora with the repeated use of *for* before each placename, but I do not think that this can be counted as poetic by itself.

The second clearly non-poetic passage in LU marked with marginal *.r.*, again boxed, is at p. 80 b 28. The technique of the boxed outline and columnar arrangement is identical to the example just cited from earlier in the text of TBC. As in the earlier example, *.r.* is here marking a boxed list, this time of victims of Cú Chulainn, which is clearly not organized as any sort of verse. Neither of these passages is marked in LL.

There is a third boxed list in columns in LU which is not marked with a marginal *.r.* It is the list of Cú Chulainn's feats at p. 73 a 1. In place of a boxed marginal *.r.*, however, is a boxed title in the margin: *turim na cless inso síis* 'this is an enumeration of the feats'. However these marginal notations originated, there is no indication at all that the *.r.*s or the boxed title in these cases were supplied in a different hand or at a radically different time from the rest of the examples in LU. In fact, they strongly resemble almost all the other examples in the

<sup>7</sup>Palaeographic references to LU and LL are to the facsimile editions: R. Atkinson (ed.), *Leabhar na hUídhri* (Dublin 1870); R. Atkinson (ed.), *The Book of Leinster* (Dublin 1880).

manuscript, and seem to be in the same hand as the boxed titles and the bulk of the text, that of 'M'. In saying this I do not intend to make any palaeographic claim, merely to indicate that, as has generally been accepted by previous commentators, there appears to be no reason to postulate some series of confused later glossators.

Thus, at least one scribe – one of the LU scribes or a predecessor in a lost manuscript antecedent to LU – apparently thought that *.r.* was appropriate for marking things which were not poetry, archaic or otherwise. The appearance of marginal *.r.* is not utterly random in LU. It marks only, though not all, things which are different in some way from the general run of the ongoing narrative prose of the text: direct speech, verse of various kinds, and two extensive lists of names which are set off visually in columns and boxes. We can thus not, on this evidence, tie the use of the term exclusively to one or another kind of poetry.

I recognize that the poetry question is really the important one, and that the question of the meaning of *.r.* would have been of little interest were it not connected to the matter of the native perception of different kinds of poetry. But the terms of the modern discussion of the notation have been dominated by the equation of the notation with either *roscað* or *retoiric*. Our need to know about the history of poetry (and the medieval perceptions of it) has, perhaps, drawn the discussion away from *.r.* as a scribal marginal symbol rather than as an abbreviation for something with a meaning that we are interested in for other reasons. While it is clear enough that various redactors probably understood the notation *.r.* as standing for some term for poetry of some kind, it is not demonstrable that the notations originally represented a kind of literary criticism rather than an extra-textual signal to the next reader of the text or the next scribe to copy it.

Marginalia fall into some broad general categories: (1) *probationes pennaë*, (2) additional or missed material added to the text, (3) material extraneous to the text, but put there as additional text (e.g. marginal poems), (4) glosses on the text, (5) notations or comments meant to communicate to future scribes or other users of the manuscript.

In the case of marginal *r.*, categories 1, 2 and 3 can hardly be said to apply; *.r.* is too carefully used and made (sometimes boxed in more than one colour) to be a test of a pen point, but too brief to stand as any kind of text on its own. This leaves categories 4 and 5, which are of course related insofar as they are intended to communicate to future users of that particular manuscript. As has been demonstrated by Thurneysen and Mac Cana<sup>8</sup> some, at least, of the actual medieval Irish uses of the words *retoiric* and *roscað* indicate that some redactors took the marginal *.r.* as a comment on the contents of the text (e.g. LU,

<sup>8</sup>Mac Cana, *Celtica* 7 (1966) 68 and passim.

p. 38 a 28: *dorigni in retairic sea 7 ro chan na runna sa*).<sup>9</sup> But it is hard to sustain the notion that whoever is responsible for the *.r.s* in LU intended it to be a gloss signifying only 'here is a piece of (archaic) poetry', since the symbol is also used of things which are non-poetic. Unless there is a distinction, indiscernable to me, between the boxed and unboxed occurrences of *.r.* in LU (or between *.r.* and *.R.* in LL) it also seems improbable that it stands for different things in different places in the same manuscript.

More likely, then, is that its origin is category 5 and that it was intended to signal something to the next scribe or reader: 'copy this with care, as is' or 'when reading aloud, read this in a particular (*rhetorical?*) manner'. If nothing else, the use of the boxed *.r.* seems to indicate a certain intent to make it visually noticeable to a user concentrating on the text. The use of *.r.* for many types of poetry and for some things which are demonstrably not poetry indicates that at some point in the history of its use it must have had a wider sense than that of designating some particular sort of poetry. Furthermore, the use of both upper- and lower-case *R* in LL to mark the same type of poetry indicates that there was some instability or choice in the use of this marker in the sources, since it is unlikely that a single scribe would vary his practice in this way.

Given the admittedly sketchy and even contradictory evidence regarding marginal *.r.* available to us, there seem to be a small number of possibilities for interpreting its significance: (A) a native term for a particular kind of poetry (*roscad/retoiric*) generated a special marginal notation, *.r.*, which for some reason could be used for more than poetry. (B) 'A' is true, but we have lost some wider sense of the relevant word which would include more than poetry. (C) The notation was introduced for some other reason, or stands for some other word, but was later equated with the native term *roscad*. Both Thurneysen and Mac Cana present versions of possibility A, though Professor Mac Cana's argument allows, I think, for the possibility of B. Because of the use of *.r.* to mark the boxed lists in LU, I would argue that B is a more likely description of the state of affairs we find in the manuscripts than is A, as I have indicated above. I would also like to put forward the notion, however, that possibility C should not be discounted in looking for an explanation of the genesis of this peculiar bit of marginalia. Professor Mac Cana writes, 'Such facts compel one to the conclusion that the symbol *.r.* was not a generally recognized element of early Irish scribal practice', and 'it seems to have been generalized, if not by the first scribe

<sup>9</sup>The actual uses of the word *retoiric* cited in the *Dictionary of the Irish language* offer some additional support to Mac Cana's argument in favour of *rosc*. The phrase at LU, p. 38 a 28, seems either to equate *retairic* and *rann*, or to indicate that they were connected but different. One 'makes' a rhetoric, but 'sings' a *rann*. *Canaid* and *as-beir* are also apparently means of producing a rhetoric. Such instability in the verb used with *retoiric* would seem to indicate that there was no clear agreement on what sort of verbal artifact such a thing might be.

of LU, then by a not very distant predecessor'.<sup>10</sup> And these conclusions seem amply justified by the apparent confusion in the twelfth century between the terms *retoiric*, *roscad*, *rithlery* and the like. The terminological confusion alone provides strong evidence that *.r.* was introduced into the medieval Irish vernacular manuscript tradition without a generally understood firm connection to any existing critical or descriptive literary term.

But if *.r.* did not develop directly from *roscad* or *rithlery*, or even *retoiric*, where did it come from? Although I can cite no Irish examples, I would like to suggest the possibility that some abbreviation attested in medieval Latin manuscripts may have been the source of the notation and of the confusion that apparently followed from it. One candidate for an ancestor of our *.r.* would be *require*, signifying 'I question this reading' or 'pay attention to this passage', and used very frequently in some scriptoria. A. C. Clark remarks that he has noted it 'more than nine times on one page' in the ninth-century *Laud Misc. 120*.<sup>11</sup> The usual form of this abbreviation is not *.r.* but *.R.*, which perhaps tells against it, but which would provide a possible explanation for the LL form *.R.* Also in its favour is the fact that it is largely a marginal notation. A form actually attested as *.r.*, if only in the fourteenth century, is *ratio*, 'reckoning'.<sup>12</sup> If it were not for its lack of common use, this would be an attractive possibility owing to the fact that as a term of art it could be made to include both verse, tallied by syllables or cadences, and other kinds of countable lists.

There is nothing inherently unlikely about the use of an abbreviation from Latin in a vernacular Irish manuscript. LU itself shows such marginal abbreviations as *d̄x̄*, for *dixit*; *.i.*, for *id est = ed ón*, and the ubiquitous tironian sign  $\gamma$  = *et* or *ocus* are found throughout vernacular manuscripts. It is impossible to know, of course, in the case of such abbreviations what sounds might have been in the ear of the scribe who wrote *.i.*, but the existence of such a common set of Latin abbreviations in the traditions certainly allows for the possibility that *.r.* has a similar origin.

The mechanism I would propose in support of option C for the origin of *.r.* is as follows: some scribe of one of the sources of LU introduced *.r.* = *require* (or *ratio*) to mark certain passages which were to get special attention from future copyists or readers because of format (columns) or archaism, or stanzaic structure which might require special copying or performing care or style. Because most of the uses were, in fact, to mark poetry, some of it archaic or archaized, some later scribe (LU's M?) made the association with the native term *roscad* (or *retoiric*) and this identification then solidified. Without further information there is

<sup>10</sup> *Celtica* 7 (1966) 70.

<sup>11</sup> *Descent of manuscripts* (Oxford 1918) 35.

<sup>12</sup> A. P. Pelzer, *Abbreviations latines medievales* 2nd ed. (Paris 1966). He cites *.r.* = *racionis* in Vatican MS Lat. 889.

no way to prove that marginal *.r.* originated in a Latin rather than an Irish abbreviation, but in view of the regular flow of manuscripts and monks across Europe, and the probability that Irish scribes saw and copied Latin manuscripts of continental origin, the hypothesis is not, of itself, improbable on its face and provides a kind of consistent answer to some of the anomalies in the equations of *.r.* with one or another term dealing with poetry and with its use for abnormal, but non-poetic, passages. I raise this possibility here in the hope that further evidence may be forthcoming from others.

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