

Philip Freneau's *ELEGY on the Death of a BLACKSMITH*

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ELEGY on the Death of a BLACKSMITH

September 18, 1793

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

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 sledgehammer--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 sons of St. Crispin⁶ no kindred he claim'd,
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.

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!

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.

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.