
Memoranda and Documents

VIRGIL'S *AENEID* AND JOHN QUINCY ADAMS'S SPEECH ON BEHALF OF THE *AMISTAD* AFRICANS

MICHELE VALERIE RONNICK

IN 1984 Meyer Reinhold observed that "very little work has been done in the involvement of John Quincy Adams with the classics and classical learning." He went on, "a thorough study would be an important contribution to an understanding of his intellectual life and to the role of the classics at the end of the eighteenth century and the first quarter of the nineteenth."¹ A few years earlier Leo Kaiser had concluded that "some of Adams's Latin quotations . . . in works already in print have never been identified."² Recent years have produced scant response to the challenges issued by Reinhold and Kaiser.³ The brief note I offer here, then, can be taken as an example of what a curious scholar may discover in this intellectual *terra incognita*. In the last forty-eight lines of Adams's peroration on behalf of the *Amistad* Africans—mutineers who had killed their abductors and seized the ship they hoped would return them to their homeland—is an untranslated, unexpected, and heretofore unnoticed and unexplained application of a line from the fifth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Virgil was an author Adams knew and loved from his youth. His diary entry for 11 March 1785 tells us that the seventeen-year-old had obtained a copy of Froullé Brindley's 1744 edition of Virgil's *Opera*. The entry made on the following day contains quotations of lines 126 and 128–29 from the sixth book of the *Aeneid*. On 28 November of the same year, Adams reflected more generally on his study of Virgil:

I have for about a month past, recited in the morning, with my brother in Virgil, and it is rather to me a relaxation, than a study. . . . A youth seldom takes

¹Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), pp. 299–300.

²Leo Kaiser, "The Latin Quotations of John Quincy Adams," *Classical Bulletin* 57 (1980): 20.

³See, e.g., Leo Kaiser, "John Quincy Adams and His Translation of Juvenal 13," *Proceedings of the American Philological Society* 114 (1970): 272–93, and Irving N. Rothman, "Two Juvenalian Satires by John Quincy Adams," *Early American Literature* 6 (1971): 234–51.

pleasure, in the first pursuit of those Studies, which afterwards afford him, the highest Entertainment. When I first went through Virgil, I was struck with many Beauties, which it is impossible to overlook, but the difficulty of understanding the passages, often overbalanced [*sic*] the Satisfaction, I then derived from them: but whenever I read over any part of this Author again I am abundantly rewarded, for all the pains I ever took, in becoming acquainted with him.⁴

Untranslated quotations from Virgil's *Aeneid* and his *Eclogues* adorn Adams's correspondence as well.⁵ And on occasion he simply quoted Virgil in English, as he did in the speech delivered for the Constitution's jubilee celebration of April 1839.⁶

Adams was, of course, well versed in both civic and forensic oratory as well as their classical antecedents. As Harvard's Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory from 1805 to 1809, he took a professional interest in the subject, as his published college lectures demonstrate.⁷ He also read, and turned his own hand to, religious poetry, his verse being published in 1848, the year he died.⁸ Therefore, it is not without significance that the closing lines of the *Amistad* speech gather their power in a crescendo that moves from the words of the pagan Virgil to the Christian text of the New Testament quoted in the ultimate line.

Adams's speech defending the *Amistad* Africans is peppered with Latin phrases. With the exception of the line from Virgil, however, all concern the practice of law. The second paragraph opens with a quotation from Justinian's *Institutes*, offered in both English and Latin, "Constans et perpetua voluntas, jus SUUM cuique tribuendi." "The constant and perpetual will to secure to every one HIS OWN right." Various legal terms and phrases, such as *mero motu*, *casus foederis*,

⁴*Diary of John Quincy Adams*, 2 vols. to date, ed. David Grayson Allen et al. (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1981-), 1:233, 234, 363.

⁵In "JQA's Latin Quotations" (pp. 20, 21), Kaiser identifies three quotations from the *Eclogues* in Adams's writings. The first is 3.108 in a published letter, Marcellus II, dated 4 May 1793; the second is 2.64, quoted in a letter to his father, on 27 June 1795; and the third is 10.4-5, in the diary entry for 6 October 1837.

⁶Greg Russell, *John Quincy Adams and the Public Virtues of Diplomacy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), pp. 174-75.

⁷John Quincy Adams, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Oratory*, 2 vols. (1810; New York: Russell & Russell, 1962).

⁸John Quincy Adams, *Poems of Religion and Society* (New York: William H. Graham, 1848). On Adams's interest in reading religious works, see Paul C. Nagel, *John Quincy Adams* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997), pp. 202-3, 230-31, 235-36, 331, and 407.

prima facie, ex parte, habeas corpus, jure belli, toto caelo, jus suum cuique, and *res inter alios*, are offered without translation.⁹

Adams set the stage for his concluding appeal to Latin by announcing how astonished he was to be back in front of the Supreme Court after an absence of thirty-two years. "Little did I imagine that I should ever again be required to claim the right of appearing in the capacity of an officer of this Court; yet such has been the dictate of my destiny." For that reason, he then declared, "I stand again, I trust for the last time, before the same Court—*hic caestus artemque repono.*"¹⁰

The four words, based upon line 484 in the fifth book of the *Aeneid*, translate to "in this place I put down [my] gloves and [my] training." Adams has, however, purposefully edited Virgil's text. He has left out one word, the noun *victor*. Virgil's original reads "*hic victor caestus artemque repono*, 'in this place I, the victor, put down [my] gloves and [my] training.'" The speaker is Entellus, a crusty old boxer of legendary repute, who has most reluctantly been drawn back into the ring to fight a young hot-head named Dares. After being knocked to the ground, Entellus shakes off his old age and regains his youthful power. When Dares is beaten nearly to death, the fight is stopped, and Entellus formally retires. Through his quotation from Virgil, then, we glimpse Adams's view of himself. He dare not immodestly claim victory in a contest that has yet to be decided; but regardless of the outcome, he is without a doubt a grand old champion like Entellus.

Adams has ample cause to be focused on matters of age. No longer a young man, he had also witnessed two unexpected deaths during the course of the trial. Toward its start, his coachman was fatally injured. In a diary entry for 18 February 1841, Adams described the event:

A severe visitation of Providence. There was an exhibition at a quarter past eleven, in the front yard of the Capitol, of firing with Colt's repeating firearm—a new-invented instrument of destruction, for discharging twelve times a musket in as many seconds. I rode to the Capitol with Mr. Smith. We had alighted from the carriage from five to ten minutes, when the firing com-

⁹*Argument of John Quincy Adams, before the Supreme Court of the United States, in the Case of the United States, Appellants, vs. Cinque, and Others, Africans, Captured in the Schooner Amistad, by Lieut. Gedney, Delivered on the 24th of February and 1st of March, 1841* (New York: S. W. Benedict, 1841). The quotation from Justinian is on p. 4; the legal terms and phrases are on pp. 15, 19, 22, 32, 78, 97, 107, 112, and 120.

¹⁰Adams, *Argument in U.S. vs. Cinque*, p. 135.

menced. My carriage was then going out of the yard; the horses took fright, the carriage was jammed against a messenger's wagon, overset, the pole and a whippetree broken, the harness nearly demolished; the coachman, Jeremy Leary, and the footman, John Causten, precipitated from the box, and Jerry nearly killed on the spot. He was taken into one of the lower rooms of the Capitol, where, as soon as I heard of the disaster, I found him, in excruciating torture.¹¹

The next day, Adams recorded that Leary had died, "almost without a groan." On 20 February, after funeral arrangements had been made for his "poor, humble, but excellent friend Jeremy," Adams walked to the Capitol "with a heart melted in sorrow, and a mind agitated and confused." "The case of the *Amistad* captives," he wrote, "had been fixed to commence in the Supreme Court this morning. . . . I therefore, as soon as the Court was opened and the case was called, requested as a personal favor of the Court to suspend the proceedings in this case from 2 o'clock p.m. today till Monday; to which Chief Justice Taney answered, 'Certainly.'"¹²

Then, just a few hours before Adams was to present the second half of his case on 25 February 1841, Justice Philip P. Barbour of Virginia died. Adams did not record his feelings about the death, but in life the two had had little good to say about one another. Barbour had criticized Adams's presidency, and Adams had described Barbour as "some shallow-pated wild-cat . . . fit for nothing but to tear the Union to rags and tatters."¹³ Barbour's unexpected demise postponed the trial for a second time, until 1 March.¹⁴

Heavy with a sense of death and also of the "unheimlich," Adams was perhaps all the more "stimulated by a desire for justice."¹⁵ The last thirty-one lines of his speech clearly indicate that he was reaching out into the "invisible world." He stood, he declared, "before the *same* Court, but not before the same judges—nor aided by the same associates—nor resisted by the same opponents." Amid the "seats of honor and of public trust," Adams cried out the names of the missing men and asked their whereabouts. They were "Gone! Gone! All gone!"¹⁶

¹¹*The Diary of John Quincy Adams, 1794–1845: American Political, Social and Intellectual Life from Washington to Polk*, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1928), p. 517.

¹²Adams, *Diary*, ed. Nevins, pp. 517–18.

¹³*Dictionary of American Biography*, 1931 ed., s.v., "Barbour, Philip Pendleton."

¹⁴Nagel, *John Quincy Adams*, p. 80.

¹⁵Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the "Amistad"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 175–76.

¹⁶Adams, *Argument in U.S. vs. Cinque*, p. 135.

And so, acknowledging that he was taking “final leave of this Bar,” he addressed his last appeal to the highest court, namely heaven. With the hope that all should reap their just reward “after the close of a long and virtuous career in this world . . . at the portals of the next,” Adams called out the welcome that would be heard there, “Well done, good and faithful servant; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.”¹⁷

Adams’s words are an abbreviated version of a passage from the book of Matthew concerning the parable of the talents: “Well done, good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will set thee over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (25:23). With this stirring climax, which moves from the victorious actions of an old pagan fighter to the rewards of the virtuous Christian, Adams made ecumenical a courtroom that had been, up to that point, only national. By employing the kind of secular and non-secular knowledge widely available to educated people of nineteenth-century America, Adams both embellished and enlarged the narrow points of jurisprudence he had made earlier in the case. All served his overarching argument: in the quest for justice, the barriers of time, religion, and race fall away.

¹⁷Adams, *Argument in U.S. vs. Cinque*, p. 135.

Michele Valerie Ronnick, *Associate Professor in the Department of Classics, Greek, and Latin at Wayne State University, is the author of a book on Cicero’s PARADOXA STOICORUM.*