

THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE, SLANT RHYMES,  
AND THE POETRY OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

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**Abstract.** It has long been accepted that the American Declaration of Independence draws on British constitutional tradition to establish its authority. Nevertheless, despite the existence of many literary readings of the document, no attention has been paid to its use of slant rhymes – rhymes that have similar but not identical sounds – to achieve its goals. This article seeks to fill this lacuna, expanding our understanding of how its authors employed both visual and aural aspects of British constitutional tradition to engender the authority required for the document’s widespread acceptance.

**Keywords:** Declaration of Independence, slant rhymes, political authority, British constitutional tradition

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although there have been many literary readings of the American Declaration of Independence (*e.g.* Derrida), no attention has so far been paid to its use of slant rhymes – rhymes that have similar but not identical sounds (Hanson 310) – to help create and bolster the document’s political authority. This essay seeks to fill this lacuna by setting out the problem of political authority as faced by the document’s authors before showing how these authors employed the visual and aural aspects of its language — and of slant rhymes in particular — to help make good their claims to independence.

## 2. THE PROBLEM OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY

One of the most pressing problems facing those who would found a new nation is establishing their authority to do so where authority is understood as the “[p]ower to influence the conduct and actions of others” (*Authority*). In the social contract tradition, authority is said to arise from the consent of the governed, the fact that one has consented to the government is why one is obligated to obey its laws. Hannah Pitkin has, however, argued that Lockean liberalism is actually underpinned by an often-unacknowledged affective quality. Drawing on Locke’s account of prerogative – the circumstances under which the sovereign can suspend laws in the interests of the public good – Pitkin argues the citizenry’s evaluation of the legitimacy of such action(s) depends not upon their consent but rather upon their assessment of the appropriateness of the sovereign’s suspension of laws. It is not, that is to say, the fact that one has consented to the government that creates the obligation to obey it but rather the answer to an ongoing personal and societal plebiscite as to whether the government *deserves* consent (Pitkin 999). Such authority is established not by rational argumentation, but rather by a much more nebulous combination of factors whose exact formulation may vary somewhat from person to person: that which makes a citizen and by extension, the citizenry, *feel* obligated<sup>1</sup>. When that occurs, the state will have authority – something quite different from power – over those who feel the state to be authoritative. In the abstract, this formulation might seem tautological. Nevertheless, pondering the question of why the Founding Fathers sought to employ a Declaration – a key part of British constitutional tradition – against the originators of that same tradition in order to establish their own authority to secede reveals why there is more to the formulation than its tautological nature might seem to suggest.

As Pauline Maier points out, a declaration was one of three ways of addressing a monarch in British constitutional tradition. The first – an address - was by far the mildest form, usually sent to a monarch

to mark a happy event, such as the birth of a child, or to express support or gratitude. The second – a petition – gave subjects a way of seeking redress of wrongs done under the authority of the monarch whom they could not sue in the regular courts. Finally, the third – a declaration – was an emphatic pronouncement whose point was to “make clear” or “to tell.” Notes Maier, “Declarations were always meant to command broad public support, and both Kings and Parliament issued them during their protracted seventeenth-century struggles” (Maier 50-51). By employing a document from British constitutional tradition against King George, the Founders were, in effect, employing the considerable authority of the British constitution<sup>2</sup>, its “[p]ower to influence the conduct and actions of others”, to cultivate their own authority to separate. This reconfiguration of a pre-existing tradition is often the stuff of poetry, and there is much to indicate the careful choice of language and the persistent reworking of older texts and tropes at work in the Declaration.

### 3. LANGUAGE AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

The most obvious appropriation of political language in the Declaration is the wholesale lifting of “a long train of abuses” from John Locke’s *Second Treatise of Government*, a phrase that is itself imbued with the poetic image of monarchs pulling abuses behind them like they would the trains of their robes of state. Similarly, the document suggests the language and form of the Puritan Jeremiad, with its litany of sins and its call for a better future (O’Neill). By drawing on ideas implicit in the public culture of the time, and transforming them for their own purposes, ‘making them new’ in Ezra Pound’s famous formulation of the poet’s role (1934), the Founders repeatedly drew upon the power of language and poetic allusion to build their authority out of the authority of those ideas’ origins.

In her book *Our Declaration*, the political theorist Danielle Allen observes that “[d]emocracies are built out of language” (Allen 43). The Declaration of Independence, a document that came to be central to the American democratic understanding<sup>3</sup>, was precisely that: a source of popular authority built out of language. While much attention has rightly been paid to the various ways in which the document borrows from, transfigures, and employs older literary and political traditions, no attention seems to have been paid to its clever use of slant rhymes, both aural and visual. In British Constitutional tradition, and indeed, in much contemporary American legislation, the separate clauses within written legislation began and begin with the word “whereas,” meaning “[i]n view or consideration of the fact that” (“Whereas”). This is evident, for example, in this extract from the Sugar Act, passed by Parliament in 1764:

Whereas it is expedient that new provisions and regulations should be established for improving the revenue of this kingdom...

whereas it is just and necessary, that a revenue be raised, in your Majesty’s said dominions in America...

whereas an act was made in the sixth year of the reign of his late Majesty King George the Second...

whereas by an act of parliament made in the twelfth year of the reign of King Charles the Second... (Avalon Project).

One of the great fictions of British constitutional tradition was that the monarch’s advisors, the monarch’s ministers, were responsible for the sovereign’s actions. Even when both parties knew that the monarch was responsible for a particular policy, objections to it were framed as though the ministers and not the monarch were responsible<sup>4</sup>. Thus, when the Declaration of Independence identifies King George III as being responsible for the “long train of abuses” it is a hugely significant moment: the moment at which, as in British constitutional tradition, revolution was declared. In making this claim, the authors<sup>5</sup> of the document drew on an allusively familiar pattern, beginning each clause with “He has”:

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance...

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people...

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual...

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly....

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected...

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States....

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice....

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone...

He has erected a multitude of New Offices...

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures...

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power...

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution...

Then, after a multitude of clauses beginning with the word “For” – itself seen repeatedly in parliamentary legislation such as 1765’s Stamp Act – the document returns to the language of “He has”:

He has abdicated Government here...

He has plundered our seas...

...He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas...

He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us...

In employing this language, the authors of the Declaration employed a slant rhyme between the “Whereas” of British constitutional tradition, and the “He has” of their own document. The significance of this for the cultivation of political authority lay in the familiarity of the sound and sight of the words. Just as the Founders borrowed the language and institution of a declaration from British tradition to make their claim credible, they did the same with “Whereas” and “He has.” Tellingly, this is a slant rhyme that is

both aural and visual, with the words not only sounding almost alike but also looking like they should rhyme. Jay Fliegelman, furthermore, convincingly argues that the Declaration was a document meant to be read aloud. As such, the power of the allusive slant rhyme would have been intensified, as indeed it would by the almost hypnotic repetition of “He has,” a total of eighteen times, itself reminiscent of the repetitiveness of the Jeremiad.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Hannah Arendt was, then, correct when she argued that the Declaration derives its power not “so much [from] being ‘an argument in support of action’ as in its being the perfect way for an action to appear in words” (Arendt 130). Thus, while some commentators have suggested that the Declaration begins with a logical fallacy, that it presupposes that which it must prove – that America is one people and the British another – Dannielle Allen’s observation about language and democracy, and the authors’ use of slant rhymes, both aural and visual, suggests the way in which the document is a performance meant to bring something new – broad public support for a new system of government – into the world. It is an approach that we might call poetry.

#### NOTES

1. Its affective element lies in the evaluation of whether the government deserves consent, something that would appear to be beyond rational calculation and exist in the realm of feeling in much the same way, perhaps, that the evaluation of how long a “long train of abuses” must be to trigger revolutionary action. (Pitkin).
2. “Americans took particular pride in being governed under Britain’s unwritten constitution, which they considered the most perfect form of government ever invented ‘by the wit of man’ – a judgment with which, they often added, every major writer on politics agreed” (Maier 29).
3. Maier offers considerable evidence that the Declaration was not considered terribly important at the time of its publication (162-163).

4. Nevertheless, during the various struggles between the monarch and parliament over the course of British history, parliament had gradually usurped the king's power, and the fiction became true, the monarch's advisors were responsible for those decisions. Complicating the matter, however, the fiction was still employed as if it *were* not true.
5. Although Thomas Jefferson is usually given credit for the Declaration, the document was actually drafted by Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert Livingston.

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