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Restoring America's Founding Imagination

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Rome was great, and America can be greater still if it can remember both Nature and Nature's God: In the dying words of Mercy Otis Warren's tragic heroine in the Founding-era play The Sack of Rome, "[v]irtue, sublim'd by piety and truth, / Now beckons to the skies." Warren's image and the images in the hearts and minds of the Founding generation offer a deeply classical, subtly witty, and optimistically Roman and republican foundation mixed with Christian hope for greater virtue still. That our forebears and Founders took such self-governing care for their imaginations provides another fitting image for us as, on the eve of our 250th anniversary, we seek to restore the wit and imagination of our Founding.

When the young John Adams read Shakespeare, his imagination lit up. After reading *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, he marveled in his journal: "Shakespeare's vicious characters are aggravated beyond Life. He draws Ingratitude, Treason, Hypocrisy, Murder, in the strongest colors of horror."[1] As evidenced in this one line, Adams possessed a sophisticated understanding of the imagination, one in accord with a long tradition that dates back at least as far as the Roman writers, such as Terrence, Cicero, Plutarch, and Seneca, who likewise helped to shape the imaginations of both Adams and the whole Founding generation of America, not to mention Shakespeare. In Adams' understanding, Shakespeare achieves the seemingly impossible when he "draws" a sensible image of an intangible virtue or vice such as

"Ingratitude [and] Hypocrisy." Ideas, morals, principles of right and wrong are given "strongest colors" that create feelings, like "horror," that are thereafter fittingly associated in one's imagination with those same ideas, morals, and principles. The character of Macbeth is a powerfully drawn image of faithlessness, hypocrisy, and murder, and he is ultimately an image of the natural and horrible end of such viciousness.

Seeing this imaginative power in Shakespeare, Adams wondered, "In Thinking of any Thing, every Image that can resemble it, rises at once in strong Colours in Shakespeare's mind." Mental things are given color such that they can be grasped more easily by the mind's eye. Without good and useful images of the sort Shakespeare conjures so prodigiously well, it is much more difficult, perhaps impossible, to act well. In Shakespeare, Adams sees also that one must govern one's own imagination by contrasting the great, wheeling, and ungoverned mess of Macbeth's imagination, which is sickened by his guilt and made wild by long habit of tyrannical and unrestrained ambition: "Macbeth's Imagination," Adams comments, "was...afraid, was as lively and teemed with Notions, a Thousand thoughts came into his Head...." Little wonder, then, that Adams, so moved by the images of Shakespeare, set himself a goal in that same youthful diary: "Let me search for the clue, which led great Shakespeare into the labyrinth of mental nature!"[2]

The "labyrinth" of man's "mental nature" is an allusion to another great font of the Founders' imagination: Greek and Roman myth, in this case the great labyrinth of King Minos of Crete for whom Daedalus invented that famously impenetrable maze to house the minotaur, half man and half beast. Adams likely saw the fittingness of his labyrinth metaphor in discussing Shakespeare's heroic journey into the soul by means of such imaginative poetry. For Adams and the Founders generally, the "mental nature" of mankind, to be fully self-governing, needed to have within it a variety of well-honed mental powers. Adams listed some of them in complimenting an old friend: "He possessed a lively Wit, a pleasing humour, a brilliant Imagination, a great Subtlety of Reasoning and an insinuating Eloquence."[3] It is a formidable list of powers: Republican "Wit," "Subtlety of Reasoning," and that great achievement of leading citizens, "Eloquence."

But each of these is especially reliant upon "a brilliant imagination," so it is of the utmost importance in 21st century America, in an age of media and entertainment saturation as well as information warfare, to reclaim a deeper understanding of the Founders' imagination. Their imagination, we shall see, is a storehouse of images well mixed with ideas, morals, and principles, and it is just that "brilliant imagination" that formed a crucial and

prior condition for all of the Founders' deliberations, words, and deeds—the very things that brought about the formation of this great country.

In so reclaiming their imagination, we might gain a clue with which to thread the labyrinth of our mental nature such that we too can preserve the liberty of our American, democratic republic for generations to come. Without a well-governed imagination, great men become Macbeths, and even a good people can become a mob. Without a deeply moral and republican imagination, America cannot help but fail tragically to govern herself.

An Alphabet of Self-Government

The *New-England Primer*'s alphabet, taught in so many schools in the colonial and Founding eras, is a fitting place to start with some of the earliest images that the Founders would have had in their memory, for in this humble alphabet can be seen traces of the variety of the sources that shaped the Founders' imagination. The *Primer* was ubiquitous in American education; Benjamin Franklin's printing press alone sold over 36,000 copies from 1749 to 1766.[4] The alphabet depicts a woodcut image of each letter of the alphabet, accompanied by an image and a short, rhyming couplet. "A" shows a rude image of a man picking fruit from a tree: "In Adam's Fall / We Sinned All."[5] Certainly, the stories and images of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, the Old and New Testaments, the Passion of Christ, and the Resurrection—the great storehouse of Christian imagery—comprises a powerful and primary part of the Founders' imagination. Lest there be any doubt, the *Primer* continues with "B" showing a picture of the Good Book with the word "BIBLE" on its open leaves along with the following admonition: "Thy Life to Mend / This Book Attend."

"C" and "D" introduce another crucial component of the Founders' imaginarium, so to speak: the natural and moral wisdom of Aesop's animal fables. "C" depicts a cat reared up before some mice and states drolly, "The Cat doth play / And after slay." "D" follows with "A Dog will bite / A Thief at night." A cat that plays dead in order to slay unsuspecting mice is an allusion to the famous fable "The Cat and the Mice." Found in William Caxton's earliest Anglicized Aesop's fables, the same story, also appeared with only slight change in the Sir Roger L'Estrange and Samuel Croxall versions found in the libraries of the Founders.[6]

Another natural source of images comes not from Aesopic fable, but from direct, moral philosophy of the generally ancient variety. "G" shows an hourglass and warns, "As runs the Glass / Mans' life doth pass." The notion is Stoic, perhaps Senecan, and the memento mori is philosophic in that most

ancient Socratic sense, which defines, as Socrates does in Plato's *Phaedo*, the very term "philosophy" as "a preparation for death."[7] "T" elaborates the theme with a skeletal reaper holding an hourglass and saying, "Time cuts down all / Both great and small." The equality of human nature as seen in man's shared mortality is another Senecan trope,[8] and Seneca, the Roman playwright-philosopher-orator who opposed the tyrant Emperor Nero, was a mainstay supplier of images for the Founding generation.[9]

Finally, "Y" offers a third in the same philosophic vein. A skeleton stabs a child with an arrow—children's imaginations were not coddled in our Founders' time—and the ditty reads, "Youth forward slips / Death soonest nips." In other words, immorality and foolishness can kill even the young. Man is mortal ("G"), men are equally so ("T"), and children are no exception ("Y"). It is as if the *Primer* is warning students that their life depends on their studies: "F" makes the point even clearer when it threatens, "The Idle Fool / is whipt at School." Perhaps this ditty for "F" is the origin of that very worst report card grade.

The *Primer*'s moral philosophy blends seamlessly into historical exemplars that reveal a subtly republican character. "O" has a ditty about the Royal Oak tree that "sav'd His Royal Majestie." The reference is to the English Civil War when republican forces were foiled in finding the prince and future King Charles II after the royal defeat at the Battle of Worcester. A king brought low, using his wit to hide in a natural setting, against republican forces—it is a truly mixed image. Such individual wit is highlighted in the letter "Q" for "Queen Esther," who cleverly charmed her tyrant king into saving the people of God even as she faced the threat of death at her tyrant husband's hands. Both stories reveal the flaws and weakness of kings and the equalizing power of cleverness and prudence—a theme in the imaginarium of the Founders that we might call republican wit. Accordingly, letter "U" highlights King David's fall briefly into tyrannical misbehavior: "Uriah's beauteous Wife / Made David seek [Uriah's] Life."

Similarly, the letter "X" offers a full-blown tyrant from the classical world in the story of King Xerxes of Persia, who took his famed million-man army to crush the greatly outnumbered Greeks. The city-states of Greece defeated Xerxes by cleverly choosing cramped locations for battle, such as the famous stand at the mountain pass of Thermopylae by the 300 Spartans, that made it impossible for the Persians to bring their superior military power to bear. Themistocles, the Athenian general, tricked Xerxes into a final, decisive naval battle of this kind in the choked channel of the Straits of Salamis. Democratic Athens, especially with Themistocles's republican wit, so to speak, is a familiar reference in the *New-England Primer*, and the themes of

human nature, equality, mortality, self-government, republican wit, and the folly of witless tyranny—themes to which this story gives such rich "colour," as John Adams put it—are given double emphasis with its terse accompanying couplet: "Xerxes the great did die, / And so must you & I." Truly, the Founders had a grammar of republican imagination, an alphabet of images for equality and self-government.

Archetypes and Images

Christian, classical, natural, moral, witty, traditional, Roman republican, Shakespearean—these elements mixed in the minds of the Founding generation in profound ways. Briefly, a consideration of each may provide a fuller sketch of the Founding imagination.

Christian. The Christian archetypes and images, the stories and exemplars that populated the memory and imagination of the Founders, cannot be overstated. The *New-England Primer* was by no means the sole text building up a Christian imagination in the Founding generation. In Isaac Watts's *Divine Songs: Attempted in Easy Language for the Use of Children*, first published in 1716 and found in schools across America in the Founding generation, the young reader is offered a versified image of the goodness of divine providence and God's creation.

Watts makes clear in his preface why these teachings are put into song: "What is learnt in Verse is longer retain'd in Memory, and sooner recollected."[10] The pedagogy of a pious imagination put in verse is as hopeful as it is explicit, for Watts continues, "[I]t may often happen, that the End of Song running in the Mind, may be an effectual means to keep off some Temptation, or to encline to some Duty, when a Word of Scripture is not upon the Thoughts."[11] In Watts's most popular "Praise for Creation and Providence," he sings of "th'Almighty Power of God, / That made the Mountains rise," "the Wisdom that ordain'd / The Sun to rule the Day," and "the Goodness of the Lord, / That fill'd the Earth with Food."[12] It is a cosmological image of a world of beneficent and provident order with an active and loving God, at once transcendent and intimately involved: "There's not a Place where we can flee / But God is present there."[13]

The cosmos so versified is also very moral: "In Heaven [God] shines with Beams of Love, / With Wrath in Hell beneath."[14] The book is replete with songs such as "Against Quarrelling and Fighting" and "Against Lying" in which the biblical image of the doomed liars from the Book of Acts is sung: "How *Ananias* was struck dead / Catch'd with a Lye upon his Tongue. / So did his Wife *Sapphira* die / When she...confirm[ed] that wicked Lye."[15] Even

the virtue of patriotism, deriving its power from the gratitude felt toward a good and provident Creator, is sung in Watts's little book: "I would not change my native Land / For rich *Peru* with all her Gold: / A nobler Prize lies in my Hand."[16]

Watts's versified work was by no means singular in its Christian cosmology and themes of moral struggle. When describing the mostly private Christian poetry of colonial writer Edward Taylor, the editors of the Poetry Foundation note the great swath of public Christian poetry, "such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667), John Bunyan's *The Holy War* (1682), Michael Wigglesworth's *The Day of Doom* (1662), and Lorenzo Scupoli's *The Spiritual Conflict* (translated from the Italian in 1613)—which could have served as models for [Taylor's] own poem of spiritual combat."[17]

In addition, the Founding generation read and studied accounts of Christian martyrs.[18] For instance, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a Maryland signatory of the Declaration of Independence, studied the martyrdom of St. Cecilia as related by the poet Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*, even going so far as to write his own elaboration on the problem of tyranny and the need for religious liberty from tyrannical state control.[19] Being good required real struggle, and the American Founding generation had a vast library of images from the Christian and biblical tradition stored for ready use.

These biblical and Christian references comprised an everyday part of the habit of thought, speech, and deeds of the Founders. In a letter to General George Washington lamenting the difficult strain that provisioning his army had put upon the locals, Major General Nathaniel Greene offered a poignant simile, drawing from the Book of Exodus: "[B]ut like Pharoh I harden my heart."[20] He framed the exigencies of war with an artful and fitting metaphor that maintains a proper, moral, and biblical tension between humane treatment and the needs of the army. Moreover, this biblical and Christian imagination did not restrict itself in the Founders to the merely quotidian. In a letter written to his wife while he was serving in Congress in August of 1776, John Adams describes several proposals for a national seal. Both are profound biblical images:

> Dr. F. proposes a Device for a Seal. Moses lifting up his Wand, and dividing the Red Sea, and Pharaoh, in his Chariot overwhelmed with the Waters.—This Motto: Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God.
>
> Mr. Jefferson proposed. The Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of Fire by night....[21]

The fledgling American Republic relied on a Christian imagination in its fight for liberty through the wilderness of tyranny.

Classical. Classical sources provided the second great vein of golden images from which the Founders mined. In *Federalist* No. 6, when Alexander Hamilton cautions against "the deceitful dream of a golden age" in favor of a more realistic politics fit for an imperfect world, he is referencing the ancient Greek poet Hesiod's *Works and Days*, in which the poet sings of the Golden Age and mankind's successive failures, brutality, and weakness in the Silver, Bronze, and, eventually, Iron Ages.[22] In the very same text, Hamilton also argues for a strong union and warns that neighboring states—like America's, if they are not unified—can go to war for petty and personal reasons. The ready image for this kind of capricious and personal war-making is Pericles, the unscrupulous Athenian who, Hamilton argues, went to costly and bloody war over the resentments of a prostitute. Hamilton cites a host of Pericles' private causes that together dragged Athens into that "famous and fatal...Peloponnesian war" that cost Athenian democracy its liberty. The history Hamilton used was John Dryden's translation of the Greco–Roman historian and moralist Plutarch's *Life of Pericles*.[23] Be it from Hesiod or Plutarch, the prudence of the Founders was deeply shaped by classical images, both poetical and historical.

Nor was this phenomenon restricted to the Founding Fathers. Jefferson once bragged in a letter about ingenious practices of American farmers, who likely took guidance for wheel-making from a passage of the ancient epic poet of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: "[O]urs are the only farmers who can read Homer."[24] To the extent that this boast holds true, it may be the result of rising educational demands across the soon-to-be United States for training in Latin and Greek. Consider Benjamin Franklin's proposal for an academy in Pennsylvania: "All intended for Divinity should be taught the Latin and Greek; for Physick, the Latin, Greek and French; for Law, the Latin and French...[a]nd though all should not be compell'd to learn Latin, Greek, or the modern foreign Languages; yet none that have an ardent Desire to learn them should be refused...."[25]

Classical texts, classical allusions, Greek and Roman history and poetry—the Founding generation forgot more classical learning in their lifetimes than most living men today ever learn. Nor were they averse to showing off such erudition. As Franklin put it in comparing American students to ancient boasters, "One of the Romans, I forget who, justify'd speaking in his own Praise, by saying, Every Freeman had a Right to *speak* what he *thought*, of himself as well as of others."[26]

Historian Carl Richard summarizes the moral classical influence—here especially that of the Greek tradition—on the Founders in this way: "They found their heroes in Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenephon, and especially Plutarch."[27] Richard contends that the Greek lawgiver of Athens, Solon, was praised for his moderation; that Jefferson compared Adams to Themistocles, hero of Salamis, when he supported the navy; and that Adams likened his own work of uniting the colonies in opposition to the British King George to that of Demosthenes, the famed Athenian rhetor, when he traveled as ambassador to the Greek city-states to unite them against the threat of Philip of Macedon.[28] While Jefferson's famous list of the works of public right only included one Greek (Aristotle) by name, the influence of the classical world, particularly that of thinkers, poets, generals, and politicians from the Athenian democracy, was ubiquitous in the imagination of the Founders.[29]

Natural. Just as the Greeks took the book of nature as their principal study, so too did the Founders, albeit in surprising ways. "NATURE: The Birds & Beasts will teach thee," read the elaborately printed ticket to the Peale Museum, which granted access to taxidermy displays of American animals collected on the upper floor of Independence Hall in Philadelphia.[30] In the Founders' time, it was commonly understood that the observation of animal character and emotion would shed light on both the lower passions that man must govern and the higher power of reason that distinguishes man from the beasts and with which man must govern himself and his passions, not to mention the Republic. In his diary, under the ambitious heading "On the Law of Nature and the Moral Sense Among Animals and Among Men," John Adams wrote:

> Self Preservation, and the Desire of Propagation, are common to all Animals. But the Law of Nature, which teaches other Species to nurse their Young, teaches man to imbue the tender Minds of Children, with Knowledge and Virtue.
>
> The Law of Nature, as an Instinct is perhaps common, but the Institutions which Reason adds to Instinct, are peculiar to man.[31]

Or as one natural historian of the Founding was quoted in a letter to John Adams as having said, "[Natural historical exhibits] open to our eyes numerous pages in the book of Nature, and allow us *at once* to read her beautiful and marvelous works."[32]

Moral, Witty, and Traditional. This Founding-era view of animals and natural history takes a further step toward a moral and literary imagination

in the fables of Aesop. Fables appear as a moral touchstone in many speeches and letters from the Founding generation. It is less a source in the specific authors of fables such as Aesop, L'Estrange, and Croxall and more a general habit of the American imagination to use the animal kingdom, classical mythology, and proverbs to color practical wisdom and fashion right and just opinion. Abigail Adams, in discussing a controversy involving Washington's Secretary of State Edmund Randolph, wrote to her husband that Randolph was "a Man Who can never be considered in any other Light than the Fool of [the] Party...assuming to himself an influence over the mind of a Man infinitely his Superior and reminding one of the frog in the Fable who tried to Swell to the size of the ox till he burst. Where there is vanity, there Will be folly."[33]

Abigail Adams viewed civic life through the double lens of fable and proverb, with which she closed her imagined analogy to Aesop's frog and ox. One detects the same pattern in a letter from John Adams to his son Thomas: "[N]one of my Children are Children of this World or of Fortune any more than their father.— Apollo's Advice to the Waggoner to put his shoulder to the Wheel, encourage his Cattle, and then pray to him for help is the only Advice that is good—God helps those who help themselves."[34] Fable and proverb—colorful image and moral principle mixed together for the sake of self-government. Benjamin Franklin's popular *Poor Richard's Almanac* published fables in great variety and number for decades before the Founding, and they too bore the same combination of fable and proverb, argument and image, and often with that republican flavor of equality: "Speak with contempt of none, from slave to king, / The meanest Bee hath, and will use, a sting."[35]

It must be emphasized that these fables are only seemingly simple, and only upon first glance would one consider them meant for children alone. Take, for instance, "Reynard the Fox" from the very popular *The Child's New Play-Thing*, which boasts its content on the cover: "Scripture-Histories, Fables, Stories, Moral and Religious Precepts, Proverbs, Songs, Riddles, Dialogues, &c."[36] The tale is somewhat crass, with the clever fox Reynard, for instance, urinating in the eyes of bear cubs and so blinding them. The fox is an Odyssean figure of cunning and wit and not an honest or particularly virtuous beast. Yet there is in his figure a kind of amoral lesson about the clever side of life required for self-government, that especially republican wit, which is always best when paired with true moral wisdom.

This figure of wit that Reynard represents is more famously put forward in the life of Aesop himself, a clever and not altogether moral slave who rises through his cleverness first to liberty, then to riches and prominence, and

then, due to the same wiliness, to his death at the hands of an angry Greek mob at Delphi.[37] Aesop was given special facility in speech by a goddess of hospitality. Through crafty words, he secured the goods of this world, but due to his lack of moral virtue, he could not maintain them safely and moderately. Reynard, like Aesop, possessed only half of Jesus Christ's double, Aesop-like admonition from Matthew 10:16, for both characters were certainly wise as serpents, but they were decidedly not innocent as doves.[38] Yet Reynard defies a royal lion, "King of Beasts," and all "his Court" of animals.

The entire genre of Aesopic fable, folksy and clever wisdom, gives, as Franklin put it, even the meanest bee a sting. Just as the famed fable of the lion and mouse shows that the wit of the smallest can be greater than the power of the king of the beasts, the entire genre of Aesopic fable is a training in republican wit or what we might call, along with the artist who designed the House of Representatives' eastern pediment, Paul Wayland Bartlett, the "genius" of democracy—"genius" being the Latinate word for plain old English "wit."[39]

Of course, this morally wise and imagistically witty fable tradition is not the sole poetic fashioner of the Founding generation's imagination. Nursery rhymes like "High Diddle Diddle, / The Cat and the Fiddle" were popular in the generation of the Founding, and they were and are full of music, wit, and subtly high principle. Just so, the popular *Mother Goose's Melodies,* in that witty Aesopic flavor discussed above, has a nursery rhyme that reads somewhat familiarly, "There was an old Woman / Lived under the Hill. / And if she isn't gone / She lives there still."[40] Subscribed beneath the poem and picture, in smaller print, is an argument of no small American import: "This is a self evident Proposition, which is the very Essence of Truth. She lived under the Hill, and if she is not gone she lives there still. Nobody will presume to contradict this." An image of an old woman gives color to the concept of self-evident truths, like those mentioned in the Declaration of Independence.

In another rhyme we meet Jack Sprat, who "[c]ould eat no Fat" and who had a "[w]ife" who "could eat no lean." That funny favorite had, in *Mother Goose's Melodies*, an accompanying moral for the misshapen couple who "betwixt them both" could lick "the Platter clean." It read, "Better go to Bed supperless, than rise in Debt."[41] In the Founding period, even the silliest images were clearly moralized for virtuous memory and active, ready use, while often containing clever riddles to aid the reader's republican wit.

The wider literary tradition of wit and wisdom begins with nursery rhymes, but it rises through fables to the likes of Daniel Defoe, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift, not to mention the great English poets of wit

and wisdom Chaucer, More, and Shakespeare.[42] Thomas Jefferson went so far as to educate the Cherokee and Creek school children in an attempt at "civilizing the Indians," noting that "to read Aesop's fables & [Defoe's] *Robinson Crusoe* are their first delights."[43] One letter addressed to George Washington slightly misquotes Alexander Pope as a commonplace of moral wisdom in verse: "For as Pope says—'Envy, will Merit like a Shade pursue, / And Like a Shadow prove the Substance true."[44] As the surgeon, veteran, and George Washington's aide during the Revolution once put it in a poem of his own, "'Tis told, my friend, in poets lore, / The muse has an exhaustless store / From which she draws with wond'rous skill / Of choicest fancies what she will."[45] The poetic tradition of skillful fancies from which the Founding generation drew a host of images, morals, and principles is truly "an exhaustless store."

Roman Republican. There is also a higher civic-minded shelf in the great storehouse of the Founding imagination in the Roman republican tradition. It is at once personally moral and socially republican—self-government of the individual and self-government of, by, and for the people. The former might best be represented by the American Founding generation's great admiration for the stern personal morals of Cato the Elder and Cato the Younger; the latter might best be represented by the great statecraft, republican philosophy, and civic-minded oratory of Marcus Tullius Cicero, whom the Founding generation all called by his affectionate nickname, Tully. The former duo was a symbol of republican individual virtue and moral excellence, of a certain stand-alone wisdom of a great soul. The latter, ironically singular figure of Tully was an exemplar of the entire American way of life that set up a people in civic friendship, self-governing, under law, with sacred honor. That last concept, "sacred honor," is named in the Declaration of Independence's closing words; it is an ideal that is deeply embedded in Cicero's theory of moral and civic duty to one's fellow man and one clearly adopted by the Founders from their old friend Tully.

Truth be told, the fame of the name of Cato may well have come from Cicero's writings in praise of both Cato the Younger and Cato the Elder. Cicero wrote in that most ubiquitous of works, *On Duties*, known to the Founding-era schoolboy, that Cato the Younger "had been endowed by nature with an austerity beyond belief, and he himself had strengthened it by unswerving consistency and had remained ever true to his purpose and fixed resolve; and it was for him to die rather than to look upon the face of a tyrant." Likewise, Cicero gave out his gathered and invented counsels in the very voice of Cato the Elder, the great-grandfather of Cato the Younger, in his *Cato Maior de Senectute* or, as Franklin published the English, James

Logan translation, "M. T. Cicero's *Cato Major; Or his Discourse of Old Age*.[46] In that work, Cicero puts a colorful image of a noble Roman in dialogue with old friends, and Cicero's Cato the Elder offers the following beautiful advice concerning a life of virtue and dying well with a clean conscience:

> The most suitable defenses of old age are the principles and practice of the virtues, which, if cultivated in every period of life, bring forth wonderful fruits at the close of a long and busy career, not only because they never fail you even at the very end of life—although that is a matter of highest moment—but also because it is most delightful to have a conscience that beholds a life well spent and the memory of many deeds worthily performed.[47]

Cicero offered a defiant image of that family of Roman men strict in their morals and famously unwilling to bend to base common opinion, as in the case of Cato the Elder, nor to the will of a tyrannical Caesar, as in the case of Cato the Younger. Both Tully and the two Catos were held in highest regard by the Founding generation because the Roman exemplars and the Roman Republic were—city and soul—the pagan forerunners of their own self-conception of republican self-government, of liberty and law.

The case was no different for the Father of the Country, George Washington. Washington had Cicero, along with Seneca,[48] in his library, and their thought can be found in so many of his speeches and letters. He had soldiers named "Tully" in his army.[49] He had military districts on the border of New York named "Tully," "Pompey" (Tully's ally), and "Fabius"[50] after the famed Roman general, Fabius Maximus Cunctator, the delayer, who repelled the invading Carthaginians and for whom Washington's own military strategy and so-called Fabian tactics against the British were often compared.[51] Washington used "Cato" as a callsign in the war,[52] and he loved Addison's eponymous play, which he staged at Valley Forge to steel the hearts of his men and to rest them in the moral beauty of the play. As he told a fond childhood friend while away fighting in The Seven Years War, "I shoud th(ink) my time more agreable spent believe me, in playing a part in *Cato* with the Company you mention...."[53] In a dark hour of the war, John Hancock encouraged George Washington by paraphrasing Addison's *Cato* after a dispiriting defeat at Germantown: "It is not in Mortals to *command* Success—But permit me to say, Sir, you have done more on this Occasion—you have *deserved* it."[54]

While it is beyond the scope of this nearly concluded cursory study of the question of Roman influence upon the Founders' imagination, it is this author's considered and studied opinion that Roman republican images, as

represented in the principles of Cato's Roman virtue and Cicero's republican theory, statesmanship, and oratory, comprise the dominant narrative frame and the dominant moral ideal of the entire American Revolution.

Shakespearean. In 1790, after the War of Independence and the Declaration of Independence, as the ratification of the new Constitution was just coming to a close and George Washington was in his first term as President, Mercy Otis Warren, "Our Forgotten Founding Mother,"[55] published her *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*[56] and dedicated it with a prefatory letter to Washington. The first work after the letter was an homage to Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Addison's *Cato*. But rather than highlight the death of Cicero and the end of republicanism, as Shakespeare did in his play, or highlight the death of Cato and the end of Roman virtue, as Addison's play did, Mercy Otis Warren chose to dramatize the devolution of imperial debauchery and misgovernment and the diminution of a proud people who forgot that, as one character puts it, "Empire decays when virtue's not the base."

The play is a lament of the loss of Rome's republican virtue in her people and her leading citizens. In so doing, Warren offers to the people of the United States the hope of more than merely imitating Roman republican virtue. With Roman models, good and bad, Warren holds out to America the hope that we may outdo Rome in virtuous citizenship and lasting good character. At another point, the play seems almost to exhort the audience, "Arise! ye ancient, venerable shades, / Who bravely fought for liberty and Rome: / Assist my powers...."[57] One even detects in the play a certain swelling pride in American public spirit and self-sacrifice during the Revolutionary War when a despairing Roman character cries, "Alas!—ye patriots of ancient fame— / Where are the youth, whose glorious fathers died / To save the commonwealth."[58]

Like her better, William Shakespeare, Warren paints a color upon the idea of corruption and imperial tyranny that builds a feeling of horror at Rome's bitter fall, while at the same time the words have a witty and ironic undertone of joy as she reminds the audience that they have recaptured that republican spirit of virtuous patriotism and self-sacrifice to "save the commonwealth," which is, of course, the plain old English word for the more Latinate, Roman "republic." The play's epilogue makes this same case analogously regarding the kind of image-making the American republic needs: "Poets and heroes travelling from home, / For perfect models, oft repair to Rome; / Yet real prowess, or true sterling wit, / Or genius there, they do not always hit."[59]

Conclusion

Rome was great, and America can be greater still if only it can remember both Nature and Nature's God, or, as the dying words of the play's tragic heroine put it, "[v]irtue, sublim'd by piety and truth, / Now beckons to the skies."[60] Mercy Otis Warren offers a deeply classical, subtly witty, deeply Roman, optimistically republican image, in dramatic Shakespearean verse with a hint of Christian hope for greater virtue still, to the head of the country, to be accepted on behalf of the whole body politic, the American people. Her dedicated work, like that of so many others among our forebears and Founders, is yet another fitting image for us today as, on the eve of our 250th anniversary, we seek to reclaim and rekindle the wit and imagination of our Founding.

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Endnotes

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