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THE AMERICAN STRUGGLE FOR IDENTITY IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY NEWSPAPER VERSE

Ann Brunjes

Most scholars of American literature can offer little more than a blank look when asked to name a famous or important figure in American Literature from the years surrounding the American Revolution (approximately 1760 to 1820). If pressed, the scholar might call up Phillis Wheatley (1753?-84), the African slave-turned-poet who amazed her mistress and Boston in¬
mately 1760 to 1820). If pressed, the scholar might recall Phillip Freneau, some of whose poems are said to prefigure the otic verse. Pushed harder still, the same scholar who lit upon the poems of Edward Taylor (1644-729) stashed in a musty collection. While no new Taylors leapt out at me, I found myself absorbed in microfilm copies of late eighteenth century issues of Pittsfield and Berkshire County (MA) newspapers.

In each issue I found a column devoted to poetry, the great majority of it attributed to local writers with elaborate pen-names like The Berkshire Chronicle’s “Philo Independantic,” my personal favorite. None of it was terribly good; even the more polished pieces were pale imitations of British neo-classical verse, and the unpolished were nearly incomprehensible, with allusions to local characters and events so obscure that only the most dogged contemporary reader could unearth their meaning. But these poems were clearly popular, and I could often trace the evolution in public opinion surrounding an event (like a proposed county lottery) more clearly through the Berkshire Chronicle’s poetry than through its prose reportage. Readers felt strongly about these poems, arguing over their quality and content in verse and in letters to the editor. While my own Edward Taylor continued to elude me, I had found something that engendered passion in early Americans. I was particularly struck by the role poetry played in the lives of those long-ago Pittsfielders. Readers transformed any issue of note in the local scene into verse, which was subsequently commented upon by scores of readers. These poems forced me to reconsider those “dark” years, for there was a tremendous output of poetry and prose in local newspapers and magazines, much of it defining itself as “literary,” and much of it quite unlike current conceptions of literature. Despite its importance to Berkshire Chronicle subscribers of the late 1780s, none of this literature is read in college classrooms today. There is no section of The Norton Anthology devoted to eighteenth century periodical literature, and few scholars recognize this material as literary. There is a fairly straightforward reason for this neglect. While the poetry of the colonial period—most notably that of Anne Bradstreet (c. 1612-72) and Taylor—is often difficult for the lay reader, suffused as it is by the religious piety of the Puritans, contemporary readers find in Taylor and Bradstreet an approach to poetry not terribly unlike our own. Both Bradstreet’s and Taylor’s poems express private pains, terrors, and fears. Though these concerns are largely focused on the
poets' relationships to God, their essential nature—an inner struggle made public in rhythmic, sometimes rhymed language—is not significantly different from the poems one might encounter in the most recent issue of *The New Yorker*.

In the years surrounding the Revolution, however, those Americans with a poetic turn of mind wrote distinctly political, public, didactic verse, poems which were designed to persuade one's fellow citizens to vote for a particular candidate or to embrace the figure of General George Washington as a hero of mythic proportions. This, to some modern readers, may be poetry in that it has meter (or more accurately aspires to meter), but today's readers have a very difficult time embracing these works as "literary" precisely because they do not transcend their own times—or perhaps more to the point, because they do not care to transcend their own times. But to Americans in 1785, a poem about the controversy surrounding the local Shaker community was as literary as Sylvia Plath's poetry is today. In the forty-odd years preceding Washington Irving's *Sketch-Book*, The *Federalist* was the talk of the taverns; Parson Weems' biography of George Washington was a best-seller; and the rapidly proliferating regional newspapers were jammed full of poems by local writers. All were considered literature; all were considered literary. Our current, still-fluctuating notions of copyright laws, it was easy for printers (who were also frequently the editors, owners, and primary contributors) to fill three printed sheets by borrowing freely from other American, British or European newspapers. In the poems and essays published in Pittsfield's *Berkshire Chronicle* for the year 1788, we find, in the restraint of copyright laws, it was easy for printers (who were also frequently the editors, owners, and primary contributors) to fill three printed sheets by borrowing freely from other American, British or European newspapers. In the poems and essays published in Pittsfield's *Berkshire Chronicle* for the year 1788, we find, in

The Berkshire Chronicle is typical in form and content of newspapers published in New England before the turn of the century. It is an accessible and entertaining paper, printing local gossip alongside national and international news. Its decidedly local flavor emerges from an "Amusement" column on science questions, a "Moral Observer" column, poetry ("The Parnassian Packet"), agriculture tips, social news, and, of course, advertisements. Most of the contributors use pen names; Alfred is the regular moral observer, as well as the "Amusement" column editor, while Justus, Whipper, and Zeno provide other less regular columns on morality and issues of popular interest. The Chronicle's motto, "Free as the savage roams his native wood—or finny nations cleave the briny flood," is also typical in its oddness (I remain perplexed by the image of the United States as a "finny nation") and tone of grandiose self-importance. These papers took themselves quite seriously as the most influential and widely read venues for information, politics, and commerce, and as outlets for local literary and artistic productions.

While better-known early American writers (like Joel Barlow or Timothy Dwight) wrote epic and pastoral poems about American history and religion—subjects which conformed to prevailing literary standards—in the newspapers and magazines the reader finds a kind of free-for-all in the poetic contents. While Barlow's and Dwight's writings were published occasionally in the periodicals' poetry sections and so were familiar to the general reader, a great hash of writing appears in these publications as well—written by both anonymous writers and famous Englishmen. Readers never knew, in short, what they would find when they opened a magazine or a newspaper; there might be English Romantic poetry (Wordsworth appears in *The Berkshire Chronicle* with surprising regularity) or a rough satire on a local controversy; or a moralistic epigram, or a religious poem... all in the same forum, all under the head-
And wade in shallows to the armpit.

And guide for once my wavering quill,
And Muses nine, impart your skill,
Salists and Shakers, though Calvinists and corn, "mountabanks" (sic), and "jockeys objects of Crispin's scorn are the Univer-

vation of spurious religions and itinerant sects, the poem offers 45 lines on the in-
gaging mice, / or numerous swarms of bodycle:; as "herd of swine in field of corn," "mountabanks" (sic), and "jockeys trading off blind horses." The particular objects of Crispin's scorn are the Universalists and Shakers, though Calvinists and atheists also endure attacks. Though Pittsfield had no Unitarian Church until 1890, the Shakers were founding a new community in nearby Hancock, and Crispin's anxieties may have been sparked by their apparent success.

The author sees him/herself as the great leveler; endorsing no creed, Crispin condemns as ridiculous the believer and atheist, all equally foolish in believing themselves saved. In closing s/he writes:

Thus all whirl round with equal scorn,
As Planets on their axis turn.
And so keep up endless contention
Yet half their craft I may not mention.

Stylistically undistinguished, Crispin's poem remains interesting to us for a number of reasons. Clearly, the citi-
zens of Pittsfield felt free to entertain a variety of religious opinions and publish their verses for the community's consid-
eration. And the fact that Crispin chooses to express her or himself in verse, rather than in prose, holds its own fascination. Crispin, like many late-eighteenth century writers, believes that worthy subjects merit the weightiness of verse. Our con-
temporary understanding of poetry (however false) as an outlet for heavy emotion or navel-gazing is a stunning reversal of earlier Americans' standards and expecta-
tions.

Politics and politicians were also con-
sidered fit subjects for poetry, though read-
ers often lamented the harsh tone taken by the poems. Magazine readers in par-
cular expressed the frequent hope that they might be spared the crudeness and

viciousness of local political debate. One writer to the March 11, 1809 issue of the Richmond, Virginia Visitor made clear his disdain of ad hominem political writing: Every well disposed man who reads the newspapers, cannot but regret what we call the liberty of the Press, when he ob-

serves how invariably it happens, that political controversies terminate in personal abuse, . .

This reader may have had in mind ex-
actly the sort of writing that caused a con-
siderable stir among the readers of the July 1788 Chronicle. In addition to igniting a series of personal attacks, one badly writ-
ten poem, signed by "Philo Inde-
pendantic" and entitled "On the Cele-
boration of the 4th of July, being a day of DEPENDANCE" (July 31 1788), sparked a lively debate among the Chronicle's readership concerning literary standards and the freedom of the press with respect to literature. Certainly the poem is rough: it has no consistent meter; an apologist might call its rhymes "creative;" and to a contemporary reader it is practically nonsen-
sical, concerned as it is with the drunken antics of a group of historically insignificant Revolutionary War veterans on the Fourth of July. Laced with local political satire, "The Celebration" is similar in content to (though perhaps rather rougher in execution than) most political poetry published in the Chronicle.

A few stanzas from the poem, re-
printed below, should provide the reader with the flavor of Philo Inde-
pendantic's verse style:

Palmer rose and told the concourse,
In his opinion 'twas no wrong course
To give them an oration.
On the present antifederal occasion.

When Palmer had done his expres-
sions so strong,
To Strong's tavern repaired
Each deacon and saint, old and young sinner,
And at Strong's request, paid six shillings
for dinner.

Dinner seated over all
Cannons roar to teach their fall.
Horse and men Danforth calls forth,
To shew their valour and some mirth;
Not with a view to fight or kill.
Nor shew their bravery or their skill.

Independence all pass'd free,
He got home who steady be.

Philo Inde-
pendantic's politics, as ex-
pressed in the poem, seem to have been on the anti-federalist side (i.e., opposed to the ratification of the new Federal Constitution), since he refers to the Fourth as a day of "Dependance"—in other words, Philo may have seen the Constitution's
ratification as a betrayal of the county’s prevailing antifederalist beliefs and a betrayal of the spirit of the Revolution commemorated on the Fourth. Philo reinforces the impression that this is a gathering of anti-federalists by naming the celebration “the present anti-federal occasion.” The characters named in these lines and elsewhere in the poem—Danforth, Strong, and Palmer, for example—were all Revolutionary war veterans and in some cases bona fide heroes. Whether Philo is lampooning the old veterans for their antics and beliefs or celebrating their politics and exuberance is unclear, but certainly the poem reflects the county’s current political climate and issues of national importance.

One week after publishing “The Celebration,” the printer of the Chronicle received an unprecedented outpouring of letters and columns from regular contributors and new ones—none of them, significantly, commenting on the content of the poem but rather on its form. One respondent in the August 7 issue, calling himself “Criticus” and overwhelmed by aesthetic pique, entitled his response to “Celebration” “Remarks on Scribbling.” Following prefatory remarks on the negative aspects of freedom of the press, “Criticus” directly addresses the offending Philo Independantic, and writes: But that any man, however destitute of learning, or even of common abilities, should be prevailed upon to expose to public view such an heterogenous, metamorphosed, borrowed, unconnected piece of composition, as that which appeared in the last week’s paper, under the signature of Philo Independantic; or otherwise called Pedantic Ignoramus, is a phenomena. Surely, if the man has any sense of propriety; if he can distinguish prose from poetry—two feet from six; or if he can perceive any difference in the rhyme of “so strong” and “repaired;” he certainly never would have exposed such imbecility. But as the candor of the public is requisite in all public performances, it is hoped and expected that Philo may partake of that benefit, upon the sole condition that he never more will attempt to wield the pen. (Chronicle, August 7, 1988).

In response to Criticus’s commentary, a regular columnist, “Pedro,” questions Criticus’s literary authority: Now, Mr. Printer, I wish to be informed by what means Criticus & Co. became clothed with authority to kill and make alive at their nod?—If they have not been vested with such powers, they must have as much impudence to assume it, as Philo had in exposing his performance to the public eye. . . . I should therefore advise Mr. Criticus & Co. to dissolve their copartnership as dictators, and pursue some business within the compass of their authority. (Chronicle, August 14, 1788)

Pedro seems less disturbed by the prospect of bad literary publications than by the thought that someone such as the anonymous Criticus might believe himself capable of censoring the press before the public had had a chance to make up their own minds about the worthiness of the poem in question. Whipper, another regular columnist, seconds that belief when he writes of Criticus & Co.: “I know no right they have, except by assumption, to recondemn works which the better judgment of the PUBLIC had previously but partially condemned.” If the Printer is to hand over inspection of submissions to the paper to Criticus, to “censure and silence, or applaud and permit any or every writer or writers whom they please, without first having the sanction of the public eye—then farewell to the liberty of the press——farewell to the idea of a reformation in the people—and farewell to the WHIPPER” (Chronicle, August 14, 1788).

Reader opinion seems to have preferred publishing unsavory pieces like “The Celebration” to the alternative of censorship. Whipper, in true Jeffersonian spirit, believes that exposure to a variety of even poor writing is the only way to develop a literary sensibility and “a reformation in the people.” These writers all continued to comment, favorably, unfavorably, and with personal venom, on one another’s writing, and the Chronicle continued to print rough homemade verses like “The Celebration” from time to time. For Pedro and Whipper, literature was not exempt from the democratic process.

The Chronicle published a great variety of political poems, more standard in form, content, and meter than Philo Independantic’s “Celebration.” These poems proclaimed the rising glory of America, exhorted Americans to be industrious, virtuous, and patriotic, and sang praise of Washington and Franklin. There were romantic love poems and pastoral elegies, poems condemning the popularity of state and local lotteries and gambling, complaints about the court system—in short, any subject of popular concern found its way into the Chronicle in verse form. The two poems I have discussed here present only an extremely limited sampling of what the Chronicle or any other late eighteenth-century provincial American newspaper has to offer. Though unlikely to revolutionize popular (or scholarly) opinion about the “dark years” in American literature before Emerson, these poets and their poems provide contemporary readers with a glimpse into our earliest literary tastes and standards. In places like the Chronicle, we find a people defining themselves through poetry—and defining poetry itself—with the vigor and passion of those engrossed in the construction of a new national identity.  

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