Thomas Paine and Comus

In the midst of the controversy over Silas Deane’s negotiations with the French government, the most sensational political scandal of the American Revolution, Thomas Paine brought forth several satirical pieces in verse and prose under a new pseudonym, Comus. Deane had been accused by his fellow commissioner Arthur Lee of using his official position for personal gain. Although Congress instituted various official investigations, Deane’s case was virtually tried in the newspapers, and Paine as Common Sense served as public prosecutor.¹

For a year after Deane’s appeal to the public for vindication in December, 1778, the newspapers carried literally hundreds of letters and essays supporting or attacking him. The controversy grew to comprise not only Deane’s foreign negotiations, but all forms of war profiteering, real and alleged. Paine at the outset became Deane’s most vociferous accuser and, in turn, the butt of retaliatory attacks by the Deane supporters. By adopting a new pseudonym, Comus, Paine was enabled to proliferate his offensives—to attack his enemies openly and soberly under his customary pseudonym, Common Sense, and to ridicule them under one that was unknown. In this way, he was sure to get a sympathetic hearing from those who were indifferent or even antagonistic to his reputation, as well as from those who habitually followed his lead. Common Sense and Comus sound somewhat alike, and it is not strange that Paine should have thought of Comus as an alternate pen name. Also, he was aware of the classical association of Comus with fun and revelry, for he consistently reserved this pseudonym for works of satire and burlesque.

From a belletristic standpoint, one of the most interesting works in Paine’s entire career is an essay signed Comus in the Pennsylvania Packet (March 16, 1779) in which Paine ridicules the prose style of

two literary Congressmen in the Deane camp, William Henry Drayton of South Carolina, and Gouverneur Morris of New York.

Before discussing the content of this essay, however, it is necessary to show that Comus was actually Thomas Paine. First of all, Paine used the pseudonym Comus at another stage of his career—on his return to America after his ten-year sojourn in France as member of the French Convention, as journalist and amateur diplomat. On August 23, 1804, he published in the Philadelphia *Aurora* a burlesque of Federalist eulogies of Alexander Hamilton under the title "Nonsense from New York." This was signed Comus. In two extant personal letters to publishers Paine admits authorship. Writing to Elisha Babcock, publisher of the Hartford *American Mercury*, August 27, 1804, he refers to "a piece of mine signed Comus and entitled Nonsense from New York," and writing to William Duane, publisher of the *Aurora*, September 19, 1804, he complains, "In the last piece I sent you signed Comus, you abridged some of the expressions."

Identification of the Revolutionary satire on the style of Drayton and Morris is almost as precise, although it comes from one of Paine's enemies rather than from Paine himself. Four months after the essay by Comus, an anonymous poem appeared in another newspaper (*Pennsylvania Evening Post*, July 16, 1779), abusing Paine for his defense of the Lees against Silas Deane:

HAIL mighty Thomas! In whose works are seen  
A mangled Morris and distorted Deane;  
Whose splendid periods flash for Lees defense,  
Replete with every thing but common sense.

Both of Paine's pseudonyms are introduced, the notorious Common Sense and the unknown Comus:

In pity tell, by what exalted name  
Thou would'st be damned to eternal fame.  
Shall Common Sense, or Comus greet thine ear,  
A piddling poet, or puft pamphleteer.

3 Typescript in Thomas Paine Historical Association from Gable Sale, New York, No. 544, Feb. 14, 1924.
And the identification is completed by an allusion to the particular essay ridiculing literary style:

And eager to traduce the worthiest men,
Despise the energy of Drayton's pen.

This couplet could hardly refer to anything but the essay in question, for Drayton, unlike Morris, remained relatively untouched by personal controversy, he was not a prolific writer, and condemnation of an opponent's literary style was a rare weapon in Revolutionary polemics. It is scarcely conceivable that there existed another take-off by Paine or anyone else on Drayton's writing.

Paine's main affair was with Morris, a personal enemy, and he probably included Drayton in his squib only because Drayton served with Morris on many committees of Congress and also belonged to the Deane faction. Both Drayton and Morris had recently composed answers to British proclamations, Drayton a pamphlet reply to a speech of George III, and Morris a newspaper reply to a speech by Governor George Johnstone, recently sent to America as a joint commissioner to treat with the colonies. His title of governor was one of courtesy, presumably applied because he had once been appointed governor of West Florida.

Paine described the productions of George III and Drayton as "a dead match of dulness to dulness," but otherwise limited his satire to a single sentence in Drayton's pamphlet and to its physical appearance: "ornamented like an ale-house-keeper's sign, with the letters W.H.D." Paine felt that the terms in which Drayton opened his address to the King were ludicrous: "Your royal voice to your Parliament on the 27th of November last, has at length, reached the ears of freemen on the western shore of the Atlantic." Paine exposed the absurdity of referring to the passage of the King's voice across the Atlantic to the ears of America, a journey which had required nine weeks but should have taken only four hours, according to Paine's estimate of the velocity of sound.

4 I have been unable to find any other trace of Drayton's pamphlet. He wrote a similar one in the previous year: The Genuine Spirit of Tyranny, exemplified In the Conduct of the Commissioners, Sent by the King of Great-Britain . . . (Poughkeepsie [1778] [Evans: 15784 (a)]).

5 Pennsylvania Packet, Mar. 11, 1779.
Paine dismissed Drayton with the N.B., “The Devil backs the King of England, and S. Deane backs W. H. D. because he has good ‘ears,’ and they are not ‘shut.’” This is a reference to Deane’s plaint at the outset of his *cause célèbre* that the ears of Congress had been shut against him.6

Two years before writing this criticism of Drayton’s rhetoric, Paine in *Crisis* No. 3 had publicly praised one of Drayton’s other works, his charge to the grand jury for the district of Charleston in April, 1776. Paine said that it was written “in an elegant masterly manner” and described it along with the address of the convention of New York as “pieces, in my humble opinion, of the first rank in America,” one of the rare passages in Paine’s works in which he pays tribute to a fellow author. His approbation is understandable, however, for Drayton in his charge had not only supported the principles of Paine’s *Common Sense*, but had also warmly praised the work. Paine was in a sense repaying a debt. Later, when he found Drayton associated with his opponents, the Deane faction, Paine changed his opinion of his literary style.

In turning to Gouverneur Morris, Paine opened up the full force of his satire. He affected to forget Morris’ surname and spelled his given name “Governeer.” Since Morris had written against Governor Johnstone, Paine was able to deride the mighty contention between the Governor and the Governeer. Johnstone in his speech had declared that “the maxim of dying in the last ditch was his principle,” and Morris had undertaken to ridicule the application of the maxim to the American war. Paine without saying anything in Johnstone’s favor sought to reduce Morris’ literary achievement to pretentious flummery.

Since Paine’s essay is fundamentally an analysis of literary humor, one may logically raise the question, why, in the midst of the rancorous controversy over Silas Deane during which Paine wrote at least thirty or forty disputatious pieces for the newspapers, did he take time to write at length on a purely literary subject? There is a measure of truth in the explanation which Paine himself offered to account for the vigor of his satire on the works of rival authors: “not only because such gasconade productions take away from that character of modern and serious fortitude which America has hitherto

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supported, and that without even giving wit in its place; but because they have a tendency to introduce a false taste among youth, who are too apt to be caught by the extravagance of a figure without considering its justness.” It may seem inconsistent for Paine to be supporting “modern and serious fortitude” in a work devoted exclusively to burlesque. Also, a large proportion of Paine’s other work, both during the Revolution and after, consists of unrelieved satire. It may be that he recognized a distinction between subjects of national importance and others of merely local or individual significance and considered that only the latter could be treated in a comic or frivolous vein.

Paine may also have singled out Drayton and Morris because they were joint authors of a Congressional report, *Observations on the American Revolution*, which Paine disapproved of because it slighted the importance of the military action at the very beginning of the war. Four days after his Comus essay, Paine published a serious condemnation of the material in this report, which he signed with his usual pseudonym, Common Sense.7

Paine used still other pseudonyms in addition to Comus and Common Sense. An opponent in the *Pennsylvania Evening Post* (January 7, 1777) described him as a “voluminous author,” appearing to the public “in three characters,” a “Proteus of a being, who can not only change his shape and appearance, but can divide and subdivide his own identity.” According to this critic, the maneuvering of Paine, a “self-created multitude of an author,” resembled the tactics of General Burgoyne, who allegedly changed his ground when he could not maintain a post.

At first glance, it may seem surprising that Paine’s contemporaries should have been aware of his identity as Comus, but that the circumstance should not have been registered in literary history until the twentieth century is still more surprising. Actually, this can easily be accounted for. Even before the end of the Revolution, Paine spoke of collecting and publishing his literary works, and the project remained in his mind throughout his life, but he was never able to carry it out. And even had he made the attempt, it probably would have been very difficult after his return from France to reassemble the newspapers of the Revolutionary decade in which his

multitudinous essays had appeared. No collection of his miscellaneous works appeared during his lifetime, and that which appeared after his death, and on which all subsequent editions are based, was composed largely on the authority of one of Paine’s later acquaintances in New York. In addition to the Comus pieces, there are scores of Paine’s newspaper essays which have never been collected or identified in print. Paine did not even supervise a complete edition of his Crisis papers. The version which appears in editions of his works was not assembled by Paine himself, and even to this day there are various doubts about which of his writings he intended to represent as No. 10.

The Crisis, of course, had ineffably greater influence than the Comus piece satirizing Drayton and Morris, but the latter gives us new insight into the human side of Revolutionary polemics and reveals that Paine had formulated conscious aesthetic principles for his writings.

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Benjamin Franklin
and the “Heads of Complaints”

The recent publication of the first volumes of The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, edited by Leonard W. Labaree and Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., and sponsored by Yale University and the American Philosophical Society, will undoubtedly prompt a renewed interest in Franklin research. The proposed forty volumes will make available for the first time in one collection a rich and varied source of information concerning Franklin’s many activities. Yet, as Carl Van Doren pointed out on the first page of the preface
to his one-volume Franklin biography in 1938, "Franklin, the most widely read of autobiographers, is best known for his *Autobiography.*" Anyone wishing to study or write about the early career of Franklin has to begin with a careful study of the *Autobiography*, and because of this, writers quote or paraphrase numerous passages from it. One sentence in the *Autobiography* has been misinterpreted consistently for almost a century. The statement concerns his negotiations in 1757 and 1758 with the Proprietors concerning provincial complaints.

Attempts to raise funds and to provide military forces during 1755 and 1756 had led to endless disputes between the Pennsylvania Assembly and the Penns’ governors. Early in February, 1757, the Assembly had appointed Franklin as an agent to go to England to “solicit the Removal of our Grievances.” In August, 1757, Franklin met with Thomas Penn in London and the two men discussed the various provincial problems. Franklin summarized the Pennsylvania grievances in a paper which he titled “Heads of Complaints.” This paper he presented to the Penns, who referred it to their lawyer Ferdinand Paris, who in turn referred it to the Attorney General and to the Solicitor General for their opinion.

In his *Autobiography*, Franklin wrote that the “Heads of Complaints” was put into the hands of the Attorney and Solicitor-General for their opinion and counsel upon it, where it lay unanswered a year wanting eight days, during which time I made frequent demands of an answer from the proprietaries, but without obtaining any other than that they had not yet received the opinion of the Attorney and Solicitor-General. What it was when they did receive it I never learnt, for they did not communicate it to me, but sent a long message to the Assembly drawn and signed by Paris.

It is the last sentence in the quotation which has often been paraphrased and as often misinterpreted. Whether from design or from carelessness, Franklin was ambiguous in his statement. When he wrote that the Penns did not communicate “it” to him, his statement refers to the opinion of the Attorney General and the Solicitor General, instead of the Penns’ answer to his “Heads of Complaints.” Franklin’s biographers have interpreted his statement to mean that he received neither the opinion from the Crown lawyers nor the Penns’ answer to the “Heads of Complaints.”
One of the best biographies of Franklin is James Parton’s *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin*, a two-volume study first published in 1864. In the first volume (page 392), Parton described the meeting between Franklin and Penn and the delay in answering the “Heads of Complaints.” “They then replied, at considerable length,” Parton wrote, “and with much show of care and elaboration, not to Franklin, but to the Assembly, transmitting the document directly to Governor Denny.” Since Parton’s work appeared, at least six significant biographies, including the more recent excellent studies by Carl Van Doren and Verner W. Crane, contain a similar statement.

Had the biographers consulted the *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania*, Volume VIII (Harrisburg, 1852), page 277, they would have found in the Penns’ letter to the Pennsylvania Assembly, which accompanied their answer to the “Heads of Complaints,” the statement that “We returned our Answer in Writing, signed by our Agent, to Mr. Franklin; and now send you hereto annexed a Copy of the said Heads of Complaints, and our Answer thereto.” The letter is dated November 28, 1758. Franklin acknowledged receiving the Penns’ answer in a letter to them (page 300) dated the same day. “I yesterday received a Paper from Mr. Paris, containing your Answer to the Heads of Complaints.” The Penns’ letter to the Assembly is also printed in *Pennsylvania Archives, Eighth Series, Votes and Proceedings of the House of Representatives*, Volume VI (Harrisburg, 1931), page 4924.

Franklin students would do well to check Franklin’s statements in his *Autobiography*, and those of his biographers, with official sources when such sources are available.

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