



Franklin at about 48 years of age by
New York artist Robert Feke (c. 1707–c.1752).

A “SILENCE DOGOOD” SAMPLER

Benjamin Franklin’s “Silence Dogood” letters antedated his more famous *Poor Richard’s Almanac*; indeed, are among his earliest known writings. As his *Autobiography* recounts, they were submitted anonymously, using the female pseudonym “Silence Dogood,” to his brother James’ Boston weekly *The New-England Courant*. In them he touches on a broad range of topics, including manners, culture, fashion, literature, history, religion, and public improvement. While many know of Franklin’s *reputation* for being witty and funny, what might come as a surprise to some was that he *actually was* and could be so -- even by much later standards. To have written the “Dogood” letters, and which were the literary ancestor of American humor writings of such as Francis Hopkinson, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Philip Freneau, Washington Irving, James Kirke Paulding and leading up to Mark Twain would be a plum and honor for any author. Yet how much even more impressed must we be when we realize he was but a 16 year-old apprentice (to his brother) at the time he wrote them! True, he drew much of his model and inspiration from Addison and Steele’s *Spectator*. But was there ever a *Spectator* article so persistently risible and laugh filled as “Dogood” letter no. VII on New World poetry? In this way, Franklin went further than his mentors; making him, as much if not more so than they, a forerunner and instructor of modern literary satire.

The proceeding is a selection from the “Dogood” letters; reproduced with unchanged spelling as they first appeared in 1722.¹

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Nº 39, From Monday April 23. to Monday April 30. 1722

*To the Author of the New-England Courant.*

Sir,

No 3

It is undoubtedly the Duty of all Persons to serve the Country they live in, according to their Abilities; yet I sincerely acknowledge, that I have hitherto been very deficient in this Particular; whether it was for want of Will or Opportunity, I will not at present stand to determine: Let it suffice, that I now take up a Resolution, to do for the future all that *lies in my Way* for the Service of my Countrymen.

I HAVE from my Youth been indefatigably studious to gain and treasure up in my Mind all useful and desirable Knowledge, especially such as tends to improve the Mind, and enlarge the Understanding: And as I have found it very beneficial to me, I am not without Hopes, that communicating my small Stock in this Manner, by Peace-meal to the Publick, may be at least in some Measure useful.

I AM very sensible that it is impossible for me, or indeed any *one* Writer to please *all* Readers at once. Various Persons have different Sentiments; and that which is pleasant and delightful to one, gives

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<sup>1</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> century “f” however we have replaced with an “s.”

another a Disgust. He that would (in this Way of Writing) please all, is under a Necessity to make his Themes almost as numerous as his Letters. He must one while be merry and diverting, then more solid and serious; one while sharp and satyrical, then (to mollify that) be sober and religious; at *one* Time let the Subject be Politicks, then let the next Theme be Love: Thus will every one, one Time or other find some thing agreeable to his own Fancy, and in his Turn be delighted.

ACCORDING to this Method I intend to proceed, bestowing now and then a few gentle Reproofs on those who deserve them, not forgetting at the same time to applaud those whose Actions merit Commendation. And here I must-not forget to invite the ingenious Part of your Readers, particularly those of my own Sex to enter into a Correspondence with me, assuring them, that their Condescension in this Particular shall be received as a Favour, and accordingly acknowledged.

I THINK I have now finish'd the Foundation, and I intend in my next to begin to raise the Building. Having nothing more to write at present, I must make the usual excuse in such Cases, of being in haste, assuring you that I speak from my Heart when I call my self, The most humble and obedient of all the Servants your Merits have acquir'd,

SILENCE DOGOOD

*Those who incline to favour Mrs. Dogood with their Correspondence, are desir'd to send their Letters (directed to her) to the Publishers of this Paper.*

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N° 45

June 4. to Monday June 11. 1722.

Quem Dies videt veniens Superbum,

*Hunc Dies vidit fugiens jacentem.*²

~ Seneca.

To the Author of the New-England Courant.

SIR,

[No VI.]

AMONG the many reigning Vices of the Town which may at any Tune come under my Consideration and Reprehension, there is none which I am more inclin'd to expose than that of *Pride*. It is acknowledg'd by all to be a Vice the most hateful to God and Man. Even those who nourish it in themselves, hate to see it in others. The proud Man aspires after Nothing less than an unlimited Superiority over his Fellow-Creatures. He has made himself a King in *Soliloquy*; fancies himself conquering the World, and the Inhabitants thereof consulting on proper Methods to acknowledge his Merit. I speak it to my Shame. I my self was a Queen from the Fourteenth to the Eighteenth Year of my Age, and govern'd the World all the Time of my being govern'd by my Master. But this speculative Pride may be the Subject of another Letter: I shall at present confine my Thoughts to what we call *Pride of Apparel*. This Sort of Pride has been growing upon us ever since we parted with our Homespun Cloaths for *Fourteen Penny Stuff*, &c. And the *Pride of Apparel* has begot and nourish'd in us a *Pride of Heart*, which portends the Ruin of Church and State. *Pride goeth before Destruction, and a haughty Spirit before a Fall*: And I remember my late Reverend Husband would often say upon this Text, That a Fall was the *natural Consequence*, as well as Punishment of Pride. Daily Experience is sufficient to evince the Truth of this Observation. Persons of small Fortune under the Dominion of this Vice, seldom consider their Inability to maintain themselves in it, but strive to imitate their Superiors in estate, or Equals in Folly, until one Misfortune comes upon the Neck of another, and every Step they take is a Step backwards. By striving to appear rich they become really poor, and deprive themselves of that Pity and Charity, which is due to the humble poor Man, who is made so more immediately by Providence. THIS *Pride of Apparel* will appear the more foolish, if we consider, that those airy Mortals, who have no other Way of making themselves considerable but by gorgeous Apparel, draw

² Who saw in vain pride the coming days
Now sees fleeing days thrown away.

after them Crowds of Imitators, who hate each other while they endeavour after a Similitude of Manners. They destroy by Example, and envy one another's Destruction.

I CANNOT dismiss this Subject without some Observations on a particular Fashion now reigning among my own Sex, the most immodest and inconvenient of any the Art of Woman has invented, namely, that of *Hoop-Petticoats*. By these they are incommoded in their General and Particular Calling; and therefore they cannot answer the ends of either necessary or ornamental Apparel.

These monstrous topsy-turvy *Mortar-Pieces*, are neither fit for the Church, the Hall, or the Kitchen; and if a Number of them were well mounted on *Noddles-Island*, they would look more like Engines of War for bombarding the Town, than Ornaments of the Fair Sex. An honest Neighbour of mine, happening to be in Town some time since on a publick Day, inform'd me, that he saw four Gentlewomen with their Hoops half mounted in a Balcony, as they withdrew to the Wall, to the great Terror of the Militia, who (he thinks) might attribute their irregular Volleys to the formidable Appearance of the Ladies Petticoats.

I ASSURE you, Sir, I have but little Hopes of perswading my Sex, by this Letter, utterly to relinquish the extravagant Foolery, and Indication of Immodesty, in this monstrous Garb of their's; but I would at least desire them to lessen the Circumference of their Hoops, and leave it with them to consider, Whether they, who pay no Rates or Taxes, ought to take up more Room in the King's Highway, than the Men, who yearly contribute to the Support of the Government.

I am, Sir,
Your Humble Servant,
SILENCE DOGOOD.

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N° 47

June 18. to Monday June 25. 1722.

*Give me the Muse, whose generous Force,  
Impatient of the Reins,  
Pursues an unattempted Course,  
Breaks all the Criticks Iron Chains.*  
~ [Isaac] Watts.

*To the Author of the New-England Courant.*

SIR,

[No VII.]

It has been the Complaint of many Ingenious Foreigners, who have travell'd amongst us, *That good Poetry is not to be expected in New-England*. I am apt to Fancy, the Reason is, not because our Countrymen are altogether void of a Poetical Genius, nor yet because we have not those Advantages of Education which other Countries have, but purely because we do not afford that Praise and Encouragement which is merited, when any thing extraordinary of this Kind is produc'd among us: Upon which Consideration I have determin'd, when I meet with a Good Piece of *New-England* Poetry, to give it a suitable Encomium, and thereby endeavour to discover to the World some of its Beautys, in order to encourage the Author to go on, and bless the World with more, and more Excellent Productions.

THERE has lately appear'd among us a most Excellent Piece of Poetry, entitled, *An Elegy upon the much Lamented Death of Mrs. Mehitebell Kitel, Wife of Mr. John Kitel of Salem, Etc.* It may justly be said in its Praise, without Flattery to the Author, that it is the most *Extraordinary* Piece that was ever wrote in *New-England*. The Language is so soft and Easy, the Expression so moving and pathetick, but above all, the Verse and Numbers so Charming and Natural, that it is almost beyond Comparison.

*The Muse disdains  
Those Links and Chains,  
Measures and Rules of Vulgar Strains,  
And o'er the Laws of Harmony a Sovereign Queen she reigns.*

I FIND no English Author, Ancient or Modern, whose Elegies may be compar'd with this, in respect to the Elegance of Stile, or Smoothness of Rhime; and for the affecting Part, I will leave your Readers to judge, if ever they read any Lines, that would sooner make them *draw their Breath* and Sigh, if not shed Tears, than these following.

*Come let us mourn, for we have loft a  
Wife, a Daughter, and a Sister,  
Who has lately taken Flight, and  
greatly we have mist her.*

In another place,

*Some little Time before she yielded up her Breath,  
She said, I ne'er shall hear one Sermon more on Earth.  
She kist her Husband some little Time before she expir'd,  
Then lean'd her Head the Pillow on, just out of Breath and  
tir'd.*

BUT the Threefold Appellation in the first Line  
— *a Wife, a Daughter, and a Sister,*

must not pass unobserved. That Line in the celebrated Watts,

*GUNSTON the Just, the Generous, and the Young,*

is nothing Comparable to it. The latter only mentions three Qualifications of *one* Person who was deceased, which therefore could raise Grief and Compassion but for *One*. Whereas the former, (*our most excellent Poet*) gives his Reader a Sort of an Idea of the Death of *Three Persons*, viz.

— *a Wife, a Daughter, and a Sister,*

which is *Three Times* as great a Loss as the Death of *One*, and consequently must raise *Three Times* as much Grief and Compassion in the Reader.

I SHOULD be very much straitened for Room, if I should attempt to discover even half the Excellencies of this Elegy which are obvious to me. Yet I cannot omit one Observation, which is, that the Author has (to his Honour) invented a new Species of Poetry, which wants a Name, and was never before known. His muse scorns to be confin'd to the old Measures and Limits, or to observe the dull Rules of Criticks;

*Nor Rapin gives her Rules to fly, nor Purcell Notes to Sing.*  
~ Watts.

NOW 'tis Pity that such an Excellent Piece should not be dignify'd with a particular Name; and seeing it cannot justly be called, either *Epic, Sapphic, Lyric, or Pindaric*, nor any other Name yet invented, I presume it may, (in Honour and Remembrance of the Dead) be called the *KITELIC*. Thus much in the Praise of *Kitelic Poetry*.

IT is certain, that those Elegies which are of our own Growth, (and our Soil seldom produces any other sort of Poetry) are by far the greatest part, wretchedly Dull and Ridiculous. Now since it is imagin'd by many, that our Poets are honest, well-meaning Fellows, who do their best, and that if they had but some Instructions how to govern Fancy with Judgment, they would make indifferent good Elegies; I shall here subjoin a Receipt for that purpose, which was left me as a Legacy, (among other valuable Rarities) by my Reverend Husband. It is as follows,

A RECEIPT to make a New-England  
Funeral ELEGY.

For the Title of your Elegy. *Of these you may have enough ready made to your Hands; but if you should chuse to make it your self, you must be sure not to omit the words AEtatis Suae,<sup>3</sup> which will Beautify it exceedingly.*

For the Subject of your Elegy. *Take one of your Neighbours who has lately departed this Life; it is no great matter at what Age the Party dy'd, but it will be best if he went away suddenly, being Kill'd, Drown'd, or Frose to Death.*

*Having chose the Person, take all his Virtues, Excellencies, &c. and if he have not enough, you may borrow some to make up a sufficient Quantity: To these add his last Words, dying Expressions, &cs. if they are to be had; mix all these together, and be sure you strain them well. Then season all with a Handful or two of Melancholly Expressions, such as, Dreadful, Deadly, cruel cold Death, unhappy Fate, weeping Eyes, &c. Have mixed all these Ingredients well, put them into the empty Scull of some young Harvard; (but in Case you have ne'er a One at Hand, you may use your own,) there let them Ferment for the Space of a Fortnight, and by that Time they will be incorporated into a Body, which take out, and having prepared a sufficient Quantity of double Rhimes, such as Power, Flower; Quiver, Shiver; Grieve us, Leave us; tell you, excel you; Expeditions, Physicians; Fatigue him, Intrigue him; &c. you must spread all upon Paper, and if you can procure a Scrap of Latin to put at the End, it will garnish it mightily; then having affixed your Name at the Bottom, with a Moestus Composuit,<sup>4</sup> you will have an Excellent Elegy.*

N. B. *This Receipt will serve when a Female is the Subject of your Elegy, provided you borrow a greater Quantity of Virtues, Excellencies, &c.*

SIR,  
*Your Servant,*  
SILENCE DOGOOD

P. S. I shall make no other Answer to *Hypercarpus's* Criticism on my last Letter than this, *Mater me genuit, peperit max filia matrem.*<sup>5</sup>

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N° 49

The New-England Courant.

From Monday July 2. to Monday July 9. 1722.

To the Author of the New-England Courant.

SIR, [No VIII.]
I PREFER the following Abstract from the London Journal to any Thing of my own, and therefore shall present it to your Readers this week without any further Preface.

'WITHOUT Freedom of Thought, there can be no such Thing as Wisdom; and no such Thing as publick Liberty, without Freedom of Speech; which is the Right of every Man, as far as by it, he does not hurt or controul the Right of another: And this is the only Check it ought to suffer, and 'the only Bounds it ought to Know.

'This sacred Privilege is so essential to free Governments, 'that the Security of Property, and the Freedom of Speech always go together; and in those wretched Countries where a Man cannot call his Tongue his own, he can scarce call any Thing else his own. Whoever would overthrow the Liberty of a Nation, must begin by subduing the Freeness of Speech; a *Thing* terrible to Publick Traytors.

³ Man's life and estate.

⁴ Sorrow brings (us) together.

⁵ Mother begat me, the daughter flowered into a mother.

‘This Secret was so well known to the Court of *King Charles the First*, that his wicked Ministry procured a Proclamation, to forbid the People to talk of Parliaments, which those Traytors had laid aside. To assert the undoubted Right of the Subject, and defend his Majesty's legal Prerogative, was called Disaffection, and punished as Sedition. Nay, People were forbid to talk of Religion in their Families: For the Priests had combined with the Ministers to cook up Tyranny, and suppress Truth and the Law, while the late *King James*, when *Duke of York*, went avowedly to Mass, Men were fined, imprisoned and undone, for saying he was a Papist: And that *King Charles the Second* might live more securely a Papist, there was an Act of Parliament made, declaring it Treason to say that he was one.

‘That Men ought to speak well of their *Governours* is true, while *their Governours* deserve to be well spoken of; but to do publick Mischief without hearing of it, is only the Prerogative and Felicity of Tyranny: A free People will be shewing that they are *so*, by their Freedom of Speech.

‘The Administration of Government is nothing else but the Attendance of the *Trustees of the People* upon the Interest and Affairs of the People: And as it is the Part and Business of the People, for whose Sake alone all publick Matters are, or ought to be transacted, to see whether they be well or ill transacted; so it is the Interest, and ought to be the Ambition, to all honest Magistrates, to have their Deeds openly examined, and publickly scan'd: Only the *wicked Governours* of Men dread what is said of them; *Audivit Tiberius proba queis lacerabitur, atque percussus est.*⁶ The public Censure was true, else he had not felt it bitter. Freedom of Speech is ever the Symptom, as well as the Effect of a good Government. In old *Rome*, all was left to the Judgment and Pleasure of the People, who examined the publick Proceedings with such Discretion, & censured those who administred them with such Equity and Mildness, that in the space of Three Hundred Years, not five publick Ministers suffered unjustly. Indeed whenever the *Commons* proceeded to Violence, the great Ones had been the Aggressors.

‘GUILT only dreads Liberty of Speech, which drags it out of its lurking Holes, and exposes its Deformity and Horror to Day-light. *Horatius, Valerius, Cincinnatus*, and other vertuous and undesigning Magistrates of the Roman Commonwealth, had nothing to fear from Liberty of Speech. *Their virtuous Administration*, the more it was examin'd, the more it brightned and gain'd by Enquiry. When *Valerius* in particular, was accused upon some flight grounds of affecting the Diadem; he who was the first Minister of *Rome*, does not accuse the People for examining his Conduct, but approved his Innocence in a Speech to them; and gave such Satisfaction to them, and gained such Popularity to himself, that they gave him a new Name; *inde cognomen factum Publicolae est;*⁷ to denote that he was their Favourite and their Friend — *Latae deinde leges — Ante omnes de provocation ADVERSUS MAGISTRATUS AD POPULUM,*⁸ Livii, lib. 2, Cap. 8.

‘But Things afterwards took another Turn. *Rome* with the Loss of its Liberty, lost also its Freedom of Speech; then Men[']s Words began to be feared and watched; and then first began the *poysinous Race* of *Informers* banished indeed under the righteous Administration of *Titus, Narva [Nerva], Trajan, Aurelius, &c.* but encouraged and enriched under the *vile Ministry of Sejanus, Tigillinus, Pallas, and Cleander: Queri libet, quod in secreta nostra non inquirant principes, nisi quos Odimus,*⁹ says *Pliny* to *Trajan*.

‘The best Princes have ever encouraged and promoted Freedom of Speech; they know that upright Measures would defend themselves, and that all upright Men would defend them. *Tacitus*, speaking of the Reign of some of the Princes above mention'd, says with Extasy, *Rara Temporum felicitate, ubi sentire qua, velis, & qua sentias dicere licet:* A blessed Time when you might think what you would, and speak what you thought.

‘I doubt not but old *Spencer* and his *Son*, who were the *Chief Ministers* and *Betrayers* of *Edward the Second*, would have been very glad to have stopped the Mouths of all the honest Men in *England*. They dreaded to be called *Traytors*, because they were *Traytors*. And I dare say, *Queen Elizabeth's Walsingham*, who deserved no Reproaches, feared none. Misrepresentation of publick Measures is easily overthrown, by representing publick Measures truly; when they are honest, they ought to be publickly known, that they may be publickly commended; but if they are knavish or pernicious, they ought to be publickly detested.’

Yours, &c,
SILENCE DOGOOD.

⁶ So heard, Tiberius proof will rend and will overthrow.

⁷ From thence surnames are made a family name.

⁸ Carries then the laws before all opposition, the Master to the People.

⁹ It is pleasing for us to complain, because they inquire not into our secrets first, but of those we hate.

From Monday July 16. to Monday July 23. 1722

*Corruptio optimi est pessima*¹⁰

To the Author of the New-England Courant.

SIR,

[No. IX]

It has been for some Time a Question with me, Whether a Commonwealth suffers more by hypocritical Pretenders to Religion, or by the openly Profane? But some late Thoughts of this Nature, have inclined me to think, that the Hypocrite is the most dangerous Person of the Two, especially if he sustains a Post in the Government, and we consider his Conduct as it regards the Publick. The first Artifice of a *State Hypocrite* is, by a few savoury Expressions which cost him Nothing, to betray the best Men in his Country into an Opinion of his Goodness; and if the Country wherein he lives is noted for the Purity of Religion, he the more easily gains his End, and consequently may more justly be expos'd and detested. A notoriously profane Person in a private Capacity, ruins himself, and perhaps the Destruction of a few of his Equals; but a publick Hypocrite every day deceives his betters, and makes them the Ignorant Trumpeters of his supposed Godliness: They take him for a Saint, and pass him for one, without considering that they are (as it were) the Instruments of publick Mischief out of Conscience, and ruin their Country for God's sake.

THIS Political Description of a Hypocrite, may (for ought I know) be taken for a new Doctrine by some of your Readers; but let them confider, that *a little Religion, and a little Honesty, goes a great way in Courts.* 'Tis not inconsistent with Charity to distrust a Religious Man in Power, tho' he may be a good Man; he has many Temptations *"to propagate public Destruction for Personal Advantages and Security:"* And if his Natural Temper be covetous, and his Actions often contradict his pious Discourse, we may with great Reason conclude that he has some other Design in his Religion besides barely getting to Heaven. But the most dangerous Hypocrite in a Common-Wealth, is one who *leaves the Gospel for the sake of the Law:* A Man compounded of Law and Gospel, is able to cheat a whole Country with his Religion, and then destroy them under *Colour of Law:* And here the Clergy are in great Danger of being deceiv'd, and the People of being deceiv'd by the Clergy, until the Monster arrives to such power and Wealth, that he is out of the reach of both, and can oppress the People without their own blind Assistance. And it is a sad Observation, that when the People too late see their Error, yet the Clergy still persist in their Encomiums on the Hypocrite; and when he happens to die *for the Good of his Country,* without leaving behind him the Memory of *one good Action,* he shall be sure to have his Funeral Sermon stuffed with *Pious Expressions* which he dropt at such a Time, and at such a Place, and on such an Occasion; than which nothing can be more prejudicial to the Interest of Religion, nor indeed to the Memory of the Person deceas'd, The Reason of this Blindness in the Clergy is, because they are honourably supported (as they ought to be) by their People, and see nor feel nothing of the Oppression which is obvious and burdensome to every one else.

But this Subject raises in me an Indignation not to be born; and if we have had, or are like to have any Instances of this Nature in *New-England,* we cannot better manifest our Love to Religion and the Country, than by setting the Deceivers in a true Light, and undeceiving the Deceived, however such Discoveries may be represented by the ignorant or designing Enemies of our Peace and Safety.

I shall conclude with a Paragraph or two from an ingenious Political Writer in the *London Journal,* the better to convince your Readers, that Publick Destruction may be easily carry'd on by *hypocritical Pretenders to Religion.*

"A raging Passion for immoderate Gain had made Men universally and intensely hard-hearted: They were every where devouring one another. And yet the Directors and their Accomplices, who were the acting Instruments of all "this outrageous Madness and Mischief, set up for wonderful pious Persons, while they were defying Almighty God, and plundering Men; and they set apart a Fund of Subscriptions for charitable Uses; that is, they mercilessly made a whole People Beggars, and charitably supported a few *necessitous* and *worthless* FAVOURITES. I doubt not, but if the Villany had gone on with Success, they would have had their Names handed down to Posterity with Encomiums; as the Names of other *publick Robbers,* have been! We have *Historians* and ODE MAKERS now living, very proper for such a Task. It is

¹⁰ The corruption of the best is the worst.

certain, that most People did, at one Time, believe the *Directors* to be *great and worthy Persons*. And an honest Country Clergy man told me last Summer, upon the Road, that *Sir John* was an excellent publick-spirited Person, for that he had beautified his Chancel.

“Upon the whole we must not judge of one another by their best Actions; since the worst Men do some Good, and all Men make fine Professions: But we must judge of Men by the whole of their Conduct, and Effects of it. Thorough Honesty requires great and long Proof, since many a Man, long thought honest, has at length proved a Knave. And it is from judging without Proof, or false Proof, that Mankind continue Unhappy.”

I am, SIR,
your humble Servant,
SILENCE DOGOOD.

William Thomas Sherman, www.gunjones.com

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