



CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF THE AMERICAN CONSTITUTION

csac.history.wisc.edu > Document Collections > Popular Culture and Ratification > Poetry
and Songs

Merry and Wise

Newport Mercury, 14 July 1788

Mr. BARBER, You are requested to publish the following versification of the story of William West, who lately headed a number of Reformers to prevent unlawful eating, drinking and cannonading, in the great town of Providence.

*It is best to be merry and wise.*¹

On the twenty-fourth of June as story doth tell,
In a certain great town they ding, donged the bell,
At Hampshire's adopting the new Constitution,
Which threw all the country in greatest confusion:
Not contented with this, they concluded a day
To solace in mirth, and then full joy to display,
On a plain near the cove a fat ox were to roast,
And from nine sounding cannon proclaim their lov'd toast,
In the next public papers publish'd wide their intent,
And to all the great men gilded billets were sent,
And, O doleful! beside, they warn'd by drum,
All the rich and the poor, by outcry, to come.
When the country at large had this brought to their view,
They declar'd it an insult that never wou'd do,
The town's folks with feasting design us to lull,
And suppose we have nothing but sap in our skull,
That our birthright (like Esau) we freely will sell,²
And how charming 'twill sound in the *Herald* to tell,
That the peasants and cits did in union combine,
The new Constitution to toast in good wine—
This maturely consider'd, the country did rouse,
And four fifths appear their good cause to espouse,
Sure schemes so *nefarious* and insults like those,
Must not pass unnotic'd and die in repose;
Whereupon in the night next approaching the day,
That the ox and its guests were to shine in full sway,

A *thousand* arm'd peasants assembled in throng, }
 To prevent the rejoicing of two things in one, }
 The Independence of all, and Constitution of some. }
 The town's folks alarm'd at their coming so near,
 Were thrown into panick and seized with fear,
 In the shade of the night, a Committee was sent,
 To search out the meeting and know what it meant:
 See here our arm'd men said the Chiefs of the wood,
 And these are not half that wou'd come if they cou'd,
 By to-morrow at twelve three thousand may come,
 And who then can *answer*, for what may be done?
 Then with firmness the Chiefs of the country declar'd,
 The new Constitution must not be observ'd,
 Not content to restrain thus, the joy of the day,
 They directed in future what words they should say,
 Controuled their pens and restrained the press,
 And what with the town could the country do less?
 This contract confirm'd the peasants agree,
 To march off the field and right merry to be,
 Part repair'd to a plain and drank their own toast,
 Without any mar, Independence did boast.
 Thus ended the bustle of the fourth of July,
 And what you have read, may be truth, or a lie.

1. Based upon the epigram to proverb xxxiii "Of Myrth wyth wysdome": "Tis good to be mery and wyse: Howe shall soles folowe that advyse." *Two hundred Epigrammes, upon two hundred proverbs, with a thynde hundred newly added and made by John Heywood* (London, 1555).

2. Genesis 25:33.

CITE AS: John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, Vol. XXIV: Rhode Island [1] (Madison, Wis.: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2011), 305–6.