

## **‘Glass, China, and Reputation, are easily crack’d, and never well mended’ - Poor Richard’s Almanack, 1750.**

“Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial.”

~ Othello (Act 2, Scene 3), William Shakespeare.

In May of this year, Masonic statues of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington were vandalised in Philadelphia, as part of the on-going destruction of historical relics integral to American history. Later, in September, another statue of Franklin, and one of Thomas Jefferson, were removed from the campus of Washburn University, Topeka, for fear of a similar fate. Clearly, as so aptly put by Franklin, reputations are indeed ‘easily crack’d.’ Within the last decade, the reputations of history’s protagonists - as well as those of contemporary figures - have become a matter of intense public interest, driving the hitherto politically uninterested to impassioned acts of vandalism, arson and violence. The heroes of yesterday have become the villains of today: Andrew Jackson, George Washington, Christopher Columbus, Robert E. Lee. These men's reputations, among many others’, have fallen alongside the rubble of their effigies.

Evidently, Franklin’s observation on the fragility of reputation seems particularly pertinent to the year of 2020. Interestingly, however, despite acknowledging the forever-imminent perishability of reputations, Franklin - as an ardent believer in the power of the individual - was equal to argue that it is largely in one’s own hands: “Act uprightly, and despise calumny; dirt may stick to a mud wall, but not to polish’d marble.”<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, we may speculate as to how Franklin would have conceptualised the trends of today relative to his idea of reputation.

Reputations are somewhat specular; we denounce what is disliked, lest it mirrors our own reputation. Thus, we have concluded that the toppling of monuments associated with a historical reputation of racism is a necessary step towards redeeming our own moral reputation. Figures of the Confederacy, Christopher Columbus, Edward Colston, Robert Mulligan, Leopold II of Belgium - all have toppled, with many more on the hit list. Franklin was no stranger to this practice. In the wake of American independence, George Washington and his troops toppled a statue of King George III; in New York, the royal coat of arms, as well as portraits of the King, were set ablaze; and, in the words of New York’s royal governor at the time: “every vestige of royalty, as far as has been in the power of the rebels, has been done away with.”<sup>2</sup> Statue toppling itself is nothing new, dating back far before the birth of America. However, what is particular about the current trend lies in its justification. The statues of today are being toppled not as part of revolution or political uprising, but rather as a result of a new moral calculus; one in which all relics of past injustice must be expunged. Contextualism is peripheral. The logic, in a very simple summation, is as follows: you are against racism, therefore you must cleanse your environment of all that is racist or is associated with racism. Franklin, as founder of the Junto and a lover of the Socratic method, would have likely admired this intellectual consistency of argument, as well as the commitment to acting out what one believes. But, what may have interested him in particular is the fact that it is the reputations of men long-dead that are being exhumed and

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<sup>1</sup> “From Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Galloway, 8 November 1766,” Founders Online, National Archives: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-13-02-0182>. [Original source: The Papers of Benjamin Franklin, vol. 13, January 1 through December 31, 1766, ed. Leonard W. Labaree. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969, pp. 487–488.]

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Lawler, Pulling Down Statues? It’s a Tradition That Dates Back to U.S. Independence. Nationalgeographic.com. July 1, 2020. URL: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/07/pulling-down-statues-tradition-dates-back-united-states-independence/>

demolished, without any concurrent government overthrow. Clearly, the reputation we leave to posterity is not fixed; it is an unending dialectic, flexuous and temperamental. This puts question to his belief of aspiring to be ‘polish’d marble’ as a means by which to absolve oneself from character despoilment.

Not only have the reputations of history’s protagonists erupted in rutilant flames; today’s players have also watched their reputations glow and perish. Alyssa Milano’s triggering of the MeToo Movement in 2017, in wake of the Harvey Weinstein scandal, saw an almost overnight despoilment of the reputations of thousands of high-profile men. Although the sexual politics of eighteenth century America were starkly different, the principles Franklin expounded still remain relevant to our time. In fact, it is likely that Franklin would have had little sympathy toward these men. Few of those who suffered the sword of the MeToo Movement were ‘polish’d marble’; they were - to varying degrees - ‘mud walls,’ and dirt did indeed stick to them. Franklin’s advice seems evidently pertinent here. In *Poor Richard* (1753), he postulates that: “An ill wound, but not an ill name, may be healed.”<sup>3</sup> Today, the mere mention of the name ‘Weinstein’, even without the prefix ‘Harvey’, evokes numerous implications. It has almost become a verb: to weinstein someone, or, similarly, to pull a weinstein. If Mr Weinstein had heeded the advice of Franklin, specifically regarding his virtues seven, twelve and thirteen (Sincerity, Chastity, and Humility),<sup>4</sup> his last name would likely not have entered popular vernacular in this manner. As Franklin aptly implied, no amount of propitiation will redeem you; the crime will haunt your name with spectral determination. In our ever-more Panopticon-esque world, his words have - arguably - never been more relevant.

Benjamin Franklin himself was dedicated to the “arduous project of arriving at moral perfection,”<sup>5</sup> living his life in accordance to his “Thirteen Virtues.’ His stoical discipline in his efforts of self-improvement, his creation of the Junto, and his lifelong ‘passion for virtue’<sup>6</sup> are all evidence of this, among many other feats. Yet, despite his virtue, his role as founding father, civic activist, scientist, philosopher and late-life abolitionist, his reputation has also been exhumed from the annals of history, and subjected to interrogation. Franklin, in the early part of his life, was a slave owner, holding up to seven slaves at one point. Similarly, he was engaged in the sale of his own slaves, as well as the capture of runaways, and himself profited from the domestic and international slave trade. Later in life, Franklin did become an abolitionist. He advocated for black education and integration, writing fervently on the matter in publications such as *A Plan for Improving the Condition of the Free Blacks* (1789) and *An Address to the Public* (1789): so much so, he was appointed head of the Pennsylvania Abolition Society. Yet, will this late conversion save him from the modern day abattoir of reputation? One of his effigies has already been vandalised, and another taken down altogether. Only time will tell if his reputation will also become tinder for the on-going cultural conflagration. What is interesting, however, is the fact that his advice still holds true. Despite his numerous accomplishments, despite realising the ‘atrocious debasement of human nature’<sup>7</sup> that slavery was (and consequently becoming an impassioned abolitionist), his reputation - just like glass or fine china - is liable to ‘crack’ at any moment now. Although this proves his aphorism true, it also highlights a limitation of another of his: you can aspire to be ‘polish’d marble,’ but what constitutes polish’d marble varies from epoch to epoch.

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<sup>3</sup> “Poor Richard Improved, 1753,” Founders Online, National Archives: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-04-02-0148>. [Original source: *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, vol. 4, July 1, 1750, through June 30, 1753, ed. Leonard W. Labaree. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961, pp. 403–409.]

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* (Digireads.com, 2011) pp. 83-4. Kindle Edition.

<sup>5</sup> Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*. p. 81.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*. (Simon & Schuster, 2003) pp. 485.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin, including the Private as well as the Official and Scientific Correspondence, together with the Unmutated and Correct Version of the Autobiography*, compiled and edited by John Bigelow (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904).

This limitation of Franklin's maxim has a significant implication. Reputation is, clearly, inextricable from some degree of moral judgement. Our individual moral framework dictates how we live our life, and how we construct our own hierarchies of value. Therefore, how we construct our own reputation, and how we perceive and value others' reputations, is an act of moral judgement. Thus, as presentism becomes the dominant method of historical analysis, the reputations of those who lived before will be destined to one day 'crack,' as standards of morality are in continual evolution. Therefore, it is arguable that posterity will eventually deem all the players of history a 'mud wall,' sooner or later, contrary to what Franklin implied.

Reputation is everything. In a world infused with information, and an increasingly elusive demarcation between that which is true and that which is 'calumny,' destroying the reputation of others for our own ends is becoming an evermore alluring venture. The ease of cracking and the difficulty of mending a reputation makes besmirchment an attractive tool of politics. In the twentieth-century, we saw the besmirching of ethnic reputations as a means of seizing power and effectuating ethnocide; the Kulaks in Russia, the Jews in Germany, the Armenians in Turkey, the Bosniaks in Bosnia. We saw the practice of character assassination by the Stasi in East Germany, under the policy of *Zersetzung*, and that of *kompromat* by the KGB in the Soviet Union. These are but a few examples out of an immense catalogue. Thus, though the scale and transparency of information we have today is ultimately a net positive, we should equally heed Franklin's words, as a reminder and a warning of both the precariousness and the expedient value of reputation as a tool for political games. As said best by Orwell: "He who controls the past controls the future." And it is this scope for reinterpretation that makes reputation so powerful a weapon. Franklin was undoubtedly cognizant of this; and his words will forever hold relevance.

**By Matthew Fitzgerald**