

Do As Poor Richard Says, Not As He Does

From whom, how, and why Benjamin Franklin plagiarized his famous proverbs

To modern Americans, Benjamin Franklin is one man but many characters. Like the boyfriends of television ingénues, everyone has a favorite. Some prefer the polymath Franklin, the nutty scientist who invented the lightning rod. Others prefer Franklin the patriot, the oldest signer of the Declaration of Independence. Then there is Richard Saunders, perhaps the most popular Franklin of all. Conjured from the oft-quoted proverbs he published in Poor Richard's Almanack between 1732 and 1758, this Franklin strikes the image of a sagacious but folksy old man: America's own Confucius.

Poor Richard's proverbs are, and have been for centuries, a part of the American canon. We identify them not only with Franklin's literary talent, but also with a unique colonial-American slant on Enlightenment-era philosophy. Widely celebrated, this association ignores two inconvenient truths. Poor Richard's sayings were not American, and for the most part Franklin didn't write them.

"Franklin took British aphorisms and adapted them in the style of 'Richard Saunders' for the American provincial audience of his almanacs," says George Goodwin, author of Benjamin Franklin in London. "Thus Daniel Defoe's 'Things as certain as Death and Taxes, can be more firmly believed' became 'In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes' and what had been British became American."

Among other sources for his sayings, Franklin borrowed greatly from Thomas Fuller's *Gnomologia* (1732), George Herbert's *Outlandish Proverbs* (1640), and an anonymous *Collection of Epigrams* (1737)—all published in England. That he mined these books for material is neither surprising nor inherently scandalous. As a citizen of a British colony, he took immense pride in the comedic sensibilities of his motherland. More importantly, as an eighteenth-century publisher, he considered the inclusion of unattributed knowledge well within the bounds of fair use. "Writers [back then] didn't have the modern sense of plagiarism that today's professors pound into the heads of our students," says George Boudreau, history professor at La Salle University. "There was certainly no shame in lifting someone else's words or ideas, whether it was for a personal letter, a newspaper article, or a government document."

Indeed, Franklin never denied lifting Poor Richard's proverbs. In his classic essay, "The Way to Wealth," he admitted that "not a tenth part of the wisdom [in the almanac] was my own...but rather the gleanings I had made of the sense of all ages and nations."

Some historians believe Franklin sold himself short with such talk. His skillful edits rescued countless proverbs from a cross-generational rubbish bin, which now brims with outmoded eighteenth-century wit. "Franklin," historian Jill Lepore once wrote, "was the kind of literary alchemist who could turn drivel into haiku." Under his pen, "A man in Passion rides a Horse that runs away with him," became, "A man in a passion rides a mad horse." Likewise, George Saville's clumsy "To understand the world, and to like it, are two things not easily reconciled," became the much snappier, "He that best understands the World, least likes it."

An example of Poor Richard's astronomical charts (1747). Notice the proverb, broken into pieces, set apart in italics, and placed in the seventh row. The text above the chart is a poem, which took spatial precedence over his "famous" sayings.

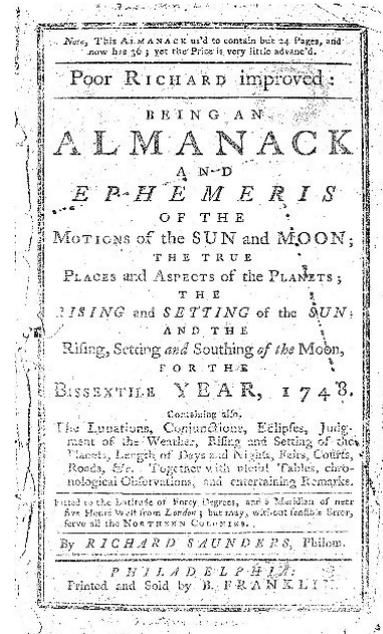
As to why Franklin chose to pilfer, polish, and publish Poor Richard's sayings in the first place, their original presentation in his almanac provides a few clues. "People then looked at [almanacs] like people today look at Google," says Boudreau. "They had government meeting dates and sessions of courts; celebrity gossip in the form of when the king, queen, and royal family celebrated their birthdays; and [other] 'useful knowledge'. Franklin's little sayings were entertaining, witty, logical, empowering. But look at how little page space they got."

An excerpt from Thomas Fuller's *Gnomologia*, first published in 1732. Note proverb 4885, which Franklin reprinted with the smallest of edits in the excerpt presented above.

While we now consume Poor Richard's proverbs on numerical lists of Franklin's greatest hits, his contemporary audience encountered them amid charts, which detailed water tides, moon phases, and the rising and setting of the sun. Franklin printed his proverbs within the seventh and final column on the right-hand side of these charts, under a section entitled "the Changes of the Moon." This required him to break one "saying" into multiple parts, often in two or three word spurts. This could explain why he did not hesitate to lift material from Fuller, Herbert, and others: Poor Richard's aphorisms were literally space fillers. When presented with problematic rows, Franklin rifled through his sources, located the choicest proverbs, then either placed them where they fit in naturally or parred them down as necessary. Thus, "A Father is a Treasure, a Brother a Comfort; but a Friend is both" became "A father's a treasure; a brother's a comfort; a friend is both."

Perhaps it is permissible, then, to forgive Franklin for participating in the rampant plagiarism that defined his era in publishing. After all, his thievery helped enliven yet one more character for colonial America's man of many faces: Franklin, the frugal capitalist. As Poor Richard himself once wrote, "Necessity never made a good bargain." So why waste money on a simple margin problem, when a nearby bookshelf offered a free and easy fix?

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I Mon. March hath xxxi days.

Celestial PATIENCE! How dost thou defeat
The Foe's proud Menace, and elude his Hate?
While *Passion* takes his Part, betrays our Peace;
To Death and Torture swells each flight Disgrace;
By not opposing, Thou dost Ill destroy,
And wear thy conquer'd Sorrows into Joy.

1	☉	above	Sunday.	3	9	6	11	6	☿	rife	8	33			
2	2	Sirius	sets	12	5	4	22	6	10	6	There's	a time			
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4	4	☿	Wednesd.	6	16	6	3	6	☿	rife	2	32			
5	5	♂	rife	10	12	7	28	6	6	to	wink	as well			
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7	7	the	month	begins	8	22	6	4	6	as	to	see.			
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9	9	☽	with	wind	10	16	6	0	6	☉	in	☿			

- 4883 There is a sort of Pleasure in indulging of Grief.
- 4884 There is something in it, quoth the Fellow, when he drunk Dish-clout and all.
- 4885 There is a Time to wink, as well as to see.
- 4886 There is a Witness every where.
- 4887 There is as much Greatness in owning a good Turn, as in the doing of it.
- 4888 There is as much hold of his Words, as of a wet Eel's Tail.