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## ***Monster of Monsters* and the Emergence of Political Satire in New England**

**By**

**Alison Olson**

In 1754, an anonymous political satire called *Monster of Monsters* appeared on bookstands in Massachusetts. The pamphlet was written in opposition to proposed legislation levying an excise on alcohol and requiring householders in the colony to report annually the amount of liquor consumed in their homes. *Monster* was not particularly well written. Its theme, equating the tax with a monster, was neither very original nor very arresting, and it did not appear to affect the ultimate passage of the tax. Nevertheless, the pamphlet attracted a great deal of attention, was read by large numbers of people and made its publisher briefly “the chief topic of conversation in town.” In so doing, it marked a rather surprising turning point in New England’s literary history.

Heretofore political satire had attracted relatively little attention in New England. Despite the fact that in the first half of the eighteenth century Massachusetts had more printers who published more titles than any other American colony, and despite the fact that the same half century was a golden age for the English political satire that Massachusetts writers admired, the colony had produced very little satire of its own before 1750. The satire that was produced was scarcely read.

*Monster of Monsters* changed all that. So well did it show how effective and how marketable satire could be in New England that in the two decades after the pamphlet appeared a dozen or so new pieces of political satire came out in New England. They showed up in various forms: poetry, plays, parodied speeches and mock news items. One of the items, “The Squabble of the Sea Nymphs,” was by Mercy Otis

Warren and a couple of others were by one or another of the "Connecticut Wits," especially Jonathan Trumbull. Trumbull, possibly collaborating with Timothy Dwight, contributed a series of satirical essays to the *Boston Chronicle* in 1769 under the title "The Meddler," more essays to the *Connecticut Journal* and *New Haven Post Boy* and later wrote *The Progress of Dulness* and his best known *M'Fingal*.<sup>1</sup> Most of the pieces, however, appeared anonymously, like the farcical and truly forgettable *The Blockheads*, or the *Affected Officers*, the satirical dream allegories that appeared in the *Rhode Island Gazette* in Providence, or the parodied speeches that appeared from time to time in the *Connecticut Gazette*.<sup>2</sup> Except for Trumbull's poems, none of them was particularly good, but the fact that they appeared at all showed that, in part at least, thanks to *Monster of Monsters*, New England satire was coming of age.

In *Monster*, the satirist found an issue on which he could draw on English satire for the first time, an issue on which, again for the first time, a political underdog could use humor to attract a wide popular audience, and an issue on which the government misguidedly enhanced the audience by arresting the printer and bringing him notoriety.

The attention that *Monster of Monsters* attracted, and the fact that numbers of people actually read it, revealed a new kind of public market place in New England for the exchange of ideas, information -- and now, humor -- about politics. Like all markets, this one relied on both its consumers -- an informed readership now aware of what government was up to and how it ran -- and its producers: political writers seeking a public forum for their views on government controversies. Such writers were learning that satire could ridicule politicians, positions, even institutions, and presume that the audience knew enough to get the joke. Political satire, in other words, could be audacious, marketable, and in the long run, relatively safe.<sup>3</sup> How did *Monster* manage this? It is worth investigating.

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<sup>1</sup> Leon Howard, *The Connecticut Wits* (Chicago, 1943), pp. 40-73.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Ingham Granger, *Political Satire in the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (Ithaca, NY 1960), pp. 17, 31, 34, 63.

<sup>3</sup> *The Monster of Monsters: A True and Fateful Narrative of a Most Remarkable Phenomenon Lately Seen in the Metropolis, to the Great Surprise and Terror of His Majesty's Good Subjects*, by Thomas Thumb (July, 1754), Evans 7332.

*Monster of Monsters* appeared during the Massachusetts Excise Crisis of 1754, when the General Court voted a tax of four pence a gallon on rum and six pence a gallon on wine consumed anywhere in the colony. The bill was designed to plug significant loopholes in an earlier law taxing spirits. The earlier law had mentioned specifically only liquor bought by the glass at taverns; it did not catch wealthy purchasers who bought large quantities of alcohol wholesale for consumption at home or resale to neighbors. In addition to extending the tax coverage, the new bill required each resident to report annually the amount of liquor consumed in his house over the past year and pay the taxes on it.

After passage by the General Court, the bill moved into the council, which was a legislative body nominated by the General Court but actually chosen by the governor and incumbent councilors. Initially the Council opposed the bill, but on a second consideration the next day when some of its members were absent, it voted to support it. Early in June the measure was presented to Governor Shirley. Shirley's response gave the opponents of the Excise their chance to take their case to the public: torn between supporters and opponents of the bill and anxious not to antagonize either, the governor adjourned the legislature until October so that copies of the measure could be distributed among Massachusetts towns and their opinions on it solicited.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the bill's supporters represented inland, rural communities whose residents had never managed to avoid the old tax as wealthy merchants had done, by buying alcohol in large quantities, smuggling it, or making it themselves. Since every Massachusetts town elected a representative, the Excise supporters dominated the General Court and saw little need to mount much of a public appeal. The seaboard representatives opposed the tax not only because it now reached the merchants but also because it invaded privacy by requiring a full-disclosure of the amount of alcohol each family had consumed over the year. They had every reason to gamble on a popular appeal since they had lost overwhelmingly in the Court (52-17), with opposition to the tax concentrated in only four of the ten counties, all of them on the coast and

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<sup>4</sup> For a full discussion of the steps leading to the bill's passage, see Paul S. Boyer, "Borrowed Rhetoric: The Massachusetts Excise Controversy of 1754," *William and Mary Quarterly*, Ser. 3. XXI (1964), pp. 329-33.

dominated by merchants or their allies.<sup>5</sup> In the four month adjournment proclaimed by the Governor, they took up the Excise question in taverns, parlors, and public meetings, and it was on the mercantile side that *Monster of Monsters* was written.

*Monster* was one of a dozen pamphlets on the Excise produced during the adjournment and one of eleven pamphlets opposed. It was a satirical allegory, a story about a Monster (the Excise) “first seen in a large assembly of matrons” (the General Court) who took such a fancy to him that they decided they could raise money by sending the charming creature around the country and selling tickets to view him. The first assembly of matrons pressed their idea before a second group (the Council) but that second group opposed sending the Monster out because he was so ugly he would terrify the viewers and so vicious that he might get loose and eat them. The first assembly of ladies was so furious at the rejection of their delightful idea that they insisted the second group reconsider, whereupon the other ladies, “some absent, some cowardly, some drunk,” caved in and went along with the plan.<sup>6</sup>

The owner of the house where the ladies met (the Governor), however, worried that the Monster would not only frighten onlookers and consume a few who came too close, but would soon break free, chase other people into their homes, and destroy them there. He proposed that first a picture of the Monster be sent around for popular perusal, so the people would not blame the ladies for exposing them to a vicious monster without their prior approval. And that, for the time, was the end of the story; it had to stop before the popular perusal was complete, since the adjournment was still on when *Monster* appeared.<sup>7</sup>

As it is described here, *Monster* sounds like a rather ordinary political pamphlet of the century, undistinguished either by the ingenuity of its writing or the originality of its theme (comparing a policy the author disliked with a monster). Hardly an exceptional piece of work, one would think. But one feature sets the pamphlet apart from other

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<sup>5</sup> June 13, 1754, *Journals of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts, 1754-55* (Boston, 1956), p. 38. For general progress of the bill, see also pp. 43, 46-47, 63-64, 72.

<sup>6</sup> *Monster*, pp. 4-16.

<sup>7</sup> *Monster*, p. 14.

New England writings of the early and mid-eighteenth centuries, and takes present-day readers back to the attention it attracted at the time. This was the pamphlet's rather exceptional character as political satire. Alone among all the pamphlets written during the Excise controversy and very nearly alone in New England literature to that time, *Monster* was political satire, and it showed that such satire could attract readers. Up to that time remarkably little satire of any kind had been written in eighteenth century New England, virtually none of it concerned politics, and almost none of it sold well anyway.

Satire is defined as "a poem or prose work holding up human vices, follies, etc. to ridicule or scorn. Trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm, used for the purpose of exposing and discrediting vice or folly." The object of the satirist is to poke fun at people who deviate from the values or standards of behavior of a community while claiming to uphold them (or really thinking they do). The incongruity itself makes readers laugh; laughter calls attention to the person or thing being ridiculed and theoretically produces correction. The political satirist stresses incongruities: the incongruity of a politician's claiming to live by certain commonly accepted principles, but acting in a way that defies them; for example, the incongruity of a representative claiming to support principles he votes against, the incongruity of a legislator claiming to represent the interests of a community that believes in a citizen's right to life, property, and privacy and then supporting laws that undermine all of these rights.

The revelation of incongruity "intentionally humiliates" by holding its victim up to public scorn.<sup>8</sup> "Satire works first on the ill nature of the audience; they are moved to laugh... and the shame of that laughter teaches us to amend what is ridiculous."<sup>9</sup> Incongruity is at the heart of *Monster of Monsters*: the ladies who claim to be charmed and delighted by a perfectly hideous monster who threatens to eat them, the ladies who really must know the monster will terrify the populace but want to cart him around on a fundraising tour that will please the viewers.

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<sup>8</sup> Allan Ingram, *Intricate Laughter in the Satire of Swift and Pope* (New York, 1986), pp. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> J.D. Browning, ed. *Satire in the Eighteenth Century*, (New York, 1983), pp. 2-3.

The incongruity works because the author tells his story in such a way that the political events behind it are transparently clear to the reader: the reader would not laugh if he didn't get the point and the satire wouldn't work if it didn't flatter the reader that he could figure out the parallels himself. So it is perfectly clear to everyone that *Monster's* author wants the reader to see the parallels between the story and the Excise crisis and to realize the incongruity of the representatives' arguing that the excise on wine will be popular when they know full well that requiring residents to report how much wine they drink at home is a dangerous invasion of privacy.

At the same time, however, the satirist must obfuscate his descriptions enough that particular victims will not be able to prove in a court of law that the satirist actually meant them and thereby sue him for libel. Note the definitions of libel cited in eighteenth century courts: "scandal as is expressed in a scoffing and ironical manner... in a strain of ridicule," "defamation, tending to expose another to public hatred, contempt, or ridicule."<sup>10</sup> How are these definitions different from the definition of satire? Contemporaries recognized the overlap, and used the terms interchangeably.

This meant that the satirist had to protect himself by obscuring the descriptions of his targets just enough that they would be easily recognizable by readers but not precisely identifiable in a court of law. He had to "wrap up [his] poison well and save some double meaning on reserve."<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Swift had actually drawn up some rules: "never to print a man's name out at length, but as I do that of Mr. 'St ---- le,'" "celebrating the actions of others who acted directly contrary to the persons we would reflect on"; "by nicknames... which everybody can tell how to apply." Political satirists had picked up on a number of these.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Case and Trial*, p. 26.

<sup>11</sup> James Miller, *A Collection of Scarce, Curious, and Valuable Pieces Both in Verse and Prose* (Edinburgh, 1785), p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> "The Importance of the Guardian Considered" in *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift*, D.D. ed. Temple Scott, V (London, 1899), p. 297. See also Robert D. Spector, *Political Controversy: A Study in Eighteenth Century Propaganda* (New York, 1992), pp. 6-7 and Laurence Hanson, *Government and the Press, 1695-1763* (Oxford, 1967), "The Law," pp. 7-35.

*Monster of Monsters* utilized Swift's methods and several more in literary usage.

For one thing, *Monster* was allegorical, and allegory was a classic way to disguise political narrative. For another thing, satirists often used ridiculous names that, while fictitious, gave their characters transparent identification. In *Monster*, politicians were nicknamed and given various matronly descriptions that would identify individuals in the Council or General Court: "Madam Rixa" who had "recently grown rich by gaming,"; "Mrs. Aquatica," "the wife of a wealthy farmer who treats his tenants haughtily"<sup>13</sup>; "Madam Capilla", "formerly a pagan priest now non-religious", were in the General Court.<sup>14</sup> "Madame Marina," tall, trying to be young, "Madam Chernia," with a philosophical bent, discoverer of a stone for the Royal Society,<sup>15</sup> and "Miss Polly," who was "a young dapper lady," were on the Council. All the descriptions applied recognizably to members of one branch or another. Readers might delight in figuring out who the descriptions applied to, but it was virtually impossible for the victim to prove in a court of law that he was the intended "Mrs. Biddy" or "Madam Capella."

Giving politicians abbreviated, but quickly recognizable, titles or names was another useful tool of the satirist. In *Monster*, Mrs. Biddy in the General Court was "wife of a C-1-n-1; she is reputedly Jewish, an Ifr-I- - ti- - - ind... d- - -."<sup>16</sup> Finally, *Monster* used the parodied speech, the satirists' stock in trade. Madame Cornelia, "in high Esteem, tho' low of stature," reminded representatives that previous attempts to send wild animals around the colony failed because of the popular abhorrence "of all Beasts of Prey." Another member of the General Court (tea party) said she was "much mistaken if you would get enough to defray the charges of carting [the Monster] about "(i.e., the Excise returns would not cover the cost of administering the tax) because people would resent being exposed to him."<sup>17</sup> The parodies were little more than a sentence

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<sup>13</sup> *Monster*, p. 10.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.



each, but that, combined with the descriptions of each representative, was enough to tell readers “in the know” what each of the speakers had said. The very publicity was alarming to legislators used to deliberating in secret; if the public was to get any information at all on their discussions, they felt, it should at least come from official sources. Thus *Monster of Monsters* was alarming to Massachusetts representatives because it showed that satirists, by clever disguise, could give away the contents of their legislative debates and ridicule them for their positions.

The pamphlet was even more alarming because it showed that in satiric form the public would actually read it and laugh. For the politician there was no defense against being laughed at; the very act of complaining about a humorist’s piece showed that the politician recognized himself as the appropriate target. *Monster*’s healthy sales revealed that political satire, for long known only erratically in New England, was now for the first time finding a function and a market.

Very little satire had been published in New England at all before 1754, and only occasionally was it of a political nature. Governor Belcher’s speech to the legislature was parodied in 1730, and Joseph Green’s poetic parody “Govr. Belcher’s speech to Assembly N: Hampshire” circulated in manuscript in 1734.<sup>18</sup> A handwritten parody of an earlier poem praising Governor Belcher had appeared on the door of the General Court’s meeting place in 1730,<sup>19</sup> but neither was published. Some writings took their titles from English satirical works, particularly several of Daniel Defoe’s, but they turned out to have little satirical content of their own. Paul Dudley and Elisha Cooke had engaged in a hostile exchange over the nature of imperial government, for example, in their pamphlets about “News from Robinson Crusoe’s Island” and the title of John Checkley’s *Shortest Way with the Diests* reminded readers of Defoe’s *Shortest Way with the Dissenters*, but none of these was really a satire.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> David S. Shields, *Oracles of Empire, Poetry, Politics, and Commerce in British America, 1690-1750* (Chicago, 1990), p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 120-122.

More daunting for a would-be satirist, the satires that were written in New England had not sold very well. James Franklin had published a good deal of English satire in his *New England Courant* (1723-27) and had inserted some satirical announcements of his own, including one insinuating that the Massachusetts government was dragging its heels in searching for a pirate ship. (That one annoyed the General Court to the point of detaining him.) But the *Courant* died of lack of readership within a few years and Daniel Fowle's own *Independent Advertiser*, which also inserted long selections of British satire, folded in even less time.<sup>21</sup> James Franklin had even lamented the end of his satirical excursion: "The smart you've giv'n to Vice, each Wound declares / And now thy mangled name shall pay th' arrears."<sup>22</sup>

William Douglass wrote a cutting attack on New England medicine which few people read,<sup>23</sup> and John Wise's satirical attack on the consociation of ministers, *The Church's Quarrel Espoused or a Reply in Satyre, to certain proposals* (1713) went unnoticed at the time.<sup>24</sup> The only writer, in fact, who seemed to be finding a market for his satire by 1750 was Joseph Green, whose *Entertainment for a Winter's Evening...* published that year poked fun at Massachusetts masons and Governor Belcher's former association with them.<sup>25</sup> In his second edition, Green could celebrate that his "Correction, gentle as it is, will probably have the desired effect."<sup>26</sup> Green's *Entertainment* was published four years before the Excise crisis. Its success, along with that of Green's *Mournful Death of Mr. Old Tenor*, which ridiculed the "happy days" when bills of old

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<sup>21</sup> Duniway, *Freedom of the Press in Massachusetts*, p. 102.

<sup>22</sup> *The Life and Death of Old Father Janus* (Boston, 1726), Evans 2758. Father Janus Stood for Satire.

<sup>23</sup> Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature, II, 1676-1765* (New York 1880), p. 153.

<sup>24</sup> Tyler, *A History of American Literature*, pp. 104, 110-114; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind, From Colony to Province* (Boston, 1953), p. 288.

<sup>25</sup> By the Hon. B.B. Esq. (Jos. Green), Boston, 1750, esp. pp. 7, 13.

<sup>26</sup> Boston, 1750. Evans 6511, Preface.

tenor had caused runaway inflation in New England suggested that political satire was then, but only then, beginning to find its readers.<sup>27</sup>

The slowness of political satire to develop in New England had been particularly striking in view of the New Englanders' familiarity with English satire that had flourished and already begun to decline by mid-century. Since the beginning of the century, satire had been the staple product of opposition political writers in England and, increasingly, in most American colonies where writers looked to English models. An extraordinary group of English satirists including Pope, Gay, Swift, Bolingbroke, and Pulteney dominated English literature from the 1720's to the late 1750's and English satire was even past its peak by 1754. Writers in most colonies from New York to the south looked to the English models, printers in most colonies produced copies of the best English satires only a year or so (sometimes less) after they appeared in England, and readers avidly bought them in the bookstores or heard them read in the taverns. But there had been little satire written in New England and even less purchased there. There was not much evidence before *Monster* that native-born satire could obtain a market in the region.

*Monster* changed all this and showed that the success of Green's poetry was not a fluke: the New England market was ready for political satire. There are no sales records but by at least one account the pamphlet had "sold well,"<sup>28</sup> and since Fowle's arrest (he was actually charged with libel) was "the chief topic of Conversation in Town," the account was probably right. At least two other pamphlets published at the time mentioned *Monster of Monsters* as if it was becoming well known.<sup>29</sup> Isaiah Thomas, a friend of the Fowles, reported that the legislature's charges against Fowle were dropped promptly because of public pressure.<sup>30</sup> The General Court even tried to let Fowle out of jail in the

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<sup>27</sup> Boston, 1750. Evans 6512.

<sup>28</sup> Leonard W. Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press* (Oxford, England, 1985), p. 34.

<sup>29</sup> *The Review* (Boston, 1754; Evans 7304), pp. 4-5; Fowle, *A Total Eclipse of Liberty; Being a True and Faithful Account of the Arrangement of Daniel Fowle* (Boston, 1755; Evans), p. 1. See also *The Eclipse* (Boston, 1754), Evans 7186.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas, *History of Printing*, I, p. 132-133.

middle of the night because he and the pamphlet were so well known that a daytime release might attract a crowd.

Why this apparent popularity? Why the sudden take off of satire in New England? We've already seen that we can't explain this by the quality of the writing: *Monster* was not a work of captivating literary merit. Nor can we explain it as a result of clever marketing: no novel techniques were used to sell the pamphlet. It has already been seen, too, that its political argument was probably favored by only a minority of the populace, those people in the seaboard towns who opposed the Excise. So one must look to other reasons for its surprising market, and historians have been a little uncertain about such explanations.

One set of arguments runs something like this: satire was incompatible with Puritanism, so satire in New England caught on only when Puritanism was declining there. But what exactly has been the relationship between Puritanism and satire? Here again, historians have been uncertain. Did the satirist's attack on such misbehavior usurp what Puritans had considered God's function, as Gary Dyer has asked?<sup>31</sup> More than a century ago Moses Coit Tyler, in his monumental *History of American Literature*, argued that Puritanism, "sad, devout, theological, analytical, looking joylessly upon this material world as a sphere blighted by sin" assumed that most men were not redeemable from their sins, and certainly not redeemable through wit and ridicule.<sup>32</sup> Recently, Richard Bushman has argued just the opposite: it was satire, not Puritanism that took a bleak view of human nature. Puritanism "aimed at reform, invited change, and implicitly or explicitly directed hearers into the path of redemption," whereas the very hopelessness of satire obviously prevented it from becoming a dominant Puritan mode of expression.<sup>33</sup> Yet another link has been suggested: did satires prosper when New England was no longer a collection of towns in which Puritan society was so tight, the Puritan sense of community so strong, that no

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<sup>31</sup> Gary Dyer, *British Satire and the Politics of Style, 1789-1832*, (Cambridge, Eng. 1997), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> *History of American Literature*, p. 300.

<sup>33</sup> Richard L. Bushman, "Caricature and Satire in Old and New England before the American Revolution" in *Massachusetts Historical Society Proceedings* 88 (1976), p. 30.

one dared to offend his neighbor by satirizing his misbehavior?<sup>34</sup> The decline of Puritanism might well be connected to *Monster*'s success but to say the least, historians are not very sure what the relationship between Puritanism and satire really is. One must look further for an explanation.<sup>35</sup>

A more convincing set of reasons revolves around the fact that alone among pamphlets published during the Excise Crisis, *Monster* was singled out for prosecution by the General Court -- a guarantee of notoriety, especially since press censorship was virtually unprecedented in Massachusetts. In October, 1754, when the legislature reconvened after its adjournment, "a complaint [was] made to the House of a printed Pamphlet entitled *A Monster of Monsters* as reflecting on sundry Members of this House. Resolved, that the Pamphlet... is a false, scandalous Libel, reflecting upon the Proceedings of this House in general and on many worthy Members in particular in breach of the privileges thereof."<sup>36</sup> The Council had the seller Daniel Fowle arrested for selling it; he was summoned for questioning by the General Court and summarily thrown in jail. Fowle's brother, Zachariah, who had actually printed the pamphlet, was also summoned before the Court but excused for reason of illness. The merchant Royal Tyler, whose servant had dropped the pamphlet off at Fowle's store, was also questioned, briefly incarcerated, and then released after a couple of days. Daniel Fowle remained in jail for five days, was interrogated again, assessed charges, and finally released.<sup>37</sup>

Fowle's imprisonment was indeed surprising. While he was in jail Fowle secretly wrote a pamphlet of his own, *A Total Eclipse of Liberty*, which he later published expressing bitterness over the miserable

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<sup>34</sup> Howard, *Connecticut Wits*, p. 66.

<sup>35</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *King and People in Provincial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, 1986). Appendix, "Country Party Rhetoric in Massachusetts," pp. 258-261; "Caricature and Satire," *M.H.S. Procs.*, pp. 27-29.

<sup>36</sup> October 24, 1754, *Journals*, p. 63.

<sup>37</sup> Fowle's travails are described in Isaiah Thomas' *The History of Printing in America*, I (Nef. 1967 reprint of Albany, NY 1874 edition), pp. 129-134. See also Clyde Augustus Duniway, *The Development of Freedom of the Press in Massachusetts* (Cambridge, MA, 1906), pp. 115-118.

conditions of his imprisonment but more than that astonishment at having been arrested in the first place. And well he might have been surprised. Massachusetts had one of the freest presses in the Anglo-American world. *Monster* was the only one of eleven pamphlets published against the Excise that was called libelous, and one of a half dozen publications against which government action was taken during the entire century. At the time Fowle was arrested, Massachusetts had long enjoyed the most active press in the colonies and one of the most free from persecution or censorship.

Pre-censorship, in practice a dead letter in the colony after 1722, had formally disappeared from gubernatorial instructions in 1730 when it was left out of the instructions of Governor Jonathan Belcher. In the 1720's the Council, through whom all charges were handed on to the courts, had charged three printers with contempt for publishing pamphlets or newspaper features critical of government, two of them pamphlet essays concerning the paper currency measures of 1720-1. The third was a mock news item by William Franklin in his *New England Courant* protesting the legislature's reluctance to pursue the pirates who raided the coast, but although Franklin was harassed for a few months, none of the cases was really followed up. John Checkley, an Anglican, was charged with libel in 1724 for selling copies of a pamphlet printed in England called *A Short and Easy Method with the Deists with a Discourse Concerning Episcopacy*. The Council ordered the prosecution of Checkley for libel since he had shown disrespect to the government; the jury, obviously confused about whether this disrespect constituted libel or not, left the decision to the judges, who convicted Checkley and fined him. But the case had set no precedent; the jury's confusion left no way for the case to serve as a model.<sup>38</sup>

After the Checkley case the Council had made only one more charge of libel against a printer, but this, too, left absolutely no model for future prosecution because the charges were dropped. Thomas Fleet, the printer of a news item reporting that Parliament had called for papers relating to a war with Spain in 1742 was apparently able to produce witnesses showing that the report was accurate.<sup>39</sup> So the legislature had instigated only two libel charges in three decades and neither had

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<sup>38</sup> Duniway, *Freedom of the Press in Massachusetts*, pp. 108-111.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 112-115.

established a precedent. Even the venomous pamphlets written during the currency controversies of the 1740's drew no charges of either libel or contempt. Certainly there was no pattern of legislative harassment of printers in Massachusetts up to the time when *Monster* appeared.

The primary model Massachusetts legislators might have known to draw upon was from another colony, and this also would have suggested the futility of prosecution. John Peter Zenger was a printer who had been charged with seditious libel for publishing in the *New York Weekly Journal* several mock articles and fake advertisements that criticized the colony's Governor much as *Monster* criticized the legislators of Massachusetts. At the trial, which was well known in Massachusetts, Zenger's attorney had argued that his client was innocent because the Governor's behavior really had violated community norms; the printer's innocence should be determined by the jury, who presumably shared the community values and could best judge if behavior deviated from them. The jury agreed and acquitted Zenger.<sup>40</sup> Since the implication of the trial was that the Governor's behavior justified the ridicule, it served as a warning to would-be future accusers in all colonies that their behavior itself might be on trial in a libel case, and politicians were very hesitant to charge their critics with libel. Fowle's charge, therefore, was unusual.

Fowle's prosecution for distributing *Monster of Monsters* was surprising not only because there was very little precedent for colonial governments doing so successfully, but also because the legislature must have known that bringing a publisher or distributor of a pamphlet to trial inevitably added to the pamphlet's notoriety and increased its sales. From long experience Englishmen knew that bringing a printer to court attracted attention to his work: as Cato had written, "Experience shows us that the more notice is taken of them [by the government against the

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<sup>40</sup> Leonard W. Levy, *Emergence of a Free Press* (New York, 1985), pp. 36, 45; Levy "Did the Zenger Case Really Matter? Freedom of the Press in Colonial New York," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser. XVIII (January, 1960), pp. 35-50; Michael Kammen, *Colonial New York, A History* (New York, 1975), p. 207; Stanley N. Katz, ed. *Brief Narrative of the Case and Tryal John Peter Zenger* (Cambridge, Mass., 1963), p. 34; Paul Finkelman, "Politics, The Press, and the Law: The Trial of John Peter Zenger," in Michael Belknap, ed., *American Political Trials* (Westport, CT, 1994), pp. 25-44.

satires] the more they are published.”<sup>41</sup> Printers actually made extra copies of poems or pamphlets or journal issues if they expected to be the object of a government attack. After such an attack “every body is enquiring after [it] so... it is read by thousands.”<sup>42</sup> Being burnt by the common hangman brought *Monster* far more notice than it would otherwise have received.

Several reasons may have fed the General Court’s desire to prosecute Fowle. One reason doubtless was *Monster*’s skill in conveying the procedure of the Court and the substance of its debates at a time when the Massachusetts legislature, like all colonial assemblies, was going to great lengths to prevent any unauthorized publication of the debates by a printer who exposed the legislature’s secret deliberations to public scrutiny.

Another reason may have been that the author of *Monster* inadvertently gave them a clear opening to press charges of libel. At the end of his pamphlet he made an imaginative -- but also egregious -- slip by announcing that his story was pure fiction. . . “my narrative... has not one word of truth in it. There is not to my knowledge been any Monster in the Town, nor anything like a Monster.” He went on to suggest that the story was open to various interpretations: one reader had thought the Monster stood for the Pope, another that it stood for France, a third thought the whole pamphlet was an attack on women.<sup>43</sup> Given the range of different interpretations the author disingenuously urged the reader not to make further interpretations of his own. Fowle then compounded the problem by quoting the same plea in his own *Total Eclipse of Liberty*.

The disclaimer made Fowle far more vulnerable to arrest than if the pamphlet had said nothing and he had left himself the defense that the material was actually true, so he could not be guilty of a crime simply for publishing the truth. Truth was not a fail-safe defense, but Zenger had

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<sup>41</sup> John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato’s Letters: Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects*, I (NY, 1971; Reprint of London, 1755, 6th edition.), p. 298. “The more notice is taken of them, the more they are published” (Ibid., III, p. 298).

<sup>42</sup> See William Smith’s comments on the Zenger Case. *History of New York*, ed. Kammen, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> *Monster*, p. 17.



gotten away with it in New York and Thomas Fleet had been set free in 1742 when he proved that a news item he had printed was accurate. Moreover, it was clearly unconvincing to argue that a pamphlet was fictional when the whole object of the satirist was to make his disguise of his subject so transparent that every reader could recognize the person or group beneath and find the action so plausible that he would accept it as true. Without leaving himself the defense of truth, the satirist tied himself up in inconsistencies.

Yet another reason for Fowle's arrest was that *Monster* had a marked similarity to the highly successful English satirical pamphlets which had briefly imperiled Sir Robert Walpole's government and forced it to back down on a proposed English excise two decades before. Fowle had earlier included long excerpts from English satirists as well as serious writers in his *Independent Advertiser*, and the author of *Monster* was certainly familiar with English satirical writings produced during Sir Robert Walpole's Excise Crisis of 1733.<sup>44</sup> The pamphlet drew on the theme of the Excise as a monster, which had been anticipated in at least four of the earlier English pamphlets, *An Excise Elegy*, *Britannia Excisa*, *The Sturdy Beggars*, and *The Congress of Excise-Asses*. In them the excise-monster was also perceived as a charming creature by his admirers (compare this to Fowle's Ladies group). In these pamphlets, the monster was to "devour the people" (Fowle's monster was sent "to devour and destroy"). The English monster had a sharp tail and claws (compare this to Fowle's description).<sup>45</sup> Indeed, *Monster of Monsters* looked like a copy of his English model, with one possible, intriguing addition: the New England variant was a suspicious reminder of witchcraft, with the monster standing in for the devil and the representatives who enjoyed much too familiar relations with him being the witches.<sup>46</sup> *Monster's* clear derivation from earlier English pamphlets showed the rich base of English satire from which American writers could draw, but it also highlighted the danger political satirists could inflict on men in power.

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<sup>44</sup> Bushman, *King and People*, pp. 259-260.

<sup>45</sup> Boyer, *Borrowed Rhetoric*. *WMQ* 3rd Ser. XXI, p. 343.

<sup>46</sup> *Monster*, pp. 5, 12-13.

So part of *Monster's* popularity can be explained by the notoriety it attracted from the distributor's arrest and by the cluster of reasons behind the arrest. An even larger part lies in the emerging relationship between the government and the public in the 1750's, creating a political market place, a "public sphere of print discourse,"<sup>47</sup> where satire could become a salable commodity. If one takes this look one would notice rather clearly that before the mid-eighteenth century there was very little grass roots, local interest in province-wide politics, and hence very little market for writings on it; in the same period there was virtually no opportunity for "imperial" politicians to seek popular support against the dominant group in the legislature and little need for the popular coalition to seek it. Both features were changing at mid-century.

One must start with the grass roots interest, or lack of it. For much of the first half of the eighteenth-century, bread and butter issues that concerned most Massachusetts citizens were handled at the local level. Education, religious arrangements, markets, and even defense were handled by town governments. What remained for assemblies to handle were constitutional issues revolving around the legislature's relationship with the governor and the place of provincial institutions in the imperial structure.

Most such constitutional issues inspired little satire for a number of reasons. At the very least, townspeople were not likely to buy it: citizens were more interested in how they kept their roads repaired, raised money for a new church building, or disciplined neighbors who got into fights, than they were in the distribution of power in distant institutions.<sup>48</sup> It was not worth satirizing provincial politicians because most potential pamphlet buyers were not very interested in, and did not care about, provincial politics.

Potential buyers were few, as were potential producers. Who would have had the incentive to produce satire? Remember here that satire is generally the weapon of political opposition, and it works best for a minority group in opposition to an established authority that cannot be attacked in any other way. That means it would not normally be

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<sup>47</sup> Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth Century America* (Cambridge, MA, 1990), p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> Alison G. Olson, "Eighteenth Century Colonial Legislatures and their Constituents," *Journal of American History* 79 (September, 1992), p. 545.

considered appropriate for imperial officials, especially the royal governors, if they were perceived to represent the established authority. It would not work for anyone in a dominant political party who was presumed to have the power to get things done. When English satirists attempted to write political pieces in support of a minister in office their efforts invariably fell flat: the hacks who wrote for Sir Robert Walpole, Lord Bute, or George Grenville were embarrassments. When American governors like Cosby in New York or Dinwiddie in Virginia hired satirists, it backfired.

It also means that satire does not work for political leaders who dominate a legislature and have plenty of other methods for reducing a governor to cooperation. This was, for example, the case in Pennsylvania, where even an accomplished satirist like Benjamin Franklin, writing in support of the overwhelmingly dominant Quaker party, never succeeded in successfully satirizing the opposing proprietary governors. And this was certainly the case in Massachusetts before mid-century where imperial governors could not get things done unless they cooperated with the coalition of Puritan popular leaders and merchants who dominated the legislature.<sup>49</sup> The governors had little patronage with which to build support and few rival interests with whom they could ally. They depended on the cooperation of the dominant popular/mercantile allies, so there was no need for these allies to satirize them.

By the middle of the century, Massachusetts' political situation began to change, encouraging both the production and the purchase of satire. Readers long used to focusing on the politics of the town, not the province, now began taking much more interest in province-wide affairs; provincial politicians, now engaged in developing new political alignments, sought ways to embarrass their opponents before such readers.

The public began looking to the Court, as it had not done before, when several kinds of issues grew in size or complexity so the towns were no longer able to handle them alone and of necessity referred them to the General Court. The growth of population, for example, required a redrawing of local boundaries, the westward movement meant a need for new provincial loads, wars with the French strained local resources and the economic dislocations caused by the wars were too much for

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<sup>49</sup> Alison Olson, *Making the Empire Work* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), p. 83.

townships to handle. Previously efficient local governments slowed down under the pressures of religious divisions and rapid economic growth.<sup>50</sup> As the appeals to the General Court increased, and as legislative leadership became more experienced, the Court began to reorganize itself to handle legislation more efficiently.

Accordingly, the General Court at mid-century began taking up local and provincial issues of far greater interest to Massachusetts townsmen than it had before (the number of laws passed nearly doubled between the 1730-35 and 1755).<sup>51</sup> There was now a far more interested potential readership for political satire and a market of readers better informed on issues a satirist might work into a story, speeches he might parody, political leaders he might ridicule.

The familiarity of readers with the issues, moreover, was also intensified by a conscious effort on the part of the Massachusetts legislature to publicize the questions before it though not yet to legalize publication of debates, and solicit input from voters. Committees held hearings in various parts of the colony and advertised their appearance; they held meetings in taverns and various public places. The General Court considered opening its chambers to onlookers. Several points about the Excise controversy are relevant here. First, there were few expressions of surprise or novelty when the Governor adjourned the House and circulated copies of pending legislation so voters would have a chance to express their opinions on it.<sup>52</sup> Second, debates on the Excise must not have been considered top secret, since news of the debates had already spread around the Boston Exchange by the time Fowle's pamphlet appeared. Finally, note that the assembly took the still unusual step of recording the votes on the Excise in the *Journals* published for the year.

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<sup>50</sup> See Stephen E. Patterson, *Political Parties in Revolutionary Massachusetts* (Madison, WI, 1973), pp. 26-29, 36-41.

<sup>51</sup> Olson, "Legislatures," *JAH* 79, p. 563.

<sup>52</sup> The Court later adjourned to consult constituents on a bill offering indemnity to the Boston Stamp Act rioters and a bill incorporating the Society for Relieving Widows and Children of Congregational Ministers. Olson, "Legislatures," *JAH* 79, p. 534.

We see in the Excise controversy a public hungry for provincial news and a legislature increasingly willing to give it. And the corollary of this was that legislative blocs became willing not only to inform the people of issues already discussed but to seek their support on matters still under discussion.

On a number of the issues concerning both local and provincial politics, moreover, there was now a frequent regrouping of blocs within the assembly, a volatility of coalition, so on given issues it was no longer hopeless for one side to appeal to the electorate and unnecessary for the other. The Excise debate was a case in point. Hitherto a number of leaders of the “popular” party like Elisha Cooke Sr., and Jr., had been drawn from the mercantile ranks so potentially rival seaboard mercantile interests and inland interests in the legislature often shared the same leadership and the same agenda. But on the Excise of 1754, for example, the interests of the small western townsmen who consumed small quantities of liquor at the tavern were clearly at odds with the interest of seaboard merchants who imported liquor, manufactured it, or bought it wholesale, and the governor attempted to be impartial.

The fragmenting of the old “popular” coalition meant that neither side could take public support for granted and neither, in fact, could count on dominating the governor; it behooved them to appeal for popular backing. Note here how appropriately the tax allowed *Monster of Monsters* to take the merchants’ side and show the incongruity of “popular” representatives supporting a tax whose administration invaded the taxpayers’ right to privacy: while they argued on grounds of principle (the fairness of making wealthy merchants pay up), they were really voting for self-interest. Neither side could take for granted the continued domination of the assembly and neither could count on getting the governor’s support. Like the Court as a whole, they needed to cultivate public interest on a succession of issues about which they were concerned.

In the short run, *Monster of Monsters* did not achieve much. Daniel Fowle was released from jail, and assessed charges, which were later substantially reduced on appeal. He left the colony in disgust and set up his press in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, though his brother, Zachariah, stayed on in Boston. The Excise passed the legislature a second time, the governor signed it, and despite an appeal from the Boston merchants, the British government let it stand.

In the long run, however, *Monster of Monsters* was not a wasted effort. The pamphlet confirmed that there was now in New England a market for political satire. Hardly good news for men in government, since political satire was already known elsewhere in Anglo-America as the literary genre best suited to opposition writers, men out of power. When its readers laughed at the silly speeches representatives made in the General Court they also recognize that satire could expose the very characters it appeared to disguise and communicate through parody information which could not legally be revealed any other way. When writers tried it they discovered the rich heritage of English political satire from which they could draw. And the ultimate fate of Fowle -- who was released when the government failed to follow up on its charges -- suggested that satire was relatively safe. No New England assembly charged a satirist with libel later in the Revolutionary era; royal governors like Bernard, Hutchinson, and Gage considered making such charges then, but could not get the courts to take them. All the satirist had to do was claim that he told the truth, because truth was the ultimate test, and poke fun, because laughter was the unanswerable weapon.