Panel Introduction: Learned And Sociable Manuscript Circulation

By: **Colin T. Ramsey**

Abstract

Early in his *Autobiography*, Benjamin Franklin remarks that "prose writing has been of great Use to me in the Course of my Life, and was a principal Means of my Advancement." Consistent with this claim, the modern literary study of Franklin overwhelmingly focuses on his prose, beginning with the teenaged satirical essays he published in the *New England Courant* under the pseudonym "Silence Dogood" and continuing all the way to the above referenced *Autobiography*, a text that was only printed posthumously but which is now Franklin's most widely anthologized work.

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Panel Introduction: Learned and Sociable Manuscript Circulation

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Early in his *Autobiograph*y, Benjamin Franklin remarks that "prose writing has been of great Use to me in the Course of my Life, and was a principal Means of my Advancement."[1] Consistent with this claim, the modern literary study of Franklin overwhelmingly focuses on his prose, beginning with the teenaged satirical essays he published in the *New England Courant* under the pseudonym "Silence Dogood" and continuing all the way to the above referenced *Autobiography*, a text that was only printed posthumously but which is now Franklin's most widely anthologized work.[2]

Notably, the earliest writing by Franklin for which we have any record is poetry, not prose. In the *Autobiography*, Franklin describes writing some doggerel "in the Grub Street style" as a teenager—work that his brother James apparently printed as broadsides so that Franklin could sell them in the streets of Boston—but, we know that Franklin was writing poetry as early as age seven.[3] Franklin's father Josiah was so impressed by his young son's verse that he mailed some of the poems to Franklin's namesake uncle—the family's most committed poet—who was then still living in England. Franklin's uncle Benjamin was likewise impressed, as is evident from his poem in reply to his nephew that includes verses full of praise and encouragement: "Go on, My Name, and be progressive still/Till Thou Excell Great Cocker with Thy

Quill."[4] As is suggested by this particular exchange of verse, there was a tradition in the Franklin family of writing poetry, though most of this poetry circulated only in manuscript copies, a fairly common way of sharing verse among Puritan poets around the British Atlantic. That is, the bulk of the poetry produced by members of the Franklin family, a body of work that included playful and sometimes visually striking anagrams and acrostics, as well as serious poems of religious devotion, moral advice, and offerings of consolation and remembrance upon sad occasions, were almost never written with any plan for the works to see print.

Nevertheless, it is a mistake to think of the Franklins's manuscript poetry as always and completely unpublished: instead, such poems were read, copied, and exchanged within a concentrically expansive coterie of family, friends, and acquaintances, a practice that very much resembles the more well-known mode of scribal publication used by some of the most highly regarded poets of early modern Britain, writers such as Philip Sidney, John Donne, and George Herbert.[5] Indeed, manuscript circulation continued to be an important medium through which writers all around the British Atlantic could and often did choose for a wide variety of written communications even through the eighteenth century.[6]

Franklin's most famous poetic work now is likely his "Epitaph," a text that he seems to have composed while a relatively young man, circa 1728, but that he continued to rewrite often during the course of his life. In the poem, Franklin adapts what was then a reasonably well-known metaphoric conceit comparing the body after death to an old book, refocusing the conceit so as to explore authorship, the complex relations between text and book, and, of course, body and soul:

> The Body of B. Franklin,
> Printer,
> Like the Cover of an old Book,
> Its Contents torn out,
> And Stript of its Lettering and Gilding,
> Lies here, Food for Worms.
> But the Work shall not be wholly lost,
> For it will, as he believes, appear once more,
> In a new and more perfect Edition,
> Corrected and amended,
> By the Author.
> He was born Jan 6. 1706.
> Died 17 _[7]

Visitors to Franklin's grave in Philadelphia, however, may be surprised to discover that no such epitaph appears on his tombstone: the marker instead

simply records Franklin's name and that of his wife, Deborah, and the year of Franklin's death, 1790. But, the absence of the above "Epitaph" from Franklin's actual grave is less surprising if we bear in mind the uses to which Franklin put his poetic epitaph during his life. His practice was to write out copies from memory at social gatherings—making small changes here and there as his mood and memory might dictate—and then to give those manuscript copies to the guests in attendance as keepsakes; some recipients even went on to write out additional copies to give to others, with Franklin's blessing.[8]

If Franklin's behavior seems in strange taste, perhaps even a little macabre, that is partly because we are insensitive to the literary and social traditions both his poem and his circulation practices were comically refracting: as I note above, a tradition of circulating poetry in manuscript was common all around the early modern British Atlantic; additionally, the poem's form, an "Epitaph," recalls the special zeal for elegiac and funereal verse that developed in Puritan New England over the course of the seventeenth century. At funeral services, for instance, family and friends of the deceased would often attach poems of sad remembrance directly to the caskets as the cortege passed—poems they had composed specifically for the purpose—and additional elegies were often composed and sent by friends from further afield, some of which were printed as broadsides for even wider circulation around the community.[9]

Indeed, the composition of elegies had become so popular by the beginning of the eighteenth century that they were sometimes written for individuals who were still alive, and those individuals would, on occasion, receive copies, which they seem to have read with pleasure.[10] Franklin undoubtedly saw many such elegies growing up in Boston, and he was familiar enough with the form by the time he was a teenager that he was able to satirize it in one of the comic letters he submitted surreptitiously to the *New-England Courant*, the newspaper produced by his older brother James Franklin. This series of essays is now commonly known as the "Silence Dogood Letters," after the punning pseudonym Franklin used to disguise his authorship, and in "Dogood Number 7," which appeared the *Courant* for the week of 25 June 1722, Franklin wickedly mocked the popularity of elegies in New England, deeming such poems almost always "wretchedly Dull and Ridiculous."[11] Others of James Franklin's stable of satiric writers—a group known as "Couranteers"—similarly lampooned Puritan funereal verse. For instance, in a letter signed by a "Hypercriticus" that appeared in the issue of the *Courant* for the week beginning 5 November of that same year, the pseudonymous author derides the genre as highly silly and embarrassing: "I find the *Funeral Elegy* to be the most universally admir'd and used in

New England. There is scarce a Plow-Jogger or a Country Cobler that has read our Psalms, and can make two Lines jingle, who has not once in his Life, at least, exercised his Talent this way. Nor is there one Country House in Fifty which has not its Walls garnished with half a Score of these Sort of Poems (if they may be so call'd)."[12]

The content and circulation of Franklin's "Epitaph" marks a combination of material ephemerality and personal intimacy that was common to Puritan elegies, while it also comically refracts their public nature and social function, displayed as they were for all to see and read as part of communal rituals of death and mourning. Similarly striking combinations of ephemerality and public significance are likewise central concerns of all of the essays included below. Each essay was developed from a paper presented during one of two sessions entitled "Publicity and Publics: Manuscript and Print Circulation for Instruction and Pleasure" that were sponsored by the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing at the 2017 ASECS annual conference.

The first essay, "Exhibitions of Manuscript Verse in the Salon du Louvre," by Ryan Whyte, analyzes some manuscript poetry of eighteenth-century France that was no less public and yet was even more ephemeral than the Puritan funeral elegies. Whyte's essay focuses on the brief manuscript poems that were frequently pinned up alongside works of painting and sculpture in the great art salons at the Louvre palace in eighteenth-century Paris. Such poems now only survive in printed texts that commented on the art on display at the Salons after they were concluded—early bodies of written art criticism. Whyte convincingly argues that in their uniformly laudatory content such poems invoked an older form of aristocratic patronage that had traditionally supported the production of art. Salon poems were performative and participatory, and, Whyte argues, they ultimately demonstrate the complexity of the interrelations between artistic and written media and the cultural and social tensions that typified the Salon during the period.

The second essay, "Scribal Publication of Elizabeth Graeme Fergusson's Commonplace Books," by Chiara Cillerai, uncovers the expansive patterns of discourse found in Fergusson's manuscript commonplace books. Cillerai argues that Fergusson fashioned a highly unusual form of common-placing that helped her to realize a kaleidoscopic array of often self-interrogating objectives. Much of her commonplace writing was, "deeply interior and intimate," while, simultaneously, it allowed her imaginatively to recreate and re-experience the quasi-public physical spaces and social interactions of the literary salons that she had enjoyed earlier in her life. And, finally, Fergusson seems to have used common-placing for a kind of literary self-critique, to generate a kind of continuous dialogue with herself about the

poetry she was inscribing within those same commonplace books, poetry that she also sometimes shared with other readers.

The final essay, "Correspondence between Benjamin Franklin and Johann Karl Philipp Spener on the American Revolution," by Jürgen Overhoff, returns us to Benjamin Franklin. Overhoff carefully analyzes the interplay of manuscript and print media as they formed a series of recursive stages that led to the popularization of Franklin's thought in Germany and France, and that positioned Franklin's philosophical and political writing within a Kantian conception of Enlightenment. Overhoff details the web of connections that brought Franklin to the attention of the printer and publisher Johann Karl Philipp Spener, who had earlier printed Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" Spener and his friend the French printer Jean-Georges Treuttel eventually began to petition Franklin by letter to provide them with his thoughts on a variety of subjects related to the American Revolution: this, they felt certain, would offer the best, most direct understanding of Franklin's views possible. As Overhoff argues, were it not for these letters and Franklin's willingness to provide replies, also in quickly written letters, that revealed his latest views on American political philosophy, the subsequent printed books in German based on those views would likely never have existed, and, thus, readers in Germany would have failed to understand both Franklin's thought, and, more broadly, the ideas that drove the American Revolution. Overhoff thus concludes that the exchange of letters which he outlines constitutes an important example of the transnational Republic of Letters, and that the exchange fundamentally shaped the way that the American Revolution was understood in Germany for much of the following century.

NOTES

1. Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, ed. J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall (New York: Norton, 1986), 10.

2. James Green and Peter Stallybrass, *Benjamin Franklin: Writer and Printer* (New York: Oak Knoll Press, 2006) 3–4. Green and Stallybrass note that Franklin's own criticism of his skills as a poet tends to obscure the fact his first writing to appear in print was ballad poetry commissioned by his brother James.

3. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 10.

4. *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, vol. 1, 6 January 1706 through 31 December 1734 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1960), 5.

5. Harold Love, *Scribal Publication in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press of Oxford Univ. Press, 1993). See also Arthur Marotti, *Manuscript,*

Print, and the English Renaissance Lyric (Ithaca and London: Cornell Univ. Press, 1995).

6. David S. Shields, "The Manuscript in the British American World of Print," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 102 (1993): 403–16.

7. Labaree, *Papers*, 111.

8. Labree, 110. At least three copies in Franklin's autograph have survived to the present day, and numerous additional copies in the hands of others are likewise extant.

9. David E. Stannard, *The Puritan Way of Death: A Study in Religion, Culture, and Social Change* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977). Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *American Broadside Verse: From Imprints of the 17th & 18th Centuries* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1930), xix.

10. David S. Shields, *Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1997), xxvi, 219–21. Shields interrogates what he calls the "hidebound dichotomies" between, among other binaries, "public and private," especially when seen as equivalent to texts-in-print and texts-in-manuscript. The portion of Shields's analysis most relevant to the above discussion concerns the poetic elegies that became popular at Harvard in the late seventeenth century, and all surviving examples of such poems were printed. As Shields notes, a good deal more such verse was likely written and circulated both in manuscript and print.

11. Benjamin Franklin [Silence Dogood, pseud.], "*To the Author of the* New-England Courant [No. VII]," *New-England Courant*, 25 June 1722. All of Franklin's so-called "Silence Dogood Letters" have been reprinted widely; for especially well edited versions, consult *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 1.

12. Hypercriticus [pseud.], "*To the Author of the* New-England Courant," *New-England Courant*, 5 November 1722. The author of this letter has not been identified definitively, though Leo Lemay argues that Nathaniel Gardner used the pseudonym in another letter to the *Courant* on a different subject. See J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, Volume 1 Journalist, 1706–1730 (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 463.