

1955

Who Fathered The Footnote?

Diane Hostetler
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile>



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hostetler, Diane (1955) "Who Fathered The Footnote?," *Exile*: Vol. 1 : No. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/exile/vol1/iss2/11>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Exile by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Who Fathered The Footnote?

BY DIANE HOSTETTLER

Footnoting literature is a basically unsound practice. It recognizes the freedom of the reader to be as allegorically profound as he fancies and the author to be as allegorically obscure as he desires. Such an individual relationship with words is bound to result in misconstrued appreciation and subjective aggrandizement. The reader unfeelingly neglects the creator as the creator carefreely neglects the reader. What has happened to the representative expression of the age in the process is recognizable to neither.

Homer and Dante may well illustrate the extremes of this footnoting abortion. Should the ancient Greek poet peer into the introductory comments of a present day edition of his *Odyssey*, he would scarcely recognize that it was his primitive story that was being so symbolically discussed. A simple narrative of a man's travels over 2,500 years ago is now a classic journey of man's wandering life—"the unresting spirit of man that is always on a quest for new knowledge and new experience." Homer could well drink ten bottles of Schweppes and sacrifice ten thousand bulls to Zeus

in appreciation for such divine attention. And so the Homeric epics have been hallowed into a presidency, into an Achillean armor that fits poorly and whose clanking has forced many a reader into a sulk. As wise as Odysseus was, he could never have foretold such a marvellous future—a future that has out-Helened Helen and has nurtured a stallion from a wooden horse.

Now that the Greek-Trojan skirmish has been immortalized, let us see what has perpetuated Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Here, the footnotes disagree because Dante saw more that could be disagreed about. T. S. Eliot says, "The less I know about the poet and his works before I begin to read, the better." Paolo Milano pleads, "For the critic, the *Commedia* is a palace that no one should enter without an absolute knowledge of its structure." Now the reader asks himself, should he gather his cloak of personal experience around him and grope through terza rimas to the "dazzling glimpse of the divine mystery of Trinity in Unity" or should he equip himself with theological paraphernalia that prohibits him from scholastic flights up to the

Rose of Paradise. This, too, is a "story of man's journey through life," but instead of burrowing under the front stoop as has Homer, it has trampled down many a ranch-house television aerial.

Thus, today's reader arrives "midway the journey of his life," wondering whether the test of a work's greatness must be measured according to the number of volumes of critical essays written about it. Finding such a conclusion the only safe alternative, he is forced to place Homer and Dante at the summit of Mount Olympus, sitting in rose petaled easy chairs. But the question still rankles—would these poets be reclining so indolently in their scholastic security if authorities hadn't decided that was where they belonged? Where would they be if the ordinary layman had read them without any preconceived idea of their greatness? Why not rub the tablet clean and see what new wax impressions of the Literary Ideal would be reflected if the individual could

collect his own anthology of classics? There is always the danger that a fresh approach might prove to be more hair-splitting than have the "barberous" footnoters of centuries, but at least the layman would recognize the problem of criticism and acquiesce with a free and willing spirit.

Obviously this has not solved the footnoting issue. Perhaps such a shift would prove that it is insolvable. It would reveal that literature's bastard child must not only be permitted to live, but also that it is no longer a foundling. The taint of his illegitimacy remains, however, in the minds of those who would like to read a book without a preface, without a mental set of its greatness, without the presence of a scholar's life-long search for its "hidden" meanings. Perhaps some day there will be a work written that requires no discussion, but only an acute attention. It would need no shotgun to find the father, for it could stand alone and face up to the situation. Its very purity would speak for itself.