



# The Sesquicentennial of the 1856 Leaves of Grass: A Daguerreotype of a Woman Reader

Ed Folsom

*University of Iowa*, [ed-folsom@uiowa.edu](mailto:ed-folsom@uiowa.edu)

ISSN 0737-0679 (Print)

ISSN 2153-3695 (Online)

Copyright © 2006 Ed Folsom

---

## Recommended Citation

Folsom, Ed. "The Sesquicentennial of the 1856 Leaves of Grass: A Daguerreotype of a Woman Reader." *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 24 (Summer 2006), 33-34. <https://doi.org/10.13008/2153-3695.1807>

This Note is brought to you for free and open access by Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact [lib-ir@uiowa.edu](mailto:lib-ir@uiowa.edu).

## NOTES

*On the Back Cover:*

THE SESQUICENTENNIAL OF THE 1856 *LEAVES OF GRASS*:  
A DAGUERRETYPE OF A WOMAN READER

This year is the sesquicentennial of the second edition of *Leaves of Grass*, the 1856 edition. A fitting way to recognize this anniversary is with the discovery of a daguerreotype of a young woman proudly displaying her then-new copy of Whitman's book. This daguerreotype is from the collection of Donald Lewis Osborne, and it is reproduced on the back cover of this issue with Mr. Osborne's kind permission.<sup>1</sup>

Here we have a truly remarkable object: the first known image of a reader holding a book by Whitman. The fact that it's a young woman, and the fact that she is holding the 1856 *Leaves* is doubly significant. The 1856 edition has been described as Whitman's "women's rights" edition, containing, among other relevant poems, the first printing of his "Poem of Procreation," later known as "A Woman Waits for Me," a poem viewed with derision by some recent feminist scholars but admired by early women's rights activists, who saw it as treating sex with the openness necessary for the success of the women's movement.<sup>2</sup> But all the arguments about Whitman's attitudes toward women in the 1856 *Leaves* fall silent in the face of this image, where we see a specific female reader *embodied*, holding in her very physical hands the actual book object itself.

Whitman had radically changed the size of *Leaves* from the first edition to the second: from an oversize book whose pages appeared to be legal notices fit for posting, he created for this 1856 version a small devotional-sized book made to fit the hands and pockets—made, as this image so powerfully documents, to fit a young woman's hands. We recall Whitman's striking statement late in his life that "*Leaves of Grass* is essentially a woman's book: the women do not know it, but every now and then a woman shows that she knows it."<sup>3</sup> Here is the actual physical evidence of such a woman, the look on her face showing she knows it. She holds the book upside down, front cover toward us, as if she has just put it on her lap for a minute to pause while reading it, maybe with her thumb still marking the page she was on.

This image also becomes by far the earliest photograph of *Leaves of Grass*. While books were often used as props in early photographs, it is not common to find an image that so clearly features an identifiable book. I'm not aware of other photos of people holding *Leaves* until near the end of the nineteenth century. This, then, may be the only documented image of a Whitman reader during his lifetime. It is fitting that the woman is unnamed while the book is clearly titled, just like the frontispiece and title page of *Leaves of Grass* itself; if we were to open that book, of course, we'd find Whitman's image, based on a daguerreotype, along with the title of his book but without an author's name

on the title page. In that unintended but highly evocative way, this haunting image of the nameless woman reflects the book she holds in this mirror-image daguerreotype. Both the poet and the woman reader are unique individuals who, in some sense, represent us all.

This image was no doubt taken in or soon after 1856, at the end of the era of the daguerreotype. The book this nameless woman holds is, as all of Whitman's books were, an object that the poet had a major hand in designing. We still have his careful draft drawings for the spine of this volume—perhaps the most significant spine in the history of the American book, with the first cover blurb in American literature, Emerson's now-famous sentence from a private letter he sent to Whitman, one he never gave permission to have quoted: "I greet you at the beginning of a great career—R. W. Emerson."<sup>4</sup> This anonymous young female reader, in her eloquent silence, greets Whitman as well.

*The University of Iowa*

ED FOLSOM

## NOTES

1 The daguerreotype was first printed in Mark S. Johnson, ed., *The Daguerreian Annual 2000* (Pittsburgh: The Daguerreian Society, 2001), 167, with commentary by Osborne. The daguerreotype can now be accessed online at The Daguerreian Society website, in their NEA Research Database Project (<http://www.daguerre.org/search.php>); type in "Leaves of Grass" in the subject field on the search page.

2 See Sherry Ceniza, *Walt Whitman and 19th-Century Women Reformers* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 45, 128-130.

3 Horace Traubel, *With Walt Whitman in Camden*, 9 vols. (various publishers, 1905-1996), 2:331.

4 For reproductions of Whitman's sketches for the 1856 spine, see Joel Myerson, *Walt Whitman: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993), 27; and the back cover of the *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 4 (Fall/Winter 1986-1987).

## THE UNIFORM HIEROGLYPHIC: A CONTEMPORARY GRAPHOLOGICAL STUDY OF WHITMAN'S SIGNATURE

The branch of graphology that studies character by way of handwriting hit its stride as a "profession" in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Like other pseudo-sciences of the time, such as chirography, phrenology, and physiognomy, graphology reified abstract and culturally determined characteristics such as gender, sophistication, and strength, and inferred a necessary connection between these entities and arbitrary outward appearances. That is, graphology confirmed prejudice by way of "scientific objectivity."<sup>1</sup> Concerning the famous surgeon Mary E. Walker, for example, graphologist Felix de Salamanca wrote, "Her style is a forced and unnatural masquerade of the unfair sex." Fellow graphologist William T. Call shared this opinion of the doctor, and recommended Florence Nightingale, who "sets a good example in the quiet neatness of her signature."<sup>2</sup>

Until now, only one graphological assessment of Whitman has been located. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the previously known assessment, by de Salamanca,