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Tully the Naïve: John Adams on Cicero

I should as soon think of closing all my window shutters, to enable me to see, as of
banishing the Classics, to improve Republican Ideas

John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 19 June 1789¹

My Dear George.

If you have a desire of a long life and a happy life I advise you to read Cicero. Your Father has expressed sufficient admiration of his office and his other writings but I wish at this time to recommend to you particular his treatise on Friendship. His dream of Scipio his letter to his brother Quintus about to take upon him for the third time the Government of Asia, and above all his treatise on old age. If you can read these writings with attention and not love your friends, your country, your species, the Universe you inhabit, and without adoring that eternal wisdom, power and benevolence which produced it better than you ever did before you must have no soul.

John Adams to grandson George Washington Adams, March 13th, 1820

1 Introduction

In the early years of the United States, Cicero came to symbolize the failure of noble republican idealism. John Adams, the second president of the United States who lost his bid for a second term and retired from politics in disgrace, wrote that he saw his own career mirrored in that of Cicero. Adams was an avid lifelong reader of Cicero's works, translating them as a young man and again with his eldest son John Quincy (later president himself). He took particular inspiration from *De republica* when he wrote his *Defense of the Constitutions* during the Revolution. After this idealistic time came disappointment and frustration. Adams thought that he and the generation of "founding fathers" who had helped to inspire America's fight for independence had carried on the legacy of Cicero as a political thinker. They were deeply committed to republican institutions and the mixed constitution as described in *De republica*. But like Cicero (in Adams' eyes), they had been stymied, relegated to political irrelevance by a new generation of politicians, whose cabals and demagoguery threatened to destroy the American republic. Cicero was powerless to stop their machinations,

¹ Quotations from letters between Adams and his correspondents are taken from the "Founders Online" website at <https://founders.archives.gov/>, a project of the National Archives of the United States.

but he preserved his own integrity and was eventually vindicated by posterity, an idea in which Adams took much comfort. Adams thus understood his own circumstances through comparison with Roman history and defended his own career through similarities with his portrait of Cicero.

John Adams' engagement with Cicero was not academic but deeply personal, using the classical orator's work as a guide for life. After an ignominious end to his political career in 1800, Adams sought solace and sympathy in Cicero's works. In a series of letters from 1808–1809, he offered a spirited defense of the orator's character and career which clearly applied to his own situation as well. He argued that Cicero was not vain, as was often alleged, but merely naïve in supposing that his virtue would offer a defense against malicious attacks. The portrait of Cicero constructed in these letters is one of a tragic figure, a true believer in noble republican ideals who failed to grapple effectively with the forces of corruption, factionalism, and demagoguery – a description Adams also applied to himself.

In several letters in 1808–1809, to his son and to his friends, Adams quotes from Cicero (particularly the *Tusculan Disputations*) to explain the American political scene, and compares his contemporaries to Caesar, Catiline, and Clodius. Adams sought to justify his own political actions by comparing himself to Cicero. Through this comparison, he promulgated a representation of Cicero as an idealist whose political vision was spoiled by a sordid reality. He argued that Cicero, like himself, failed to prevent the republic's collapse because he was too naïve to anticipate the villainy of his opponents. Adams was particularly eager to defend Cicero against the charge of vanity (not least because Adams himself was accused of the same vice), arguing that Cicero was merely conscious of his own extraordinary merit, and defending himself against the slanderous attacks of others. He represented Cicero as simple and innocent, not as a masterful rhetorician or calculating political operator, and accepted Cicero's most damning portraits of his enemies as historical fact.

2 John Adams: life and intellectual background

John Adams was the second president of the United States, serving only a single term from 1796 to 1800 as the successor to George Washington, under whom he had served as vice president. He had been an early and leading advocate of independence from Britain in Boston, authoring letters to newspapers (sometimes

under pseudonyms like “Novanglus”),² and as a delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1774–1776, where he nominated George Washington to lead the Continental Army and helped Thomas Jefferson to draft the Declaration of Independence. He drafted the constitution of the state of Massachusetts in 1780, now the world’s oldest functioning constitution, and in 1787 penned his *Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, a sort of sourcebook on political theory to be used in writing the new federal constitution. This work drew heavily on the text of Cicero’s *De republica* known at that time, before Angelo Mai’s discovery of the Vatican palimpsest in 1822;³ he expressed regret that “the best Writings of Antiquity upon Government those I mean of Aristotle, Zeno and Cicero are lost”.⁴ He was a firm believer in the classical theory of the mixed constitution, and a Federalist who advocated for a centralized federal government with a strong executive, as opposed to the Democratic Republicans who favored a weaker executive or the anti-Federalists who advocated for greater autonomy for the states.⁵ He is now among the lesser known of the founding fathers of the United States, and no monument to him exists in Washington, D.C.

The Revolutionary and Critical periods in American history saw a flourishing of neoclassicism in the thirteen colonies.⁶ Carl Richards has suggested that the colonists used learned Latin and Greek references to demonstrate that their young frontier country was still civilized by Old World standards.⁷ The classical personifications of *Libertas* with her *pilleus*, *Fama* with her trumpet, and Justice with her scales and blindfold were common in early American iconography.⁸ George Washington was lionized as the American Cincinnatus and even as the American Fabius Maximus Cunctator,⁹ and had Joseph Addison’s popular play

² On the Ciceronian rhetoric of these essays, see Farrell 1992a.

³ Procter 2018, 253–257; see also Gummere 1962. On Mai’s discovery: Zetzel 1995, 33; Zetzel 2012.

⁴ Letter from John Adams to Samuel Adams, Sr., 18 October 1790; cf. letter from John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 9 July 1813.

⁵ Siemers 2013, 102–124; Ryerson 2016.

⁶ On Cicero in America see “Ciceroniana” 8, Rome 1994 (especially Rahe 1994, on the general popularity of Cicero’s works at the time).

⁷ Richard 1995, 51. Richard provides an eclectic account of classical traditions among the founding fathers, organized thematically. See also Shalev 2009 on classical traditions in the American Revolution.

⁸ Jacobs 1977; Korshak 1987, 57–64; Richard 1995, 43–52; Verheyen 1996; Fischer 2005; Riccio 2018.

⁹ Cincinnatus: see e.g. Charles Henry Wharton’s *Poetical Epistle to George Washington*; letter to George Washington from Count de Wengierski, 8 October 1783; letter to George Washington from

Cato performed for officers at Valley Forge during the war.¹⁰ Adams' wife Abigail sometimes signed her letters "Portia", after the wife of M. Brutus. Later, during the Critical Period and Washington's presidency, Alexander Hamilton and his colleagues routinely accused their opponents of being Catilines and Caesars, subverting the new nation's political order.¹¹ Hannah Arendt wrote that "the American founders had donned the clothes of the Roman *maiores*" and assumed the venerable status arrogated to founding figures in classical antiquity, which resulted in near-worship of the new Constitution as the vessel of "the authority which the act of foundation carried within itself".¹² They saw themselves as a combination of Lucius Brutus and the founders of the Roman republic with Marcus Brutus, Cato the Younger, and the defenders of the republic in its final days. They were simultaneously founding a new republic and taking measures to avert its end – or mourning its immediate decline from the ideal they had imagined. Neoclassicism went out of fashion in the early 19th century, as thinkers like Thomas Jefferson and Adams' friend Benjamin Rush advocated a new model of education based on modern sciences rather than the classics, and politicians like Jefferson and later Andrew Jackson turned to more populist, less elitist styles of political communication.¹³

Adams, like many of his peers in the colonies, had learned Latin and read the classics from an early age, even though his father, a farmer, had not attended college. Latin and Greek translation and grammar were a staple of the entrance requirements for universities like Harvard, Adams' alma mater.¹⁴ Adams first purchased a book of Cicero's in 1750 at the age of 15 while preparing for those entrance requirements, a Dutch school edition of select orations in Latin.¹⁵ He later helped his oldest son, John Quincy Adams, to read the same orations to prepare

Jean Baptiste Mailhe, 19 May 1784. See also Wills 1984. Fabius: see *e.g.* letter from John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 25 November 1775; from Alexander Hamilton to Robert R. Livingston, 28 June 1777; letter from John Adams to Abigail Adams, 2 September 1777; letter from Major General Arthur St. Clair to George Washington, 5 January 1778.

10 Malamud 2009, 9–14; Melton 2013, 84.

11 Malamud 2019, 120–121; Kenty 2019; see also Berno (p. 369–390) in this volume. On the influence of passages related to Catiline in the *Columbian Orator*, a textbook published first in 1797, see Melton 2013, 82–84; Malamud 2013, 99; 2019, 92–99.

12 Arendt 1963, 204, 200.

13 Miles 1974, 263–274; Reinhold 1994, 59–108, 125–136; Richard 1995, 196–212. John Quincy Adams and others saw much of Julius Caesar in Jackson; Malamud 2009, 19–25.

14 Smith 1962, 15–18; Gummere 1963, 55–75; Mooney 1994; Winterer 2002, 10–43; Bederman 2008, 1–49; Howe 2011; Richard 2015, 124–130.

15 Adams 1981, XIII. On Adams' education, see Ellis 2001, 26–57.

for his own entrance to Harvard,¹⁶ and his younger sons Charles and Thomas and daughter Abigail also learned Latin.¹⁷ John Quincy later taught rhetoric as a professor at Harvard concurrently with his career in public service, which included his own stint as president from 1825–1829, and published his lectures on rhetoric.¹⁸ Adams (senior) read Conyers Middleton's enormously popular 1741 *History of the Life of Marcus Tullius Cicero* at least twice.¹⁹ His library at Braintree, catalogued in 1790, contained an 8-volume edition of the works of Cicero in Latin, the letters to Atticus, and several volumes of select orations translated into English and French.²⁰

3 Adams' identification with Cicero

While others among America's "founding fathers" will have had a similar education in the classics,²¹ John Adams felt a special kinship to Cicero, and regarded him as a technical and moral exemplar. Cicero was the yardstick by which Adams measured his own achievements and ambitions. James Farrell has argued that Adams chose "Syren Tully"²² as a role model at an early point in his career,

¹⁶ Diary entry from April 1779; *Founders Online*.

¹⁷ On Abigail, see Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 16 March 1776. Charles and John Quincy were enrolled at the Latin School in Amsterdam and then at the University of Leiden while Adams served as American ambassador to the Netherlands in 1780 (John Adams to Abigail Adams, 25 September 1780; 18 December 1780). Thomas' "classical taste" is referred to in a letter from John Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, 17 October 1799.

¹⁸ Auer/Banninga 1963; Wills 1984. Adams senior worried that his son would be overworked in this post to no purpose, since oratory seemed useless in a corrupt age, and commented cynically: "Demosthenes and Cicero, the two consummate Masters died Martyrs to their Excellence" (letter to Benjamin Rush, 23 July 1806).

¹⁹ Letter to William Tudor, 4 August 1774; letter to Benjamin Rush, 4 December 1805.

²⁰ "List of Books in John Adams's Library in Braintree, June 1790", *Founders Online*, National Archives. Adams owned an edition of Cicero's works in eight volumes, *M. Tullii Ciceronis Opera Omnia*, edited by Janus Gruterus (Jan Gruter) and corrected by Cornelius Schrevelius (Cornelis Schrevel) in an edition first published in Amsterdam in 1661. That volume contains all of the orations in the second volume, and the letters *ad Familiares*, *ad Atticum*, *ad Quintum*, and *ad Brutum* in the third volume.

²¹ The 1994 issue of *Ciceroniana* (vol. 8) focused on traditions and receptions of Cicero in America.

²² This nickname comes from a poem by Samuel Dexter, delivered at a public exhibition at Harvard in 1780, which Adams may have seen; Adams inscribed the verse in his edition of the works of Cicero in Latin (Farrell 1992b, 390).

when he began to practice law in Boston.²³ Adams was the son of a Massachusetts farmer and, like Cicero, relied on his own merit and industry in the absence of distinguished ancestors.²⁴ “I find myself entering an unlimited Field. A Field in which Demosthenes, Cicero, and others of immortal Fame have exulted before me! A Field which incloses the whole Circle of Science and Literature, the History, Wisdom, and Virtue of all ages”, Adams wrote giddily as he chose his career.²⁵ He marveled at the eloquence and force of *Pro Milone*, copying Latin passages into his diary in 1758 and offering a commentary on the persuasive strategy of the peroration: “feeling with so much sensibility, the Ingratitude, Cruelty, and folly of Banishing a Man who had rendered the Republic such Important services and was able and zealous to render still more, must have drawn Tears to their Eyes and Rage to their Breasts. [...] I take it this Peroration for Milo, may be studied as a Model of the Pathetic”.²⁶

In 1765, when his friend and classmate Jonathan Sewall suggested that Adams might someday be as famous as Cicero,²⁷ Adams answered:

Yet tho I have very few Hopes, I am not ashamed to own that a Prospect of an Immortality in the Memories of all the Worthy, to [the] End of Time would be a high Gratification to my Wishes. But to Return, Tully, therefore, had but few Advantages, in the Estimation of Reason more than We have, for a happy Life. – He had greater Political Objects to tempt his Ambition, he had better Opportunities to force the Hozanna’s of his Countrymen, but these are not Advantages for Happiness. On the Contrary, the Passions which these Objects were designed to gratify, were so many stings for ever smarting in his Mind, which at last goaded him into that Excess of Vanity and Pusillanimity, for which he has been as often blamed, as ever he was praised for his Genius and his Virtues.²⁸

Vanity was also a vice with which Adams struggled himself. In his diary in 1756, he wrote: “Vanity I am sensible, is my cardinal Vice and cardinal Folly, and I am in continual Danger, when in Company, of being led an *ignis fatuus* Chase by it, without the strictest Caution and watchfulness over myself”.²⁹ Little did Adams know that his own historical circumstances would soon see a series of crises with political objects great enough to tempt any man’s ambition, and great op-

²³ Farrell 1991; 1992b, 378–380; cf. Gummere 1934; Reinhold 1994, 46–50; Rahe 1994, 65.

²⁴ Cf. La Bua (p. 118) in this volume.

²⁵ Letter to John Wentworth, October–November 1758. The last phrase shows the influence of *De Oratore* on education in rhetoric in this period; see Guthrie & Thomas’ chapters in Brigrance 1955; Farrell 1992b, 377–379; Farrell 2011; Botein 1978.

²⁶ Farrell 1992b, 379–382.

²⁷ Letter to John Adams from Jonathan Sewall, 13 February 1760. Cf. Farrell 1992b, 385–388.

²⁸ Letter to Jonathan Sewall, February 1760.

²⁹ Diary, 1 May 1756. *Founders Online*, National Archives.

portunities to “force hosannas” (or not). Setting off for the Continental Congress, he compared himself to Cicero embarking on his quaestorship in Sicily, and to Cicero writing missives to Atticus from the capital.³⁰ Farrell has argued that Adams took Cicero as an epistolary model as well, in using letters as a vehicle for deliberation and in anticipating their later circulation as historical documents.³¹

Adams could not have known either that, like Cicero, after a great triumph in ascending to the highest office in his country, he would suffer humiliation and a kind of exile (at least in his own eyes).³² He was not a popular president, and had been the target of hostile press for years. He managed to avert war with France (by negotiating with the new Consul Napoleon Bonaparte, to the disappointment of his own Federalist party) during a period of high tensions, and passed the reviled Alien and Sedition Acts, which allowed him to imprison or deport anyone suspected of spying for the French or aiding their cause, including journalists.³³ This abuse of executive power did him no favors in the election of 1800: he had hoped to win a second term, but instead came in a distant third to Aaron Burr and his own former Vice President and friend, Thomas Jefferson. He felt personally betrayed, and refused to attend Jefferson’s inauguration or even to speak to Jefferson for over a decade.

Returning home to Massachusetts, Adams began to write an autobiography to vindicate himself, which he never finished. In this project, Farrell writes, he was “driven by a personal quest to be remembered as a great orator and by the desire to emphasize oratory as a historical force in the American Revolution”, and thus to live up to the Ciceronian paradigm.³⁴ In composing an autobiography, Adams worried that he was engaging in a vanity project and nurturing the very vice he had written about in his diary as a young man:

30 Letters to William Tudor, 4 August 1774; to Abigail Adams, 31 March 1777. See also a letter from John Adams to John Trumbull, 18 November 1805 referring to Cicero in Syracuse.

31 Farrell 1995.

32 He calls it exile at the end of a letter to Benjamin Rush, 18 January 1808. This was not the first period of his life which he had compared to Cicero’s exile: while serving as ambassador to France and the Netherlands in 1785, he wrote: “I find myself sometimes disposed to write Elegies and Jeremiads upon my Exile in imitation of Ovid and Cicero, but to avoid such thoughts as much as possible, I make a little America of my own Family” (Letter from John Adams to John Jay, 31 January 1785; see also the letter from John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 13 December 1784).

33 Again, on the Ciceronian posture of this policy, see Farrell 2002.

34 Farrell 1989, 510.

As the Lives of Phylosophers, Statesmen or Historians written by themselves have generally been suspected of Vanity, and therefore few People have been able to read them without disgust; there is no reason to expect that any Sketches I may leave of my own Times would be received by the Public with any favour, or read by individuals with much interest. [...] My Excuse is, that having been the Object of much Misrepresentation, some of my Posterity may probably wish to see in my own handwriting a proof of the falsehood of that Mass of odious Abuse of my Character.³⁵

Adams felt that he had been abused unjustly by his critics; most notably, Alexander Hamilton, his fellow Federalist, had written a pamphlet for their party's electors in 1800 vilifying his "public conduct and character" as president.³⁶ However, Adams may have felt an even greater sense of betrayal at the criticism levied against him in 1806 by his friend, the historian and playwright Mercy Otis Warren. She wrote that while Adams was serving as an ambassador and negotiator in Europe during the Revolution, "unfortunately for himself and his Country, he became so enamored with the British Constitution, and the Government, Manners and Laws of the Nation, that a Partiality for Monarchy appeared, which was inconsistent with his former Professions of Republicanism".³⁷ Adams was branded by Warren and others as a monarchist, a secret Tory and admirer of George III, heretical ideas in the wake of the war for independence. Perhaps he took some comfort in knowing that Cicero, too, had been accused of abusing his power in presiding over the executions of the Catilinarian conspirators, and in promoting monarchistic rule by Pompey and Caesar.

4 Vanity & naïveté

In balancing vanity against a desire to defend himself against such attacks, Adams turned again to Cicero. In fact, he seems to offer a defense of Cicero as a sort of proxy for himself, circumventing vainglorious self-justifications by metonymy. In January of 1808, he wrote to his son John Quincy Adams (who had recently been forced to resign from the U.S. senate himself), and concluded the letter:

³⁵ Ellis 2001, 57–62; Shaw 1976, 269–275.

³⁶ Farrell 2002, 84–85. Adams wrote public rebuttals in his 1809–1811 editorials to "Boston Patriot".

³⁷ Quoted indignantly in a letter from Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 11 July 1807. Ryerson 2016, 361–364.

When poor Cicero found himself almost the only Roman left Surrounded by Clodius, Cataline Caesar and Pompey, all alike ambitious and Selfish, the two last with Legions at their heels Sufficient to overawe every independent Soul, by four and twenty per Cent, Men in thousands to gripe the People and by Millions of the People in desperate Poverty and more desperate Vice, he had no Consolations but in his own Vanity as most men call it, but his own Conscience of Merit as I deem it. I believe you will find little other Comfort. You remember the Proclamation of Ephesus, when she banished Hormodorus [sic]. No Man among Us Shall excell. If any Such Man Shall arise let him carry his merit to Some other Country". *Nemo de nobis Unus excellat. Sed Si quis extiterit, alia in loco et apud alios Sit.* You remember too, no doubt Ciceros Comment upon this memorable Vote of the Ephesians. *An hoc non ita Sit, in omni populo? Nonne omnem exuperantiam virtutis oderunt?* *Tusc. Quest.* 1.5. n. 105. The Constitution of our Country is already far advanced in decay under this corroding Cancer of Envy.³⁸

The quoted passage belongs in the context of Cicero's repudiation of baser desires, in which the teacher in the text argues that the wise man "will scorn our ambitions and trivial aspirations and even the honors bestowed by the people" (*Tusc.* 5.104).³⁹ Adams was also feeling isolated, frustrated with his decline from an earlier age of greatness ("almost the only Roman left"), surrounded by enemies in the midst of threats of internal and external war in a morally bankrupt society.⁴⁰ The "cancer of envy" which had afflicted Cicero's Rome had metastasized in his own America, and it seemed clear to Adams that what seemed like vanity in Cicero was surely only consciousness of merit, virtuous but insufficient to combat the evils of the time. Adams, too, was convinced that he had acted meritoriously and served his country well, but the more he tried to convince others of that, the more they maligned him.

Richard writes: "The only difference between the two was that Cicero, uninfluenced by Christian notions of humility, had found nothing shameful in vanity. Not only would it never have occurred to Cicero to deny the charge of vanity; it would never have occurred to his contemporaries to make it. Classical heroes

38 Letter from John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 17 January 1808. He also quotes this passage from *Tusc.* 5.105 in a letter to Abigail Adams, 14 January 1794, also with reference to John Quincy's detractors and his own.

39 *Ille vero nostras ambitiones levitatesque contemnet honoresque populi etiam ultro delatos repudiabit.* On Cicero's philosophy in early America, see Gummere 1963, 97; Caspar 2014.

40 In a letter to John Quincy a few weeks later on 12 February 1808, Adams recommended Dionysius of Halicarnassus' history as an instructive and highly relevant account of the struggle of the orders and class warfare in Rome (he found Livy overly sympathetic to the patricians). He quotes Cicero's *De Officiis* on property rights and land redistribution laws and proclaims: "in all this Cicero was right, but notwithstanding Cicero's boast of his Efforts and Success the Evil was not eradicated, as he soon found at the expence of his head and Lands".

were hardly known for their modesty”.⁴¹ However, Cicero’s detractors did accuse the orator of arrogance and delusions of grandeur, particularly targeting his poem *De Consulatu Suo*, so that Cicero’s character came under attack even before Puritan discourse framed vanity as a sin (*Sull.* 22–7, *Pis.* 72, *Phil.* 2.19–21).

Adams was not only consoling himself with this revisionist account of Cicero’s intentions, but was also consoling his son, the letter’s recipient. John Quincy, too, had been exiled (in a sense) despite his merit, as the target of envious political attacks and slander. The implication is that if a great man like Cicero had been so treated without deserving it, the Adams men too had no reason to blame themselves. They could blame society and circumstance rather than any fault of their own, and could hope to be vindicated by posterity, as Cicero had now been vindicated in their eyes. They had thus followed the advice of Cicero given in *Epistula ad Quintum fratrem* 1.1 (recommended reading for George Washington Adams in one of the quotations with which I began, see p. 195) and other texts.

In an effort to console himself and his son for the political trials they were facing, at a time when they were no longer able to serve their country as statesmen in elected office, Adams turned to Cicero’s *Tusculan Disputations*, themselves an effort by the orator to console himself in a period of forced political inactivity – and following the death of a child, Tullia, just as Adams was mourning the loss of his second son, Charles. This suggests that Adams was not only picking out *sententiae* from Cicero’s works, but was actively looking for comfort and advice in works of Cicero written in circumstances which seemed to him to parallel his own. To comprehend his own situation, he thought of similar situations in Cicero’s biography and seems to have sought out relevant reading from his library on the basis of that similarity.

In settling on Cicero as an *exemplum* of ill-deserved political attacks, Adams also may have been inspired by contemporaries such as the English historian Catherine Macaulay. In the fourth volume of her history of the English Civil War (an edition of which sat in Adams’ library and was donated to the Boston Public Library, where it has been digitized), she recorded a quotation by the 17-century anti-monarchist parliamentarian John Pym, comparing himself to Cicero: “My case, if we may compare lesser things with great, hath to his a very near resemblance; the reason I am so much maligned and reproached by ill-affected persons being, because I have been forward in advancing the affairs of the kingdom, and have been taken notice of for that forwardness; they out of their malice converting that to a vice, which, without boast be it spoken, I esteem

⁴¹ Richard 2015, 133.

my greatest virtue”.⁴² Adams may also have been responding to Conyers Middleton’s biography, in which Middleton wrote of the letter to the historian Lucceius (*fam.* 5.12):

This letter is constantly alleged as a proof of Cicero’s vanity, and excessive love of praise: but we must consider it as written, not by a philosopher, but a statesman, conscious of the greatest services to his country, for which he had been barbarously treated; and, on that account, the more eager to have them represented in an advantageous light, and impatient to taste some part of that glory, when living, which he was sure to reap from them when dead.⁴³

Adams extended Middleton’s rationalization, which pertained to the Catilinarian conspiracy and its aftermath, to cover Cicero’s career in general.

A day after writing to John Quincy, Adams wrote a second letter on the same theme, this one addressed to his friend and fellow Continental Congress delegate, the physician Benjamin Rush.⁴⁴ Rush, too, had suffered from political scandal over his controversial treatments of the victims of a yellow fever outbreak in Philadelphia, and was raked over the coals in the newspapers.⁴⁵ Adams, deploying Cicero and the Hermodorus episode again to console both Rush and himself, began: “What a pitty it is; and indeed what a Shame it is, that We have not a Word in our language to express the idea of the French Word *Naïveté*? There is not a figure of Rhetorick So impressive as this is “tho it is no figure, but the most perfect simplicity”. He turned again to Cicero:

Poor Cicero! I pity you. But to address myself to Dr Rush, rather than a departed Spirit; What other People call Vanity in Cicero, I denominate Naïveté. The Superiority of his Virtue and Talents excited Jealousy and Envy among the Citizens in general, and Clodius Cataline Sallust, Cæsar and Pompey too appear to have hated it as fervently as any Ephesian or Athenian could have done. Debtors and Creditors, griping Usurers and Starving People, were Scrambling around him, the two Generals were Rivals one Courting the People and the other the senate, both attended by Legions and Spies enough to overawe the most honest and independent Soul. Poor Cicero, watched, dreaded, envied, by all: no doubt Slandered by innumerable Emissaries, despized, insulted, belied. No Press it is true to traduce

⁴² Macaulay 1769, IV 93.

⁴³ Middleton 1741, I 264–5.

⁴⁴ Schutz and Adair have collected the correspondence of Adams and Rush from this period in the 19th century in a volume entitled “The Spur of Fame”, a phrase inspired by Francis Bacon (Schutz/Adair 1966, 3) which seems to me to be drawn ultimately from Cicero’s *Pro Archia*, in which he describes *virtus* as “spurring” the minds of Roman statesmen like himself “with the goads of glory” (*nunc insidet quaedam in optimo quoque virtus, quae noctes ac dies animum gloriae stimulis concitat*, *Arch.* 29).

⁴⁵ Schutz/Adair 1966, 15–16.

him, nor any to vindicate him. But Manuscript Libells and Hand Bills enough in Circulation. He could not hire So many Scribblers to defend him as his Enemies did to reproach him. In this distressing Situation he poured out the feelings of his tortured heart with the Utmost Naiveté, as plain as... Shipping or as old Montaigne.

He blazoned forth his own Virtues Talents and great Services in the Face of the senate and the whole Roman People, bidding open Defiance to every Citizen to contradict him if he could. It does not appear that any one had the impudence to attempt it. Do you call this Vanity? It was Self Defence, Independence, Intrepidity, or in one Word Naiveté. You are not more in an Enemies Country in Philadelphia than he was in Rome. Cæsar got rid of Pompey, as Cincinnatus got rid of Mælius and Camillus of a better Man Manlius Capitolinus, and afterwards Anthony of Cicero and as our Jefferson got rid of Jay and our Burr of Hamilton.⁴⁶

He asked Rush to burn the letter upon reading it.⁴⁷ Once again, Adams seems eager to refute the charge of vanity, which had been levied not only against Cicero but against himself. This time, the quality of naïveté is substituted for consciousness of merit, but the underlying perception is the same: Cicero thought that if he simply acted with superior virtue and explained his motivations truly after others attacked him, he would be rewarded with fame and popularity. It was the cabals of his corrupt enemies and the irrational envy of his fellow citizens that rendered his self-defenses ineffective. Others ran roughshod over the rules he followed, and mischaracterized or willfully misinterpreted his good intentions. No one could truly rebut Cicero's self-promoting accounts of his own excellence, according to Adams, and yet he was scorned and ignored, and eventually killed by Antony; but tyrants had killed (and been killed) throughout Roman history, after all.

5 John Adams in a Toga

Adams used his knowledge of Roman history to grasp how events were unfolding in his own time, to perceive patterns and trajectories, and to foretell the significance of individual decisions or events. He clearly saw himself as following (unwillingly) in Cicero's footsteps, while the American Republic seemed to be fol-

⁴⁶ Letter to Benjamin Rush, 18 January 1808.

⁴⁷ In his letter to John Quincy on 12 February 1808, he enclosed a second letter and asked J. Q. A. to burn that one as well, a letter which Peter Shaw (1976, 272) supposes to be the letter to Rush quoted above; I have been unable to corroborate the identification. However, Page Smith writes that "New England-like [sc. Adams] never threw anything away, even the confidential family missives that ended with the admonition, "burn this letter"; Smith 1962, I 2.

lowing the same downward trajectory laid out in Roman history. The nascent republic of the United States seemed to have fallen rapidly into the same state of degradation and violence, in Adams' eyes. He later wrote: "One Thing, I know that Cicero was not Sacrificed to the Vengeance of Anthony by the unfeeling Selfishness of the latter Tryumvirate, more egregiously than John Adams was to the unbridled and unbounded Ambition of Alexander Hamilton, in the American Triumvirate".⁴⁸ Adams particularly blamed Hamilton, the founder of Wall Street, the National Bank, and the Treasury of the United States, for promoting the interests of tycoons and robber barons at the expense of the common citizens.⁴⁹ He blamed his successor Jefferson for fomenting partisan squabbles, blind party loyalty, and a libelous press culture.⁵⁰ Meanwhile, he saw himself as bravely resisting these trends, but tragically doomed to failure. In eras of "commerce, luxury, and dissipation", he wrote in a letter to Rush in the following September, "the Labours Eloquence and Patriotism of Cicero, were to as little purpose as those of Demosthenes, and were equally rewarded. We Mortals cannot work Miracles: We Struggle in vain against the Constitution and Course of Nature. Americans, I fondly hope, and candidly believe are not yet arrived at the Age of Demosthenes or Cicero. If We can preserve our Union entire, We may preserve our Republick".⁵¹ Adams' Cicero is John Adams in a toga, in historical circumstances which seemed only superficially different.

Besides the *Tusculans*, quoted directly, what works of Cicero inspired this reception? The *Catilinarians* were clearly influential, as were the *Philippics*, at least the *Second*. Adams presumably had the *Philippics* in mind in these references pairing Cicero with Demosthenes. Once again in 1809, in a letter to Massachusetts state representative William Sumner, Adams repeated the theme of recasting Cicero's vanity as consciousness of merit: "I am weary, my Friend, of that unintermitted Insolence of which I have been the Object for twenty years, Stoical Patience, unlimited Submission passive obedience and Non Resistance are the only Arms I have, as yet opposed to it". Adams' twenty years of patience and emphasis on the repetitiveness of these attacks on Cicero echo *Philippics* 2.1, 2.118, and 12.24, in which Cicero announces that it is the twentieth year since enemies

48 Letter from John Adams to James Lloyd, 11 February 1815.

49 Farrell 1989, 507; Ellis 2001, 62–65. See e.g. letter from John Adams to Benjamin Stoddert, 16 November 1811.

50 Letter from John Adams to William Cranch, 23 May 1801; letter from John Adams to John Quincy Adams, 2 December 1804; letter from John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 23 June 1807; letter from John Adams to Mercy Otis Warren, 15 August 1807.

51 Letter from John Adams to Benjamin Rush, 27 September 1808.

of the republic first began to attack him in an effort to overthrow the state. The letter continues:

Mausoleums, Statues, Monuments will never be erected to me. I wish them not – Panegyric Romances, will never be written, nor flattering Orations pronounced to transmit my Character to Posterity in glorious Colours. No nor in true Colours neither. – All Colours but the last I abhor. Nevertheless I will not die unlamented. – Cicero was libelled, Slandered insulted by all Parties; by Caesars Party, by Catalines Crew, by Clodius’ Mermidons,⁵² Aye and by Pompey the Patricians and the senate too – He was persecuted and tormented by turns and by all Parties and all Factions, and sometimes by combinations of all of them together, and that for his most virtuous and glorious Councils and Conduct. In his anguish at times under these multiplied provocations and in the consciousness of his own Merit, which have been denominated Vanity. Instead of reproaching them with Vanity I think them, the most infalliable Demonstrations of his Purity Since no Man did or dared to contradict them. He declares that all honours are indifferent to him, because he knows that it is not in the Power of his Country to reward him in any proportion to his Services.⁵³

The preface to *Tusculans* V, the source of the Hermodorus episode, also alludes to Cicero’s political misfortunes (5.3–5). Clodius’ attacks are described in *Pro Milone*, which Adams praised explicitly (above), but also in the less often read orations of 57–56 BCE, particularly *De domo sua*, *De haruspicum responsis*, and *Pro Sestio*, which Adams also could have read. We should also note that Adams accepted the negative portraits of Cicero’s opponents like Clodius and Catiline in these texts as historical fact, not rhetorical polemic.

It seems to me that when Adams mentioned insults by patricians and the senate here, he could only have been thinking of Cicero’s letters. Cicero publicly claimed total unity and sympathy among the *boni*, but was more forthcoming in his correspondence. Adams may have been thinking of Cicero’s letters to Lentulus Spinther in 54 BCE (*fam.* 1.8 and 1.9), in which Cicero justified his cooperation with the “first triumvirate” partially by citing the faithlessness of the *optimates* (see especially 1.9.11–12, 19). The letters in exile, particularly *fam.* 14.4.5 to Terentia and the children, offered lamentations that he had been exiled without committing any wrongdoing. Adams’ declaration that Cicero suffered for “his most virtuous and glorious Councils and Conduct” echoed a letter to Quintus, in which Cicero wrote that “that glorious consulship of mine has stolen you, my children, my country, my fortunes from me, but I hope it has taken nothing but me from you” (*Q. fr.* 1.3.1, cf. *Att.* 3.10.2). In the same letter, Cicero confessed that he regretted his own *stultitia* (1.3.6), a folly not far removed from naïveté as

52 “Myrmidons” is used to mean “mercenaries” in other letters of this time.

53 Letter from John Adams to William Sumner, 28 March 1809.

Adams defined it, and also blamed Hortensius and Pompey for failing him in his hour of need (1.3.8–9, cf. *Att.* 3.13.2, *Q. fr.* 1.4.4). As for insults from Caesar’s party, Cicero worried that he had become an object of suspicion and surveillance by Caesar’s partisans at *Att.* 11.7.5, 11.8.1–2, 11.9.1–2 and *Fam.* 9.16.2–4 to Papirius Paetus. Finally, in the letter to Benjamin Rush Adams mentioned Sallust, which suggests to me that he was likely thinking of the spurious *Invectiva in Ciceronem*.

What is missing from Adams’ portrait of Cicero, no matter his sources, is the Roman orator’s strategic mastery, manipulation of political expediency, and rhetorical versatility. Cicero did not simply oppose Caesar, Pompey, Clodius, and the rest and fail in the attempt, but struggled to compromise and adapt and even collaborate with them in some circumstances. His political maneuvering extended far beyond futile claims of merit. His speeches themselves show a high degree of artifice, at odds with Adams’ perception of his simple naïveté and purity. Cicero slandered and vilified opponents as much as they attacked him. Adams’ positive representation of Cicero excludes any concern about the morality of rhetoric or manipulation, since he regards Cicero himself as morally virtuous. It is worth noting that Adams’ portrait of Cicero is thus entirely different from and indeed incompatible with Mommsen’s portrait of Cicero as “trimmer” (*Achselträger*) and “short-sighted egoist” (*ein kurzsichtiger Egoist*) from later in the same century.⁵⁴ In addition, by claiming that Cicero’s “demonstrations of purity” were never assailed, Adams also overlooks the very pretext for Cicero’s exile: the belief, sincere or not, that Cicero had abused his power as consul in executing Roman citizens without trial.

6 Conclusion

John Adams was an avid reader of Cicero’s works throughout his life, and beyond the intellectual stimulation he received from his readings in classics, he also analogized his own life experience to that of his Roman role model, as a way of understanding his own role in human affairs. Adams’ sympathy for Cicero and his refutation of the charge of vanity against the Roman orator allowed him to defend himself by proxy. He also consoled those close to him who had been the victims of political attacks that the great and faultless Cicero had been so treated, and that those attacks had done nothing to diminish his merit or his legacy.

⁵⁴ Mommsen 1856: V 168, 618. On this portrait see Slaughter 1921; Narducci 2004; Altman 2015a.

In Adams' friendly view, Cicero had been a good man in a bad era, unable to halt the spread of corruption. He had acted well and had even tried to use political philosophy to inspire those around him to improve the laws of the republic. Adams, too, had tried to set the United States on a path of stability, prosperity, and good governance through political science as well as leadership, using Cicero's theory and the traditions of thinkers who had followed Cicero. His proposals were rejected, and his good faith was called into question. He could envision the ideal, but this only made it more painful when reality thwarted his expectations. He imagined a harmonious and just system, but the system as it actually developed was discordant, contentious, and corrupt. His own contemporaries were scheming behind closed doors to enrich bankers and enslavers at the expense of the common people, to militarize the new republic, to pit state against state, to get rid of their enemies by any means, including demagoguery and slander. The American experiment had been contaminated. When Adams thought about the tragically hopeless idealism of republicanism in the face of human failings, the failure of theory in the face of reality, Cicero became his *exemplum par excellence*.