

# NEW PUNCTUATION, NEW MEANING

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Walsh's *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities* (Lippincott, 1892) relates the more-or-less apocryphal story of the soldier who asked an oracle if it were safe to go off to war. He chose to interpret the oracle's reply (Ibis redibis no moreiris in bello) with a comma after redibis which, translated, means "You will go, you will return, you will not die in battle" but as he lay dying on the battlefield he realized that the message could instead be read with the comma after non: "You will go, you will return not, you will die in battle."

Shortly after the Civil War a tariff bill, enumerating duty-free articles, listed "all foreign fruit, plants" instead of the correct "all foreign fruit-plants" (meaning plants for transplanting, propagation or experiment). Before the law could be amended, two million dollars in duties were lost.

In the August 1972 *Word Ways*, Margot Quinjuys (a pseudonym for Mary Youngquist) constructed three poems which can convey opposing sentiments while preserving the word order. An example:

## GREED

My life is full, indeed, of gloom.  
I've naught you see--just this small room.  
I need more wealth--that's misery.  
What joys in great renown! What glee!  
A mace and throne I long to own--  
No crown too grand for me alone.

## CONTENTMENT

My life is full, indeed.  
My life is full, indeed.  
Of gloom I've naught you see  
Just this small room I need.  
More wealth? That's misery.  
What joy's in great renown?  
What glee a mace and throne?  
I long to own no crown.  
Too grand for me alone.

Some more recent examples were cited in *Games* magazine:

Woman without her man is nothing.  
Woman--without her, man is nothing.

I hate fools; like you, I find them boring.  
I hate fools like you; I find them boring.

Inspired by these, I have constructed three examples of my own. My first example takes a rather short sentence and works it into not two but four configurations--but only with the help of some story-telling to tie it all together:

It is a cold night and we are sleeping in an unheated tepee. THE ANIMAL HIDES WILL KEEP YOU WARM. You have come in, cold and miser-

able, and have gone to bed to get warm, when it occurs to you that the bison skins are still piled in a heap outside and should be stretched on frames to dry. I think that job can wait until tomorrow; I am more concerned that you not get a chill. THE ANIMAL HIDES WILL KEEP YOU WARM? On cold nights, you generally take your dog under the covers with you and cuddle with him for warmth. Tonight, however, William Rainhard, a brave from a nearby tribe, is staying with us and the dog, instinctively mistrusting him, is hiding in a cave deep in the forest. I notice that Will has crept under the blankets with you. THE ANIMAL HIDES WILL KEEP YOU WARM? Will has commandeered all of the blankets and is snoozing under them at the far size of the tepee, leaving you shivering in the cold. I bring you a pile of deerskins. THE ANIMAL! HIDES WILL KEEP YOU WARM.

My second example shifts from prose to rhyming verse:

#### THE ROYAL TOURNAMENT

"Start the royal tournament now. Let's see who shall be chosen to play a game with."

"Me? What--shall we play while the King is ill? It would be most shameful! Not to still the Queen's doubt is sinful."

"But she is the Queen who says the games must still go on."

"Between the Queen's ill temper and the King's ill health, I wouldn't play today for all the King's wealth!"

Start the royal tournament! Now let's see  
 Who shall be chosen to play a game with me.  
 What shall we play while the king is ill?  
 It would be most shameful not to. Still,  
 The Queen's doubt is sinful, but she is the Queen.  
 Who says the games must still go on? Between  
 The Queen's ill temper and the King's ill health  
 I wouldn't play today for all the King's wealth!

My final example shifts from one rhyming verse to another:

"Let him go. Jump for joy!  
 Is yours the pain in parting?  
 Lingers the lad, forlorn and sad?  
 Well, off he should be starting--  
 Fingers around his walking stick  
 And head raised high." "His hope  
 Is turning to despair for him.  
 Nevermore he can cope."

"Let him go jump, for joy is yours."  
 "The pain in parting lingers."  
 "The lad, forlorn and sad: well-off  
 He should be. Starting--fingers  
 Around his walking stick, and head  
 Raised--high his hope!  
 Is turning to despair for him?"

Nevermore! He can cope!"

This wordplay can be generalized by allowing spaces to be shifted around as well, creating new words. Howard Bergerson gave several examples of what are called charade sentences in Dmitri Borgmann's *Language on Vacation* (Scribner's, 1965) and the February 1969 *Word Ways*:

Flamingo, pale, scenting a latent shark,  
Flaming, opalescent, in gala tents--hark!

No, uncle- and aunt-less be, as ties deny our end.  
No unclean dauntless beasties' den you rend.

If the second charade sentence can be reversed, one creates a palindrome:

Doc,note,I dissent.A fast never  
.doc no teid I.ssentaf a stneverp

### The Outrageous Atlas

This rather light-hearted book is based on the premise that there are a lot of funny placenames in the United States and Canada. In a \$9.95 paperback published by Citadel Press, Richard and Laurine Rogers have plotted such names on a sequence of state and province maps, accompanying each one with a two-page analysis of some of the names depicted. The humor, alas, is rather sophomoric: the citizens of Retreat are 100 per cent behind the military; be sure to take in Cash because missing Cash is a problem for any tourist; stop by for a complimentary bag of dirt at Free Soil. Some are really strained: the developers of the Peapack (NJ) ski area, wanting year-round business, realized that the color of artificial snow does not match the summer landscape as well as peas do. Still, there's little doubt that the authors have amassed an eclectic collection of placenames which can be enjoyed for their own sake.