

Philip Freneau's *ELEGY on the Death of a BLACKSMITH*, September 18, 1793

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WITH the nerves of a Sampson¹ this son of the sledge,
By the anvil his livelihood got:
With the skill of old Vulcan² could temper an edge;
And struck--while his iron was hot.³

By *forging*⁴ he liv'd, yet never was tried,
Or condemn'd by the laws of the land;
But still it is certain, and can't be denied,
He often was *burnt in the hand*.⁵

With the sons of St. Crispin⁶ no kindred he claim'd,

¹Sampson's life is described in the Bible's Old Testament, in the Book of Judges. He was the last of Israel's tribal leaders, or judges from the Hebrew tribe of Dan, [c. 11th century B.C.] His Herculean feats of strength, such as wrestling a lion and defeating an entire army with only a donkey's jawbone, were widely known. His tribe's enemies wanted to learn the secret of his strength, so they used the wiles of an attractive woman, Delilah, to entice him to break his Nazarite vow and reveal the secret, which was his uncut long hair. While he slept, his hair was cut, he was then blinded, imprisoned and made to grind grain. Meanwhile, his hair began to grow again. He asked a boy to guide him to the supports of the temple. He prayed for one last burst of strength and collapsed the building on a gathering of his enemies. Book of Judges, Chs. 13-16.

²Vulcan was the son of Jupiter and Juno and husband of Maia and Venus. He was the Roman god of fire and volcanoes. He manufactured arms, armor and metals for the other gods and heroes.

³The sledge and the anvil were essential tools in a blacksmith's shop. The sledge--a large, heavy hammer, often known as a sledgeworker--was used to beat the iron into shape on the anvil, which is the large block on which the iron is hammered into shape. "Temper an edge" refers to the process of heating the metal and cooling it rapidly to produce the degree of desired hardness. In order to shape the iron, the blacksmith had to work it when it was still quite warm. The proverbial expression, "To strike while the iron is hot", i.e., to make an effort before it is too late, comes from the world of the smithy.

⁴This stanza plays on different meanings of the word 'forge.' In the world of the blacksmith, the forge could refer to the entire shop; the word is often found in place names, such as Valley Forge. It could also mean the furnace itself, or the hearth on which the wrought iron was shaped. To forge means to hammer into shape by heating and hammering.

The idea of shaping or changing a shape is also latent in a negative meaning of the word, which means to counterfeit, to attempt to pass off an imitation as the genuine article. Such forging often runs afoul of the law. Freneau plays on these two different meanings by indicating that though the blacksmith lived by forging, he never broke the law.

⁵ The last line, "He often was burnt in the hand" refers to the corporal punishment of branding, which was often part of the sentence for forgery. While this branding or burning often occurred on other body parts, the blacksmith's hand was naturally often burned in the course of shaping hot metal. His branding is, of course, not because of criminal behavior, but, like the forging, related to his occupation.

With the last he had nothing to do;
He handled no awl⁷, and yet in his time
Made many an excellent shoe.

He blew up no coals of sedition,⁸ but still
His bellows was always in blast;⁹
And I will acknowledge [deny it who will]
That one *Vice*,¹⁰ and but *one*, he possess'd.

No actor was he, or concern'd with the stage,
No audience to awe him appear'd;
Yet oft in his shop[like a crowd in a rage]
The voice of a *hissing* was heard.¹¹

Tho' *steeling* of axes was part of his cares,
In thieving he never was found;¹²
And tho' he was constantly *beating on bars*,
No vessel he e'er ran aground.¹³

⁶ St. Crispin was the Catholic patron saint of shoemakers, tanners and leatherworkers; he and his twin brother, St. Crispinian, were martyred for trying to spread Christianity in Gaul during the third century.

⁷ An awl is a tool used in shoemaking, since it can make holes in leather. Naturally it is useless in the manufacture of horseshoes, which was one of the major jobs of the smith and a vital one for economic life in the colonies.

⁸ Sedition is midway between simple anger at the government on the one hand, and treason on the other. Sedition may involve rebellion, as the recent one of the colonies against England, a rebellion that certainly would have been seen as sedition by the English. But sedition was still much in the air when Freneau wrote this poem; the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 were passed to combat it. Emotions tend to run high in such circumstances; that is why Freneau refers to the coals of sedition.

⁹ A bellows is an instrument that, through expansion and collapse, brings in air through a valve and pushes it out. It can be used to start and enliven a fire or to make organ pipes sound. A blacksmith needs fire much of the time, so his bellows is always in use.

¹⁰ The last two lines of this stanza play on two very different meanings of words that sound alike but are spelled differently, 'vise' and 'vice.' The former is, of course, a tool that holds an object so it can be worked, while the latter is an evil habit, or a tendency to such a habit.

¹¹ This stanza plays on the hissing of hot iron cooled by water and the hissing of 18th-century audiences when a play or an actor displeased them. In colonial times, it was customary for audiences to make ribald, pointed and often rude comments in loud voices or noises of disapproval when they did not like a theatrical performance.

¹² Steeling, a play on words with steal, in the metal industry, relates to the various mixtures of alloys to enable the metal to be worked, to be cast, rolled or drawn.

¹³ "Beating on bars"--a bar, such as a sand bar, is an underwater barrier that may cause ships to run aground when they do not know of its existence. Of course a blacksmith is always beating on bars.

Alas and alack! And what more can I say
Of Vulcan's unfortunate son?-
The priest and the sexton¹⁴ have bore him away,
And the sound of his hammer is done!

Presentation of the Poem:

In spite of its title, this poem is meant to be amusing through its use of plays on words. The teacher can adapt the text to give as few or as many of the explanatory notes provided, asking the students to explain the riddles in the text: i.e., how is it that the blacksmith was a forger, but was never tried in court? Because of the teasing, tongue-in-cheek quality of much of the poem, it is a good vehicle to induce students to read poetry, as well as to understand why a blacksmith was an important figure in colonial times.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is the overall picture of the blacksmith given in this poem? [That of an honest, hardworking man.]
2. How does the poet convey this picture? [He describes the work of the blacksmith and contrasts it positively with destructive social activities such as theft and forging.]
3. How does Freneau's picture of the smith compare with that of Longfellow? [Both describe the blacksmith in a positive light.]

Philip Freneau, sea captain, poet, newspaper editor, was a contemporary of the great figures of colonial America and the American Revolution. Born into a wealthy Huguenot trading family, his French Protestant ancestors came to America in 1705 to New York. He went to the College of New Jersey, which became Princeton University, in 1768, where, as is often the case with students, he learned a great deal outside of class, particularly since he met young men from the other American colonies. He also had ready access to the latest political broadsides and pamphlets, because the post road--a sort of 18th-century superhighway--went through Princeton; in addition, many prominent politicians and public figures came to speak there.

What would Philip Freneau have studied as a college undergraduate? Since he would have learned Latin and Greek in secondary school, he continued reading classical literature from the Roman Empire and ancient Greece as a freshman, and would have continued these readings in his second and third years. In his second year, he would have begun the study of philosophy and mathematics, including natural philosophy and moral philosophy. He would have read major British authors such as Shakespeare and

¹⁴An employee or officer of a church who is responsible for the care and upkeep of church property and sometimes for ringing bells and digging graves.

Milton, as well as prominent French writers and studied composition. Prayers and sermons were also part of daily college life. There were no electives except French.

Such an education sharpened young Philip's mind and honed his latent literary talents. Already in college, he began his first literary efforts in a "paper war" between two clubs. Here we find the mixture of satirical elements with both melancholy and good humor, traits that appear in his later poetry. Soon after his graduation in 1771, just a few years before the Declaration of Independence in 1776, his first works about America appear, and then in 1775, poems on the events of the American Revolution. At this time, Freneau had left for the West Indies, where he carried on the family tradition of trading, but he came back in 1778 and joined the New Jersey Militia, where he stayed for 2 years. In 1780, he was imprisoned on a British prison ship in New York Harbor. After his release, he began a lifelong involvement with newspapers, which he combined, as he did throughout his life, with other occupations, such as working in the colonial post office. Throughout his life, Freneau was a devoted anti-monarchist, whether in regard to what he viewed as monarchial tendencies in the early American governments, or in regard to reigning monarchs in Europe. At the time he wrote this poem, Freneau was editor of the National Gazette in Philadelphia. Unlike newspapers today, he presented original state documents, which he printed in full before the editorials and essays that accompanied them. His paper was anti-Federalist,¹⁵ but included the documents of opponents as well as some opinion pieces by them. He died in 1832 at the age of 80.

For more information, please consult the following books:

The Works of Philip Freneau: A Critical Study, by Philip M. Marsh. Scarecrow Press: Metuchen, New Jersey, 1968

Philip Freneau by Mary Weatherspoon Bowden .Twayne: Boston, 1976

Philip Freneau: Champion of Democracy by Jacob Axelrod. University of Texas Press: Austin/London, 1967

¹⁵ The Federalist Party was a political party formed by Alexander Hamilton during the First Party System, [c. 1792-1820]. Supporters in Congress of Hamilton's fiscal policies also supported a strong national government, a more mercantile and less agricultural economy, and a loose construction of the United States Constitution. Their opposition was the Democratic-Republican Party of Jefferson and Madison.

The Democratic-Republican Party was founded by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison during the First Party System. Its main purpose was to oppose Hamilton's party; it supported states' rights and the rights of the yeoman farmer. It also opposed tariffs, military spending, a national debt and a national bank, all policies associated with the Federalists.