



Benjamin Franklin's Satire of Witch Hunting

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Framing Question

How did Benjamin Franklin use satire to assert the primacy of reason?

Understanding

Many people in the eighteenth century, especially the educated elite in Europe and America, believed that truth was discovered through reason, through the application of principles discovered through science, observation, and experimentation. In "A Witch Trial in Mount Holly" Benjamin Franklin asserts the primacy of reason by satirizing efforts of those who would seek truth through superstition and irrationality.

Text

[Benjamin Franklin, "A Witch Trial at Mount Holly," 1730](#)

Background

"A Witch Trial in Mount Holly" appeared in the October 22, 1730, edition of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, one of the most popular newspapers in colonial America. The article was written by Benjamin Franklin, who was a co-owner of the paper and who often published his own writing in it. At the time Franklin was twenty-four and fully embraced Deism, a form of religious belief, popular among the educated elite, that placed faith in the power of reason and rejected the supernatural. The brief narrative describes the determined efforts of a mob in a small New Jersey town to find a man and a woman guilty of witchcraft after they had been accused of making sheep dance and hogs sing. In a normal proceeding only the accused would be tried, but in this one the accused cut a deal to put their accusers, also a man and a woman, on trial as well. The mob decides upon two tests. In the first the men and women will be weighed individually against a "huge great" Bible. If it outweighs them, they are witches; if they outweigh it, they are not. In the second test they will be cast into water. If they sink, they are innocent; if they float, they are guilty. The inclusion of the accused in the tests makes the proceedings less a trial and more an absurd experiment to see how well scales and water detect virtue and vice.

The article is a literary hoax. As far as scholars have been able to determine, Franklin was neither reporting on nor responding to an actual event, certainly not a witch trial. No one has found records of one in New Jersey or Pennsylvania in or around 1730.



Portrait of Benjamin Franklin, circa 1746.
Courtesy of Harvard Art Museums.

Contextualizing Questions

1. What kind of text are we dealing with?
2. When was it written?
3. Who wrote it?
4. For what audience was it intended?
5. For what purpose was it written?

Text Analysis

Burlington, October 12

1. Saturday last at Mount-Holly, about 8 Miles from this Place, near 300 People were gathered together to see an Experiment or two tried on some Persons accused of Witchcraft.

1. What does Franklin do to establish the “authenticity” of his hoax? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

2. What are the connotations of the word “experiment”?

3. What do experiments usually seek to do?

4. What is the effect of the narrator’s use of the word “experiment”?

2. It seems the Accused had been charged with making their Neighbours Sheep dance in an uncommon Manner, and with causing Hogs to speak, and sing Psalms, &c. to the great Terror and Amazement of the King’s good and peaceable Subjects in this Province; and the Accusers being very positive that if the Accused were weighed in Scales against a Bible, the Bible would prove too heavy for them; or that, if they were bound and put into the River, they would swim; the said Accused desirous to make their Innocence appear [desiring to prove their innocence], voluntarily offered to undergo the said Trials, if 2 of the most violent of their Accusers would be tried with them.
3. Accordingly the Time and Place was agreed on, and advertised about the Country; The Accusers were 1 Man and 1 Woman; and the Accused the same.
4. The Parties being met, and the People got together, a grand Consultation was held, before they proceeded to Trial; in which it was agreed to use the Scales first; and a Committee of Men were appointed to search the Men, and a Committee of Women to search the Women, to see if they had any Thing of Weight about them, particularly Pins.

Activity: Franklin’s Satirical Language

In “A Witch Trial at Mount Holly” Franklin ridicules the thinking of the people of Mount Holly with language that is in some places obviously humorous and in others finely subtle. This online activity explores his use of satire. Use the browser’s ‘back’ button to return to this worksheet.



5. How would you describe the persona of narrator or “reporter” of this story?

6. How does Franklin create this persona? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

7. What is the narrator's point of view? How does Franklin establish it? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

5. After the Scrutiny was over, a huge great Bible belonging to the Justice of the Place was provided, and a Lane through the Populace was made from the Justices House to the Scales, which were fixed on a Gallows erected for that Purpose opposite to the House, that the Justice's Wife and the rest of the Ladies might see the Trial, without coming amongst the Mob; and after the Manner of Moorfields [in the eighteenth century, an open space in London, often the site of markets and shows] a large Ring was also made.
6. Then came out of the House a grave tall Man carrying the Holy Writ before the supposed Wizard, &c. (as solemnly as the Sword-bearer of London before the Lord Mayor) the Wizard was first put in the Scale, and over him was read a Chapter out of the Books of Moses, and then the Bible was put in the other Scale, (which being kept down before) was immediately let go; but to the great Surprize of the Spectators, Flesh and Bones came down plump, and outweighed that great good Book by abundance [a large amount].
7. After the same Manner, the others were served, and their Lumps of Mortality severally [separately] were too heavy for Moses and all the Prophets and Apostles.

8. What are the connotations of the word "plump"? How does Franklin use it in the story?

9. What does the term "Lumps of Mortality" refer to? How does Franklin use it?

8. This being over, the Accusers and the rest of the Mob, not satisfied with this Experiment, would have the Trial by Water; accordingly a most solemn Procession was made to the Mill-pond; where both Accused and Accusers being stripp'd (saving only to the Women their Shifts [undergarments]) were bound Hand and Foot, and severally placed in the Water, lengthways, from the Side of a Barge or Flat, having for Security only a Rope about the Middle of each, which was held by some in the Flat.
9. The Accuser Man being thin and spare [bony], with some Difficulty began to sink at last; but the rest every one of them swam [floated] very light upon the Water.
10. A Sailor in the Flat jump'd out upon the Back of the Man accused, thinking to drive him down to the Bottom, but the Person bound, without any Help, came up some time before the other.
11. The Woman Accuser, being told that she did not sink, would be duck'd a second Time; when she swam again as light as before.
12. Upon which she declared, That she believed the Accused had bewitched her to make her so light, and that she would be duck'd again a Hundred Times, but she would duck the Devil out of her.
13. The accused Man, being surpriz'd at his own Swimming, was not so confident of his Innocence as before, but said, *If I am a Witch, it is more than I know.*

Activity: Satire as a Corrective

Satire is often practiced as a corrective of behavior. Satirists may imply a course of action to improve, reform, or change in some way the target of their ridicule. This online activity explores Franklin's possible correctives.



14. The more thinking Part of the Spectators were of Opinion, that any Person so bound and plac'd in the Water (unless they were mere Skin and Bones) would swim till their Breath was gone, and their Lungs fill'd with Water.
15. But it being the general Belief of the Populace, that the Womens Shifts, and the Garters with which they were bound help'd to support them; it is said they are to be tried again the next warm Weather, naked.

10. What does Franklin mean when he says that the male accuser “with some Difficulty began to sink”? Why would he include this detail?

11. How does Franklin focus our attention on the word “naked”? What function does it play in the story?

12. How does Franklin characterize the trials? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

13. How does Franklin portray the people of Mount Holly? Cite evidence from the text to support your answer.

Image Credit

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