The Significance of Pennsylvania's Eighteenth-Century Jest Books

IN 1789, JOHN WYETH PUBLISHED for Mathew Carey of Philadelphia the first edition of the most influential and popular jest book produced in America. The American Jest Book, with its attached second part, The Merry Fellow's Companion, would be published in at least eight different editions by the end of the century, six editions of which appeared in either Philadelphia or Harrisburg. Pennsylvania jest books that followed in its wake included The Philadelphia Jest Book, Tom Paine's Jests, and Feast of Merriment. Other jest books appeared in New England later in the century, but for the most part they were neither as numerous nor as ambitious as those published in Pennsylvania, particularly The American Jest Book in its various editions.

Students of eighteenth-century British popular culture have no difficulty in finding what made Englishmen of the time laugh—we all know of Joe Miller's Jest Book, considered the most popular humor book of all time. American reprints of the Joe Miller collections in

1 Eighteenth-century editions of The American Jest Book and The Merry Fellow's Companion appeared in 1789 (Philadelphia), 1791 (Philadelphia), 1795 (Philadelphia), 1795 (Worcester, as Funny Stories), 1796 (Boston), 1796-97 (Harrisburg), 1798 (Wiscasset, Maine), and 1798 (Philadelphia). Later editions appeared in 1800 (Wilmington), 1807 (New England, as The American Jester), 1810 (Philadelphia), 1832 (Philadelphia), and 1833 (Philadelphia and Pittsburgh). References in my text are to the first (1789) edition, with allusions to The American Jest Book indicated by AJB and to its second part by MFC. Other eighteenth-century Pennsylvania jest books are referred to as follows: Tom Paine's Jests (1794) as Paine; The New Entertaining Philadelphia Jest Book (1790) as PfJ; Feast of Merriment (1795) as Feast. Still extant eighteenth-century jest books published outside of Pennsylvania include Daniel Bowen's pamphlet-sized (32 pp.) Collection of Funny, Moral, and Entertaining Stories and Bon Mots (New Haven, 1787); and even smaller (24 pp.) Merry Fellow's Pocket Companion (Boston, 1789); Be Merry and Wise (Worcester, 1786); and Laugh and Be Fat (Salem, 1799). To these we may add The Youthful Jester, published in Baltimore in 1800. Harry B. Weiss has estimated from Evans's American Bibliography that there were at least two dozen titles of what appear to be jest books before 1800 in America—but some of these turn out to be simply later editions of the same jest books; others are not jest books at all; and still others are no longer extant to be examined. See "A Brief History of American Jest Books," Bulletin of the New York Public Library (1943): 276-289.
our own century include a massive 700-page unabridged edition (New York: William T. Henderson, 1903), in which the original, modest collection of 247 jokes had grown to 1546; the most recent republication is the 1960 Dover reprint of the first (1739) edition. In recent years, several other collections of early English jests have appeared: John Wardroper's *Jest Upon Jest* (1970), P. M. Zall's *A Nest of Ninnies and Other English Jest Books of the Seventeenth Century* (1970), and Robert Thompson's *Samuel Pepys' Penny Merriments* (1977).

However, there has been no reprint of *The American Jest Book* and no edition since the 1833 version. Although libraries like the American Antiquarian Society and the Library of Congress have rare copies, these well-thumbed books are scarce, with some editions completely lost to us. Moreover, early American jest books have been largely forgotten or dismissed by historians of American humor. They are not mentioned at all by Carl Holliday in *The Wit and Humor of Colonial Days* (1912). Constance Rourke, in her classic study, *American Humor* (1931), refers to them only in a bibliographical note. Walter Blair (*Native American Humor*, 1937) alludes to the 1796 edition of *The American Jest Book*, but like Rourke dismisses such collections as having little to do with native American life. The Blair and Hill study, *America’s Humor* (1978), barely mentions jest books, which receive no entry at all in the most recent *Oxford Companion to American Literature* (1983). On the other hand, two articles have called attention to American jest books. In 1943, Harry B. Weiss presented what is essentially a descriptive listing in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*. More recently, and more appreciatively, P. M. Zall has written on “The Old Age of American Jest Books,” wondering why American literary critics have been so “studiously silent” about them. Zall’s essay is illuminating but modest in its scope and intentions. His only purpose, he says, is to draw distinctions between the style (not content) of American and English jest books, and in so doing “to help map out the territory as a new frontier for fun and profit.”

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2 There are no extant copies known of the *American Jest Book* and *Merry Fellow's Companion* published in Philadelphia in 1791 or 1795, or in Maine in 1798, or of the Harrisburg *Merry Fellow's Companion* of 1797.

Zall's thesis is that jests in the American collections are more discursive and generalized than those published at the same time in England, where they had evolved from the "medieval" to the "classical" mode, which depends less on story-telling than on dramatic epitomes.

If Zall's thesis is correct, he provides us with reason enough to look more closely at American jest books, instead of dismissing them as merely imitations of England's Joe Miller's collections. Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that there is a high degree of imitation and borrowing from English jest books and that an American jest book does not imply a book of particularly American humor. On the average, throughout the century, for every story with an American setting in these books, there are two or three more properly located in Great Britain. On the other hand, like most jokes, the great majority of these jests do not evoke any particular country at all. We should not be surprised or disturbed by the fact that the origins of much of the non-American material can be found in English sources, from both seventeenth-century collections like Mirth in Abundance (1659) and Francis Bacon's Apophthegms (1625) and earlier eighteenth-century collections, such as Joe Miller's (1739) and Quinn's Jests; or, the Facetious Man's Pocket Companion (1766). A people's humor travels with them, and the Americans of the new republic did not exchange their jokes with their citizenship. Moreover, all joke books have their sources; it has been shown that all of the original Joe Miller's entries were taken from earlier jest books. We do not imagine that Wyeth and Carey sat around their offices thinking up native American humor—and in the year of Washington's first inauguration the United States was too new to be well stocked in native sources from which anecdotes could be culled. Even Benjamin Franklin had to borrow, and sources (mostly published in London) have been found for approximately two-thirds of the sayings of Poor Richard's Almanac.

4 The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature (1962), for example, has only a brief entry for The American Jest Book, picking up only the 1796 edition and calling it "perhaps the earliest American imitation of the English Joe Miller's collections."

5 The 247 items of the original 1743 Joe Miller collection were "lifted, with a change of phrase here and there, from two earlier books, Pinkethman's Jests, first published in 1720, and Polly Peachum's Jests, 1728. Those books were themselves largely re-workings of seventeenth-century collections, with catchpenny titles." John Wardroper, Jest Upon Jest (London, 1970), 12.
from George Herbert's *Outlandish Proverbs* (1640) to an anonymous *Collection of Epigrams* (1735-1737). Gershon Legman puts such borrowing in perspective when he observes that jestbooks "which derive mainly from one another, and seldom from coeval folk sources—are not so much being alimented by folk sources as constituting, themselves, a main source of the jokes in oral transmission. As to their copying from one another, that is only one intermediate step in their migrations: from one mouth to another, one book to another, one land to another." Finally, insofar as we are interested in what struck early Americans as humorous, the question of whether the jokes they laughed at were indigenous to America is not as significant as it might seem to be.

There are three main reasons for students of American humor and culture to recall the American jest books. First, to dismiss them as simply English imitations is to ignore the truly American material which nonetheless found its way into these collections. Second, whether or not the jokes themselves are "native," the compilers' choices necessarily tell us much, not only about early American humor but about the language, tastes, and attitudes of the times. As Keith Thomas says, "when we laugh we betray our innermost assumptions. . . . Jokes are a pointer to joking situations, areas of structural ambiguity in society itself; and their subject-matter can be a revealing guide to past tensions and anxieties." And third, the jests necessarily help us to chart the development of American humor, both as signposts for the direction in which it will evolve and as starting points against which its later development can be measured. In fact, some of the stories we find in the early jest books were later naturalized to become part of what we now see as the heritage of American humor.

The inclusion of American material which helps to distinguish American from British jest books can be found in Pennsylvania's first extensive jest book. Although jests treating America and Americans

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occasionally reappear throughout the book, they are concentrated in
the beginning of each of its two parts: three-fourths of the first forty-
four jokes in *The American Jest Book* and all of the first twenty-three
in *The Merry Fellow’s Companion* deal with subjects particularly Amer-
ican—either in setting, or in the characters who appear in the jests
and anecdotes, or in the point of view from which the stories are
told. There are jests about New England sea captains and New York
fops, about John Smith and gentlemen settlers in Virginia and the
Dutch settlers in New York, about General Elbert’s death in Georgia
and George Whitefield’s preaching in South Carolina, about blacks
in New Jersey and Indians in West Florida. There are anecdotes
about the voting laws of Pennsylvania and the stage wagon between
Richmond and Hampton in Virginia. The currency of some of these
stories is clear from their treatment, only eight years after Cornwallis
surrendered at Yorktown, of such Revolutionary War events as the
1780 siege of Charleston and the battles fought at Lexington, Mon-
mouth, and Germantown. Many of these jests, particularly those set
during the revolutionary period, reflect the new country’s emerging
nationalism.

Clearly the sources for most of these American entries are not to
be found in English forerunners. Rather they can be found in Amer-
ican almanacs and in local newspapers and magazines, which in turn
often borrowed material from the jest books to use as fillers. The
symbiotic relationship should be expected, since the compilers of jest
books were likely to be editors as well. For example, the following
anecdote concerning Benjamin Franklin and the Stamp Act, which
Mathew Carey used in his 1789 *The Merry Fellow’s Companion*, is
repeated from his own *American Museum* of the previous year (August,
1788):

Dr. Franklin, as agent for the province of Pennsylvania, being in
England at the time the parliament passed the stamp-act for America,
was frequently applied to by the ministry for his opinion respecting the
operation of the same, and assured them that the people of America
would never submit to it. The act was nevertheless passed, and the
event showed he had been right. After the news of the destruction of
the stamped paper had arrived in England, the ministry again sent for
the doctor, to consult with him, and concluded with this proposition,
that if the Americans would engage to pay for the damage done in the
destruction of the stamped paper, the parliament would then repeal the
Actually, although Franklin fought the Act for a number of years, he eventually supported it in London in the spirit of political compromise, even urging the editor of his Philadelphia newspaper to make readers aware of their obligation to the Crown. Franklin’s appearance before Parliament to participate in the Act’s repeal in February 1766 was in fact carefully staged by the Grenville ministry, which needed to quiet colonial fears by presenting Franklin as a respected advisor as much as Franklin needed to repair his reputation back home. That Franklin succeeded is evident from the currency of this anecdote, which casts him in the familiar guise of the sly old satirist and patriot.

Another anecdote concerning Franklin shows that Americans’ pride in him extended to his position in the world of science; at the same time it mocks those who failed to acknowledge the new world’s contribution to the advance of science. Supposedly, an English philosopher opposed Franklin’s theory concerning the efficacy of pointed lightning conductors and advised the English king that only blunt conductors were safe. During the revolutionary war, King George thus replaced the sharp conductors around his palace with blunt ones,

rather than show faith in an enemy’s invention—this despite the Royal Society’s condemnation of the pretended improvement. *The Philadelphia Jest Book* ends the anecdote with an epigram from Horace Walpole.

While you, great George, for safety hunt,  
And sharp conductors change for blunt,  
The nation’s out of joint:—  
Franklin a wiser course pursues;  
And all your thunder fearless views,  
By keeping to the point. (*PJB*, p. 97)

In the context of the pro-patriot stance of the jest book, the epigram conveys the pointed rightness of the Americans’ cause. Patriots need not fear the English king, who in vain hunts for safety.

Not all colonists were certain of the need to go to war, however, and some were torn between their loyalist tendencies and patriotic pride in their new country. An anecdote from *The American Jest Book* suggests such ambivalence in “an elderly gentleman from New York, who was at bottom a staunch loyalist, but so fond of argument, that he would occasionally take up the subject of the war and argue upon it either pro or con.” When this New Yorker overheard a conversation at a London coffeehouse, however, he proved himself a thorough Yankee:

[O]ne of the company, more sanguine than the rest, roundly asserted, there could be no doubt of conquering the Americans, notwithstanding the superiority of their numbers; for that one Englishman could drive an hundred of them.—Pray, do you think sir, said the Yankee, you could achieve so noble an exploit? Perhaps not, replied the hero, upon so great a number—Could you drive fifty? No—Could you drive twenty?—No—Could you drive one? Oh yes, by G—d, I could do that easily at any time.—Then, sir, said the old gentleman, as you are an Englishman and I am an American, if you please, drive me. The political braggadocio, drew in his horns, and sneaked off. (*AJB*, p. 13)

A similar story of Yankee pride has the English Colonel Tarleton, several months after two hundred of his troops were routed by Colonel William Washington, bragging at a farmer’s house that he would just like to see Washington’s face: “It is a pity then,” replied a girl in the house, “that colonel Tarleton did not take the pains to turn his head at Cowpens” (*MFC*, pp. 10-11).
As we might expect, the jest books juxtapose images of heroic Americans with vignettes of cowardly British. One tale tells of an American soldier who fell into the hands of the English cavalry. Knocked down and about to be pierced in the back by a sword, he managed to turn around to say “Strike me in the heart, . . . that my friends may not blush for me after my death” (AJB, p. 17). A contrary story is told about the English fleet under Sir Charles Hardy, which kept its cowardly distance when the French entered the British channel. A shamed jack tar on the Royal George covered his ship’s figurehead of the King, saying “Let me, old boy, muffle you, for damn me but it would hurt you too much to see us running away” (AJB, p. 4).

Perhaps more disturbing to the British than these images of Americans posturing after their military victories was the radical Tom Paine’s Jests, which relentlessly attacked basic English assumptions and institutions. Published in both London and Philadelphia in 1794 (and having no more relation to Thomas Paine than the Joe Miller jest books had with Joe Miller), the collection made its target England’s social and political system. It included, for example, an intriguing list of eighteen oddities of English law, observing that while it is a capital crime to wound cattle, to wound a man is only a misdemeanor; that it is the same crime to kill a king or to plunge the country into civil war as it is to counterfeit a six-pence, but it is no crime whatsoever to involve the country in an unnecessary foreign war; that a rich man of great property can hunt on a poor man’s property at will, but a poor man of small property may not hunt on his own land; that shoemakers have to apprentice for seven years and then produce if they are to remain employed, but peers are simply born into the legislature for life without any condition that they must produce to keep their jobs (Paine, pp. 14-17). Differences in cultural assumptions between England and America are captured by parallel lists of the names of ships: The English Royal George and the American Buffalo, the English Monarch and the American Assurance, the British Princess Caroline and the American Spitfire. The anonymous compiler then suggests names for new American ships, such as Justice, Truth, Citizen, Patriot, and Republic (Paine, p. 5). Tom Paine’s Jests was far more political than the other jest books published in America, but like them it presented anti-British images beside more positive ones of the new
nation. At times, these jest books seemed to serve as much to swell Yankee pride as they did to tickle their readers’ funny bones.

As the previous examples show, many of the American entries in these jest books were not so much jests as they were observations and anecdotes meant to reflect nationalistic pride and to reveal and emphasize cultural differences. However, Keith Thomas was right to suggest that a nation’s cultural attitudes, its tensions and anxieties, are more often revealed unwittingly by jests which intend only to be funny. For example, people never show their prejudices more baldly than they do in their humor, and ethnic humor has understandably flourished in a society as heterogeneous as ours. There are no better places to find this ethnic humor than in the early American jest books and almanacs. Of course the new American citizens brought many of their ethnic stereotypes directly from England, most particularly that of the stage Irishman, the most recurring comic stereotype in American jest books. Robert Dodge has recently traced the stereotype in American almanacs of the same period, pointing out that America had many Irish immigrants even before the Famine. Dodge concludes that the comic Irishman contributed to the “stockpile of Old World humor that was available to Americans to manipulate and transform into an American humor.”

In American jest books and almanacs alike, the Irish are most frequently depicted as simpletons—like the man who was eager to learn whether his sister’s baby was a boy or a girl, so he could find out whether he was an uncle or an aunt (Feast, p. 83)—and they smell of potatoes. Sometimes, however, they got their revenge, as when an Irish general cut off the nose of an ill-bred squire who commented about his odor (AJB, pp. 83-84). In another, an Irish gentleman who danced the jig with great spirit confronted a “macaroni” imitating him at a dance. When the macaroni insisted he was only dancing his natural way, the Irishman forced him to prove it by making him dance his exaggerated imitation for the rest of the evening (MFC, p. 61). In addition to the Irish, the Scots are frequently abused. Here too the humor often depended on the retaliation of the insulted party. General Lee asked a Scottish

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drinking companion at Albany to excuse his fault of abusing Scotland and Scotsmen when drunk. The Scotsman told him he understood, but that the general must in his turn excuse a little fault he has, of caning soundly anyone who abuses the Scottish (MFC, p. 5). Other ethnic anecdotes occasionally condescend towards Jews, usually denoted by the name “Ephraim.”

More native are references to blacks and Indians. As simple servants and slaves, blacks shared for the colonists the role of simpleton that the British usually reserved for the Irish. Thus a black man stubbed his toe at night and exclaimed, “why de debil de sun no shine in deese dak nights” instead of “always shining in de day time, when dere’s no need of him” (MFC, pp. 26-27). In contrast to this negative stereotype of the black man as simple-minded are the portraits of the Indian, which are almost wholly favorable.

Indians lived in closer and often more peaceful contact with the settlers than the captivity tales which have come down to us suggest. Members of the Six Nations and colonial Americans fought together against the French in the Indian wars, dealt with each other in the fur trading posts, and negotiated treaties for land. Richard Dorson has suggested that the anecdotal chaff of jokebooks and humor omnibuses provide images of the Indian which came out of such relations and are not found in histories and ethnological studies.\[11\] The images we get in these eighteenth-century jest books, however, are surprisingly romanticized. Actually, the image of the Indian in the European and American mind seems constantly to have shifted, from the mythic portraits of the noble savage first reported by early explorers to the demonic image (what Howard Mumford Jones calls the “anti-image”\[12\]) he was cast into by the end of the sixteenth century.

By the early eighteenth century, however, the Puritans’ image of the heathen Indian in league with the devil in the immoral wilderness

had begun to change again. The eighteenth-century American sought some distinctive quality in American life and landscape which justified his separation from British and continental culture. The various hero-narratives, beginning in 1786 with John Filson’s *The Adventures of Daniel Boone*, depicted the American at home in the wilderness, and although the Indian is still the enemy, nevertheless the qualities of the new American hero are frequently those he shares with and even has learned from him. As Richard Slotkin has observed,

> The savage trusted his natural passions, innocent of the consequences of his individualism and self-indulgence; the colonist had learned to use his intellect and conscience to conceive the American experience as a blending of Indian and European characteristics, although there were wide variations in judgment as to whether this had improved or degenerated the colonials.\(^{13}\)

The Indian characters found in American jest books are thus noble warriors, generally innocent (although occasionally cunning), always brave, and eloquent. “An Indian chief of the Creek nation, being once appointed to negotiate a treaty of peace with the people of South Carolina, was desired by the governor and council to speak his mind freely, and not to be afraid, for he was among friends. ‘I will speak freely, for I will not be afraid,’ said he, ‘for why should I be afraid among my friends, who never was afraid among my enemies’” (*AJB*, pp. 19-20). In another romanticized story, we are told how one Indian killed another of his tribe, which according to Indian code necessitated revenge by the dead Indian’s brother. However, the brother on seeing that the murderer had a wife and young family, allowed him to live until his family no longer depended on him. When his eldest son killed his first deer, the murderer, “With an undaunted countenance . . . then called on the brother of the deceased, to strike; and died without a groan!” (*MFC*, p. 10). So heroic is the Indian that he cannot understand how General Forbes (in the 1758 western expedition), no matter how infirm he may have become, could have allowed himself to be carried in a litter. The brave and innocent savage was satisfied only when Colonel Weiser explained that “This man is so terrible in war, that we are obliged to confine him, and

\(^{13}\) Slotkin, 191.
let him write his orders; for if he was let loose on the world, he would deluge it with blood” (MFC, p. 12). The jest book’s Indian insists on his dignity. One such anecdote is reminiscent of Pope’s couplet on the collar of a dog he presented to the Prince of Wales—“I am my master’s dog at Kew/Pray tell me sir, whose dog are you?” When a white man asks “whose Indian” he is, a “copperfaced genius” replied “I am God Almighty’s Indian; whose Indian are you?” (MFC, p. 26).

The most nearly negative images we have of Indians occur in stories concerning the effect of drink. The jest books fostered the stereotype of the drunken Indian, but their emphasis was very different from the later nineteenth-century stories collected by Dawson showing Indians’ pride and honor evaporating before their addiction to fire-water. In a characteristic nineteenth-century story, Indian John managed to get liquor from Squire Hills under the pretense that he needed it for the funeral ceremony of his friend Sam. When the Squire came upon Sam in a drunken stupor, he confronted John with his lie. “Me not lie,” insisted John, “me think him dead; he say so himself.”14 In contrast, the eighteenth-century jest books did not present comic drunken Indian pratfalls, but instead conveyed the way drink corrupts nobility. “‘It seems to me,’ says the copper-coloured warrior, ‘to be a juice extracted from the tongues of women and the hearts of lions; for, after drinking freely of it, I was as loquacious as a woman, and felt as bold as a lion’” (AJB, p. 18). Rather than demean the Indian by presenting his talk in pidgin English, a common practice of the later nineteenth and twentieth centuries, eighteenth-century jest books attribute to him heightened or picturesque speech, here as he describes the transforming power of drink. The jest books thus present us with important new evidence of how perceptions of native Americans at the end of the eighteenth century differed from those of a later era.

If the jest books reveal the prejudices of the early Americans by the stereotypes they present, they more often capture general images of the age. One compiler suggested this function in a rare moral tag

14 Dawson (p. 115) sees this as a version of a soldier story circulating in the nineteenth century (and told by Riley as “The Old Soldier’s Story”). See Dawson (pp. 115-117) for summaries of a number of nineteenth-century stories about Indians and alcohol.
to an anecdote in *The Philadelphia Jest Book* (pp. 55-56) concerning Sir Walter Raleigh, whom he identified as "one of the first scholars, soldiers, navigators and statesmen, who adorned the reign of Queen Elizabeth of England." The story tells of Raleigh’s having visited the country house of a nobleman, where he overheard his host’s wife ask in early morning if the pigs had breakfasted. Raleigh teased her by repeating the question, to which she replied: “all except you.” The compiler adds a coda: “This anecdote is related for the sole purpose of exhibiting the economy and industry which prevailed in those days, even amongst people of the first fortune. It may be doubted, whether some women in these states, so far from being anxious about their pigs, concern themselves even about their children.” Another entry similarly questioned contemporary values by lamenting the fact that Milton never received more than ten pounds for *Paradise Lost*, yet Mr. Hoyle receives over two hundred guineas for his treatise on the game of whist (*AJB*, p. 51). The deterioration of the religious sentiment is implied by another jest (which also appeared in *Joe Miller’s Jest Book*), in which two gentlemen argued about whether the other can say the Lord’s Prayer. When one took up the bet, he recited the Apostle’s Creed instead, only to be told by his companion that it was well done: “I own that I have lost: I did not think he could have done it” (*MFC*, p. 29). These jests about the potential loss of industriousness, morality, and religion represent a jeremiad for the colonial era passed away and a lament for the era of luxury and corruption that has ensued. They exemplify Keith Thomas’s assertion that jokes point to “areas of structural ambiguity in society itself” and capture the tensions and anxieties of the times in which they are told.

Some of these jests are so much of their time that we have difficulty responding to them, but they nonetheless reveal aspects of contemporary life or language and expose certain crudities which differ from our own. For example, we need to know that sand was often used to dry wet ink, much like blotting paper, and that the “stones” which often gave people trouble in their urinary tract were called “gravel” in order to comprehend this jest: Swift, mistaken for an innkeeper,

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was asked by a traveller if he has any sand for his letter. "No friend," said Swift, "but I have got some gravel, and if you will give me your letter, I will piss on it directly" (*MFC*, p. 51). The assumptions behind some of these jests should now make us decidedly uncomfortable. Crude jokes have always been told at the expense of women, but the attitude towards rape in *The Philadelphia Jest Book* seems particularly revealing. In one jest, a judge asked a woman if she had resisted her attacker, to which she replied that she had indeed cried out. "Yes," added a witness, "but that was nine months later" (*PJB*, p. 84). In another rape case before the court, the defendant claimed that he had caught the victim stealing faggots, warning her that if she did it again he would have his way with her. The defendant argued that she nonetheless continued to steal his faggots and so he jocularly demanded personal restitution, at which point she unhesitatingly submitted. The judge dismissed the case, although he advised the man not to threaten the ladies in such a way again, unless he wanted to be left without "a stick in your hedge" (*PJB*, pp. 80-81). It is hard today to laugh at jokes which foster the belief that the rape victim only gets what she has been seeking.

The modern reader laughs at his own truly tasteless jokes, but eighteenth-century taste apparently found physical deformity funnier than we do. We are more likely to be made uneasy than to be amused by the "man of humour" who told a "crooked gentlewoman" she was in violation of public law: "you are built but two stories high, and your balcony hangs over your house of office" (*MFC*, p. 76). Another deformed citizen, a gentleman with no nose, was similarly accosted by a beggarwoman, who said, "God preserve your eye-sight, Sir!" "Why so, good woman?" said he. "Because, sir," said she, "if you should grow dim-sighted, your honour would have no place to hang your spectacles on" (*AJB*, p. 33). Pope's deformity is a recurring subject for humor, with the poet depicted as enjoying such wit as much as those who make fun of him. In one anecdote, a link boy overheard Pope muttering, as he sometimes did when vexed, "God mend me!" "Five hundred such as I might be made, before one such crooked son of a bitch as you could be mended!" the link boy cried after him. Pope, pleased by the retort, gave him half a crown as a reward for his wit (*MFC*, pp. 33-34). The victim appreciated the witticism, for eighteenth-century taste could value the clever "bon
mot" even when it supported the violation of women or only mocked
the deformed.

Some jests are dated because they make use of obsolete slang, but
in so doing they preserve the slang for us. One anecdote, set in
London, is about the then-current slang. A judge has been told by
a "St. Giles bird" that

"as I was coming by the corner of the street I *stagged* a man." "Pray,"
said lord Mansfield, "What is *stagging* the man?" "*Stagging,* my lord;
why you see, I was down upon him." "Well, but I don't understand
down upon him any more than *stagging*—do speak to be understood."
"Why, an't please your lordship, I speak as well as I can—I was up,
you see, to *all he knew.*" "To all he knew!—I am as much in the dark
as ever." "Well then, my lord, I'll tell you how it was." "Do so."
"Why, my lord, seeing as how he was a *rum kid,* I was *one upon his
tibby.*" The fellow was at length sent out of court, and was heard in
the hall to say to one of his companions, that he had gloriously "*queered*
old Full Bottom" (*MFC*, p. 28).

We will be as "queered" as Lord Mansfield if we do not know that
to "stag" is eighteenth-century slang meaning to turn upon a con-
federate (from the practice of deer "who are said to turn their horns
against any of their number who is hunted"); that to be "down on"
and to be "up to all he knew" both mean to be aware of; that a
"kid" was a little, dapper fellow, while "rum" in this context implied
that he was an odd one—so that the St. Giles "bird" (young man,
pejoratively, as "chicken") is "one up on" the rum kid's "tibby,"
obsolete slang for a woman of low reputation. No wonder the fellow
leaves the court room believing he has "queered old Full Bottom,"
confounded the judge. We will not easily find such slang preserved
for us in the more formal writing of the century, so jest books at
times serve as linguistic treasuries where current slang and obsolete
terms and expressions are used in contexts that give them meaning.

16 *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue: A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and
Pickpocket Eloquence* (1811; rpt. London, 1984). The dictionary, "by a member of the whip
cub," was originally compiled by Captain Francis Grose in 1785; the 1811 edition draws
largely from it and is thus a useful source for deciphering the slang of the late eighteenth-
century jest books. Definitions are drawn either from this source or the *Oxford English
Dictionary*.
As one historian of sub-culture slang has commented, "Slang is a tricky piece of pun acrobatics." The pun is one of the recurring forms of humor in these jest books, for the age which gave us Mrs. Malaprop paid close attention to the comic possibilities inherent in the use and misuse of language. In fact, the humor of these jest books depended more than anything else on various degrees of attention and inattention to language. Countering the view of the pun as low wit, Walter Redfern in his recent study of the form argues from the premise that "puns illuminate the nature of language in general." The pun is a kind of eighteenth-century wit that depends on attention to the nuances of language, and the punster is always aware of tricks he is playing with it. For instance, in one jest a man dying of consumption was told by a friend that he seemed to be walking very slowly: "Yes (replied the sick man) but I am going very fast" (AJB, p. 85). The punster here was fully aware of his paradoxical play on words.

Related to the pun is an opposite kind of humor, whereby the teller is wholly unaware of the paradoxical humor of his remark because he is inattentive to the most literal meaning of his words. In one anecdote, a verger was instructed to keep the chapel empty until the great persons arrived and were seated. When he forgot his charge, he was reprimanded with, "I am afraid you'll be turned out of your place, for you have filled the chapel full of people before any body comes in" (MFC, p. 59). This jest has its own logic, of course, as long as we understand how it has distorted the literal meaning of "any body," but the point of the jest is that the speaker was not aware of the distortion. The jest books are filled with such usages: a man was pleased with his new house because "the morning sun lies all day upon it" (MFC, p. 60); a maid kicked a dog, grumbling that "it is so lazy it would not move if you killed it" (MFC, p. 61); Paddy consoled himself when his father died, saying "it does not signify grieving, for it's what we must all come to, if we live long enough" (Feast, p. 15).

The common term for this type of humor in the eighteenth and

17 B. Rodgers, The Queens' Vernacular (San Francisco, 1972), Introduction.
nineteenth centuries was “bull,” as it is used in the following jest from the *Companion*:

Three citizens walking in the fields, one said, we should have a great year of black berries; for, said he, the last week I plucked a handful of the fairest red black berries that ever I saw. A second person laugh’d at him, saying, red black berries is a bull. But the third person, with much gravity, justify’d what the former had said, and very sagely asked, are not black-berries always red when they are green? (*MFC*, p. 60)

The term also appears in a jest concerning a servant who saw a man astride a cow and exclaimed at the oddity of a man “riding on horseback on a cow.” “That’s a bull,” said his master. “Nay, Sir,” replied the servant. “It is not a bull, I know it is a cow by its teats” (*PJB*, pp. 53-54). The 1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* defined a “bull” simply as “a blunder,” claiming that it derived from Obadiah Bull, “a blundering lawyer of London, who lived in the reign of Henry VII.” The term, the dictionary asserted, now always refers to “a blunder made by an Irishman,” and the identification of the bull with the Irish simpleton was clearly meant to confirm the ethnic stereotype. In *Bulls and Blunders* (1894), Marshall Brown gave a more precise definition of the bull by distinguishing it from the simple blunder:

Blundering arises from stupidity, and the stupid are found the world over; but the bull, a peculiarity that belongs most exclusively to Ireland, is always connected with thought, and originates in the imaginative power of its people. It is not at all a dull absurdity which no one can comprehend; it is always comprehensible, even when it is most confused. It proceeds, not from the want, but from the superabundance of ideas, which crowd one another so fast in an Irishman’s brain that they get jammed together, so to speak, in the door-way of his speech, and can only tumble out in their ordinary disorder. For example, in the opinion of an Irish philosopher, “The only way to prevent what is past is to put a stop to it before it happens.”

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19 The jest appears in *Oxford Jests*, and Wardroper traces it to French sources. He speculates that the origin of the term “bull” might be in the English version of the joke, but this is difficult to accept since the point of the joke seems to depend on an already established double meaning for the term. (*Jest Upon Jest* [London, 1970], 96-97.)

What Brown's definition of "bull" leaves out, however, is that unlike the punster the perpetrator of a bull is not trying to be clever and is unaware of his solecism. The *Oxford English Dictionary* makes this aspect of the bull clearer in calling it "a self-contradictory proposition; ... an expression containing a manifest contradiction unperceived by the speaker." The speaker who called black berries red was guilty of a bull because he was not aware of the linguistic solecism of which he was guilty, but there is logic to this bull, even though the speaker himself cannot articulate it. So the berry anecdote brings in a third speaker, an aware speaker, who wittily enlarges on the seeming contradiction, pointing out that black ones are indeed reddish when they are not yet ripe—or green.

There is no suggestion that any of the citizens discussing berries were Irishmen, and the feeling seems to be, both in Brown's collection and in the jest books, that although we associate the telling of bulls with the Irish, others are capable of telling them as well. Thus the 1833 *American Jest Book* (38) accuses even Milton of a bull when he calls Eve "the fairest of her daughters," observing that "the Irish are not the only nation that makes what are called bulls in speaking." Nevertheless, because these jokes depend on a characterization of an unaware speaker, they work best when put in the mouth of an invented character (such as the mythic Irishman) whose naïveté can be assumed.

If many of these anecdotes depend for their humor on the intentional or unintentional distortion of language, represented by the pun on the one hand and the bull on the other, many others are illustrations of the exactly appropriate word or phrase, the *bon mot*, frequently in the form of the witty rejoinder or the intentional double entendre. The *bon mot* is used to make a point in a particularly felicitous fashion, as when a Count, forced to read verses by a would-be poet, remarked, "if there had been more fire in your verses, or more of your verses in the fire, I would not suffer as I now do" (*AJB*, pp. 78-79). It can also be used as an insult: "A young fellow, not quite so wise as Solomon, eating some cheese full of mites, one night at a tavern: Now, said he, have I done as much as Sampson, for I have slain my thousands and my ten thousands. Yes, answered one of the company, and with the same weapon too, the jawbone of an ass" (*MFC*, p. 61). Or it can be used in defense of insult: when a small man was told by a taller that he was so short he would have to stand on his toes
in order to touch his, the taller man’s, head, the small man agreed, but added, “and you can’t kiss my a-se without stooping” (Feast, p. 41). A young woman had a similar thought when a blade complained that her nose was too long and would get in his way if he tried to kiss her; she suggested that he kiss her “where there is no nose to give you offense” (MFC, pp. 68-69). These examples show the *bon mot* as a low wit response to insult, but it was frequently used as the singularly appropriate rejoinder on higher levels as well. For example, at the start of the Revolutionary War the English ambassador berated the French ambassador for assisting the colonies by saying, “You have been guilty of a dishonorable act . . . that is unpardonable—no less than that of debauching our daughter.” The Frenchman accepted the metaphor and coolly replied: “I am sorry. . . . She made the first advances, and absolutely threw herself into our arms; but, rather than forfeit your friendship, if matrimony will make any atonement, we are ready to act honorably and marry her” (MFC, p. 7).

The *bon mot* or witty rejoinder can also be put into service by rogues and hypocrites, like the clergyman who was told that by his own lustful behavior he was in no position to lead his flock. The parson directed his accuser’s attention to a sign indicating the way to the next town: “It never goes to the place it points to; but it is effectual in directing others” (PJB, p. 15). Besides, the parson pointed out, if he were not to stay behind, who would look after the stragglers? Other *bon mots* puncture the pretensions of such clergymen, however, such as the self-important minister who announced that he had entered the ministry because the Lord had need of him. A gentleman present replied, “That may be, . . . for I have read often that the Lord once had need of an ASS” (AJB, p. 40).

Lawyers and doctors were also frequent targets of these jest books. The attitude towards lawyers throughout the century is reflected by a recurring jest in which a lawyer is presented with a bill from a cabman—or a tailor, or a barber—and makes him swear that the amount is a reasonable one, after which swearing he charges a similar lawyer’s fee for administering the oath. A *bon mot*, which also recurs with variations in these jest books, puts both lawyers and doctors in their places. In this jest, a wag who notices that a lawyer and a doctor are both about to go through a doorway tells the lawyer to go first, since the thief usually precedes the executioner. That doctors were also a
frequent target of the _bon mot_ is not surprising, for eighteenth-century medicine was an odd mixture of medical science, empirical folk remedies, and simple hokum. Perhaps the story which best conveys the state of the art tells how a Bucks county farmer put on his son’s jacket by mistake. Finding it much too small, he assumed that he had been bitten by a rattle snake he killed in the field that day and had begun to swell. Before the mistake was discovered, one physician “poured down his throat a pint of melted lard—another gave him a dose of wild plantain—and the third made him drink hoarshound tea, made very strong” (PJB, pp. 39-40). Beau Nash conveyed the distrust of the age towards doctors in a _bon mot_ when he was asked by his physician if he had followed his prescription. Nash answered that he certainly had not, for if he did he would be in even worse shape, having tossed it out the window (Feast, p. 135).

Clergymen, lawyers, and doctors had been traditional targets of humor before the eighteenth century, but the nature and frequency of their appearance in these jest books tell us something about the relation of the populace to these professions in eighteenth-century America. The number of jests which expose the hypocrisy and pretension of the clergy show that the common man was not as reverent towards them as the formal literature of the period suggests, while at the same time the dependence of these jests on biblical allusions and turns of phrases indicate how intimate eighteenth-century Americans were with their Bible. The fact that so many of these jokes are set in the courtroom or involve judges and lawyers supplies further evidence for Robert Ferguson’s thesis that law was a pervasive influence in early American culture. The jokes about doctors show us that medicine had a strong influence on early American letters as well, evidenced elsewhere by the frequent appearances of doctors, hospitals, and drugs as primary subjects in the fiction of both Charles Brockden Brown and H. Henry Brackenridge. Jests reflect changing

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21 In finding the original of this story in the _Worcester Magazine_ for December 1786 (p. 464), with the farmer named, Zall cites the jest book’s replacement of the specific name with “a Bucks County farmer” as an example of preference for the general over the specific, but it is hard to see what purpose would be served by the jest book naming an obscure farmer, whose name might mean something to the readers of the _Worcester Magazine_ (“American Jest Books,” 7).

public attitudes toward these professions. For example, while jokes are still told today about doctors, they most likely revolve around the way they protect their money and their time, not about the primitive state of their art, as in these eighteenth-century jest books.

Another kind of bon mot is that which depends on double entendre, frequently at the expense of women. One such jest tells how the Duke of Ormond defended the women of his country against the charge that they had fat legs by declaring, “we can lay their legs aside and search for other beauties” (Feast, p. 24). In another, a woman rejected the compliment that her legs are so handsomely alike that they must be twins, saying that that cannot be, “for I have had more than two or three between them” (Feast, pp. 26-27). Sometimes of course the double entendre is unintentional and the bon mot accidental. Such was the case when a member of the Massachusetts legislature fell asleep while waiting to vote on a lumber act, and awoke after a bill to prevent fornication had been discussed instead. Getting the floor, he intoned that he wanted to say a few words on the bill, since “above half our town get their living by it” (MFC, p. 7). In the longest jest of Feast of Merriment (pp. 44-48), a clergyman asked his maid to cook two fowls for dinner, but her lover ate them both in his absence. When the clergyman returned with a guest and went to the kitchen to sharpen his carving knife, the resourceful maid frightened the visitor away by saying her master had a habit of luring guests to the house in order to geld them. When the clergyman emerged from the kitchen, the maid gasped that their guest scooped both fowls off the table and into his breeches and ran off. The clergyman ran after, flashing his knife and yelling, “give me you brazen rogue, what you have run away with in your breeches.” The fellow cried as he ran, “Efaith, doctor, not I. I would rather see you hang first.” “Prithee, friend, don’t run away with them both,” pleaded the preacher, “but be so kind as to let me have one of them.” The tale is repeated in the most Chaucerian jest book published in the states during the century, Salem’s Laugh and Be Fat (1799), consisting of thirteen mostly bawdy tales filled with phallic puns.

If the double entendre, whether intentional or not, is a version of the bon mot, it is also a kind of pun, relying on the various meanings of words and their ambiguities. When it is unintentional, it shares qualities with the bull, since it presumes an unaware speaker, but insofar as it plays with the possibilities of language it differs from the
bull, which is characterized by inattention to all meanings of words, including the most literal. Another kind of jest which finds humor in man’s relation to his language posits a speaker—usually a simpleton or rube (who is often a country bumpkin)—unable to go beyond the most literal meaning of words. Perhaps the best illustration of this kind of misunderstanding is in the story of the fellow at the top of a steep hill who, fearing that the bottom may be boggish, called to a countryman below to ask if the ground was hard down there. The countryman assured him that it was, but when the horseman descended, he started to sink to his saddle skirts. “Why you whore son rascal, said he to the ditcher, did you not tell me it was hard at the bottom? Ay, replied the other, but you are not half way to the bottom yet” (MFC, p. 21). The rube is not always the butt in these jests, however; in fact, frequently he gets the better of those who assume their superiority over him. In one such jest, a “smart fellow” insolently called to a countryman sowing his ground, “It is your business to sow, but we reap the fruits of your labour.” The countryman had a bon mot ready: “’Tis very likely you may, for I am sowing hemp.”

In fact, the honest countryman had a place in the popular American mind which in some ways was superior to his opposite, the arrogant scholar, who was usually bested by the common sense of the ordinary citizen. Sometimes the scholar is shown a fool by his pretension to knowledge. In one jest, a scholar told some museum guests that the rusty sword on exhibit is the one which Balaam was going to use to kill his ass. “Upon which one of the company replied, that he thought Balaam had no sword, but only wished for one. ‘You are right,’ says the student, ‘and this is the very sword he wished for’ ” (MFC, p. 364). In another, a pretentious scholar cried out when he sighted a group of rabbits on a rabbit hunt, “ecce cuniculi multi!” The rabbits scattered and his companions berated him for scaring them away. The scholar replied in defense, “Who the devil would have thought that rabbits understood Latin” (MFC, p. 166).

When the scholar replaces the rube as the simpleton who has lost touch with common sense and reality, the eighteenth-century jest

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23 The jest can be found in Bacon’s Spurious Apothegms. The Works of Francis Bacon, eds. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath (London, 1861), vii, 186.
books mirrored America's popular almanacs of the day, which offered common sense morality and reversed the pose of the almanac-makers of the previous century, those learned "Harvardines" who mocked the superstitions of the country bumpkin. In the seventeenth century, from 1646 onwards, yearly almanacs were produced in Cambridge by Harvard students calling themselves "philomaths," who showed off their academic prowess by drawing on classical and scientific learning while making "rusticks" and "plough-men" objects of satire. By the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, Daniel Leeds was calling himself a "Student of Agriculture" on the title page of his almanacs, and not long after Franklin was dispensing common sense wisdom as Poor Richard Saunders, writing at the behest of his wife Bridget. American intellectuals learned to appeal to the common sense of their audience. As Jefferson wrote, "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The farmer will decide it as well, and often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules." By the beginning of the nineteenth century the American public would no longer be patronized by the educated elite, and so the ludicrous schoolmaster Ichabod Crane is the object of derision while the hearty, broad-shouldered countryman, Brom Bones, becomes the folk hero through whom country bumpkins get to puncture the schoolmaster's pretensions. Perhaps we can see the seeds of this comic tale in the anecdotes concerning the countrymen and the scholars of the eighteenth-century jest books. Certainly these jests convey the same anti-intellectualism that Richard Hofstadter identified as a major strain in American life.

The third reason for renewed interest in these jest books is that they reveal eighteenth-century attitudes and language and prefigure

24 Perhaps the best example of the way the early philomaths mocked the rustic is "The Country-Man's Apocrypha," a poem included by John Richardson in his Cambridge almanac for 1670. One ploughman who took offence responded in a verse sent to the town clerk of Providence, in which he asked, "Most learned academicks, have your gownes / and college taught you to abuse the clownes / In empty rimes truss'd to an Almanack"? See New England Historical and Genealogical Register (October 1855): 356.


the direction of later American culture. They also provide evidence of the development of American humor, presenting sources for humor which later became naturalized as part of the American comic mythology. Curiously, although the figure of the American as “Brother Jonathan” was well established by the end of the Revolution, the rube does not appear in that guise in the Pennsylvania jest books. Nevertheless, country rubes were not far from the American Jonathan. In depicting the Americanization of humor, Walter Blair has shown how a joke from the 1796 *American Jest Book* about a countryman named “Hodge” was naturalized by turning the countryman into the Yankee Jonathan when the anecdote resurfaced in an 1801 Wilmington almanac. Surely many other jests told in these books throughout the eighteenth century can be found transformed into more native humor in nineteenth-century almanacs, newspapers, and by our literary comedians. Perhaps the most striking example is the following jest from *Feast of Merriment*:

Two sailors, one Irish the other English, agreed reciprocally to take care of each other, in case of either being wounded in an action then about to commence. It was not long before the Englishman’s leg was shot off by a cannon-ball; and on his calling Paddy to carry him to the doctor, according to their agreement, the other very readily complied; but he had scarcely got his wounded companion on his back, when a second ball struck off the poor fellow’s head. Paddy, who, through the noise and disturbance, had not perceived his friend’s last misfortune, continued to make the best of his way to the surgeon, an officer observing him with a headless trunk upon his shoulders, asked him where he was going? “To the doctor,” says Paddy. “The doctor!” says the officer, “why you blockhead the man has lost his head.” On hearing this he flung the body from his shoulders, and looking at it very attentively, “by my soul,” says he, “he told me it was his leg” (p. 73).

A version of this tale survived well into the next century, where John Whitcomb Riley heard it in his boyhood from a circus clown,

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27 He does make an eighteenth-century appearance in Boston’s *Merry Fellow’s Companion*, however, in a jest about a rube who turns the tables on six blades who have sport with him in a game of “follow the leader.” Jonathan calls the local doctor to remove all his teeth, having only two in his mouth, and tells his tormenters that they must follow.

and then frequently retold it (first testing it with a Louisville audience in 1888) to great success. Perhaps his most appreciative audience was Mark Twain, who says the story "is about the funniest thing I ever listened to," at least as Riley told it, "in the character of a dull-witted old farmer who has just heard it for the first time, who is innocent and happy and pleased with himself." Compare the first paragraph of Riley's version of "The Old Soldier's Story" with the jest book version quoted above:

I heerd an awful funny thing the other day—ha! ha! I don't know whether I kin git it off er not, but, anyhow, I'll tell it to you. Well!—le's see now how that fool-thing goes. Oh, yes! W'y there was a feller one time—it was durin' the army, and this feller that I started in to tell you about was in the war, and—ha! ha!—there was a big battle and bullets a-flyin' ever' which way, and bombshells a-bu'stin', and cannon-balls a flyin' round promiskus; and this feller right in the midst of it, you know, and all excited and het up, and chargin' away; and the fust thing you know along came a cannon-ball and shot his head off—ha! ha! ha! Hold on here a minute!—no, sir; I'm a-gettin' ahead of my story; no, no; it didn't shoot his head off—I'm gittin' the cart before the horse there—shot his leg off; and down the poor feller drapped, and of course, in that condition ef somepin' wasn't done fer him he was perfectly he'pless, you know, but yit with presence o'mind enough to know that he was in a dangerous condition ef somepin' wasn't done for him right away. So he seen a comrade a-chargin' by that he knowed, and he hollowers to him and called him by name—I disre-member now what the feller's name was.

The story of the English and Irish sailors has now become fully naturalized, replaced by American soldiers who probably fought in the American Civil War; and their story is presented in the idiomatic voice of a befuddled American farmer. The jest as it appears in Feast of Merriment can be traced to English jest books, to Wits Museum (1780) and Tegg's Prime Jest Book (1811). It also appeared in a much shortened form in the 1765 Complete Jester:

30 The Best of James Whitcomb Riley, ed. Ronald C. Manlove (Bloomington, 1982), 187-188.
In the heat of an engagement a sailor took his wounded comrade on his shoulders—and carrying him down to the surgeon, the fellow in his way lost his head. "Why," says the surgeon, "do you bring me a man without a head?" "Odso!" says the sailor, "he told me he had only lost his leg, but he was always a lying dog."  

By its inclusion of the much more discursively told tale instead of the concise anecdote, the Feast of Merriment supports Zall's thesis that, given the choice, American jest books preferred the medieval story-telling method over the dramatic mode advocated by Quintilian. To Americanize the jest in the later nineteenth century, Riley took the narrative method further, turning attention from the story itself to the story-teller.

Actually, the distinction Zall makes between English and American jest books is exactly the one that Twain made between English and American humor in "How to Tell a Story: The Humorous Story an American Development—Its Difference from Comic and Witty Stories," first published in Youth's Companion (October 3, 1895). According to Twain, "The humorous story is American, the comic story is English, the witty story is French. The humorous story depends for its effect upon the manner of the telling; the comic story and the witty story upon matter."  

Perhaps the best example of Twain himself turning an old jest into his version of American humor can be found in "An Encounter with an Interview." The jest which Twain reworked has been found among the Greeks and Arabs, but it also appeared in English jest books from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. It tells of a man who heard that one of a pair of twins had died. Meeting the surviving brother, the man offered his condolences—and asked which of the two had died. Twain does turn upon turn on the situation in his mock interview, telling the reporter that he is one of a pair of twins who died, but his family could never tell which of the two brothers was the deceased. In the final twist, Twain lets the interviewer in on a secret never before revealed: "One of us had a peculiar mark—, a large mole on the back of his left hand,—that was me. That child was the one that was drowned!"  

31 Reprinted by Wardroper, 113.
32 "How to Tell a Story," 39.
old jest thus becomes the germ for Twain’s extended humor, which depends not so much on the matter as on the manner of the telling.\textsuperscript{33}

It is easy to overstate the case. Surely, many of the entries in these American jest books, particularly those which quickly sketched a dramatic situation in order to supply the context for a telling \textit{bon mot}, appeared in exactly the same form in earlier English sources. Nonetheless, insofar as jests in the American books tend to be more discursive than those contemporary with them in England, perhaps they locate the crossroads at which certain assumptions about humor in England and America took different directions. American humor developed around the crackerbarrels of country stores and on the stagecoaches and river boats of a moving frontier, where strangers met and passed the time by swapping stories rather than telling pointed jokes with comic nubs. For Twain, “the humorous story is strictly a work of art—high and delicate art—and only an artist can tell it; but no art is necessary in telling the comic and the witty story; anybody can do it.”\textsuperscript{34} What Twain particularly admired in the performances of such stage comedians as Riley and Artemus Ward is their method of creating a speaker (like the bull-teller) who does not even dimly suspect that there is something funny about his narrative. This device becomes crucial for Twain’s own best work, including \textit{Huckleberry Finn}.

In a less direct way, perhaps we can see the seeds of the American tall tale concerning such mythicized strong men as Mike Fink and Davy Crockett in the jest about the local strongman, a farmer “who had a very great name in the country for his dexterity in many exercises, such as wrestling and throwing the bar, and the like.” One day, a stranger who heard about his reputation dismounted from his horse and challenged him to a “turn.” “The champion without more words, came up to him, and closing with him, took him on such an advantageous lock, that he pitched him clear over the pails; and with a great deal of unconcern, took up his spade and fell to work again: the fellow getting upon his legs again, as nimble as he could, called

\textsuperscript{33} “An Encounter with an Interviewer” first appeared in \textit{Lotus Leaves}, ed. W. F. Gill (Chicago, 1875). For earlier appearances of the jest upon which this part of the interview was based, see also Wardroper (p. 17) and Blair and Hill (pp. 305-306).

\textsuperscript{34} “How to Tell a Story,” 39.
to speak to him. 'Well,' says the champion, have you any more to say to me?' 'No, no,' replied the fellow, 'only to desire you would be so kind as to throw my horse after me.'” (MFC, pp. 74-75). Similarly, we can see something of the later epic boasts of the comic frontier hero in the tale of the “braggadocio” who “swore that he met with two great enemies at one time, and he tost one so high in the air, that if he had a baker’s basket full of bread, he would have starved in the fall; and the other he struck so deep into the earth, that he left nothing to be seen but his hand and one arm, to pull his hat off to thank him” (MFC, p. 89). Perhaps the best early example of competing hyperbolic boasts published in America is in The Feast of Merriment (p. 104), where two tars stop at an inn on the road to Philadelphia. The innkeeper tells them that it is too bad that they had not arrived sooner, for they then would have seen a real wonder.

“I was blessed this year,” said he, “with such a miraculous and luxuriant crop of Indian corn, that in ploughing it I was obliged to have a candle carried before me at noon day, in order to light me along the furrows, for such was the darkness occasioned by the monstrous leaves of corn. When husking time came on, the corn had grown to such an amazing height, that I was under the necessity of having ladders erected against the stalks before I could have it gathered.”

The tars, not to be outdone, talk of the wonders they have seen at sea, of a storm with winds so great “it took ten men to hold one man’s hair upon his head.” Such competing boasts became a staple of frontier humor.

By the time of its last edition, The American Jest Book (Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, 1833) had been out of print for two decades. Resurrecting it at the gates of the Victorian era, the compiler judged the eighteenth-century character of the work no longer acceptable. Its title page promises “A Chaste Collection,” and the Preface shares with the reader the compiler’s discovery of why previous editions have lapsed from popularity:

The point of a large majority of the anecdotes and bon mots, hitherto offered to the public, in each compilation, rests merely upon oaths,

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35 A version of the jest can be found in Mirth, where a North Country gentleman similarly puts in his place a man who believed himself to be “the glory of the West of England.”
upon indelicate and indecent allusions; upon a man being at one time transformed into the hackneyed character of a goose, or an ass: the domestic and professional relations of life, also, have been, for centuries, a standing jest; the husband is generally embellished with a pair of horns, the wife arrayed with a pair of breeches; the doctor is in league with the undertaker, the attorney with the devil; the clergyman is looking after his tythe-pig, and the taylor after his cabbage. Indeed, not a single volume, in the form of a Jest Book, has ever yet been published, that was fit to be read by any female without a blush, nor by young persons of either sex, without some injury to their morals.

The tameness promised is delivered, and whatever spontaneity the earlier jest books captured is gone. The climate in which the jokes are told is not much different from that in which William Dean Howells, in the later half of the nineteenth century, said he would not write anything unfit for the eyes of a young girl who read the magazines in which his fiction was serialized. But this is not a climate in which humor can long survive. And so the last American Jest Book, born a half-century earlier, announces in 1833 its own demise. Happily, another kind of humor, a native humor based wholly on the American experience and character, was beginning to make itself heard on the American frontier.

*The Pennsylvania State University*  
**ROBERT SECOR**