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The Humorous Side of Shays' Rebellion

William Pencak

"Good humor is the only shield to keep off the darts of the satirical railer," commented one anonymous contributor to the January 13, 1787 issue of the *Massachusetts Centinel*. "If you have a quiver well stored and are sure of hitting him between the joints of the harness, do not spare him. But you had better not bend your bow than miss your aim." During Shays' Rebellion, the western Massachusetts farmers' insurrection which began in late August of 1786 and petered out the following spring, the pro-government press fired unstintingly at the rebellious yeomen, sometimes viciously, sometimes (especially after January of 1787, when Shays no longer posed a serious threat) in a spirit of fun. If the poems and anecdotes which made their way through the papers and, in some cases, into traditional New England folk humor, misfired more often than not, they nevertheless provide insight into the mentality which found the rebels' conduct incomprehensible and outrageous.

Perhaps the first humorous piece generated by the western protests appeared in the *Worcester Magazine* in the third week of August, 1786. Someone claiming to be "Ned Lovefun" complained that "nothing new, nothing diverting, witty, or amusing [was] in the papers," which covered the "cry from the corrupt placeman, down to the humble hunter after dreadful paragraphs and tales of broken limbs and astonishing recoveries." But he insisted that "the fault, Mr. Printer, I apprehend, is in the readers, not in the paper, as matter enough is almost daily presented to them, in these heterogeneous repositories, to afford infinite entertainment, if they knew how and where to find it." "Having lately discovered the clue to unravel this important secret," Lovefun shared with the public the art of "cross reading, or reading two columns, together onwards."

Lovefun's examples, however, for the most part called attention to Massachusetts' economic problems:

Saturday Mr. --- gave a grand entertainment ***
four bankruptcies took place one day last week.

The credit of the United States, says a
correspondent *** on Thursday will be sold at
public auction.

Want employ *** the merchants of this town, etc.,
says a writer.

The old Continentals, it is said, will be called in
***which will be sold at 28 shillings per barrel.

Maryland State has also made paper money *** two
others were branded for like offense.

Some of Lovefun's examples, while having nothing to do
with the economic depression, are too delectable to resist. They
include:

Dr. M'N--t--n's pills cure *** Damaged furniture,
broken chairs, etc. etc.

Yesterday, a gentleman fell violently in love with
*** West India and New England Rum and other
articles.

The person who lately hung himself was ***
Benedict Arnold, lately arrived at Halifax.

Mr. P---, the equestrian performer, imports ***
three ladies of pleasure, we are creditably
informed.

Money is the root of evil, yet it is much wanted
*** enquire of the printer.

Unlike most of the Shays' humorists, Lovefun at least gave
the dissatisfied equal time. He spoofed the County Conventions
where the future Shaysites drew up their lists of grievances, by
noting that "the Bristol Convention met a few days since and ***

more jackasses, we hear, are expected from Spain." But he also criticized the legal profession, then as now a butt of popular wit for its excessive fees and chasing after possible suits: "A warrant is issued for the execution of *** the whole order of lawyers, to a man, we hear."

Lovefun's balance was missing in other diatribes against the agrarian protestors. The November 29 issue of the *Centinel* told of how the sheriff of Worcester County was insulted by protestors when he read them the riot act. They informed him that his fee for hanging a man -- the possible if rarely enforced maximum penalty for riot -- was too high. This "brought on the mobbers their favorite topic, grievances." "Well, rejoins the Sheriff, if that is all the grievance you have to complain of, you will not long want for redress, for I will now hang you all for nothing." Such bravado may well have won the Shaysites' respect, for no violence accompanied their closing of the November court at Worcester to prevent foreclosures and imprisonment for unpaid debts.

Of course, the rebels had other grievances, including the existence of a State Senate, the size of the governor's salary, and the state's tax and debt collection policies, which they presented in long lists to the General Court. On February 3, the *Centinel* trivialized the farmers' genuine hardships by inventing some hypothetical grievances some uneducated Shaysites supposedly discussed:

One of them, says he, had been an expert hunter in his younger days but he is now grown old and his eyesight fails him, therefore he has no success in hunting, and that he thinks is a grievance, and ought to be redressed. Another of them says his wife has a child every year, and that he thinks a grievance, and ought to be redressed. Another of them borrowed an apprentice boy's boots, and wore them to Worcester in Convention with the Broom Smith General and others, to stop the sitting of the Court of Common Pleas, to be holden there in December last, and the inclemency of the weather drove him too near the fire as to spoil the boots, and the boy refused to take them again, and that he thinks a grievance, and ought to be redressed. The rest of them complain of similar grievances.

After the rebellion was safely crushed, the *Hampshire Gazette* of March 7, 1787, lampooned the vanquished farmers' "List of Grievances," in verse. If the newspapers mocked the Shaysites' bold language and confidence that the people would support them, they were equally scathing in their jibes at the lack of personal integrity and cowardice of the insurrection's leaders. Luke Day, commander of one of the two wings of Shays' army, found himself the butt of the following anecdote in the January 3 issue of the *Centinel*:

In the course of the last war, a Negro man ran away from his master, in the state of New York, and was taken up and committed to gaol in Springfield. A brother-in-law of Luke Day's (being the head of a class that wanted a man) finding that the Negro was willing to go into the service if he could have his liberty, engaged Day to go and purchase him for the class, furnished him with money, and agreed to pay him [for] his trouble and expense. He accepted, went and bought the Negro for thirty pounds. On his return, his brother being sick, Day went to Springfield, took the Negro from gaol, got him mustered, and then found he could sell the Negro for fifty dollars more than he had given for him (to a person who wanted a man for another class) sold him, and on his return, told his brother and the class, that they could not have the Negro as he refused to go, unless they would give him an additional sum to what he had already paid. Day then paid the class the money he had been advanced, and very honestly put the pounds in his own pocket.

This tale of Day's mendacity complements the legend that Daniel Shays himself pawned for fifty pounds the sword presented to him by the Marquis de Lafayette, for gallantry in the American Revolution. It also skillfully played on the growing anti-slavery sentiment in Massachusetts, whose Supreme Court had declared the practice unconstitutional in 1780, thereby pointing out a contradiction between the Shaysites' insistence on liberty for themselves while nonchalantly trafficking in human beings to

avoid military service during the Revolution. Eastern Massachusetts' justifiable indignation that the west did not shoulder its fair burden during the conflict also comes through vividly in the Day anecdote.

Shays himself came in for considerable personal attacks. The *Centinel* reported some "intelligence extraordinaire" on December 13, that Shays was last seen "with a green leaf in his hair, lolling on two soft cushions. In his right hand he held the life of the pious St. Austin [Augustine], and with his left hand he pointed to this passage: 'While the timid guide we have nought to fear.'" At that time, the government had taken no measures besides arresting the Middlesex County ringleaders in the hope of ending the rebellion. On January 10, however, after the General Court had decided to muster a 4,400 man expedition to quell the uprising, the same author updated his account. Instead of leaning on two cushions, a symbol of pretention to regal authority, Shays now rested on:

but one, and that was a very odd one, it being hardly distinguishable from a bag of cotton wool, but for its red covering. The other instead of a cushion, was a thorn. It is now said, that the life of the pious St. Austin gives Shays no consolation; that he dreads the 23rd of January [the date General Benjamin Lincoln's expedition was to embark against him] more than Charles did the 30th [the date of King Charles I's execution in 1649]; that the ghost of the Earl of Lincoln haunts him night and day, but that he still wears a green leaf in his hair.

In these mock "intelligence reports," Shays appears as an illegitimate claimant to the sort of monarchical authority Americans dreaded, as the analogy with the detested Charles drives home. But he still wore the green badge of rebellion, even after the state overcame its hesitation to punish him.

Shays' very name, pronounced the same as the small chariot pulled by one horse, also provoked some heavy-handed humor. An "Advertisement Extraordinaire" which first appeared on December 23 was reprinted in the *Centinel* on January 6:

Started from the door of the Court-House in Worcester, in a great fright, on the ninth instant, a white horse, in a small fallback shaise, which had run but a few times before, and then on a very smooth road, where it met with little or no injury. The body was painted red, arms on the back, a sword and a bayonet: maker's name Sediton. It was afterwards at Hubbardstown, with one wheel off, the knave-led fellows of which, were so split and divided, as to be deemed incapable of further service. It was afterwards seen on the road to Pelham, the body then almost broken in pieces, and the head in a very shatter'd [a play on the name of Job Shattuck, prominent Shaysite] condition. If any light horseman, supposed to be yet on the run, will transport the same to Boston, and deliver it to the right owner, so as he can fairly dispose of it by execution, will receive his best thanks, and have all the necessary charges paid.

N.B. As said Shaise is of a small size, some people may possibly take it for a sulkey. But if it answers the above description, it may be taken in for further examination.

Besides expressing the state's frustration that the Shaysites materialized from nowhere to close courts (as at Worcester on December 9), this anecdote illustrates the common belief that Tories (hence the color red) were behind the "sedition." The division among the rebels once the General Court offered some concessions and a pardon to those who laid down their arms by January 1 is also mentioned. The author's feeling that "execution" would be an appropriate reward for the diminutive Shays comes through as well.

The Shaysites could not win. If they employed hit-and-run tactics, they were cowards. When they openly declared their principles, as did Thomas Grove, they were insane. In a newspaper advertisement printed in the *Centinel* on February 14, Grove had urged the rebels, who had been driven into neighboring states, to gather and overwhelm "Burgoyne Lincoln's army," much as the militia forced the hapless British general to surrender in

1777. A reply appeared in the *Centinel* on March 3: "Observing, sometime past, a remarkable publication, to which the author had the madness, or vanity, to sign his proper name, Thomas Grove, it brought to mind an old song," that of Tom of Bedlam:

I'm old mad Tom - behold me!
 My wits are quite unframed;
 I'm mad I'm sure, and past all cure,
 And no hope of being reclaim'd.

I'll climb the snowy mountains,
 And there confront the weather;
 I'll block the rainbow from the sky,
 And stick both ends together.

I'll mount the primum mob lo,¹
 And there I'll fright the gypsies,
 I'll play at bowls with sun and moon,
 And shade them in eclipses.

I'll break the Constitution,
 Change customs, times, and laws;
 Push judges from the bench,
 Nor let them know the cause.

With pointed swords and guns,
 And bayonets at their breast,
 From boys and fifes and drums,
 Their laws are all a jest.

I'll drive from their old seat,
 The powers legislative;
 Or else where they must meet,
 When'er I call, or drive.

This is my lot, I'm sure,
 Still to increase my fame;
 Conspicuous heretofore,
 Mad Tom's my proper name.

¹ a play on "primum mobile," the "first cause identified with God in Christianity."
 Mocks the mob's efforts to play God.

The Shaysites' principles proved as vulnerable as their personalities. One of the earliest satires concerning the rebellion, which appeared in the *Centinel* of September 20, showed how some citizens of Northampton, "determined of convincing" one of the "ringleaders" of the recent court stoppage of "the fatal tendency of his conduct":

They employed a true Hibernian . . . who coming up to the Captain begged him to be so kind as to fight him, but he absolutely refused. When Paddy, in a civil way, knocked him down with his fist, and played his part at handcuffs so well that the prostrate countryman was soon glad to call loudly for mercy. Here Patrick ceased from the conflict and the captain rising on his feet threatened him with prosecution -- "By Jesus," says he, "you may prosecute as you please, for there is no law now -- you killed it this morning."

To emphasize the obvious conclusion that law and order would disappear without courts, the paper added: "The Captain was left to contemplate at his leisure the bruises he had obtained."

In a different vein, a writer in the December 16 issue of the *Centinel* mocked what he believed were the anarchist tendencies of the insurgents. He described what was certainly an imaginary discussion held at one of the conventions where the farmers met to discuss their grievances. One yeoman proposed a governor, lieutenant-governor, and council made of wax:

We should follow the genius of the people, and the ancient forms so nearly, that a stranger might forever mistake them for such as existed long ago, say in the days of British tyranny, and I think our aristocratic gentlemen could not be against this, for they have ever declared that under the present mode, the governor and council had so little power, and that they were only cyphers, and if wax, they would at least be figures.

The most extensive parody of the Shaysites and their principles, in the January 4, 1787, issue of the *Hampshire Gazette*,

identified them with the legendary Robin Hood and his band. Among respectable Bay State citizens, these folk heroes had apparently lost whatever charm they might have possessed as defenders of the poor and oppressed. Reporting on a convention that met in Hatfield, one pundit wrote of "the laws and members of the Robin Hood Society," which had just disbanded after four months' activity. Wrongly thinking that the insurrection had ended because of spirited division during the convention's last meeting, the writer commented on how "the venerable remains of this great and luminous body were decently interred in the family vault, under the great seditious synagogue, in Confusion Alley." He then described the funeral procession:

The Corpse was preceded by the Little Man in the East with a long white wand to clear the streets of little boys, who collected in great numbers, gazing at the wondrous novelty -- at his right hand, the Great, and only remaining number of the Council of War, weeping over the petition of the men at arms addressed to the Governor and Council, which he carried in his left hand.

Because the number of mourners was so small, the club decided to "dispense with two of the usual number of pall bearers, as otherwise, they should make a very contemptible figure in the rear." Following "antient custom, the bier was therefore supported by some of their eldest sons, viz. General Pelham [Shays], Colonel Luke Trumps [Day], Colonel Montague and Captain Amherst [rebels from those towns]." The article, prematurely predicting the Shaysites' demise, concluded by adding:

Some have supposed that the broken and scattered members of the former club will by their magic wand attend its resurrection upon the third Thursday of March [a next projected meeting?] -- others better skilled in these matters, who saw the corpse at the time of internment, declare, that there was then such manifest signs of putrefaction (for behold, it stinketh) that nothing short of the power of antient miracles could bring it again into existence.

The newspapers not only attacked the principles and character of the rebels. They sarcastically inquired of the government why it hesitated so long in putting them down. By January 3, one *Centinel* writer, claiming to represent "Thousands," asked the editor to insert this poem to "oblige a number of country customers":

Had not our rulers, lenient as they're wise,
 (More anxious to reclaim than to chastise),
 With pity view'd the weak, misguided few,
 Whom falsehoods had in arms together drew,
 Had they but bid their numerous friends to draw,
 The vengeful sword to execute the law --
 Long, long ere this had Shays and Wheeler died,
 And groaning gibbets had been satisfied.

The popular expectation that at least the leading insurgents would suffer death may have kept them in the field longer than otherwise. Despite the government's offer to pardon those who laid down their arms by January 1, it gave no sign of how those who did not would be treated if captured. One parody of "Yankee Doodle," appearing in the *Centinel* on January 13, intimated that retribution was at hand, with Lincoln's troops preparing to march:

Insurgents all, what will ye say?
 Come -- is this not a griper?
 That when your hopes are danced away
 Tis you must pay the piper.

After the rebels were routed on January 25 and February 4, with almost no bloodshed, one "Nestor" took to the *Centinel's* columns of February 17 to commend "Honestus," whose writings had urged the government to stand firm, and to warn the still unrepentant that the state's patience was wearing thin:

Honestus, you've wrote, and I'm sure you've grown
 grey,
 You have ruined poor Shays, Wheeler, Parsons, and
 Day,
 Some thousands insurgents your writings will curse:
 "Whilst order, like Atlas," remains ne'er the worse.

Then solicit a pardon, acknowledge your fault or
Some of your Function, shall twist you a Halter.

The rebels' dismal performance in the field (they ran away from General William Shepard's troops at Springfield after a single round of cannon fire, and were then chased from their breakfasts at Petersham by Lincoln's army) also provoked some laughter. In a *Hampshire Gazette* story reprinted in the *Centinel* on January 27 (the papers tended to borrow, without benefit of copyright, each other's juicier material), one rebel's earlier (perhaps apocryphal) encounter with an old woman and a cow symbolized the cowardice their entire army had just displayed:

A Gentleman in one of the eastern towns in this county, who had distinguished himself in County Conventions and in the late insurrection, had been for some time apprehensive of an excursion of the light horse [which had arrested Shaysites in Middlesex], and armed himself with two firelocks and a large sword, which every night he kept at the head of his bed. There was an old lady who lived at a small distance with her son. At a time when men were called for, upon the great expedition to Rutland, this old lady's son left her to reinforce the venerable gentleman of the East. The old lady was left alone with a cow, and destitute of any subsistence for her. At length, one night she determined to drive the cow to the gentleman to keep until her son's return. Before the old lady had got to the house, it began to grow dark, and the gentleman with his usual agitations of mind, had retired to his house and locked his doors. His wife went out of the door, and coming in, told him, that she heard a noise like a company of men: he in an undaunted manner girded his sword upon his thigh, and retired into the pot-hole (his usual retreat at such extraordinary times). His wife watched the motions of affairs out of doors, and employed her eldest son as a messenger to carry the news to the gentleman in the pot-hole. At length after some very critical observations, his wife

informed him that she could not absolutely discern more than one personage, though she conjectured that she had seen two. After mature deliberation he resolved to conquer or die. At first he in a most vigorous manner, with drawn sword, assaulted the innocent old cow. He fought a while; when he was re-enforced by his wife, and after a short engagement the poor old cow surrendered a prisoner of war. Elated with his victory, he turned his rapier (which was hot from the capture of the old cow) upon the good old woman: she was surprised, but having furnished herself with a broom handle to drive the old cow, she opposed the onset with great bravery. The engagement was dubious for a long time. The old lady avoided the repeated thrusts of his rapier with the greatest alacrity, and often pelted him with the butt end of the broom handle. But unhappily, it is said, that the woman fell, but recovered and as she was rising, the gentleman's wife attacked her behind with the tongs (the usual weapon of the sex) and the old woman submitted to an honorable peace, and the matter was settled to their satisfaction. The people of the county of Hampshire are cautioned to keep their wives and cows at home, peradventure they shall be taken and slain for Light Horse.

Another anecdote, related to the aftermath of the "battle" at Springfield, also stressed the Shaysites' cowardice. After the insurgents fled, the government troops began to round them up. In a tale recorded by Daniel Stebbins, who was present at the battle and who in 1845 wrote his recollections of the events:

One of Day's men, a poor fellow who could not or did not get away in season with the others, hid under a barn floor. Some of General Shepard's men, reconnoitering the premises, discovered a pair of legs, which the owner could not find room to stow out of sight. Help was called and seizing the legs, [they] began pulling until checked by the body

sticking fast, or by the person holding back. One sung out for an axe to cut off what they had already found. But the poor fellow sang out for quarters, his "hind quarters," and was spared. Being drawn forth and standing upright was near a seven footer.¹

One newspaper "wag," his poem recorded by Franklin Bonney in his Shays' Rebellion Notes, managed to get off some puns on Shays' name while commenting on the astonishing ease with which the rebellion was quelled:

Says sober Bill -- Mr. Shays had fled,
 And peace returns to bless our days.
 Indeed, cried Ned, I always said
 He'd prove at last a fall back Shays!
 And those turned over and undone
 Call him a worthless Shays to run.

When the insurgents fled to New York and Vermont following the rebellion's sudden end, the *Centinel* scored yet another blow on February 21, by comparing them to a horde of insects that not even their new hosts welcomed:

Some gentlemen who belonged to the county of Berkshire, travelling in the state of New York, put up for a night's lodging at a merry old Dutchman's house. He for some time in the evening railed them severely upon the mobbish disposition of the people in their country. After a while the conversation turned upon raising wheat, and the insects which destroy it. One of the Berkshire gentlemen observed, he feared they should never raise much more wheat in the country, because of their flies. The facetious old Dutchman answered, "You in Berkshire need not be afraid of the creatures, for so soon as you discover them to be

 1. Stebbins' recollections are available at the Forbes Library, Northampton.

coming, you will rise like a mob, and drive them back over the line again."

Not all the anecdotes associated with Shays' Rebellion have an obvious moral. Bonney also recorded two which call attention to the well-known facts that eighteenth century New Englanders were not exactly teetotalers, and that they would go to court at the drop of a hat, or rather the bolting of a horse:

It is stated that when General Shepard's army was drawn up awaiting the onset of Shays and his insurgents, pails of rum and whiskey were passed to the soldiers in order to stir up their courage. As the liquor was passed to Moses Porter (afterwards Colonel Porter) he declined the proffered draught, saying, "No, I will take none of it. If I am to die, I will die a sober man." William Cook, who stood at the end of the company, shouts, "Pass it along! Pass it along! I will drink my share and his too."

And the horse story:

After the fiasco, a number of men deserted Shays' army and made their way homeward. In passing on the road, they gave their customary salutation: "Hurrah for Shays." A horse attached to a wagon, at some distance, broke from his fastening, and running away, was killed. The owner of the horse brought action against the "Shays men" for recovery of the value of the horse, on the ground that they were primarily the cause of his death. The men employed a lawyer who was given to over draughts of brandy, at times, and he was not at such time choice of his language. He got through with his evidence, and with conciseness made his plea. "May it please the Court and the gentlemen of the jury -- "If 'Hurrah for Shays' will kill a horse at forty rods, we've lost our case. If not, then by --, we've won it."

Shortly after Shays had been defeated, and the vanquished troops were either pardoned or escaped to other states, "The Ballad of Daniel Shays" began to be sung in Massachusetts. Reprinted in C. O. Parmenter's 1898 *History of Pelham* and subsequently in *Poets and Poetry of Springfield* (1902), its nineteen verses depict such a worthless fellow that even the Devil wouldn't accept him in Hell!

My name was Shays; in former days,
 In Pelham I did dwell, sir;
But now I'm forced to leave that place,
 Because I did rebel, sir.

Within the state I lived, of late,
 By Satan's foul invention,
In Pluto's cause, against their laws
 I raised an insurrection.

Twas planned below, by that arch foe,
 All laws should fall before me;
Though in disgrace, the populace
 Did, Persian like, adore me.

On mounted steed I did proceed
 The federal stores to plunder;
But there I met with a bold salute
 From Shepard's war-like thunder.

He kindly sent his aide-de-camp
 To warn me of my treason;
But when I did his favors scorn,
 He sent his weighty reason.

Which proved too hard for my front guard,
 And they still growing stronger,
I planned to go to the world below
 And live on earth no longer.

When I arrived at the river Styx,
 Where Charon kept the ferry,
I called for speedy passage o'er

And dared no longer tarry.

But Charon's boat was freighted with
Four ghosts from Springfield plain, sir;
He bade me tarry on the wharf
Till the board returned again, sir.

But while I tarried on the wharf,
My heart kept constant drumming,
And conscious guilt made me believe
'Twas Lincoln's army coming.

Then Charon hoists his sable sails,
The lazy gales seemed ling'ring;
I leaped into the sulph'rous stream,
To cross the flood by swimming.

The Demon came to Charon's boat
And strictly gave him orders
To take no more such rebels o'er,
Till he enlarged his borders.

"For I have orders sent to me
That's very strict indeed, sir,
To bring no more such rebels o'er
They're such a cursed breed, sir."

"Go tell that rebel to return.
And he shall be well-guarded.
And for the service done for me
I'll see him well reserved."

Then Charon ordered Shays right back
To gather up his daisies.
And for the service done for him
He gave him many praises.

Then Shays was wroth, and soon replied.
"O! Charon, thou art cruel!"
And challenged him to come on shore
And fight with him a duel.

Then Charon straightway ordered Shays
 To leave the river's bank, sir;
For he would never fight a man
 So much below his rank, sir.

Then Shays returned to Vermont state
 Chagrined and much ashamed, sir;
And soon that mighty, rebel host
 Unto the laws were tamed, sir.

Oh, then our honored fathers sat
 With a bold resolution,
And framed a plan and sent to us
 Of noble constitution.

America, let us rejoice
 In our new constitution,
And never more pretend to think
 Of another revolution.

As during the American Revolution, the actions of residents of western Massachusetts inspired satire as well as patriotic fervor. Nearly all the Shays' Rebellion humor soundly denounced the rebels. It helped to set a pattern that shaped historians' and the public's perception of the event until the early twentieth century. Only in 1902, when Charles Francis Adams spoke up at the American Antiquarian Society, for "poor old Shays, and his somewhat ragged, helter-skelter, and tatterdemalion followers," did the historiographical tide begin to turn.