That'll Do, Comma

When the humorist James Thurber was writing for New Yorker editor Harold Ross in the 1930s and 1940s, the two men often had very strong words about commas. It is pleasant to picture the scene: two hard-drinking alpha males in serious tribbies smacking a big desk and barking at each other over the niceties of punctuation. According to Thurber's account of the matter (in The Years with Ross [1959]), Ross's "clarification complex" tended to run somewhat to the extreme: he seemed to believe there was no limit to the amount of clarification you could achieve if you just kept adding commas. Thurber, by self-appointed virtuous contrast, saw commas as so many upturned office chairs unhelpfully hurled down the wide-open corridor of readability. And so they endlessly disagreed. If Ross were to write "red, white, and blue" with the maximum number of commas, Thurber would defiantly state a preference for "red white and blue" with none at all, on the provocative grounds that "all those commas make the flag seem rained on. They give it a furled look."

If you want to know about editorial "commaphilia" as a source of chronic antagonism, read The Years with Ross. Thurber once went so far as to send Ross a few typed lines of one of Wordsworth's Lucy poems, repunctuated in New Yorker style:

She lived, alone, and few could know
When Lucy ceased to be,
But, she is in her grave, and, oh,
The difference, to me.

But Ross, it seems, was unmoved by sarcasm, and in the end Thurber simply had to resign himself to Ross's way of thinking. After all, he was the boss; he signed the cheques; and of course he was a brilliant editor, who endearingly admitted once in a letter to H. L. Mencken, "We have carried editing to a very high degree of fussiness here, probably to a point
approaching the ultimate. I don’t know how to get it under control.” And so the comma proliferated. Thurber was once asked by a correspondent: “Why did you have a comma in the sentence, ‘After dinner, the men went into the living-room?’” And his answer was probably one of the loveliest things ever said about punctuation. “This particular comma,” Thurber explained, “was Ross’s way of giving the men time to push back their chairs and stand up.”

Why the problem? Why the scope for such differences of opinion? Aren’t there rules for the comma, just as there are rules for the apostrophe? Well, yes; but you will be entertained to discover that there is a significant complication in the case of the comma. More than any other mark, the comma draws our attention to the mixed origins of modern punctuation, and its consequent mingling of two quite distinct functions:

1. To illuminate the grammar of a sentence
2. To point up — rather in the manner of musical notation — such literary qualities as rhythm, direction, pitch, tone and flow

This is why grown men have knock-down fights over the comma in editorial offices: because these two roles of punctuation sometimes collide head-on — indeed, where the comma is concerned, they do it all the time. In 1582, Richard Mulcaster’s The First Part of the Elementarie (an early English grammar) described the comma as “a small crooked point, which in writing followeth some small branch of the sentence, & in reading warmeth vs to rest there, & to help our breth a little”. Many subsequent grammars of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries make the same distinction. When Ross and Thurber were threatening each other with ashtrays over the correct way to render the star-spangled banner, they were reflecting a deep dichotomy in punctuation that had been around and nagging people for over four hundred years. On the page, punctuation performs its grammatical function, but in the mind of the reader it does more than that. It tells the reader how to hum the tune.

If only we hadn’t started reading quietly to ourselves. Things were so simple at the start, before
grammar came along and ruined things. The earliest known punctuation — credited to Aristophanes of Byzantium (librarian at Alexandria) around 200 BC — was a three-part system of dramatic notation (involving single points at different heights on the line) advising actors when to breathe in preparation for a long bit, or a not-so-long bit, or a relatively short bit. And that’s all there was to it. A comma, at that time, was the name of the relatively short bit (the word means in Greek “a piece cut off”); and in fact when the word “comma” was adopted into English in the 16th century, it still referred to a discrete, separable group of words rather than the friendly little tadpole-like number-nine dot-with-a-tail that today we know and love. For a millennium and a half, punctuation’s purpose was to guide actors, chanters and readers-aloud through stretches of manuscript, indicating the pauses, accentuating matters of sense and sound, and leaving syntax mostly to look after itself. St Jerome, who translated the Bible in the 4th century, introduced a system of punctuation of religious texts per cola et commata (“by phrases”), to aid accurate pausing when reading aloud. Cassiodorus, writing in the 6th century in}

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southern Italy for the guidance of trainee scribes, included punctuation in his Institutiones Divinarum et Saecularium Litterarum, recommending “clear pausing in well-regulated delivery”. I do hope Harold Pinter knows about all this, by the way; who would have thought the pause had such a long and significant history?

These earnest scribes placed the positura, a mark at the end of a piece of the glosses in a word or at the start of a paragraph, indicated until much later the virgula suspensiva, which looked like our present-day solidus or forward slash (/), and was used to mark the briefest pause or hesitation. Perhaps the key thing one needs to realise about the early history of punctuation is that, in a literary culture based entirely on the slavish copying of venerated texts, it would be highly presumptuous of a mere scribe to insert helpful marks where he thought they ought to go. Punctuation developed slowly and cautiously not because it wasn’t considered important, but, on the contrary,