

Chapter One

FRANKLIN'S BOSTON YEARS, 1706–1723

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Few Bostonians noticed the birth of Benjamin Franklin on a wintry Sunday in 1706, which has become one of the most memorialized events in history. The future printer, publisher, writer, inventor, scientist, patriot, and diplomat of international renown was the son of Abiah (Folger) and Josiah Franklin, a tallow chandler in town. The infant was baptized the same day on January 6 (Old Style; January 17, New Style) at the Old South Church, right across from the family's small tenement house in Milk Street. A growing urban center itself, colonial Boston played a crucial role in shaping the formative years of this young boy, whose energy, prodigy, ambition, and rebellion would soon make him someone to reckon with in this orthodox Puritan community. Franklin's *Autobiography* describes many major events in his childhood, the information of which modern scholars continue to rely on (unless otherwise indicated, many quotes in this chapter also came directly from part one of that book). Yet they differ in emphases. Whereas biographers from Carl Van Doren, Esmond Wright and H.W. Brands to Walter Isaacson chronicled this period, Arthur B. Tourtellot remains the one who has focused on the young Franklin in Boston. Through extensive studies of Franklin's writings in the *New-England Courant* and other contemporary publications, Perry Miller and J.A. Leo Lemay demonstrate not only how society has shaped Franklin, but also how he has fought against tradition and orthodoxy by searching for a novel voice of personal expressions at a very young age.

1.1 Parents

The Franklins came from Ecton, a hamlet only a few miles outside Northampton in England, where the family had a small estate and a blacksmith shop. Born in 1657, Josiah Franklin was the youngest son of Jane White and Thomas Franklin 2nd. Their oldest son, Thomas 3rd, inherited the family estate but mistreated the father who, in 1666, moved to stay with his second son John at Banbury in the neighboring Oxfordshire. A gentle and agreeable person, John also took Josiah, then about nine years old, as apprentice in his dyeing business. Within ten years Josiah finished his apprenticeship, married Anne Child of Ecton in 1677, and had their first child Elizabeth the next year. Things then turned sour, however. Shortly after Anne gave birth to a son Samuel in 1681, Josiah's father passed away. Brother John, now thirty-nine, was finally getting married and so was another brother Benjamin, who returned to Banbury from London where his business had not gone well. All three brothers were dyers, raising their families, and trying to make it in the same town, which also had other dyers. As the youngest, Josiah wanted no competition and decided to leave. Along with Anne, five-year-old Elizabeth, two-year-old Samuel, and the infant Hannah, he left Banbury for Boston in New England in the summer of 1683.

At that time Massachusetts law (in 1651, 1662, and 1672) forbade "men or women of mean condition" to imitate the fashion of the upper class by wearing silk. A provincial town of under ten thousand souls, Boston did not have a rich clientele large enough to support newly arrived dyers until an influx of royal officials later that decade when Massachusetts became a crown colony. Not the least would it favor those dyers who were unable to establish a calender house for a heavy press to scour woolens, silk, and other delicate material. Struggling to survive but limited by resources, Josiah Franklin decided to adapt. His versatility, mechanical dexterity, and a strong personal determination, all of which were a trademark of the Franklins, helped in this transition. He tried several different businesses and finally settled as a soap boiler and candle maker, a profession he kept for the rest of his life.

After giving birth to seven children in twelve years, Anne Franklin did not survive the transatlantic migration for long and died in July 1689. In November the Reverend Samuel Willard, pastor of the Old South Church, officiated Josiah's marriage to Abiah Folger, daughter of Mary (Morrill) and Peter Folger of Nantucket. Both Abiah and Josiah later became church members and were married for more than fifty years. Fellow parishioner Samuel Sewall, in his diaries, recorded praying with them at least ten times. Josiah died in Boston in 1745 at the age of 88, and Abiah in 1752 at 85. The couple had ten children. Although never as pious as his parents,

Benjamin Franklin's childhood resembled that of his father's – both were the youngest son in the family, both were apprenticed to their older brother, both were hard-working, ingenious, multi-talented, gregarious, and public-spirited, and yet both were forced to leave and seek a new life somewhere else away from their birthplace.

1.2 Childhood and Education

The boy, who could read at the age of four or five, seemed to have promise which no loving parents would miss. They had planned to send this tenth son to serve in the ministry, and in 1714 enrolled him at the South Grammar School, which was a necessary step to prepare him for the college entrance exam. A college degree, not to mention the ability to read Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, was of course the first prerequisite for becoming a clergyman. Within a year, however, reality set in that the limited incomes from the father's trade would never be enough to feed his large family and at the same time to support his son through the grammar school, let alone a college. The boy was then withdrawn and transferred to a private writing school headed by Mr. George Brownell. Although the boy enjoyed the classes and performed reasonably well except for arithmetic, family circumstances once again resulted in his second withdrawal when he was only ten. Unlike many children from substantial families, therefore, Franklin's formal schooling ended in two years and his subsequent education was largely self-taught.

Such a serious setback must have been disappointing for anyone who had dreams to rise from an artisan background to a member of the educated community. Yet the boy did not dwell on self-pity. If he had experienced any melancholy, it was quickly replaced by a kind of upbeat self-determination which would sustain much of his adult life. If his aversion to privileges later led to a commitment to egalitarianism, the harsh realities of social divide and modest family circumstances also forced him to cultivate self-reliance, to overcome career obstacles by his own effort, to bite the tongue and not to complain about those misfortunes falling on him.

He began to develop his life-long habit of learning from commonsense wisdom, from avid reading, from personal trials and mistakes, and from close observations of human experiences. He noticed his mother's excellent dyeing skills. He learned a shorthand from his uncle Benjamin the Elder, whose interest in poetry once aroused his curiosity. He admired his father who played the violin and could "draw prettily," besides being a singer, a carpenter, and a public servant. His father's two big maps on the wall first attracted him to geography. So did the father's comments on public discourse make him realize the need to improve his own writing style. Like the father, the son relished proverbs and homely sayings. Some

typified his taste, such as “Seest thou a Man diligent in his Calling, he shall stand before Kings,” while others mocked those professionals whose formal training had produced no upright men, such as “God heals, and the Doctor takes the Fees” or “A countryman between 2 Lawyers, is like a fish between two cats.” Simple but profound, some still would captivate his whole career, such as “The noblest question in the world is, *What Good may I do in it?*”

One thing the boy did regret was that father possessed few books beyond devout polemics. The gap was somewhat compensated later when he was able to borrow books from the tanner friend Matthew Adams. Brother James's library also helped, which consisted of works from Pliny's *Natural History*, Aristotle's *Politics*, and Herman Moll's *Geography* to an eight-volume set of *The Spectator*. The boy's perusal of books on diverse topics opened his mind to literature, history, ethics, and the natural sciences. For a while, at sixteen, Thomas Tryon's *Way to Health* converted him to a vegetarian. He enjoyed John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*, Daniel Defoe's *Essay Upon Projects*, and Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good*. The last two in particular had given him such a “Turn of Thinking” that he attributed his life-long commitment to public service to his early reading of them.

Franklin was not alone in his aloofness from religious services in Boston, where interest in spiritual matters did decline before the Great Awakening. He was, however, never insensitive to those good morals that anyone could demonstrate. Cotton Mather's promotion of “doing good” was one example, and his warning the young Franklin “to stoop” to avoid a head-on collision was another. From his father he learned that “nothing was useful which was not honest.” From his siblings he learned the cost of his blind passion for a whistle. He would continue to learn many more similar lessons in the years to come from a series of errata, indiscretion, ignorance, and inexperience he later enumerated in the *Autobiography*. Unlike erudite writers who tended to quote classical texts by famed authorities, he was willing to share those twists and turns he had learned from his personal experiences. Whereas some critics believe that he was too earthy and self-righteous, if not downright pretentious, his habit of sharing intimate lessons must be viewed in the context of the way he had grown up and of the emphasis he had placed on how to gain knowledge not only from textbooks and classrooms but also from close observations of day-to-day activities. Thus he preferred expressions such as “God helps them that help themselves” or “'Tis hard for an empty bag to stand upright.” This habit would become so proverbial that on the last day of the Constitutional Convention in 1787, delegates would hear him haranguing, at the age of eighty-one, that “the older I grow the more apt I am to doubt my own Judgment and to pay more Respect to the judgment of others” (Lemay, 1987: 1139).

1.3 Apprenticeship

Contemporary Bostonians saw crown officials wearing scarlet, wealthy men riding carriages, gentlewomen going to country estates to pick and eat cherries, and households of good fortune celebrating at the pomp of Harvard's commencement at Cambridge. The Franklins could not afford any of those luxuries. They toiled hard to make ends meet. Worse still, the smelly, hot, and extremely tedious work of a tallow chandler and soap boiler bored the boy within days. Clearly, cutting wicks, filling the mold, attending shop, and running errands would never enchant him. Even though the father was content with the trade, he quickly saw that his prodigious son was unhappy and restless. Concerned, he took the boy to visit several businesses in the hope that one of them might be to his liking, but this did not happen. The father finally decided to bind Benjamin as an apprentice to the older son James, whom he had recently helped to set up a printing shop in Queen Street.

An indenture between two kin was commonplace those days. Once bound to his own brother, the father did not see anything wrong this time. The boy, however, had an ambition as big as anyone else's. He used to have a fancy for the sea, which the father firmly disallowed – he had already lost a son going to the sea. Franklin stood out for a while and was only prevailed to sign the indentures after persuasion. Now at twelve years old, he had to serve for nine long years until twenty-one, which must have seemed eternal to this strong-minded and unfettered adolescent at the moment. The initial doubt and resistance dissipated soon after he gained great proficiency in the two basic skills of the business – typesetting and press work. He started to like the new trade, which demanded strength as well as intelligence. For one thing, he now had access to the shop's book collection. For another, he gradually became acquainted with several book sellers, stationers, and bookish customers, who took note of his interest and kindly lent books for him to read. Most of all, a wide variety of products such as sheets, broadsides, tracts, pamphlets, chapbooks, small volumes, and newspapers passed through his hand daily and he was tempted to explore whether he might write something for the printing press. Would that be ideal – a situation allowing him to combine his literary interest in reading and composition with dreary labor? Captivated by the prospect, he took steps to embrace the world of writing and print, which he thoroughly enjoyed through the rest of his life.

Franklin's expanding skills at the press, increasing knowledge of the printing business, and a growing ambition of becoming a writer boosted his ego and gradually altered his attitude toward James. Reluctant to enter the indentures in the first place, the printer's devil now gained confidence to see James as his equal, not his master. Nine years older than Franklin, James

would view things differently. Perhaps feeling the threat that the junior brother might indeed be his competitor instead of his servant, he insisted on his authority as the boss. When sometimes he felt his apprentice too saucy and provocative, he was willing to use the fist to subdue him, which only led to more complaints and resentment.

The sibling crossfires caught the father in the middle. Franklin used to think that being the youngest and smartest boy in the family, he was father's favorite, which was probably true until this point. Now that the father had borrowed several hundred pounds to finance James's business, he was deeply in debt and wanted to see harmony rather than domestic quarrels that rocked the boat. Franklin sensed that father began to side with James on more occasions than before. Instinctively he felt the grip of both father and brother falling on him, a type of constraint and control he had never been comfortable with since his toddler days.

The father had his reasons to keep a balance between the two brothers. He had taken some considerable risk to help set up James's printing shop. The Franklins had produced no printers in the past. Nor was it definitively recorded where and when James had undergone standard training in the business. While acquiring the press, types, and other equipment was a considerable investment, more costly than many practical trades, success was far from guaranteed. In 1718 Boston had five printers – Bartholomew Green, John Allen, Thomas Fleet, Thomas Crump, and Samuel Kneeland. Fleet was from London. Green and Kneeland were well connected to the powerhouse of printers in the colony – they descended from Samuel Green, the second printer in Massachusetts. Although the town had developed a print culture and book trade more advanced than any other colonial center by that time, the scope of their operations remained small and limited. No one knew whether or not the local population and market demand would be large enough to support another self-proclaimed printer from the obscure family of a tallow chandler.

Since the eldest son in the family, John, had already followed the father's footsteps to become a candle maker and soap boiler, the younger ones (except for Peter who also became a candle maker) had to branch out to find their own professions. James was indeed struggling to survive in the new business for the first few years. Fortunately, both father and Uncle Benjamin the Elder were trained dyers, whose knowledge and experience helped him to add printing cloth to his business. He put this advertisement in the *Boston Gazette* in 1719 that "the Printer hereby Prints Linens, Callicoes, Silks, &c. in good Figures, very lively and durable Colours, and without the offensive Smell which commonly attends the Linens Printed here." Apparently, his special skill and technique enabled him to establish a fine reputation in this line of service. When a year later a person in Charlestown began to forge similar products by adopting his name, James was understandably outraged. He immediately published a notice which

demanded an end of the practice or threatened to bring the transgressor to the court of justice.

1.4 Journalistic Debut

In fact, working for James turned out to be a blessing. According to Lemay, America's first newspaperman was not Franklin but his brother James who "made the *New-England Courant* the first literary, lively, entertaining, humorous, and proto-nationalistic American newspaper" (Lemay, 2006a: 109). The first writing in print which showed Franklin's literary talent took place in his brother's shop where he wrote a ballad called *The Lighthouse Tragedy* toward the end of 1718 (Leonard, 1999). Franklin clearly recalled that it was James who had encouraged him to write the ballad, which "sold wonderfully." Still, Franklin was indebted to his brother more than he explicitly stated in the *Autobiography*. Or as Lemay has pointed out, Franklin "learned about the printing business, running a newspaper, drumming up interest in the paper, and literary techniques from his older brother," and "learned the arts of publicity and of controversy from his brother," and that he "also imbibed his older brother's radical Whig ideology as well as his resentment of the assumption of superiority by ministers and the civil authorities" (Lemay, 2006a: 142). Working for his brother particularly suited Franklin's literary ambition, which was further stimulated by a group of friends and visitors to the shop who desired to use James's newspaper to vent their sentiments.

Two other newspapers already existed at that time, the *Boston News-Letter* and the *Boston Gazette*, which refused to publish anything critical to the established authorities, civil or religious. The *Courant* meant to be different as its title suggested. Whereas most colonial publishers printed official proceedings and copied oversea news from imported newspapers, the *Courant* sought those who could offer their individual opinions with a literary flair. It therefore attracted writers and contributors of a contrarian bent. From August 1721 to May 1722, within the first ten months of the establishment of the *New-England Courant*, at least fourteen people supported James's business by contributing ninety-four pieces of letters, essays, notes, and poems to the publication, and about a half of them contributed repeatedly. The most prolific of this group was Nathaniel Gardner, who wrote no fewer than thirty-two times for the *Courant*. He was a tanner and a partner of Matthew Adams, whom Franklin mentioned as an early friend in the *Autobiography*. He was an inventive writer and sometimes co-edited the *Courant* with James. A member of the First Church, he exposed religious abuses frequently and yet without savage mockery. In a January 1721/2 issue of the *Courant*, he sketched a character which may have made a lasting impression on Franklin, who later created his famous Poor

Richard and his wife Bridget. Gardner wrote that he was “sadly fatigu’d with a Scolding Wife, and in short she is such a *Shrew*, as I believe cannot be match’d in all Christendom.” “I am such a quiet man,” continued he, “(as my Neighbours can all testifie) that I willingly part with any thing for peace (the Breeches not excepted) and am afraid to say my Soul is my own in her Presence.” This little gem, Lemay says, was “the best social satire to appear thus far in an American newspaper” (Lemay, 2006a: 87–89, 91).

Other contributors to the *Courant* included John Checkley, John Williams, Thomas Lane, Captain Christopher Taylor, John Eyre, Matthew Adams, and a Mrs. Staples. Born in Boston, John Checkley attended the South Grammar School. He later studied at Oxford and traveled extensively on the Continent. He wrote *Choice Dialogues between a Godly Minister & an Honest Countrymen*, which censured the Puritan doctrines of election and predestination. In this lively piece he used a country bumpkin *persona* who possessed considerable mother wit. “This incipient American posture probably delighted young Franklin.” “As Franklin recognized,” Lemay wrote, “Checkley imitated the first issue of the *Spectator* (which began with a description of the supposed author) but transformed it with an American flavor” (2006a: 96). Clearly, James, his unorthodox associates, and a group of opinionated contributors made the *New-England Courant* “America’s first fiercely independent newspaper, a bold, antiestablishment journal that helped to create the nation’s tradition of an irreverent press” (Isaacson, 2003: 22). Trained in this environment, the aspiring young Franklin was as much a creature of as an active participant in that bold, antiestablishment, and irreverent culture.

1.5 Controversy over Inoculation

From its inception, the *New-England Courant* was deeply involved in a bitter debate over the practice of inoculation following a smallpox outbreak in Boston in 1721 (Lemay, 2006a: 84). Although silent on the issue at the time (Chaplin, 2006: 23), Franklin publicly declared his belief in inoculation as “a safe and beneficial Practice” in 1736 (Van Doren, 1938: 126). Yet later generations have continued to speculate over his “true” stand, as several key players played a far more important role than he at fifteen.

Two contributors to the newspaper, Dr. William Douglass and Dr. George Steward, opposed inoculation. Dr. Steward thought that inoculated persons could spread the disease and thus insisted that only persons in excellent health might be inoculated (Lemay, 2006a: 103). Arrogant and highly opinionated, Dr. Douglass was nevertheless an independent thinker and a talented naturalist and physician. Boston’s only practitioner with a medical degree from Edinburgh, he also published *A Summary, Historical and Political* (1749–1751) – an extensive two-volume account of British North

American colonies. Suspecting both the lethal nature of inoculation and its source of information, he led anti-inoculators and voiced strong opposition in July 1721 by attacking Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, who had started voluntary inoculation at the suggestion of Cotton Mather (Minardi, 2004). Yet after all facts had come in at the end of the controversy, Douglass, as a good scientist, was the first one to urge inoculation in 1730 when another epidemic threatened Boston (P. Miller, 1953: 362).

1.6 Blossoming

Franklin wrote more than a dozen pieces for his brother's journal, the first blossoming of his literary gift in print. Even though other contributors' flamboyance and antiestablishment stance stimulated him, he surpassed many of them in boldness, irony, humor, and theatrical effect, a remarkable feat for a lad at sixteen. His Silence Dogood essays, totaling fourteen in number published between April 2 and October 8, 1722, were compelling illustrations of his mind and literary imagination during this period.

Perhaps the single most remarkable accomplishment in his series was the creation of the *persona* Silence Dogood. Purported to be a minister's widow, the pseudonym itself transpired numerous inferences and mysteries. The surname mocked Cotton Mather, the running title of whose popular book *Bonifacius* was called "Essays to Do Good." The first name, "Silence," had several connotations. It derided Cotton Mather, who was a notorious busy-body never silent in admonishing others. It echoed an essay signed "Rusticus" by Nathaniel Gardner, and may also have alluded to Mather's recent sermon, *Silentiarius*. These inferences became apparent as the first essay openly attacked Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*. As readers read the subsequent essays, however, they might think that the author could have some altruistic purpose too. In a vein similar to that of Mather's *Bonifacius*, the essayist raised schemes to improve society, such as promotion of modesty and a strong censure of waste and alcoholism. Thus, Franklin's first literary *persona* produced multiple ironies – an anonymous author who had both a penchant for privacy and an urge to talk, a member from the supposed weaker gender speaking to a powerful male audience and secretly, an under-age youngster haranguing the adult world about some of the most revered public icons and highly respected authorities.

"At the time of my Birth," Silence Dogood recalled, "my Parents were on Ship-board in their Way from *London to N. England*. My Entrance into this troublesome World was attended with the Death of my Father, a Misfortune, which tho' I was not then capable of knowing, I shall never be able to forget; for he, poor Man, stood upon the Deck rejoicing at my Birth, a merciless Wave entred the Ship, and in one Moment carry'd him beyond Reprieve. Thus was the First day which I saw, the Last that was seen

by my Father; and thus was my disconsolate Mother at once made both a parent and a Widow.” Such a tragic beginning was of course Franklin’s strategy, which was preceded by his ridicule of Mather’s account of “The Death of Mr. John Avery” in *Magnalia Christi Americana*. Franklin’s masterful arrangement to maximize a dramatic effect was achieved because his witty style, clever tone, humorous reversal, and the comic situation “all burlesque the ostensible tragedy with its sentimental diction (‘a merciless Wave’) and religious clichés (‘this troublesome World,’ ‘beyond Reprieve’)” (Lemay, 2006a: 143–146).

Alternating between explicit biblical messages or sexual insinuations and sometimes a blunt animality, Silence Dogood continued her story. Spending her “Infancy and Childhood in Vanity and Idleness,” she said, “until I was bound out Apprentice, that I might no longer be a Charge to my Indigent Mother, who was put to hard Shifts for a Living.” Yet she exceeded the usual “Knowledge and Learning which is necessary for our Sex” by her interest in “reading ingenious Books,” and therefore became a suitable mate for her master, the country minister. “My Reverend Master who had hitherto remained a Batchelor, (after much Meditation of the Eighteenth verse of the Second Chapter of *Genesis*) took up a Resolution to marry; and having made several unsuccessful fruitless Attempts on the more topping Sort of our Sex,” said she, “he began unexpectedly to cast a loving Eye upon Me, whom he had brought up cleverly to his Hand.” After laughing at his awkward proposal, she consented perhaps for “Love, or Gratitude, or Pride, or all Three.”

“This unexpected Match was very astonishing to all the Country round about, and served to furnish them with Discourse for a long Time after; some approving it, others disliking it, as they were led by their various Fancies and Inclinations.” After seven years of marriage, blessed with two daughters and a son, she lost her husband. She now lived in the same small town and provided lodging for the new minister. As the election season was underway, she declared her politics that she was “a mortal Enemy to arbitrary Government & Unlimited Power.” “I am naturally very jealous for the Rights and Liberties of my Country,” said Silence Dogood, “and the least appearance of an Incroachment on those invaluable Priviledges, is apt to make my Blood boil exceedingly” (Lemay, 2006a: 146–148).

Impressive as her life and politics may sound, she confessed that “I have likewise a natural Inclination to observe and reprove the Faults of others, at which I have an excellent Faculty.” Bostonians would easily recognize that this was a parody about Puritan ministers in general and about Cotton Mather in particular. They also read, with consternation, that “the most dangerous Hypocrite in a Common-Wealth, is one who *leaves the Gospel for the sake of the Law*: A Man compounded of Law and Gospel, is able to cheat a whole Country with his Religion, and then destroy them under *Colour of*

Law.” Though ostensibly a sketch of the royal governor Joseph Dudley, this vicious personal satire attacked Chief Justice Samuel Sewall, a neighbor and a fellow-parishioner with Josiah and Abiah Franklin at the Old South Church. More to come were Silence Dogood’s attacks on poorly composed funeral elegies, on wealthy persons, and on those ministers who had tried to eulogize them. She suggested that the clergy were blind to the rich parishioners’ oppression of the poor because the ministers “are honourably supported (as they ought to be) by their People, and see nor feel nothing of the Oppression which is obvious and burdensome to every one else” (Lemay, 2006a: 164–165). Convinced that “Publick Destruction may be easily carry’d on by *hypocritical Pretenders to Religion*,” she quoted from *Cato’s Letters* and insisted that “we must not judge of one another by their best Actions; since the worst Men do some Good, and all Men make fine Professions: But must judge of Men by the whole of their Conduct, and the Effects of it” (Lemay, 1987: 28).

And judge people’s conduct she did. She satirized Harvard College, the temple of learning. Traveling (in a dream) over “pleasant and delightful Fields and Meadows, and thro’ many small Country Towns and Villages,” she found that parents were preparing to send at least one of their children to college. But these peasants “consulted their own Purses instead of the Childrens Capacities: So that I observed, a great many, yea, the most part of those who were traveling thither, were little better than Dunces and Blockheads.” After entering the temple herself, she saw two sides to a high throne of learning. On the right hand sat English and on her left, “with their Faces veil’d,” reclined Latin, Greek, Hebrew, etc. The latter “were very much reserv’d, and seldom or never unvail’d their Faces here, and then to few or none, tho’ most of them who have in this Place acquir’d so much Learning as to distinguish them from *English*, pretended to an intimate Acquaintance with them.” When asked why they were veiled, she was shown the figures of Idleness and Ignorance “who first veil’d them, and still kept them so” (Lemay, 2006a: 151–152).

She not only attacked established institutions and the upper class’s hypocrisy, but also mocked pride, vanity, drunkenness, prostitution, and lavish spending among the general population. She was not reluctant to criticize those who had parted with home-spun clothing for imports and “by striving to appear rich they become really poor.” Nor did she hesitate to say that all persons should serve the country they lived in. While she had not done so in the past, she resolved “to do for the future all that *lies in my Way* for the Service of my Countrymen.” As she reflected on her own writing style, she realized that she could not please everyone. Yet she pursued different topics by employing many tactics – “merry and diverting”, “solid and serious,” “sharp and satyirical,” “sober and religious” – “Thus will every one, one Time or other find some thing agreeable to his own Fancy” (Lemay, 2006a: 150).

1.7 Women

By creating the *persona* Silence Dogood and by presenting her side of views, Franklin became the first American writer who seriously pondered and commented on feminist issues of gender difference and equality. He became interested in the matter early on, shortly after he was bound to his brother in 1718, when he befriended a young man named John Collins. The two engaged in a so-called battle of sexes, debating about “the Propriety of educating the Female Sex in Learning, & their Abilities for Study.” Collins took the opposing position while Franklin supported it. Even though that episode was more “for Dispute sake” than for anything else, the exercise perhaps left Franklin with some lingering questions which intrigued him to look for answers.

To be sure, Franklin was not free from the prejudices of his time. For all his affirmatives of female quality, he viewed women as the weaker and fair sex and he ridiculed the stereotyped feminine foibles (such as vanity and frivolity) as mercilessly as other human weaknesses. Yet he was far more advanced than most of his male contemporaries in recognizing women’s ability and potential, even if he did not explicitly state their equality with men. Modern scholars have wondered about the sources of his ideas. Lemay pointed out the possible influences from some female members in the family. They were intelligent in many ways and Franklin long prided himself on the fact that mother Abiah and sister Jane were superb dyers who could also use New England bayberries to make a fine soap of high quality. He pointed out Franklin’s boyhood teacher George Brownell who had accepted girl students. He pointed out those prominent roles Queen Elizabeth and Queen Anne had played that no contemporary English subjects dared to ignore. He further pointed out the titles by Defoe, Michael Wigglesworth, and the famous poet Anne Bradstreet, who openly expressed concerns with gender topics (Lemay, 2006a: 59–60).

It also seems, however, that the sixteen-year old apprentice was able to sympathize with females because both were under-dogs whose intelligence, talent, and potential were unrecognized and marginalized. In this sense, he and the fair sex were in the same position of being oppressed. His protest against authority and dominance was as much for Silence Dogood as for himself, while his literary devices of satires and ridicules were as much a means of self-expression as a tool in fighting that dominance. This is not to suggest that Franklin’s feminism was entirely self-serving. His sensitivities, perceptive observations, and critical commentaries revealed his genuine sympathy and careful attention to issues concerning the welfare and wellbeing of women. He condemned the hoop-petticoats, a new fashion for women. He wrote: “These monstrous topsy-turvy *Mortar-Pieces*, are neither fit for the Church, the Hall, or the kitchen; and if a Number of

them were well mounted on *Noddles-Island*, they would look more like Engines of War for bombarding the Town, than Ornaments of the Fair Sex” (Lemay, 2006a: 157).

Although Franklin was later known for his many projects for the public good, his first proposal (August 13 and 20, 1722), inspired by Defoe’s *Essay Upon Projects*, was about forming a society for the relief of poor widows. He said that “the Country is ripe for many such *Friendly Societies*, whereby every Man might help another, without any Disservice to himself.” “We have many charitable Gentlemen who Yearly give liberally to the Poor,” he continued, “and where can they better bestow their Charity than on those who became so by Providence, and for ought they know on themselves.” In a colony where not a few ministers’ families had fallen into poverty, he asked “how many Clergymen themselves in the Country are forc’d to labour in their Fields, to keep themselves in a Condition above Want? How then shall they be able to leave any thing to their forsaken, dejected, & almost forgotten Wives and Children.” Again in the voice of Silence Dogood, he concluded, “For my own Part, I have nothing left to live on, but Contentment and a few Cows; and tho’ I cannot expect to be reliev’d by this Project, yet it would be no small Satisfaction to me to see it put in Practice for the benefit of others” (Lemay, 1987: 32–33).

Last but not least, Franklin openly defended women who were frequently blamed as “particularly guilty of Pride, Idleness, &c.” “Men have not only as great a Share in those Vices as the Women,” he wrote, “but are likewise in a great Measure the Cause of that which the Women are guilty of.” Was there a peculiar female vice? Franklin wrote that “I find it a very difficult Matter to reprove Women separate from the Men; for what Vice is there in which the Men have not as great a Share as the Women? and in some have they not a far greater, as in Drunkenness, Swearing, &c? And if they have, then it follows, that a Vice is to be reprov’d, Men, who are most culpable, deserve the most Reprehension, and certainly therefore, ought to have it.” “For notwithstanding the Men are commonly complaining how hard they are forc’d to labour,” he continued, “only to maintain their Wives in Pomp and Idleness, yet if you go among the Women, you will learn, that *they have always more Work upon their Hands than they are able to do*, and that *a Woman’s Work is never done, &c.*” As to the charges of ignorance and folly, Franklin quickly pointed out the crux of the matter – the unequal opportunities in education. Here he expressed one of the most explicit demand for equal education for both sexes. Contrary to his usual cynical tone, he wrote with all seriousness that he “often thought of it as one of the most barbarous Customs in the World, considering us as a civiliz’d and Christian Country, that we deny the Advantages of Learning to Women. We reproach the Sex every Day with Folly and Impertinence, while I am confident, had they the Advantages of Education equal to us, they would be guilty of less than our selves.” “Why did we not let her learn,” he demanded, “that she

might have had more Wit? Shall we upbraid Women with Folly, when 'tis only the Error of this inhuman Custom that hindred them being made wiser" (Lemay, 1987: 14–16).

1.8 Slavery

However outspoken Franklin might have been about the status of women, equally striking was his reticence on another grave injustice – the existence of slavery. For all the hypocrisy he exposed about the vanity of the clergy, superficiality in faith, falsehood in politics, and pretentiousness and wastefulness in orthodox education, he did not see any inconsistency between his personal desire for liberty and an institutionalized human bondage around him, even though he did create the first African *persona* Dingo in 1723, a case now subject to different scholarly interpretations (Waldstreicher 2004: 50–52; Lemay 2006a: 202–4). For all his attacks on well-known figures in Boston, he found no irony in the fact that whereas Samuel Sewall questioned the inhumanity of slave trade in his pamphlet *The Selling of Joseph* as early as 1700, contemporaries continued to advertise to sell slaves, including his son Samuel Jr in the *Boston News-Letter* of April 9, 1716 and his nephew Jonathan in the *Boston Gazette* of July 15 and 22 and September 30, 1728, two years before the judge's death. This sort of inconsistency was commonplace among Bostonians, who believed liberty and self-government to be their birthright as much as they tolerated holding and trading slaves to be a form of regular business transactions.

Along Union Street, where the Franklins moved to in 1712, many neighbors bought and sold slaves on a daily basis. One of them, Hugh Hall, came from the Barbados. His father and grandfather made great fortune by engaging the slave trade. Using his connections, Hall himself advertized half a dozen times every month to sell slaves and became quite wealthy in Boston. Franklin's older brother John owned a slave. Two advertisements to sell slaves appeared in 1713 in the *Boston News-Letter*. The first one read, "Three able Negro Men and three Negro Women to be sold by Messieurs Henry Dewick and William Astin, and to be seen at the House of Mr. *Josiah Franklin* at the Blue-Ball in Union Street near the Star Tavern, Boston." It seems that the father was helping Dewick and Astin to sell slaves at his residence where the three male and three female slaves might have stayed. Dewick and Astin could be passers-by traders who needed a convenient site to dispose their slaves because a month later, a female slave was sold and the second advertisement appeared without their names, "Three negro Men and two Women to be sold and seen at the House of Mr. *Josiah Franklin* at the Sign of the Blue ball in Union-Street Boston." These local events and family circumstances contributed to Franklin's insensitivity to slavery, which may in part explain why he did not see anything wrong to own household

slaves himself after he achieved business success in Philadelphia, and why he only changed his views on slavery much later in life.

1.9 Crises and Runaway

Massachusetts government kept a close watch on the printing press, which had yet to fight for its freedom of expression. As the publisher of a nonconformist newspaper, James Franklin was twice censured – first in the summer of 1722 and then in January the following year. During this critical period he and Franklin made an arrangement allowing the latter to manage the newspaper while the former struggled to deal with official indictment.

The first incident took place when authorities found out a seemingly inconspicuous piece of news in James's newspaper of June 11, 1722. After reporting a quick action Rhode Island took to pursue an enemy privateer, the *New-England Courant* went on to say that "the Government of the Massachusetts are fitting out a Ship to go after the Pirates, to be commanded by Capt. Peter Papillion, and 'its thought he will sail sometime this Month, if Wind and Weather permit." This implied that Massachusetts was somehow lukewarm in its effort to catch the pirate vessel, an insinuation which infuriated authorities. The next day, the governor's council demanded the printer attend its meeting, examined him, and resolved that the paragraph "was a High affront to this Government." The House of Representatives concurred and ordered the Suffolk County sheriff to commit him to jail for a month (Lemay, 2006a: 158).

While under incarceration, James petitioned for the General Court's forgiveness by stating that he was "Truly Sensible & Heartily Sorry for the offence." He submitted that he was "Indisposed, & Suffering in his health by the Said Confinement." A certificate testified his illness, which was, ironically, signed by Dr. Zabdiel Boylston, a champion of inoculation and whom James's newspaper had attacked a year earlier. The court read James's petition and granted him the "liberty of the Prison House & Yard" only after he could post a bond. He remained in jail until July 7 (Lemay, 2006a: 158–159).

Several months later, another issue of the *Courant* on January 14, 1722/23 again angered the government. It charged that the paper "of this days [*sic*] date, Contains many passages, in which the Holy Scriptures are perverted and the Civil Government, Ministers & people of this Province highly reflected on." The following day, a joint committee of the Council and the House reported that "the Tendency of the Said paper is to Mock Religion, & bring it into Contempt, That the Holy Scriptures are therein prophanelly abused, that the Reverend and faithful Ministers of the Gospel are Injuriouly Reflected upon, his Majesties Government affronted, and the peace & Good Order of his Majesties Subjects of this Province disturbed

by the Said Courant.” The committee further proposed that “James Franklyn the Printer & publisher thereof be Strictly forbidden by this Court to print, or publish the New England Courant, or any Pamphlet or paper, of the like Nature, Except it be first Supervised, by the Secretary of this Providence, and the Justices of his Majesties Sessions of the peace, for the County of Suffolk, at the Next adjournment be directed to take Sufficient Bond of the Said Franklyn for his Good Behaviour, for Twelve Months.” (Lemay, 2006a: 185)

To the authorities' surprise, publication of the *Courant* continued. A member on the joint committee, Samuel Sewall, noted in his diary on January 21, “The Courant comes out very impudently,” perhaps referring to an indirect satire on the judge in that issue. Under local news, the *Courant* defiantly printed the General Court's deliberations and the act forbidding the proprietor to print his *Courant*. Not amused, the court took further steps to silence the printer. It ordered that a “Warrant for apprehending James Franklyn of Boston printer” be issued and that he be bound over “to answer, at the next Assizes to be held for the County of Suffolk, for his high contempt of the order of the General Assembly at the last Session.” The warrant was issued on January 28, but Undersheriff John Darrell searched for him in vain. Knowing he would be arrested, James had fled Boston (Lemay, 2006a: 186).

Before his escape, James consulted his friends. Some suggested him to change the newspaper's name, which he thought inconvenient. They finally decided that the paper would be printed under the name of Benjamin Franklin who, overtly released from his indenture, would sign a clandestine contract to continue as James's subordinate for the remainder of his terms. On Monday, February 11, the *New-England Courant* did appear over the new name. A headnote explained: “The late Publisher of this Paper, finding so many Inconveniencies would arise by his carrying the Manuscripts and publick News to be supervis'd by the Secretary, as to render his carrying it on unprofitable, has intirely dropt the Undertaking. The present Publisher having receiv'd the following Piece, desires the Readers to accept of it as a Preface to what they may hereafter meet with in this Paper.” This arrangement allowed James to keep his paper in the family while technically abiding by government mandate. Franklin revealed further details of the scheme in the *Autobiography*: “And to avoid the Censure of the Assembly that might fall on him, as still printing it by his Apprentice, the Contrivance was, that my old Indenture should be return'd to me with a full Discharge on the Back of it, to be shown on Occasion; but to secure to him the Benefit of my Service I was to sign new Indentures for the Remainder of the Term, which were to be kept secret” (Lemay, 2006a: 193–195).

The legal trouble dragged on through the spring and fortunately for James, a grand jury in May ruled “Ignoramus,” which denied government charges a true bill for insufficient evidence. The action against James was

thus dropped (Lemay, 2006a: 200–201). Just as he and friends were celebrating, an internal tension resurfaced or in Franklin's words, a "fresh Difference arising between my Brother and me, I took upon me to assert my Freedom, presuming that he would not venture to produce the new Indentures." Evidently, whereas James was struggling to protect the freedom of his press, Franklin, who had wished an escape for a long time, took advantage of his predicament to assert his personal freedom by fleeing the bondage. He correctly predicted that James could not openly challenge the claim that the old indenture had been cancelled without incriminating himself. A fraudulent cancellation and a secret indenture with the brother would expose him as the actual printer of the *Courant*, which would surely reopen all the government's charges against him.

Franklin did not immediately leave town. He attempted to find employment at other local shops. But James was apparently furious and talked to all Boston master printers to boycott and not to hire him. Franklin could have sought the father to mitigate the situation but found out, however, that he was "now siding with my Brother." As all options were then closed, "I was the rather inclin'd to leave Boston," Franklin described in the *Autobiography*, "when I reflected that I had already made myself a little obnoxious to the governing Party; and from the arbitrary Proceedings of the Assembly in my Brother's Case it was likely I might if I stay'd soon bring myself into Scrapes; and farther that my indiscrete Disputations about Religion began to make me pointed at with Horror by good People, as an Infidel or Atheist." He hid for a while, sold some books for money, and secured the help of Collins, who talked to a captain of a sloop bound for New York into taking him on board "privately." Fearing the suspicion that he was a runaway apprentice, the two friends made up a story claiming that Franklin got a girl pregnant. He must then escape under cover or the girl's family would force him to marry her. Franklin sailed sometime after mid-September, but could not find work in New York, and therefore continued his journey. He finally arrived at Philadelphia on Sunday, October 6, 1723 (Lemay, 2006a: 205–206, 224).

Still a lad at the time, Franklin was nonetheless more accomplished than most young men at the same age. Growing up with numerous siblings, he delighted the parents for his early promise. Although the family circumstances allowed but nominal schooling, his voracious reading and unorthodox self-education achieved keen insight into human nature and society. Independent minded, he left behind the parents' world of private piety and entered into one of public interest and action. Youthful diligence and intelligence quickly turned him into one of the best printers in town, while a remarkable literary talent and imagination enabled him to craft some of the most amusing and brilliant essays in colonial literature. His uncommon ability, indomitable spirit, and driving ambition propelled him to plunge into newspaper wars, in which he took great pleasure to scorn government, satirize the clergy,

ridicule the powerful, and entertain the public. An obscure son of a tallow chandler when he was born in 1706, he was no doubt a highly competent craftsman and very gifted (alas insolent to some) writer by the time when he rebelled and ran away from Boston at the age of seventeen.

FURTHER READING

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