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HUMOR IN FRANKLIN'S HOAXES AND SATIRES

Richard E. Amacher

"Pieces merely humorous," wrote young Benjamin Franklin, "are of all Sorts the hardest to succeed in."¹ Perhaps for this reason he studiously avoided the creation of compositions that were "merely humorous." But ample evidence exists to show that Franklin nevertheless made frequent use of several different kinds of humor in many different kinds of writings, not only during his youth but throughout his entire life. Three of these works are particularly interesting examples from his early, middle, and late career as a writer of hoax and satire—*A Witch Trial at Mt. Holly*, *The Speech of Polly Baker*, and *An Economical Project*. All three herald the advent of a new kind of native American humor that Professor Walter Blair has aptly denominated "hoss sense."² I shall try to show how these three essays reveal a certain growth or development of Franklin's unique brand of humor and also how they and some of his political satire and comedy of manners are related to his inveterate "*Tendency to benefit the Reader, either by improving his Virtue or his Knowledge.*"³

A Witch Trial at Mount Holly was first published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (Oct. 22, 1731). "Many regarded the hoax as historical," writes Robbins, "and it was reprinted in the *British Gentleman's Magazine* of 1731."⁴ During the seventeenth century, of course, the Quakers had "suffered much abuse," and to physical violence had been added "satires linking them to witchcraft," for it was popularly supposed that the Quaker revelation occurred only when "the witchcraft fit" fell upon them. By the time the Quakers were well established in America, however, "belief in witchcraft was fading everywhere." Although the statute of King James I against witches had been revived in Pennsylvania in 1718, according to Robbins, it had never been invoked.⁵ In such a climate of ideas and literary precedent, then, Franklin's spoof of both the institution of witchcraft and the Quakers living near Mount Holly (the site of one of their most prominent meeting houses) made sense. It is worth remembering, too, that he knew Cotton Mather and had probably looked into *The Wonders of the Invisible World*.

A frequent charge in witch trials of earlier date was shape-shifting or metamorphosis, it being believed that witches could take the form of almost any small animal.⁶ In the present case, writes Franklin, "It seems the Accused had been charged with making their Neighbours Sheep dance in an uncommon Manner, and with causing Hogs to speak, and sing Psalms, &c. to the great Terror and Amazement of the Kings' good and peaceable Subjects in this Province."⁷

During the trial at Mount Holly two tests (Franklin refers to them as

“an Experiment or two”) were imposed upon those suspected of demon possession—“the accused were weighed in the Scales against a Bible” and they were also subjected to trial by water. Supposedly, if they really were witches (airy spirits), they would be outbalanced by the weight of a large, solid Bible (a tangible enough object). On the other hand, if they failed to sink in water, they would be judged as witches. The accused (a man and a woman) had offered to undergo both of these tests *only if* the two most violent of their accusers (also a man and a woman) would consent to be tried with them. “It was agreed to use the Scales first; and a Committee of Men were appointed to search the Men, and a Committee of Women to search the Women, to see if they had any Thing of *Weight* about them, particularly Pins.” Witches were thought to practice a kind of acupuncture *in absentia*, bringing about perfectly devilish results by thrusting long sharp pins into doll-like images of their enemies. Thus the reference to *Pins* is relevant. But the pun on the word *Weight* (in the sense of avoirdupois as well as of importance) produces a humorous effect—one of common sense, or horse sense—since *pins*, no matter how long or sharp, would not much affect the weight of the human body. The satiric, humorous effect is redoubled, moreover, by Franklin’s skillful underscoring of the sense with a combination of alliteration, anti-climax, and periodic sentence structure.

As one would expect, in the ensuing test the bodies of both accused and accusers outweigh the presence of the Bible in sheer pounds. Here the author satirizes the gullible audience, as well as the proceedings. “To the great surprise of the Spectators,” he writes, “Flesh and Bones [of the first suspected witch, or wizard] came down plump, and outweighed that great good Book by abundance,” even though “a chapter out of the Book of Moses” had been read over him before he stepped onto the scales. “After the same Manner,” the account continues, using mock Biblical language, “the others [both accused and accusers] were served, and their Lumps of Mortality severally were too heavy for Moses and all the Prophets and Apostles.”

This would have seemed proof sufficient, but the audience was unconvinced. “Not satisfied with this Experiment,” writes Franklin, they “would have the Trial by Water.” In this event, which Franklin then described as taking place in a barge on a mill pond, some very odd phenomena occur. First, the male accuser, “being thin and spare,” begins to sink. Since both his hands and feet were tied, he could not have kept afloat even if he had wanted to. A rope was also tied around the waist of each of the four persons undergoing this trial—just in case! I forgot to mention that all four were “stripp’d (saving only to the Women their Shifts [petticoats]).” Beyond saying that the Accuser began to sink “with some Difficulty,” Franklin does not tell us what happened to this “thin

and spare” man. The other three, at any rate, all “swam very light upon the water,” a phenomenon which was supposed to prove witchcraft.

Next, Franklin introduces a new character—a sailor. This sailor jumps off the barge. I can only surmise that the Sailor must have been a friend of “the Man accused,” because, according to Franklin, the Sailor “jump’d out upon the Back of the Man accused, thinking to drive him down to the Bottom.” But despite the gallant sailor’s attempt to save his friend, by making him sink to prove his innocence, the man popped to the surface “some time before the other.” Obviously “the other” must refer to the “thin and spare” Accuser, who apparently has not yet been hauled up—is still glug-glugging in the depths of Mount Holly Mill pond, where, incidentally, Franklin leaves him, although, by *implication* (since the entire trial is a *comedy*),⁸ the man will eventually be hauled up and resuscitated. (For an instructive, although somewhat different, parallel, cf. Pope’s *The Dunciad*, Bk, II, where Jonathan Smedley pops to the surface after a much more extended submarinal effort.)

In the next part of the satire Franklin details the reactions of two of the three persons (shall we call them “floaters”?) who, after being hauled out of the water, were told that they had failed to pass the test! One was a man, the other a woman. With female persistence in her virtue the “Woman Accuser, being told that she did not sink, would be duck’d a second Time: when she swam as light as before.” She could only conclude that “the Accused” had bewitched her “to make her so light.” And, to prove her innocence, “she would be duck’d again a Hundred Times” in order to “duck the Devil out of her.”

The “accused Man,” whom the friendly sailor had tried to help sink, is surprised to learn that he, too, had floated and is now “not so confident of his Innocence as before.” His fatuous comment, “*If I am a Witch, it is more than I know,*” brings to a climax the humor of the whole trial.

From the hilarity of these “high jinks” Franklin now suddenly switches to sober common sense, in the last part of the satire, saying, “The more thinking Part of the Spectators were of the Opinion that any Person so bound and placed in the Water (unless they were mere Skin and Bones) would swim, till their Breath was gone, and their Lungs fill’d with Water.” Then with a graceful turn he ends with a nice touch of more common sense and a little earthy humor: “But it being the general Belief of the Populace that the Women’s Shifts and the Garters with which they were bound help’d to support them, it is said they are to be tried again the next warm Weather, *naked.*”

To one Victorian scholar the account of witch-ducking at Mount Holly was “nearly as witty” and not as “coarse” as one of Franklin’s most famous essays from his middle period—*The Speech of Polly Baker*, first

printed in the London *General Advertiser* (Apr. 15, 1747).⁹ Here are a few examples from this well-known hoax that show Franklin's use of increasingly earthy humor.

In *The Speech of Polly Baker*, Franklin rings in an interesting variation on one of his most used phrases, "Industry and Frugality." Polly stands before the Judge for having borne her fifth child out of wedlock with who knows how many more in prospect. She explains to his Honor that she really prefers in-wedlock to out-of-wedlock. Always, she continues, she has been quite willing to enter the married state. She has no doubt that once in that state she would behave well in it, "having all the Industry, Frugality, and *Fertility* . . . appertaining to a good wife's character."¹⁰ [My ital.]

Franklin was fond of poking fun at the legal profession. Perhaps this is why he makes Polly's original betrayer one of the Judge's own calling. He is a man they all know, she explains to his Honor, one who had become a fellow magistrate. She had hoped he would appear on the bench that very day to try to influence the court in her favor. But since he had not, she was forced to defend herself and her actions. This, she ably does by equating the aforementioned "Fertility" with *doing her duty*, especially "the Duty of the first and great Command of Nature, and of Nature's God [a phrase with a magnificent Deistic ring], *Encrease and Multiply*." From "the steady Performance" of this duty, she adds, "nothing has been able to deter . . . me."

Another instance of Franklin's playful satire of the learned professions, specifically of ministers and of justices of the peace, occurs in the same speech. In moving that the fine against her be remitted, Polly argues:

I have debauched no other Woman's Husband, nor enticed any Youth; these Things I never was charg'd with, nor has any one the lest Cause of Complaint against me, unless, perhaps, the Minister, or Justice, because I have had Children without being married, by which they have *missed a Wedding fee*.

In the development of Franklin's ability as a satirist of the law and other professions, the *pun* often played an important part in humorous effect. The speech of Polly Baker contains at least one example of a pair of puns. Referring to her original betrayer—the judge who first seduced her—Polly calls him "the first Cause of all my Faults and *Miscarriages* (if they must be deemed such)." Eighteenth-century Deistical works were full of allusions to "the first Cause." In the manner of the mock heroic Franklin here playfully and incongruously combines the grandiose connotations of this phrase with the more literal one referring to Polly's anonymous seducer, who also occupied a somewhat elevated position—at the bar. Franklin plays, too, on *miscarriages* of morality and on those of childbirth.

Apparently the whole problem of such “miscarriages” (viz. legal action against women who bore children out of wedlock) had earlier caused discussion in the British press. One aspect of the discussion had to do with certain problems that might arise if such women were permitted (by reason of their poverty) to plead their own case. In admiring Franklin’s handling of *The Speech of Polly Baker*, Max Hall refers to one of Addison’s *Spectator* papers in which this English author had stated that “if women were to plead in the courts they would carry the eloquence of the bar to new heights.” Thus, concludes Hall, Franklin’s treatment of Polly Baker’s speech can be related to the development of the American “tall story”:

His contribution was a sort of American ‘tall story’ in which his New England heroine outdid her British cousins in the number of her illegal offspring, in the pain of her public punishment, and in the splendor of her vindication.¹¹

While the American tall story can be traced back to such seventeenth-century writers as Samuel Peters and Captain John Smith, there is no denying that it really flourished in the nineteenth century from the pens of professional humorists like Thomas Bangs Thorpe, George Washington Harris, Mark Twain and others. In the eighteenth century Franklin (in his satires and hoaxes) served as a bridge between these earlier and later writers.

If Franklin used earthy puns in *The Speech of Polly Baker*, he employed similar and even more highly charged puns in his satiric letter *To the Royal Academy of ******¹² The date of composition of this bagatelle is uncertain. But we do know that in a letter of September 16, 1783, he wrote to Dr. Richard Price in England, saying he had written it “some years since.”¹³ A year earlier, in 1782, he had written to William Carmichael in Madrid that the collection of bagatelles he was sending him was at his disposal for printing “except the Letter to the Academy, which having several English puns in it cannot be translated, and besides has too much of *grossièreté* to be borne by the polite Readers of these [Spanish speaking] Nations.”¹⁴ The puns may have been English, but the humor and the handling, in general, was unmistakably American.¹⁵

The “Prize Question” Franklin sets for investigation by the Belgian Academy he is satirizing reads as follows: “To discover some Drug wholesome & not disagreeable, to be mix’d with our common Food, or Sauces, that shall render the Natural Discharges, of Wind from our Bodies, not only inoffensive, but agreeable as Perfumes.” Since I have written elsewhere on this satire,¹⁶ I would only here call attention to a few of the puns Franklin inserts into his discussion of what is vulgarly known as breaking wind in company—“avoid the Report,” “give Vent to his Grievs,”

“Expressing one’s Scenti-ments,” and the final “scarcely worth a Fart-hing.” But I cannot resist quoting a short passage which distinctly shows something, too, of Franklin’s uniquely pragmatic humor, combined as it is with his matchless rhetoric, his admirable style, and, indeed, his own special brand of the mock-Homeric:

Are there twenty Men in Europe at this Day, the happier, or even the easier, for any Knowledge they have pick’d out of Aristotle? What Comfort can the Vortices of Descartes give to a Man who has Whirlwinds in his Bowels! The knowledge of Newton’s mutual Attraction of the Particles of Matter, can it afford Ease to him who is rack’d by their mutual Repulsion, and the cruel Distensions it occasions? The Pleasure arising to a few Philosophers, from seeing, a few Times in their Life, the Threads of Light untwisted, and unseparated by the Newtonian Prism into seven Colours, can it be compared with the Ease and Comfort every Man living might feel seven times a Day, by discharging freely the Wind from his Bowels? Especially if it be converted into a Perfume. . . .

Turning now from this minor masterpiece of scatology in which he ridiculed the hifalutin language and silly experimenting of contemporary scientific academies, we discover in *An Economical Project* an even later example of Franklin’s continuing tendency to rely on good old-fashioned horse sense for humorous effect.¹⁷ In fact, this letter to the *Journal of Paris* (Apr. 26, 1784) amounts to a *tour de force* of that valuable commodity and is relevant to the present world energy and monetary crisis.

Assuming anew his role as a modern simpleton, which he had used in several of his political satires of the Revolutionary period, Franklin signs this letter “A Subscriber.” He tells of being present one night “in a grand company, where the new lamp of Messers Quinquet and Lange was introduced, and much admired for its splendour.” In the prolonged discussion that followed, the question arose as to “whether the oil it consumed was not in proportion to the light it afforded, in which case there would be no saving in the use of it.” Since no one could answer this question—a question, incidentally, of great importance because of the need to lessen the cost of lighting apartments in Paris at a time “when every other article of family expense was so much augmented”—the author, a great lover of economy, went home well after midnight (with his head “full of the subject”) and fell asleep. Waked by an accidental noise at six in the morning, he was greatly surprised to find his room full of light, his maid having forgotten to close the shutters on the preceding evening. Greatly astonished to learn that the sun rose so early, he checked in an

almanac, only to find that on succeeding days the sun would rise still earlier. He then writes:

Your readers, who with me have never seen any signs of sunshine before noon, and seldom regard any part of the almanac, will be as much astonished as I was, when they hear of his [the sun's] rising so early; and especially when I assure them, *that he gives light as soon as he rises.*

The asseveration of the Subscriber on this point is unmistakable. "I am convinced of this," he writes. "I am certain of my fact. One cannot be more certain of any fact. I saw it with my own eyes. And, having repeated this observation the three following mornings, I found always precisely the same result."

Professor A. O. Aldridge's comment on this piece is illuminating. "There is as much self-satire in the piece as social criticism [of Parisian habits]," he writes. "Not only is it a parody of some scientific and economic works, but it is also a reflection on his own habits. At Passy Franklin had been known to stay up all night playing chess until well after sunrise."¹⁸ Aldridge offers a summary in one of his books and again alludes to it in another as Franklin's "making fun . . . of his scientific papers. . ."¹⁹ But in the sixth paragraph of this hoax, at least, Franklin seems not so much making fun of his own scientific papers as satirizing the pretentious learning of the virtuoso scientists he had struck at in his letter *To the Royal Academy*. For he has his Subscriber note the strangely skeptical reaction the announcement of his discovery has had upon *others*, including one "learned natural philosopher." The Subscriber complains, "When I speak of this discovery to others, I can easily perceive by their countenances, though they forbear expressing it in words, that they do not quite believe me." The "learned natural philosopher" does, however, express in words his disbelief, assuring the Subscriber that he "must certainly be mistaken as to the circumstances of the light coming into my room; for it being well known, as he says, that there could be no light abroad at that hour [six a.m.], it follows that none could enter from without; and that of consequence, my windows being accidentally left open, *had only served to let out the darkness*; and he used many ingenious arguments to show me how I might, by that means, have been deceived."

The Subscriber readily admits that this learned philosopher, or pseudo-scientist, had "puzzled" him a little at first by this explanation. And since the Subscriber had not been satisfied by the explanation, he had by "subsequent observations" verified his own "discovery" and had thus been "confirmed" in his "first opinion."

The Subscriber foresees, of course, that the dubious utility of his "discovery" might be objected to. To this objection he has a ready answer:

“If it should be said, that people are apt to be obstinately attached to old customs, and that it will be difficult to induce them to rise before noon, consequently my discovery can be of little use; I answer *Nil desperandum*.” The Subscriber has faith that “all who have common sense, as soon as they have learnt from this paper that it is daylight when the sun rises, will contrive to rise with him. . . .” For those lacking in this valued possession, the Subscriber lays down a somewhat stern program of compulsion:

1. Windows “with shutters to keep out the light of the sun” should be taxed at the rate of a louis per window.
2. Police should prevent the burning of candles, and “guards should be placed in the shops of the wax and tallow chandlers” to prevent any family from being supplied with more than a pound of candles per week.
3. “Let guards also be posted to stop all the coaches, &c. that would pass the streets after sun-set, except those of physicians, surgeons, and midwives.”
4. “Every morning, as soon as the sun rises, let all the bells in every church be set ringing; and if that it not sufficient, let cannon be fired in every street, to wake the sluggards effectually, and make them open their eyes to see their true interest.”

Franklin carries still farther, moreover, his satire of pretentious scientific discoveries and the controversies that sometimes arose over them. He ridicules the mock modesty and altruism of his simpleton Subscriber who poses as a great world benefactor, making the latter say, “For the benefit of this discovery, thus freely communicated and bestowed by me on the public, I demand neither place, pension, exclusive privilege, nor any other reward whatever. I expect only the honour of it.” Then, playfully interjecting an ancients-vs-moderns motif, such as had raged in the critical literature of the early eighteenth century (cf. Swift’s *Battle of the Books*), Franklin puts these words into the mouth of his Subscriber who has made this epochal “discovery”:

And yet I know there are little, envious minds, who will, as usual, deny me this, and say, that my invention was known to the ancients, and perhaps they may bring passages out of the old books in proof of it. . . . I will not dispute with these people, that the ancients knew not the sun would rise at certain hours; they possibly had, as we have, almanacs that predicted it; but it does not follow thence, that they knew *he gave light as soon as he rose*. This is what I claim as my discovery.

Furthermore, argues the Subscriber, “If they [the ancients] knew it, it might have been long since forgotten; for it certainly was unknown to the

moderns, at least to the Parisians,” whose custom forbade rising before noon. And since these Parisians were

as well instructed, judicious, and prudent people as exist anywhere in the world, all professing, like myself, to be lovers of economy . . . it is impossible that so sensible a people under such circumstances, should have lived so long by smoky, unwholesome, and enormously expensive light of candles, if they had known, that they might have had as much pure light of the sun for nothing.

Professor Blair in a recent article has noted that one of the values of humor is that it “puts things in their proper places.”²⁰ Franklin’s conclusion to *An Economical Project* which I have just quoted has this effect of putting things in their proper places for the reader. The intentional disarrangement by means of deliberately bad logic and bombastic claims of the simpleton Subscriber (a standard device of the straw man in nineteenth-century humor) is put in order with Franklin’s praise of the Parisians and his appeal to their sense of reason.

The satires and hoaxes we have thus far considered aimed chiefly at exposure and ridicule of the faults, failings, foibles, and peccadilloes of *homo sapiens* and his various professions. Since the correction or instruction in these essays is usually gently and kindly administered by Franklin, the discussion of them readily falls into the category of humor, however earthy. (See Addison’s essay on Humor—*Spectator* No. 35—April 10, 1711.) In the last half of the eighteenth century, however, when for Franklin his increasingly active involvement in politics became a battle to the death for high principles, his political satires abounded more and more with caustic wit and warm—sometimes very warm—indignation. There was little that was kind, gentle, or good humored about Franklin’s political satire. Nevertheless, his *method* of putting the shoe on the other foot, which he used again and again in some of his best political satires, in a kindly and good-natured way, to help his readers to gain proper perspective on difficult issues, seems *humorous*, as well as instructive.

In *Exporting of Felons to the Colonies*,²¹ for example, which appeared in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (May 9, 1751), Franklin suggests that the dumping of English convicts on the American provinces be met with a return in kind, especially since the British government had ruled that legislatures in the colonies could not make any laws discouraging or prohibiting such dumping. The specious rhetoric brought by the British to support this ruling is quoted by Franklin: “*That such Laws are against the Publick Utility, as they tend to prevent the IMPROVEMENT and WELL PEOPLING of the colonies.*” Using trenchant irony, Franklin writes that “such a tender *parental* Concern in our *Mother Country* for the *Welfare* of

her *Children*, calls aloud for the highest *Returns* of Gratitude and Duty.” The returns he has in mind are the shipping of certain “venomous Reptiles we call RATTLESNAKES: Felons-Convict from the Beginning of the World” to the so-called Mother Country, there to be “carefully distributed in *St. James Park*, in the *Spring-Gardens* and other Places of Pleasure about *London*; in the Gardens of all the Nobility and Gentry throughout the Nation; but particularly in the Gardens of the *Prime Ministers*, the *Lords of Trade* and *Members of Parliament*; for to them we are *most particularly* obliged [for both the ruling and the above-mentioned law].” Franklin mentions an old American custom, following the Biblical law (“Thou shalt Bruise his Head.”), of putting such rattlesnake “convicts” to death. But as this “general Sentence of *Death*” might be objected to as too cruel and sanguinary, it was to be changed to “*Transportation*.” (In effect, this was exactly what the British were doing by transporting their criminals to the colonies.) Then, following the specious rhetoric of the British in attempting to rationalize their conduct, and law, Franklin cleverly asserts a similarly false premise—which seemingly underlay the British action—that however “mischievous” the rattlesnakes might have been in America, they might *change their natures* when given a change of scene and climate in merry England.

The proposition that Franklin’s argument rested on, of course, was that hardened criminals, such as were then found in Newgate and other British prisons, were as little likely to change their nature as were rattlesnakes, even if given a change of scene and climate. In anticipating objections to this humorous scheme, he therefore next takes up what might happen if the Rattlesnakes did *not* change their “convict” nature upon arrival in London. In that case, he suggests, example being “more prevalent than Precept,” the English might learn a few tricks from the rattlesnakes. The “honest rough British Gentry, by Familiarity with these Reptiles, [might] learn to *creep*, and to *insinuate*, and to *slaver*, and to *wriggle* into Places (and perhaps to *poison* such as stand in their Way) Qualities of no small Advantage to Courtiers! In comparison of which ‘IMPROVEMENT and PUBLICK UTILITY’ what is a *Child* now and then kill’d by their venomous Bite, . . . or even a favorite *Lap Dog*?”

Despite this stinging attack on the court system, Franklin nevertheless manages to create a humorous ending, although not neglecting an opportunity to quip at the injustice of British trade policies:

I would only add, that this exporting of Felons to the Colonies, may be consider’d as a *Trade*, as well as in the Light of a *Favour*. Now all Commerce implies Returns: Justice requires them: There can be no Trade without them. And *Rattle-Snakes* seem the most *suitable Returns* for the *Human Serpents* sent us by our *Mother Country*. In this, however, as

in every other Branch of Trade, she will have the Advantage of us. She will reap *equal* Benefits without equal Risque of the Inconveniencies and Dangers. For the *Rattle-Snake* gives Warning before he attempts his Mischief; which the Convict does not.

Thus by effective use of a clarifying analogy Franklin enables the reader to see clearly the whole thorny problem, the dangers and injustices consequent upon the British policy of exporting felons to the colonies. Although quite possibly this satire was intended when first published only to crystallize public opinion in America against the British practice, Franklin apparently adapted it, if we can believe Condorcet, to an oral story or anecdote while he was ambassador to France.²²

Another instance of this same method of a playful, although heated, common-sense analogy is the little story entitled *Episode on Pont Neuf* (from the *Pennsylvania Chronicle*, March 23, 1767). Shortly after the repeal of the Stamp Act there was an attempt by the British to make the Americans pay for the cost of printing the stamps. Franklin's story tells of a Frenchman on this well-known bridge in Paris who with a red-hot iron in hand would accost an English passer-by with this modest proposal, "Pray Monsieur Anglois . . . Do me the Favour to let me have the Honour of thrusting this hot Iron into your Backside?" When the Englishman exclaimed, "Zoons [!] What does the fellow mean! Begone with your Iron or I'll break your Head!" The Frenchman retorted "*Nay Monsieur . . . if you do not chuse it, I do not insist upon it. But at least, you will in Justice have the Goodness to pay me something for the heating of my Iron.*"²³ The analogy with the unfair British policy in connection with the Stamp Tax was obvious enough to draw a ready laugh from American readers.

Crane refers to this little work as a "rather feeble squib," and Granger treats it as an anecdote.²⁴ It is funnier and more effective than Granger and Crane think. Far from being a "rather feeble squib," or a mere anecdote as Crane and Granger call it, this little piece makes telling use of earthy humor to expose a particularly flagrant example of governmental parasitism. Two of Franklin's finest satires exhibit this same tendency. Both were published in the London *Public Advertiser* in 1773.

In *An Edict by the King of Prussia*²⁵ a fictitious royal proclamation by the King of Prussia high-handedly orders the British to obey certain of the German King's tyrannical trade impositions, on grounds that Great Britain, originally settled by Germanic tribes, had never officially seceded and was therefore still a colony of Prussia. This work again attacked British trade policies—the ad valorem tax, the prohibition in the colonies of the manufacture of iron and other metals, wool, and beaver hats (such as Franklin was later to don for special effect in France)—and also the dumping of felons. Several of Franklin's English friends were taken in by

this hoax. But its appeal to fair-minded thinkers and American sympathizers in England lay in its use of an analogy that enabled the English to put themselves in place of the American colonists and see these matters from a new and more instructive point of view. The laugh was on themselves, as Whitehead and the more intelligent of them were only too ready to admit.

In the second satire, *Rules By Which A Great Empire May Be Reduced To A Small One*, which Franklin thought his best, he immediately establishes a humorous tone by having his persona, “a modern simpleton,” address himself “to all ministers who have the management of extensive dominions, which from their very greatness are become troublesome to govern, because the multiplicity of their affairs leaves no time for *fiddling*.” Since the “modern simpleton” assumes that the British ministers are deliberately trying to destroy the empire, this reference to “*fiddling*” brings to mind Nero’s performance while the Roman empire was “reduced.” But the pun on *fiddling* also suggests fooling around and bungling, the muddling of the Earl of Hillsborough’s administration with respect to government of the American colonies. The rather slow and sly appearance of this word at the end of a fairly long periodic sentence with the effect of anti-climax is characteristic of Franklin’s humor. Although I cannot tell why, it seems to me a specifically American touch. For it seems to possess a certain simple, homely quality that gives it rich individuality.

In the *Rules* the “modern simpleton” advises the ministers how they may best destroy the British directed empire, since, because of their policies towards the American colonies, he can only conclude that this is their serious intention:

gentlemen, you are to consider that a great empire, like a great cake, is most easily diminished at the edges. Turn your attention, therefore, first to your remotest provinces; that as you get rid of them, the next may follow in order.

Thus we see Franklin once again setting up an analogy for improving his reader’s knowledge of complicated governmental mismanagement. In the form of a grievance list of some twenty “rules,” climactically arranged with respect to degree of the injustice, he can then state the specific nature of the bungling and its effect of eventually causing a crumbling of the empire at its edges—viz. a separation of the American colonies from the mother country. By putting the rules to reduce the empire into the mouth of a “modern simpleton” and by having those rules coincide with the actual unjust policies pursued by the British, Franklin gave the British leaders a chance to see themselves as the Americans saw them.

Similarly with satires of the last two decades in the eighteenth century, Franklin continues using this technique of changing the point of view, turn

about being fair play. In *Remarks Concerning the Savages of North America* (1784)²⁶ he tells of the Virginia commissioners offering the Indian leaders of the Six Nations admission to the college at Williamsburg. "If the Indians would send down half a dozen of their young Lads to that College, the Government would take care that they should be well provided for, and instructed in all the Learning of the White People." To the surprise of the Commissioners the Indians declined this offer with thanks. In their thank-you note Franklin makes them say, "Different Nations have different Conceptions of things; and you will therefore not take it amiss, if our Ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same with yours." The Indians then go on to relate an experience they had already had in sending their youth to some of "the Colleges of the Northern Provinces." The result? "When they came back to us, they were bad Runners, ignorant of every means of living in the Woods, unable to bear either Cold or Hunger, knew neither how to build a Cabin, take a Deer, or kill an Enemy, spoke our Language imperfectly, were therefore neither fit for Hunters, Warriours, nor Counsellors; they were totally good for nothing." Therefore, obliged as they were to the white Commissioners for their kind offer, they declined it. But to show their gratitude, the Indians made a counter offer: "If the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a Dozen of their Sons, we will take great Care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make *Men* of them."

Franklin's last satire, *On the Slave-Trade*,²⁷ written and published in the *Federal Gazette* (March 25, 1790) some three weeks before his death, shows his consistency of method in this same respect. Here, in answering pro-slavery arguments of Congressman Jackson, Franklin asks his Christian readers to put themselves in the place of the Negro slaves in the Deep South. Alluding to the fact that Christians were sometimes captured and sold into slavery by the Moslems, he assumes the mask of one "Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, a member of the Divan of Algiers." Sidi had received a petition from a certain sect (called Erika) "who pray'd for the Abolition of Piracy and Slavery as being unjust." Sidi makes a speech against the petition of the Erika, which begins:

Allah Bismillah &c. God is great, and Mahamet is his Prophet

Have these *Erika* considered the Consequences of granting their Petition? If we cease our Crusades against the Christians, how shall we be furnished with the Commodities their Countries produce, and which are so necessary to us? If we forbear to make Slaves of their People, who in this hot Climate are to cultivate our Lands? Who are to perform the common Labours of our City, and in our Families? Must we not then be our own Slaves? And is there not more Compassion and Favour to us as Mussulmen, than to these Christian Dogs?

Seen in this light, Franklin's audience of Christian readers began to gain a little better perspective on the effects of slavery than Mr. Jackson had managed to give them. As Professor Blair expresses it, things were put in their proper places. Or as Franklin undoubtedly hoped, the reader was benefitted by having his knowledge and virtue improved.

Franklin was a master of many styles.²⁸ This versatility seems to have served him well in humorous sniping at pretentious learning, sentimental literature, and lawyers and their jargon. He especially enjoyed poking fun at this latter class. In the *New England Courant* (Feb. 8, 1723) he had written of lawyers "who with equal Force of Argument, can plead either for the Plaintiff or Defendant." In his first issue of *Poor Richard's Almanac* (1733) he had written some verses entitled "The Benefits of going to Law."

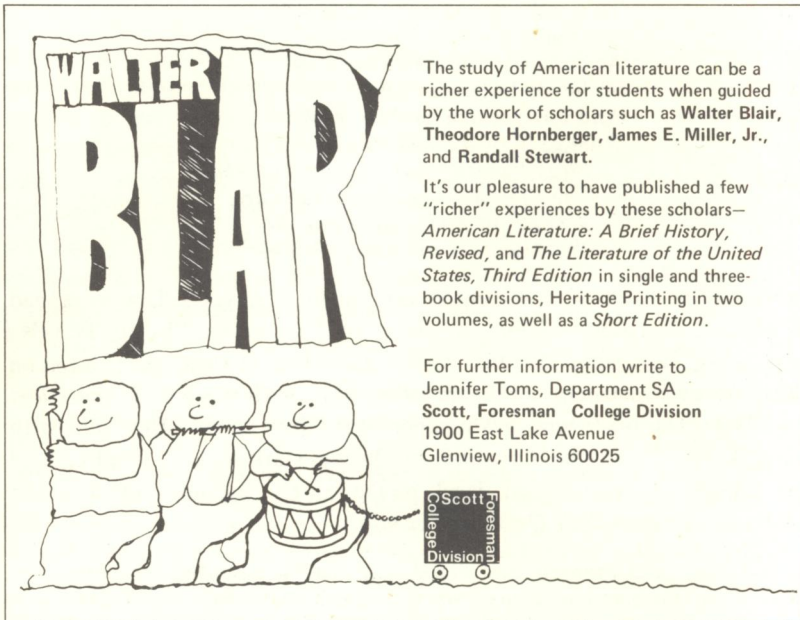
Two Beggars travelling along
One blind, the other lame,
Pick'd up an Oyster on the Way
To which they both laid claim:
The Matter rose so high, that they
Resolv'd to go to Law,
As often richer Fools have done,
Who quarrel for a Straw.
A Lawyer took it strait in hand,
Who knew his Business was,
To mind nor one nor t'other side,
But make the best o'th' Cause;
As always in the Law's the Case:
So he his Judgment gave,
And Lawyer-like he thus resolv'd
What each of them should have:
*Blind Plaintiff, lame Defendant, share
The Friendly Laws impartial Care,
A Shell for him, a Shell for thee,
The Middle is the Lawyer's Fee.*²⁹

In the 1737 issue he commented cryptically, "A good Lawyer a bad Neighbor."³⁰ Later in *Poor Richard* (1742) he wrote, "In my Travels I once saw a Sign call'd *The Two Men at Law*; One of them was painted on one Side, in a melancholy Posture, all in Rags, with this Scroll, *I have lost my Cause*. The other was drawn capering for Joy, on the other Side, with these Words, *I have gain'd my Suit*; but he was stark naked." Finally, in all the annals of parodies of legal jargon surely nothing matches the conclusion of Franklin's *On Amplification*:

Given, and granted, and dated, and signed, and sealed by my own Hand and with my own Hand, and so my own Hand, and under my own Hand and Seal this Day of Anno. Dom.³¹

But preachers of the gospel were also sometimes given to amplification, “the Art of saying Little in Much.”³² He explains the necessity for this as follows: “If they preach, a Discourse of considerable Length is expected from them, upon every Subject they undertake, and perhaps they are not stock’d with naked Thoughts sufficient to furnish it out.” For this reason the Preacher should be allowed “to tell us whatever a Thing is negatively, before he begins to tell us what it is affirmatively,” and we should “suffer him to divide and subdivide as far as *Two and fiftiethly*.”

In conclusion, any article on Franklin’s satire would be incomplete without some mention of the wide range of the essays (both in time and kind) in which he teased another class—the opposite sex. In his early letters of Silence Dogood and his later bagatelles for French ladies, one can detect from time to time delightful flashes of sprightly satire. Silence Dogood, the young Boston widow, is made to say, “I intend now and then to beautify my Writings with a Sentence or two in the learned Languages, which will not only be fashionable, and pleasing to those who do not understand it, but will likewise be very ornamental.”³³ Of course, here Franklin is attacking pretentious learning as well as teasing the fair sex about their relatively new preoccupation with writing. In the same vein in his famous recipe for a New England elegy he makes Silence advise the reader to “be sure not to omit the Words *Aetatis Suae*, which will Beautify it [the sentimental elegy] exceedingly.” Also, in the note appended to the



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elegy she makes this observation: “N.B. This Receipt will serve when a Female is the Subject of your Elegy, provided you borrow a greater Quantity of Virtues, Excellencies, &c.” Turning her attention to female dress, she compares the new “Hoop-Petticoats” to “monstrous topsy-turvy *Mortar Pieces*” fit for neither “Church, the Hall or the Kitchen,” suggesting, too, that they might be taxed “for taking up so much room in the King’s High-Way.”³⁴ Satirizing the “*Want of Manners*” of an over fond mother who lets her children run wild in a shop of one Patience, he has the latter object that sometimes, when the shop is filled with customers, these brats pull dry goods “off my low Shelves down to the Ground, and perhaps where one of them has just been making Water; My friend [the mother] takes up the Stuff, and cries, *Eh! thou little wicked mischievous Rogue!—But however, it has done no great Damage; ’tis only wet a little;* and so puts it up upon the Shelf again.”³⁵ His proposals to Mesdames Brillon and Helvétius (in the later bagatelles) are often cited as showing the refinement of his style and the beginnings of belletristic literature among American writers; but at least one or two of these illustrate with equal effectiveness his subtly-veiled earthy humor, his superior knowledge of human nature, and his eminent rationality. Thus from first to last Franklin gave free play to his humor, spicing his edifying hoaxes and satires with the refreshing power of good old-fashioned American horse sense.

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NOTES

¹ Leonard W. Labaree, et al., eds. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959–), I, 331. Hereafter *Papers*.

² *Horse Sense in American Humor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1942).

³ *Papers*, I, 331.

⁴ Rossell Hope Robbins, *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1959), p. 403.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁷ See *Papers*, I, 182-83, for text. All quotations are from this source.

⁸ See Elder Olson’s remarks on the comic and the humorous in *The Theory of Comedy* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 22-24, as well as the chapter following, “The Poetics of Comedy.”

⁹ John Bach McMaster, *Benjamin Franklin as a Man of Letters* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1887), p. 71.

¹⁰ Max Hall, *Benjamin Franklin & Polly Baker: The History of a Literary Deception* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960), pp.157-67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112. See, also, Franklin’s letter to the London *Public Advertiser* (May 22, 1765) for two other examples of the tall story in satire—his references to the tails of American sheep being so laden with wool that “a Car or Waggon on four little wheels” was necessary to “keep it from trailing on the Ground” and “the grand Leap of the Whale” up Niagara Falls, which he claims “is esteemed by all who have seen it

as one of the finest Spectacles in Nature!" To which he adds, "Really, Sir, the World is grown too incredulous."

¹²For text I have used my edition of the bagatelles, *Franklin's Wit and Folly* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), pp. 66-69.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵In this five-star performance in the gentle art of scatology Franklin obviously owes much to Swift's third book of *Gulliver's Travels*. But the style, the more affable tone, and possibly the allusion to freedom of the press mark it as still very much Franklin's own kind of humor.

¹⁶*Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962), pp. 121-23.

¹⁷The text used is A. H. Smythe, ed. *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), IX, 183-89. For the correct publication date of this Franklin work see A. O. Aldridge, *Franklin and his French Contemporaries* (New York: New York University Press, 1957), p. 178. I am indebted to Aldridge, too, for notice of an unpublished work which Franklin apparently had also designed for the *Journal of Paris*. In this work Franklin writes of having discovered "a material ten times lighter than inflammable air [used to inflate balloons] . . . in the Promises of Lovers and Courtiers; in the sighs of widowers, in the good resolutions made in a storm at sea, and in sickness on land, and above all, in the compliments contained in Letters of Recommendations." *Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher and Man* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1965), p. 359.

¹⁸*Franklin and his French Contemporaries*, loc. cit.

¹⁹Respectively *Franklin and his French Contemporaries*, pp. 177-78, and *Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher and Man*, p. 359.

²⁰"Some Values of American Humor," *American Humor: An Interdisciplinary Newsletter*, 1 (Fall, 1974), 1.

²¹See *Papers*, IV, 130-33, for text used and for additional information on historical background.

²²*Ibid.*, IV, 130-31.

²³*Ibid.*, XIII, 184.

²⁴Verner W. Crane, *Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950), p. 76. Bruce Ingham Granger, *Benjamin Franklin, An American Man of Letters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), p. 82.

²⁵*Writings*, VI, 118-24 and 127-37, for both the *Edict* and the *Rules* (in the paragraph following in my text).

²⁶*Ibid.*, X, 97-105.

²⁷*Ibid.*, X, 87-91.

²⁸Granger, p. 208.

²⁹*Papers*, I, 318.

³⁰*Papers*, II, 168.

³¹*Papers*, II, 149. See p. 146n for attribution of this work to Franklin by the Yale editors, who note its first appearance in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (June 17, 1736).

³²*Papers*, I, 330.

³³*Ibid.*, I, 12. Cf., too, I, 50.

³⁴*Ibid.*, I, 26 and 22 respectively for these quotations.

³⁵*Busy-Body*, No. 4. *Papers* I, 123.