

Interpreter

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Colonial Humor

Harold Gill and Peter Derks, professor of psychology at the College of William and Mary, collaborated in writing this article that analyzes some examples of eighteenth-century humor and generalizes from them about colonial culture and society.

"The shortest distance between two people is a laugh." Thus Victor Borge succinctly expresses an opinion held by most humorists and exploited by psychologists in the study of human nature. Our goal in this article is to examine some examples of colonial humor from the *Virginia Almanack* and the *Virginia Gazette* between 1732 and 1789 to see what they can tell us about the colonists and see if we can relate to them today.

As an aid in this examination it may be helpful to outline some general themes that theorists use to characterize humor. Most evident in the discussions of some early philosophical and psychological theorists is the aggressive quality of much humor. There is frequently a "butt" of a joke who is "laughed at" or "put down." An equally important theme to many, such as Victor Borge, is the affiliation evident in some humor. Although it is not discussed as often by philosophers and psychologists, "laughing with" plays an important role in understanding the emotional side of humor.

Interacting with the emotional themes of aggression and affiliation are intellectual, stylistic factors. Incongruity, of course, is at the heart of humor. Max Eastman describes it as a "derailment" of thought. Such sudden chaos, nonsequiturs, and slapstick can be very funny. At the other end of the intellectual dimension from chaotic, however, is the "re-railment" of thought. The clever and witty not only disrupt but create a new, previously only dimly suspected relation. The quality of this new order differentiates intellectually creative humor from the chaotic.

From our sample of colonial humor the most common themes, then as now, are the aggressive and the chaotic. The chaos comes

from mentioning the unmentionable and aggressively criticizing the sacrosanct in the public forum of the press.

Now Clients, Lawyers, haste away,
The Capitol Chimes begin to play;
But honest People I advise,
Except they are more rich than wise,
T' agree at home, and never go
To spend their Money at the Law

Virginia Almanack
1772

Some efforts show a little creativity in punning:

"A grave old Country Blade coming before a Judge, and taking his Oath on a cause, he was bid to have Care what he swore, less he went to the Devil: I fear not that, replied he, by Way of Retort, for I have given him my eldest Son, and he ought to be content with one out of a Family. How is that? says the Judge, pray explain yourself. Why, truly, I have made him a Lawyer, and you know the Devil was a Lawyer from the Beginning. A Lyar you mean, says the other. I know not, replied he, what Distinction there may be made at London; but I am sure, by sad Experience, we in the Country know no Difference between a Lawyer and a Lyar."

Virginia Almanack
1762
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The Free Women of Petersburg

by Suzanne Lebsock

A book review by Gail S. Terry

Suzanne Lebsock has written an extremely readable history of white and free black women who lived in Petersburg, Virginia, between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Using quantitative techniques and the sources and methods of social historians, local public records—wills, accounts, deeds, censuses, and court minutes—she shows how Petersburg women fit into the larger community. At the same time she draws upon private family

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Humor, *continued*

Indeed lawyers seem to bear the brunt and be the butt of an inordinate amount of not very good-natured humor. Other professionals, such as doctors and prostitutes, receive less attention, and even when the story is about someone else, a lawyer may be introduced to receive the hardest slap.

"A Bawd being carried before a Justice, and the chief Accusation against her was, she kept a Bawdy-House, which she confidently denied: Housewife, says the Justice, you keep a Bawdy-House, and I'll maintain it. I thank your Worship, says she, for your kind Promise to me, for indeed I have a very great Need for such Supporters."

Virginia Almanack
1764

Walter Blair and Hamlin Hill point out in *America's Humor* that American citizens of this period were criticized as "suspicious skeptics" and that this trait spilled over into their humor. It may well be that lawyers gave them just cause for suspicion and skepticism.

Another big topic in the colonies was, of course, sex.

"One was saying that Women would bear Malice longer than Men. Why so? said another. I had a Scuffle, says he, with a Girl once, and she remembered me for it nine Months after."

Virginia Almanack (Royle)
1762

Women, however, were not always butts in the jocular battle of the sexes.

"A gentleman riding out one morning early in a place where he happened not to be acquainted coming up by the side of a young woman who was carrying a pig in her arms, and hearing it scream violently, addressed her, thus, Why my dear, your child cries amazingly! The young woman readily turning round and looking him in the face, said, with a smile upon her countenance, I know it Sir, it always does when it sees its daddy."

Virginia Gazette, or Winchester Advertiser
April 17, 1789

Furthermore, the ladies had morality on their side to aid in the put down.

"Henry IV, of France, asking a Lady which Way to her Bedchamber, she replied briskly, 'Through the Church, Sir.'"

Virginia Almanack (Royle)
1764

Once all was proper, sexuality could be expressed in an open and good-natured way. Humor in print was frequently earthy.

"An elderly Quaker, being joined in the

Bond of Wedlock, to a brisk Widow of the same Persuasion, as he was entering the Sheets with her on the Wedding-Night, he called out for the Lord to direct him; Nay, saith Tabitha, the Lord strengthen thee, and I will direct thee."

Virginia Almanack (Royle)
1762

Along with lawyers and sex, death received some attention. On the one hand it could be presented in its ironic truth.

"Granville County, North Carolina, February 19, 1773. Departed this Life, in the fiftieth year of his Age, Thomas Low Thimble, after a long Series of Drunkenness. It may with Truth be said, that no Man ever died less regretted: The Sound of his last Trumpet gave a general Joy to all his Friends, as well as those who had the Misfortune to be of his Acquaintance. Take Heed, ye Sons of Bacchus, that when Death comes with his Summons you may not be caught napping; as, you see, was the Case with Mr. Thimble."

Virginia Gazette (Purdie and Dixon)
April 1, 1773

On the other hand it could be presented as one hoped it might be, by the best known colonial humorist of them all.

"The Body of B. Franklin Printer, (Like the Cover of an old Book Its Contents torn out And stript of its Lettering and Guilding) Lies here, Food for Worms. But the Work shall not be lost; For it will, (as he believ'd) appear once more, In a new and more elegant Edition Revised and Corrected, By the Author"

Epitaph written by Benjamin Franklin
1728

The colonists joked about the same things we do, and their styles had the same general characteristics. Mark Twain's observations about English and American humor seem relevant. "Americans are not Englishmen," he wrote, "and American Humor is not English Humor; but both the American and his humor had their origin in England, and have undergone changes brought about by changed conditions and environment." The roots of our skeptical, robust humor are in the colonies. Perhaps this realization can bring them a little closer to us.

Free Women, *continued*

papers, letters, and diaries to show how the women themselves viewed their lives.

In 1786, Josiah Flagg, a visiting Yankee, declared Petersburg "the most dirty place I

ever saw." By 1860 the muddy frontier town was Virginia's second largest city with a population of more than 18,000, one-half of whom were black (and one-third of those blacks were free). According to Lebssock, the most significant divisions among that population were class, color, and sex; and it is to the analysis of all three, but especially the last two, that she devotes her book.

Lebssock sets out to answer two questions in *The Free Women of Petersburg: Status and Culture in a Southern Town, 1784-1860*. First, what was women's status in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Petersburg and how did it change or remain constant over time? Second, did women act on the basis of a set of shared attitudes and values that differed from men's? Ultimately, she concludes (with some qualifications) that women's status improved between the two wars as they experienced increasing autonomy, at least in the sense of freedom from dependence on men. "Relatively speaking, fewer women were married, more women found work for wages, and more married women acquired separate estates, that is, property that their husbands could not touch." While the larger causes of these changes lay outside the women themselves in the changing economic or political scene, individual women sometimes had opportunities to make choices in determining their own destinies. When they made these choices, they were often based on a system of values that differed from that of men. An example may help to illustrate the point. When men disposed of their personal property by will in antebellum Petersburg, they usually divided it equally among all their children. When women made wills (and by the 1840s and 1850s nearly half of the wills in Petersburg were written by women), they did not follow the same procedure. They played favorites, often using individual need as the criterion, but sometimes making choices for which the logic totally escapes the historian. Mary Bolling, one of the wealthiest women in Petersburg, left a will with no parallel among Petersburg fathers, singling out some individual children and grandchildren for special favor and others for expressions of particular displeasure without a clue as to why. Lebssock identifies this distinct female value system as "persistent personalism." She writes, "Women, more than men, noticed and responded to the needs and merits of particular persons. This showed in their tendency to reward favorite slaves and to distribute their property

unevenly among their heirs. It also showed in their ability to make independent judgments about their own fitness to administer estates . . . they were not as ego-invested as men in the control of wealth. . . . And in their efforts to give assistance to the poor, both personalism and regard for other women surfaced again; the poor were mainly women and children, most of whom cannot have 'deserved' their poverty."

But Petersburg is not Williamsburg, and 1784 is not 1750. What can interpreters learn from reading *The Free Women of Petersburg*? They can learn a great deal of both a theoretical and a practical nature.

The nineteenth century provides the link between the eighteenth century that Colonial Williamsburg interprets and the twentieth century visitors inhabit. In order to understand how eighteenth-century and twentieth-century persons are alike and different, one must know what happened in between. Many of the aspects of women's lives addressed in Suzanne Lebssock's book are those that the Foundation is most interested in presenting to the visitor: Their family lives, their work, their legal status, and the relationships among the three. For example, in her discussion of women's work in nineteenth-century Petersburg, Lebssock provides a compendium of comparative information for the knowledgeable student of eighteenth-century women. She explains how Petersburg residents brought the farm to the city with gardens, dairies, livestock, and smokehouses. She discusses the range of women's occupations outside the home and the impact upon them of new opportunities (for men and women) created by industrialization and manufacturing. She identifies the segregated occupations of white and free black women. She addresses the question of how women who were gainfully employed outside their own households coped with both jobs and young children at the same time. Lebssock also discusses equally fully and with the same factual accuracy both the status of free black women (and its relation to laws governing free blacks in Virginia) and the property rights of married women.

The interpreter who reads *The Free Women of Petersburg*, however, will gain more than a wealth of comparative facts. Lebssock provides a painless education in the important historical theories about the status of American women and how it changed over four centuries. She examines the introduction of romantic love and the companionate marriage,
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Free Women, *continued*

the myth of the golden age, and the Civil War-as-watershed theories. In each case she carefully tests the general theories against the evidential realities that existed in Petersburg. The results are often surprising and always interesting.

The Free Women of Petersburg is an example of local history at its very best. It is factually accurate, well integrated, methodologically sound, and eminently readable (as most of the sound methodology appears in the footnotes). Lebsock provides a bird's-eye view of Petersburg's women and at the same time manages to keep the reader aware not only of the larger community in which these women lived, but also of the larger world into which Petersburg fit. While the interpreter's methods must vary, his or her goal in interpreting Williamsburg is much the same—to help the visitor understand the immediate object of his interest while at the same time moving him into the larger world of which it was a part.

The Exchange

Anne Schone and Anne Willis prepared a delicious eighteenth-century midday dinner at the Powell-Waller Kitchen in March for the faculty members who taught Core Curriculum classes this year. They were assisted in doing some of the drudgery by other members of the department of interpretative education. After dinner Rex Ellis and Dylan Pritchett led a group of unskilled musicians from the same department in polyrhythms as a background to readings by Rex and Bill Tramosch. We thought you might want to reminisce with the faculty about your courses.

Corn Curriculum

These seeds of an idea we decided to sow
In the fertile soil of the PRO:
The wisdom from all courses we'll present to
you
In a succinct, provocative—irreverent—review.
From Barbados to Plymouth, New York with
its Dutch
Jamaica, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and such
We've analyzed our maps and read up a storm
To catalog our values and label each norm.

We know more, we talk better,
Eighteenth-century speak, right down to the
letter:

Please say baroque; Queen Anne's a no-no
As for Tom Chippendale, he's really rococo.

Talk of petticoats, hoops, gowns, and stays
Never say "dress," but *undress* you may.
You may call him Richard, and you may call
him Dickie

But not Receiver General—he's only Deputy!

A smith can hammer bar iron, a cutler file his
fleams,
But they'll never hammer cast iron; it'll break,
it seems.

Be liberal with hogsheads as you fill each one
No matter how it measures, a ton is not a tun.

A word here of academic liberty
Our courses are nothing worth if the teacher
isn't free.

Colonial court cases, letterbooks—make
them demographic
You can have them either way—benign or
pornographic.

Events renowned, thoughts abound, jargon
that is hard

And don't forget the wet hike up to the Col-
lege yard.

We went to the Court House, the Capitol to
see

Forgot the Goodwin Building—*its* order,
permanence, and authority.

For all interpreters there were lessons to be
learned

They listened and they wrote; these words
could not be spurned:

"Put your desk in order, sort and clean your
closets

They could turn out to be primary deposits!"

We didn't need to fight a war and start a
brand- new nation

We were right, and they were right—just vile
communication.

What is the nature of nature? Where is reality?
Philosophers make us think, and if we think,
we be!

—Barbara Beaman

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Summary of Company of Colonial Performers Programs Summer 1984

Summer is always a busy time for programs and interpretive opportunities for our visitors and ourselves. The best way to see firsthand what is happening is by checking the "Visitor's Companion" each week. Keep up to date and help our visitors realize what a wealth of programs is available to them. Remember that your employee pass admits you to the programs as well.

- Mondays:** *Black Music Programs* behind the Brush-Everard House at 5:00 P.M.
and 5:30 P.M. beginning June 18
- Tuesdays:** *Military Review* on Market Square at 9:00 A.M. beginning June 19
Eighteenth-century Plays at the Lodge Auditorium at 8:30 P.M.
- Wednesdays:** *Fifes and Drums Parade* on Duke of Gloucester Street at NOON beginning July 11
Black Music Programs behind the Brush-Everard House at 5:00 P.M.
and 5:30 P.M. beginning June 20
The Assembly at the Capitol at 8:00 P.M., 8:20 P.M., and 8:40 P.M.
beginning June 20
- Thursdays:** *Military Review* on Market Square June 21 through June 28
Militia Muster on Market Square at 9:00 A.M. beginning July 5
Afro-American Heritage at the Lodge Auditorium at 8:00 P.M. beginning June 21
- Fridays:** *Reveille* at the Magazine at 9:00 A.M. beginning June 22
Musical Diversions at the Capitol at 8:00 P.M. beginning June 29
- Saturdays:** *Fifes and Drums Parade* on Duke of Gloucester Street at NOON
Eighteenth-century Plays at the Lodge Auditorium at 8:30 P.M.
-

Special Events

- July 4:** *Independence Day Review* at 10:00 A.M.
Tatoo by the Fifes and Drums at 8:30 P.M.
- July 8-11:** The Southern Governors' Conference
- July 25:** *Reading of the Declaration of Independence* at NOON