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Lehigh University
Information Resources

Special Collections *Flyer*

Leaves of Grass

The rustic yet dignified figure looking back at you from this page is Walt Whitman, as depicted in the frontispiece portrait of his collection of poems *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855. Special Collections possesses three copies of this first edition, which the author produced and marketed himself. Each of these copies shows variants which suggest the turmoil of Whitman's process of self-publication. In addition, Special Collections has a number of the subsequent early editions of this work, which had a profound influence on the course of American letters.

Whitman was an unlikely figure to loom so large on the landscape of 19th-century American literature. Born in 1819 on Long Island to parents with Dutch and English ancestry, Whitman's first years were spent on the family farm, but when Walt was twelve his father moved to Brooklyn, N.Y., to try to improve the family fortunes. After a public school education, Whitman was apprenticed to the printing trade.

Not only did this trade provide him with a liveli-

hood, but proximity to New York City increased his opportunities for self-education by giving him an opportunity to see plays, particularly Shakespeare, and to hear music, particularly opera. He also spent many hours walking the streets of the city, observing the life around him. In addition to learning to be a printer, Whitman taught for a while in country schools, and wrote as a journalist – mostly popular and sentimental poems and stories with little if any literary merit.

Thus the appearance of *Leaves of Grass* in 1855, containing Whitman's experiments in a new style of poetry, was a bright flash on the literary scene. It attracted the praise of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and was reprinted frequently, with the regular addition of new poems. A good portion of the attention, and controversy, focused on the work's relative sexual frankness, as well as its directness and simple language, both novelties in the Victorian world.

The first edition, like the second edition of 1856 bears no publisher's imprint, simply the location: "Brooklyn, New York." Its format is unusually large, being nearly 11½ inches tall. The fact that the introduction is in two columns on each page suggests Whitman's proximity to newspaper printing. The poems themselves are printed rather crudely in single lines, as shown in the illustration on the re-verse, lower right.

The second edition was a good deal smaller in format, and in spite of the anonymity of the imprint, had a New York distributor, Fowler & Wells. As he did with some issues of the first edition, Whitman included a section of reviews at the back of the volume. He even included Emerson's comment to the author, "I greet you at the beginning of a great career," on the spine of the volume.

Special Collections has two copies of the third edition, each representing a particular set of publishing circumstances. At this point the Boston firm of Thayer and Eldridge took over publication, producing an edition with the rather unusual calligraphic title page shown on the reverse upper right.

Shortly thereafter the firm failed, and the printing plates for this edition eventually came into the hands of another publisher, who continued to produce unauthorized reprints even as late as the 1880s. Special Collections also has a copy of this printing, which bears no clue as to its true origin.

Along with these significant early editions, Special Collections has a number of others, including the

