BOOK REVIEWS


After only two hundred years, there is available now a complete edition of Father Bombo’s Pilgrimage to Mecca, a piece of comic fiction perpetrated by Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Philip Freneau when they were undergraduates at the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, in 1770. As Michael Davitt Bell states, Bombo was a by-product of the paper war between the Cliosophic and American Whig literary societies at Princeton. Until recently, it was assumed that a fire in 1802 had destroyed all copies of Bombo except a transcript of Book III that was published earlier in this century. In 1957, however, a copy of the entire work was discovered among the papers of John Blair Smith, the first president of Union College. Now in the possession of Princeton’s library, this manuscript is the basis of the present edition of Bombo. Bell has theorized upon the authorship of each chapter, regularized the punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, and provided an introduction that treats Bombo in a context that is both literary and historical.

Father Bombo — rogue, brawler, lecher, liar, opportunist, pedant — sets out from Nassau Hall on a pilgrimage after being caught in a plagiarism of Lucian. He travels first to his home on Long Island, encountering one misadventure after another, many attributable to his “Arab” costume, which the Americans find ridiculous. He brawls as frequently as Parson Adams in Fielding’s Joseph Andrews. Like Adams he also has a pot of urine dumped on his head, is set upon by dogs, and arrives at his destination in such a tattered condition that no one recognizes him. (The resemblance is superficial, however; Bombo is not humane and altruistic like Adams.) When Bombo leaves for his ship, his father outfits him in a turban and robe that have been waterproofed with tar, and hairy boots with horns protruding from the heels. An absurd voyage ensues, during which he is imprisoned after kissing the captain’s wife and later commandeers the ship. After several sea battles, he ends up on an Irish ship. When the Irish decide that he is a wizard, they put him overboard in a hogshead and eventually he washes ashore in Ireland. The rest of his odyssey is covered in the previously-published Book III, including his final arrival at Mecca and his return home.
Bombo is full of coarseness, absurdity, and burlesque humor based mainly on physical discomfort. Everyone seems to exist merely to be satirized, even Father Bombo. Much of the humor may be personal satire. Two hundred years later, however, the narrative seems like burlesque and absurdity for their own sake.

Ultimately the value of Bombo is historical rather than literary. While Books I and II are superior to III, the narrative is virtually formless and capitalizes on few of the novelistic techniques already developed by 1770. But the narrative suggests the attraction that Fielding and other imitators of Cervantes held for two of early America's best writers. It also prefigures Modern Chivalry, America's first novel of consequence, in several ways — the satire upon the Irish, the boorishness of the working class characters, the utter absurdity of some of the burlesque, the love of irony, and the episodic picaresque structure. It is an early manifestation as well of the coarse, satirical vein that places these writers in a tradition that includes among others Twain and Faulkner.

Students of early American culture are indebted to the Princeton University Library and Michael Davitt Bell for this book. Admirers of Modern Chivalry especially will find it amusing, but all scholars of the period will be interested in seeing the first two books of Father Bombo's Pilgrimage. A two-hundred-year wait can pique one's curiosity.

Department of English
Virginia Wesleyan College
Norfolk, Virginia

Joseph H. Harkey


Few Americans have received as much scholarly attention as Benjamin Franklin. Admirers have praised him as a statesman and diplomat, as a scientist and inventor, and as a moralist and thinker. Critics have condemned him as an insensitive materialist. And several writers have maintained that he exemplified the essence of the American national character. But until now there has been no good study of Franklin's family life. The Private Franklin fills that void very effectively. It is a skillful biography of the personal dimensions of