

# LEWIS MORRIS – NEW JERSEY’S COLONIAL POET-GOVERNOR

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AMONG the other, more substantial legacies which in 1745 Governor Lewis Morris of New Jersey bequeathed to his eldest son were “all my bookes and manuscripts . . . to be carefully Kept by him, and to descend as an heir loom.”<sup>1</sup> Of Governor Morris’s books, some fifty percent did not survive the Revolution (when British troops occupied the family estate in New York) and the remainder have since been dispersed. A considerable number of his manuscripts, however, have been preserved, and in that portion of the Morris family papers housed in the Special Collections of Rutgers University Library there exists, among the family letters and legal documents, a sheaf of some eighteen poems of the Governor’s own composition. These poems (all of which are in Morris’s hand and several of which are endorsed “L.M.”) range in size from the twelve lines of “Definition of a libel” to the 668 lines of Morris’s most ambitious effort, “The Dream & Riddle.” A few of the manuscripts are clean copies, though most are in draft form and bear the author’s emendations. Almost all deal satirically with political subjects, closely reflecting the various stages of Governor Morris’s contentious role in the administration of New Jersey’s colonial affairs.

Though the poet-statesman—the busy man of political affairs who yet finds time to function as a dilettante author—has been a perennial figure in the history of England, in early eighteenth-century America, where both poets and statesmen were in comparatively short supply, the combination is rare enough to deserve some note. That Governor Morris’s poems have found no place in anthologies of early American verse is hardly surprising—aside from occasional felicities, his poetic

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Morris, *The Papers of Lewis Morris, Governor of the Province of New Jersey from 1738 to 1746* (New York, 1852), pp. 328-29. Hereafter cited as: Morris, *Papers*.

efforts seldom rise even as high as mediocrity. Yet, negligible though these poems may be from an artistic standpoint, the fame of their author, as well as the date and place of their composition, serves to endow them with an interest as both literary curiosities and historical documents.

Lewis Morris was born in 1671 at Morrisania, his father's 3,000-acre estate in what is now New York City. The elder Morris, who had been a supporter of Cromwell, found the political atmosphere of Restoration England uncongenial and had, accordingly, fled in 1660 to America, eventually settling in New Amsterdam. Both of Morris's parents died within a few months of his birth, and the young boy was put in charge of an uncle, likewise named Lewis Morris. Little is known of young Morris's early years, but the existing records make no mention of any formal schooling. His relations with his uncle were strained, and family legend has it that as an adolescent he left home, wandering as far as Jamaica. During his peregrinations, Morris is said to have supported himself as a legal scrivener, and it was presumably under these circumstances that he began to acquire the knowledge and training which led to his later profession as a lawyer. In any case, by 1691 Morris had returned to New York, and upon his uncle's death in May of that year, he assumed control of the family estate. One year later, at the age of about twenty, Morris's political career began with his appointment as a judge of the Court of Common Right under the Proprietary Government of New Jersey.

From its start Morris's life in politics was characterized by strong opinions and dizzying reversals of fortune. In the rivalry between the Scotch and English proprietors, Morris's allegiance was to the English, and whether his career flourished or languished at any given time was largely dependent upon which party enjoyed the ascendancy. In 1698, as a consequence of his efforts to invalidate the appointment of Jeremiah Basse as Proprietary Governor, Morris was discharged from the post he had earlier won on the Governor's Council. In addition, he suffered the further humiliation of incurring a fine of some £50 for contempt of that same Court of Common Right on which he had earlier sat as a judge. In 1702, as a leading spokesman of those who opposed the system of proprietary government in New Jersey, Morris was sent to England to urge its abandonment. With the successful completion of his mission, Morris triumphantly re-

turned to America and a seat on the Council of Edward, Viscount Cornbury, the newly appointed Governor of New York and New Jersey. The victory was short-lived, however, as Morris, ever sensitive to gubernatorial encroachments on the powers of the Council, soon antagonized the arrogant Cornbury, with the result that in the course of the years 1704-1705 he was in quick succession suspended, reinstated, and then once again suspended from the Council. His political fortunes improved briefly when in 1708 Cornbury's successor, Lord Lovelace, once more assigned Morris a seat on the Council. Shortly thereafter, however, when Lovelace died and was replaced by Acting-Governor Ingoldsby, Morris, for the fourth time in little more than a decade, suffered the by now familiar experience of losing his seat on the Governor's Council.

Morris's political fortunes took a turn upward with the appointment in 1710 of Colonel Robert Hunter as Governor of New York and New Jersey. A warm friendship sprang up between the two men, and before long Morris had not only re-entered the Governor's Council, but was designated head of its New Jersey section. The alliance between Hunter and Morris had a literary, as well as political, basis, for Hunter, like Morris, had developed the useful habit of relieving his political frustrations by the composition of verse satire. Furthermore, as a close friend and correspondent of such men as Swift, Addison, and Prior, Hunter served the provincial Morris as a point of contact with the world of London wit and sophistication. The rapport between the two men may even have extended as far as literary collaboration in the case of *Androboros, a Biographical Farce in Three Acts*. Published in 1714, this attack upon the Council and Lieutenant-Governor of New York is commonly attributed to Hunter alone, though at least one scholar has suggested Morris as co-author.<sup>2</sup>

Under Hunter's successor, William Burnet (son of the famous Bishop), Morris's political life progressed smoothly, and by 1720 he had been appointed Chief Justice of New York and New Jersey. In 1732, however, when William Cosby was installed in the governorship, the tumults of Morris's early career resumed. Cosby, even more than his forerunners Basse, Cornbury, and Ingoldsby, was committed to arbitrary power. His administration was immensely unpopular and

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce I. Granger, *Political Satire in the American Revolution*, Cornell University Press (Ithaca, 1960), p. 3.

with no one more than with Morris, who, within a year of Cosby's arrival, had been suspended as Chief Justice. By 1735 dissatisfaction with Cosby had reached such proportions that Morris, in a role similar to that he had undertaken some thirty-three years before, was chosen by members of the New Jersey Assembly to go to England and there to urge Cosby's removal and the establishment of separate government for the Province of New Jersey. In formal terms, Morris's mission was a failure, for London rejected both his petitions. Fate intervened, however, and in March of 1736 Cosby died—an event which gave rise to renewed, and finally successful, efforts for the separation of New Jersey's government from that of New York.

Morris's near half-century of experience in New Jersey politics and the wide popularity he had achieved in his long role as the people's champion against oppressive Royal Governors now led to the high point of his career—his appointment in February 1738 as Colonial New Jersey's first separate governor, a position which he filled until his death. Ironically, Morris's popularity did not long survive his appointment, and his administration, no less than those of Cornbury and Cosby, was characterized by repeated accusations of arbitrary rule. On May 21, 1746, after eight years of jealously guarding his prerogatives against the challenges of his Council and Assembly, Lewis Morris died at the age of seventy-five and was buried at Morrisania.<sup>3</sup>

It was out of the materials of this busy career that Morris fashioned his verse. To this task Morris brought an intellectual background which, insofar as the records show, included no formal schooling whatsoever beyond what was furnished in his youth by a family tutor. Yet Morris's poems, crude as they frequently are, are not the products of an uneducated or poorly-stocked mind. Indeed, there is evidence which suggests that for his time and place, Morris was a man of altogether exceptional cultivation. On September 19, 1789, when Dr. Ezra Stiles, President of Yale College, visited Governor Mor-

<sup>3</sup> For the best concise biography of Morris, see the "Introductory Memoir" to Morris, *Papers*, pp. 1-30; for the best brief discussions of Morris's political career, see Gordon B. Turner, "Governor Lewis Morris and the Colonial Government Conflict," *Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society*, LXVII (1949), 260-304; and Donald L. Kemmerer, *Path to Freedom, The Struggle for Self-Government in Colonial New Jersey 1703-1776* (Princeton, 1940).

ris's grandson (General Lewis Morris) at Morrisania, he noted the following in his diary:

Gov. Morris very learned, once had a Library at Morrisania of 2 to 3000 Vol. The Enemy destroyed much [in] the late War. I viewed the Residue, perhaps 12 or 1500 Vol. It is replete with learned Works in Law, Politics, Hist<sup>y</sup>, Phil<sup>o</sup>, the Sciences, Theol<sup>y</sup>, party Walton's Polyglott. Gen. Morris tells me his grand-father the Gov. understood Heb.[,] Arabic & the Oriental Languages, as well as Gr. & Lat. And that he got it all of himself, proprio Marte, or as the Gen. exprest it[, ] by his own Pliability, meaning Applic<sup>a</sup>, for he had no College Education.<sup>4</sup>

Even after allowance is made for possible exaggeration of the original library's size, Morris's collection of books remains an impressive one. It compares favorably with early eighteenth-century America's largest private libraries (Cotton Mather's—3,000 to 4,000 volumes in 1728; William Byrd II's—3,600 volumes in 1744)<sup>5</sup> and such institutional collections as those at Harvard (c. 3,000 volumes in 1723) and Yale (2,600 volumes in 1742).<sup>6</sup>

No catalogue of Morris's library exists, but Stiles's description of Morris's taste in reading is confirmed by other sources. In 1735-1736, when Morris journeyed to London to urge the replacement of Governor Cosby, he was accompanied by Robert Hunter Morris, his second eldest son, who bore the name of his father's old political and literary friend. The younger Morris kept a brief diary of this trip, and in it he occasionally recorded the names of the books he and his father read during their year-long stay in London. As might be expected, political and historical works predominate among the titles mentioned, but more purely literary items are not lacking. Thus, on May 7, 1735, young Morris notes that his father had purchased "a quarto Greak Grammer," and on July 26 of the same year he records that his father was engaged in reading "the persian letters" of Montesquieu.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *The Literary Diary of Ezra Stiles* (3 vols., ed. by F. B. Dexter, New York, 1901), III, 366 n.

<sup>5</sup> Louis B. Wright, *The Cultural Life of the American Colonies 1607-1763* (New York, 1957), p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Hunter Morris, "An American in London, 1735-1736" (ed. by Beverly McAnear), *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* (April-July, 1940), pp. 164-217, 366-406. The diarist likewise mentions that he and his father occasionally attended plays at the Drury Lane Theater, where on August 31, 1735, they saw *Julius*

Bolstering Robert Hunter Morris's brief reference to his father's reading are two letters by Lewis Morris to John Clark, his London book-seller. In the first of these, some fourteen books are requested: four dealing with historical and political subjects, three with legal practice, and three with religious matters. The remaining four books ordered are: "Miltons Works," "A New Hebrew Grammar, in English," "An Arabic Grammar, if to be gotten," and (more prosaically) "Millars Gardiner's [i.e., Gardener's] Dictionary."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps even more indicative of Morris's catholic reading tastes is his request of October 12, 1739, for "Tindal's Josephus, a little book Just publish'd call'd the compleat gamester, a large quarto bible bound in turkey, guilt & Letter'd; and, if the money holds out, Chambers dictionary."<sup>9</sup>

Bookish though he undoubtedly was, in his own compositions Morris is seldom self-consciously literary, and in only one of his poems—the brief and altogether conventional "Solilique on Marriage in Imitation of Addison's on Death"—does he acknowledge a specific model. Such literary influences as are discernible in his work are mostly of a more general nature. In the political poems which make up the bulk of his verse, Morris writes in the broad Hudibrastic tradition, as filtered through his contemporary, Sir Richard Blackmore.<sup>10</sup> From Butler and his imitators Morris acquired a taste for the octosyllabic couplet, jogging rhythm, and double rhymes; while in Blackmore he found a respectable poetic precedent for his natural tendency toward prolixity. It is this latter quality, especially prevalent in Morris's more ambitious works, which led to Cadwallader Colden's remark of 1729 (elicited by one of Morris's ruthlessly thorough legal opinions) that "it is the fault of the Morris family that they exhaust the subject they treat on."<sup>11</sup> But despite their verbosity,

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Caesar, and on September 11, 1735, an "ill-done" performance of Farquhar's *Love and a Bottle*.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, *Papers*, p. 47.

<sup>9</sup> Morris, *Papers*, p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> Blackmore (d. 1729) was a prolific author of topical satires, as well as of what Richard Boys has called "soporific epics" (Introduction to *Series One: Essays on Wit No. 1*, Augustan Reprint Society, May, 1946). In his own time Blackmore was hugely popular, especially in America, where his fame exceeded that of Dryden and Pope. (See William P. Trent, *A History of American Literature 1607-1865* [New York, 1929], pp. 82, 84, 87.) Almost forgotten today, Blackmore achieved what is probably his most secure claim to literary immortality when he was pilloried by Pope in *The Dunciad*.

<sup>11</sup> Letter to James Alexander (July 13, 1729), as quoted in Morris, *Papers*, p. 239 n.

it is precisely Morris's longer poems which have best weathered the more than two centuries since their composition. Three such poems—"The Mock Monarchy or the Kingdom of Apes," "The Dream & Riddle," and "To his Excellency Lewis Morris Esq<sup>r</sup>. Upon the assembly's Desireing him to fix his own Seat"—are of particular interest, and together they may serve as a fair introduction to the verse of the man who in all likelihood was New Jersey's first poet, as well as her first governor.

"The Mock Monarchy or the Kingdom of Apes: A poem by a gentleman of New Jersey in America," like all of Morris's manuscripts, bears no date. Its preoccupation with tyrannical Royal Governors and corrupt Assemblies, however, would seem to reflect Morris's concerns during the period of either 1691-1710 or of 1733-1738—more probably the latter, since it was in the second half of his career that he wrote most of his verse. The poem (some 465 lines in length) opens with a description of a bygone era, "In pious princes golden Days,"<sup>12</sup> when all men practiced virtue. "Then publick Spirit was itself,/ then men lov'd honnour more than pelf." In this fortunate society, we are told, merchants were honest; country squires disdained "to bribe, or flatter" their way into Parliament; "priests" did not meddle in politics; and judges who "dispensed the laws/ did Judge according to the cause." This pleasant state of affairs is interrupted when

Some happy Son  
of fortune, by design led on,  
or chance, no matter which[,]  
discover'd here [i.e., America] a fertile Soile  
in which whoever would but moile  
was certain to be rich.

The response to this discovery is immediate; for

no sooner did the news get o'er  
of this vast, rich, prolifick Shore  
than numbers undertake,  
at once to leave their native land

<sup>12</sup> All quotations from Morris's poems are taken from The Morris Papers, Rutgers University Library, New Brunswick, New Jersey. Except in cases where clarity demanded it, I have left Morris's orthography and punctuation (or, more often, his lack of punctuation) unchanged.

and waft themselves unto this Strand  
a monarchy to make.

To people this new land, various European countries send settlers, and Morris (forgetting that earlier in the poem he had characterized Europe as a utopia) describes the immigrants as follows:

from Dane, from Hollander and Swede,  
from Wales, and from the north of Tweed  
our first Supply's came o'er,  
from france a band of refugees,  
and from fair Ireland rapparees,  
came crowding to this Shore  
a mungrell brood of canting Saints,  
that filled all Europe with complaints  
came here to fix their stakes  
And such another whyning gang,  
that rather chose to move than hang,  
came from the land of cakes  
the germans send a numerous train,  
and some from England cross the main,  
who were none of the best  
from the low countrys came a crew  
whose parents were the Lord knows who  
the Jayles supplied the rest.<sup>13</sup>

In the absence of any genuinely skilled men, people who were at the bottom of society in Europe become impressively professional in

<sup>13</sup> It is interesting to note how Morris's jaundiced view of America's first colonists parallels Defoe's lines on the various strains which contribute to "The True-Born Englishman."

The *Romans* first with *Julius Caesar* came,  
Including all the Nations of that Name,  
*Gauls, Greeks, and Lombards*; and by Computation,  
Auxiliaries or Slaves of ev'ry Nation.  
With *Hengist, Saxons; Danes* with *Sueno* came,  
In search of Plunder, not in search of Fame.  
*Scots, Picts, and Irish* from th' *Hibernian Shore*:  
And Conqu'ring *William* brought the *Normans* o're.  
All these their Barb'rous Offspring left behind,  
The Dregs of Armies, they of all Mankind; . . .  
From this Amphibious Ill-born Mob began  
That vain ill-natur'd thing, an Englishman.

Morris may well have been familiar with Defoe's poem (first published in 1701), but it does not follow that he used it as a model. The two poems are different in spirit, as well as meter, and what general resemblances they have would seem ascribable to their similar themes, rather than to any conscious imitation.



America. Thus, tooth-drawers become physicians, and former servants of lawyers set up as judges.

Even trulls, who rang'd about the town  
and there, would for a groat lay down,  
and that without formality;  
no sooner touch these happy Shores,  
but all the tribe of bawds and whores,  
do here, set up for Quality.

Just as everyone “here” has become more than he was at home, so the Governor assigned to rule the land “did ape the great/ would be forsooth a King.” Accordingly, he begins to rule by means of spies, hypocrisy, and bribes. Eventually, the restive people demand a parliament, which the mother country grants. The colony rejoices and “the rabble rout did then prepare/ to choose the men, who were to share/ the ruling of this Land.” One thing all agree on—“learning” is not what they want in a legislator; “for if a man could write or read,/ they all were in a mighty dread,/ he would destroy their Charter.” Among those chosen as representatives are a cobbler, a blacksmith, a “jaylor bird,” a miller, and a weaver. “A Lawer [sic] next step'd forth; the fop,/ held in his hand, a Inkhorn top;/ for which he was rejected.” Other successful candidates include a peddler, a cooper, a carpenter, and a tailor.

The parliament, which, like its English model, has both a House of Commons and a House of Lords, now combines with the royally ambitious Governor to bilk the country. Both houses engage in niggling disputes and unimportant debates, until eventually enmity between Commons and Lords becomes so great that they cannot agree on any legislation—much to the chagrin of the Governor, who needs their formal approval for his revenues. He therefore calls in the members of his “mock house of peers” and threatens to create more new lords unless they pass bills to furnish him with more money. They fearfully comply, and there is general celebration in Commons.

So it went and so it goes, says Morris—as each greedy and ambitious Governor gets his way, his power grows until he over-steps himself and gets recalled. His replacement, however, is seldom any improvement. “The men were changed, not the thing/ Each one affected to be King.” The Commons and Lords, through fear and venality, are disinclined to reform, and in any case, they are powerless. Thus it remains, says Morris in closing, “and tis but Just, that

any man/ who won't take freedom when he can/ should remain a Slave."

The second of Morris's poems to be summarized here is his lengthiest composition, "The Dream & Riddle" (668 lines in iambic pentameter couplets). This work is clearly autobiographical, and the journey it describes (in which a colonial emissary visits the mother country in an unsuccessful attempt to effect the recall of a corrupt governor) suggests that Morris intended the poem as a parable of his own mission of 1735-1736. "The Dream & Riddle," as its title indicates, employs that traditionally favorite device of satirists—the dream-vision. As the poem begins, the speaker, having dozed off "Under a lofty limetrees spreading shade," dreams that he is standing upon a seashore, where he shortly witnesses the arrival of a ship. The ship deposits "A proper Gentleman upon the Strand," and this gentleman, after a prayer of thanks for his safe delivery, leaves for "the Capital," where he seeks out a lawyer. At this point the dreamer-narrator disappears, and the poem assumes the form of a dialogue between the "Councillour" and his "Clyent." The "Clyent" announces his mission in the following terms:

From distant regions where Vicegerents may  
 leave nought untry'd to make mankind their prey—  
 by forc'd Obedience to despotick sway—  
 who did when on their native Soil despair,  
 of Bread, or credit, thither did repair,—  
 to Shun a Jail, and walk in open Air—  
 whose crimes (where [sic] Justice done) should make them feel  
 the Sharp remarks of executing Steel;  
 and far from being worthy to comand  
 should take their merits from the hangman's hand.  
 from thence I came determin'd to complain  
 to get misrule redress'd, I cross'd the main, . . .  
 I am inform'd our noble Prince's Ear  
 is open to complaints, if he will hear  
 the Difficulty's how to get them there  
 and You must tell by what best means I may  
 the various ills unto the Prince display  
 that his Vicegerents do in *distant* Lands  
 in opposition to his just commands  
 what steps to take, & how shall I proceed?  
 and what most likely methods to succeed?  
 in order future mischiefs to prevent  
 or bring the actors to just punishment.

The "Councillour," though sympathetic, has little to offer; for, as he says:

I greatly fear  
 You'r come to very little purpose here.  
 Complaints if just, are very shocking things;  
 and not encourag'd in the courts of Kings.  
 t'accept your Chief, they'll construe to be meant  
 a Side reflection on the Government—  
 and Senders mostly will defend the Sent  
 if they perhaps deciev'd abroad do send  
 Some worthless wretch, or known one recommend,  
 in either case the matter's much the same;  
 the Recommendors can't be free'd from blame.  
 will therefore for their own sakes strive to shun  
 a Censure well deserv'd for what they've done.

The "Councillour" next begins a rambling digression on contemporary moral corruption ("The gaudy Shops of this tumultous [sic] hive/ by several arts of cheating only thrive/ Use various frauds in praising what they sell/ affronting Heaven and contemning Hell."). Included is a warning to avoid the fleshpots of the city.

The beauteous Nymph engages with a Smile  
 furnish'd with various methods to beguile  
 pretends to honour to[o], but who are wise  
 Know no such thing below the girdle lyes.  
 an Angel's face exposes with much art,  
 be carefull to avoid an other part,  
 the latent fire may rise into a flame,  
 that may consume your Substance & your fame.

In turn there follow condemnations of conniving lawyers ("by long delays You'll be undone."); of doctors ("They well the weakness of their Patients know,/ and should they not be sick, they'l make them so."); and of worldly prelates ("[our] Priests have brought the Priesthood to contempt."). Returning to the immediate problem, the "Councillour" suggests that, if the "Clyent" really wishes redress, his proper place is at home, and his task should be "t'acquaint those lands [i.e., the colonies], that gainst a wicked chief/ They from themselves or heav'n must hope relief." In any case, a change in "chiefs" will, in all likelihood, mean only that one rascal will be replaced by another. ("The vile but strong insatiate thirst of gain/ Is what induces chiefs to cross the main.") But the "Clyent" should

realize that it is physically dangerous to fight corruption; for great men will punish anyone so bold as to publicize their robberies.

At this point in the text, abruptly and with no transition, the "Councillour" begins a panegyric of Cromwell (in whose army, it will be remembered, Morris's father had been an officer).

There is a Nation underneath the Sky,  
that's greatly fam'd for Love of liberty:  
which when the Prince did with the Priesthood join  
and to destroy their Libertys combine,  
They bravely did assert their native right;  
defending it in Senates and in fight.  
by arms their bygot King a Captive made  
and boldly struck off his Majestick head.  
Then rose a greater mortal in his Stead.  
He Styl'd what they had done the work of God,  
made trembling nations to obey his Nod,  
rendred the Servants of most courts his own:  
their Secret Measures unto him were known.

The "Councillour" goes on to describe Cromwell's death and the political confusion which brought about the Restoration ("and, after all the changes they had run,/ who slew the Father reinthron'd the Son."). To show their loyalty to the new King (Charles II) his subjects had generously bestowed money and gifts on him, but, we are told, "he soon exhausted all their mighty stores,/ and lavish'd all their bounty on his whores." Eventually a new King (James II) abetted by power-hungry "priests," (described as "the ready tools of every court,") sought to enslave the nation by asserting "That King and Priests, were both by right divine." Driven too far, "This People had recourse to forreign aid/ And of a Neighbouring Prince assistance pray'd." The Prince (William of Orange) came with an army and the evil King, unable to muster troops, was obliged to flee.

The "Councillour," as he comes to the close of his protracted speech (and the close of the poem of which it forms the bulk), reiterates that times have once again grown bad, and that the corruption which breeds rebellion is once more rife. Accordingly, the "Clyent's" grievance is, for the moment, beyond redress. In parting, however, the "Councillour" asks that the "Clyent" disclose the name of the country he represents. The "Clyent" ignores the question and counters by asking what nation it is whose recent history the "Councillour" has so lengthily explicated. Before any reply can be made,

the dreamer-narrator of the early portion of the poem abruptly reappears and teasingly ends the poem with the announcement:

I wak'd amaz'd; but to what place he came  
let those who can by y<sup>t</sup> discription [sic] name.

The third (and last) of our trio of Governor Morris's poems represents him in an uncommonly mellow mood. By 1738 his long campaign against tyrannical vice-regents had finally borne fruit, and he himself had been appointed Royal Governor of New Jersey. The tribulations of his own administration were still in the future, when, in February of that year, the Assembly voted their popular new Governor permission to select his own place of official residence. In "To his Excellency Lewis Morris, Esq<sup>r</sup>. Upon the assembly's Desiring him to fix his own Seat" Morris assumes the role of a helpful outsider and addresses himself with offers of advice as to where to settle. The poem (some 190 lines long) is in the form of a catalogue, wherein the virtues and attractions—primarily gastronomic—of each of New Jersey's principal towns are described. Thus, Morris tells himself:

Shou'd you reside in Hackinsack  
you may have Rum & sometimes Rack  
good mutton, Venison & veale  
gees, mallard plover duck & teal  
tho company not so polite  
as you would wish to spend aright  
And shou'd your choice be to reside  
in Essex on pisayicks side  
that pleasing stream will gratifie  
by turns your pallet & your Eye  
& with the neigbring lands aford  
plenty to grace a noble board.

In turn there follow discussions of Newark and Elizabeth ("the Seits of Each are Very good/ abounding in both hay and wood/ & choice of Viands fit for food.") and of Perth Amboy (" 'tis very pleasant all agree/ at proper distance from ye Sea. "). When he comes to describe New Brunswick, Morris satirically emphasizes its commercial spirit and multiplicity of religions.

let not new Brunswick be passed by  
but well observe their Industry—  
in what small space of time they'r grown

from nothing to a thriving town . . .  
 they are devout beyond compare  
 of most religions have some share  
 & if you've lost ye one you had  
 You'll there find that or one as bad[;]  
 as good I meant & should have said  
 but that's all one in point of trade  
 where no distinction's ever made  
 of good or bad but as it shows  
 what loss or proffit from it flows  
 what proffit yields they sacred hold  
 & no thing sinfull that brings Gold.

In more general (and less critical) terms, Morris goes on to describe the appeals of Princeton (“a pleasant spot & fine retreat/ that in some ages may be great”) and of Trenton (“a fertile country round it Lyes/ that it can never want supplies/ of all things needfull for your board.”). Such are the major contenders, but the choice, as Morris ruefully concludes, is bound to be a difficult one. In any case, it is to be hoped that, once the Governor’s selection has been made, there will ensue “between all parts an harmony/ and all of them with you agree.”<sup>14</sup>

In his life of William Somerville (1692-1742), Samuel Johnson remarks: “It is with regret that I find myself not better enabled to exhibit memorials of a writer who at least must be allowed to have set a good example to men of his own class, by devoting part of his time to elegant knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> Both the regret and the equivocal compliment in Johnson’s statement may appropriately be applied to Lewis Morris in his role as a poet. Governor Morris’s verse, as even so limited a survey reveals, is not of a quality likely to win him a secondary fame as a poet; but there is no evidence to suggest that he ever sought or expected such fame. He practiced poetry as a gentlemanly diversion, intended for little more than the private amusement of himself and a few friends. It is perhaps a sufficient tribute to Lewis Morris’s satiric vigor that the modern reader, more than two centuries later, can still share some measure of that amusement.

<sup>14</sup> Morris’s seeming indecision as to the place of his official residence was more of a poetic fiction than a reality. For all practical purposes, the choice had been made some years earlier, when Morris built a house at Kingsbury, near Trenton. Predictably, it was in this house that he resided during his term as Governor.

<sup>15</sup> Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the English Poets*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill (Oxford, 1905), II, 318.