Michael Warner has recently discussed the possible connection between the inscription “VIR” (the Latin word for “man”) on the frame of Joseph-Siffred Duplessis’s 1778 portrait of Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Wedderburn’s vituperative attack on Franklin in London’s Cockpit in 1774. Using the language of classical allusion, Wedderburn charged that Franklin, in order to attain disloyal political ends, resorted not simply to duplicitous manipulation but to so low a tactic as theft. The charge was particularly painful because it officially validated the kinds of attacks that had been uttered against Franklin by his pseudo-aristocratic enemies in Pennsylvania politics since at least 1764. And it did this at the very center of the British Empire,
at a time when relations between Great Britain and her mainland North American colonies south of Canada were strained to the breaking point.

The attack was so severe that, on the one hand, Franklin could hardly afford to dignify Wedderburn’s words with a response. Yet, on the other, neither could he let the charges go unanswered. Whatever he had done, he felt he had undertaken to achieve a vital good: to counteract the stupidity of authorities whose actions were, Franklin thought, destroying the British empire, that noble China vase of which he had always been a proud admirer and within which he had always conceived of himself as implementing the program that he considered the public embodiment of his core values. Therefore Franklin did respond, with silence while he stood before Wedderburn in the Cockpit, and with print and paint over the next four years. His carefully calculated responses are a fine example of the extraordinary skill with which he could mobilize silence, print, and even the visual arts, to achieve his intentions—in this particular case to defend himself against a charge that cut him to the core—and to record his ingenioussly subtle work for posterity.

In the most cleverly scurrilous passage of his attack, Wedderburn had called Franklin “homo trium literarum” (a man of three letters), an allusion to fur, the Latin word for thief. According to Warner:

> It might seem that only a poor pun unites the three-letter man of Duplessis’ portrait to the man of three letters named by Wedderburn, but the logic that would justify such a pun has been provided by Franklin himself. In Franklin’s career the virtuous citizen of the republic (vir) attests to his virtue by constituting himself in the generality of letters; if the designation of manipulator (fur) is made appropriate, so is the exemplary and general status that makes possible the designation of “VIR” rather than “Franklin.”

There may be more to this pun than has caught Warner’s sharp eye. At the very least it may be significant that Duplessis painted Franklin wearing a fur collar. The purpose of this essay is to lay the pun squarely at Franklin’s door, to explicate its complexity, and to suggest, first, that the joke highlights important elements of Franklin’s thought on literate and pictorial communication with his contemporaries and posterity, second, that Franklin worked with Duplessis to insure that the portrait

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would convey the final word in the Franklin-Wedderburn exchange, and, third, that emphatic word *vir* has proved to be the most durable one of the controversy.

It may be well to begin with a review of the Cockpit incident itself. In reviewing the incident, it is important to remember Franklin’s reluctance to speak in public, his preference for using print to create his public self. Given the overwhelming bulk of Franklin’s writings that have come down to us and his ubiquity on two continents in the eighteenth-century worlds of science, technology, politics, and literature, it is surprising that Franklin’s contemporaries often remarked on his *silence*. John Adams, for instance, noted his “rigorous taciturnity,” adding, “He conversed only with individuals, and freely only with confidential friends. In company he was totally silent.” Jefferson remarked on the same habit, recording that at political meetings Franklin spoke rarely, limiting himself to no more than “ten minutes at a time,” during which he never wandered from “the main point.”

Franklin designed his silence first to form, then to safeguard, his carefully crafted reputation. As Michael Warner has noted, “The print ideology of the public sphere [of which Franklin himself was almost the ideal reification] valorized the general above the personal and construed the opposition between the two in the republican terms of virtue and interest.” Thus, Franklin’s virtue was “predicated on his absorption into generality.” In Larzer Ziff’s terms, “To publish is to make public in a multitude of identical copies that have the effect of depersonalizing discourse and transferring authority from the speaker to the spoken. To replicate in print is to translate self into the general.” To speak out loud, on the other hand, can be to reveal the personal, thus risking devaluation of oneself as a representative man and of one’s writings accordingly. And

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to speak extemporaneously is to risk the false step, which Franklin, so often the representative of either legislative bodies or the people themselves, was too responsible to contemplate doing. Moreover, to remain silent in the face of invective was wise, as Franklin likely had read early in life (and learned somewhat later) in Cotton Mather’s *Silentarius*:

> My Friend, Set a watch before thy Mouth, Keep the door of thy Lips. Be advised of this; To suffer many sad Things from such as have been insufferably Abusive to us, but be after all able to say, Thro’ the help of a dear SAVIOUR, there has not been all this while so much as One Impatient Word Extorted from me! Verily, This were a Greater Favour of GOD, than there would have been in it, if the sad Things had never been met withal.7

As agent to Parliament for the lower house of the Massachusetts legislature, Franklin had good reason to remain silent when, on January 29, 1774, at a meeting of the Privy Council in London, he was verbally attacked by Wedderburn, the ministry’s henchman.8 The scene of the attack, Whitehall’s Cockpit, was packed for the occasion with political and social luminaries. Wedderburn’s attack lasted for over an hour and included the accusation that Franklin had stolen some private letters relating to colonial affairs and shamelessly published them.

I hope, my lords [said Wedderburn], you will mark and brand the man, for the honour of this country, of Europe, and of mankind. Private correspondence has hitherto been held sacred, in times of the greatest party rage, not only in politics but religion. He has forfeited all the respect of societies and of men. Into what companies will he hereafter go with an unembarrassed face, or the honest intrepidity of virtue? Men will watch him with a jealous eye; they will hide their papers from him, and lock up their escrutoires. He will henceforth esteem it a libel to be called a man of letters; homo trium literarum?9

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7 Cotton Mather, *Silentarius* (Boston, 1721), 13.
9 Papers, 21:48-49, 49n. Francis S. Philbrick has noted that William Duane, editor of the 1834 Philadelphia edition of *The Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (2 vols.), glossed homo trium literarum by quoting “Pliny’s Latinized account of the Athenian custom of branding thieves on the hand—‘inscripti trium literarum’”—and then interpret[ing] the reference: ‘the man of three letters, referring to the three initial letters, I.T.L., impressed on the culprit’—and a Greek culprit, too!” Philbrick, “Notes on Early Editions and Editors of Franklin,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 97 (1953), 525-64 (quotation 554). Duane’s gloss is hardly responsi-
The triple Latin pun on Franklin's supposed crime (theft), on its specific character (the theft of letters), and on his prized and dear-bought European reputation as a man of letters is an allusion to the Aulularia of Plautus, in which occurs the following line:

\[ Tun, trium litterarum homo me vituperas? fur. \]
Do you find fault with me? You, a man of three letters—thief.\(^{10}\)

Through the entire attack, during which Privy Councilors and their friends occasionally laughed aloud,\(^{11}\) Franklin stood silent and motionless, facing Wedderburn. Edward Bancroft, an eyewitness, later wrote:

The muscles of his face had been previously composed, so as to afford a placid tranquil expression of countenance, and he did not suffer the slightest alteration of it to appear during the continuance of the speech in which he was so harshly and improperly treated. In short, to quote the words which he employed concerning himself on another occasion, he kept his "countenance as immovable as if his features had been made of wood."\(^{12}\)

The laughter of the Privy Councilors was sufficient indication that it would have been futile to attempt to respond in that place at that time. And so Franklin remained silent during one of the most humiliating incidents of his political career.

Verner Crane and recent editors of Franklin's papers have tentatively attributed to him a response to Wedderburn that appeared in London's Public Advertiser on February 16, 1774, over the bold signature "HOMO TRIUM LITERARUM."\(^{11}\) It is worth quoting in full:

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\(^{10}\) Papers, 2: 49n

\(^{11}\) Thomas Gage to Thomas Hutchinson, Feb 2, 1774, in Thomas Hutchinson, The Diary and Letters, ed Peter Orlando Hutchinson (2 vols, Boston, 1884, repr, New York, 1973), 1: 99

\(^{12}\) Papers, 2: 41

\(^{13}\) Verner W Crane, ed, Benjamin Franklin's Letters to the Press, 1758-1775 (Chapel Hill, 1950), xxvii-xxx, 293-94, Papers, 2: 99-100 Crane and the editors of the Papers agree that Franklin also defended himself anonymously against Wedderburn in the colonial press in letters that appeared in the Pennsylvania Gazette of April 20, 1774, and the Boston Gazette of April 25, 1774 (Letters to the Press, 240-46, Papers, 2: 78-83, 112-15) Neither of these two letters mentions Wedderburn's quotation from Plautus Franklin wrote his Tract Relative to the Affair of Hutchinson's Letters soon after Wedderburn's attack, but withheld it from the press during his lifetime Papers, 2: 414-35
To the Printer of the Public Advertiser.

Sir,

The Admirers of Dr. Franklin in England are much shocked at Mr. Wedderburn’s calling him a Thief; but perhaps they will be less surprised at this Circumstance when they are informed, that his greatest Admirers on the Continent agree in entertaining the same Idea of him. As an Evidence of this, I send you a Copy of a poetical Stanza, which is engraved under his Portrait prefixed to the late French translation of his Work, in two Volumes, Quarto.

I shall also send you an Attempt of a Translation of them, that the English Reader may be able to judge of the Similarity between the Idea of Mr. Wedderburn and that of the French Philosopher, with whom all the Philosophers in Europe intirely concur. It will even be seen that Foreigners represent him as much more impudent and audacious in his Thefts than the English Orator (though he was under no Restraint from a Regard to Truth) has ventured to insinuate. I am, Sir, Your humble Servant,

HOMO TRIUM LITERARUM.

Il a ravi le feu des cieux,
Il fait fleurir les arts en des climats sauvages.
L'Amerique le place a la tete des sages,
La Grece l'auroit mis au nombre de ses Dieux.

To steal from Heaven its sacred Fire he taught,
The Arts to thrive in savage Climes he brought:
In the New World the first of Men esteem'd;
Among the Greeks a God he had been deem'd.  

For some, this response might have been sufficient. But Franklin well knew that newspapers are ephemeral rags, so he bided his time until he could settle on a more dependable medium through which he might best turn Wedderburn’s insult to his permanent advantage.

In 1778, four years after the Cockpit incident and at the height of his fame in France, Franklin sat for his portrait to Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, painter to the French king. If Charles Coleman Sellers is correct, Duplessis made the pastel study of Franklin that is now in the New York

\[ 14 \text{ Papers, 21:100-101.} \]
Public Library before painting him in oils. The pastel depicts Franklin in a gray coat with a simple gray cloth collar. The finished oil portrait, in its original frame, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Fig. 1). The pose of the latter is essentially that of the study, but one conspicuous detail has been altered: Franklin is portrayed wearing a red coat trimmed with an ample fur collar. The frame, heavily carved with emblems representative of Franklin’s role in the American Revolution, bears at the bottom of its gilded face a verbal description of Franklin compressed into three letters signifying a true man possessing all the virtues valued from ancient times to the present: V I R.

Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours saw the Duplessis oil of Franklin in Paris at the Salon of 1779, where it hung next to portraits of the royal family. Of the inscription he wrote, “On a mis au bas de son portrait cette laconique inscription, Vir. Il n’y a pas un trait de sa figure ni de sa vie qui la démente.” In 1959 the editors of The Papers of Benjamin Franklin reproduced the Duplessis portrait as the frontispiece to their first volume, with a caption that mentions the “laconic characterization.” In 1962 Charles Coleman Sellers noted, “In that day [during the eighteenth century] a few lines of verse were added beneath a portrait again and again, so that the sister arts of poetry and painting might in unison proclaim the theme. ‘Vir’ outshone them all, echoing Franklin’s own terse directness, what the Duc de Croy called ‘son laconisme sublime.’”

The possibility that “Vir” may not merely echo Franklin’s “laconisme sublime,” but rather be an example of it does not appear to have been suggested until now. This suggestion, of course, supposes that it was Franklin himself who requested Duplessis to change the cloth-collared coat of the pastel study to the fur-collared, pun-bearing coat of the final portrait. It could be argued that by 1778 Wedderburn’s charge was

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17 Quoted by Sellers, BF Portraiture, 127.

18 Papers, 1 frontispiece, xix.

19 Sellers, BF Portraiture, 127.

20 Sellers, BF Portraiture, 2. Richard Brilliant, Portraiture (Cambridge, Mass., 1991) discusses sitters’ complicity—often less explicit than I am suggesting Franklin’s was in the present in-
too old for response, but the incident was simply too painful for Franklin to have dismissed it. In fact, one year after the Cockpit incident, when Lord Chatham called on him at his London residence, Franklin noted: "Such a Visit from so great a Man, on so important a Business, flattered not a little my Vanity; and the Honour of it gave me the more Pleasure, as it happen'd on the very Day 12 month, that the Ministry had taken so much pains to disgrace me before the Privy Council." Legend has it that three years later, on the day he and the king of France signed their countries' treaties of recognition and alliance (February 6, 1778), Franklin was asked why he was wearing an old coat to such an important ceremony. He responded, "To give it a little revenge. I wore this coat on the day Wedderburn abused me at Whitehall." Whether or not Franklin spoke these particular words, he knew that for the rest of his life he was destined to hear and see himself referred to as a man of letters. Therefore, he might sensibly have tried to re-infuse the phrase with exclusively positive connotations, such as it had carried before it had been poisoned by Wedderburn. Such substitution could be pleasing to the victim. And if the editors of Franklin's papers are correct in attributing to Franklin the February 16, 1774, letter to the Public Advertiser, this was exactly the strategy that Franklin employed when he pseudonymously broke the public silence he had imposed on himself in the Cockpit.

A more serious objection is that no one but Michael Warner appears to have apprehended a connection between Wedderburn's words and either of the two corresponding elements of the Duplessis portrait—the fur collar and three-letter inscription. Not even one of Franklin's highly literate contemporaries appears to have left behind a comment appreciative

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21 Papers, 21 579

22 Van Doren, Benjamin Franklin, 594, Aldridge, Benjamin Franklin, 280 For a discussion of errors in the transmission of the original story, see Richard Meade Bache's "Franklin's Ceremonial Coat," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography (hereafter, PMHB) 23 (1899), 444-52 When Carl Becker sketched Franklin's life for DAB he considered the coat story to be a myth but later reversed himself and concurred with Van Doren Becker, Benjamin Franklin A Biographical Sketch (Ithaca, 1946), 29n

23 The phrase "man of letters," meaning a scholar (in a good sense) had been in circulation in English since the middle of the seventeenth century Oxford English Dictionary, 2d ed., s v "letter" sb 1, 6b
Figure 1. Duplessis, "VIR," signed and dated 1778. Oil on canvas, 28.5 x 23 inches. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Michael Friedsam, 1931.
of the portrait as response. Could it be that Franklin wanted it this way—that he planned it this way—and that his plan worked? The answer lies in Franklin’s philosophy of literate communication, for important elements of Franklin’s strategies are embodied in the visual-literate punning response to Wedderburn preserved in the Duplessis portrait and its frame.

Franklin’s earliest efforts at writing had involved the formation of an elegantly simple, widely accessible style. His use of models drawn from the works of Addison and others, described in the *Autobiography*, are too well-known to require quotation here.24 So successful was he that it has been said that “he virtually established an American style and an American literature.”25 The style Franklin cultivated not only enabled him to reach “general readers” but helped to create a body of such readers. According to Larzer Ziff, by shaping his writings “for an assumed audience of intelligent, busy people who had the ability to understand even technical subjects if they were presented in a clear and simple . . . style,” Franklin “called forth the audience that from his day to this exists substantially yet elusively under the title of common reader.”26

Franklin was able to render written language accessible to common readers from his age to our own in part because he attempted to limit the ambiguities with which evolution endowed writing across place and time. Regarding spelling, for instance, Carl Van Doren estimated that Franklin “knew enough about etymology and the history of language . . . to understand that speech had moved faster than writing, and that . . . writing had become a drag on language, stiffening it to the printed usage of dictionaries.”27 The resulting quixotic spelling schemes of modern languages thus struck Franklin as an impediment to fluent comprehension. (His discussion of the various European orthographical schemes for American Indian languages provides the extreme example.28) Partly for this reason he proposed the reformation of modern orthography based on a phonetic alphabet of his own design.29

25 Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin*, 415
26 Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation*, 92-93
27 Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 427
28 *Writings*, 1,033
29 *Writings*, 626-32 Christopher Looby’s “Phonetics and Politics: Franklin’s Alphabet as a Political Design,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 18 (1984), 1-34, suggests that Franklin’s alphabet
The reduction of spelling to rationality, however, would not alone tame written language to the needs of enlightened common readers across the far-flung, ever-expanding English-speaking world. Words in constant use change their values across time and place, as Franklin was aware. Writing on September 28, 1768, to Polly Stevenson, who had objected that his reformed alphabet would conceal “all our etymologies, consequently we could not ascertain the meaning of many words,” Franklin reasoned:

Words in the course of time, change their meanings, as well as their spelling and pronunciation; and we do not look to etymology for their present meanings. If I should call a man a Knave and a Villain, he would hardly be satisfied with my telling him, that one of the words originally signified only a lad or servant; and the other, an under ploughman, or the inhabitant of a village. It is from present usage only, that the meaning of words is to be determined.30

For Franklin, assistance in determining the meaning of words was to be given and taken through the use of illustrations. In 1749 he gave pride of place to penmanship and drawing in his Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pensilvania. Of the latter he wrote: “Drawing is a kind of Universal Language, understood by all Nations. A Man may often express his Ideas, even to his own Countrymen, more clearly with a Lead Pencil, or Bit of Chalk, than with his Tongue. And many can understand a Figure, that do not comprehend a Description in Words, tho’ ever so properly chosen.”31 Franklin helpfully dotted his own writings with diagrams and illustrations of his own devising. And some of his most poignant written communications, the political cartoons “Join, or Die,” of 1754, and “Magna Britannia her Colonies Reduc’d,” ca. 1766, are pictures with legends rather than illustrated prose.32
From the use of illustrations to the employment of emblems is in one sense less than half a step, but in another sense it is a long jump, because today most eighteenth-century emblems seem completely foreign unless familiarity has rendered us oblivious to their significance (like those on the one dollar bill). Franklin was more than an amateur emblematologist. As one of the young nation’s preeminent freemasons, communication through emblems was for him a subject for serious study. He owned a set of a four-volume emblem book, the *Symbolorum ac Emblematum Ethico-Politicorum centuriae quatuor* of Joachim Camerarius (Mainz, 1702), which he used when he sat on the United States committee responsible for the design of the first confederal issue of paper money. Franklin delighted in adapting, designing afresh, and decoding emblems for the esoteric challenge they provided. For the sake of this intellectual recreation Franklin was willing to sacrifice his wonted investment in the common reader. The challenging emblem was on occasion a necessary element in Franklin’s literate embodiments of himself, analogous to the obscurer layers of meaning that he arranged beneath the accessible surfaces of all his literary productions.

For the prolific Franklin, to think was to write. Sometimes, however, he admitted to feelings that he could not express in written words, occasions when the sight of an interlocutor’s or author’s face was vital to the comprehension of true meaning. In 1758, for instance, he was obliged as the agent of the Pennsylvania Assembly to negotiate with the colony’s proprietor, Thomas Penn, son of the founder. During their negotiations Penn intimated that if his father had granted his first colonists certain legal privileges, he must have done so fraudulently. Franklin’s reaction was heated: “I was astonished to see him thus meanly give up...

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35 As J.A. Leo Lemay has noted, “Emblem book authors commonly said that proper devices should not be accessible to or understandable by the ignorant herd. Devices should be the delight of learned scholars.” Lemay, “The American Aesthetic of Franklin’s Visual Creations,” *PMHB* 111 (1987), 465-99; quotation, 493.
his Father's Character and conceived that Moment a more cordial and thorough Contempt for him than I ever before felt for any Man living—A Contempt that I cannot express in Words, but I believe my Countenance expressed it strongly." In France, Franklin recognized that the ability to see clearly the face of one’s conversation partner could be an aid in the comprehension of language itself. “I find [wearing bifocals],” he wrote in 1785,

more particularly convenient since my being in France, the Glasses that serve me best at Table to see what I eat, not being the best to see the Faces of those on the other Side of the Table who speak to me; and when one’s Ears are not well accustomed to the Sounds of a Language, a Sight of the Movements in the Features of him that speaks helps to explain; so that I understand French better by the help of my Spectacles.

Just as the ability to read the face of a speaker could clarify spoken language, so the opportunity to read the person of the author of a published work could in some cases illuminate his or her text. Thus Franklin, who had seen more of Provost William Smith than he cared to, inscribed the following verses between the covers of his copy of Smith’s *Discourses on Several Public Occasions during the War in America* (London, 1759):

Full many a peevish, envious, slanderous elf
Is, in his works, Benevolence itself.
For all mankind, unknown, his bosom heaves,
He only injures those with whom he lives.
Read then the Man; does truth his actions guide,
Exempt from petulance, exempt from pride?
To social duties does his Heart attend,
As son, as father, husband, brother, friend?
Do those who know him love him? if they do,
You’ve my permission, you may love him too.

Because Franklin copied out these thoughts but concealed their written form within the covers of one small book shelved in his large library,

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36 Papers, 7 362
37 Franklin is speaking of reading all the features, not just lip-reading Writings, 1,110
38 Ron Scollon, “Cultural Aspects in Constructing the Author,” in Deborah Keller-Cohen, ed., *Literacy: Interdisciplinary Conversations* (Cresskill, N J , 1994), comments acutely on the place of “face” in literacy
39 Green, *Poor Richard’s Books*, 16
they are reminiscent of his never-sent letter of April 3, 1778, to Arthur Lee, which he preserved in his extensive personal archive. This letter embodies an angry outburst that Franklin probably never intended to send. But for Franklin to think this response was to write it out, at once reducing tension and preserving his thoughts for posterity by salting away their written form.

In its intensity this letter is typical of Franklin's expression of some of his most serious thoughts: his impatience, even disgust, at the behavior of bad men. Alas! the real reformation of Arthur Lee was hopeless. When Franklin needed to diffuse similar tensions or when he could hope that publication of similar thoughts might have a corrective effect on the men whose actions he pilloried, he frequently published them anonymously in humorous essays. These exercises range from the mild "Parable Against Persecution" to the gruesome "Sale of the Hessians." The anonymous outlet was for Franklin a valuable one. His frequent use of it highlights Michael Warner's assertion that "thought is unimaginable for Franklin without exchange or objects, that the personal is insufficient context for thinking."

The distinction between private emotions and speech (or unsent letters and hidden pillories) on the one hand, and the public nature of all sent or published writings on the other, highlights the fact that Franklin was deadly serious when in a letter to the printer of the London Chronicle, December 25, 1773, that precipitated Wedderburn's attack, he disclosed his complicity in the transfer of the trouble-causing Hutchinson letters to the colonists who published them. Franklin explained his actions by noting that the letters in question "were not of the nature of 'private correspondence between friends': They were written by public officers to persons in public station, on public affairs, and intended to procure public measures; they were therefore handed to other public persons who might be influenced by them to produce those measures." According to Franklin, the contents of these letters could have been considered truly private only if they had never been written down; that the authors neither knew nor followed his rules for private discourse should have been their problem, not Franklin's.

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40 Writings, 904, 999-1,000
41 Writings, 420-21, 917-19
42 Warner, Letters of the Republic, 81-82
43 Writings, 703-4
In Franklin’s scheme, then, only ideas that he reserved exclusively for unrecorded speech were absolutely private. As Larzer Ziff has noted, for Franklin the notion “that speech was fittest for private moments and print for public” was “a conviction so deeply held that it was an essential trait of character rather than an idea.” Handwritten communication occupied an intermediate position on the private speech/public print spectrum, but tended to shift only towards the public print end. Franklin knew that the paper and ink with which he wrote out his thoughts was capable of lasting centuries, even if not multiplied and circulated by printing. And as Albert H. Smyth observed, “Franklin preserved all his papers.” For Franklin, then, to write was knowingly to make public, though not necessarily immediately. He understood all communication that he committed to letters to transcend the bounds of time and place. This concept was crucial to Franklin because he exploited the alphabet’s several media in order to participate in both the improvement of the present (or immediate future) and the projection of the present into distant futurity. To project the present into futurity was to be able to offer counsel to posterity—on posterity’s behalf and, of course, on his own.

Given Franklin’s public and well-published persona, it might seem paradoxical that one of the major themes in Franklin’s *Autobiography* is—in Ziff’s words—“the way in which secrecy . . . formed an essential part of his world and played an important role at crucial stages of his career.” Franklin repeatedly points to various themes throughout his *Autobiography* by summarizing them in maxims, but he does not highlight the effectiveness of secrecy in this way. The theme is there, but it is a sort of demi-secret, written out but piecemeal and arranged so as to require for its discovery a degree of effort that Franklin neither demanded nor expected of all his readers. The question is, given the wisdom of secrecy-silence and the close identity in Franklin’s mind of thought-writing-publication, how would he, with his (bifocal) eyes clearly set on the present and posterity, preserve a complete secret so as to pass it on to posterity intact? As Poor Richard said, “Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead.” But if the private secret is reserved only for

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45 Albert H Smyth, ed., *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin* (10 vols., New York, 1905-07), I I
46 Ziff, *Writing in the New Nation*, 86
47 Francis M Barbour, *A Concordance to the Sayings in Franklin’s Poor Richard* (Detroit, 1974), 189
speech, then the secret ceases to be kept when the third person dies. All evidence of the secret then dies too, and thus the secret not only ceases to exist, but for posterity never existed at all. Yet the explicitly narrated secret loses its secret nature through narration. Could Franklin use writing to recreate a secret? The Wedderburn episode confronted Franklin, and all his literate strategies, with exactly this problem.

Judging from the extant records, one of the best kept secrets of the Wedderburn episode was the exact wording of Wedderburn’s most vicious insult. From the response of “Homo Trium Literarum” printed in the Public Advertiser soon after the incident, the general reader—ignorant of the complete line from Plautus—would have learned simply that Wedderburn had called Franklin a thief. Israel Mauduit subsequently printed most of Wedderburn’s speech in The Letters of Governor Hutchinson, and Lieut. Governor Oliver . . . with . . . the Proceedings of the Lords Committee of Council. Together with the Substance of Mr. Wedderburn’s Speech Relating to Those Letters (London, 1774). But Mauduit did not print the homo trium literarum passage, which seems to have been considered too rude, even by Franklin’s enemies. Of those who witnessed Wedderburn’s speech in the Cockpit, many wrote accounts of it, but none appears to have committed to writing the passage that Mauduit declined to print.

In fact, almost six years passed before the full text of the insult entered the printed public record. The vehicle for publication was none other than an edition of Franklin’s own writings. Edited by his friend Benjamin Vaughan, the Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces, although finally published in London on December 7, 1779, had been in production since the end of 1776. Vaughan justified his decision to print the homo trium literarum passage by noting that “Mr. Mauduit has prudently omitted part[s] of [Wedderburn’s remarks] in his account of the proceedings before the privy council. They are given here altogether however (as well as they could be collected) to mark the politics of the times.
and the nature of the censures passed in England upon Dr. Franklin's character." Wisely understated (Great Britain and the United States were of course then at war, and Franklin was a traitor), this was nonetheless pointed criticism of the British establishment.

Vaughan did not say from whom he received the text of the insult. According to Franklin's most recent editors, "BF may well have supplied them." Evidence is lacking, but we have this much to go on. By the time it was published, Franklin and Vaughan had corresponded about the proposed edition for three years, beginning in December 1776. Franklin provided copy for it, and he sent Vaughan corrections of the printed text after the bulk of the book had been printed but before it was published. Before publication, he had read all of it. It therefore seems likely that it was Franklin who saw to it that the book—which was at the printers during the months when Franklin was sitting for Duplessis—included the only non-ephemeral text of Wedderburn's insult.

All of this suggests that Franklin himself recreated for posterity the sly secrecy inherent in the wittiest of silent responses to Wedderburn. Were it not for "Homo Trium Literarum's" letter to the Public Advertiser and the text of Wedderburn's remarks as recorded in Franklin's own Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces, the literal- emblematic joke in the Duplessis portrait would exist without referents. That is, the joke would not now be a joke, but rather a kept secret that died with Franklin. By planting the referents in printed sources that would survive into futurity rather than vanish with Wedderburn's breaths, Franklin made indelibly public the language upon which he built the cleverest retort.

How did Franklin's philosophy of literate communication inform the response to Wedderburn that he built on this foundation? By his own choice he was constrained to build on Wedderburn's splendid triple pun.

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51 Vaughan, editorial notes in Franklin, Political, Miscellaneous, and Philosophical Pieces, 338n, 340-41n
52 Papers, 21 40n5
53 Papers, 27 201-3, 202n7, Smyth, Writings, 7 410-11
54 The final version of that portion of the printed text of Pieces to which the homo trium literarum note is appended (i.e., pp 340-41) appears to have been ready by the end of April, 1779 (Wolf, "Benjamin Franklin's Pieces, 1779," 53). The Duplessis portrait was first publicly displayed during the months immediately preceding the tardy publication of Pieces. Had the difficult war-time course of editorial work on Pieces run smoother, the Wedderburn insult might well have appeared in print in London in time for the opening of the 1779 Paris salon on August 25
If he were to triumph in this trial of wit, he ought to return the petard to Wedderburn and thereby give himself a chance to smile at the result. This he did, changing only the letters $F \ U \ R$ for $V \ I \ R$. By responding in Latin Franklin was not, however, only playing a literate game by his challenger's rules. Given his own thoughts on language, he may also have thought of his decision as forestalling the ambiguities inherent in the use of a modern language that would continue to evolve across place and time. Moreover, the accolade of a Latin tag was something that the learned world had for some time been telling Franklin he was worthy of. "Vir Praeclarissime," Beccaria of Turin had addressed him in a Latin letter of 1757; "Vir Ornatissimus," ran the diploma citation that recorded Oxford's bestowal of a doctorate in 1762. And in 1778 Turgot gave final form to the epigram that had been evolving in several languages for many years: *Eripuit coelo fulmen sceptrumque tyrannis* (He stole thunder from the heavens and the scepter from tyrants).\(^5\)

Nothing would have been more ludicrous than the tag "Vir" beneath the well-painted portrait of what Richard Savage called "the tenth transmitter of a foolish face," or beneath the ill-painted portrait of a truly noble one. The Duplessis portrait of Franklin was neither. It is now hard to recreate the enthusiastic reception that Franklin's face won, especially among the French. Even Abigail Adams was favorably impressed when she first saw him in October 1775: "I thought I could read in his countenance the Virtues of his Heart, among which patriotism shined in its full Lustre—and with that is blended every virtue of a christian.\(^6\) Franklin thought of his face—and, as we have seen, his control of it—as one of his important public assets. In 1771 he allowed a comment on his visage to slip out in a letter of advice to Mary Hewson, mother of his first godson:

> Pray let him [the baby] have every thing he likes; I think it of great Consequence while the Features of the Countenance are forming. It gives them a pleasant Air, and that being once become natural, and fix'd by Habit, the Face is ever after the handsomer for it, and on that much of a Person's good Fortune and Success in Life may depend. Had I been cross'd as much in my Infant Likings and Inclinations as you know I have

\(^{5}\) Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*, 271, 300, 606. Cf. note 63, below.

been of late Years, I should have been, I was going to say not near so handsome, but as the Vanity of that Expression would offend other Folks Vanity, I change it out of Regard for them, and say, a great deal more homely.\textsuperscript{57}

In Joseph-Siffred Duplessis, Franklin encountered the man whose talents enabled him to communicate to posterity this not-so-homely asset. The portrait would serve Franklin’s purposes as an exquisite example of both the illustrative powers of drawing and the communicative powers of face as an aid to the comprehension of meaning in language. And it depicted the very face Wedderburn had confronted in the Cockpit: a face-as-emblem, a face of three letters—but not the face of a thief. In fact, it depicted a face very much like one that Franklin had imagined fifty years earlier when describing “Cato” in his third “Busy-Body” paper: “I believe long Habits of Virtue have a sensible Effect on the Countenance: there was something in the Air of his Face that manifested the true Greatness of his Mind.”\textsuperscript{58}

Franklin was not content to respond to Wedderburn without superadding a further element of emblematic wit. Apropos of the possibility of Franklin’s agency in Duplessis’s depiction of his sitter in a fur-collared coat, Charles Coleman Sellers noted: “Richard S. Greenough told Edward Everett Hale that Franklin’s ‘fondness for fur in his pictures, was due to his supposing that fur was used as a professional badge by the early printers.’” Sellers, however, “found no evidence that Franklin thought so or that he expressed any preference for the fur.”\textsuperscript{59} Yet the anecdote that Greenough reported to Hale is indeed supported by iconographic evidence. In 1986 the Library Company of Philadelphia acquired Franklin’s own copy of Joseph Moxon’s \textit{Mechanick Exercises}, volume 2: \textit{The Doctrine of Handy-Works, Applied to the Art of Printing} (London, 1683).\textsuperscript{60}

There are two frontispiece portraits in this volume of the \textit{Mechanick Exercises} (Figs. 2, 3). One depicts Laurens Koster (ca. 1370-1440), who may have been one of the inventors of Western printing, wearing a coat

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Papers}, 18 253  Franklin’s second godson, Benjamin West (second son of the painter of the same name), was born in August 1772 Robert C Alberts, \textit{Benjamin West, A Biography} (Boston, 1978), 112

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Papers}, 1 119

\textsuperscript{59} Sellers, \textit{BF Portraiture}, 133

\textsuperscript{60} Green, \textit{Poor Richard’s Books}, 23
with fur collar and cuffs; the other shows Johannes Gutenberg wearing a cap edged with fur and a cloak similarly trimmed at the collar and sleeves. It is not yet known when Franklin purchased his copy of Moxon. It is likely, however, that Greenough's anecdote was originally founded on the boundlessly curious Franklin's awareness of this iconographical connection between fur and printers.

Better known in the eighteenth century was the iconographical connection between fur and theft. J.G. Hertel's 1758-60 edition of Cesare Ripa's popular *Iconologia*, for instance, depicts the thief (Fig. 4) cloaked in the fur of a wolf who was known for stealing the food of others. (Franklin's collar in the Duplessis portrait appears not to be the fur of the evil wolf, but is perhaps that of the clever fox.) It is likely that Franklin made use of all this knowledge to connect his portrait with depictions of earlier master printers, to pun on his renowned theft of thunder from the gods, and to belittle Wedderburn's puny insult. Franklin thus created a triple pun of his own that completely sank Wedderburn's insult. Over the wake he floated the most positive, concise, unambiguous, and durable of literate captions: "VIR."

Wedderburn's attack was, as has been noted, extraordinarily ungentlemanly. Franklin was characteristically content to bide his time before he executed a well-tempered retort. In the Cockpit Franklin had remained silent, as was his habit when faced with malevolent bickering, which he generally hoped would pass into "oblivion," rather than on to posterity.

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61 Franklin's copy of Moxon survives with the frontispiece portrait of Koster but without that of Gutenberg. Both frontispieces are reproduced in Herbert Davis's and Harry Carter's edition of the *Mechanick Exercises* (London, 1958), lx, lxii.


63 While Duplessis was working on the Franklin portrait, George Richardson (1736–1817?) revived Ripa's *Iconologia* in England, see his *Iconology* (2 vols, London, 1778–79, repr 2 vols, New York, 1979), 2 89-90 and pl 85, fig 330 depicts Theft as a "young man covered with the skin of a wolf [which] indicates that a Thief feloniously procures his sustenance by means of rapine and plunder" and adds, "This subject may be represented by Mercury [who] pilfered Jupiter's sceptre, and would have taken his thunderbolts also, but they were too hot for his fingers." Cf note 55 above. In other figures, fur (particularly the lion's skin, which is one of the emblems carved in the Duplessis portrait's frame) is connected with *virtue* (pl 23, fig 86) and *decorum* (pl 26, fig 100). Alexander Wedderburn was one of the subscribers to Richardson's edition.

64 Smyth, *Writings*, 9 694.
When he finally responded through the Duplessis portrait, the response by its very silence avoided reviving Wedderburn's insulting words while quietly appropriating and transforming them to Franklin's permanent advantage.

Franklin's response to Wedderburn was just as literate as Wedderburn's attack, yet more clever, much more subtle, and unimpeachably gentlemanly. It took all his art of communication to accomplish the feat, which in the final analysis seems to be quintessentially Franklin in each of its aspects except perhaps its baroque complexity. But Franklin's use of language was always complex. While simplicity of surface was invariably one of his primary goals, he nevertheless strove to use letters and illustrations to insure that diverse layers of meaning would always be accessible to a wide range of readers with varying levels of fluency. This is in itself a very complex task. In the present instance he used letters and another visual medium to twist another man's words so skillfully that he was able to dictate the only meanings that he wanted them to carry, quietly preempting in his contemporary readers' minds other meanings that they had previously borne. The rest was—indeed, had to be—silence (long, but not permanent), for key to success in this endeavor was his masterful obfuscation of his own involvement in the process. As Franklin knew, the triumphal emblems of the portrait's frame, and its three-letter accolade, had to appear to contemporaries to have been bestowed on Franklin by others in order to function properly. The true man could not be vain, but through the exercise of the manly virtues he would have his way with the world—and would make sure that some future reading-viewers would know it.

Back in 1756, the fifty-year-old Franklin noted in a letter to George Whitefield that "Life, like a dramatic Piece, should not only be conducted with Regularity, but methinks it should finish handsomely. Being now

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67 John Adams, for one, did not think that Franklin was innocent of engineering his general adulation by the French. On December 2, 1778, Adams wrote scathingly from Passy of self-promoting men: "A Man must be his own Trumpeter, he must write or dictate Paragraphs of Praise in the News Papers . . . he must ostentatiously publish to the World his own Writings with his Name, and must write even some Panegyrics upon them, he must get his Picture drawn, his Statue made. . . ." Quoted in Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin*, 354. Aldridge sensibly considers this a reference to Franklin, although Adams did not mention Franklin by name in the original letter; *Warren-Adams Letters* (2 vols., Boston, 1917-25), 2:72. If it is also a subtle reference to the Duplessis portrait, it is not an appreciative one.
in the last Act, I begin to cast about for something fit to end with. Or if mine be more properly compar’d to an Epigram, as some of its few Lines are but barely tolerable, I am very desirous of concluding with a bright Point.” The literary metaphors Franklin embedded in his writings are generally telling ones, and this is no exception. In 1728, at the age of twenty-two, Franklin had composed the humorous epitaph for himself that likened his corpse to the covers of an old book, “its Contents torn out, And stript of its Lettering and Gilding.” The epigrammatic epitaph runs to fifty-eight words, a confident young man’s sally, but a bit long. Sixty years later the single word “VIR”—a “bright point” indeed!—would prove sufficient for the mature Franklin. With the Duplessis portrait completed and framed, Franklin felt, as Charles Coleman Sellers has noted, “a comfortable sense of justification in refusing to pose again.” Instead, when asked to sit he often suggested that admirers commission copies of Duplessis’s work, which he seemed to consider definitive.

Ars longa, vita brevis. Those who heard Alexander Wedderburn’s words in the Cockpit on January 29, 1774, died generations ago. The Duplessis canvas, one of the great portraits of the age, survives. For those people who have seen it during the past two hundred years and may see it during the next two hundred, VIR, not fur, is most likely the three-letter word that their minds carry beneath Franklin’s image. How many of those who have seen the portrait have read Wedderburn’s attack? That Franklin’s response should have taken the form of a hidden joke, rather than a malevolent retort, and that the joke should be discussed afresh 200 years after Franklin’s death, are tributes to the skill with which Franklin habitually applied his constantly-calculating, self-assured genius to problems large and small. For Franklin, to think was—to an astonishing degree—to write and to illustrate; and to write was to publish, either by himself, reducing his manuscripts to type and multiplying them through presswork, or by carefully bundling them up and away for posterity, on which he always had at least one eye clearly focussed. In the present instance, Franklin combined a singular form of publication with the latter course, which he seems to have favored whenever he

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66 Papers, 6 469
67 Papers, 1 111
68 Sellers, BF Portraiture, 137
69 Sellers, BF Portraiture, 128, 248
thought it expedient to let death overtake his opponent before presenting future readers with the final word in a particular debate. In the Duplessis portrait and its frame Franklin both published and bundled away packages of meaning for his contemporaries and for posterity.

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