HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Abigail (1744-1818**) and John Adams** (1735-1826)

Selected Letters

John Adams From *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams And Discourses on Davila*

Letters and diaries, it has been said, are "serial autobiography." The writers compose and recompose themselves at short intervals and, in the case of letters, to an audience of just one other person, whose interests and viewpoints help shape the letter. Moreover, as forms much older than autobiography per se, letters and diaries provided precedents for it.

In the eighteenth century, the familiar letter became an extremely important means of self-improvement, self- invention, and liberation from the restrictions of Puritanism. Young New Englanders like John Adams and his wife-to-be Abigail Smith wrote letters to entertain themselves, to improve their penmanship and writing, and to cultivate their sentiments. To add to the game, and to show off their learning, they often chose classical pen names, making a pretense of hiding or altering identity, while also giving themselves more license to tease or be frank. Thus Abigail Smith, a minister's daughter from Weymouth, Massachusetts, early chose the name Diana, while John Adams became Lysander. Later Abigail became Portia, and John simply became John or, to Abigail, "My dearest Friend," but some of the teasing and playfulness, and the gentleness and gentility, remained throughout a correspondence which, because of the revolution and John's subsequent diplomatic and governmental assignments, continued nearly all their lives.

The Revolution, along with their ambition and desire for recognition, also gave them both a profound sense of destiny. This sense underlies their correspondence and John Adams's diary/autobiography-even to the recording of his night with Benjamin Franklin and his reflections on colds. Their sense of destiny also intensified their identification with the creation of the American character. Their ideals were not just for themselves but for their children and the nation, as is clear in the remarkable exchange of letters, March 31 and April 14, 1776. These two letters are also known for Abigail's request that the declarers of "an independency" "remember the ladies," and for John's answer which notes "the Despotism of the Petticoat," a clash in which teasing may be present, too. But when John wrote "My dear Portia" in May, 1780, about how he "must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematics and Philosophy…in order to give their children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick,…and his war would be the last war. America was to be a new kind of nation. (One can ask how the autobiographies of Henry and Charles, his great-grandsons, reply to this prophecy.) Similarly, when Abigail objected to French manners and the dirt of her house in Auteuil, she wrote to her American sister, Mrs. Richard Cranch, in Abigail's experience, meanwhile, is that when she saw Madame Helvetius as the image of all French female depravity, Madame Helvetius's darling was at that moment Benjamin Franklin, the vastly popular image of new American worldly success.

Yet thanks to Charles Francis Adams's edition of his grandmother's letters in 1840, Abigail's style of letter-writing became a model for later American women. Her chattiness mixed with her acerbic wit and strong sense of self-worth is abundantly present in the letters of Marianne Hooper Adams, Henry Adam's wife. Her letters are also interesting to compare with Mary Boykin Chesnut's diary.

With Charles Francis Adams's publication of *Familiar Letters of John Adams and his Wife,* during the Revolution in 1876, as a tribute to the national Centennial, both writers were soon reprinted in anthologies. As the editors of The Book of Abigail and John wrote in their introduction: "their fortitude, their sacrifices, their public and private wisdom- and…their unexpected charm and humor: made them "the prototypical American couple"; "in the United States at its hundredth birthday, John and Abigail Adams were everybody's grandparents" (9).

No such popularity has ever fallen on John Adam's Discourses on Davila. They were written, as we noted above, in 1789-90, the first year of the French Revolution, and Adams wrote them to warn his fellow Americans of the dangers of an unchecked and unchanneled drive for fame. Wisdom in statecraft sublimated the instinct of emulation to the public good, Adams argued, and he believed that the American experiment had so far done this. But many of Adams's critics misread the Discourses as a plea for monarchy and inherited titles in America.

The Discourses thus illustrate the controversy in early Federalist America over the power of egotism and how to control it, whether by a stronger class system or through training in self-control and modesty. The work also illustrates the value which the Adams family placed on civic service and fame. John and Abigail Adams knew the power of the "instinct of emulation," because they felt it in themselves.

The selections below are from The Book of Abigail and John: Selected Letters of the Adams Family, 1762-1784, ed. L.H. Butterfield, Marc Friedlander, and Mary-Jo Kline (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1975): Letters of Mrs. Adams…, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little and Brown, 1840); Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, ed. L.H. Butterfield, vol. 3 (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1962); and Discourses on Davila, in the Works of John Adams…,ed. Charles Francis Adams, vol. 6 (Boston: Little and Brown, 1851). All editorial information in notes and brackets is given by the respective editors.

Reading

New Letters of Abigail Adams: 1788 – 1801
http://archive.org/stream/newlettersofabig002627mbp#page/n7/mode/2up