“THE WAY TO WEALTH”: BENJAMIN FRANKLIN’S USE OF AUDIENCE ISOLATION AS AN INSTRUMENT OF RHETORIC

A Short Essay

by

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It is not up for argument that Benjamin Franklin's "The Way to Wealth" is a work of rhetoric aimed at persuading all audiences to read and learn from the wise proverbs of the made-up old sage, Richard Sanders. Of course the very premise of Franklin's introduction is to engage his audience with his proverbs through an example of how they might be applied to real life. However, in his attempt to persuade all, Franklin certainly finds it necessary to approach different audiences with different types of rhetoric. Patrick Sullivan catches onto this separation of readerships and divides Franklin's audience into two categories: the "least sophisticated reader" and the "more sophisticated reader" (249). In his separation of the two, Sullivan finds that for the former group the preface becomes more literally a "convenient collection of proverbs," whereas for the latter he explains that preface works as a challenge to "engage the critical faculties" of the mind. Most important for Sullivan is the conclusion that from this second, more sophisticated audience, we can begin to see that the preface "is built around the tension between the simple instruction offered in the form of proverbs and the more sophisticated instructions generated by the dramatic context" (249). The tension that Sullivan introduces here leads him into an interpretation of the introduction as an important play between the forms of literal pedantry and complex symbolic meaning, which seems to align Franklin's bifurcated audiences into a parallel sense of collective importance.

However, by examining this "dramatic context" that separates the two audiences from each other, it becomes apparent to the removed (in the sense of time) reader that in the preface Franklin is in fact seeking to persuade his more sophisticated and mature audience to actually separate themselves from the common crowd, and in doing so truly learn from his proverbs. While Sullivan briefly touches on this element of audience

division in his discussion of Franklin's rhetoric as a combatant of "mental laziness" (255) and a promoter of "intellectual independence," this essay will seek to examine more deeply the way in which Franklin aims particularly at the audience of intellect and uses them and them alone as his target audience. Evidence of this separation comes throughout the preface as Franklin introduces irony, hypocrisy, and downright dull-wittedness into Poor Richard's proverbial maxims that he is prefacing. All of these elements create a theme of contradictions to the introduction and seem to be placed only where a more attentive readership would be able to catch them, that is, under the surface.

To be sure, with each incongruous piece of information about Poor Richard, Franklin's sophisticated reader distances further and further from the audience that would take Franklin's proverbs at face value. As a result, his attentive audience is isolated into a realm of higher understanding as the readers themselves become a part of the inside subtlety that Franklin is crafting. Therefore, in this introductory essay we can observe an excellent example of Franklin carefully disguising his most meaningful arguments deep within the text and asking only a select few to do some digging and pull them out. Finally, what I hope to explore in this essay is the method that Franklin uses to create this type of rhetoric and why this type of narrative espionage is so important to Franklin and other writers of the 18th century.

To begin, the fact that Franklin would employ the rhetorical device of audience isolation in "The Way to Wealth" is not uncharacteristic of his other writings. Sally Griffith finds that Franklin uses a similar method in an essay he wrote as far back as in the winter of 1747 – 1748 entitled "Order, Discipline, and a few Cannon." In this particular piece Franklin had set himself to organize a "voluntary citizens' militia to

provide for the colony's defense" (131). Griffith finds that Franklin's primary rhetorical strategy relies on the creation of an "intended audience" that would become the sole aim of his essay (144). Contrary to "The Way to Wealth," yet equally important, Franklin's persuasive aim is leveled at the middle class colonists as they are the very people who will need to be rallied for the militia. Griffith explains, "Franklin insisted that his intended audience, 'we, the middling People, the Tradesmen, Shopkeepers, and Farmers of this Province and City,' stood to lose the most, being less able than the wealthy to flee and more likely to lose all they own; indeed, they would bear the brunt of tributes extorted by their conquerors." While its is interesting that Franklin focuses his argument on the middle, rather than elite class (similar to the intellectual elite in "The Way to Wealth") in "Order, Discipline and a Few Cannon," it is also fascinating that he keeps his arguments focused towards the class system altogether. Griffith touches on this idea as she writes,

> He [Franklin] was clearly making a calculated appeal to a nascent class consciousness…. Yet this rhetoric also channeled class resentments in the interest of unified action. Franklin suggested that because traditional elites had neglected their civic duties, it was the right and obligation of all citizens regardless of station to play a significant role in community life." (144)

From Griffith's sharp interpretation here, we can see Franklin clearly playing on class tensions as he uses the resentments of the middle class as a catalyst towards changes throughout all of the hierarchies of his society. What is most important for Franklin's rhetoric to be successful is the existence of a stratified society altogether. For, without stratification, to focus and aim a narrative at a particular group of people would of course

be impossible. Additionally, while "The Way to Wealth" is certainly not a piece that Franklin would have intended to cause class resentment as seen in his essay above, Griffith's findings are illuminating to Franklin's consciousness of the power of splitting audiences and focusing rhetoric.

Moving to "The Way to Wealth" in particular, we can immediately see a division of audiences in the first paragraph of the preface as Franklin appeals to the more analytical reader by exposing Poor Richard's major flaw of vanity. Poor Richard states,

> …for though I have been, if I may say it without Vanity, an *eminent Author* of Almanacks annually now for a full Quarter of a Century, my Brother Authors in the same Way, for what Reason I know not, have ever been very sparing in their Applauses; and no other Author has taken the least notice of me, so that did not my Writings produce me some solid *Pudding*, the great Deficiency of *Praise* would have quite discouraged me. (Franklin 785)

An attentive reader is able catch on to the contradictory nature of Poor Richard's character at once, as it is laughable that he attempts to lament, "without Vanity," his lack of fame and attention both of which might have actually satisfied his vanity. To add to this, Poor Richard goes on to say in the second paragraph, "I concluded at length, that the People were the best Judges of my Merits." Thus, Poor Richard confesses that after being rejected by a more "learned" class, he decides to look for "Satisfaction" and "Praise" in the less learned and more common "People." As we will see, the subtle contradiction of Poor Richard's character that Franklin begins with here sets the stage for an entire narrative that seems to cater to a more analytical and less literal readership; especially a readership who would not be fooled by a man who must call himself an

"*eminent Author*." Moreover, with the second quote, Franklin is playing with the idea of Poor Richard himself having two audiences, one being the "learned Author" and the other the more common people. Therefore, similar to Franklin's more sophisticated audience, Poor Richard's learned audience seems to be wary of the authority of the almanac's proverbs as well as Richard himself.

With the sarcastic tone of the narrative established, Poor Richard then moves on to relate an incident with which he was much "gratified." The reader soon realizes this incident to be another example of Poor Richard's vanity as Father Abraham, after being asked by a crowd to explain what he thought of the "*Times*," begins to expound many of Poor Richard's proverbs word for word. While the proverbs are useful to the people listening to them, there is very much a sense of irony in Father Abraham's teachings as he relies almost entirely on Poor Richard's sayings. Sullivan finds Father Abraham to be a "comic figure" who is "unable, it seems, to complete a single sentence without recourse to Poor Richard" (251). Therefore, with Poor Richard's rather pitiful display of vanity and Father Abraham's mechanical reproduction of Poor Richard sayings, it would seem ridiculous for any analytical reader to accept the preface as an argument towards blind adherence to the Poor Richard doctrine. Rather, it seems that Franklin is allowing for room to criticize or at least examine the deeper meanings of his proverbs and how they might be applied to an individual person. The fact that only an active (as opposed to passive) reader would be able to catch these subtleties suggests that Franklin is urging his more sophisticated audience to absorb the subtle clues being laid before them and thus separate themselves from the more literal readers.

Throughout Father Abraham's reproduction of the proverbs, the contradictory elements of Poor Richard and his sayings still humorously entertain the more sophisticated readers, while also instructing them to think for themselves. Very early in this section, Father Abraham, playing off statements of discontent expelled by the crowd, asks, "So what signifies *wishing* and *hoping* for better times" (786). Finding nothing to signify such pessimistic idleness and errant yearning, Father Abraham goes on to say, "We make these times Times better if we bestir ourselves" and ends the argument with a Poor Richard's saying: "*Industry need not wish… He that live upon Hope will die fasting*." The proverb offered here seems to be a direct judgment of Poor Richard's own hoping and wishing for recognition as an "eminent" writer. And to a more attentive reader, Poor Richard's decision to be happy in the merit he receives from the common people would definitely materialize as a contradiction to his theory of industry. Moreover, the sophisticated reader would have no problem imagining Poor Richard starving to death out of his idle dreaming of fame.

Similarly, during his speech on frugality, Father Abraham uses proverbs of Poor Richard that again appear to be aimed directly at his (Poor Richard's) lamentations at the beginning. Father Abraham states, "… for *Pride that dines on Vanity sups on Contempt*, as Poor Richard says…. And after all, of what Use is this *Pride of Appearance*, for which so much is risked, so much is suffered? It cannot produce Health, or ease Pain; it makes no Increase of Merit in the Person, it creates Envy, it hastens Misfortune" (789). An attentive reader cannot read this passage without thinking back to Poor Richard's consolation in "solid *Pudding*" to assuage his lack of praise and even his apparent envy of those authors who "find [their] Works respectfully quoted by other learned Authors"

(785). Edward Gallagher finds similar conclusions in this section as he explains that "Since the tenor of this section militates against the satisfaction of pride, it radically conflicts with Poor Richard's desire to gratify his Vanity" (482). Furthermore, he states that this section undercuts the "expectation fostered by Poor Richard's attitude at the beginning of the essay." Therefore, Franklin's use of this section to further expose Poor Richard's hypocrisy demonstrates his desire to urge his sophisticated audience to resist even the subtle foolishness of Poor Richard himself.

In examining the proverbs that make up the body of the preface and the majority of the entire work (or the actual almanac), Charles Meister explores Franklin's use of the proverb itself as a tool of rhetoric. He explains, "one might ask what rhetorical functions are generally served by the proverbs he [Franklin] quotes. To be sure, any proverb usually tries to vivify a concept or give a mental picture of an argument or of an ideal social conduct" (161). Meister's definition of the purpose of writing proverbs altogether seems to apply to both audiences (less and more sophisticated) that have been examined above. For the less sophisticated audience, a proverb could merely be a mental picture or example of what exemplifies virtuosity and the life of a "good" citizen. In terms of the more sophisticated reader, Franklin's proverbs represent a symbol through which enlightenment is reached on a symbolic rather than literal level. Furthermore, Meister expands this definition to encompass the most simplistic of Franklin's proverbs to include those that "carry practically the sole burden of proof of an argument" that Franklin had been advancing (162). Thus, even without the obvious contradictions in Poor Richard's character that have been observed above, there still exists single proverbs that seem to indicate an overall sense of ambiguity within their meaning. And this serves Franklin's

rhetorical strategy well, as Franklin would have clearly known that many readers would not sense the ambiguities of the proverbs and would end up missing their deeper meanings altogether.

Within the preface this element can be seen when, in commenting on making a payment in the form of credit, Father Abraham quotes Poor Richard as saying, "*Creditors… have better Memories than debtors*" (789). As Meister has pointed out, the point of this proverb is apparent with no additional explanation (even though Father Abraham takes the opportunity to add his own wisdom). But it is the simplistic nature of the maxim that would have made it problematic for the sophisticated reader. This same reader would find the saying quite silly if it were to be applied to someone who, through good business sense, used a loan to make a sound and profitable investment. That a contrary condition such as this was left out of the direct narrative of the preface indicates that Franklin meant the sheer simplicity of the remark to be intended for a reader who would actually get the point. Therefore, as Franklin uses the contradictions of Poor Richard throughout to persuade his sophisticated audience to split off from the crowd, we also see a similar development here as Franklin uses the proverbs themselves in the body of the piece to focus his rhetorical strategy on his more attentive audience.

Finally, it isn't till the conclusion of the preface that Franklin uses both the common people and Poor Richard to focus his argument on his sophisticated readership. In the last paragraph, as Father Abraham ends his "Harangue," Franklin does the unexpected by having the listeners approve "the Doctrine," and subsequently practice the "contrary" (790). By showing the way in which a common person would react to Poor Richard's proverbs, Franklin challenges his more mature audience to separate themselves

from such a reading and use their intellect to learn from the wise maxims. This idea is furthered when, in another shocking development, the reader finds that Poor Richard himself had gone to the market to buy a new coat and upon hearing the speech of Father Abraham, decided that he could stave off his vanity and "wear my old one a little longer" (790). In showing even Poor Richard learning from the proverbs he himself had written, Franklin again pushes his readership not to fall victim to the same folly as Poor Richard does. He suggests, rather, that they take yet a different path than any of the people presented and use "*Experience as a dear school*" and to remember that one must always hear "*Reason*" (790). This lesson of using experience and reason before depending on "*Advice*" from others yet again throws in another contradiction to Franklin's proverbial passages. But as before, this message is subtle and was most likely intended for only the more sophisticated of his audiences. The preface is finally ended when Poor Richard states "my Vanity was wonderfully delighted with [Father Abraham's speech]" and exclaims in the final line: "*Reader*, if thou wilt do the same, thy Profit will be as great as mine." Thus, the undercurrent of contradictions and messages stays neatly tucked into the weave of words, available only to those who know where to look for it.

Cameron Nickels touches on Franklin's toying with the character of Poor Richard in the conclusion of the preface and finds that "Given the inexorable direction of Franklin's intentions in the preface, the conclusion can perhaps be anticipated" (87). She goes on to say, "Poor Richard can quote himself with gravity, but until reminded by Father Abraham, even he had blithely ignored the substance of his proverbial wisdom…. if we recall the advice from the 1756 almanac: 'When you incline to have new Cloaths, look first well over the Old ones, and see if you cannot shift with them another Year.'"

Thus, we can almost see Franklin laughing as he wrote Poor Richard into the preface as doing quite the opposite of his proverbs by "inclin[ing] to have new Cloaths." The message to his audience is of course clear: it is acceptable to chuckle a little at Poor Richard's own fallacy, but find the lesson within the humor and truly learn from the proverbs.

As can be seen, Franklin's use of audience isolation becomes an essential element in his overall persuasive power. The influence of his rhetorical strategy did not receive a blind-eye in his own time period. In fact, several of his contemporaries (and close friends) often used a similar line of attack towards their audiences. Most notably, the persuasive strategy undertaken by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay in *The Federalist Papers*, published about thirty years after "The Way to Wealth" in 1788 and 1789, is decisively similar to Franklin. The connection between Franklin and this group of political activists was both personal and professional. Nian-Sheng Huang notes that Jay and Franklin worked together on numerous projects including negotiations with Britain (79) and also finds that after Franklin's death, Madison praised the statesman by saying that "Franklin was 'an illustrious character, whose native genius has rendered distinguished services to the cause of science and mankind in general; whose patriotic exertions have contributed in a high degree to the independence and prosperity of the country in particular" (27). Thus, as Franklin was an influential character in the general history of the United States, he was also an integral person in the lives of these and other political men. And this can be directly applied to the rhetorical strategies of this time period.

In his discussion on the rhetoric of *The Federalist Papers*, John Longaker finds that the authors of the piece "talk of a plural 'we,'" in their discourse on "a politically, economically, and ideologically unified group working towards a common goal" (95). However, Longaker finds this "unify[ing]" approach to be misleading in the Papers as he states, "Needless to say, however, the apparently inclusive 'we' of early American Federalism actually masked the exclusion of many people." The many people that Longaker explains were left out of American Federalism and were subsequently masked by the "ideological and rhetorical" use of "we" included nearly all of the under-represented class, race, and gender groups. He argues that the primary rhetorical strategy of the *Federalist* Papers was to make a "disparate group identify with a singular identity" and thus allow a unified nation to rally around a strong centralized government. The primary similarity between this type of argument and Franklin's in "The Way to Wealth" can be seen in the way that the *Federalist* authors use a analogous strategy of layering their argument and aiming it at a particular audience. For the *Papers*, the argument is aimed at persuading the classes of people not of the hegemonic sect in an attempt to persuade them to "support the dominant class" (95). And as Longaker points out, this creates, in the "early print agora" of Franklin's time period, a type of rhetoric "only open to a certain type of people speaking in certain ways about certain things." This appears surprisingly akin to Franklin's use of audience isolation in his own rhetorical strategy, as he similarly masks the truer aim of his piece within the narrative. And in both of the works, the role of the audience and the intent of the rhetoric are intrinsically intertwined to enhance the persuasive power of the writing. With all of this considered, it is apparent that the type of persuasive writing that Franklin mastered in "The Way to Wealth" was an

important influence on some of the most significant rhetorical writing of the founders of the United States government.

By using two layers of meaning in "The Way to Wealth," Benjamin Franklin gives both the unsophisticated reader and sophisticated reader a workable preface to a book of proverbs. Aiming directly at his sophisticated readers, however, Franklin also displays the correct way to read *Poor Richard's Almanack*. He does this by pushing them to separate themselves from a literal reading and use their own reason and wit to examine the proverbs before applying them to real life. And, as discussed above, it is this type of rhetorical strategy that influenced many prominent writers in the colonial period. All this, however, is not to say that Franklin felt the less sophisticated readers were unable to use his doctrines. Rather, "The Way to Wealth" is merely evidence to his excellent command of audience and furthers his reputation as one of the most effective American rhetoricians. By the preface alone, the modern reader both learns some important maxims to leading a productive and happy life and gets a lesson on how to use audience to create an excellent piece of rhetoric.

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