

Can a Gentleman Rage? Ben Franklin on the Curve of Satire

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It was the Golden Age of satire, the eighteenth century in England, and Swift, Pope, Gay, Addison and Steele, Fielding, and Jane Austen were the gold standard. Never has a country before or since produced so much corrosive free-market laughter. Of course, a veritably free press—the Licensing Act had expired in 1695—brought a sunny climate for English satire. Even colonial America sprouted some humorous dissent, but the crop was sparse because the blazing sun of treason law dried up its ground. After the war, American criticism was more humorless invective fired between the Federalists and Republicans than the sophisticated irony and parody of the wits of the mother country. One American exception, however, is thought to be Benjamin Franklin, hailed by many critics as America's founding satirist. If so, where does he stand in the British empire of satire and how should he be presented in literature classrooms of a post-colonial America?

First, some stipulative definitions that students need. Satire is a distortion, a fun-house mirror that exaggerates things to mock them. It is a text that distorts its contexts. Like all art it is an act of illusion, its artist's conception of things. More a cartoon than a portrait and less a truth than a polemic, satire aims less to inquire than to persuade. Recalling Plato's rant against rhetoric in the *Gorgias*, one may say that satire starts with, rather than establishes, a supposed truth, and so it can never be philosophical in aim or fully ethical in act. It rests on analogy, but analogy has no purchase on truth, the less so if the analogy is false. So satire is finally an argument by ridicule. It is the most aggressive, the most offensive of literary types: Think only of a few words that characterize it:

satire is a scourge, a *bludgeon*, a *whip*, and a *weapon*; it *shoots at targets*; it *attacks*, *wounds*, *skewers*, *blasts*, *explodes*, *flays*, *damages*, *destroys*, and *demolishes*. Long satire like Byron's mock-epic *Don Juan* is a barrage of heavy artillery; short satires like Mencken's essays are the light cavalry of literature, skirmishing an enemy flank.

Its destructiveness aside, whatever its intention, satire rarely reforms. Swift's *Gulliver* didn't make readers less gullible, and Pope's satire on dunces didn't end stupidity. Voltaire's satire didn't bury optimism, Jane Austen's mock of the Gothic novel didn't stop its rush from the presses, and Ben Franklin's criticism of slavery didn't emancipate slaves. Satire can enlighten, delight, or enrage readers, expose shortcomings, and vent the writer's rage, but alone it never repairs. As war breaks up bones and buildings, satire aims to break up its readers' false conceptions. More positively, satire may be a form of what Robert Frost called "counter-speech"—the power of other minds to draw out the best in us. So satire is to literature what the scrimmage is to football: it forces the reader to defend against its onslaught or it bends the reader under its drive. In another slant of light, the satirist is a healer, a pathologist: detecting the cancers in the bodies politic and social, ultimately for law or popular will to be the surgeons that excise them. And that too is positive.

The Curve of Satire: Tones and Topics

Taking his models from classical Rome, John Dryden, following seventeenth-century belief, asserted that two tones mark the ends of the curve of satire. Horatian satire is gentle, generalized, urbane, and mild; it satirizes the inconsistencies of human nature. Juvenalian satire is biting, bitter, and angry; it attacks individual human beings and institutions with contempt and abuse. Both tones are aggressive, but Horace's satire is a boardwalk shooting gallery of tin ducks—fun without injury; Juvenal's is a combat zone. And the neo-classical eighteenth century imported both

types. Paired at opposite ends of Dryden's curve, Swift and Pope are the reigning Juvenalians, Addison and Steele the Horatians.

While he emphasizes satire's tones, Dryden omits satire's topics from his scheme. But a descriptive definition makes clear that satire ridicules a public policy or a public person repugnant to the satirist. Juvenal does and Swift does. Horace, Addison, and Steele rarely do, instead smiling at incongruities in human nature that can't be changed.

Franklin on a Revised Curve of Satire

Dryden's too neat neoclassical division also recognizes but scants the important distinction between wit and humor. Swift, the best of English satirists, finds a more "strict-constructionist" approach that sees "savage indignation" or righteous anger as the foundation of satire. So I exclude Franklin's squibs, hoaxes, and puns, and the wonderful all-American horse sense that gives his humor its foundation. Rather I will glance at four mature and exigent criticisms of topical policy by Franklin: on transported felons, on empire, on Hessian hegemony, and on slavery. Their critical topics of policy ride the road of eighteenth-century satire. But what characterizes their tones? Could a self-styled urbane gentleman like Franklin really vent anger in public?

What does not characterize Franklin's tone is clear both in intention and in effect. As early as 1733 in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin wrote an essay called "On Ill-Natured Speaking." In it he said that ill-natured speakers "delight in touching gall'd Horses that they may see 'em wince." And he compares them to "the meanest Insect, the trifling Muskotoe, the filthy Bug, [who has] as well as you, the Power of giving Pain to Men." In 1781, nearly fifty years later, he repeated the same insect imagery in a letter about "malevolent Criticks and Bug-writers They will abuse you and wound your Character in nameless Pamphlets; thereby resembling those dirty little stinking Insects that attack us only in

the dark . . . molesting and wounding us." And in 1788 he complained of "the Spirit of Rancour, Malice, and Hatred that breathes in the Newspapers." These prohibitions govern the tone of what are called Franklin's satires. And what are called his satires therefore lose great satire's predatory bite.

They are models of eighteenth-century prose style. It was the style in England of Swift, Addison, and Steele. This Anglo-American style we read in Madison's *Federalist* papers and Washington's (and Hamilton's) *Farewell Address*. It is parallel, balanced, antithetical, phrased mainly in periodic sentences. Jefferson wrote it in the middle style with a lean to Latinate diction, while Paine wrote it in the plain style with a bend to the Old English, but all the Founders' prose was clear as a windowpane. Their tones, however, were as different as the organ and the fife. Had Paine, for example, written the Declaration in his visceral style and Jefferson *Common Sense* in his cerebral style, fans might all have risen last July 4th in ballparks across America to sing "God Save the Queen" before a cricket match. Neither is a satire, of course. Jefferson explained independence to the world in universal terms, but Paine got the muskets into the field. The difference? Paine's anger.

Like Paine, Franklin pens the plain style in his essays. But in *The Autobiography* he invoked Addison's *Spectator* papers as his tonal model—even, mild, moderate, always more humorous than stinging. He never limns the lampoons of Pope or imitates the grotesque visions of Swift. He is ironic, but not militantly so. Yet Franklin is derivative of Swift in the structures of his satires, so much so that Franklin often seems like the copyist with a pale palette painting Hogarth by the numbers.

Contrast two of Swift's matchless essay-length satires with Franklin's. In the 1708 *Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, Swift, a Church-of-England parson, purposely argues the right conclusion for the wrong reasons. We should not, his persona rages in the earnestness of a

Cotton-Mather sermon, abolish Christian services to allow trade on the Lord's Day because we would lose valuable nap time on Sunday mornings. Without preachers, whom would we mock? And without Christianity how could our free-thinkers deny the Trinity? And in *A Modest Proposal* of 1729 Swift attacks repressive English taxes imposed on the Irish. So his ironic persona proposes ways for Ireland to meet its tax obligations. How? Irish parents should butcher and market their babies to earn money, to end abortion, to reduce the number of family mouths to feed in famine, to save their children from begging for food, to raise the Irish GNP, to increase the English-Irish balance of trade, to reduce the number of papists, and to finally put some good food on English tables and gloves on English ladies. The "final solution" is the logical solution. Even if one thinks that church is a good place to nap to the drone of sermons or that taxes are a form of state-sanctioned cannibalism, each essay is a satire on a timely public issue that has evaporated over time. But the preservative in the satire is the angry affirmation that what is purely rational is not even remotely ethical. Swift's personae measure water in watts or time in teaspoons when they use a rational calculus to solve a moral matter. So Swift's satire always breathes righteous indignation, an angry man intolerant of mechanical abstract reasoning.

Or take Defoe's 1702 satire, *The Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, satirizing Swift's own Tory and High Church fear and treatment of non-Anglicans. Defoe's persona, masked as a Tory and High Churchman, is another ironic rationalist: again the "final solution" is the logical way to rid the nation of non-believers. So the essay demands that dissenters not be merely exiled but killed. Defoe's analogy: In your garden, "Tis Cruelty to kill a Snake or a Toad in cold Blood, but the Poyson of their Nature makes it a Charity to our Neighbors to destroy those Creatures, not for any personal Injury receiv'd, but for Prevention; not for the Evil they have done, but the Evil they may do." The animal imagery is telling: a

hierarchical metaphor that implies authority and superiority, but the analogy is purposely false: Dissenters are not snakes. And the garden image implies that to a Dissenter Queen Anne's England is no Eden. Defoe the Dissenter knows that, but he parodies his persona's angry language to exaggerate and stigmatize the persona's own ruling church and politics.

Swift's and Defoe's satires are edgy and violent and furious because the two Englishmen are fighting rear-guard actions against political threats to their causes and defending what is sacred to them. They glimpse an apocalypse if their side is lost. Their calls are phrased, because their calls are felt, as life-and-death matters nuanced with cold human-racial implications. They are dire warnings, Orwell with a dark laugh. Addison's and Franklin's essays are coffee-house cleverness, less analytical, a wink and a nod among gentlemen aligning them more with comedy than with satire.

Franklin's four essays do follow Swift's and Defoe's main structural lines: parody, irony, and speeding along accumulated effects of a policy like boxcars on the rails of their sentences. Each voiced by a persona, all the essays target a policy to criticize. But Franklin tempers his "plain English" in what he praises as "modest Diffidence."

Franklin is prescient in feeling that low pulse in his own plain style. But *it is* that "modest Diffidence" that makes his tone the milder, an analogue of the Horatian-Whig voice of Addison and Steele and far from the slash and salt of Pope's and Swift's Juvenalian-Tory brand. The Whig persona is Lord Shaftesbury's ideal of the good-natured man, a *gentleman* who finds truth in humor and expression in refined words, and in *The Autobiography*, Franklin cites Shaftesbury's as a model of gentlemanly conversation. Another of Franklin's models, Steele, in *Tatler*, No 21, claims that in a gentleman "the height of good breeding is shown in never giving offense." (Can there even be satire without offense?) In No. 242

Steele asserts "good Nature to be an essential Quality in a Satyrist." (Tell that to Swift who saw "savage indignation" at the heart of satire.) And in *Spectator*, No. 10 Addison promises that his satires will "make Instruction agreeable and Diversion useful for which Reason I shall endeavour to enliven Morality with Wit and to temper Wit with Morality." In *The Autobiography* Franklin holds Addison up as a model "I wish'd if possible to imitate," and, like Addison again, he claims to imitate Socrates who avoided "abrupt Contradiction . . . and put on the humble Inquirer and Doubter" to express himself in "Terms of modest Diffidence." And in his list of thirteen gentlemanly virtues, Franklin extols moderation, tranquility, and humility. But the satirist must establish an air of superiority—he is, after all, chastising; and can a true gentleman hold himself out as superior? Without offense, let alone abuse, what is called Horatian satire is at best only a first cousin to satire. It is comedy's fraternal twin.

Empty of anger, Franklin's essays are masterpieces tending as much toward incongruous comedy as toward satire. Together, comedy and satire graph a Venn diagram in which the family resemblance is merely risibility, in one a gentle smile of recognition of inconsistency, in the other an angry laugh of disdain and rebuke. Thus in "Exporting of Felons to the Colonies" (1751), only a smile results from the simple inversion of returning a favor to England: As the mother country transports felons to the colonies, so the colonies should export rattlesnakes to the mother country. Or in "An Edict by the King of Prussia" (1773) Franklin's German persona argues that since England was colonized by Germans, and Anglo-Saxons colonized America, and Prussia defended England and America in the Seven Years' War, Prussia has a right to tax both England and America. In "Rules by Which a Great Empire May Be Reduced to a Small One" (1773), Franklin, posing as a "how-to-book" author—"a modern Simpleton," he says—lays out twenty canons that will assure the diminishing of the British empire, for example, levying odious taxes,

delaying and perverting justice, suspecting your colonists always of revolt, denying them representation, granting your generals unconstitutional powers, and dissolving your colonial parliaments. In "On the Slave Trade" Franklin masks as an editor who prints a letter by an Algerian Muslim governor and advocate of human bondage at a time in the 1780s when north African states were capturing, selling, and enslaving European and American whites. "If we cease our Cruises against Christians, how shall we be furnished with the Commodities their Countries produce?" If slavery is stopped, "who will indemnify [the owners] for the[ir] loss[es]?" Where would the slaves go if freed? They are too ignorant to establish good government, "and the wild Arabs would soon molest and destroy or again enslave them." Does the Koran censure slavery? Of course not. Franklin writes in 1790 after similar questions and answers had been voiced by Southern delegates to the Constitutional Convention and again in the Senate. In Franklin's parody, slave masters are businessmen, slaves stupid Christians, Indians wild Arabs, and the Bible is the Koran. Again, the persona. Again, simple inversion. Again, accumulated effects. Every time, fun without fire. We smile, but righteous anger never flames up. Franklin's essays never darken with the repulsiveness and rage against butchering and mass execution that shock the reader into horrified recognition and anger and therefore prompt him to anger. We never feel the pain of slaves, the injustice to taxpayers, the crimes of the transported felons. Swift and Defoe founded their satires on inviolable principles; Franklin's rested on circumstances.

Horace taught that literature should instruct and entertain; Cicero added that it should also persuade. And Juvenal showed that satire should punish. Franklin teaches and he delights, but his gentlemanly / intellectual rationality fences out the sympathy to move the reader or to punish the satiric butt. He is the lawyer whose reasoning wins the admiration of the judge, but whose emotional distance loses the case to

the jury. Convincing, but not persuasive. He is the director telling the comic actor to put two feet into one pant leg to get the laugh when he falls down. Funny, but not furious.

Incongruous reversal is Franklin's *most* common denominator—and it's as simple, untextured, and unnuanced as a nursery rhyme: what's good for the goose is good for the gander. So felons become snakes, Prussians pass as Englishmen, north Africans mimic South Carolinians, and Yankee Doodle cross-dresses as John Bull. It's all good fun, pastel violet on the spectrum, Swiftian lite. If only the reversals were acted on and not merely understood by the reader, Franklin implies, the country would be a better place. But teaching ethics is not moving readers to ethical acts. A reader's understanding of a gentlemen's words—Franklin's or Jefferson's—did not bring action or liberty. The emotive, warlike words of Paine—no gentleman, he—did. Gentlemen both were Swift and Pope, but Swift took off his clerical bands and Pope hung up his wig when they sat down to aim their satire and impersonate rude and angry young hellfires. Franklin never could. The reasonableness, diffidence, and moderation that our Founding Grandfather extols as virtuous in *The Autobiography* hedge against abusing the guilty and sentimentalizing the victim. Respectability ruled his life, and respectability tempered his satire.

So what do readers derive from satire? America's Swift manqué, H. L. Mencken, no gentleman himself when throwing his brickbats, had an answer: "I believe that people like to read abuse." What that says about the satirist is one thing. What it says about ourselves as readers of satire we can ponder.

Yet Franklin is finally also a satirist and colleague of Swift. His tone is stronger than Addison's and Steele's and his topics more exigent. So on a curve of satire revised for the eighteenth century, at the poles Swift still huffs furiously and Franklin now smiles impishly. The significance?

Dethroning and replacing the Englishmen Addison and Steele on the traditional curve, Ben Franklin is finally an American literary revolutionist.

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