

"God Helps Them Who Help Themselves"

Proverbial Resolve in the Letters of Abigail Adams

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For my Bulgarian friend Roumyana Petrova

American patriarchs like John Adams, Aaron Burr, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington, and others are deservedly revered as the founding fathers of the American nation,ⁱ but behind all of these political heroes stood their wives and other women, who helped or enabled these great men to construct a republican government based on sound democratic principles. While the glory of these men continues to shine, there is also a female star that has received universal acclaim. This person is Abigail Adams (1744-1818), wife of President John Adams (1735-1826) and mother of President John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), who as the matriarch during revolutionary and nation-building times could most assuredly hold the proverbial candle to her male compatriots. While she as a woman could not participate publicly in the revolution or political debates, she nevertheless worked in the background and made her views on sociopolitical issues known. To be sure, she did not write pamphlets or a book, she never gave a public speech, she did not keep a diary, and as a woman, she never had the opportunity to vote despite her keen interest in women's issues.ⁱⁱ However, she was her husband's most astute political adviser and confidante, telling him her ideas when he happened to be home or expressing them to him in hundreds of letters when he was separated from her for periods of several years at a time. But there are countless other letters to family members and political leaders of her time by this barely five-foot tall woman, with "the epistolary network knit[ting] together women and men with widely differing social, economic, and religious positions."ⁱⁱⁱ Throughout her invaluable epistles, Abigail Adams shows herself to be a person of the highest moral standards with a sincere commitment to do her part as a public servant next to and not in the shadow of John Adams.

Judging by the steady stream of letters that she composed throughout her life, one might well talk of an epistolary "addiction"^{iv} to familial, instructional, didactic, political, moralizing, descriptive, impressionistic, analytical, judgmental, opinionated, reflective, and at times also gossipy missives. Ten years after their marriage, John Adams wrote to his wife on July 2, 1774, that she should "put them [their letters] up safe, and preserve them. They may exhibit to our Posterity a kind of Picture of the Manners, Opinions, and Principles of these Times of Perplexity, Danger and Distress" (I,121).^v Abigail herself did not always have such high opinion of the potential importance of her letters which, as she expressed to her sister Mary Cranch on

May 26, 1798, she considered nothing but "first thoughts, without correction [including unorthodox spelling, random capitalization, and almost nonexistent punctuation; all of which have faithfully been maintained throughout this essay]" (NL, 182).^{vi} As spontaneously formulated impressions, observations, and reflections her letters are indeed literary documents of invaluable authenticity, containing the view of a revolutionary world seen through the eyes of one of the keenest minds of the American eighteenth century. To be sure, Abigail Adams was "the quintessential Puritan – purposeful, pietistic, passionate, prudish, frugal, diligent, courageous, well-educated, and self-righteous," but just as her husband, Thomas Jefferson, and others, Abigail also embraced the "Enlightenment confidence in freedom and openness."^{vii}

Little wonder that this female intellectual giant in the world of male domination is a complex figure of ambivalent contradictions. In a fascinating review article on "The Abigail Industry" (1988) of the many studies and biographies on this unique American woman of wit and emotions, Edith B. Gelles speaks of the multifaceted interpretations of her life and character: the saintly Abigail, the romantic Abigail, the flirtatious Abigail,^{viii} the feminist Abigail, the Freudian Abigail, the political Abigail, and the hidden (manipulative) Abigail.^{ix} One thing is for certain, Abigail Adams was part of "what was legally, economically, and politically a man's world,"^x She thus had no choice but to excel in the realm of domesticity while letting her intelligence on worldly affairs shine in her letters that she often signed with the pen-name of Portia, the "loving and faithful wife of Brutus, liberator of Rome, who is said to have shared the physical weakness of women, but whose patriotism was as steadfast as any man's."^{xi} Abigail did not only stand by her husband through all of his political life, she very much stood solidly on her own two feet as an independent thinker and accomplished farmeress and wife of a revolutionary, diplomat, and Vice(President). As a female participant and observer of the pre- to post-revolutionary period in America, Abigail Adams' exquisite mind, forceful determination, strong opinions, political ambition, and powerful rhetoric had much to do with her husband's career, who in turn acknowledged her intellectual prowess and supportive love throughout their long fifty-four year marriage as spirited and committed soul mates.

"Out of the abundance of the Heart, the mouth speaketh" – epistolary floods

This deep love for each other is already expressed proverbially in an early courtship letter of September 12, 1763, by then Abigail Smith to John Adams:

You was pleas'd to say that the receipt of a letter from your Diana [Abigail's earlier pen-name] always gave you pleasure. Whether this was designed for a complement (a commodity I acknowledg that you very seldom deal in) or as a real truth, you best know. Yet if I was to judge of a certain persons Heart, by what upon the like occasion passes through a cabinet of my own, I should be apt to suspect it as a truth. And why may I not? when I have often been tempted to believe; that they were both cast in the same mould, only with this difference, that yours was made, with a harder mettle, and therefore is less liable to an impression. Whether they have both an equil quantity of Steel, I have not yet been able to discover, but do not imagine they are either of them deficient. Supposing only this difference, I do not see, why the same cause may not produce the same Effect in both, tho perhaps not equil in degree. (I,8-9)

This is indeed a bit of playful epistolary indirection, with the proverbial expression of "to be cast in the same mold" with plenty of steel in it indicating that here might just be two lovers made for each other.^{xii} But true to her determined disposition, Abigail does not stop with this metaphor. Instead, she continues with a clear allusion to the Bible proverb "It is better to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35), now quite directly telling John that she expects him to be more forthcoming with his expression of love to her: "But after all, notwithstanding we are told that the giver is more blessed than the receiver I must confess that I am not of so generous a disposition, in this case, as to give without wishing for a return" (I,9). Some thirteen years later, Abigail returned to this proverb in her letter of April 21, 1776, to John at Philadelphia, reprimanding him for the rarity and shortness of his letters: "I have to acknowledg the Receipt of a *very few* lines dated the 12 of April. You make no mention of the whole sheets I have wrote to you, by which I judge you either never Received them, or that they were so lengthy as to be troublesome; and in return you have set me an example of being very concise. I believe I shall not take the Hint, but give as I love to Receive" (I,389). This is the independent and witty wife, who is quite capable of giving her husband, albeit with a good dose of irony, a bit of her mind. When one considers the lengthy periods of separation that Abigail had to endure, she had every reason to scold her husband from time to time for not being as prolific a correspondent with her as she was forever with him.

It is not surprising then that Abigail also favored the Bible proverb "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh" (Matthew 12:34) as a psychological explanation for her epistolary verbosity as an expression of her loneliness. This was already the case when on April

12, 1764, she wrote the following lines from her parental home in Weymouth to her fiance John in not at all far away Braintree: "Here am I all alone, in my Chamber, a mere Nun I assure you, after professing myself thus will it not be out of Character to confess that my thoughts are often employ'd about Lysander (John's pen-name), 'out of the abundance of the Heart, the mouth speaketh,' and why Not the Mind thinketh" (I,25). What an absolutely delightful use of the traditional proverb with that splendid addition to it, indicating that her nunlike seclusion does by no means prevent her from having amorous thoughts. In a second allusive use of the proverb in a letter of October 25, 1778, Abigail vents her frustrations of being alone in Braintree with the children while John is conducting his diplomatic services in distant France:

In the very few lines I have received from you not the least mention is made that you have ever received a line from me. I have not been so parsimonious as my Friend, perhaps I am not so prudent but I cannot take my pen with my Heart overflowing and not give utterance to some of the abundance which is in it. Could you after a thousand fears and anxieties, long expectation and painful suspences be satisfied with my telling you that I was well, that I wished you were with me, that my daughter sent her duty, that I had ordered some articles for you which I hoped would arrive & &. – By Heaven if you could you have changed Hearts with some frozen Lapplander or made a voyage to a region that has chilld every Drop of our Blood. – But I will restrain a pen already I fear too rash, nor shall it tell you how much I have sufferd from the appearance of – inattention. (III,110-111)

Abigail knew very well how much John loved her, how much he hated their long separations, and she also knew that many of their letters were lost at sea. But at this moment she wanted to let John know that she needed and deserved more attention from him, as she managed the domestic life at home. About twenty years later, her love for John unaltered, she writes on April 26, 1797, from Quincy (formerly Braintree) to the new President in Philadelphia: "I am ready and willing to follow my husband wherever he chooses; but the hand of Heaven has arrested me. Adieu, my dear friend. Excuse the melancholy strain of my letter. From the abundance of the heart the stream flows" (LA,377). It was difficult for Abigail to say her good-byes to her relatives and friends in Massachusetts, as she prepared to leave for the capital to take on her more urban role as the second "first lady" of the United States. Her heart and mind were always filled with emotions and thoughts, and their abundance resulted in a steady stream of letters, with the Bible

proverb, even if it is merely alluded to, becoming an explanatory *leitmotif* of sorts for her obsessive letter writing.

"There is a tide in the affairs of men" – seizing the moment

One is reminded of an early letter that Abigail wrote to John on April 16, 1764, telling him before their marriage "I write to you with so little restraint," for after all, as she states proverbially, "what is bred in the bone will never be out of the flesh" (I,32). Three days later, she shows an incredible strength of character when she literally invites John to inform her of her faults before they speak their marriage vows, for as the proverb claims, there is "No time as proper as the present":

But altho it is vastly disagreeable to be accused of faults, yet no person ought to be offended when such accusations are deliverd in the Spirit of Friendship. – I now call upon you to fullfill your promise, and tell me all my faults, both of omission and commission, and all the Evil you either know, or think of me, be to me a second conscience, nor put me off to a more convenient Season. There can be no time more proper than the present, it will be harder to erase them when habit has strengthned and confirmd them. (I,37)

But never mind, John Adams was a man who liked his strong, courageous, and intelligent bride just the way she was, accepting her as his intellectual equal, a stance that put him far above most men of his time. Abigail continued to live up to the wisdom of this proverb, always speaking her mind at the time she saw fit.

In fact, there is another proverb that encouraged her to act in word and deed according to her principles. Quoting several lines from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* on March 7, 1776, Abigail's revolutionary spirit is eager to push John into deliberate action towards independence from Great Britain: "I cannot Bear to think of your continuing in a State of Supineness this winter. ` There is a tide in the affairs of Men / Which taken, at the flood leads on to fortune; [...]" (I,354). About fifteen years later she used this piece of wisdom again without a direct reference to Shakespeare in a letter of January 9, 1791, to her sister Mary Cranch, this time to express her view that the younger generation must be active participants in the construction of the new American nation: "' There is a tide in the affairs of men.' Our young folks must watch for it" (NL,69). By putting the statement into quotation marks, Abigail signals

that she is in fact quoting her beloved Shakespeare. However, his statement from the year 1599 had long become proverbial both in England and the United States.^{xiii}

But with all of her proactive determination in her personal and social affairs, Abigail Adams was also well aware of mankind's limitations and the transitoriness of life. She expresses this predicament with typical humility by quoting a couplet out of Oliver Goldsmith's (1728-1774) *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1764) which had quickly become proverbial: "In what so ever state I am I will endeavour to be therewith content. `Man wants but Little here below / Nor wants that Little long'" (I,355).^{xiv} This statement is part of the letter of March 7, 1776, in which Abigail had encouraged John to take time by the forelock, so to speak. But here, in a mood shift in the same letter, the deeply religious Abigail reminds herself and John of the frailty of human life. This proverb became a comforting device of rationalizing for Abigail as she faced various toils, challenges, and frustrations, as can be seen from two additional occurrences in letters to John:

If I have neither Sugar, molasses, coffe nor Tea I have no right to complain. I can live without any of them and if what I enjoy I can share with my partner and with Liberty, I can sing o be joyfull and sit down content –

"Man wants but little here below
Nor wants that little long."
(II,324; August 22, 1777)

Were we less Luxurious we should be better able to support our Independance with becomeing dignity, but having habituated ourselves to the delicacies of Life, we consider them as necessary, and are unwilling to tread back the path of Simplicity, or reflect that

"Man wants but little here below
Nor wants that little long."
(IV,344; July 17, 1782)

From revolutionary times to her life on the stage of world politics, Abigail Adams seems to have remembered this wisdom concerning a life of satisfaction and simplicity based on Puritan ethics.

"God helps them who help themselves" – undoubting resolve

Her favorite proverb, however, was the internationally disseminated proverb "God helps them who help themselves" that has been traced back to classical antiquity.^{xv} Abigail used it as a *leitmotif* of resolve and determination four times, with John Adams quoting it back to her, accepting it as a principle of taking fate into one's own hands: "As to Politicks, We have nothing to expect but the Whole Wrath and Force of G. Britain. But your Words are as true as an oracle ` God helps them, who help them selves, and if We obtain the divine Aid by our own Virtue, Fortitude and Perseverance, We may be sure of Relief" (I,290; October 1, 1775). But while John Adams cites the anonymous folk proverb as an oracular truth, his wife connects the proverb with King Richard by using such introductory formulas as "as King Richard said," "that saying of king Richard," "King Richards [observation]", and "it was a saying of king Richards." Clearly she associated the popular proverb with an historical figure, but who might this have been? She often quotes Shakespeare in her letters, and she might have had a passage out of his *King Richard II* (1596) in mind that can be read as an allusion to the proverb:

The means that heavens yield must be embrac'd,
 And not neglected. Else if heaven would
 And we will not, heaven's offer we refuse,
 The proffer'd means of succors and redress. (III,2,29-32)

Two paremiographers and Shakespeare scholars have identified this passage as a reminiscence of the proverb "God helps them (those) who (that) help themselves,"^{xvi} and there is no reason why Abigail might not have made the same connection upon her reading of the play. But the editors of the *Adams Family Correspondence*, at a loss who this King Richard might be, came up with the idea that "this might be AA's joke, since one source of this saying, which appears as early as AEsop's fables, is Benjamin Franklin's *Maxims Prefixed to Poor Richard's Almanac* [1757]" (V,177, note 3 to Abigail's letter of June 14, 1783). Benjamin Franklin actually cited the proverb as "God helps them that help themselves" already in June 1736 in one of the twenty-five celebrated and extremely popular *Poor Richard's Alamacks* that he edited from 1733 to 1758.^{xvii} And indeed, he repeated it in the preface to his famous essay *The Way to Wealth* (1758) that served as an introduction to the last almanac, summarizing the entire proverbial wisdom of the previous issues, as it were: "Let us hearken to good advice, and something may be done for us; *God helps them that help themselves*, as Poor Richard says."^{xviii} Obviously Abigail Adams knew this reference, but upon reading the following four occurrences of the proverb in her letters, it seems doubtful that she is referring jokingly to Franklin's "Poor Richard" as "King Richard."

Had she wanted to allude to the almanac, she would have used the formula "as poor Richard says" that had long become proverbial at her time. But perhaps her knowledge of both Shakespeare' and Franklin's passages became intermingled in her insistence on the association of the proverb with the name of Richard in some way, with more credit most likely going to Shakespeare. In any case, the actual contextualized occurrences of the proverb in her four letters have nothing humorous about them. Instead they speak of such solid values as virtue, fortitude, perseverance, determination, independence, justice, and confidence that should be the basis of all Americans as they construct a government founded on democratic principles:

God helps them that help themselves as King Richard said and if we can obtain the divine aid [for the revolutionary cause] by our own virtue, fortitude and perseverance we may be sure of releaf. (I,280; September 16, 1775)

Heaven grant us success at the Southard [against the British]. That saying of king Richard often occurs to my mind "God helps those who help themselves" but if Men turn their backs and run from an Enemy they cannot surely expect to conquer them. (II,358; October 25, 1777)

[...] but King Richards [observation] was a more independant one. God says, he helps those who help themselves. Advise is of little avail unless it is reduced to practise nor ought we implicitly to give up [on] our judgement to any one what ever may be our regard or esteem for them untill we have weighed and canvassed that advise with our reason and judgment – then if it is right agreeable to virtue expedient and prudent we ought strictly to adhere to it – a mutability of temper and inconsistency with ourselves is the greatest weakness of Humane Nature, and will render us little and contemptable in the Eyes of the World. There are certain principal which ought to become unchangeable in us justice temperance fortitude hold the first rank – he who possesses these will soon have all others added unto them. (V,176; June 14, 1783; letter to Royall Tyler)

It was a saying of king Richards "that God helps those who help themselves." I should think our Countrymen have too often experienced this doctrine not to see their path plain before them. (VI,298; August 25, 1785; letter to Thomas Welsh)

Of course, these references also show once again Abigail's deep faith in God looking out for her young nation. Never mind how much sacrifice will be needed by its citizens as long as there is the willpower and hope to establish a society based on freedom and democracy.

And there is another proverb that lends plenty of hope and confidence for the future, i.e., "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb." Abigail employs this sixteenth-century French proverb that had become current in English as a loan translation during the seventeenth century in a letter of October 31, 1799, to her sister Mary Cranch. But again, instead of citing it as an anonymous folk proverb, she refers to Laurence Sterne's (1713-1768) use of it in his *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768),^{xix} a clear indication of her literary prowess:

Where is the situation in Life which exempts us from trouble? Who of us pass through the world with our path strewed with flowers, without encountering the thorns? In what ever state we are, we shall find a mixture of good and evil, and we must learn to receive these vicissitudes of life, so as not to be unduly exalted by the one, or depressed by the other. No cup so bitter, but what some cordial drops are mingled by a kind Providence, who knows how as Sterne says, to "temper the wind to the Shorn Lamb." – But I shall insensibly run into moralizing. (NL,212)

Convinced that God will look out for her and her compatriots, Abigail Adams can face life's challenges and provide a bit of moral support to her sister and others by citing a most appropriate proverb.

"If it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well" – free advice

Her dedication to particular truths from the realm of religion, politics, and social intercourse in general frequently led Abigail to speak with a moralizing and judgmental voice of authority, addressing family members, friends, and acquaintances of all ages and both genders. Her oldest son John Quincy Adams received numerous such missives from his mother, and more often than not they include solid proverbial advice, as can be seen in this letter to him of March 2, 1780:

You have great reason for thankfulness to your kind preserver, who hath again carried you through many dangers, preserved your Life and given you an opportunity of making further improvements in virtue and knowledge. You must consider that

every Moment of your time is precious, if trifled away never to be recalled. Do not spend too much of it in recreation, it will never afford you that permanent satisfaction which the acquisition of one Art or Science will give you, and whatever you undertake aim to make yourself perfect in it, for if it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well. (III,293)

The proverb "If it is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well" was one of the favorite proverbs of Lord Chesterfield (Philip Dormer Stanhope, 1694-1773), who used it repeatedly in his many prescriptive letters to his son Philip Stanhope as a guiding principle for success in life.^{xx} Abigail had just read Chesterfield's famous *Letters to His Son* (1774), and it might well be that she remembered the proverb from Chesterfield's instructional letters. But both John and Abigail found Chesterfield's letters much too worldly and unprincipled, "inculcating the most immoral, pernicious and Libertine principals," as Abigail opined. Add to this "his abuse of our sex," i.e., Chesterfield's chauvinistic and anti-feministic statements, and it is not surprising that they rejected the popular letters as a book of social conduct and etiquette. Abigail even began to refer "to a breach of morality as Chesterfieldian."^{xxi} And yet, she is willing to grant "his Lordship the merit of an Elegant pen, a knowledge of *Mankind* and a compiler of many Excellent maxims and rules for the conduct of youth" (III,289; February 28, 1780; letter to Mercy Otis Warren).

But to be sure, Abigail herself was somewhat of a female Chesterfield, never in lack of words to give advice of proper social conduct. This certainly is the case in a letter of July 14, 1784, to Royall Tyler, the unsuccessful suitor of Abigail's and John's daughter Abigail (Nabby):

Upon all occasions I have delivered my sentiments to you with freedom; (*and shall continue to do;*) but it remains with you to give them energy and force. Your favorite Rochefoucault observes we may give advice, but we cannot give conduct. If I could I would kindle in your Breast a spirit, of emulation, and ambition, that should enable you to shine with distinguished Brightness as a deep thinker a close reasoner and eloquent Speaker, but above all a Man of the strictest honour and integrity, for without these, the former would be only of temporary duration and the fame acquired by them would be like a faint meteor gliding through the Sky, shedding only a transient light, whilst the latter like the fixed stars never change their place but shine on to endless duration. (V,391)

Again Abigail decides to show her literary knowledge by mentioning that François de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680) had included the wisdom of "We may give advice, but we cannot give conduct" among his *Maxims* (1665), of which John Adams had bought a Paris 1777 edition in 1780 (V,393, note 2). However, the text had long become proverbial in the English language, with Benjamin Franklin including it in his 1751 (June) *Poor Richard's Almanack* and at the end of *The Way to Wealth* (1758). The anonymous folk proverb could have sufficed, but clearly Abigail's epistolary style is informed by the literary elegance of eighteenth-century correspondence.

But here are a few additional instructive and didactic passages from Abigail's letters to various people, where well-known proverbs conclude a paragraph or an entire letter as a concise summary of the intended message:

There are entanglements [...] from which Time the great solacer of Humane woe only can relieve us. And Time I dare say will extricate those I Love from any unapproved Step, into which inexperience and youth may have involved them. But untill that period may arrive Honour, Honour, is at Stake – a word to the wise is sufficient. (VI,366; September 18, 1785; letter to William Stephens Smith)

Pray let me hear from you. The season is plentiful. Let us rejoice & be glad. Cheer up my good Sister. A merry Heart does good like a medicine. (NL,22; August 9, 1789; letter to Mary Cranch)

But you know there are cases where silence is prudence [varied: golden], and I think without flattering myself I have attained to some share of that virtue. We live in a world where having Eyes we must not see, and Ears we must not hear. (NL,36; January 5, 1790; letter to Mary Cranch)

But such are the visitudes of Life and the Transitory fleeting state of all sublinary things; of all pride that which persons discover from Riches is the weakest. If we look over our acquaintance, how many do we find who were a few years ago in affluence, now reduced to real want, but there is no Family amongst them all whose schemes have proved so visionary, and so abortive as the unhappy one we are now commiserating. Better is a little with contentment than great Treasure; and trouble therewith. (NL,37; February 20, 1790; letter to Mary Cranch)

What is past cannot be remedied. We seldom learn from experience until we get too old to use it, or we grow callous to the misfortunes of the world by Reiterated abuse. (NL,142; March 13, 1798; letter to Mary Cranch)

I do not regret that my Nephew is disappointed, if so he is. I am sure the family connexion could never have proved happy, however amiable Ann was, or is. She will be better the wife of any other Man. I never thought it a judicious connexion. Oil & water might as well mix, as the Fathers harmonize. (NL,239; March 15, 1800; letter to Mary Cranch)

The last text shows that Abigail feels free to break the normal structure of the proverb "Oil and water do not mix" in order to get her point across that a young couple and their families were simply not made for each other.

But here is yet another advisory letter by a caring mother to her studious son John Quincy that is in some way reminiscent of the way Lord Chesterfield "pestered" his son with a constant barrage of proverbial wisdom:

Your friends are not anxious that you will be in any danger through want of sufficient application, but that a too ardent pursuit of your studies [at Harvard] will impair your health, and injure those bodily powers and faculties upon which the vigor of the mind depends. Moderation in all things is conducive to human happiness, though this is a maxim little heeded by youth whether their pursuits are of a sensual or a more refined and elevated kind.

It is an old adage, that a man at thirty must be either a fool or a physician. Though you have not arrived at that age, you would do well to trust to the advice and experience of those who have. Our bodies are framed of such materials as to require constant exercise to keep them in repair, to brace the nerves, and give vigor to the animal functions. Thus do I give you "line upon line, and precept upon precept." (LA,341)

Abigail even uses introductory formulas as "this is a maxim" and "it is an old adage" to draw her son's attention to the generational wisdom that is contained in her advice couched in traditional

folk proverbs. And John Quincy adhered well to her counsel, for he did indeed excel as ambassador to England and Russian and eventually as President of the United States.

Reading such passages makes it difficult to understand why scholars have repeatedly argued that proverbs were not in high esteem during the eighteenth century, that so-called Age of Reason and Enlightenment that could not possibly be positively disposed towards folk wisdom. Paremiologist Richard Jente observed in 1945 that the literature of that time "with its enlightenment and sophistication made less use of the proverb than the preceding centuries,"^{xxii} and social historian James Obelkevich in 1987 drew the overstated conclusion that "by the early decades of the eighteenth century opinion was turning sharply against them [the proverbs]. Though evidently still widely used in conversation, there too they came under attack; Swift pillories them, along with trite witticisms and banal small talk of the day; other critics found them ostentatious, competitive [i.e., contradictory], insincere – to use them was a `sign of a coxcomb.' Having dropped out of polite literature (and the manuals of rhetoric), they were then banished from polite conversation; by the 1740s, when Lord Chesterfield advised his son that `a man of fashion never has recourse to proverbs or vulgar aphorisms,' the process was complete."^{xxiii} But closer scrutiny of written sources of various types have by now shown that there was no general collapse of proverbiality, and the infamous Lord Chesterfield himself made ample use of proverbs in his didactic letters while at the same time arguing against their use. There simply was no major hiatus in the literary or oral appearance of proverbs in the eighteenth century! Renowned European authors as William Blake, Louis Carmontelle, Denis Diderot, Henry Fielding, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Johann Gottfried Herder, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, Johann Friedrich Schiller, Tobias George Smollett, Laurence Sterne, Jonathan Swift, and François-Marie Voltaire have all proven to be quite proverbial in detailed studies on their literary style.^{xxiv} And in the United States, the writings of Benjamin Franklin, Cotton Mather, and such major figures as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson are replete with proverbs as well. For the American stage, paremiographer Bartlett Jere Whiting has illustrated the high frequency of folk proverbs during the eighteenth century in his invaluable collection of *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (1977), stating quite correctly in the introduction that "of the Founding Fathers – and *now* we must include a mother – John Adams, amply seconded by his redoubtable wife Abigail, bears away the bell as user of proverbs. It is no accident that the Harvard College Library possesses a copy of John Ray's *Collection of English Proverbs* (1670) with John Adams' autograph scrawled on the title page."^{xxv}

And yet, the extensive scholarship on both John and Abigail Adams has almost completely ignored this, with my article on "Narrative History as Proverbial Narrative: David

McCullough's Best-Selling *John Adams* [2001] Biography" (2002) being the only study having picked up on Whiting's observation concerning the propensity towards employing proverbs by these two major figures of the eighteenth century.^{xxvi} Otherwise only Kathleen Ann Lawrence has referred to Abigail's partiality for folk wisdom in passing: "When lost for the words of her own, Abigail made use of proverbs, maxims and prose [i.e., quotations] to write what she could not utter,"^{xxvii} But as the examples cited thus far have shown and what numerous additional contextualized proverb references will clearly substantiate, Abigail Adams is a most conscious, deliberate, and effective user of proverbs which serve her as major rhetorical and argumentative devices. Her employment of proverbs has nothing to do with lacking the words to express herself, but their traditional wisdom is part and parcel of her epistolary style and wit.

"I feel the absence of my better half" – love and separation

This is also true for the numerous passages in Abigail's letters where she expresses her deep love for John and her almost unbearable loneliness during their long separations. In fact, "letters were their only consolation. They were a poor substitute for conversation, but Abigail had nothing else. She wrote often, with an ease and grace that made her letters as close to conversation as the written word could be. She poured out her worries about everything from planting corn to the possibility of war with Great Britain. Just putting her thoughts on paper helped relieve her mind, but it could take weeks for John's answers to come – when they came at all."^{xxviii} Again and again Abigail cites the proverbial expression "to be one's better half" to state how much she missed her beloved husband: "I feel the absence of my better half, in this Day of Distress" (I,190; May 2, 1775; letter to Mercy Otis Warren); "[...] in the Education of my little flock [the children] I stand in need of the constant assistance of my Better half" (I,377; April 13, 1776; letter to Mercy Otis Warren); "[...] my Heart was too full to bear the weight of affliction which I thought just ready to overtake us, and my body too weak almost to bear the shock unsupported by my better Half" (II,301; August 5, 1777; letter to John); and "[...] cannot you imagine me seated by my fire side Bereft of my better Half, and added to that a Limb lopt of to heighten the anguish" (II,390; February 15, 1778; letter to John Thaxter). The last reference refers to the extreme anxiety that Abigail experienced after John and their son John Quincy had left on their transatlantic voyage for France during the hazardous winter and the dangerous wartime with Great Britain.

It is not surprising that Abigail often used somatic "heart" expressions to vent her emotional ups and downs during the long periods of separation from John. They add a great deal of emotive expressiveness to her letters that are filled with love and tenderness as well as anxiety:

I want very much to hear from you, how you stood your journey, and in what state you find yourself now. I felt very anxious about you tho I endeavoured to be very insensible and heroick, yet my heart felt like a heart of Led. (I,193; May 4, 1775)

I set down with a heavy Heart to write to you. I have had no other since you left me. Woe follows Woe and one affliction treads upon the heal of an other. (I,284; September 25, 1775)

My Heart is as light as a feather and my Spirits are dancing. I received this afternoon a fine parcel of Letters and papers [from you], it was a feast to me. I shall rest in quiet I hope this Night. (I,416; May 27, 1776)

I am sometimes quite discouraged from writing. So many vessels are taken, that there is Little chance of Letters reaching your Hands. That I meet with so few returns is a circumstance that lies heavy at my Heart. (III,140; December 27, 1778)

I recollect the untitled Man to whom I gave my Heart, and in the agony of recollection when time and distance present themselves together – wish we had never been any other. Who shall give me back Time? Who shall compensate to me those *years* I cannot recall? How dearly have I paid for a titled Husband; should I wish you less wise that I might enjoy more happiness!" (*Adams Papers*, October 25, 1782)^{xxix}

Of course, Abigail was way too much a realist and pragmatist not to support her husband in his political role as a servant of the American cause. No matter how much she lamented and complained, she actually shared John's ambitions and thus was willing to endure loneliness while she trusted him to be faithful to her during his long absences. This is beautifully expressed with the proverb "The falling out of Lovers is the renewal of Love" in her letter of November 13, 1780, to John at Paris. In that epistle, Abigail is taking issue with John's earlier statement that he likes her letters especially when they do not include any complaints:

I am wholly unconscious of giving you pain in this way since your late absence. If any thing of the kind formerly escaped my pen, had I not ample retaliation, and did we not Balance accounts tho the sum was rather in your favour even after having destroyed some of the proof. In the most Intimate of Friendships, there must not be any recrimination. If I complaind, it was from the ardour of affection which could not endure the least apprehension of neglect, and you who was conscious that I had no cause would not endure the supposition. We however wanted no mediating power to adjust the difference, we no sooner understood each other properly, but as the poet says, "The falling out of Lovers is the renewal of Love."

Be to my faults a little Blind

Be to my virtues ever kind

and you are sure of a Heart all your own, which no other Earthly object ever possessd.

Sure I am that not a syllable of complaint has ever stained my paper, in any Letter I have ever written since you left me. I should have been ungratefull indeed, when I have not had the shadow of a cause; but on the contrary, continual proofs of your attention to me. You well know I never doubted your Honour. Virtue and principal confirm the indissoluable Bond which affection first began and my security depends not upon your passion, which other objects might more easily excite, but upon the sober and settled dictates of Religion and Honour. It is these that cement, at the same time that they ensure the affections. (IV,13-14; November 13, 1780)

It is interesting to note once again that the educated Abigail introduces the proverb with the introductory formula "as the poet says." Its wisdom goes back to classical antiquity, and it has appeared in variations in Terence, Shakespeare, Robert Burton, Jonathan Swift, Samuel Richardson, and others,^{xxx} and Abigail might have had almost any of these "poets" in mind. And yet, she really is citing an insight that had long become a folk proverb.

Be that as it may, she is well aware of the fact that the proverb "Time erases all sorrows" is commonly known among her compatriots, as is indicated by her use of the introductory formula "which is said to" in yet another epistle to John: "Time which is said to soften and alleviate Sorrow, encreases anxiety when connected with expectation. This I hourly experience" (IV,229; October 21, 1781). This summarizes Abigail's situation for most of her life, and she never stopped declaring her love for John in her lonesome letters. She has herself described her predicament the best in a letter to John of September 23, 1776: "There are perticular times when

I feel such an uneasiness, such a restlessness, as neither company, Books, family Cares or any other thing will remove, my Pen is my only pleasure, and writing to you the composure of my mind" (II,133). And she even calls on the Bible proverb "No man liveth for himself" (Romans 14:7) for authoritative support in venting her anxieties to John:

I feel a disposition to Quarrel with a race of Beings who have cut me of, in the midst of my days from the only Society [i. e., John] I delighted in. Yet No Man liveth for himself, says an authority I will not dispute. Let me draw satisfaction from this Source and instead of murmuring and repineing at my Lot consider it in a more pleasing view. Let me suppose that the same Gracious Being [God] who first smiled upon our union and Blessed us in each other, endowed my Friend with powers and talents for the Benefit of Mankind and gave him a willing mind, to improve them for the service of his Country. (V,22; October 25, 1782)

Such letters are indeed "a revealing source of self-analysis"^{xxxii} that place her love for John in the greater realm of service to society, but Abigail is not always the keen intellectual in her epistles to John. There are numerous passages in these letters that abound with love and emotion,^{xxxiii} as for example "My Dearest Friend – How much is comprised in that short sentance? How fondly can I call you mine, bound by every tie, which consecrates the most inviolable Friendship, yet seperated by a cruel destiny, I feel the pangs of absence sometimes too sensibly for my own repose" (IV,50; December 25, 1780) or "Adieu and believe me most affectionately, most tenderly yours and only yours and wholly yours. A Adams" (V,409; July 30, 1784). These are emotional outbursts that have sexual undertones. This is as far as Abigail dared to go, and in the case of such intimate allusions proverbs most understandably have no place.

"Nothing venture nothing have" – a castle in the air in Vermont

Vacillating between a public life on the center stage and the domestic tranquility of rural life, the enlightened and rational Abigail was also perfectly capable of a Rousseauistic desire of returning to nature. To this end she contemplated buying land in remote Vermont in the spring of 1781, with "Vermont becoming a dream, a hope, for a future free from war and politics."^{xxxiii} Already on May 1, 1780, Abigail had hinted to John: "I have a Castle in the air which I shall write to you upon by the next opportunity, either for you to laugh at and reject, or to think of if practicable" (III,335). The editors of the letters indicate in a footnote that it is not clear what

Abigail might have had in mind with this proverbial castle in the air (III,336, note 4). But I am quite convinced that this "castle" is a reference to a haven in Vermont, where the couple could retire from the politics of Massachusetts and the federal government, to wit her letter of December 9, 1781: "Two years my dearest Friend have passd since you left your Native land. Will you not return e'er the close of an other year? I will purchase you a retreat in the woods of Virmont and retire with you from the vexations, toils and hazards of publick Life. Do you not sometimes sigh for such a Seclusion – publick peace and domestick happiness" (IV,257). About three months later, on March 17, 1782, Abigail has much to say about Vermont, and it is here where in my opinion it becomes clear that a possible life in Vermont is the longed-for castle in the air for her. Here she repeats the proverbial expression, albeit referring to a farm close to their homestead that they cannot afford to buy:

Most sincerely can she [Portia= Abigail] unite with you in the wish of a sequestered Life, the shades of Virmont, the uncultivated Heath are preferable in her mind to the servility of a [French] court. [...] I mean a Lot of Land of 300 acres for each of our children in the New State of Virmont, for which I have been very assiduously collecting all I could spair from taxes. [...] Land here [in Massachusetts] is so high taxed that people are for selling their Farms and retireing back. [...] Mr. Alleyne has Burried his Mother and sister. He now wishes to sell his Farm and has accordingly put it upon sale. It is a place I should be fond of, but know it must still be my castle in the air" (IV, 293,295,296)

Abigail did not know that the Alleyne farm would come up for sale when she used the "castle" phrase about a year earlier. Having told John about her desire to buy land in Vermont, her castle in the air about to become reality, she is now simply transferring the proverbial phrase to the Alleyne farm which is beyond their means. And sure enough, this strong lady purchased the land, writing her husband on July 18, 1782: "My favorite Virmont is a delightfull Grain Country. I cannot tell why, but I feel a great fondness for the prosperity of that State. [...] I recollected the old adage Nothing venture nothing have; and I took all the Lots 5 in number 4 of which I paid for, and the other obligated myself to discharge in a few months" (IV,345). The use of the folk proverb is indeed a shrewd way for Abigail to justify her purchase to John, who was, however, not interested in the venture as a brief statement in his letter of June 17, 1782, to James Warren indicates: "God willing, I will not go to Vermont. I must be within the scent of the sea."^{xxxiv} And they didn't go, even though they now owned some 1500 acres of beautiful and

natural Vermont. John wanted and needed to be in the public sector, becoming a two-term first Vice President and then a one-term second President of the young nation. And Abigail, certainly not because she was a subservient wife, moved with him through all three capitols, from New York to Philadelphia, and on to Washington. They were public servants par excellence, and their commitment to making a success of the United States kept them from secluding themselves in quiet Vermont that remained a mere castle in the air after all.

"Necessity has no law" – domestic concerns of a matriarch

As this Vermont venture amply shows, Abigail Adams was perfectly capable of handling her multifaceted domestic obligations while John was away on various colonial, European, and (vice)presidential missions. She "remained dogmatically domestic in her own self-image, her consciousness, and her ideology," and despite of her interest in women's issues, "she continued to believe in the primacy, the propriety, and the dignity of women's domestic role."^{xxxv} In her life and letters, Abigail tried "to balance international, political, and domestic concerns, but always tended toward the latter. Familial and personal concerns were mingled easily with discussions of politics, economics, and international affairs."^{xxxvi} As she became ever more the matriarch of the growing Adams clan, she excelled in what has been called "kinkeeping" or "kin work," i.e., the conscious attempt by women of "holding together and exercising guardianship for an extended family."^{xxxvii} In an early letter of April 11, 1776, to her husband busy with his legal affairs and revolutionary politics, Abigail described her situation and aspirations the best: "I hope in time to have the Reputation of being as good a *Farmeress* as my partner has of being a good Statesmen" (I,375). Some six years later, as she thought more seriously of crossing the Atlantic to join John in Europe, she wrote to John Thaxter on October 26, 1782: "I love the peacefull Rural Retirement and pleasures of domestick Life" (V,26). In talking about her role at home with her children and extended family, Abigail quite frequently finds proverbs to be the perfect traditional phrases to describe her concerns and tribulations. As but a few contextualized references show, proverbs helped her to put some common-sense wisdom into her epistles that give them much metaphorical vividness:

We talked of keeping Thanksgiving with you [her sister Mary Cranch and family], but farming and the Courts come so thick upon us, that we cannot bring that to bear, for next week the Superior Court sets, the inferiour is adjournd to the week after. So that there is no opportunity till the week after that, and then I hope there will

not any more Mountains arise to hinder me. Mole hills I always Expect to find, but them I can easily surmount. (I,54; July 15, 1766; letter to Mary Cranch)

As to applying to some of the Members of the General Court for Horses, I remember the old proverb, he who waits for dead mens schooes may go barefoot. It would only lengthen out the time, and we should be no better of, than before I askd. (II,105-106; August 22, 1776; letter to John Adams)

Necessity is the Mother of invention. There is a Manufactory of Molasses set up in several Towns. Green corn Storks ground and boild down to Molasses, tis said an acre will produce a Barrel. I have seen some of it, it both tastes and looks like Sugar Bakers molasses. (II,340; September 10, 1777; letter to John Adams)

The door opens into the Cabbin [of the ship that carried Abigail to Europe to join John in France] where the Gentlemen all Sleep; and wh[ere] we sit dine &. We can only live with our door Shut, whilst we dress and undress. Necessity has no law, but what should I have thought on shore; to have layed myself down to sleep, in common with half a dozen Gentlemen? We have curtains it is true, and we only in part undress [...]. (V,361; July 6, 1784; letter written on board the ship to her sister Mary Cranch)

My Family has been so large for this year past, that we shall not make both ends meet, as they say. The expenses of Removing a Family, Furniture & was a heavy burden, and the wages of servants is very high here [in New York city], especially for such misirables as one is obliged to put up with – but I hate to complain. No one is without their difficulties, whether in High, or low Life, & every person knows best where their own shoe pinches. (NL,43; March 21, 1790; letter to Mary Cranch)

I wrote to the Dr. [Cotton Tufts] and proposed having the outside of the house [at Braintree] new painted, and the Garden fence also which never was more than primed, but I would not put too many Irons at once in the fire. (NL,166; April 26, 1798; letter to Mary Cranch)

The lower class of whites are a grade below the Negroes in point of intelligence, and ten below them in point of civility [she is speaking of servants in the newly built White House in Washington]. I shall bear and forebear. (*Adams Papers*, November 28, 1800; letter to Cotton Tufts)^{xxxviii}

This [White] House [in Washington] is twice as large as our meeting House [in Braintree]. I believe the great Hall is as Bigg. I am sure tis twice as long. Cut your coat according to your Cloth. But this House is built for ages to come. The establishment necessary is a tax which cannot be born by the present sallery: No body can form an Idea of it but those who come into it. I had much rather live in the house at Philadelphia. (NL,259; November 21, 1800; letter to Mary Cranch)

One really gets the feeling that Abigail and John lived in "splendid misery" (NL,90; May 16, 1797; letter to Mary Cranch) in the three capitol of the young nation, but they bore and forbore, as Abigail put it proverbially in one of her letters just cited. While the proverbs in the letters dealing with domestic matters are used to describe, explain, and deal with various problems, Abigail can also employ them with a certain sense of humor or irony, as when she comments on the newest fashion in Philadelphia in a letter to her sister Mary Cranch of November 15, 1799: "I have heard of once a Man & twice a child, and the Ladies caps are an exact copy of the baby caps – those which are made with drawings, and drawn with a bobbin to a point, a quarter and Nail deep, a lace upon the border, a bow upon the point, three bows behind and one before, the Hair a little drest at the side & a few curls upon the forehead, the cap to lie flat upon the head" (NL,215). And there is also this touching paragraph in a letter to her granddaughter Caroline A. Smith of February 26, 1811: "As if you love me, proverbially, you must love my dog, you will be glad to learn that Juno [the family dog] yet lives, although like her mistress she is gray with age. She appears to enjoy life and to be grateful for the attention paid her. She wags her tail and announces a visiter whenever one appears" (LA,404). Such passages show Abigail as a woman of practicality, common sense, wisdom, understanding, and compassion, and the proverbs contained in them serve her well to comment on all aspects of life.

"All Men would be tyrants if they could" – "Remember the Ladies"

While Abigail might have had a bit of fun describing the fashionable caps of the ladies of Philadelphia, she had much more urgent concerns for women, especially during the early

revolutionary years. In fact, as John and other male revolutionaries contemplated the proper form of a new American government, she wrote her most famous letter to him that is commonly referred to as the "Remember the Ladies" epistle of March 31, 1776. The letter deals primarily with issues of independence and the question of political power, quoting a Bible proverb in its second paragraph that has been overlooked by scholars thus far:

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us. (I, 369)

This is, albeit somewhat indirectly expressed, a strong condemnation of slavery in the original colonies, with Abigail and John having the distinction among the founding families of never having owned a slave. The proverbial golden rule of "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12)^{xxxix} was the perfect proverb to cite in this context, even though Abigail does not go on to argue openly against slavery. It took another six and a half decades until Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), himself a former slave turned abolitionist, made this proverb his *leitmotif* in 1842, arguing with its wisdom for the next fifty years against slavery and for equal rights for African Americans and women as well, and making him one of the greatest champions for civil rights in the United States.^{xl}

The thought of treating other people fairly and equally as one would wish to be treated must have led Abigail to think of the lot and role of women, causing her to make a truly remarkable statement to her husband who was working on new laws of independence and rights:

I long to hear that you have declared an independancy – and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation. That your Sex are Naturally Tyrannical is a Truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the

harsh title of Master for the more tender and endearing one of Friend. Why then, not put it out of the power of the vicious and the Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supream Being make use of that power only for our happiness. (I,370)^{xii}

A few weeks later, Abigail returned to this theme again in her letter of May 7, 1776, reproaching John that not enough consideration was being given to the women of the revolution:

I can not say that I think you very generous to the Ladies, for whilst you are proclaiming peace and good will to Men, Emancipating all Nations, you insist upon retaining an absolute power over Wives. But you must remember that Arbitrary power is like most other things which are very hard, very liable to be broken – and notwithstanding all your wise Laws and Maxims we have it in our power not only to free ourselves but to subdue our Masters, and without violence throw both your natural at legal authority at our feet. (I,402)

Rebellious as these statements sound, it must be remembered that Abigail voiced them primarily in the privacy of her letters. She cannot be considered a feminist revolutionary in the modern sense, and "these bold paragraphs were not a declaration of the principle of sexual equality for which nineteenth- and twentieth-century feminists would contend. Abigail Adams did not call for a revolution in the roles of men and women. She hoped rather for a legal system under which women could find maximum fulfillment in their ascribed roles as wives and mothers, as domestic beings deferential to, but not abused by, fathers and husbands."^{xiii} Abigail expressed all of this quite clearly in a much later letter of June 5, 1809, to her sister Elizabeth Shaw that illustrates her basic social conservatism: "I consider it as an indispensable requisite, that every American wife should herself know how to order and regulate her family; how to govern her domestics, and train up her children. For this purpose, the all-wise Creator made woman an help-meet [mate] for man, and she who fails in these duties does not answer the end of her creation" (LA,402).

Nevertheless, all of these comments show the strength and resolve of Abigail Adams in a world governed by men. The unfortunately too often true phrase that "All men would be tyrants if they could" is, however, not original with her. Even though she does not place quotation marks

around it, she might well be quoting the second line of Daniel Defoe's (1660-1731) couplet "Nature has left this tincture in the blood, That all men would be tyrants if they could" from his *Kentish Petition* (1712).^{xliii} But she might also have recalled the fact that John had used this quotation about a year before their marriage in 1763 as the title for an essay on man's lust for power.^{xliv} But be that as it may, it is Abigail's use of this apparent truth that has become proverbial today, especially in feminist circles. Since 1980 it has been entered under her name in editions of John Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations*,^{xlv} and as part of Abigail's rallying cry "Remember the Ladies"^{xlvi} it is approaching proverbial status in a world where modern women fight valiantly against male supremacy in all social, political, and economic spheres. Clearly Abigail did not only influence her well-meaning husband with her astonishing gender awareness. Her bold statement lives on and still has an impact on the continuous fight against the proverbial truth that "All men would be tyrants if they could."

"Righteousness exalteth a Nation" – Biblical morality

Abigail might not have been successful with John as an early feminist, but she certainly had much influence on him ethically. Being a minister's daughter, she often used Bible proverbs to give her husband moral support and advice. She did the same with their children, relatives, and friends, citing Biblical wisdom to add authority to her explanatory comments. There was no need for her to identify these sayings as stemming from the Bible, although references to "the best Authority" or "the greatest Authority" are, of course, indirect allusions to the Bible. Her Puritan compatriots were for the most part equally well versed in this wisdom literature, and the frequent use of Bible proverbs had turned them into anonymous folk proverbs in any case.^{xlvii} For Abigail "religion [...] was most important in providing a set of moral standards for behavior and a source of hope in troubled times,"^{xlviii} and as the following epistolary passages show, Bible proverbs represented ready-made phrases to be used to support arguments, give advice, and express resolve and hope:

The race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong [Ecclesiastes 9:11], but the God of Israel is he that giveth strength and power unto his people. Trust in him at all times, ye people pour out your hearts before him. God is a refuge for us. (I,222; June 18, 1775; letter to John Adams)

But alas our virtues are not of the first Magnitude; we are told by the best Authority that the Love of Money is the Root of all Evil [1. Timothy 6:10], we want a Solon and Licurgus to restrain the ruling passion of the present day. (III,6; April 9, 1778; letter to John Thaxter)

Yet there is envy and jealousy sufficient in the world to seek to lessen a character however beneficial to the Country or useful to the State. Nor are these passions Local. They are the Low, Mean and Sordid inhabitants of all countries and climates, an Instance of which I can give you, with regard to Mr. Adams. [...] A prophet is not without honour save in his own country [Matthew 13:57]. (III,298; March 13, 1789; letter to Elbridge Gerry)^{xlix}

The two most important Lessons in life for a young person to acquire, is a knowledge of themselves, and of the connections they form. As the latter determines and establishes the character, too much attention cannot be paid to this important matter. Who can touch pitch and not be defiled? [Ecclesiasticus 13:1]. Tho Merrit alone seldom obtains the distinction that is its due, yet when united with a knowledge of the world and those Graces which happily for Mr. Warren he has not now to acquire, they will not fail obtaining favour with every character whose acquaintance he would be ambitious to cultivate. (III,353; May 19, 1780; letter to Winslow Warren)

Yet such is the unhappy lot of our native land, too, too many of our chief Actors *have been and are unprincipled wretches*, or we could not have suffered as we have done. It is Righteousness, not Iniquity, that exalteth a Nation. There are so many and so loud complaints against some persons in office that I am apt to think neither *age* nor *Fame* will screen them. (IV,2; October 8, 1780; letter to John Adams)

Heaven has yet in store for you some sweet female companion to smooth the Rugged road of Life, and sweeten the bitter cup – indeed you shall not live single. The greatest Authority pronounced that it was not good for Man to be alone [Genesis 2:18]. (V,149; April 29, 1783; letter to John Thaxter)

It ought to be a warning to every man not to contract habits of sloth, and inaction, to consider that no Man liveth for himself [Romans 14:7]. (NL,249; May 3, 1800; letter to Mary Cranch)

This letter is written in confidence. Faithful are the wounds of a friend [Proverbs 27:6]. Often have I wished to have seen a different course pursued by you. I bear no malice. I cherish no enmity. I would not retaliate if it was in my power; nay more, in the true spirit of Christian charity, I would forgive as I hope to be forgiven. (LA,393-394; July 1, 1804; letter to Thomas Jefferson)

The cited Bible proverbs do not so much refer to a mystical faith, but rather they function as pragmatic statements to reflect upon and to deal with everyday occurrences, problems, and challenges. The advice given by Abigail is always meant well, as can be seen by one final example of an internationally disseminated proverb in an early letter of October 6, 1766, to Mary Cranch. It is not a Bible proverb, and it advocates nothing more than pure pragmatism in its epistolary context:

Methinks your Salem acquaintance have a very odd kind of politeness. By what I have heard of them, they have well learned the lesson of Iago, to Rodorigo, "put money in thy purse." It is the Character of the whole people I find, get what you can, and keep what you have got. My advice to you is among the Romans, do as the romans do. This is a selfish world you know. Interest governs it, there are but a very few, who are moved by any other Spring. They are Generous, Benevolent and Friendly when it is for their interest, when any thing is to be got by it, but touch that tender part, their Interest, and you will immediately find the reverse, the greater half [of] the World are mere Janases. (I,55-56)

These proverbial passages show Abigail as a careful observer of social behavior who takes much interest in the world around her. Her insights into human nature are invaluable, and the same is true for her sociopolitical thoughts that she was ever willing to share with her politician husband.

"The die is cast" – political strategies

Abigail Adams was thirty years old, when the political situation in the colonies became increasingly tense and an uprising against the British appeared unavoidable. Abigail was part of the revolutionary spirit, writing to her husband on September 22, 1774: "I will not despair, but will believe that our cause being good we shall finally prevail. The Maxim in time of peace prepair for war, (if this may be call'd a time of peace) resounds throughout the Country. Next tuesday they are warned at Braintree all above 15 and under 60 to attend with their arms, and to train once a fortnight from that time, is a Scheme which lays much at heart with many" (I,161). And then, four and a half months later on February 3, 1774, Abigail begins a letter to her friend Mercy Otis Warren with a proverb and a powerful paragraph that express the unavoidability of the revolution:

The die is cast. Yesterday brought such a Speech from the Throne as will stain with everlasting infamy the reign of G[e]orge the 3 determined to carry into Execution "the acts passd by the late parliment, and to Mantain the authority of the Legislature over all his dominions." The reply of the house of commons and the house of Lords shew us the most wicked and hostile measures will be pursued against us – even without giving us an opportunity to be heard in our defence. Infatuated Brittain! poor distressed America. Heaven only knows what is next to take place but it seems to me the Sword is now our only, yet dreadful alternative, and the fate of Rome will be renued in Brittain. (I,183)

Abigail did well in choosing the classical proverb "The die is cast" to refer to the inescapableness of war with Britain, just as Julius Caesar had used it on crossing the Rubicon after coming from Gaul and advancing into Italy against Pompey (49 B.C.) and as Winston S. Churchill would employ it repeatedly in his struggle against Nazi Germany.¹ She repeated the proverb in her letter of August 15, 1785, to her sister Mary Cranch to signal her acceptance of a family matter: "[...], but the die is cast" (VI,277). And when George Washington in September of 1796 announced that he would not accept a third term as President, she used it again in a letter to her son Thomas Boylston Adams of September 25, 1796: "The die is cast! All America is or ought to be in mourning."ⁱⁱ Of course, this also meant that John would most likely become the second president of the country.

As the revolutionary skirmishes with the British increased in 1775, Abigail tells John that the men of Braintree do not "[...] tremble at the frowns of power." Slightly varying the proverb "Danger makes men bold," she touchingly describes how even a quiet physician plays his part:

"Our good Friend the Doctor is in a very misirable state of Health, has the jaundice to a very great degree, is a mere Skelliton and hardly able to ride from his own house to my fathers. Danger you know sometimes makes timid men bold. He stood that day very well, and generously attended with drink, Bisquit, flints &. 5 hundred men without taking any pay" (I,225; June 22, 1775). Two weeks later she employs the proverb again to assure John that she is doing fine and that she has plenty of courage to carry on the fight: "I would not have you be distressed about me. Danger they say makes people valient. Hitherto I have been distress'd, but not dismayed. I have felt for my Country and her Sons, I have bled with them, and for them" (I,239; July 5, 1775). Here Abigail relies on a proverb to deal with a dangerous situation, taking solace in the traditional wisdom that she too can muster up the strength and courage to be a responsible part of the revolution. And when things don't go so well, she is quick to remind John proverbially that "Rome was not Built in a day" (II,47; July 13, 1776), that "Experienced Birds are not to be caught with chaff" (II,172; March 8, 1777), and that "Affliction is the good mans shining time" (III,371; July 5, 1780), thus keeping up her resolve that the insurgents will prevail and build an independent America in due time.

Clearly Abigail could count on John's recognition and appreciation of her proverbial statements and allusions. As quite the proverbial stylist himself, he must have enjoyed her description of an upcoming election in Massachusetts in which she prophecies the eventual demise of a bad politician by a mere hint at the proverb "Give a man rope enough and he will hang himself":

This is a Great and important day in the political System of this State. Mr. Bowdoin has merrit and integrity, all the judicious people will vote for him, but popular Clamour will elect an other [John Hancock], who ought to forfeit every vote, by the low mean Arts he has taken to procure them. I could tell you many, if prudence did not restrain me, yet nothing that would surprize you, for you know every Avenu of his vain Heart. Give an extensive cord, and you know the adage. (III,406; September 3, 1780)

Little wonder that two weeks later Abigail wrote to her friend James Lovell on September 17, 1780: "O my dear Sir I am Sick[,] Sick of politicks. How can you exist so long in the midst of them? There is such mad ambition, such unbounded avarice, such insufferable vanity, such wicked peculation of publick property. Yet Hosana to these wretches" (III,415).

And yet, Abigail could not and surely also did not want to stay out of politics, defending, advising, and supporting her husband in all of his trials as he rose ever more towards national prominence. As she expressed her views in letter after letter to John and others, proverbs served her well to underscore her points, adding traditional wisdom to her revealing missives:

Time was you know Sir, when an amicable treaty might have been made with England very favourable to America, and you know to what intrigues it was owing that the Commercial powers were taken from the person in whom they were first invested [Abigail is referring to Congress' decision, in July 1781, to revoke John's sole power to negotiate a commercial treaty with England]; but Time past, can not be recalled, as our Country Men now feel, and as was then predicted. (VI,77-78; March 8, 1785; letter to Cotton Tufts)

Mr. [Oliver] Wolcot [John's Secretary of the Treasury] seemd anxious at the Idea of the Presidents going so far from the Seat of Government [to his home in Braintree] at so critical a period. I know he will not leave here [Philadelphia] for any time if the Ministers think his presence necessary. We may truly say, we know not what a day will bring forth. From every side we are in Danger. We are in perils by Land, and we are in perils by sea, and in perils from false Breathern [with Wolcott *sic*] being one of them, conspiring with Alexander Hamilton against John Adams]. (NL,101; July 6, 1797; letter to Mary Cranch)

The President [John Adams] has said, and he still says, he will appoint to office merit, virtue & Talents, and when Jacobins possess these, they stand a chance, but it will ever be an additional recommendation that they are friends to order and Government. [...] But the Ethiopen [*sic*] [Abigail speaks of the conspiring Tench Coxe, whom Adams had not appointed as Secretary of the Treasury after Alexander Hamilton resigned, placing Oliver Wolcott in the position instead] could not Change his Skin, and the Spots of the Leopard have been constantly visible, tho sometimes shaded [Jeremiah 13:23]. (NL,127; February 1, 1798; letter to Mary Cranch)^{lii}

This is reminiscent of modern politics as well, and Abigail's warning "Hear before you blame, is a good maxim" (NL,178, May 21, 1798; letter to Mary Cranch) would be a fitting proverb to

recall in today's political acrimony. This is also true for her proverbial observation that "On such occasions as the present, every hand should be put to the plough" (NL,178) in the same letter, and every politician would certainly want to keep in mind what Abigail wrote to their son Thomas Boylston on November 13, 1800, after his father had been defeated in his attempt at a second presidential term by Thomas Jefferson: "The triumph of the Jacobins is immoderate, and the Federalists deserve it. It is an old and just proverb, `Never halloo until you are out of the woods'" (LA,381; November 13, 1800). And how touching her philosophical view regarding John's defeat and the change that will bring for them in the same letter:

The consequence to us, personally, is, that we retire from public life. For myself and family, I have few regrets. At my age, and with my bodily infirmities, I shall be happier at Quincy [formerly Braintree]. Neither my habits, nor my education or inclinations have led me to an expensive style of living, so that on that score I have little to mourn over. If I did not rise with dignity, I can at least fall with ease, which is the more difficult task. I wish your father's circumstances were not so limited and circumscribed, as they must be, because he cannot indulge himself in those improvements upon his farm, which his inclination leads him to, and which would serve to amuse him, and contribute to his health. I feel not any resentment against those who are coming into power, and only wish the future administration of the government may be as productive of the peace, happiness, and prosperity of the nation, as the two former ones have been. I leave to time the unfolding of the drama. I leave to posterity to reflect upon the times past; and I leave them characters to contemplate. (LA,380)

Such self-analytical philosophical thoughts are, perhaps, not in need of proverbs, but when Abigail reflects on human nature in general, she often cites the traditional wisdom of Bible and folk proverbs to underscore her general observations.

"The great fish swallow up the small" – reflections on human nature

Throughout her massive correspondence, Abigail shows herself as a sociopsychological analyst, reflecting on common traits of human nature.^{liii} When one considers that proverbs are in fact generalized truths of the human condition that have been appropriately defined as "monumenta humana,"^{liiv} it is not surprising that the more philosophical passages of Abigail's

epistles abound with proverbs from the Bible or traditional folk proverbs. Thus she turned to the Bible proverb "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 19:19) to reflect upon the ambivalent value of human ambition that in its negative effects has factionalized the country and has undermined the moral values of its people:

The passion of Ambition when it centers in an honest mind possess'd of great Abilities may and often has done imminent Service to the World. There are but few minds if any wholly destitute of it and tho in itself it is Laudible yet there is nothing in Nature so amiable but the passions and intrest of Men will pervert to very base purposes. When I consider the Spirit which at present prevails throughout this continent I really detest that restless ambition of those artfull and designing men which has thus broken this people into factions – and I every day see more and more cause to deprecate the growing Evil. This party Spirit ruins good Neighbourhood, eradicates all the Seeds of good nature and humanity – it sours the temper and has a fatal tendency upon the Morals and understanding and is contrary to that precept of christianity thou shalt Love thy Neighbour as thy self. (I,98; February 27, 1774; letter to Mercy Otis Warren)

About six years later, Abigail refers to this proverb again in one of the many letters of advice to her son John Quincy, reminding him that "The only sure and permanant foundation of virtue is Religion. Let this important truth be engraven upon your Heart [...]. Man is bound to the performance of certain duties which all tend to the happiness and welfare of Society and are comprised in one short sentance expressive of universal Benevolence, `Thou shalt Love thy Neighbour as thyself" (III,310-311; March 20, 1780). But again, when Abigail speaks of religion, she has in mind not merely faith but above all the moral code of Christianity, i.e., the Puritan ethics with which she grew up in the parsonage of her parents.

Turning to more worldly matters, it is her letter to John of November 27, 1775, that contains one of her most powerful statements about human nature written at the time of American revolutionary reactions against the British abuse of power. The proverb "Big fish eat little fish" has served to describe human power struggles since classical times,^{iv} and it most assuredly is also a befitting metaphor for eighteenth-century politics, showing that human nature in the Age of Reason and Enlightenment has barely evolved from that of the fish world:

I am more and more convinced that Man is a dangerous creature, and that power whether vested in many or a few is ever grasping, and like the grave cries give, give. The great fish swallow up the small, and he who is most strenuous for the Rights of the people, when vested with power, is as eager after the perogatives of Government. You tell me of degrees of perfection to which Humane Nature is capable of arriving, and I believe it, but at the same time lament that our admiration should arise from the scarcity of the instances. (I,329)

This is a devastating indictment of humanity bordering on a fatalistic worldview regarding the corruptness of power and government. Not even a year later in another letter to John of August 29, 1776, Abigail cites the proverb "Man is the only animal who is hungry with His Belly full" (II,113) as describing "Humane Nature," but she is quick to state more positively and more befitting her resolute nature of struggling for success that "Pure and disintrested Virtue must ever be its own reward" II,113).

Abigail and John Adams certainly tried to live by the proverb that "Virtue is its own reward," while adding a bit of positive ambition to it. They believed in the Puritan ethics and, proverbially speaking, that "Experience is the mother of wisdom" and that "Great necessities call out great virtues," as can be seen from yet another letter by mother Adams to her son John Quincy:

These are times in which a Genius would wish to live. It is not in the still calm of life, or the repose of a pacific station, that great characters are formed. Would Cicero have shone so distinguished an orator, if he had not been roused, kindled and enflamed by the Tyranny of Catiline, Millo [Abigail is mistaken here, since Cicero was n ardent supporter of Millo], Verres and Mark Anthony. The Habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties. All History will convince you of this, and that wisdom and penetration are the fruits of experience, not the Lessons of retirement and leisure.

Great necessities call out great virtues. When a mind is raised, and animated by scenes that engage the Heart, then those qualities which would otherways lay dormant, wake into Life, and form the Character of the Hero and the Statesman. (III,268; January 19, 1780)

This wisdom is sent to a boy of merely thirteen who accompanied his father to Europe at that young age. As Abigail penned these well-intended comments, she must have had her husband John in front of her eyes as her hero and aspiring statesman. Little did she know that their son John Quincy would become that well educated "genius" who rose to the presidency in 1825. All of this is summarized to a degree in a letter from Abigail to her sister Elizabeth Shaw that alludes to the proverb "Example is better than precept":

The longer I live in the world, and the more I see of mankind, the more deeply I am impressed with the importance and necessity of good principles and virtuous examples being placed before youth, in the most amiable and engaging manner, whilst the mind is uncontaminated, and open to impressions. Yet precept without example is of little avail, for habits of the mind are produced by the exertion of inward practical principles. The "soul's calm sunshine" can result only from the practice of virtue, which is congenial to our natures. (LA,278; March 4, 1786)

Mere words in the form of precepts, maxims or proverbs as well as the best education that people could attain are simply not enough if that wisdom is not followed by responsible and virtuous deeds. Abigail knew well of what she spoke, having been responsible for the education of their four children Abigail (Nabby), John Quincy, Charles, and Thomas Boylston (another daughter Susanna died at the age of two), before the boys went off to Harvard. Of course, she kept instructing and educating them with her letters throughout her life.

"Hope springs eternal in the human breast" – forever optimism

As matriarch of the Adams family, Abigail cared deeply for her children, loved and supported her husband, and was forever involved in the extended family, but she also never lost sight of the well being and future of the United States that she in her own way helped to establish. At the time of the war of 1812, she wrote thoughts to her friend Mercy Otis Warren that are of universal application long beyond their inception:

So long as we are inhabitants of this earth and possess any of our faculties, we cannot be indifferent to the state of our country, our posterity and our friends. [...] We have passed through one revolution and have happily arrived at the goal, but the

ambition, injustice and plunder of foreign powers have again involved us in war, the termination of which is not given us to see. [...]

If I give an opinion with respect to the conduct of our native State [of Massachusetts], I cannot do it with approbation. She has had much to complain of as it respected a refusal of naval protection, yet that cannot justify her in paralyzing the arm of government when raised for her defence and that of the nation. A house divided against itself – and upon that foundation do our enemies build their hopes of subdoing us. May it prove a sandy one to them. (LA,412-413; December 30, 1812)

There was no need for Abigail to cite the Bible proverb "A house divided against itself cannot stand" (Mark 3:25) in its entirety. Her friend and her contemporaries knew it only too well, and so did Abraham Lincoln when he utilized it as an authoritative *leitmotif* before the Civil War in his arguments for maintaining the Union at all costs.^{lvi} The proverb has been used on the political scene repeatedly since these earlier occurrences, always with the intent of placing national unity above the interests of individual states, certain groups of people, and policies or actions that might tear the nation apart.

As a strong Federalist and social conservative, Abigail had the interest of the entire country in mind when she acted as an adviser to her husband. She explained this conviction through yet another Bible proverb to Mercy Otis Warren, clearly stating that faith in the American government and society will overcome major obstacles in due time:

I shall [...] turn my attention to my own country, which, though not terrified with the prospect of a profligate prince to govern it, appears to be in an untranquillized state, embarrassed in its finances, distressed in its commerce, and unbalanced in its governments. But I have faith that will remove mountains [Matthew 17:20]; and, as distress and difficulties in private life are frequently spurs to diligence, so have we seen public industry excited in the same manner. (LA,324; May 14, 1787)

It is interesting to note that Abigail appropriates the religious proverb "Faith will move mountains" by relating it not so much to faith in God but to faith in her own abilities. This calls into memory her most beloved proverb "God helps them who help themselves" that also emphasizes the fact that people have to work on their own fate. But there is a third element to the

equation of faith in one's own abilities and the resolve to action, and that is hope in the future that appears to be a definite part of the American worldview.^{lvii} As a great admirer of Alexander Pope (1688-1744), Abigail turned to a quotation from his famous *Essay on Man* (1733) to find the proper wording, namely "Hope springs eternal in the human breast."^{lviii} This quotation has long since turned proverb, and by today it is often cited in the truncated form of "Hope springs eternal" without any reference to Pope. In any case, Abigail cites it once as a proverb without any quotation marks or reference to Pope in a letter of June 20, 1784, as a personal explanation for having reached the decision to cross the Atlantic in order to end the long separation from her husband: "I am going to embark very soon upon the mighty waters. Never did I think I could have been persuaded to such an undertaking unaccompanied with Husband son or some near connection, but thus it is. Hope that springs Eternal in the Humane Breast, I pray may in some early day realize to me the promised blessing" (V,350; June 20, 1784; letter to Elizabeth Ellery Dana). In a second employment of this encouraging piece of wisdom, Abigail is hoping to see her sister Mary Cranch again soon, especially since she has been experiencing a rather troublesome period in her life.:

My mind is not in the most cheerful state. Trials of various kinds seem to be reserved for our gray Hairs, for our declining years. Shall I receive good and not evil? I will not forget the blessings which sweeten Life. One of those is the prospect I have before me of meeting my dear sister soon, I hope in health and spirits. A strong imagination is said to be a refuge from sorrow, and a kindly solace for a feeling Heart. Upon this principle it was that Pope founded his observation, that "hope springs eternal in the human breast." (NL,253; May 26, 1800)

Whatever troubled Abigail, be they family matters or political issues, she always mustered up enough faith, resolve, and hope to carry on as one of the truly remarkable women of the American Revolution and the first few decades of the new American nation. The three proverbs "Faith will remove mountains," "God helps them who help themselves," and "Hope springs eternal (in the human breast)" encapsulate the life, action, and worldview of this great matriarch. Faith, resolve, and hope served her well as she dedicated herself with love and commitment to her husband, family, and country, making her a proverbial *prima inter pares* in the distinguished group of founding fathers of the United States. Her vast correspondence and several biographies about her tell the intriguing and touching story of this great American woman, whose words and deeds were to a considerable degree informed by the wisdom of proverbs.

Notes:

- i. See Charles W. Meister, *The Founding Fathers* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 1987); Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers. The Revolutionary Generation* (New York: A. Knopf, 2001); and Andrew S. Trees, *The Founding Fathers and the Politics of Character* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- ii. See the concise but informative portrayal by Linda Myer, "Abigail Adams," *Maryland Committee for the Humanities*, 78 (2001), 9-12.
- iii. Frank Shuffelton, "In Different Voices: Gender in the American Republic of Letters," *Early American Literature*, 25 (1990), 290 (the entire article on pp. 289-304). See also Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis, "The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century: Some Generalizations," in H. Anderson, Philip B. Daghljan, and I. Ehrenpreis (eds.), *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1966), pp. 269-282.
- iv. See Phyllis Lee Levin, *Abigail Adams. A Biography* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 310.
- v. Quotations from the letters are taken from the following publications with the precise references listed in parentheses. Their inconsistent and frequently erroneous orthography has been maintained throughout:
 1. *Adams Family Correspondence (1761-1785)*, ed. by L.H. Butterfield, 6 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963-1993). The volume numbers are cited in Roman numerals followed by the page numbers.
 2. *New Letters of Abigail Adams 1788-1801*, ed. by Stewart Mitchell (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1947). This volume is identified by NL followed by the page numbers.
 3. *Letters of Mrs. Adams, Wife of John Adams*, ed. by Charles Francis Adams, 4th ed. (Boston: Wilkins, Carter, and Company, 1848). Passages from this volume are identified by LA followed by page numbers.
- vi. This statement was used as a motto (p. vii) and in part as the title of an invaluable study by Edith B. Gelles, *First Thoughts. Life and Letters of Abigail Adams* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998). For the linguistic problems of the largely self-taught Abigail see Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend. A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: The Free Press, 1981; New York: Touchstone, 2002), p. xiii.
- vii. Ralph Ketcham, "The Puritan Ethic in the Revolutionary Era: Abigail Adams and Thomas Jefferson," in Carol V.R. George (ed.), *"Remember the Ladies": New Perspectives on Women in*

American History. Essays in Honor of Nelson Manfred Blake (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1975), p. 49 and p. 65 (the entire article on pp. 49-65).

viii. This is a reference to the somewhat flirtatious correspondence between Abigail Adams and James Lovell; see Edith B. Gelles, "A Virtuous Affair," in E.B. Gelles, *Portia. The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 57-71.

ix. See Edith B. Gelles, "The Abigail Industry," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 45 (1988), 656-683.

x. Edith B. Gelles, *Portia. The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 3.

xi. Elaine Forman Crane, "Political Dialogue and the Spring of Abigail's Discontent," *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999), 769 (the entire article on pp. 745-774). Crane also refers to the more unlikely source for the Portia pen-name in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*.

xii. See also the appropriately entitled chapter on "'Cast in the Same Mould'" in Rosemary Keller, *Patriotism and the Female Sex. Abigail Adams and the American Revolution* (Brooklyn, New York: Carlson, 1994), pp. 1-20.

xiii. See Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. 438; and Wolfgang Mieder, Stewart A. Kingsbury, and Kelsie B. Harder, *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 595.

xiv. Oliver Goldsmith might have taken this phrase from Edward Young's didactic and reflective poem *Night Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* (1742-1745): "Man wants but little; nor that little, long." See Burton Stevenson, *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 2444 (no. 8); and Wolfgang Mieder, Stewart A. Kingsbury, and Kelsie B. Harder, *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 401.

xv. See the many multilingual references in Gyula Paczolay, *European Proverbs in 55 Languages with Equivalentents in Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Chinese and Japanese* (Veszprém: Veszprémi Nyomda, 1997), pp. 150-154.

xvi. See Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), p. 263; and Robert W. Dent, *Shakespeare's Proverbial Language. An Index* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1981), p. 122.

- xvii. See Frances M. Barbour, *A Concordance to the Sayings in Franklin's "Poor Richard"* (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Company, 1974), p. 82.
- xviii. Cited from Jared Sparks, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Childs & Peterson, 1840), vol. 2, p. 94; with italics in original. See also Stuart A. Gallacher, "Franklin's *Way to Wealth*: A Florilegium of Proverbs and Wise Sayings," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 48 (1949), 229-251; and Wolfgang Mieder, "Benjamin Franklin's 'The Way to Wealth'," in W. Mieder, *Proverbs. A Handbook* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), pp. 216-224.
- xix. See Burton Stevenson, *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 980-981 (no. 15); and F.P. Wilson, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 312-313.
- xx. See Wolfgang Mieder, "'A Man of Fashion Never Has Recourse to Proverbs': Lord Chesterfield's Tilting at Proverbial Windmills," in W. Mieder, *Strategies of Wisdom. Anglo-American and German Proverb Studies* (Baltmannsweiler: Schneider Verlag Hohengehren, 2000), pp. 55-56 (the entire chapter on pp. 37-68).
- xxi. Edith B. Gelles, "Abigail Adams: Domesticity and the American Revolution," *New England Quarterly*, 52 (1979), 516 (the entire article on pp. 500-521). See also Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams. An American Woman*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), pp. 84-85.
- xxii. Richard Jente, "The Untilled Field of Proverbs," in George R. Coffman (ed.), *Studies in Language and Literature* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1945), p. 116 (the entire article on pp. 112-119).
- xxiii. James Obelkevich, "Proverbs and Social History," in Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds.), *The Social History of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 57 (the entire article on pp. 43-72; also in Wolfgang Mieder (ed.), *Wise Words. Essays on the Proverb* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1994), pp. 229-230 (the entire article on pp. 211-252).
- xxiv. For numerous studies see Wolfgang Mieder and George B. Bryan, *Proverbs in World Literature. A Bibliography* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).
- xxv. Bartlett Jere Whiting, *Early American Proverbs and Proverbial Phrases* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1977), p. xviii.
- xxvi. See Wolfgang Mieder, "Narrative History as Proverbial Narrative: David McCullough's Best-Selling *John Adams* [2001] Biography," *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship*, 19 (2002), 279-322.

- xxvii. Kathleen Ann Lawrence, "' Splendid Misery': The Influential Letters of Abigail Adams," in K.A. Lawrence, *The Domestic Idiom. The Rhetorical Appeals of Four Influential Women in Nineteenth-Century America* (Diss. Indiana University, 1989), p. 58 (the entire chapter on pp. 21-85). Lawrence mentions but three examples, namely "God Helps them who help themselves" (p. 56), "God helps them that help themselves" (p. 57), and "Revenge is sweet" (p. 58). See also Lawrence's statement that "throughout her letters Adams referred to literature, poetry, historical, classical, biblical, and political sources. Often her 'topoi' or places were found in stories, anecdotes, fables, folklore, parables, and proverbs" (p. 27).
- xxviii. Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend. A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), p. 58.
- xxix. This letter is included in the microfilm edition of the voluminous *Adams Papers* of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Cited from Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend. A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), pp. 136-137.
- xxx. See Burton Stevenson, *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 1488 (no. 10).
- xxxi. Natalie S. Bober, *Abigail Adams. Witness to a Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1994), p. 60.
- xxxii. See also the following letters to John: June 3, 1776 (II,4); April 17, 1777 (II,213); June 23, 1777 (II,269); July 10, 1777 (II,278-279); July 15, 1778 (III,60); February 13, 1779 (III,167); July 24, 1780 (III,382); June 17, 1782 (IV,326); November 13, 1782 (V,35); April 28, 1783 (V,144); and February 11, 1784 (V,302-303). The emotive if not sensual passages are usually at the beginning or the end of the letters.
- xxxiii. Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend. A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), p. 134.
- xxxiv. Cited from Charles Francis Adams (ed.), *The Works of John Adams* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), vol. 9, p. 513. See also Edith B. Gelles, "Abigail Adams: Domesticity and the American Revolution," *New England Quarterly*, 52 (1979), 514 (the entire article on pp. 500-521).
- xxxv. Edith B. Gelles, "Abigail Adams: Domesticity and the American Revolution," *New England Quarterly*, 52 (1979), 500 (the entire article on pp. 500-521).
- xxxvi. Kathleen Ann Lawrence, "' Splendid Misery': The Influential Letters of Abigail Adams," in K.A. Lawrence, *The Domestic Idiom. The Rhetorical Appeals of Four Influential Women in*

Nineteenth-Century America (Diss. Indiana University, 1989), p. 30 (the entire chapter on pp. 21-85).

xxxvii. Edith B. Gelles, *Portia. The World of Abigail Adams* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 119 (see also pp. 123-125).

xxxviii. Cited from David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 553.

xxxix. For a discussion of the proverb "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," see J.O. Hertzler, "On Golden Rules," *The International Journal of Ethics*, 44 (1933-1934), 418-436; and John Marks Templeton, *Worldwide Laws of Life. 200 Eternal Spiritual Principles* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Templeton Foundation Press, 1997), pp. 8-12.

xl. See Wolfgang Mieder, "'Do Unto Others as You Would Have Them Do Unto You': The Golden Rule as the Ultimate Wisdom for Equality," in W. Mieder, *No Struggle, No Progress". Frederick Douglass and His Proverbial Rhetoric for Civil Rights* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 95-102 and pp. 184-192.

xli. Abigail also referred to these remarks in a letter of April 27, 1776, to her friend Mercy Otis Warren (see I, 397).

xlii. Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams. An American Woman*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), p. 48.

xliii. Cited from Burton Stevenson, *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 2404 (no. 10).

xliv. See Elaine Forman Crane, "Political Dialogue and the Spring of Abigail's Discontent," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 56 (1999), 763 (the entire article on pp. 745-774).

xlv. John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations*, ed. Emily Morison Beck, 15th ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1980), p. 392.

xlvi. "Remember the Ladies" is used as chapter headings by Edith B. Gelles, *First Thoughts. Life and Letters of Abigail Adams* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998), pp. 14-30; and Charles W. Akers, *Abigail Adams. An American Woman*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 2000), pp. 35-52.

xlvii. See Selwyn Gurney Champion, *The Eleven Religions and Their Proverbial Lore* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1945); Albert Kirby Griffin, *Religious Proverbs. Over 1600 Adages from 18 Faiths Worldwide* (Jefferson, North Carolina: NcFarland, 1991); and more specific Wolfgang Mieder, *Not by Bread Alone. Proverbs of the Bible* (Shelburne, Vermont: New England Press, 1990).

- xlvi. Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend. A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), p. 7.
- xlix. This Bible proverb also appears in a letter of May 12, 1785, to Elizabeth Cranch (see VI, 143).
- i. See Wolfgang Mieder and George B. Bryan, *The Proverbial Winston S. Churchill. An Index to Proverbs in the Works of Sir Winston Churchill* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), pp. 29-32 and p. 196. See also W. Mieder, "' Make Hell While the Sun Shines': Proverbial Rhetoric in Winston Churchill's *The Second World War*," in W. Mieder, *The Politics of Proverbs. From Traditional Wisdom to Proverbial Stereotypes* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), pp. 447-49 (the entire chapter on pp. 39-66).
- li. *Adams Papers*, cited from Lynne Withey, *Dearest Friend. A Life of Abigail Adams* (New York: The Free Press, 1981), p. 239.
- lii. Abigail alludes to this Bible proverb again in another letter to her sister Mary Cranch: "The people who can see and judge for themselves are disposed to do right, but the Ethiopian cannot Change his skin" (NL, 159; April 21, 1798)
- liii. See the many passages in R. B. Bernstein (ed.), *The Wisdom of John and Abigail Adams* (New York: MetroBooks, 2002), pp. 42-63; with Abigail's use of the "fish"-proverb on pp. 45-46.
- liv. Matti Kuusi, *Parömiologiske Beträchtungen* (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, 1957), p. 52.
- lv. See Wolfgang Mieder, "History and Interpretation of a Proverb about Human Nature: 'Big Fish Eat Little Fish'," in W. Mieder, *Tradition and Innovation in Folk Literature* (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1987), pp. 178-228 and pp. 259-268 (notes). Abigail's use of the proverb is treated on p. 212 of this chapter.
- lvi. See Wolfgang Mieder, *"A House Divided": From Biblical Proverb to Lincoln and Beyond* (Burlington, Vermont: University of Vermont, 1998). See also W. Mieder, *The Proverbial Abraham Lincoln. An Index to Proverbs in the Works of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 10-18.
- lvii. For this see Alan Dundes, "Thinking Ahead: A Folkloristic Reflection of the Future Orientation in American Worldview," *Anthropological Quarterly*, 42, no. 2 (1969), 53-72.
- lviii. See Burton Stevenson, *The Home Book of Proverbs, Maxims, and Famous Phrases* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), p. 1168 (no. 2); and Wolfgang Mieder, Stewart A. Kingsbury, and Kelsie B. Harder, *A Dictionary of American Proverbs* (New York: Oxford University Press,

1992), p. 309. The quotation/proverb appears in Epistle 1, line 95 of *An Essay on Man*. Stevenson states that this was "the birth of a phrase which promptly became proverbial."

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