



Benjamin Franklin, Women, and the Virtue of Appearance

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Introduction

In “The Speech of Polly Baker” and “On Selecting a Mistress,” Benjamin Franklin seems to present two conflicting viewpoints. The former, which was written for the public eye, criticizes gender inequality. The latter, which was written privately, objectifies women. Before we call Franklin a hypocrite, it could be helpful to look at his other statements on gender as well as the culture of public figures during his life.

How could the culture of the time period have influenced these two Franklin pieces?

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Claim

Benjamin Franklin’s life and times should inform our reading of his seemingly conflicting statements in his humorous texts about women.

I chose my research in perspective to two pieces by Franklin: “The Speech of Polly Baker” and “On Selecting a Mistress.”

To answer my research question, I researched various topics including:

- Franklin’s commentary on gender compared to his treatment of women in his life
- Franklin’s carefully crafted public image – how it differed from his private life and how he crafted it
- the culture of public figures and appearance in Franklin’s time



Joseph Siffred Duplessis. *Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)*. 1778, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Research Based Argument

In “The Speech of Polly Baker,” Franklin points out the hypocrisy of a society that punishes a woman while turning a blind eye to a man who does the same. This satirical piece reflects Franklin’s frequent “candid questioning of the unequal status of women in society” (Kerry 42). Franklin was especially concerned with women’s equality through education. In “Petition of the Left Hand,” Franklin “adopt[s] the persona of a young woman who had been denied an education,” insisting that the left hand deserves the same education as the right (Kelly 83).

Franklin’s private actions did not always reflect his public image as an advocate for women’s rights. Franklin did not provide his daughter with education opportunities equal to his son (Kelly 83), and many of his private writing can be considered misogynistic, such as “On Selecting a Mistress” and letters that condemn his wife for being a “frivolous consumer” (Bloch 145).

Franklin’s contradictory statements on women’s equality were not uncommon for the time period and are ultimately indicative of the culture of appearances that existed then. The inconsistencies between Franklin’s public and private lives would not have been considered scandalous, as it was acceptable for gentlemen to enhance their image through dishonesty and exaggeration (Murray 106). Because Franklin maintained his reputation in order to “perpetuate the good,” this embellishment was considered virtuous (Osborne 15, 24). Franklin used the power of language not to completely manufacture a different self, but to enhance the truth for respectable goals.

While we may still consider him hypocritical, the social history can explain the dissonance between Franklin’s “The Speech of Polly Baker” and “On Selecting a Mistress.” Franklin carefully crafted a flattering public image to suit his needs, an acceptable practice in his time.

Discussion

From Franklin’s time to today, celebrity culture has changed in some ways while staying the same in others. For those in the public eye, the self can often be considered an act. Celebrities carefully calculate their actions in order to benefit their image. Public figures, especially politicians, still play off the relatable “everyman” trope. In Franklin’s time, people accepted this duplicity as a necessity for gentlemen to protect their reputations and benefit the public good. In modern times, many of us are under the impression that celebrities’ public images are reflections of their true characters, and there is often uproar when we discover that celebrities are not who we thought they were. For a future project, it would be interesting to see how the culture of public figures has changed over time and what factors could have influenced this change.



Benjamin West. *Benjamin Franklin Drawing Electricity from the Sky*. 1816, oil on slate, Philadelphia Museum of Art.