

THE  
WORKS C+  
OF  
JOHN ADAMS,  
SECOND PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES:

WITH  
A LIFE OF THE AUTHOR,  
NOTES AND ILLUSTRATIONS,

BY  
HIS GRANDSON  
CHARLES FRANCIS ADAMS.

VOL. III.

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## CONTENTS OF VOLUME III.

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	PAGE
I. AUTOBIOGRAPHY CONTINUED . . . . .	3
II. DIARY . . . . .	94
III. NOTES OF A DEBATE IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES .	407
IV. ESSAYS . . . . .	425
On Private Revenge . . . . .	427
On Self-Declusion . . . . .	432
On Private Revenge . . . . .	438
DISSERTATION ON THE CANON AND THE FEUDAL LAW .	447
INSTRUCTIONS OF THE TOWN OF BRAINTREE TO THEIR RE- PRESENTATIVE, 1765 . . . . .	465
THE EARL OF CLARENDON TO WILLIAM PYM . . . . .	469
GOVERNOR WINTHROP TO GOVERNOR BRADFORD . . . . .	484
INSTRUCTIONS OF THE TOWN OF BOSTON TO THEIR REPRESENTATIVES, 1768 . . . . .	501
INSTRUCTIONS OF THE TOWN OF BOSTON TO THEIR REPRESENTATIVES, 1769 . . . . .	505
ON THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE JUDICIARY: A CONTROVERSY BETWEEN W. BRATTLE AND J. ADAMS, 1773 . . . . .	513

### APPENDIX.

A. ON THE POWERS OF THE SENATE IN APPOINTING AMBASSADORS AND FIXING THE GRADE, BY THOMAS JEFFERSON, 1790 . . . . .	575
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## ESSAYS.

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THE three Essays that follow, are the earliest printed productions known to have come from Mr. Adams. In a letter dated in 1819, he says, "There were many flickerings in the newspapers between Mr. Sewall and me, the precise dates of which I cannot recollect. Sewall wrote under the signature of Philanthropos sometimes, and at other times under the signature of a long J.; and I wrote under that of a great U., and, perhaps, other signatures that I do not remember. All these trifles of mine were printed in the Boston Gazette. There were several papers written by me on occasion of the assault of Colonel Murray upon General Brattle, on the council stairs of the old town house."

The first and third papers relate to this event, which caused some excitement at the moment, and led to a legal prosecution that continued it. All three bear the peculiar mental and moral characteristics of the author, and are therefore preserved.

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### ON PRIVATE REVENGE.

NO. I.<sup>1</sup>

MAN is distinguished from other animals, his fellow inhabitants of this planet, by a capacity of acquiring knowledge and civility, more than by any excellency, corporeal, or mental, with which mere nature has furnished his species. His erect figure and sublime countenance would give him but little elevation above the bear or the tiger; nay, notwithstanding those advantages, he would hold an inferior rank in the scale of being, and would have a worse prospect of happiness than those creatures, were it not for the capacity of uniting with others, and availing himself of arts and inventions in social life. As he comes originally from the hands of his Creator, self-love or self-preservation is the only spring that moves within him; he might crop the leaves or berries with which his Creator had surrounded him, to satisfy his hunger; he might sip at the lake or rivulet to slake his thirst; he might screen himself behind a rock or mountain from the bleakest of the winds; or he might fly from the jaws of voracious

<sup>1</sup> From the Boston Gazette, No. 435, 1 August, 1763.

beasts to preserve himself from immediate destruction. But would such an existence be worth preserving? Would not the first precipice or the first beast of prey that could put a period to the wants, the frights, and horrors of such a wretched being, be a friendly object and a real blessing?

When we take one remove from this forlorn condition, and find the species propagated, the banks of clams and oysters discovered, the bow and arrow invented, and the skins of beasts or the bark of trees employed for covering, — although the human creature has a little less anxiety and misery than before, yet each individual is independent of all others. There is no intercourse of friendship; no communication of food or clothing; no conversation or connection, unless the conjunction of sexes, prompted by instinct, like that of hares and foxes, may be called so. The ties of parent, son, and brother, are of little obligation. The relations of master and servant, the distinction of magistrate and subject, are totally unknown. Each individual is his own sovereign, accountable to no other upon earth, and punishable by none. In this savage state, courage, hardiness, activity, and strength, the virtues of their brother brutes, are the only excellencies to which men can aspire. The man who can run with the most celerity, or send the arrow with the greatest force, is the best qualified to procure a subsistence. Hence, to chase a deer over the most rugged mountain, or to pierce him at the greatest distance, will be held, of all accomplishments, in the highest estimation. Emulations and competitions for superiority in such qualities, will soon commence; and any action which may be taken for an insult, will be considered as a pretension to such superiority; it will raise resentment in proportion, and shame and grief will prompt the savage to claim satisfaction or to take revenge. To request the interposition of a third person to arbitrate between the contending parties, would be considered as an implicit acknowledgment of deficiency in those qualifications, without which, none in such a barbarous condition would choose to live. Each one, then, must be his own avenger. The offended parties must fall to fighting. Their teeth, their nails, their feet, or fists, or, perhaps, the first club or stone that can be grasped, must decide the contest, by finishing the life of one. The father, the brother, or the friend, begins then to espouse the cause of the deceased; not, indeed, so much

from any love he bore him living, or from any grief he suffers for him dead, as from a principle of bravery and honor, to show himself able and willing to encounter the man who had just before vanquished another. Hence arises the idea of an avenger of blood, and thus the notions of revenge, and the appetite for it grow apace. Every one must avenge his own wrongs when living, or else lose his reputation, and his near relation must avenge them for him after he is dead, or forfeit his. Indeed, nature has implanted in the human heart a disposition to resent an injury when offered; and this disposition is so strong, that even the horse treading by accident on a gouty toe, or a brickbat falling on the shoulders, in the first twinges of pain, seems to excite the angry passions, and we feel an inclination to kill the horse and to break the brickbat. Consideration, however, that the horse and brick were without design, will cool us; whereas the thought that any mischief has been done on purpose to abuse, raises revenge in all its strength and terrors; and the man feels the sweetest, highest gratification, when he inflicts the punishment himself. From this source arises the ardent desire in men to judge for themselves, when, and to what degree they are injured, and to carve out their own remedies for themselves. From the same source arises that obstinate disposition in barbarous nations to continue barbarous, and the extreme difficulty of introducing civility and Christianity among them. For the great distinction between savage nations and polite ones, lies in this, — that among the former every individual is his own judge and his own executioner; but among the latter all pretensions to judgment and punishment are resigned to tribunals erected by the public; a resignation which savages are not, without infinite difficulty, persuaded to make, as it is of a right and privilege extremely dear and tender to an uncultivated nature.

To exterminate from among mankind such revengeful sentiments and tempers, is one of the highest and most important strains of civil and humane policy. Yet the qualities which contribute most to inspire and support them may, under certain regulations, be indulged and encouraged. Wrestling, running, leaping, lifting, and other exercises of strength, hardiness, courage, and activity, may be promoted among private soldiers, common sailors, laborers, manufacturers, and husbandmen, among whom

they are most wanted, provided sufficient precautions are taken that no romantic, cavalier-like principles of honor intermix with them, and render a resignation of the right of judging, and the power of executing, to the public, shameful. But whenever such notions spread so inimical to the peace of society, that boxing, clubs, swords, or firearms, are resorted to for deciding every quarrel, about a girl, a game at cards, or any little accident that wine or folly or jealousy may suspect to be an affront,—the whole power of the government should be exerted to suppress them.

If a time should ever come when such notions shall prevail in this Province to a degree, that no privileges shall be able to exempt men from indignities and personal attacks, not the privilege of a counsellor, nor the privilege of a House of Representatives of “speaking freely in that assembly, without impeachment or question in any court or place,” out of the General Court—when whole armed mobs shall assault a member of the House, when violent attacks shall be made upon counsellors, when no place shall be sacred, not the very walls of legislation, when no personages shall overawe, not the whole General Court added to all the other gentlemen on 'Change, when the broad noon-day shall be chosen to display before the world such high, heroic sentiments of gallantry and spirit, when such assailants shall live unexpelled from the legislature, when slight censures and no punishments shall be inflicted,—there will really be danger of our becoming universally ferocious, barbarous, and brutal, worse than our Gothic ancestors before the Christian era.

The doctrine, that the person assaulted “should act with spirit,” “should defend himself by drawing his sword and killing, or by wringing noses, and boxing it out with the offender,” is the tenet of a coxcomb and the sentiment of a brute. The fowl upon the dunghill, to be sure, feels a most gallant and heroic spirit at the crowing of another, and instantly spreads his cloak, and prepares for combat. The bull's wrath enkindles into a noble rage, and the stallion's immortal spirit can never forgive the pawings, neighings, and defiances of his rival. But are cocks and bulls and horses the proper exemplars for the imitation of men, especially of men of sense, and even of the highest personages in the government!

Such ideas of gallantry have been said to be derived from the army. But it was injuriously said, because not truly. For

every gentleman, every man of sense and breeding in the army, has a more delicate and manly way of thinking, and from his heart despises all such little, narrow, sordid notions. It is true that a competition, and a mutual affectation of contempt, is apt to arise among the lower, more ignorant, and despicable, of every rank and order in society. This sort of men, (and some few such there are in every profession,) among divines, lawyers, physicians, as well as husbandmen, manufacturers, and laborers, are prone, from a certain littleness of mind, to imagine that their labors alone are of any consequence to the world, and to affect a contempt for all others. It is not unlikely, then, that the lowest and most despised sort of soldiers may have expressed a contempt for all other orders of mankind, may have indulged a disrespect to every personage in a civil character, and have acted upon such principles of revenge, rusticity, barbarity, and brutality, as have been above described. And, indeed, it has been observed by the great Montesquieu, that "From a manner of thinking that prevails among mankind," (the most ignorant and despicable of mankind, he means,) "they set a higher value upon courage than timorousness, on activity than prudence, on strength than counsel. Hence, the army will ever despise a senate, and respect their own officers; they will naturally slight the orders sent them by a body of men whom they look upon as cowards, and therefore unworthy to command them." This respect to their own officers, which produces a contempt of senates and councils, and of all laws, orders, and constitutions, but those of the army and their superior officers, though it may have prevailed among some soldiers of the illiberal character above described, is far from being universal. It is not found in one gentleman of sense and breeding in the whole service. All of this character know that the common law of England is superior to all other laws, martial or common, in every English government, and has often asserted triumphantly its own preëminence against the insults and encroachments of a giddy and unruly soldiery. They know, too, that civil officers in England hold a great superiority to military officers, and that a frightful despotism would be the speedy consequence of the least alteration in these particulars. And, knowing this, these gentlemen, who have so often exposed their lives in defence of the religion, the liberties, and rights of men and Englishmen, would feel the utmost indignation at the



## ON PRIVATE REVENGE.

NO. III.

*Impiger, iracundus, inexorabilis, acer,  
Jura neget sibi nata, nihil non arroget armis.*

*Hor.*

Rebuke the spearmen, and the troops  
Of bulls that mighty be.

*Novang.*TO THE PRINTERS.<sup>1</sup>

It seems to be necessary for me, (notwithstanding the declaration in my last) once more to digress from the road of agriculture and mechanic arts, and to enter the list of disputation with a brace of writers in the Evening Post, one of whom has subscribed himself X, and the other W. I shall agree with the first of these gentlemen, that "to preach up non-resistance with the zeal of a fanatic," would be as extraordinary as to employ a bastile in support of the freedom of speech or the press, or an inquisition in favor of liberty of conscience; but if he will leave his own imagination, and recur to what I have written, he will not find a syllable against resistance. Resistance to sudden violence, for the preservation not only of my person, my limbs and life, but of my property, is an indisputable right of nature which I never surrendered to the public by the compact of society, and which, perhaps, I could not surrender if I would. Nor is there any thing in the common law of England, (for which Mr. X supposes I have so great a fondness,) inconsistent with that right. On the contrary, the dogmas of Plato, the maxims of the law, and the precepts of Christianity, are precisely coincident in relation to this subject.

Plato taught that revenge was unlawful, although he allowed of self-defence. The divine Author of our religion has taught us that trivial provocations are to be overlooked; and that if a man should offer you an insult, by boxing one ear, rather than indulge a furious passion and return blow for blow, you ought even to turn the other also. This expression, however, though it inculcates strongly the duty of moderation and self-government

<sup>1</sup> From the Boston Gazette, 5 September, 1768.

upon sudden provocations, imports nothing against the right of resistance or of self-defence. The sense of it seems to be no more than this : that little injuries and insults ought to be borne patiently for the present, rather than run the risk of violent consequences by retaliation.

Now, the common law seems to me to be founded on the same great principle of philosophy and religion. It will allow of nothing as a justification of blows, but blows ; nor will it justify a furious beating, bruising, and wounding, upon the provocation of a fillip of the finger, or a kick upon the shins ; but if I am assaulted, I can justify nothing but laying my hands lightly upon the aggressor for my own defence ; nothing but what was absolutely necessary for my preservation. I may parry or ward off any blow ; but a blow received is no sufficient provocation for fifty times so severe a blow in return. When life, which is one of the three favorites of the law, comes into consideration, we find a wise and humane provision is made for its preservation. If I am assaulted by another, sword in hand, and if I am even certain of his intention to murder me, the common law will not suffer me to defend myself, by killing him, if I can avoid it. Nay, my behavior must absolutely be what would be called cowardice, perhaps, by Mr. X and W, though it would be thought the truest bravery, not only by the greatest philosophers and legislators, but by the best generals of the world ; I must run away from such an assailant, and avoid him if I have room, rather than stand my ground and defend myself ; but if I have no room to escape, or if I run and am pursued to the wall or into a corner where I cannot elude his fury, and have no other way to preserve my own life from his violence, but by taking his there, I have an indisputable right to do it, and should be justified in wading through the blood of a whole army, if I had power to shed it and had no other way to make my escape.

What is said by Mr. W, that “ if a gentleman should be hurried by his passions so far as to take the life of another, the common law will not adjudge it murder or manslaughter, but justifiable homicide only,” — by which he must mean, if in truth he had any meaning at all, that killing upon a sudden provocation is justifiable homicide, — is a position in comparison of which the observations of the grave-digger upon the death of the young lady, in Shakspeare’s Hamlet, ought to be ranked among the *responsa prudentium*.

Every catechumen in law, nay, every common man, and even every porter upon the dock, that ever attended a trial for murder, knows that a sudden provocation raising a violent passion, where there is no precedent malice, is, in consideration of human frailty, allowed to soften killing from murder down to manslaughter; but manslaughter is a heinous crime, and subjected to heavy punishments.

Such is the wisdom and humanity of English law; upon so thorough a knowledge of human nature is it founded, and so well is it calculated to preserve the lives and limbs of men and the interior tranquillity of societies! I shall not dispute with Mr. X my affection for this law, in preference to all other systems of law that have ever appeared in the world. I have no connection with parishioners, nor patients, nor clients, nor any dependence upon either for business or bread; I study law as I do divinity and physic; and all of them as I do husbandry and mechanic arts, or the motions and revolutions of the heavenly bodies; or as I do magistracy and legislation; namely, as means and instruments of human happiness. It has been my amusement for many years past, as far as I have had leisure, to examine the systems of all the legislators, ancient and modern, fantastical and real, and to trace their effects in history upon the felicity of mankind; and the result of this long examination is a settled opinion that the liberty, the unalienable, indefeasible rights of men, the honor and dignity of human nature, the grandeur and glory of the public, and the universal happiness of individuals, were never so skilfully and successfully consulted as in that most excellent monument of human art, the common law of England; a law that maintains a great superiority, not only to every other system of laws, martial or canon, or civil and military, even to majesty itself; it has a never-sleeping jealousy of the canon law, which in many countries, Spain in particular, has subjected all officers and orders, civil and military, to the avarice and ambition, the caprice and cruelty of a clergy; and it is not less watchful over the martial law, which in many cases and in many countries, France in particular, is able to rescue men from the justice of the municipal laws of the kingdom; and I will own, that to revive in the minds of my countrymen a reverence for this law, and to prevent the growth of sentiments that seemed to me to be in their tendency destructive of it,

especially to revive a jealousy of martial laws and cavalier-like tempers, was the turn which I designed to serve for myself and my friends in that piece which has given offence to X and W.

A certain set of sentiments have been lately so fashionable, that you could go into few companies without hearing such smart sayings as these, — “If a man should insult me, by kicking my shins, and I had a sword by my side I would make the sun shine through him ;” — “if any man, let him be as big as Goliath, should take me by the nose, I would let his bowels out with my sword, if I had one, and if I had none, I would beat his brains out with the first club I could find.” And such tempers have been animated by some inadvertent expressions that have fallen from persons of higher rank and better sentiments. Some of these have been heard to say, that “should a man offer a sudden insult to them, they could not answer for themselves, but they should lay him prostrate at their feet in his own blood.” Such expressions as these, which are to be supposed but modest expressions of the speaker’s diffidence of his own presence of mind, and government of his passions, when suddenly assaulted, have been taken for a justification of such returns to an insult, and a determination to practise them upon occasion. But such persons as are watching the lips of others for wise speeches, in order to utter them afterwards as their own sentiments, have generally as little of understanding as they have of spirit, and most miserably spoil, in reporting, a good reflection. Now, what I have written upon this subject was intended to show the inhumanity of taking away the life of a man, only for pulling my nose or boxing my ear ; and the folly of it too, because I should be guilty of a high crime, that of manslaughter at least, and forfeit all my goods, besides receiving a brand of infamy.

But I have not yet finished my history of sentiments. It has been said by others that “no man ought to receive a blow without returning it ;” “a man ought to be despised that receives a cuff without giving another in return.” This I have heard declared for a sober opinion by some men of figure and office and importance. But I beg leave to repeat it, — this is the tenet of a coxcomb and the sentiment of a brute ; and the horse, the bull, and the cock, that I mentioned before, daily discover precisely the same temper and the same sense of honor and decency. If, in walking the streets of this town, I should be

met by a negro, and that negro should lay me over the head with his cudgel, should I think myself bound in honor or regard to reputation to return the blow with another cudgel? to put myself on a level with that negro, and join with him in a competition which was most expert and skilful at cudgels? If a mad dog should meet me and bite me, should I think myself bound in honor, (I mean before the poison had worked upon me enough to make me as mad as the dog himself,) to fall upon that dog and bite him again? It is not possible for me to express that depth of contempt that I feel for such sentiments, and for every mortal that entertains them; and I should choose to be "the butt, the jest, and contempt" of all companies that entertain such opinions, rather than to be in their admiration or esteem. I would take some other way to preserve myself and other men from such insolence and violence for the future; but I would never place myself upon a level with such an animal for the present.

Far from aiming at a reputation for such qualities and accomplishments as those of boxing or cuffing, a man of sense would hold even the true martial qualities, courage, strength, and skill in war, in a much lower estimation than the attributes of wisdom and virtue, skill in arts and sciences, and a true taste to what is right, what is fit, what is true, generous, manly, and noble, in civil life. The competition between Ajax and Ulysses is well known.

" Tu vires sine mente geris, mihi cura futuri,  
Tu pugnare potes :  
Tu tantum corpore prodes,  
Nos animo ;  
Pectora sunt potiora manu. Vigor omnis in illis." <sup>1</sup>

And we know, in whose favor the prize was decreed.

I shall not be at the pains of remarking upon all therodomontade in the two pieces under consideration, and Mr. X and Mr. W, and the whole alphabet of writers may scribble as many volumes as the twenty-four letters are capable of variations, without the least further notice from me, unless more reasoning and merit appear in proportion to the quantity of lines than is to be found in those two pieces. But since I have made some remarks upon them, it will, perhaps, before I conclude, be worth

<sup>1</sup> From the speech of Ulysses, in *Ovid. Metamorphos. lib. iii. l. 363 - 368.*

my while to mention one thing more in each. Mr. X tells us "that cases frequently occur where a man's person or reputation suffer to the greatest degree, and yet it is impossible for the law to make him any satisfaction."

This is not strictly true ; such cases but seldom occur, though it must be confessed they sometimes do ; but it seldom happens, very seldom indeed, where you know the man who has done you the injury, that you can get no satisfaction by law ; and if such a case should happen, nothing can be clearer than that you ought to sit down and bear it ; and for this plain reason, because it is necessary, and you cannot get satisfaction in any way. The law, by the supposition, cannot redress you ; and you cannot, if you consider it, by any means redress yourself. A flagellation in the dark would be no reparation of the injury, no example to others, nor have any tendency to reform the subject of it, but rather a provocation to him to contrive some other way to injure you again ; and of consequence would be no satisfaction at all to a man even of that false honor and delicacy of which I have been speaking, unless he will avow an appetite for mere revenge, which is not only worse than brutal, but the attribute of devils ; and to take satisfaction by a flagellation in public would be only, in other words, taking a severe revenge upon yourself ; for this would be a trespass and a violation of the peace, for which you would expose yourself to the resentment of the magistrate and the action of the party, and would be like running your sword through your own body to revenge yourself on another for boxing your ears ; or like the behavior of the rattle-snake that will snap and leap and bite at every stick that you put near him, and at last when provoked beyond all honorable bearing, will fix his sharp and poisonous teeth into his own body.

I have nothing more to add, excepting one word of advice to Mr. W and all his readers, to have a care how they believe or practise his rule about "passion and killing," lest the halter and the gibbet should become their portion ; for a killing that should happen by the hurry of passion would be much more likely to be adjudged murder than justifiable homicide only. Let me conclude, by advising all men to look into their own hearts, which they will find to be deceitful above all things and desperately wicked. Let them consider how extremely addicted they

are to magnify and exaggerate the injuries that are offered to themselves, and to diminish and extenuate the wrongs that they offer to others. They ought, therefore, to be too modest and diffident of their own judgment, when their own passions and prejudices and interests are concerned, to desire to judge for themselves in their own causes, and to take their own satisfactions for wrongs and injuries of any kind. u.