

YOUNG MAN BACHE: NOTES FOR A SKETCH

Arthur Scherr

Abstract: Far from being a humorless radical, as he is often depicted, Benjamin Franklin Bache, editor of the *Philadelphia General Advertiser: Aurora* from 1790 until his death in 1798, was a romantic, erotic young man concerned with loving and being loved. He was also a gentleman, like his grandfather Benjamin Franklin. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, Bache had a reading knowledge of Latin. He valued a good education and was interested in presenting arguments in a logical, cohesive manner, rather than in composing partisan, rambling tirades. A complex individual, he was exemplary of the Late Enlightenment, combining its Romantic and rationalist features. More creative and serious-minded than most scholars who write about him comprehend, he was also a loving suitor, husband, and father.

Although he died tragically—from the horrible disease of yellow fever at the young age of twenty-nine—Benjamin Franklin Bache (1769–98) has aroused a great deal of controversy among journalism historians and scholars of the early American Republic. The youngest grandson of Benjamin Franklin was even more famous for his radical political ideas and the way he communicated them in his popular Democratic-Republican newspaper, the *Philadelphia General Advertiser/Aurora*, than for his ancestry. Many scholars, as well as his contemporary political

opponents, have portrayed him as a violent-tempered, angry, resentful individual who hated George Washington because his renown outshone his grandfather's. They say that his criticisms of the new Federalist government of the Washington and Adams administrations were unmerited and divorced from logical thinking, the result of his own emotional needs and demands for public attention. More often than not, they fail to look at what kind of man Benny Bache really was.

We confront obvious impediments in gaining insights into the personalities and psyches of people who lived during the 1780s and 1790s. Nonetheless, Benjamin Franklin Bache's manuscripts, including a detailed diary and memorandum books, various notes that he took as a student at the University of Pennsylvania, and a Commonplace Book he entitled *Melanges* (French for "mixtures") illuminate significant aspects of his adolescence. These materials for the years 1785–88 are available in the American Philosophical Society's Castle Collection. An examination of these papers can help us determine what kind of person Bache was—and for the student of the history of American journalism this is an important question.

Not only was Bache the great Benjamin Franklin's grandson, he was the first major partisan printer of the new nation, and his newspaper was the leading mouthpiece for what became the Democratic Party, a party that still exists today. In addition, Bache has gained a vocal following among scholars, who see him as a proto-democratic hero who demanded greater political, social, and economic equality in the new nation and organized local political cells in Philadelphia to achieve his goals.¹ Therefore, an examination of his personality is worthwhile. This article will try to find out more about "Young Man Bache," in a similar manner to what Erik Erikson did in his great book *Young Man Luther*, but with less of a psychoanalytic emphasis.²

As a teenager, Bache was sexually precocious for his time. In 1786 he was only seventeen. At that age, a young man was expected to think more about his career and less about young girls. However, in his notebooks, Bache writes much about his feelings toward women. To Margaret Markoe, his girlfriend and later his wife, Bache wanted to express his feelings honestly. In a draft of a letter, which he may not have sent, Benny upbraided her for excessive dependence on her mother. "You think it improper to receive any body's Addresses without your Momma's Approbation," he asserted.

You must by this time be perfectly acquainted with my sentiments concerning you, tho you still seem'd inclined to doubt their Firmness & think they formed in a few moments & as soon to dye away, o how you will be mistaken. I am almost glad of your Intended voyage to Saint Croix [her father's birthplace] that I may have an opportunity of convincing you on your return that Love founded on true Regard & Esteem cannot diminish by absence.³

Thus, Bache was a Romantic, a man of sentiment and sensuality.⁴ He wanted to express his sincerity to his beloved. He also possessed his share of irony and wit.

Benny also expressed jealousy. He suspected that Margaret secretly had another lover, whom she preferred to him. Or at least this was what he claimed: "I hope that the above stated objections [her mother's disapproval] are the only Impediments to my Happiness, but I must own I much fear, that tho' they have some Weight with you they are not what I have the most to fear; I still must think your Heart is engaged another Way." He depicted himself as an aggrieved, jilted lover: "Forgive me if my doubts are ill disguised, but why should I ask forgiveness, surely it is necessary if my [illegible] to think you have bestowed your Affections on a Young Man, who, did he know your worth, would almost deserve you."

Thus, it seems that, rather than angry and jealous, Bache is here again being witty and chivalrous, a romantic courtier. He also appears to be an aggressive lover for those times, when the bourgeois male was supposed to tread gingerly until he was married.⁵ Such seems to be the purport of the following sentences: "What gave rise to these fears was the Manner in which you received the last short sentence I wispered to you in the back room, which you seemed not to approve of tho' I thought it would remove the Impediment to my writing [to] you stated in the Front Room."⁶

Ben was a man about town, the chairman of the Philadelphia Dancing Assembly; perhaps it was at a dance party that he made these nebulously bold propositions to Margaret, daughter of a Danish West Indies merchant, possibly also a sugar and slave dealer.

In another instance of youthful precocity, Bache's "Essay on Writing" shows that he understood Latin. He also respected the logical development of an essay. He mentions that his grandfather Benjamin Franklin gained his skill as a writer from imitating Joseph Addison's famous magazine articles

in *The Spectator*. Like Thomas Jefferson, at least according to Professor Jay Fliegelman's analysis of the Declaration of Independence in *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance*, Bache thought that writing should emulate elegant speech. (It is not known whether he, like Jefferson and George Washington, was a poor public speaker, a factor that Fliegelman's interpretation ignores.)⁷

In his "Essay on Writing," Bache observed that gracefulness was an important feature of writing: "Language is the Picture of Thought & when a Writer can clothe his ideas in such words as to express them with Fulness & Elegance, yet Clearness he has attained Perfection in that Point." Recommending that writing and speaking adopt a musical quality, he continued,

There is yet one particular to be attended to render the Communication of knowledge more extensively, I mean the noting setting down speech with Propriety, either by Writing or by means of Printing. And this particular appears to me of great Importance, if the Writer wishes to convey his full Meaning to the Reader & also enable him to read aloud with Propriety. To effect this every considerable rising or depression of the Voice should have its corresponding mark, and every emphatic Expression its proper Sign.⁸

Bache thought that the United States should have a language society like the Académie Française, whose purpose would be to standardize writing and make American English easier for foreigners to learn. He rejected the idea of US subordination to England in matters of language:

We will continue to be ruled by her in this Respect till we have established among us *Literary Authority*; a Society at the example of the *Academie Française* to which we can look up for a proper Standard to regulate all Matters relative to our Language. If such a Society could be established our Language under their Hands would be properly corrected & rendered more extensively really useful in promoting the various good Purposes it is intended for.⁹

Thus, contrary to the disorderly, reckless image that his right-wing contemporaries created of him, which persists in many present-day scholarly accounts, Bache sought uniform language standards and an end to haphazard

modes of writing and spelling American English. More than most young men, he was a seeker for order. He anticipated Noah Webster's *Dictionary* by over forty years. He was a more creative and prescient intellectual than his detractors and even those scholars who seek to rehabilitate his image have assumed. And, at the same time, he was a romantic, loving suitor, husband, and father.

NOTES

1. In general, see Jeffrey L. Pasley, *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2001); James Tagg, *Benjamin Franklin Bache and the Philadelphia Aurora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991); and Jeffery A. Smith, *Franklin and Bache: Envisioning the Enlightened Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
2. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1958).
3. Letter (draft) from Benjamin Franklin Bache to [Margaret Markoe], n.d., reel 5, Bache Papers, Castle Collection, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.
4. On the importance of sentiment in the social life of the Revolutionary War period, see Sarah Knott, *Sensibility and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: Omohundro Institute, 2009); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill, NC: Omohundro Institute, 2010); and Nicole Eustace, *Passion Is the Gale: Emotion, Power, and the Coming of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill, NC: Omohundro Institute, 2008).
5. See Nicole Eustace, "The Cornerstone of a Copious Work: Love and Power in Eighteenth-Century Courtship," *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 517–46.
6. Letter (draft) from Bache to [Markoe], n.d.
7. Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).
8. "Essay on Writing," reel 5, Bache Papers, Castle Collection.
9. Ibid.