He That Would Thrive Must Ask His Wife: Franklin's Anthony Afterwit Letter

Benjamin Franklin's "Anthony Afterwit" letter (printed in The Pennsylvania Gazette, July 10, 1732) might have been intended as a fable for Deborah, his wife of nearly two years, as well as his usual audience. In Part Two of his autobiography, Franklin, age 78, provided an incident showing Deborah's extravagance—the purchase of luxury items, a china bowl and a silver spoon at a time when the young married couple were still trying to make ends meet. "They had been bought," he wrote, "for me without my Knowledge by my Wife, and had cost her the enormous Sum of three and twenty Shillings, for which she had no other Excuse or Apology to make, but that she thought her Husband deserv'd a Silver Spoon & China Bowl as well as any of his Neighbors." I suspect that the silver spoon and china bowl incident may have given Franklin the idea of writing the major portion of the Anthony Afterwit letter to indicate the folly of such extravagance and the likely results of further excess.

Before giving the evidence in support of my hypothesis, I will first discuss the probable dating of the incident. Ideally, I would like to show that the silver spoon and china bowl incident occurred at the time when it would have been most likely to have triggered the writing of the Afterwit letter—shortly before the publication of that letter on July 10, 1732. Existing evidence does not permit the date to be fixed with precision. The incident could not have occurred before Franklin's...

*This essay was initially prepared while the author was a Winterthur Fellow at the University of Delaware. The author wishes to thank J.A. Leo Lemay and the participants in the Colonial American Literature Seminar (fall 1981) for their comments and suggestions.

1 Leonard W. Labaree et al., eds., The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, (New Haven, 1959), 1, 237. Hereafter cited as Papers. The page numbers of all subsequent references to the Anthony Afterwit letter reprinted in Papers I will be noted in the text within parentheses.

2 J.A. Leo Lemay, P.M. Zall, eds., The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: A Genetic Text, (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1981), xxi, 73, 76. All subsequent quotations of The Autobiography are a clear text taken from this edition and will be noted in the text within parentheses.
It probably could not have occurred later than 1732, the year in which his printing business significantly expanded and his debts seem to have been cleared. At the close of that year Franklin's publication of his first *Poor Richard* met with immediate success. After 1732, £1.3.0 was no longer an "enormous Sum," and scrupulous frugality was not the necessity that it had earlier been. Thereafter his business grew steadily; his circumstances, easy.

Franklin's ordering of the events in Part Two of his autobiography further suggests that the silver spoon and china bowl incident took place in 1731 or 1732. In the autobiography, Franklin recounted the events of his life chronologically and topically unless he was making references to future events as foreshadowing or he was in error (his memory in regard to dates was remarkable, but not perfect). Franklin began Part Two with the same event that closed Part One, the founding of The Library Company of Philadelphia—the first meeting of its board of directors took place on November 8, 1731. Pointing out that reading was his only amusement at the time, he then listed the reasons that necessitated his industry.

I was in debt for my Printing-house, I had a young Family coming on to be educated, and I had to contend with for Business two Printers who were establish'd in the Place before me (75).

We do not know when Franklin paid off the "Printing-house" debt. Franklin's "young Family coming on" indicates a date of about 1732—his illegitimate son William is believed to have been born before 1731, and Deborah carried Francis Folger, their first child, during much of 1732. The mention of contending for business with two printers is somewhat confusing. These men were Andrew Bradford, and either Samuel Keimer or David Harry. Presumably Franklin had put an effective end to the competition of Keimer, when he bought from him *The Universal Instruction in all Arts and Sciences: and Pennsylvania*

---


5 *Autobiography*, 130, 304.

6 *Autobiography*, 304. Surely William Franklin was conceived at some time prior to the Franklins' marriage on September 1, 1730—this indicates that he could not have been born any later than 1731; Francis Folger Franklin was born on October 20, 1732.
Gazette and converted it into The Pennsylvania Gazette on October 2, 1729. After Keimer failed and went to Barbados in 1730, his former apprentice David Harry succeeded him as Franklin’s competitor, but Harry, like Anthony Afterwit’s wife, dressed genteelly, “liv’d expensively, took much Diversion and Pleasure abroad, ran in debt,” and failed (69-70). Harry followed his former master to Barbados sometime after December 1731. Andrew Bradford remained a competitor throughout the decade.7

Franklin next made a reference to a Bible verse his father had frequently repeated to him: “Seest thou a Man diligent in his Calling, he shall stand before Kings” and noted that he had since “stood before five, & even had the honour of sitting down with one, the King of Denmark, to Dinner.” Following this bit of foreshadowing he launched into the paragraph detailing the silver spoon and china bowl incident (75-76). Franklin had not mentioned this incident in the outline, which served as his plan for writing the autobiography; he placed “Father’s Remark and Advice upon Diligence” immediately before “Carolina Partnership,” a reference to his 1733 partnership with Louis Timothee. “Father’s Remark” was linked in the autobiography to standing before kings and to the silver spoon and china bowl incident, which suggests that Franklin might have recalled that the incident took place before 1733.8

The remainder of Part Two is a topical discussion of Franklin’s ideas about religion and his well-known attempt to achieve perfection (76-91). The only date he mentions in the course of this discussion is 1728 and this as prior to the time discussed: “I had some Years before compos’d a little Liturgy. . . in 1728 entitled, Articles of Belief & Acts of Religion” (78). Part Three, written in Philadelphia about four years after Part Two, continued Franklin’s philosophy of life by beginning with his observations on reading history in the library on May 9, 1731. He then discussed the publication of his Almanack in 1732. In the pages immediately following he advanced the story into the mid-1730s (91-99). This evidence seems to indicate that 1731 or 1732 is the plausible date for Deborah’s purchase of the silver spoon and china bowl. Unless new information comes to light, the strongest evidence indicating that the purchase preceded the writing of the “Anthony Afterwit” letter is contained in the letter itself.

7 Ibid., 120, 126, 276, 285, 287.
8 Autobiography, 166, 269, 299.
Anthony Afterwit, Franklin's make-believe character and pseudonym, bears at times an almost uncanny resemblance to Franklin himself. Afterwit, like Franklin, is "an honest Tradesman" recently married, whose "Affairs went on smoothly while a Batchelor" (237). In fact, J. A. Leo Lemay and James A. Sappenfield, working independently, have already suggested that the story of Afterwit's courtship is modeled on Franklin's courtship of Thomas Godfrey's unidentified female relative.\(^9\) Franklin told the story in his autobiography.\(^10\) In Afterwit's case, as in Franklin's, the girl's father at first encouraged the hopeful couple and then feigned anger when he felt "that the Match was too far gone to be easily broke off" to force an elopement and save himself the dowry. Afterwit "stole a Wedding" and fell into the trap (237-238). Franklin did not. He was so outraged by the suspected subterfuge that he "declared absolutely" his "Resolution to have nothing more to do with that Family" (70). Franklin later married Deborah Read, who could have brought no more money to the marriage than did Afterwit's bride. Deborah Reed's former, presumably deceased, husband had fled to the West Indies to escape his creditors in Philadelphia, and her father had suffered financial reverses shortly before dying.\(^11\)

Franklin used Afterwit to ridicule the Godfreys and their kin: "And I have since learn'd that there are old Curmudgeons (so-called) besides him, who have this Trick, to marry their Daughters, and yet keep what they might well spare, till they can keep it no longer: But this by way of Digression; A Word to the Wise is enough" (238).\(^12\) If we assume that Deborah Franklin is the principal target of the letter, then the reference to the Godfrey affair is truly what Franklin labeled it, a digression. Deborah Franklin had recently spent the extravagant sum of £1.3.0 to replace a useful pewter spoon and a twopenny earthen porringer, appropriate for the table of a tradesman, with a fashionable silver spoon.

---

\(^9\) J. A. Leo Lemay first called attention to this in his discussion of Franklin as an almanac compiler and publisher in Everett Emerson, ed., \textit{Major Writers of Early American Literature}, (Madison, Wisconsin, 1972), 210-211. Hereafter cited as \textit{Major Writers}. See also, James A. Sappenfield, \textit{A Literary Apprenticeship} (Carbondale, Illinois, 1973), 60. Hereafter cited as \textit{Sweet Instruction}.

\(^10\) \textit{Autobiography}, 127-128.


\(^12\) Sappenfield has noted: "The first paragraphs of the Afterwit letter are inconsistent with the rest. The reader is not prepared to learn that Anthony's wife, so dearly bought, turned into a poor bargain. The effect is to make the letter seem broken-backed." \textit{Sweet Instruction}, 61.
Mr. Gazetteer,

I am an honest Tradesman, who never meant Harm to any Body. My Affairs went on smoothly while a Bachelor; but of late I have met with some Difficulties, of which I take the Freedom to give you an Account.

About the Time I first address'd my present Spouse, her Father gave out in Speeches, that if she married a Man be liked, he would give her 200l. on the Day of Marriage. This true he never said, foh me, but he always receiv'd me very kindly at his House, and openly countenanc'd my Courtship. I form'd several fine Schemes what to do with this same 200l. and in some Measure neglected my Business on that Account. But unluckily it came to pass, that when the old Gentleman saw I was pretty well engaged, and that the Match was too far gone to be easily broke off; he, without any Reason, grew very angry, forbid me the House, and told his Daughter that if she married me be would not give her a Farthing. However (as he forefaw) we were not to be disappointed in that Manner; but having fled a Wedding, I took her home to a Houfe, where we were not in quite so poor a Condition as the Couple described in the Scotch Song, who had Neither Pot nor Pan, but four bare Legs together; for I had a Houfe tolerably furnish'd, for an ordinary Man, before. No thanks to Dad, who I understand was very much pleased with his political Management. And I have since learn'd that there are old Currardigeous (so called) fathers, who love this Trick, to marry their Daughters, and yet keep what they might well spare, till they can keep it no longer. But this by way of Digression; A Word to the Wife is enough.

I saw that with Care and Industry we might live tolerably easy, and in Credit with our Neighbours: But my Wife had a strong Inclination to be a Gentlewoman. In Consequence of this, my old-fashioned Locking-Glafs was one Day broke, as I said, No Mortal could tell which Way. However, since we could not be without a Glafs in the Room, My Dear, says for, we may as well buy a large fashionable One, that Mr. Such-a-one has to sell; it will cost but little more than a common Glafs, and will be much handfomer and more creditable.

Accordingly the Glafs was bought, and hung against the Wall: But in a Week's time, I was made sensible by little and little, that the Table was by no Means suitable to such a Glafs. And a more proper Table being procur'd, my Spouse, who was an excellent Contriver, inform'd me where we might have very handsome Chairs in the Way: And thus, by Degrees, I found all my old Furniture flow'd up into the Garret, and every thing below alter'd for the better.

Had we stopp'd here, we might have done well enough; but my Wife being entertain'd with Tea by the Good Women she visit'd, we could do no less than the like when they visit'd us; and so we got a Tea-Table with all its Appurtenances of China and Silver. Then my Spouse unfortunately overwork'd herfelf in washing the Houfe, fo that we could do no longer without a Maid. Besides this, it happened frequently, that when I came home at One, the Dinner was but just put in the Pot; for, My Dear thought really it had been but Eleven. At other Times when I came at the same Hour, She wondered I would stay fo long, for Dinner was ready and had waited for me these two Hours. These Irregularities, occasion'd by mistaking the Time, convin-ced me, that it was absolutely necessary to buy a Clock; which my Spouse observ'd, was a great Ornament to the Room! And lastly, to my Grief, she was frequently troubled with some Ailment or other; and nothing did her so much Good as Riding; And these Hackney Horfes were such wretched ugly Creatures, that —

I bought a very fine pacing Mare, which cost 20l. And hereabouts Affairs have stood for some Months past.

I could see al along, that this Way of Living was utterly inconsistent with my Circumstances, but had not Resolution enough to help it. Till lately, receiving a very severe Dnu, which mention'd the next Court, I began in earnest to project Relief. Last Monday my Dear went over the River, to see a Relation, and stay a Fortnight, because she could not bear the Heat of the Town.

In the Interim, I have taken my Turn to make Alterations, viz. I have turn'd away the Maid, Bag
Bag and Baggage (for what should we do with a Maid, who have (except my Boy) none but our selves.) I have sold the fine Pacing Mare, and bought a good Match Coat, with 31. of the Money. I have dispos'd of the Tea-table, and put a Spinning Wheel in its Place, which methinks looks very pretty: Nine empty Cantlers I have stuff'd with Mus; and with some of the Money of the Tea-Furniture, I have bought a Set of Knitting-Needles; for to tell you a Truth, which I would have go no farther, I begin to want Stockings. The flatty Clock I have transform'd into an Hour-Glass, by which I gain a good round Sum; and one of the Pieces of the old Looking-Glass, furnish'd and framed, supplies the Place of the Great One, which I have convey'd into a Closet, where it may possibly remain some Years. In short, the Face of Things is quite changed; and I am mightily pleas'd when I look at my Hour-Glass, what a Ornament it is to the Room. I have paid my Debts, and find Money in my Pocket. I expect my Dime home next Friday, and as your Paper is taken in at the House where it is, I hope the Reading of this will prepare her Mind for the above surprising Revolutions. If she can conform to this new Scheme of Living, we shall be the happiest Couple perhaps in the Province, and, by the Blessing of God, may soon be in thriving Circumstances. I have refer'd the great Glass, because I know her Heart is set upon it. I will allow her when she comes in, to be taken suddenly ill with the Head-ach, the Stomach-ach, fainting-fit, or whatever other Disorder she may think more proper; and she may retire to Bed as soon as she pleases: But if I do not find her in perfect Health both of Body and Mind the next Morning, away goes the aforesaid Great Glass, with several other Trinkets I have no Occasion for, to the Vendue that very Day. Which is the irrevocable Resolution of, Sir,

Her loving Husband, and
Your very humble Servant,

ANTHONY AFTERWIT.

Postscript, You know we can return to our former Way of Living, when we please, if Dad will be at the Ex pense of it.

and china bowl, both better suited to the table of a gentleman. Franklin, feeling that this expenditure was beyond their present circumstances, seems to have chided her for aping the gentry as Anthony Afterwit pointed out "that with Care and Industry we might live tolerably easy, and in Credit with our Neighbors: But my Wife had a strong Inclination to be a Gentlewoman" (238).
Franklin used household furniture in the Afterwit letter to symbolize his tableware, which in common eighteenth-century parlance was known as table furniture. Years later in writing of the silver spoon and china bowl incident in his autobiography Franklin noted: “our Table was plain & simple, our Furniture of the cheapest. For instance my Breakfast was a long time Bread & Milk, (no Tea,) and I ate it out of a twopenny earthen Porringer with a Pewter Spoon” (76). Franklin’s table with “Furniture of the cheapest” became Afterwit’s “House tolerably furnished, for an ordinary Man.” Deborah Franklin’s replacement of the humble tableware with more aristocratic tableware became Mrs. Afterwit’s replacement of an “old-fashioned Looking-Glass” with “a large fashionable One” (238). The modes used by the two women to accomplish their ends are less different than they at first seem. Deborah Franklin, who probably managed the Franklins’ household expenditures, chose to surprise her husband. Mrs. Afterwit had to employ another method. Afterwit stated that in consequence of his wife’s strong inclination to be a gentlewoman his “old-fashioned Looking-Glass was one Day broke, as she said, No Mortal could tell which way.” Mrs. Afterwit then persuaded Anthony that since they could not be without a looking glass, they might “as well buy a large fashionable One that Mr. Such-a-one has to sell; it will cost but little more than a common Glass, and will be much handsomer and more creditable” (238).

Franklin exaggerates his wife’s foible in Mrs. Afterwit by having her employ the subterfuge of willfully breaking an object of value to force her husband to purchase a more elegant and costly replacement. In the second quarter of the eighteenth century, when the reflection cast by a pail of water did the duty of a looking glass for many people, the possession of even the simplest glass could be seen as pretention to fashion. The breaking of the mirror, an irrevocable act (traditionally associated with bad luck) committed without Mr. Afterwit’s approval, symbolizes what Franklin saw as Deborah’s extravagance. Franklin’s wife probably did nothing worse than spend £1.3.0 without his approval when he was trying to make his way up in the world. These lines, penned years later, in “Advice to a Young Tradesman, Written by an Old One,” (1738) must have reflected Franklin’s view of the matter: “He that murders a Crown destroys all that it might have produc’d,

even Scores of Pounds.” Franklin makes it clear that he would have said no if asked and that further extravagance is at present forbidden for their mutual good. Anthony Afterwit derives his name from not wisely saying no at the outset. He foolishly indulges his wife’s genteel whims. Just as in an eighteenth-century view of the progress of corruption where the telling of fibs leads by stages to worse sins, then crimes, and the gallows, the admission of one seemingly excusable extravagance leads to progressively greater extravagances and debt. In introducing the silver spoon and china bowl incident, Franklin wrote: “But mark how Luxury will enter Families, and make a Progress, in Spite of Principle” (76). The Afterwits were to pass through five stages of luxury (Franklin did not number them) before Anthony had to reverse the progress and save himself and his wife from debt.

The first stage began with the hanging of the new looking glass against the wall. At first the old furniture, like Franklin’s table furniture, was supplanted by new not for the sake of utility but solely for the sake of appearance. Then the table was “by no Means suitable to such a Glass.” The Afterwits got some “very handsome Chairs in the Way; And thus, by Degrees” all the old furniture was “stow’d up into the Garrett, and every thing below alter’d for the better.” Afterwit indicated that they could have afforded this much: “Had we stopp’d here, we might have done well enough” (238-239).

Perhaps the Franklins had already reached in some degree the second stage in the progress of luxury. In that stage the china and silver are introduced riding the back of Franklin’s favorite genteel bugbear, the tea table. The “Tea-Table with all its Appurtenances of China and Silver” (239) is a two-fold symbol of extravagance, standing for great expense and idleness. Franklin, in relating the silver spoon and china bowl incident, emphasized that his breakfast long consisted of bread and milk, “no Tea.” Tea was still an expensive and relatively new-fangled drink in England and the colonies. The tea table also was extravagant because it was a specialized furniture form that served no other function than supporting and displaying tea wares for the entertainment of polite company. At this time china—true china, i.e., porcelain—came to the British colonies from China via England. The

14 Papers, III, 306.
use of porcelain had filtered down to the upper middle class, but pos-
session of porcelain in prodigious quantity was still a status symbol in
European court circles.\textsuperscript{16} Ownership of silver in colonial America was
one of the gentry’s prime modes of storing and displaying wealth.\textsuperscript{17}
Franklin’s \textit{Modest Enquiry into the Nature and Necessity of a Paper
Currency} (1729) indicates that he was no bullionist. In it he had written:
“By Labour may the Value of Silver be measured.”\textsuperscript{18}

Finally, the tea table with its appurtenances was a symbol of ex-
travagance because it encouraged women to be idle rather than indus-
trious. Their labor in the home manufacture of textiles meant money.
In \textit{Poor Richard} (1734), Franklin wrote:

\begin{quote}
Many estates are spent in the getting,
Since women for tea forsook spinning and knitting.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{quote}

Evidently he valued these lines, for he incorporated them into his “The
Way to Wealth” in 1758, adding:

\begin{quote}
And Men for Punch forsook Hewing and Splitting.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

The tea table brought idleness, and Franklin further brought home the
high cost of this idleness by having the Afterwits hire a maid to do the
work formerly done by Mrs. Afterwit—this may be seen as the third
stage in the progress of luxury. In contrast, Franklin began the para-
graph containing the silver spoon and china bowl incident with:

\begin{quote}
We have an English Proverb that says,
He that would thrive
Must ask his wife;
it was lucky for me that I had one as much dispos’d to Industry & Frugality
as my self. She assisted me cheerfully in my Business, folding & stitching
Phamphlets, tending Shop, purchasing old Linen Rags for the Paper-
makers, &c &c. We kept no idle Servants. . .\textsuperscript{(75-76)}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{17} Barbara McLean Ward, Gerald W.R. Ward, eds., \textit{Silver in American Life}, (New York, 1979), 33-34.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Papers}, I, 149.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Ibid.}, 315.
\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Papers}, VII, 345.
In the fourth stage of the progress of luxury Anthony Afterwit found his noon day dinner served at irregular times. Taking the hint, he bought a clock which they did not really need. After its purchase Afterwit's wife remarked that it was "a great Ornament to the Room!" Clocks, particularly long case clocks, were luxury items throughout the eighteenth century, being one of the most expensive pieces of furniture in the home. They were generally only exceeded in price by large case pieces and furniture that heavily incorporated textiles, such as a fully furnished bed.  

In the final stage of the progress of luxury, Mrs. Afterwit was troubled by "some Ailment or other" which required "Riding." This ploy to get a horse in a town still small enough that one could easily get everywhere on foot (and could get exercise in the same manner) smacks not only of extravagance, but of ostentation. Since ancient times ownership of a riding horse was regarded as a mark of wealth or rank. An ordinary hackney horse would not do; Afterwit "bought a very fine pacing Mare, which cost £20." Afterwit at last realized that he and his wife were living beyond their means, but it took "a very severe Dun" mentioning the next court to bring him fully to his senses. When his wife left for a fortnight to escape "the Heat of the Town," Afterwit took his "Turn to make Alterations" and almost completely reversed the progress of luxury (239).

How many of things mentioned in the Afterwit's progress of luxury were desired by Deborah Franklin? She evidently wished to have silver and china in her home. From time to time she may well have expressed her desire for finer furniture and perhaps a clock. Whatever the case Benjamin Franklin probably did consider her to be somewhat extravagant. In 1771, just three years before Deborah's death, he wrote her a letter in which he gently explained his reasons for limiting her living allowance to £360 a year: "I know you were not very attentive to Money-matters in your best Days, and I apprehend that your Memory is too much impair'd for the Management of unlimited Sums without Danger of injuring the future Fortune of your Daughter and Grandson." Perhaps, too she did indeed seek to escape the heat of Phila-

---

21 Clocks were rare in Philadelphia at this time. A study of estates and other inventories from the city's founding in 1682 through 1730 revealed references to only 53 clocks—an average of little more than one clock a year. For a table compiled from this study, see Cathryn J. McElroy, "Furniture of the Philadelphia Area: Forms and Craftsmen Before 1730," Master's thesis. (University of Delaware, 1970), 235.

22 Papers, XVIII, 91.
delphia in June or July of 1732. At this time she was about six months pregnant with their first child. The summer of 1732 could not have been a comfortable one for her.\textsuperscript{23}

Anthony Afterwit’s “Alterations” provide a series of contrasts that at once illustrate the methods and benefits of frugality. These closely relate to Franklin’s own lifestyle in his early years. “I have turn’d away the Maid, Bag and Baggage for what should we do with a Maid, who have (except my Boy) none but ourselves” (239). This line corresponds not only to the “We kept no idle Servants” of the autobiography, but also to the size of Franklin’s family in the summer of 1732. The phrase “except my Boy” probably was taken by most of his readers to mean an apprentice. Deborah Franklin may have recognized it as a reference to her husband’s illegitimate son William (then at least a year and a half old).\textsuperscript{24}

“I have sold the fine Pacing Mare, and bought a good Milch Cow, with £3 of the Money.” It is likely that Franklin in 1732 had no horse. Perhaps he instead kept the cow which provided the breakfast milk mentioned in the autobiography.

I have dispos’d of the Tea-Table, and put a Spinning Wheel in its Place, which methinks looks very pretty: Nine empty Canisters I have stuff’d with Flax; and with some of the Money of the Tea-furniture, I have bought a Set of Knitting-Needles; for to tell you a Truth, which I would have go no further, I begin to want Stockings. (239)

This amusing event echoes another family incident. In January of 1726/7 Benjamin Franklin sent his favorite sister, Jane, a spinning wheel as a wedding gift and wrote: “I had almost determined on a tea table, but when I considered that the character of a good housewife was far preferable to that of being only a pretty gentlewomen, I concluded to send you a spinning wheel, which I hope you will accept as a small token of my sincere love and affection.”\textsuperscript{25} Franklin did not think of spinning and knitting as a punishment, but merely as a suitable symbol of female industry. Deborah Franklin’s industry probably consisted more of work in the printing shop than of work at wheel or needles. Yet at the conclusion of the Stamp Act crisis he wrote her from England “it was a Comfort to me to recollect that I had once been cloth’d from Head to

\textsuperscript{23} Autobiography, 304. This calculation is based on Francis Folger Franklin’s birth date, October 20, 1732.
\textsuperscript{24} See footnote 6.
\textsuperscript{25} Papers, I, 100.
Foot in Woollen and Linnen of my Wife's Manufacture, that I never was prouder of any Dress in my Life, and that she and her Daughter might do it again if it was necessary.” What Franklin seems to have been saying through Afterwit to his wife was, “it's good that you have been industrious, but you must remain so, if we are to prosper.”

Afterwit finished reversing the progress of luxury by exchanging the “stately Clock” for an “Hour-Glass” gaining “a good round Sum,” and replacing the new looking glass with “one of the Pieces of the old Looking-Glass, squar’d and fram’d” (239)—a frugal but common practice in the eighteenth century when all looking glasses were of value, and consequently highly prized. Afterwit’s statement of the happy results could easily have been Franklin’s in 1732—“I have paid my Debts, and find Money in my Pocket.” Afterwit did not sell the great looking glass; he put it into a closet where it might “remain some years,” because he knew that she had her heart set on it (239-240). And Franklin probably did not stow away the china bowl and silver spoon that the looking glass symbolized. Afterwit’s action, though, is best explained by Franklin’s attitude toward appearance. In the autobiography he recalled: “In order to secure my Credit and Character as a Tradesman, I took care not only to be in Reality Industrious & frugal, but to avoid all Appearances of the Contrary. I drest plainly; I was seen at no Places of idle Diversion. . .and to show that I was not above my Business, I sometimes brought home the Paper I purchas’d at the Stores, thro’ the Streets on a Wheelbarrow (68).

The remainder of Afterwit’s letter seems to address Deborah:

...as your paper is taken at the House where she is, I hope the reading of this will prepare her Mind for the above surprising Revolution. If she can conform to this new Scheme of Living, we shall be the happiest Couple perhaps in the Province, and by the Blessings of God, may soon be in thriving Circumstances.

Afterwit allows his wife a day to get used to the idea “to be taken suddenly ill with the Headach, the Stomach-ach, Fainting-Fits, or whatever other Disorders she may think more proper; and she may

---

26 Papers, XIII, 233.
retire to Bed as soon as she pleases. . .” (240). This common jest at female behavior could easily have been a private joke between Franklin and his wife: the symptoms expected of Mrs. Afterwit are symptoms suffered during pregnancy. By phrasing the letter in this way, Franklin could jest Deborah out of taking advantage of her pregnant condition to influence the outcome of the silver spoon and china bowl incident. Earlier in the letter Afterwit stated that his wife “was an excellent Contriver” (238). Afterwit closed the letter with a threat:

But if I do not find her in perfect Health both of Body and Mind the next Morning, away goes the aforesaid Great Glass, with several other Trinkets I have no Occasion for, to the Vendue that very Day. Which is the irrevocable Resolution of, Sir, Her loving Husband, and Your very humble Servent,

ANTHONY AFTERWIT (240)

Franklin, who had begun the Afterwit letter as “an honest Tradesman, who never meant harm” and closed it “Her loving Husband” here jestingly “laid down the law” to Deborah. For their mutual good, as Franklin saw it, the progress of luxury must cease until they found themselves “in thriving Circumstances.” Afterwit’s postscript to the letter, “You know we can return to our former Way of Living, when we please, if Dad will be at the Expence of it” (240), could thus have been reminded Deborah that she had brought no dowry to the marriage and that Franklin did not object to luxury when it was within their means.

The draft of the Afterwit letter in Franklin’s commonplace book (now at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania) indicates that Franklin had planned a different postscript and suggests that his use of the Afterwit pseudonym was an afterthought. In light of my hypothesis this postscript (which stands as a clear text in the draft) would have been more humorous than the one Franklin printed. In it Afterwit posed a query to the editor: “I would be glad to know how you approve my Conduct. Answ. I don’t love to concern my self in Affairs between Man & Wife.” The signature that Franklin considered using is problematic. In the draft “Anthony Afterwit” appears below a large obliterated signature, placed immediately below the phrase “Your very huml Serv.,” the only discernable part of which is the bold flourish. This signature seems to have been nearly as long as the Afterwit signature with letters twice as high. Evidently obliteration, not mere deletion, was the intent of whoever scratched through the signature.
In the rest of the Afterwit letter Franklin consistently used one or two lines to delete words, not one of which was rendered illegible by the process. Furthermore, in the commonplace book draft of the Celia single letter (a letter published only two weeks after the Afterwit letter), Franklin jotted down two pseudonyms for consideration—one below the other with letters of approximately equal height and with no flourishes. A single line drawn through Fanny Forethought deleted this name in favor of Celia Single. It is far too tempting to theorize that Franklin boldly signed the letter "B. Franklin" at about the same time that he wrote the original postscript and then, having decided that his own signature would not do, obliterated it. We may never know how the letter was actually signed, but the deliberate obliteration is itself significant. Franklin could reasonably have expected that only his wife and employees would see the draft in the commonplace book. This suggests that the obliteration masks something that would have been sensitive to someone in this group. If the major portion of the Afterwit letter was directed at Deborah Franklin she could have easily been that person. Perhaps Franklin, who meant no harm, had chosen for the original signature a pseudonym which he later decided was either too biting or too pointed for his wife and employees to see.

Although this essay has emphasized one aspect of the Anthony Afterwit letter, that of Franklin’s inside jokes—the gentle reproof of Deborah Franklin and (to a lesser extent) his ridicule of the Godfreys, the letter should also be seen in the broader context of Franklin’s writing and life. Franklin had already used (and was to make frequent use of) humor to render his moral truths palatable to his audience. In Anthony Afterwit, he created a humorous persona whose battle of the sexes anecdote delights the reader while its examples instruct him in the merit and method of industry and frugality. The letter, which preceded the publication of the first Poor Richard by about six months, is at once a personal embodiment and an early published expression of Franklin’s Poor Richard mentality. Silence Dogood, the voice of the teenage Franklin, had favored industry and frugality. Franklin was always industrious, but his autobiography and other writings suggest that he did not completely resolve to live frugally until his return voyage from

29 Ibid., 43.
In his early twenties Franklin, partially due to expected financial help, had managed his money badly enough to incur debt, but by age twenty-six, when he wrote the Afterwit letter, he had mended his ways. In this sense Benjamin Franklin was Anthony Afterwit in 1732. Drawing on his stock of recent personal experiences for the Afterwit persona, Franklin championed industry and frugality not only for his neighbors, but also for himself and his family.

We cannot judge what effect the Afterwit letter might have had on Franklin’s general audience, but it most likely influenced some of the future actions of Deborah Franklin and Thomas Godfrey.

In the Afterwit letter Franklin asked the wife, whose love for him had found what he considered an extravagant expression in her gift of a silver spoon and china bowl, to let him thrive. The young couple with a “Family coming on” had probably already purchased some furniture for their home. Perhaps there had been extravagances. Evidently the Franklins by mutual consent called the progress of luxury to a temporary halt. In the autobiography Franklin, as quoted earlier, recalled that Deborah was “as much dispos’d to Industry & Frugality as my self.” In the course of the next few years the Franklins were to find themselves in “thriving Circumstances.”

Franklin closed his account of china bowl and silver spoon incident in the autobiography with these words: “This was the first Appearance of Plate & China in our House, which afterwards in a Course of Years as our Wealth encreas’d, augmented gradually to several Hundred Pounds in Value” (76). Benjamin Franklin’s jibe at Thomas Godfrey seems to have contributed inadvertently to the Franklins prosperity. J.A. Leo Lemay has suggested that Godfrey’s anger over the Afterwit letter caused him to take the almanac, formerly printed by Franklin, to Franklin’s rival, Andrew Bradford. Franklin, at the last minute, compiled his own. Poor Richard first appeared in December of 1732, and immediately began to make poor Benjamin rich.