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978-0-521-15357-7 - Thomas Paine and the Literature of Revolution

Edward Larkin

Excerpt

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## Introduction

Forty-five years after the Revolution, in an 1821 letter to a friend, Thomas Jefferson commented on the remarkable literary skills of his old friend and sometime political ally, Thomas Paine: “No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, Jefferson’s observation about the unique character of Paine’s prose has been reiterated time and again by scholars of the Revolution. In his 1976 monograph *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America*, Eric Foner sums up this most durable critical consensus: “What made Paine unique was that he forged a new political language. He did not simply change the meanings of words, he created a literary style designed to bring his message to the widest possible audience” (xvi). Paine himself recognized the novelty of his approach to political writing. At the beginning of *Rights of Man Part II*, he explains why his immensely popular response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* had appeared in two parts: “I wished to know the manner in which a work, written in a style of thinking and expression different to what had been customary in England, would be received before I ventured further.”<sup>2</sup> With a style specifically designed to appeal to a wide popular audience, Paine moved away from the dominant tradition of classical rhetoric, which was an integral part of an older exclusionary political discourse, and

<sup>1</sup> Jefferson to Francis Eppes. January 19, 1821. *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, Ed. Merrill D. Peterson. New York: Library of America, 1984, 1451.

<sup>2</sup> Paine, Thomas, *Complete Works*, 2 Vols., Vol. I, 348–349. All further references will be noted in the text as CW followed by the volume and page numbers.

toward a new psychology of persuasion that would define the newly emergent public sphere.

The simplicity of Paine's language is only half the story, however. Scholarly emphasis on the popularity and unvarnished style of Paine's prose has led us to overlook how well versed he was in the very classical tradition that works such as *Rights of Man* overturned. Paine's writing does not simply abjure elite prose stylings so much as appropriate them for new ends. The apparent simplicity of Paine's language belies a subtle rhetorical gambit. Paine's success was largely predicated on his ability to present sophisticated political ideas to a general readership. When, for example, Paine states, at the beginning of the third section of *Common Sense*, that "In the following pages I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and Common sense" (17), he emphasizes the essential accessibility of his arguments. Characterized as simple, plain, and common, his ideas are available to all readers. At the same time, however, it soon becomes difficult to separate facts from arguments, and arguments from what he insists are the intuitive and self-evident perceptions of common sense. This is precisely the point: By insisting that truth is by its nature simple and universal, Paine both manipulates and politically enfranchises a new popular audience by presenting what are actually complex and rhetorically sophisticated arguments as simple facts. This did not equate to dumbing down those arguments or voiding them of nuance, but rather in fashioning a new language that presented politics in a vernacular that artisans and other middling sorts were already accustomed to reading.<sup>3</sup>

By altering the form of political writing, Paine also altered its content. Democracy, for example, meant something quite different to one of Paine's earliest and most persistent critics, John Adams. Shortly after the publication of *Common Sense*, Adams anonymously published his *Thoughts on Government* where he quarrels with Paine's suggestion that the United States adopt a unicameral legislature. Adams and other more conservative advocates of independence perceived Paine's government as one too beholden to the will of the people. According to this camp, the

<sup>3</sup> For a recent exception to the tendency to disregard Paine's debt to classical rhetorical traditions see Robert Ferguson, "The Commonalities of *Common Sense*." Even Ferguson in his intensive examination of Paine's pamphlet has overlooked the popular origins of much of Paine's prose. Presenting a general intellectual history of the ideas and writing strategies in *Common Sense*, Ferguson does emphasize its attempts to reach a popular audience with the plain style and with various rhetorical strategies, but he never connects Paine's prose style to the periodical literature of the day, a literature that Paine had been trained in and that his readers were consuming in ever increasing numbers.

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purpose of representative democracy (and of republican forms of government more generally) is to rein in the people and allow the leaders to restrain the mob and refine its crude notions of government and justice. The difference between Adams's and Paine's respective views is apparent in the very language that they use to discuss the role of government. Not only Adams's argument but also his rhetoric is designed to limit access to an elite group. "Thoughts on Government" begins with an address to the reader that implies that only a select few are capable of understanding the workings of government:

If I was equal to the task of forming a plan for the government of a colony, I should be flattered with your request, and very happy to comply with it; because, as the divine science of politics is the science of social happiness, and the blessings of society depend entirely on the constitutions of government, which are generally institutions that last for many generations, there can be no employment more agreeable to a benevolent mind than a research after the best. (3)

By suggesting that not even he – a Harvard-educated member of the incipient New England social and political aristocracy – is privy to such knowledge (which he further mystifies with references to a divine science) Adams implicitly counters the notion that ordinary citizens might be capable of understanding how governments work. Throughout the text, moreover, Adams's authority is often established through his ability to invoke key authorities from the past, such as "Confucious, Zoroaster, Socrates and Mahomet" in one instance, or "Sidney, Harrington, Locke, Milton, Nedham, Neville, Burnet, and Hoadly" in another (5, 7). Paine's strategy, on the other hand, is to open discussions of government to the general public by presenting his arguments as ones that he had arrived at through the use of simple logic and that were not contingent on access to privileged information or education. His writings strive to educate ordinary people in the workings of the state and thus redefine the relationship between such categories as "the people," "the state," and "democratic government."

The process of inventing a more accessible and appealing political language was anything but easy. It required knowledge of political theory and classical rhetorical traditions, as well as familiarity with contemporary popular modes of writing. This book explores how Paine constructed his new literature of politics and how he successfully represented himself as both a sophisticated political theorist and a popularizer. Herein lies the real novelty of Paine's prose: Instead of subscribing to the traditional binary that counterpoised the mob and the elite, he created an idiom where

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politics could be simultaneously popular and thoroughly reasoned. His writing made it possible to think of a public sphere that could be democratized outside the narrow confines of a literate bourgeoisie. Through his writings, in other words, Paine turns the people into thoughtful participants in the affairs of the nation and transforms democracy from a political system into a more broadly conceived social and cultural phenomenon involving the dissemination of ideas. In his version of democracy and the public sphere, which Adams and other leaders of the Early Republic saw as a serious threat to their power, everyone is equally capable of contributing to and participating in the nation's political and cultural life. This process of making politics accessible to ordinary people involved not only the invention of a new political language but, just as importantly, the fashioning of a new kind of political actor. The object of my study is often both Paine's prose and the persona he invents for himself in that prose, a persona who could serve as a model for others to emulate in the continuing effort to mediate the elite and the common.

I approach Paine as a professional writer who produced an important corpus of writings that integrates intellectual and literary trends from both sides of the Atlantic. Although this study explores his career from a distinctly American point of view, it also places him firmly in the context of a larger culture of exchange between England, the United States, and France. Paine offers a remarkable window into a transatlantic milieu in which he moved with ease and in which he achieved enormous success. In order to attain such recognition he had to construct an authorial persona whose voice would not become too intimately linked with a particular national identity. Paine, then, becomes the purveyor of a political language as thoroughly cosmopolitan as it was democratic. First, with *Common Sense*, he would import English and Continental ideas about democracy and the terms of public debate and integrate them into the American political scene. Then in *Rights of Man* he would export this new American democracy back to Europe where he would participate in a revolution in France and attempt to spark another one in England. Through Paine we see the traffic of ideas crossing the Atlantic in both directions but, most interestingly, we see how European ideas return to the Old World in a new shape after being refashioned and reimagined in the New World.

In spite of his central role in both the American and French Revolutions, Paine remains virtually unstudied as someone who sought to make his living by his pen. As a result of the impact of works such as *Common Sense* (1776) and *The Rights of Man* (1791), historians have studied Paine's role

in the American Revolution and political scientists have evaluated his contributions to political theory, but he has been largely overlooked as a literary figure.<sup>4</sup> In large measure this oversight can be attributed to Paine's political reputation rather than his literary skills. Most of Paine's more prominent contemporaries were at best reluctant to pursue the radical egalitarian ideas that had driven the early stages of the Revolution and that he had come to represent.<sup>5</sup> After his involvement in the French Revolution and the publication of *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, American Federalists sought to discredit Paine's ideas with attacks on his character. Federalists, such as Peter Porcupine (William Cobbett), spread rumors about Paine because they were fearful of the popular support his ideas enjoyed. The success of those attacks on Paine mirrors the Federalists' success in containing the radicalism of the Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

Not only did his more conservative contemporaries succeed in limiting Paine's impact on the institutions of the day, but they managed to persuade future generations of his marginality.<sup>7</sup> Whether by raising questions about his character, his nationality, or the originality of his works, Paine's detractors have often succeeded in reducing one of the most important writers and thinkers of the eighteenth century to an atheistic, drunken, ill-mannered, unoriginal, unpatriotic propagandizer. Consequently, Paine appears only briefly in most histories of the American Revolution as the author of a pivotal but controversial pamphlet. Most recent histories acknowledge that *Common Sense* played a crucial role in the early days of the Revolution, but they emphasize its controversial aspects and its

<sup>4</sup> In "The Commonalities of *Common Sense*" Ferguson too notes the absence of a body of scholarship on Paine's literary abilities (465). Paine also plays a significant role in recent books by Elizabeth Barnes and Gillian Brown but on the whole his inclusion in the literary study of the American Revolution and Early Republic is the exception rather than the norm.

<sup>5</sup> See Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* for an account of the more conservative agenda that propelled the supporters of the Constitution in the years following the War of Independence.

<sup>6</sup> On the conservative tendency of most early interpretations of the Revolution see Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party* and Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*.

<sup>7</sup> One measure of Paine's marginality in literary history can be seen in all the major anthologies of American literature where Paine occupies only a minor section of the text. Even though *Common Sense* is relatively short, no anthology (including specialized ones dedicated to early America) reprints more than a few excerpts from the text and for the most part the rest of his writings, with the exception of *Crisis No. 1*, are completely ignored. Considering the impact of *Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, these telling omissions reflect a particular notion of what constitutes American literature in the Early National period.

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popularity more than its intellectual content or its effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most insidious of these categorizations of Paine has been the emphasis on his popular appeal. By aligning Paine's writing with "the popular," scholars have trivialized his contributions to American history and literature. The popular is implicitly set in opposition to the supposedly more important and real intellectual work of the Revolution done by Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton, and Madison, who are cast as enlightened patriarchs engaged in the allegedly more complicated questions of political economy and theory. Paine's contribution to the Revolution has thus been understood in terms that immediately relegate it to a secondary role.

If Paine challenges the distinction between the popular and the intellectual, the effect of reducing him to the role of a popularizer is to agree with the Federalists and other political and cultural elites who have succeeded over the years in making these two terms antithetical to one another. Paine exposes the limitations of that logic by exploding the distinction between high and low. That is to say, he denies the validity of the distinction between high and low suggesting that these categories refer to social rather than mental distinctions. Privileging reason and experience, Paine stigmatizes the idea of learnedness as fundamentally conservative. Where Adams establishes the authority of his ideas by reference to learned sources, Paine repeatedly appeals to the reader's capacity to reason for him/herself. For example, when he is discussing the "origin and rise of government" in *Common Sense*, Paine closes his case with an appeal to the reader's intuition: "And however our eyes may be dazzled with snow, our ears deceived by sound; however prejudice may warp our wills, or interest darken our understanding, the simple voice of nature and of reason will say, it is right" (68). The truth, in other words, is liable to be distorted by a number of our faculties, but it will always be available to our reason, which he strategically aligns with the voice of nature (as opposed, of course, to the voice of culture). Hence, reason itself becomes a commonly shared sense that everyone possesses by nature.

Given his skillful and persuasive assault on one of the key foundations of elite political and social power, the effort to discredit Paine should be understood less as a personal vendetta against him and more as an attempt to undermine his project of democratizing intellectual practice. In the late nineteenth century, no less a figure than Walt Whitman would identify this very issue regarding Paine's place in American history. Whitman,

<sup>8</sup> For example see Gordon S. Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, 93–97, and Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 287–291.

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who would challenge divisions between elite and common in his poetry, recognized the importance of Paine's legacy and sought to promote Paine as a quintessentially American figure. In his conversations with Horace Traubel, Whitman discusses Paine repeatedly. On one occasion he comments in terms that capture a sense of the way Paine's writings had posed and continued to pose a serious challenge to elite power: "The most things history has to say about Paine are damnably hideous. The polite circles of that period and later on were determined to queer the reputations of contemporary radicals – not Paine alone, but also others . . . I have always determined that I would do all I could to help set the memory of Paine right" (79). Although Whitman was unable to rescue Paine's reputation, his admiration for him, and the terms of his intellectual engagement with him, suggest the degree to which Paine had become a lightning rod for questions about the place of popular democracy in the Revolution and the nature of intellectual exchange in the nation. By obviating the distinction between high and low culture, Paine offers a way out of the central dichotomies of American intellectual life over the past two centuries. To recover Paine, as Whitman recognized, is to embrace the possibilities of a broadly democratic culture.<sup>9</sup>

It was precisely his ability to instill a sense of enfranchisement in a popular audience that had made Paine so extraordinarily successful: By 1791 he had sold more books than anyone else in the history of publishing, and he still had not published *The Age of Reason*.<sup>10</sup> Although sales are not

<sup>9</sup> One of the crucial differences between Whitman and Paine, however, is that Paine never invokes the language of genius that becomes such a paradox for Whitman. A Romantic, Whitman casts himself as simultaneously common and extraordinary. Although Paine can be remarkably self-serving in his writings, he never occupies the oracular position that Whitman employs in his poems. Perhaps this signals a cultural shift in the nineteenth century that reasserted the boundaries between high and low culture. In Whitman this longing to be both representative and exceptional represents an aspiration in American culture that continues to be present but cannot be realized. Paine was not yet saddled with the Romantic aesthetic that had transformed the author into genius. Hence, he could much more easily avoid becoming entangled in the role of visionary. Paine's ability to steer clear of some of the paradoxes Whitman faced was also due to the novelty of democracy in the United States. The structures of power were still being shaped in the new nation so that it was possible to imagine possibilities for the distribution of power in the late eighteenth century that would have evaporated by the second half of the nineteenth century, when American democracy had crystallized in to a particular set of institutions. It might even be that Whitman envied Paine's historical timing as much as he admired his tenacious advocacy of participatory democracy.

<sup>10</sup> In her dissertation, "Virtual Nation: Local and National Cultures in the Early United States," Trish Loughran shows that most of the commonly accepted accounts of the sales figures of Paine's writings are vastly exaggerated. Paine's most recent biographer

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necessarily indicative of skill, Paine's texts not only sold, they shaped the major debates of the age. Even Adams, his lifelong political antagonist, admitted that Paine had exercised an unparalleled influence on the age:

I am willing you should call this the Age of Frivolity as you do, and would not object if you had named it the Age of Folly, Vice, Frenzy, Brutality, Daemons, Buonaparte, Tom Paine, or the Age of the Burning Brand from the Bottomless Pit, or anything but the Age of Reason. I know not whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or affairs for the last thirty years than Tom Paine. There can be no severer satyr on the age. For such a mongrel between pig and puppy, begotten by a wild boar on a bitch wolf, never before in any age of the world was suffered by the poltroonery of mankind, to run through such a career of mischief. Call it then the Age of Paine. (Hawke, 7)

In spite of his profound dislike for Paine and his radical democratic ideas, Adams envied his fame, much as he did Jefferson's. More importantly, Adams recognized that in certain ways Paine had defined the revolutionary era. In one of his most brilliant rhetorical maneuvers, Paine had given his last major work a title that corresponded to the term that was emerging as the moniker for the era, thus ensuring that his name would be permanently linked with it. Paine's strategy of naming his text *The Age of Reason* also served to empty the term and the era of its association with high rational critique, instead connecting it to his own style of narrative critique where reason, rather than being identified with learning, is set in opposition to it.

Adams's characterization of Paine's influence on the era reveals the degree to which this is fundamentally an argument about the dissemination of knowledge and its implications for the exercise of power. As Adams would have recognized, Paine's purpose in *The Age of Reason* is once again to undermine a system of ideas and a language that is organized so as to limit access to a particular kind of knowledge (in this case, religious instead of political) to a select few. In 1806, when Adams writes these words in a letter to Benjamin Waterhouse, it clearly seemed to him that Paine had succeeded in his mission to democratize reason and religion. Although *The Age of Reason* had been denounced by the official channels of religion on both sides of the Atlantic, Paine had become a crucial icon for what Nathan O. Hatch has called "the democratization of American Christianity." Important religious leaders of the early nineteenth century, such as Lorenzo Dow and William Miller may have

John Keane credits Paine's own estimate of 120,000 to 150,000 as the number of copies sold. Even taking Loughran's more conservative numbers into account, his texts enjoyed unprecedented success.



ultimately disagreed with Paine's theological views, but they fully endorsed his critique of church authority, be it in the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, or the Methodist Church.<sup>11</sup> The irony is that Adams shared Paine's interest in rational religion, but like so many of his counterparts in the early Republic, he was concerned about the social and political repercussions of those ideas if they were spread to the masses.<sup>12</sup> Adams's references to Vice, Daemons, and the Bottomless Pit are thus designed to distance Paine's religious ideas from his own. As had been the case with *Common Sense*, Adams does not want his own more genteel and learned political and religious ideas to be confused with Paine's similar but more accessible versions of the same subjects, so he amplifies the distance between them by associating Paine with enthusiasm, disorder, and immorality.

In the midst of his insults Adams pinpoints one of the essential characteristics of Paine's writing that led to his success: His ideas did not conform to traditional categories of knowledge and discourse. The fact that Adams casts that quality as a mongrelization and employs metaphors – pig and puppy, wolf and boar – that associate Paine's writing with the barnyard is a fair indication that Adams sees Paine as someone who is diluting and bastardizing elite culture. Whitman, on the other hand, admires this quality and celebrates Paine as someone who is raising up the people and tearing down the artificial barriers that have traditionally kept ordinary people out of the public sphere. Despite their differing opinions of Paine and his role in U.S. history, Adams and Whitman agree that one of the most important distinguishing characteristics of Paine's thought and writing is that he refuses to accept the conventional dichotomies that underwrite traditional structures of authority. Not only does Paine reject

<sup>11</sup> In his closing observations to *The Democratization of American Christianity*, Hatch comments more broadly on Paine's cultural significance: "Nourished by sources as contradictory as George Whitefield and Tom Paine, many deeply religious people were set adrift from ecclesiastical establishments at the same time they demanded that the church begin living up to its spiritual promise" (225). In *Democratization* Hatch also discusses Lorenzo Dow's interest in Paine. On William Miller's deist phase see Wayne R. Judd, "William Miller, Disappointed Prophet." In *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism*, Richard Bushman points out that in his youth Smith studied Paine too.

<sup>12</sup> For an account of Adams's intellectual and religious commitments to the philosophical rationalism of the American Enlightenment see C. Bradley Thompson, "Young John Adams and the New Philosophic Rationalism." Through a careful analysis of Adams's diary, Thompson demonstrates that Adams, who has often been described by historians as a Puritan, actually "repudiated the orthodoxies of New England Puritanism" in favor of "a view of nature, man, and moral obligation that drew heavily on the enlightened views of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke" (262).

the distinction between high and low culture, he also assails the binaries of public and private, entertainment and instruction, theoretical science (physics and astronomy) and common science (mechanics). Throughout his career Paine also denounces easy dichotomies in genre (that is, history, letter, narrative, and criticism), human psychology (feeling, fancy, understanding, passion, and reason), and, most spectacularly, reason and revelation.

Paine was not the first, or perhaps the most subtle and sophisticated, critic of any one of these dichotomies, but he intuited the links between them in ways that other thinkers had not. He did not see them as isolated instances, but rather as symptoms of a larger invisible system of thought. The principal purpose of these dichotomies was to exclude the mass of the people from power. Paine, therefore, would fuse the high and the low, politics and literature, reason and religion, and other such dichotomies as a means to dismantle the structures that underwrite elite intellectual and political power. The way to supplant the old divisions is to replace them with hybrid forms that reconnect the very elements the old forms had dichotomized. In a sense Paine's thinking represents the fusion of form and content writ large. This is precisely the point where literature and politics meet: where language directly shapes the exercise of power in the world. Paine writes texts that demonstrate how that language and those structures of power create an illusion of inevitability to secure the status of the elites. They make it seem as if the current system is the product of a natural rather than an artificial process. In a fundamental sense, Paine's project partakes of the same philosophical and historical impulses that impelled Locke, Rousseau, Ferguson, and others to study the origins of the social and political systems in the eighteenth century.

At the same time that he denounces these essentialized dichotomies,<sup>13</sup> Paine insists upon simplicity as a fundamental value. At first blush, his appeal to simplicity may seem antithetical to the work of unmasking the falsity of the basic substructure of Western social, religious, and political authority, but his point, from *Common Sense's* claims about the British constitutional monarchy to *The Age of Reason's* account of revealed religion, is that these dichotomies have rendered the world (government, religion, politics, society, and so on) unnecessarily complex by creating a tangled web of artificial systems to prop up the elite's claim to preeminence. Reverting to common-sensical ideas of social and political relations

<sup>13</sup> Essentialized because they have become accepted as facts when, as Paine demonstrates, they are merely theories or constructs.