

Honestus, New York Journal, 26 April

This Antifederalist satire by “Honestus” revived the debate begun by the Antifederalist “Cato” and the Federalist “Cæsar” in September and October 1787 and continued by both Antifederalists and Federalists until the meeting of the New York Convention in June 1788. “Cato” I had encouraged all citizens of New York, who, like the citizens of other states, had “given to the world astonishing evidences of your greatness,” to “Deliberate ... on this new national government with coolness; analyze it with criticism; and reflect on it with candour.” Referring to George Washington, who signed the Constitution, “Cato” maintained that even “the wisest and best of men may err, and their errors, if adopted, may be fatal to the community” (*New York Journal*, 27 September, [CC:103](#)).

“Cæsar” II, who was “not much attached to the *Majesty of the multitude*,” argued that the people in general were “very ill qualified to *judge* for themselves what government will best suit their peculiar situations.” They should maintain “a tractable and docile disposition ... while others ... with the advantages of genius and learning” consider the Constitution. Commenting on the work of the Constitutional Convention, “Cæsar” I asked rhetorically: “Has not the wisdom of America been drawn, as it were, into a focus, and the proffered Constitution sent forth with an unanimity, that is unequalled in ancient or modern story?” (*New York Daily Advertiser*, 1, 17 October, [CC:121, 169](#)).

Entering into the spirit of satire displayed by “Honestus,” Antifederalist printer Thomas Greenleaf explained why he published

“Honestus”: “Lest some illiberal Individual should superciliously, through his Ignorance of the important Subject of the *Freedom of the Press*, have the least Item, by which he might presume to stigmatise the Printer with the hateful Epithet of *partiality*, he has omitted several Pieces, Paragraphs, and Advertisements for the Purpose of giving Place to the *Performance* under the Signature of *Honestus!!*” (*New York Journal*, 26 April).

“Honestus” became an issue in the election for state ratifying convention delegates in the city and county of New York. It was “*Re-inserted by particular desire*” in the *New York Journal* on 28 April, the eve of the five-day election, and it drew an immediate Federalist response. “One and All,” in a broadside dated 29 April, warned his fellow citizens to “Keep a good *Look-Out*.... The enemies of federalism know they can do nothing in this City by *fair play*. They are, therefore, trying to divide you, that they may, if possible, *smuggle in* a few of their friends, and they stick at nothing to effect this. Witness the publication in Greenleaf’s paper, signed Honestus; who, under the mask of friendship to the proposed Constitution, insults the whole body of Mechanics, in order to raise their prejudices against it” (Evans 21500. The pseudonym “One and All” was probably taken from a Federalist nominating ticket drawn up three weeks earlier, with the words: “In Supporting the present Nomination let ONE and ALL be our MOTTO” .). “Honestus” was unsuccessful as the city and county of New York elected nine Federalist delegates by at least a margin of twenty-to-one.

“Honestus” was reprinted in the *Massachusetts Centinel* on 14 May.

[220 ]

Mr. Greenleaf, I was led to the following reflections, by accidentally falling in company, some evenings since, with a

number of characters (chiefly mechanics) at an ale-house, who were making absurd comments on the constitution proposed by the general convention; which convention was composed of the greatest and most enlightened characters in this country. It must be considered, that government is a very abstruse science, and political disquisition a very arduous task, far beyond the reach of common capacities; and that no men, but those who have had a liberal education, and have time to study, can possibly be competent to such an important matter, as the framing a government for such an extensive country, as is comprehended within the United States. Whenever men of neither abilities or education, presume to meddle, with such matters as are above the reach of their knowledge or abilities, they will find themselves out of their proper sphere.


The blacksmith will find that he had better attend to his hammer and anvil, and hammer out hob-nails, for country hoof, than concern himself with affairs of state, should he be weak enough to suppose that he has abilities equal to such an undertaking; he will find, that there is a material difference, between welding together two pieces of steel or iron, and that of uniting heterogeneous and jarring interests, so as to make them productive of the public good.

The mariner may very well understand, how to take an observation, and navigate his ship; but he cannot possibly be acquainted with every point of the political compass, or so to steer the ship of state, as to avoid the hidden and dangerous

rocks, and shelves, that may lay in the way – and whenever he makes the attempt, he will undoubtedly find himself out of his latitude.

The distiller, brewer and baker, may be perfectly well acquainted with the principles of fermentation, and how to regulate and check the same, so as to answer their particular purposes; but they must be entirely ignorant of the laws and means that will be necessary to prevent a dangerous fermentation in the community, or what steps it may be necessary to take, to check such fermentation, when excited.

The farmer may have a sufficiency of knowledge to guide and govern the plough, and team; and understand the best method to thrash his grain – but he must be incompetent to the great purpose of guiding the machinery of the state, or to suggest the best and most effectual method, to thrash the enemies of his country.

The carpenter may be a perfect master of his trade, and understand the rules of architecture; he may frame an edifice, complete in all its parts, and sufficiently strong to secure the proprietor from the [221 ] attempts of the midnight robber; but he will be totally ignorant, how to frame laws for the security of society, so as to prevent the artful and designing from preying upon the ignorant and innocent.

The miller may be a complete artist in his profession, and know how to regulate every thing appertaining to his mill;

he may understand extremely well, how to separate the flour from the bran; but he cannot possibly be master of the address, that will be necessary, to distinguish the wheat from the chaff; in the choice of officers, to fill the different departments in the state.

The clock and watch-maker may know very well how to regulate the wheels, and other movements of a clock or watch; but he will be ignorant of the necessary art, how to regulate the complex machinery of government, so as to dispose the different wheels, as will prevent their interfering with, and bearing too hard on each other.

The mason may be an excellent workman, and understand how to lay the foundation of an house or a wall properly – but he will be at a loss how to determine what base will be necessary on which such a superstructure as government should be erected.

The sadler may be a proficient in his business, and may know what kind of curb is proper to restrain an unruly and restive horse – but he cannot possibly be a judge what laws or curbs will be proper and necessary to restrain the unruly passions of men, so as to prevent their injuring one another.

The turner may be a very expert artizan, but he cannot possibly be acquainted with all the turns and windings, that are used by bad men to evade the laws, and escape the punishment which they justly deserve.

The cooper may know extremely well, how to stop the flaws and worm holes in a cask, and make it so tight as to

hold water, rum, or any other liquor; but he will be much puzzled to stop the flaws, and worm-holes in a law; so as to prevent its operating, either to the injury of individuals, or the government.

The barber may know very well how to make a wig, to suit either the priest, phisician or gentleman of the long-robe, or how to shave his customer with dexterity, – but whenever he attempts to meddle with affairs of state, he will find that his razors have lost their edge, and that he is himself compleatly in the suds.

If this production should operate in such a manner, as to prevent people's neglecting their business and meddling with public matters, beyond their capacities, it will be a sufficient compensation to the writer, who has no other object in view, than that of confining every man within his proper sphere.

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