

Classical Receptions as Autobiographic Subtext
in Ego-Documents and Commonplace Books of the Founding Generation

Since Carl Richard's pathbreaking study on *The Founders and the Classics* and John C. Shields' magisterial *American Aeneas*, classical appropriations by the generation of the American Founders have received renewed attention in historical and literary scholarship. Scholars like Eric Ashley Hairston, for instance, have uncovered rich layers in Phillis Wheatley's poetry by exploring the autobiographic resonances of classical receptions in her writings (Hairston 2011). Similarly, recent biographies like David McCullough's *John Adams* and Ron Chernow's *Alexander Hamilton* include astute references to the Founders' engagement with the classics. But other biographical studies lack similar analyses, and important texts of autobiographic significance deserve further examination. What has not been fully appreciated is the extent to which classical references include messages that go beyond and sometimes even run counter to the obvious purposes and themes of a given text.

John Adams' admiration for Cicero has long been acknowledged. But it is worth noting that Adams' private references to the Roman statesman reveal nuances that the respective diary entries and letters do not otherwise convey. Similarly, Jefferson's quotes from Horace and Cicero in his commonplace book provide glimpses into the inner world of a man whom one of his biographers would call *American Sphinx* (Ellis 1996). Fredric Litto and others deserve credit for examining Washington's references to Addison's *Cato* (Litto 1966, 441-442). But the passages gain even more significance when contrasted with nineteenth-century appropriations that stress Cato's suicidal heroism, for this was not the quality Washington highlighted in his own citations from Addison's drama.

Ron Chernow recognized the revealing nature of Alexander Hamilton's Plutarch paraphrases found on spare pages of the paybook that the young officer kept for his unit during the Revolutionary War. As Chernow points out, these personal notes foreshadow Hamilton's emergence as a leading constitutional scholar as well as his role as the "protagonist of the first great sex scandal in American political history" (Chernow 2004, 112). But beyond Chernow's insights, the paraphrases also betray other preoccupations of Hamilton, namely with legitimacy, honor, authority, and integration. Moreover, the passages demonstrate Hamilton's humane convictions and cast doubt on the charge that Hamilton consistently championed the legitimacy of a monarch's lifelong claim to rule.

The literary output of many others in the Founding Generation shares autobiographical elements and personally relevant classical references with the examples cited above. William Livingston's poem *Philosophic Solitude*, written in 1747, reveals what appear to be personal sentiments and convictions, and Shields tied them to an emerging American identity (Shields 2001, 106-111). The poem Livingston wrote as a young man draws on classical pastoral poetry to assert the superiority of country living far from government affairs to life at the city's centers of power. Yet his references to Cicero and Cato contradict the very tenor of his poem. Livingston's conflicted leanings are revealed through classical appropriations, and his subsequent career in public service supports the reader's intuition.

In sum, classical receptions in commonplace books and writings of autobiographical significance among the Founding Generation provide rich insights into the authors' thinking, emotional lives, motives, and aspirations. Although these appropriations sometimes confirm themes in a given text, they frequently reveal subtexts and underlying messages that are not self-evident or that even contradict a text's overall message. It goes without saying that most

documents cited above lend themselves well to classroom discussions in an undergraduate classical reception course focused on the American Founding Generation.

Bibliography

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