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MISOGYNY AND SEXISM IN BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S *OLD MISTRESSES' APOLOGUE* AND DONALD TRUMP'S PUBLIC STATEMENTS: STATESMEN USING HUMOUR AS A COVER-UP

Key words: Benjamin Franklin, Donald Trump, humour, misogyny, sexism

I. Introduction

Laughter, at some points, can be perceived as disrespectful and is even discouraged in certain social and institutional settings, like, for example, some religious situations or churches. Many individuals take offense when they are the target of laughter, highlighting a fundamental aspect of human social interaction. There are some theoretical frameworks that provide an explanation for this phenomenon, suggesting that disrespect arises when one individual perceives another's emotional distress as acceptable. For instance, according to Veatch's theory, laughter signifies the person (X) laughing regards the violation of certain moral principles as perfectly normal. However, if another person, for instance person (Y), is in fact deeply or emotionally invested in that principle - such as in cases where it relates to one's own personal

dignity - and does not view the violation as acceptable, a conflict arises. To elaborate further, offensiveness relates to different perceptions which refer to a range of processes. A situation is considered funny only when it is seen as a "subjective moral violation" by the person laughing. This means it must go against a moral principle that the perceiver personally values. For instance, from (Y's) perspective, their emotional distress is dismissed or validated as acceptable by (X's) laughter. Consequently, (Y) interprets (X's) reaction as an indication of disregard for their feelings, leading to the perception of insolence (Veatch, 1998: 166-167)

In this respect, this research paper focuses on the misogynistic tendencies through usage of laughter and joke by analyzing select excerpts from the opus of the famous American statesmen, Benjamin Franklin, and selection from President Donald Trump's public addresses throughout the

years, who both use humour as a cover-up to express and articulate certain misogynistic ideas, disregarding the feelings of women as pointed in Veatch's analysis. Having in mind the dissimilar time-frame in which they both lived and worked, their approaches reflect diverse historical and cultural contexts and therefore, the tactics they use to veil their misogynistic standpoints are different. For instance, Benjamin Franklin's humour is subtle and intellectual, using satire and irony to express sexism in a more sophisticated, playful tone; in addition to this, his poking remarks reduce women solely to their utility for men. By contrast, Trump's humour seems to be more blunt, even confrontational, and blatantly misogynistic, often ridiculing women in the open, strongly relying on stereotypes and dehumanization to assert domination, presenting himself as almighty and predominantly masculine, a real 'manly man'. Both statesmen use humour as a tool to deflect criticism - Franklin by using high-brow intellectual authority, whereas Trump, being on a lower rhetoric scale in comparison to Franklin, through populist dismissal of "political correctness." However, in both cases, humour in its essence disguises and reinforces patriarchal norms, making sexism palatable to their respective audiences.

II. Benjamin Franklin and his position on women in "Old Mistresses' Apologue"

Benjamin Franklin (January 17, 1706 – April 17, 1790) was the American Founding Father, and scientist. He has also been known as "the First American" (Morgan, 2002). In his essay which is a part of the collection of articles on Benjamin Franklin and women, Jan Lewis comments on the inconsistency of Franklin's views on gender and on the situation of women in the eighteenth century.¹ This analysis is based precisely on such inconsistency, focusing on his satirical writing "Old Mistresses Apologue" which can be considered both as a defense of marriage and a provocative exploration of unconventional relationships, revealing Franklin's wit and his refined, subtle flirtation with societal norms when expressing his opinions. According to Veatch, "humor may play off lexical ambiguity (puns), or make use of linguistic ill-formedness or stigmatized forms, dialect features, etc. (as in mimicking ridicule), or may use linguistic arguments (that is, logically fallacious lines of reasoning whose apparent sense is derived from linguistic factors like ambiguity, metaphor, idioms, formal similarities)", etc. Some of these linguistic components can be detected in Franklin's writing as a tool to pinpoint certain personal opinions. It opens with advocating for the institution of marriage, which he characterizes as the most natural arrangement for men and women, and by employing

¹ See more in Richard Gildrie's article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03612759.2001.10525742> and in: <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=benjamin%20franklin%20Author%3A%22Franklin%2C%20Benjamin%22&s=1111211111&r=1&sr=>

metaphors, like the one of an unmarried man and woman resembling “the odd half of a pair of scissors,” to underscore his view that men and women are complementary halves, each fulfilling different, distinct roles, Franklin claims, that marriage is in fact the most natural state of mankind, since it contributes “force of body and strength of reason,” among men, while for women offers “softness and sensibility” - a perspective that perfectly reflects the gender norms of the 18th century. By praising marriage, Franklin criticizes extramarital relationships, asserting that they fail to offer the same social and personal benefits. Despite this criticism, Franklin does not dismiss the possibility of affairs; on contrary, by pointing out that if it comes to that, there’s a guidance to be followed for those interested in pursuing them. He provides an infamous list of eight reasons for preferring older women as partners in extramarital relationships, which not only shifts the entire tone of the essay, blending humour with pragmatic observations, but it also reveals the hidden misogynistic standpoints that a founding father of a nation, in fact, didn’t have the greatest of opinions when it comes to women.

Franklin’s essay ultimately juxtaposes misogyny and serious commentary on social conventions with satirical exaggeration, leaving room for readers to question the sincerity of his advice. His arguments are framed within the context of Enlightenment thinking, where reason and pragmatism often guided discussions on morality and human relationships. The humour that he uses in “Old Mistresses’ Apologue” contains elements that, through a contemporary lens, can be interpreted as extremely misogynistic, despite its seemingly progressive

defense of older women, which opens another Pandora’s box regarding his stance about ageism. The misogyny ‘undercover’ arises from the fact that Franklin manages and articulates humour to reduce women to objects of utility, desirability, and convenience, perpetuating gendered stereotypes even as he appears to celebrate their virtues. I would like to pinpoint the most crucial aspects related to this hypothesis as

- Key Characteristics of Misogynistic Humour in Franklin’s Essay:

1. Firstly, Franklin begins by emphasizing the conversational and intellectual qualities of older women, arguing that their wisdom and experience make them superior partners. He contrasts this with younger women, who, while often physically attractive, lack the maturity and depth that older women possess. Moreover, Franklin highlights the transient nature of physical beauty, suggesting that with age, the charms of a younger woman fade, while the qualities of an older woman remain consistent, adding that with “a basket on a woman’s head, and a focus below woman’s waist down, there is hardly any difference whether the lady is young or old, which is offensive both towards younger and elderly women at the same time. On a more moral tone, Franklin asserts that relationships with older women mitigate the harm typically associated with affairs. He claims that seducing a young woman could lead to her lifelong unhappiness and social ruin, whereas an affair with an older woman avoids such consequences. He also theorizes that older women are more grateful for the

friendship, appreciating a man's company in a way younger women might not.

2. Then, Franklin praises older women not for their intrinsic value as individuals, but for their utility to men thus reducing them solely to the **utilitarian value** - offering experience, discretion, and above all gratitude in romantic relationships. By bordering women's worth in terms of what they provide to men, the humour reinforces the patriarchal notion that women's value is primarily serviceable, social, or functional.

3. Third, Franklin humourously dismisses physical appearance with a saying "in the dark, all cats are grey" which flagrantly challenges the female body, putting it solely in a role of **commodification**, a metaphor that reduces women to interchangeable entities, ignoring their individuality. Even though he most likely intended to be witty and pragmatic, his comment objectifies and insults all women, suggesting that their physical identities are irrelevant compared to their ability to fulfill male desires.

4. Furthermore, Franklin's humour also relies on **condescending**, exaggerated praise of older women's gratitude and loyalty. These traits function as Franklin cover-ups for presenting compensations for women's diminished sexual appeal in the eyes of society. This sugar-coated compliment implies that older women are more accommodating because they are grateful for the coitus or any attention whatsoever, which is not only insulting, but also a condescending, reductive perspective.

5. In continuation, the statesman applies **double standard through** humour, thus subtly reinforcing a dosed hypocrisy when it comes to sexu-

al relationships. While older women are commended for their "experience" and "virtue," the young male reader is implicitly encouraged to exploit these qualities without being subjected to similar scrutiny regarding his own character or intentions.

All in all, it seems that Benjamin Franklin uses humour to reflect the overall gender dynamics of the Enlightenment era, where women were often evaluated in terms of their usefulness to men rather than as autonomous individuals. Even though in various aspects, the statesman appears to subvert ageist norms by advocating for older women, at the same time, it seems that his humour simply continues those gendered hierarchies by framing their worth in relation to male desires. Therefore, from a feminist point of view, his humour can be understood in the category of benevolent sexism, a form of gender bias that appears to praise women while ultimately reinforcing stereotypes that limit their roles and identities (Glick & Fiske, 2018). By concealing his standpoints in humour, Franklin seems to diffuse the severity of these statements, normalizing the misogynistic and sexist undertones embedded in his satire. With all this being said, the misogynistic aspect of Franklin's humour lies in its failure to transcend the patriarchal structures of his time, and by using wit and satire to reinforce, rather than dismantle the objectification and instrumentalization of women. Even though his letter-essay is entertaining, the humour in it reflects the gender biases of its cultural and historical context under which pretext he lived and worked. Therefore, his objectification of women, reducing them to utilitarian roles within a male-centered perspective is a cruel jest that centers on a testosterone-driven lens,

using both younger and older women as the butt of the joke, thus perpetuating stereotypes about women's worth being tied to their physicality or service to men, even when framed in a seemingly progressive light.

III. Trump's Humour: A Pattern of Dismissal, Deflection, and Dehumanization

Donald Trump is yet another statesman and the current president of the USA whose history with women in both private and public spheres illustrates an extremely complex interplay of humour, rhetoric, and overt derogation that extends beyond his more general public statements. Offensive violation occurs when there is a perceived violation but there is no competing view of the situation as normal, or where the competing view is driven out by the strength of affective commitment to the principle being violated (Veatch, 179). To put it in other words, approximately two dozen women have accused Trump on variety of violations, from using an offensive language to sexual misconduct², including high-profile cases such as that of writer E. Jean Carroll, who alleged that Trump raped her in a department store dressing room in the 1990s. In civil proceedings, Trump was found liable for sexual abuse and defamation against Carroll and ordered to pay substantial damages, though he has appealed the case. Despite these serious accusations and findings, Trump has frequently attempted

to publically reframe these allegations as insignificant or exaggerated, using humour or casual dismissals to minimize their impact. Analyzing Donald Trump's use of humour through an academic lens reveals how his rhetoric often employs misogynistic tropes that reinforce traditional gender hierarchies. His humour can be seen as a mechanism for asserting dominance, masculinity, relying on dehumanization, ridicule, and reinforcement of power imbalances. Trump's jokes about women often draw on cultural stereotypes, race, agism, body shaming etc., even exploiting societal anxieties around gender roles and expectations.

- Key Characteristics of Misogynistic Humour in Trump's Rhetoric:

1. Firstly, one of the most notorious instances occurred in 2016, when the "Access Hollywood" tape surfaced, revealing Trump bragging about grabbing women by their genitals - remarks he later defended as "locker room talk." By reframing this explicit and offensive language as "banter," Trump utilized humour and a downplaying strategy to excuse behavior that would otherwise be perceived as predatory. This tactic is strikingly similar to Benjamin Franklin's use of satire to disguise the underlying misogyny in the "Old Mistresses Apologue." Both figures leverage humour or casual, unpremeditated language as a mask for underlying disrespect, allowing them to deflect criti-

² See in: <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/list-trumps-accusers-allegations-sexual-misconduct/story?id=51956410> and: <https://www.businessinsider.com/women-accused-trump-sexual-misconduct-list-2017-12> <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/25/g-s1-29963/stacey-williams-donald-trump-jeffrey-epstein>

cism and cast any objections as taking things “too seriously.”

2. However, Trump’s frequent public criticisms of female figures, especially those in powerful or visible positions, often focus on their intelligence or physical appearance, which can be identified as women **ridicule and objectification**. A recent example involved his election campaign attacks on former Vice President Kamala Harris, whom he called “slow” and a “low IQ individual”³ and compared unfavorably to Brett Favre, the retired NFL quarterback who appeared alongside him at a rally, right after which he claimed that he was being “very nice to her”. By ridiculing Harris’s intelligence in contrast to a male celebrity, Trump perpetuates a stereotype of women – particularly women of color – as inherently less capable than their male counterparts. Such rhetoric works on multiple levels: first, it diminishes women’s credibility and competence, reinforcing a long-standing cultural stereotype that women, especially women in authority, are “less than” men. Second, it aligns Trump with an audience that finds his humour confirmative rather than offensive and insulting, as it appeals to gendered (and often racialized) biases without directly confronting them. Third, by positioning these insults as jokes, Trump successfully manages to quickly dismiss any criticism as an overreaction, maintaining the humour barrier that makes it difficult for opponents to hold him accountable. Trump’s jokes frequently reduce wom-

en to their physical appearance or perceived desirability. For example, he also objectified women like Heidi Klum, calling her “no longer a 10”; Nikki Haley, to whom Trump refers to as a “bird-brain” and “Nimbra” (the name she was given at birth is “Nimarata”) then, his infamous remark about journalist Megyn Kelly (“blood coming out of her wherever”) or his comments about Carly Fiorina’s looks (“Look at that face! Would anyone vote for that?”)⁴ all of which rely on demeaning language that undermines women by focusing on their bodily features rather than their capabilities or intellect and objectifying them at the same time.⁵ And in addition to this, he often uses mimicry for humorous effect, which, according to Veatch “may make specific use of linguistic features characteristic of a dialect or of an individual’s speech pattern, or may impose artificial or exaggerated intonation patterns or voice quality so that listeners who view the speech patterns of another as unusual or different may laugh at them.” (199)

3. Imposing in public the opinion of **hyper-masculinity** is perhaps the common thread linking Trump’s humour, accusations of sexual misconduct, and public insults in a way a complex rhetorical strategy that establishes serious issues as inconsequential. Just as Franklin used humour in his essay to depict women in purely utilitarian terms, Trump’s “banter”, or, his so-called famous “teasing of the public” often serves to trivialize and dehumanize women just to underline and stress his

³ See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/tv/news/trump-harris-low-iq-north-carolina-rally-b2638513.html>

⁴ See links: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-is-botching-his-already-dismal-shot-with-women-voters/>

⁵ See links: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/donald-trump-tape-transcript.html>
<https://www.vox.com/politics/384792/your-body-my-choice-maga-gender-election>

own hypermasculinity. By casting random ‘humorous’ remarks on serious issues as light-hearted jokes, or “a locker room talk”, he applies jest as a strategy to mitigate the seriousness of his behavior and alleviate personal standpoints. This tactic seems to normalize harmful gendered attitudes on a mass scale, allowing prejudiced views to persist under the pretext of entertainment. The pattern is recurring and it involves humour and casual dismissal which serve to enforce power dynamics in which women are devalued or objectified, (for instance during the presidential campaign 2024, he stated “I will protect women at all costs, whether they like it or not.”⁶). This dynamic creates as well a double standard, where Trump’s seemingly “jovial” or “chivalrous” tone allows him to appear as though he is acting in women’s best interests while simultaneously discrediting their ability to make decisions about their own protection creating a scenario where questioning the statement could be construed as taking it too seriously or “missing the joke.” The repeated use of humour to deflect responsibility, belittle intelligence, and reframe serious accusations aligns with a cultural tendency to overlook or excuse such behavior when delivered in a “joking” tone. The cumulative effect is a public narrative where misogynistic comments are normalized, and women’s voices and experiences are consistently undermined. Trump’s hu-

mour often juxtaposes his own perceived masculinity against caricatures of women as weak, overly emotional, or irrational – not having ‘the stamina’ to be presidents. This framing hardens his self-presentation as a dominant figure, while downgrading women to subordinate or trivial roles. This tactic is consistent with hegemonic masculinity, (Donaldson, 1993) where dominance is maintained by belittling perceived “others.”⁷

Trump’s jokes about women frequently act as a form of **verbal aggression**, intended to humiliate or silence the female opponents, taking the structure of a weaponized humour and deflection through which the speaker/inventor (in this case President Trump) generally feels a certain glow of creative accomplishment (Veatch, 201). For instance, calling Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman” during the 2016 presidential debate reduced her assertiveness to a negative stereotype, casting her as unlikable and unworthy of respect while the Trump’s MAGA supporters often defended such remarks as “just jokes” or as part of his unconventional persona, who often uses humour to bypass political correctness. This deflection strategy diminishes the perceived harm of his comments while perpetuating the belief that calling out misogyny is an overreaction. Sociologist Deniz Kandiyoti’s concept of patriarchal bargains explains how systems of gender inequality persist through cultural practices,

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/31/us/politics/trump-women-like-it-or-not.html?smid=url-share>
<https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2024/03/17/how-donald-trump-uses-humour-to-make-the-outrageous-sound-normal-00146119>
<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2024/03/21/laugh-riot-trump-fintan-otoole/>

⁷ See also in: Whitehead, Stephen. “Hegemonic masculinity revisited.” *Gender, Work & Organization* 6, no. 1 (1999): 58-62.

such as humour, that reward complicity in patriarchal norms. Trump's misogynistic humour upholds these norms by casting women in reductive roles while rewarding his audience with the familiarity of gendered stereotypes, at the same time, projecting his own subjective state of "much ado about nothing" philosophy, while demonstrating apparent emotional absurdity, where the perceived situation is seen as normal.

IV. Conclusion

Trump's use of humour reflects broader societal structures of power and inequality and is in style with the populist communication which is described as a 'simple and even vulgar language' (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017: 64). While his comments may seem offhand or petty, they contribute to a discourse that devalues women and reinforces male-controlled norms. The analyses of his public statements reveal the multifaceted ways in which this humour functions—not merely as personal expression but as a strategic tool for maintaining dominance, marginalizing opposition, and cultivating loyalty among his MAGA base. Trump's humour is at times quite blunt, aggressive, and often thrives on explicit ridicule and provocation, aligning with the norms of contemporary, right-wing political populism. His comments about women - mocking their appearance, intelligence, behavior, or abilities are not indirect, nor veiled in irony; they are strictly designed for maximum impact in a media-saturated environment. Trump exploits cultural anxieties around feminism and gender equality to mobilize his base, often claiming

that his remarks are "jokes" by saying "I'm kidding", thus deflecting criticism while maintaining misogynistic undertones.

In contrast, Franklin's humour reflects the Enlightenment values of wit, reason, and irony, repeatedly used to explore moral or societal questions. In "Old Mistresses' Apologue," he adopts a satirical tone to discuss romantic relationships, praising older women for their discretion and wisdom. While Franklin's humour may seem progressive in elevating older women, it ultimately reinforces misogynistic assumptions by reducing women to their utility in serving male desires. The humour is indirect, with implied irony and rhetorical elegance, appealing to an educated elite familiar with layered satire. Franklin's humour serves to navigate the social taboos of his time. By framing his misogyny as playful satire, he makes provocative arguments seem acceptable within the context of Enlightenment intellectual discourse. Humour becomes a mask, softening the underlying sexism and making it tasty to an elite audience. Trump's humour, on the other hand, operates more as a harsh tool for control and identity politics. It reinforces his self-image as a disruptor of political correctness, using jokes to ridicule feminist ideals or opponents. By framing misogynistic remarks as jest, Trump normalizes such behavior and dismisses criticism as overreaction or lack of sense of humour.

To sum, Benjamin Franklin's and Donald Trump's usage of humour reveals how both political figures deploy it to express or reinforce misogynistic ideas, though within vastly different historical, cultural, and rhetorical contexts. While

Franklin's humour operates within the intellectual and literary conventions of the Enlightenment, Trump's humour is rooted in contemporary populist rhetoric and mediated spectacle. Despite these

differences, both statesmen use humour as a shield and weapon, allowing them to articulate patriarchal ideas while deflecting criticism.

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**Хуморот како маска за искажување мизогинија и сексизам во
Апологија на старите љубовници на Бенџамин Френклин и
јавните изјави на Доналд Трамп
(Резиме)**

Хуморот, иако честопати е бенигна и обединувачка сила, може да послужи и како средство за канализирање на длабоко вкоренети општествени предрасуди и сексизам. Овој труд ги истражува начините кога и како мизогинијата може да се замаскира преку употребата на хумор, како во историските отсечки така и во модерниот контекст, со фокус на двајца американски државници, Бенџамин Френклин и неговото сатирично есеј-писмо „Апологија на старите љубовници“ (1745) и американскиот претседател Доналд Трамп, со селекција од негови јавни настапи и изјави. Обајцата политичари го користат хуморот за да ги потенцираат родовите стереотипи во контекст и на начин типичен за нивните епохи на битисување. Писмото на Френклин во форма на духовит совет до еден млад човек да ги одбере постарите жени за свои љубовници, навидум делува како тој да се залага за нив како претпочитани сексуални партнери. Сепак, базичните претпоставки и тезите кои Франклин ги изнесува ги сведуваат жените на нивната сексуална утилитарност, притоа откривајќи мизогинистичка перспектива маскирана преку сатира. Во таа насока се и некои јавни изјави на Трамп, кои, честопати преполни со хумор и сарказам, ги прикажуваат жените во улоги кои ја намалуваат нивната способност, вредност или интелигенција, користејќи лукавство со цел да се минимизира каква било потенцијална реакција или приговор. Преку расчленувањето на овие примери, овој труд покажува како хуморот во одредени контексти служи како моќна реторичка алатка која обелоденува сексистички ставови, едновременно овозможувајќи им на виновните за нанесување навреда да избегнат критика и осуда под изговор дека станува збор за шега. Трудот ги истражува психолошките и културните механизми кои ја овозможуваат оваа динамика, покажувајќи како и Френклин и Трамп користат хумор за да ја маскираат и нормализираат мизогинијата, истакнувајќи ги пошироките импликации на таквите реторички стратегии. Истовремено, оваа анализа ја истакнува потребата за поголемо критичко преиспитување на улогата на хуморот во овековечувањето на штетните општествени ставови, воедно поттикнувајќи на размислување за тоа дали и како современиот дискурс може и (не)свесно да ги преслика историските предрасуди.

Клучни зборови: Бенџамин Френклин, Доналд Трамп, хумор, мизогинија, сексизам