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"EARLY TO BED AND EARLY TO RISE":  
FROM PROVERB TO BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND BACK\*

In a short essay entitled "The Truth and Myths about Benjamin Franklin" that appeared in the 1990 issue of *The Old Farmer's Almanac* commemorating the bicentennial of Benjamin Franklin's (1706-1790) death, David Lord repeats the often stated claim that "Franklin coined countless catch phrases of morality and wisdom in his peerless *Poor Richard's Almanac*".[1] In an accompanying box listing twenty of "Franklin's Famous Phrases" and a few examples of phrases that "Franklin didn't mint", he seriously misleads his readers by this juxtaposition of "true" and "false" Franklin proverbs into believing that this great American printer, writer, publisher, scientist, inventor, businessman, and diplomat was in fact also the originator of numerous new proverbs. Yet nothing could be further from the truth, as Robert Newcomb, in particular, has shown in his seminal study *The Sources of Benjamin Franklin's Sayings of Poor Richard* (Diss. University of Maryland, 1957). Among Franklin and proverb scholars it is now generally known that this pragmatist of common-sense philosophy relied heavily on various proverb collections for the numerous proverbial texts that he included in his instructive and entertaining *Poor Richard's Almanack* which he published for twenty-five years from 1733 to 1758.[2] Many of these proverbs he integrated verbatim into the almanacs, but as an acute "proverb stylist" he also reformulated some of them in his own wording. Many of these became current due to the unrivaled popularity of the almanacs, of which about 10,000 copies were sold every year. A very few of his own creations, at most 5% of the total of 1044 proverbial texts that appeared in the almanacs, did become proverbs in their own right, notably "Three removes is as bad as a fire", "Laziness travels so slowly, that poverty soon overtakes it" and "There will be sleeping enough in the grave".[3]

It should, therefore, not be surprising that the extremely popular proverb "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy wealthy and wise" [sic] which Franklin cites in this precise wording as a bit of proverbial wisdom and advice for the month of October in his *Poor Richard's Almanack for the Year 1735* does not stem from him at all.[4] That does not, of course, prevent such popular writers as David Lord from continuing the "myth" that Franklin did originate this Anglo-American favorite saying. On a more official level E. D. Hirsch and his co-compilers of the best-selling *Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (1988) claimed with equal conviction at the end of the eighties that this is "a saying of Benjamin Franklin in *Poor Richard's Almanack*".[5] The same is true for the widely disseminated 15th edition of John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* (1980),[6] whose modern editor Emily Morison Beck should have known better. After all, previous editions including the centennial 13th edition of 1955 referred quite correctly to John Clarke's (d. 1658) *Paroemiologia Anglo-Latina [...] or Proverbs English, and Latine* (1639) where the proverb is cited almost one hundred years before Franklin used it.[7] It is not at all clear why Beck dropped this extremely important source reference that even includes a very early quite similar variant from 1598 in the 14th and 15th edition of this major reference work. This unfortunate exclusion should certainly be rectified in the next edition.

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While it is one thing to criticize a scholarly publication as Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*, it is quite another matter with the misconception that the general folk might have regarding the origin of this particular proverb. To this day people use such introductory formulas as "Benjamin Franklin said" or even more frequently "as Poor Richard says", a formula which Franklin himself had employed so often in his almanacs. There can be no doubt that Franklin played a major role in spreading and popularizing traditional proverbs among his compatriots. They read them daily in his almanacs, they heard them on Sunday in church, and clearly they used them in all public encounters and at home in the family. People got so used to citing proverbs with reference to the almanacs that proverbs which were long in use in England since the Middle Ages became looked at as American proverbs that originated with Benjamin



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Franklin. That is still the case at the present time, as field research by folklore students of the University of California at Berkeley shows. One of these students reports what her grandfather used to say to her when at the age of seven she wanted to stay up and watch T.V.: "He would say, 'You know what Ben Franklin always said? Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise'".[8] Another student recorded that her informant "thinks that this saying originated with Benjamin Franklin",[9] while a third collector quotes his informant to have "remembered that Ben Franklin said this".[10] The informants are not always that certain about Franklin's authorship, one reporting "that it was possibly Benjamin Franklin who first said it"[11] and another stating that "she believes that her father learned it as something that Benjamin Franklin once said. She was not certain that he did state this proverb but she said it is a good example to follow".[12] Whether assertively or with some doubt, many if not most current speakers of the proverb will refer to or think of Benjamin Franklin or his *Poor Richard's Almanack* when citing this proverb. In the folk's mind this proverb and many others that appear in the almanacs and which continue to be favorites in the United States today were created by Benjamin Franklin when, in fact, he merely stated or slightly restated old proverbs. As a scholar one can point out this discrepancy, but it is part of folklore that these texts are often regarded as Benjamin Franklin's "proverbs".

Nothing could, however, be further from the truth, and it is important to note that Franklin himself tried to rectify this popular error already during his lifetime. As a didactic writer and as a printer and shrewd businessman with the desire of spreading high moral and practical wisdom among his readers he must have been very pleased about the success of his little almanacs that averaged only thirty-six pages per issue. Obviously he was excited to read and hear how people were quoting "his" proverbs in written and oral communication. Yet he knew only too well that most of the proverbs and maxims were not at all his own. In his autobiography he wrote in 1788 that the proverbs he cited in the almanacs "contained the wisdom of many ages and nations".[13] But this was by no means a belated admission on Franklin's part that he had actually been copying the proverbial wisdom from various sources throughout the many years that he acted as the compiler of the almanacs. He had been honest about this fact before, especially at the end of his famous preface to the almanac of 1758 which he wrote in the summer of 1757 and which became an international best-seller essay with the title "The Way to Wealth". At the end of this masterful treatise on virtue, prosperity, prudence and above all economic and monetary common-sense he openly admitted the following: "[...] my vanity was wonderfully delighted with it [that people quote "his" proverbs by adding the formula "as Poor Richard says"], though I was conscious that not a tenth part of the wisdom was my own, [...], but rather the gleanings that I made of the sense of all ages and nations".[14] There was thus no intentional deception on Franklin's part, but in keeping with the spirit of the time he certainly did not mind copying proverbs and maxims out of books without citing his sources and taking a bit of credit where he could.

But what is the origin and history of the proverb "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise" for which Benjamin Franklin appears to have been but an intermediate popularizer and at best an apocryphal source? The first recorded reference of this proverb in the English language is an early variant that appeared in *A Treatise of Fysshynge wyth an Angle* dating from 1496:

Also who soo woll vse the game of anglynge: he must ryse erly. Whiche thyng is prouffrable to man in this wyse / That is to wyte: moost to the heele of his soule. For it shall cause hym to be hole. Also to the encrease of his goodys. For it shall make hym ryche. As the olde englysshe prouerbe sayth in this wyse. Who soo woll ryse erly shall be holy helthy & zely.[15]

This proverb does not yet talk about "going to bed early" and the triad of "holy helthy & zely" (i.e. happy, fortunate) does not yet completely agree with the proverb as it is cited later, but this variant is clearly a precursor. The statement that early rising will "encrease [...] goodys" already alludes to the later idea of becoming "wealthy". And that the author introduces the text with the introductory formula "as the olde englysshe prouerbe sayth in this wyse" is, of course, of great importance in establishing the fact that the proverb might be considerably older than 1496, dating perhaps from the middle or even the beginning of the 15th century.

The second historical reference stems from *The Book of Husbandry* (1523) by Anthony Fitzherbert (1470-1538) that contains a half-page paragraph entitled "A shorte lesson for the husbände":

One thinge I wyl aduise the to remembre, and specially in wynter-tyme, whan thou sytteste by the fyre, and hast supped, to cosynder in thy mynde, whether the warkes, that thou, thy wyfe, & thy seruauantes shall do, be more auantage to the tan the fyre, and candell-lyghte, meate and drynke that they shall spende, and if it be more auantage, than syt styll: and if it be not, than go to thy bedde and slepe, and be vppe betyme, and breake thy faste before day, that thou mayste be all the shorte wynters day about thy busynes. At grammer-scole I lerned a verse, that is this, *Sanat, sanctificat, et ditat surgere mane*. That is to say, Erly rysyng maketh a man hole in body, holer in soule, and rycher in goodes. And this me semeth shuld be sufficien<sup>t</sup> instruction for the husbände to kepe measure.[16]

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Mere proverb allusions run the risk of not being understood, even if they refer to very common proverbs. Nevertheless, such lack of communication is rather rare among native speakers, and there certainly was no confusion possible in the case of a short gossip column by Stanton Delaplaine (1907-1988) in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of March 12, 1980, that mentions only part of the proverb in the title and more of it plus Benjamin Franklin in the text itself:

#### **'And Early to Rise'**

"Plough deep while sluggards sleep," said Benjamin Franklin. "Early to bed and early to rise." Ran into some of Ben's personal history the other night. He was in France doing a little work for the U.S. government. He was quite a dude with the Paris girls. "Early to bed and as often as possible," was Ben's motto.



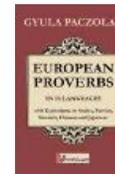
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How he managed to get up early--with the routine he had going--is beyond me. He certainly gave the mademoiselles a vote of confidence. Didn't find out how well he did for the U.S.A.

"Early to bed and early to rise" doesn't give you much leisure time. But some smart fellow has discovered that the "leisure class" no longer exists. The more money you have, the harder you have to work.

I never figured to get out of work and into the leisure class. Now it seems I did the right thing. If I had made it, there's no leisure left.[118]

But it will take time until these changes will in fact be accepted by large numbers of the population in the English speaking world. Most of the parodies cited above, perhaps with the exception of George Ade's "Early to bed and early to rise and you won't meet many prominent people", will certainly not become proverbial in their own right. The fact that such parodies in the form of anti-proverbs[145] exist at all is ample proof that the traditional proverb is still very much present and valid. A wonderful example of how people to this day are surrounded by this proverbial wisdom can be seen from a Häger comic strip from 1985 that presents a number of proverbs that argue for getting up early and then creates a new text in order to avoid rising that early: "'Up and at 'em, Tiger'--'The early bird gets the worm'--'Up sluggard, and waste not life'--'Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise'--'He who gets up early is a blooming fool'--'I knew if I tried long enough I'd find one I liked'." [146] That last self-rationalizing invented pseudo-proverb won't do the "trick" unfortunately--everybody confronted by this comic strip knows that. There is not much or at least only a temporary chance of escaping the inevitability of proverbs. It is one thing to poke fun of proverbs, to parody them or to argue against them with biting satire, but a complete escape from or utter denunciation of the age-old wisdom expressed in them is simply not possible. Benjamin Franklin knew this only too well when he drew on the traditional proverb stock of the English language to instruct his colonial Americans with their wisdom in his many volumes of *Poor Richard's Almanack*. He invented or coined barely any proverbs, but he popularized them to such an extent that some of them, notably the proverb "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise", came to be attached to his name especially in the mind of Americans.[147] Yet even this apocryphal identification of the proverb with Benjamin Franklin is starting to be forgotten as the general level of cultural literacy appears to be declining, and the proverb is once again becoming a piece of true folk wisdom that is attached to no individual person. Benjamin Franklin as "coiner" of the proverb was thus but a mere interlude in the history of this proverb about health, wealth and wisdom. It was, therefore, quite appropriate that a traditional embroidery sampler[148] of the proverb from 1977 did not attach the name of Benjamin Franklin to it but rather let the proverb speak for itself with proper anonymity:

Early to Bed,  
Early to Rise,  
Makes a Man  
Healthy, Wealthy  
and Wise.

#### Notes:

1. David Lord, "The Truths and the Myths about Ben Franklin," *The Old Farmer's Almanac for the Year 1990*, ed. by Robert B. Thomas. Dublin/New Hampshire: Yankee Publishing Inc., 1989, pp. 44-47.
- 1.
2. See Thomas Herbert Russell (ed.), *The Sayings of Poor Richard. Wit, Wisdom, and Humor of Benjamin Franklin in the Proverbs and Maxims of Poor Richard's Almanacks for 1733 to 1758*. Chicago: Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States, 1926; Carl van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*. New York: The Viking Press, 1938, esp. pp. 106-115, 149-150 and 266-268; Richard E. Amacher, "Poor Richard's Almanack," in R. E. Amacher, *Benjamin Franklin*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962, pp. 51-66; and James A. Sappenfield, "Poor Richard's Almanac [sic]," in J. A. Sappenfield, *A Sweet Instruction. Franklin's Journalism as a Literary Apprenticeship*. Carbondale/Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973, pp. 121-177 and 221-223 (notes).
3. See F. Edward Hulme, *Proverb Lore*. London: Elliot Stock, 1902; rpt. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1968, pp. 62-64; Charles Meister, "Franklin as a Proverb Stylist," *American Literature*, 24 (1952-1953), 157-166; Frances M. Barbour, *A Concordance to the Sayings in Franklin's "Poor Richard"*. Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1974; and Wolfgang Mieder, "Benjamin Franklin's 'Proverbs'," in W. Mieder, *American Proverbs: A Study of Texts and Contexts*. Bern: Peter Lang, 1989, pp. 129-142.
4. *The Complete Poor Richard Almanacks published by Benjamin Franklin*. Reproduced in facsimile with an introduction by Whitfield J. Bell. Barre/Massachusetts: Imprint Society, 1970, vol. 1, p. 64.
5. See E. D. Hirsch, Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil (eds.), *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1988, p. 49.
6. See John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, ed. by Emily Morison Beck. 15h ed. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1980, p. 347.
7. See John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, no eds. given. 13th ed. Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1955, p. 330. See also p. 421 of the 14th ed. from 1968, where Emily Morison Beck as editor must have made the decision to drop the significant reference to John Clarke.

8. The student collector was Lorrie Behrhorst, who remembered her grandfather Paul Schorr making this statement to her in 1967. She recorded it for the Berkeley Folklore Archive on November 13, 1979, in Berkeley, California. I would like to thank Alan Dundes from the University of California at Berkeley for making these archival materials available to me.
9. Melissa Davis collected this statement from her husband Richard Davis on October 30, 1977, in Albany, California.
10. Michael Lobo collected the proverb and this comment from Krista Lobo on November 26, 1976, in Oakland, California.
11. Jane Franklin collected this statement from Susan Belloni on March 8, 1969, in Berkeley, California.
12. Kathleen Mossi collected the proverb from Kathleen St. John who had heard it spoken by her father on November 7, 1978, in Berkeley, California.
13. Cited from *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. by Jared Sparks. Philadelphia/Pennsylvania: Childs & Peterson, 1840, vol. 2, p. 92.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

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