

A TENTATIVE SUGGESTION ON A POSSIBLE ORIGIN OF THE THREE-DOT TECHNIQUE

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Taking A.A.G. Anderton's article¹ as my starting-point, I should like to offer one or two brief comments on Walt Whitman's Preface to *Leaves of Grass* as a possible origin of the so-called three-dot technique and related syntactical deviations. My chief aim is to provide a possible dating for the origins of this practice. I should add that I have accepted Anderton's premise that this grammatically incorrect practice had its origins in America, and I have merely attempted to seek out a feasible source. I should also like to state that my comments here are not intended to reflect unfavourably on the considerable merits of Whitman's poetry.

To begin with, let us look at the opening lines of the Preface which first appeared in the slim 1855 quarto edition of *Leaves of Grass*:

America does not repel the past or what it has produced under its forms or a other politics or the idea of castes or the old religions ... accepts the lessons with calmness ... is not so impatient as has been supposed that the slough still sticks to opinions and manners and literature while the life which served its requirements has passed into the new life of the new forms ... perceives that the corpse is slowly borne from the eating and sleeping rooms of the house ... perceives that it waits a little while in the door ... that it was fittest for its days ... that its action has descended to the stalwart and wellshaped heir who approaches ... and that he shall be fittest for his days.²

¹ See *English Usage in Southern Africa*, vol 5, no 2, pp. 1-12, especially p. 7.

² Blodgett & Bradley, editors: *Leaves of Grass by Walt Whitman*, London, University of London Press, 1965, p. 709.

Two comments are pertinent here. First, Whitman uses the three-dot technique in preference to other punctuation marks which would perform exactly the same function, and which would be more grammatically correct. Secondly, I should like to remark on the problems which this 'dotty' technique creates for the serious student of literature. Since it is customary to indicate the omission of words or phrases in quotations and manuscripts by three dots, the use of those dots as punctuation marks can be most misleading. When faced with a text such as that which I have just quoted, it is impossible to know whether or not there have been any omissions. Similarly, if there have been omissions from a text which does make extensive use of the three-dot technique, how is the reader to differentiate between the author's 'punctuation' and editorial exclusions? Thirdly, three dots are customarily used to indicate passages which are missing or illegible. Thus it is not always possible to know whether passages are illegible or torn away because the removal of portions of a manuscript does not always disturb the meaning of that passage.

And this is not all. In addition to the three-dot technique, Whitman also employs two- and four-dot variations. Here I must be excused a fairly lengthy quotation:

Other states indicate themselves in their deputies ... but the genius of the United States is not best or most in its executives or legislatures, nor in its ambassadors or authors or colleges or churches or parlors, nor even in its newspapers or inventors ... but always most in the common people. Their manners speech dress friendships – the freshness and candor of their physiognomy – the picturesque looseness of their carriage ... their deathless attachment to freedom – their aversion to anything indecorous or soft or mean – the practical acknowledgment of the citizens of one state by the citizens of all other states – the fierceness of their roused resentment – their curiosity and welcome of novelty – their self-esteem and wonderful sympathy – their susceptibility to a slight – the air they have of persons who never knew how it felt to stand in the presence of superiors – the fluency of their speech – their delight in music, the sure symptom of manly tenderness and native elegance of soul ... their good temper and openhandedness – the terrible significance of

their elections – the President’s taking off his hat to them not they to him – these too are unrhymed poetry. It awaits the gigantic and generous treatment worthy of it.³

This passage is a typical example of how the poet fails to take cognizance of established rules of punctuation in his *Preface*. In the second sentence, we note that there are no commas separating ‘manners speech dress friendships’, and that three dots are regularly used in places where commas and semi-colons would usually (and correctly) be used. One should also notice that the four dots in the opening sentence should properly suggest that a whole sentence has been omitted, but this is not the case apparently as there is no disruption of the general flow of the argument.

Even if one could not accept it, one might possibly understand Whitman’s rationale if he chose to make consistent use of three dots instead of the comma *or* instead of the semi-colon, but he irritatingly persists in using the dots as an alternative to *both*. And as if this were not sufficient, he employs the dash as a substitute for the dots, the semi-colon, *and* the comma!

We can, therefore, safely assume that the incorrect practice of substituting dots and dashes for commas and semi-colons dates back to at least 1855! Thus it can hardly be described as a ‘comparatively new phenomenon’⁴. After more than one hundred and twenty years of use, it would appear that we may have to accept this unfortunate practice as ‘established’. On the other hand, perhaps this question will in time acquire the same sort of mystique as the deciphering of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*, and some ingenious researcher will reveal to us lesser mortals the profound message hidden in the Morse Code of Whitman’s dots and dashes!

³ *Ibid.*, p. 710.

⁴ Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 7.