The Importance of Punctuation— Another Look…

Punctuation is a fairly modern invention. Hyphens don't appear until the eleventh century in Europe and not until the thirteenth century in England. Colons don't appear until the fourteenth century, and then were only used to indicate a pause. Commas appear in the 1520s and semicolons appear in the late sixteenth century. Quotation marks and dashes weren't invented until the eighteenth century. The very earliest writers in Rome and Greece didn't even bother to put spaces between words, and the older versions of Hebrew had no means of indicating vowel sounds. Reading was much harder until these inventions. To illustrate this point, see how easily you can read the following sentence with the vowels removed.

YCNRDTHSSYSJHN
What does that say? Let's add a new invention, <u>capitalization</u>, and try again.

YcnrdthssysJhn
Still hard to read? Try adding the invention of <u>spacing between words</u>.

Y cn rd ths sys Jhn
Getting better. Now try it with the invention of <u>punctuation</u> like commas and quotation marks.

"Y cn rd ths," sys Jhn.
Odds are pretty good that you are figuring out the meaning now, even though there aren't any vowels.

The use of punctuation and capitalization help us figure out meaning more rapidly. It allows us to indicate subtle nuances of meaning. Much of these word-tools, however, don't exist in surviving texts from Greece, Rome, and the early Middle Ages. Any modern editor who wants to create a readable version must select his own punctuation, but doing so always involves a choice that "fixes" the meaning.

YOUR TURN: For instance, suppose you are an editor editing a manuscript, and you come across a hypothetical text: **a woman without her man is lost**
How many ways could you punctuate this sentence? Try to come up with three or four, then look at the next page when you've written them down.

Beowulf: An Exercise in Punctuation

Here are nine possible ways to punctuate a statement that produce very different readings of what that line means:

- **A woman without her man is lost.**

- **A woman (without her man) is lost.**

- **A woman without her man is lost?**

- **A woman--without her man--is lost.**

- **A woman. Without her, MAN IS LOST!**

- **A woman? Without her, man is lost.**

- **A woman! Without her, man is lost!**

- **A woman. Without her, man is . . . lost.**

- **A woman: "Without her, Man is lost."**

Note that some of these choices in punctuation and capitalization create completely different meanings. The first sentence implies that women are helpless without men, but the last sentences imply that men are helpless without women! These radically differently readings come from examining only a single sentence. Imagine reading 3,000 lines of Beowulf without any modern punctuation, only an occasional bit of "pointing" as decoration. How many divergent meanings might result, depending upon how and where a modern editor chooses to punctuate the sentences?

Readers looking at printed versions of early medieval texts should eye the punctuation suspiciously. A modern editor must choose one specific form of punctuation and capitalization to help make the text more readable. Her choice might very well be a good one, but it still covers up all the other possibilities that exist in the original manuscript by limiting the options to a single one.

"You can read this," says John.