The Common Style of *Common Sense*

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**Abstract**

The extraordinary impact of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* has often been attributed to its style – to the simplicity and forcefulness with which Paine expressed ideas that many others before him had expressed. Comparative analysis of *Common Sense* and other pre-Revolutionary pamphlets suggests that *Common Sense* was indeed stylistically unique; no other pamphleteer came close to matching Paine’s combination of simplicity and forcefulness.

Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* was the spark that ignited the American Revolution. In *Common Sense*, Paine, an Englishman only recently arrived in America, launched frontal attacks on the institution of monarchy in general and on the British crown in particular, and painted a bleak portrait of the oppressiveness and injustice of British colonial rule. Deriding the very idea of monarchy and ridiculing George III as “the royal brute of England,” Paine sounded a clarion call for American independence.

Paine wrote *Common Sense* at the behest of Benjamin Rush, a strong supporter of independence who, fearful of the consequences of putting his own views on the line, convinced Paine that he had nothing to fear from the reaction to publication of such views. A largely unschooled but gifted writer bitterly opposed to monarchy and deeply sympathetic to the cause of independence, Paine approached the task with dispatch, promptly producing a document that, though originally intended as a series of letters to newspapers, circulated as a pamphlet, a prominent communications medium of the pre-Revolutionary era.

Paine’s primary points in *Common Sense*, as one commentator has aptly summarized them, were three: “The English system is corrupt, despotic, and contemptible; reconciliation with such a system is a foolish and delusive recompense for American suffering; America should be and can become an independent republic” (Smith, 1938, p. 23). These ideas were by no means novel. John Adams, for one, considered them singularly unoriginal (Foner, 1976, p. 82), and historian Merrill Jensen (1967, p. xiv) reminds us that they had been appearing in newspaper essays and resolutions of
town meetings for more than a decade before *Common Sense* was published.

Nonetheless, Paine's pamphlet burst forth, as General Charles Lee proclaimed at the time, "like Jove in Thunder" (quoted by Keane, 1995, p. 111), radically redefining the terms of the debate and lending enormous impetus to the push for independence. Even Adams, who considered Paine "a bad character" (quoted in Fruchtman, 1994, p. 10) and once described *Common Sense* as "a poor, ignorant, malicious, shortsighted, crapulous mass" (quoted in Hawke, 1974, p. 49), conceded that "without the pen of the author of 'Common Sense,' the sword of Washington would have been raised in vain" (quoted in Fruchtman, 1994, p. 78). It has been estimated that a copy of *Common Sense* was read by virtually every literate man, woman, and child in the colonies and was read to a substantial portion of the illiterates. In an era when a popular newspaper might have two thousand readers and a like number of copies of a typical pamphlet might be printed, *Common Sense* raced through twenty-five editions and reached hundreds of thousands in America and abroad in the year it appeared (Edwards, 1974; Foner, 1976). Considering its extraordinarily rapid and thorough circulation through the colonial population, Jensen (1967, p. lxvi) ranks it as perhaps the all-time best-seller in American history. It reached virtually everyone and had a dramatic effect on virtually everyone it reached. Historian John Keane (1995, pp. 110–111) puts Paine's contribution to the Revolutionary struggle on a par with those of "George Washington on the battlefield and Benjamin Franklin on the diplomatic front," and Sir George Trevelyan concluded that "It would be difficult to name any human composition which has had an effect at once so instant, so extended and so lasting" as that of *Common Sense* (quoted by Woodward, 1946, p. 80).

If *Common Sense* said nothing new, why did it have such an extraordinary impact? Historians of the Revolutionary period have proposed two complementary answers to this question: the accessibility of Paine's language and the forcefulness with which he made his arguments. Paine viewed accessibility and forcefulness as rhetorically vital, reasoning "that if an argument did not carry force and conviction there was no sense in printing it at all" and that "if it were so intricate in style and expression that only the learned could gather its full import most of its possible readers were thus excluded" (quoted by Woodward, 1946, p. 68).

Reflecting both his roots in the laboring classes and his egalitarian political orientation, Paine, unlike other polemicists of his day, "addressed his appeals primarily to the man of ordinary understanding rather than to the man of taste or learning" (Aldridge, 1959, p. 27). To communicate with such an audience, he had to craft his arguments in simple words and sentences. As he himself put it, "As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand, I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet" (quoted by Foner, 1976, p. 83). In this endeavor no less an authority than Thomas Jefferson judged him successful; in Jefferson's words, "No writer has exceeded Paine in ease and familiarity of style, in perspicuity of expression, happiness of elucidation, and in simple and unassuming language" (quoted by Keane, 1995, p. 114).

It is one thing to make one's ideas widely accessible. It is something else again to change people's minds and stir them into action. Accordingly, many historians have pointed to the forcefulness of Paine's language – its energy and vividness – as the second key to understanding the impact of *Common Sense*. With more than a trace of understatement it has been written that "Nothing Paine said in the pamphlet was understated" and that he wrote

...grippingly, using images and metaphors of a high, sophisticated caliber.... His images, lively and sharp, were profoundly meaningful to his readers who understood exactly what he meant when he not merely belittled the king of England but turned him into a monster.... [He] couched his argument in a language designed to inflame, to convince his readers that there were no alternatives to separation from England and in effect to get them to go to war against the English government. He offered a good deal of his message consequently in extreme terms. Monarchy was always evil, kings eternally animalistic, noblemen invariably voracious, the people consistently virtuous (Fruchtman, 1994, pp. 63, 64, 69).

Paine's tone, it has been argued, was altogether different from the cold legalism, the "decorous and reasonable" language, of previous pamphleteers (Foner, 1976, p. 82–83). It is the sheer forcefulness of *Common Sense*, working in conjunction with the accessibility of its language, that is widely seen as responsible for the reaction the pamphlet evoked.

But just how accessible and forceful was *Common Sense*? There is no gainsaying its reputation, as attested by Paine himself, by his allies and foes alike among his contemporaries, and by later generations of scholars.