

## NOTES ON THE SEMINAL LETTERS OF ABIGAIL ADAMS

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### Abstract

The letters of Abigail Smith Adams (1744-1818), the wife of the second U.S. President vividly describe her family life, but more importantly, her views as she is recalled for the numerous letters she inscribed to her husband John Adams. Abigail's letters are an important aspect of early American literature as they reveal the sphere of discussion about issues that occurred during those times written by a prominent woman. Even though Abigail's letters were inhibited by societal norms and gender roles and seen as a masculine pursuit, they offer an inviting sight into Abigail's thoughts and feelings and richly demonstrate the finest epistolary, which this paper seeks to profoundly exhibit.

**Keywords:** Abigail Adams-Letters- Epistolary -Early American Literature-Correspondence

Abigail can be described as a well-informed and wise woman even though she had no formal education. Abigail was entirely educated at the home of Smith, her family place, where she read extensively in her father's library (Akers, 1980). Also, the endless visitations of intellectual and interesting guests molded Abigail into a knowledgeable, compelling young lady who became a creative letter writer whose communication gave a warm and vivid account of a life of a young country that she passionately loved (Akers, 1980). In a letter to her sister Mary Smith Cranch where she informs her of their decision to leave their country for England, she writes, "I could not have believed if I had not experienced it, how strong the love of country is in the humane mind" (Butterfield, 1963). The statement exhibits how Abigail was attached to her nation. The attachment is further presented in the way she provided political support as she was a critical advisor and confidant to John Adams, the second president of America (Adam & Adams, 1840). John regularly sought Abigail's advice on several issues, and with limited communication, both resorted to exchanging letters to bond, assist, and encourage each other. As such, Abigail's letters were full of intellectual discourses on a plethora of events. The letters acted as witness records of the American culture and history as many letters spoke much about the views of Abigail presenting a strong female voice. (Norton, 1980). In a letter to John dated March 31, 1776, Abigail writes: "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" (Adams Family Papers, 2013).

In addition to being a great chronicler of momentous events, Abigail provided family support by caring for the children while John Adam was away in Philadelphia (Gelles, 1920). She ensured her family was kept moving and alive through letters where she and the husband would communicate. Not only did Abigail give her husband spiritual and political support, but she also supported other family members. For instance, she took her son Charles, brother William Smith and her husband's brother Joh Shaw to stay in the house of the president when John Adams became the president because the parents to the children were all battling with alcoholism (Akers, 1980). Moreover, Abigail instructed and even forced her son Quincy to accompany his father to France, showing how supportive she was to her entire family. In a letter to Quincy, Abigail writes:

Tyranny, War, and Misery are the curses of God, and should undoubtedly be condemned. But it is your time, son, to become an eyewitness of these catastrophes in your native country and similarly to owe existence among the individuals who made magnificent protection of their encroached freedoms and those who supported by a powerful and

generous friend, with the blessings of heaven will convey this birthright to ages not yet born” (Adams Family Papers, 2013).

Abigail's letters to her son while in France were of encouragement and instruction that would mold him to a future leader as he witnessed all that was happening in the Native Land. Such support that Abigail gave to the entire family made the family stronger and shaped the son into a vibrant future leader. For example, in 1780, just eight years prior to the endorsement of the constitution, Abigail wrote to her son Quincy Adam a letter when the son travelled with his father abroad when the father was a U.S ambassador. Abigail wrote the message in determinations to advise her son concerning his travels. In this letter, Abigail employs a tender and concerned tone to express to Quincy the significance of acquiring knowledge through experience. In this entire letter, Abigail opposes the notion that wisdom originates from age and time to emphasize the essence of experience to her son while he is on a trip. Abigail writes, “compares a judicious traveler to a river that escalates its tributary the more it flows far from its source; or to specific springs, that run through rich veins of minerals, advances their qualities as they pass along” (Ellis, 2010). These wise metaphorical words used by Abigail to inform and explain to her son that the more he acquires experience through travelling with his father from one place to another, the higher his knowledge will be. Seemingly, Abigail proved a supportive woman, not to his husband alone but the entire family and the women and United States as a country.

Abigail backed her husband in his career as the U.S president. Some individuals could use her to contact John Adams. As a result, she remained a firm follower of her husband's political career by backing up his policies. For instance, Abigail aided the approval of the 1798 Alien and Sedition Act, which extended the period of aliens or non-U. S citizens stayed in the country to become citizens from 5 years to 14 years (Bobbé, 1929). This was to give the government authority to deal with aliens or suspicious persons as France had threatened the U.S for a war. Abigail encouraged her husband to sign the Alien and Sedition Act because she feared for her husband's safety, and she was away that Adam himself feared riots and wars. Hence, she supported him to sign the law even if the opponents of John Adams like Thomas Jeffery said it was one of the biggest mistakes that Adam made (Brown, 1920).

Appreciated also as a magnificent lady due to her actions, John Adams and Abigail's relationship continued as a model of shared love and regard; as both have been mentioned as “United States first force couple” (Criss, 1952). In a letter dated February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1797, to demonstrate her support, she wrote to John Adams on the day the electorate votes were opened, and the U.S president was declared John Adams: “My meditations and thoughts are with you, although personally not present.....my emotions are not those of ostentation or pride, on the event” (Adams & Adams, 1848). From these lines, Abigail Adams chooses to reassure her earnest backing to John Adam in their new episode of life that even if she is personally absent from the ceremony, she is fully in support of her husband. Within this same note, Abigail composed a preface stating, “the sun dressed in brightest beams, to give thy honors to the day” (Adams & Adams, 1848). Abigail begins with smart words in a verse form for this particular letter, then follows with religious words in a prayer form then finishes with supporting and comforting words. Abigail Adams prays, “And how, O Lord, my God, thou has made thy servant a ruler over the people. Provide on to him a heart of understanding, that he may learn how to go out and come in before the great people; that he may distinguish between the bad and good” (Akers, 1980). Abigail's selection of words in her prayer stands for her care and affection towards her husband. John Adams also sought Abigail's support and wrote after his swearing-in. “I did not need your assistance and advice more in my life” (Akers, 1980). From these words, Abigail understood that by being the first lady, she was to have more social obligations and responsibilities.

Although Abigail's life has been addressed in abundance, there is little information concerning her political opinions because most of her earlier letters primarily emphasize her support or family life. Nonetheless, fewer authors have attempted to deliver the historical accounts of Abigail's political views. For example, Withey Lynne, a biographer, argues that Abigail was a conservatist. as she was afraid of revolution but treasured stability. She believed that religion and family were the most important support of social command and saw discrimination as a social requirement (Lynne, 1981). Abigail had actively engaged in politics that her political rivals called her “Mrs. President” (Betty, 2010). Being the husband's confidant, Abigail was always informed on matters influencing the husband's government, sometimes encompassing facts of present activities not yet recognized by the people in letters written to her son John Quincy, and sister Mary Smith. However, for Abigail, her eighteenth-century mentality made her believe that “improved social plus legal status for ladies was never uneven with their fundamentally household

responsibility” (Adam & Adams, 1884). Therefore, Abigail valued women’s rights and largely advocated for human rights. Abigail was a faithful and strong enthusiast for women’s rights. She wrote so much about the concerns and troubles she experienced as an eighteenth-century female. For instance, she was educated at home which meant that the women of the time had no right to formal education. Therefore, she wanted women to get equal education rights. In a letter to John dated August 14, 1776 Abigail writes:

If you complain of neglect of Education in sons, What shall I say with regard to daughters, who every day experience the want of it. With regard to the Education of my own children, I find myself soon out of my depth, and destitute and deficient in every part of Education. I most sincerely wish that some more liberal plan might be laid and executed for the Benefit of the rising Generation, and that our new constitution may be distinguished for Learning and Virtue. If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women (Adams Family Papers, 2013).

In this letter, Abigail presents a strong opinion on women education. She contends that for women to be vital in their societies, they need to gain education so they can perform their responsibilities.

Abigail was a strong believer in marriage but thought that women should be engaged more in decision making instead of just serving their husbands (Norton, 1750-1800). For Abigail, women should never submit to rules that do not consider their interest, and they should not be satisfied with the mere responsibility of being mates to their men alone (Adams & Adams, 1848). Women must educate themselves so that they can be acknowledged for their intellectual competencies to influence and guide the lives of their husbands and children. Known for her popular reproach for the U.S founding forefathers, “remember the ladies” for the new rules, Abigail was one of the first enthusiasts for the rights of females. In Abigail's letter dated March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1776, she keeps in touch with her husband encouraging him and different people from the Continental Congress never to neglect the country’s females while battling for the independence of America from Great Britain. She writes, “I desire you would remember the ladies and be more favorable and generous 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” (Adams & Adams 1848). Adams encouraged the husband and other continental congress members to remember the ladies because she was a supporter of women’s equal property and education rights. In this letter, she requests John to thoughtfully consider women, such perspective reflects the social status of women of those times. Abigail being an advocate for women’s equal property and education rights wrote this to her husband as she believes that ladies should be involved in decision making instead of just serving their husbands. For Abigail, Women were academic equals of men and had a right to get education” (Whitney, 1981). Additionally, she believed that women should educate themselves to be educated society members and utilize their intellectuality to achieve all desired goals, from household management to serving the nation.

In addition to advocating women’s rights. Abigail supported the revolutionary movement for the independence of America. The spirit of revolution had swept through many colonies as Americans needed their independence and separate from Great Britain. Therefore, in 1776, Abigail’s husband, John Adams, was preparing to meet with his associates to inscribe the statement of the ideologies that were to be implemented soon by the Continental Congress known as the Declaration of Independence (Middlekauff, 1982). During this time, she requested John and their colleagues to remember the women by being more favorable and generous than the ancestors. Even though the letter had been cited correctly and frequently as proof of Abigail’s ardent yearn for women's rights, she never championed, then later, the women's right to vote, a stance nearly disregarded then. Abigail strongly supported women’s right to learn, and in 1778 she wrote to John Adams that “you should not be told how much women education is abandoned, nor how stylish it has become to scorn women education” (Adams & Adams, 1848). These statements in Abigail’s letter to her husband John and the colleagues then depicted support for a revolution for the independence of America and the inclusion of women to have equal rights to vote and get an education.

Abigail also took part in thrilling discussions daily. For example, she participated in the anti-federalists (later called the Jefferson republicans) and the federalist's groups discussions, which later in the 1790s became political parties. While Abigail engaged in these political discussions and activities, she did point out the enemies and friends on both sides. For example, concerning Alexander Hamilton, who, together with John Adams, were chief Federalists. Abigail wrote, “I saw in his eyes the very devil.... lasciviousness itself.” Abigail also judged Gallatin Albert, an opponent of the husband's Republican party, “artful, sly...insidious.” Gallatin critics refuted these sentiments by saying that the president's wife should never insinuate herself in political arguments, and she wrote, “Abigail is Mrs. President not of the U. S but

of a group...it is never right" (Shuffelton, 1920). Such incidences exhibit Abigail's political view and stand as a devoted republican who treasured engaging in debates and hated pretenders as she would easily point them out during discussions, as explained above.

Abigail Adams also reinforced and favored the eradication of slavery. She believed that everyone is equal and should be treated equally, and the blacks or immigrants should not be enslaved (Gelles, 1920). Ethically Abigail believed slavery is sinful and a peril to the U.S. democracy of America. For example, Abigail's letter dated March 31<sup>st</sup> 1776 illuminated that she was skeptical that most Virginians had such "desire for Liberty" as they professed they did because they "repudiated their fellow creature's liberty" (Shuffelton, 1920). Such sentiments meant that the Virginians were pretending to desire liberty, yet they practiced slavery. As such, Abigail was skeptical about them as a slavery activist. One of the remarkable incidents that demonstrate Abigail's disregard for slavery occurred in 1791 in Philadelphia when a free black youth visited Abigail's family asking to be trained on writing. Without hesitation, she enrolls the young man in a resident late afternoon school (Gelles, 1920). Such move from Abigail depicts a robust political opinion concerning slavery as an aspect that is dangerous to the American democratic experiment and even further depriving blacks of securing a means of living and sustenance.

Abigail employs different rhetorical devices and appeals in her letters, some of which are ethos, pathos, allusions, rhetorical questions, and metaphors. Abigail uses ethos in most of her works, especially in introductory paragraphs. For example, in Abigail's letter dated March 31<sup>st</sup>, 1776, and written to John Adams, she utilizes ethos in the introductory paragraph by questioning about the matter at hand, "I wish you ever write me a letter half as long as I write you; and inform me if you may where your Navy are gone? What kind of Defense Virginia can make against our common Enemy?" (Adams & Stewart, 1947). In addition, the questions she uses in the introduction of the letter unveils Abigail's burning tone and the care she has for her husband. These questions demonstrate that Abigail is much concerned about her husband's well-being.

As a devoted wife, Abigail applies a sincere tonal language in her letters to her husband. Evidently, Abigail's letters to John Adam are sincerer than John's letters to Abigail. John's letters to Abigail are dry; they have no feelings or emotions. For example, in John's letters, he explains political details alone and only displays intimacy while asking about the kids (Criss, 1952). John Adams is not emotionally attached to the wife; she never writes any loving words to her. On the contrary, in Abigail's letter, one can tell that although she disagrees with some of her husband's stands on some matters, she still demonstrates support and love to him. Abigail uses an intimate tone in her letters, ascertaining to readers that she misses her husband and is worried about him when she states that she is ready to do whatever he desires (Ellis, 2010). Such tone that Abigail's employs in her letters to her husband reveals her love and care. Regardless of their separation, Abigail's love for her husband remains intact.

In her letters to her son, John Quincy Adams, Abigail employs a concerned and motherly tone, historical allusions, and vivid illustrations to highlight the significance of knowledge through experience. In one letter, dated January 19<sup>th</sup>, 1780, Abigail challenges the notion that wisdom originates from age and time to accentuate the prominence of experience to her son while on his travels. In reference to a conversation Abigail had with a writer, Abigail articulates to her son of the essence of his voyages such are evident in lines 20-24 of the 1780 letter where Abigail writes how the author "... links a judicious traveler to a river that escalates its tributaries the farthest it flows from its main source; or to particular springs, which, running through rich veins of minerals, improve their merits as they pass along" (Adams & Adams, 1848). First, Abigail employs rhetorical situations to exemplify and notify her son that the more experiences he secures, the more advanced his knowledge will be. She, therefore, counsels her son to take advantage of the voyages to gain more experiences so that her knowledge is advanced because she tells her son that he is the only individual who defines the future and when he is experienced and must be competent enough to know to pull through the adversity.

Additionally, Abigail uses ethical appeals in her letters to her son. For instance, in the concluding paragraph of one letter, Abigail says, "The strict and inviolable regard you have ever paid to truth, gives me pleasing hopes that you will not swerve from her dictates, but add justice, fortitude, and every Manly Virtue which can adorn a good citizen, do Honour to your Country, and render your parents absolutely happy, predominantly your ever loving Mother" (Adams & Adams, 1848). These statements from Abigail illustrate that the primary purpose of writing to her son was to boost his confidence. For instance, from the quote above, Abigail lists the positive competencies as a truthful son and his potentialities to improve his

country by telling her, “son it is his role to eye witness the war, desolation and tyranny” (Brown, 1920). Such vivid illustrations express Abigail’s use of ethos in her letters.

Abigail additionally applies metaphorical allusion in her letter to Quincy Adams. Abigail writes, “compares a judicious traveler to a river, that increases its stream the further it flows from its source; or to certain springs, which, running through rich veins of materials, improve their qualities as they pass along” (Adams & Adams, 1848). With the lines, Abigail uses the river metaphorically to try to express her main message to John Quincy that the more he travels, the more knowledge he is likely to attain just as the river spreads or increased its tributaries as it flows farthest to its source so should his son do the same to acquire more knowledge through his travel experiences.

In her letters, she also applies pathos. For instance, in a letter to her son written in 1778, Abigail Adams uses her position as John Quincy’s mother to urge him to regard her advice because she wants the best for him. By doing this, Abigail appeals to both her love for her son (pathos) and her integrity (ethos), although her primary strategy is to encourage John Quincy to heed to her advice by articulating, “You however readily submitted to my advice, and I hope will never have occasion yourself, nor give me reason to lament it” (Criss, 1952). In these lines, Abigail tells her son that although he is willingly submitted to her advice, he should always heed her advice but never give her a reason to a dirge.

Also, Abigail employs historical allusions in her letters, especially the ones to her son, to invoke a sense of patriotism in John Quincy, particularly in the letter’s second part to impart a sense of independence and responsibility in him. For instance, in a letter dated January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1780, Abigail infers that John Quincy is a genius like Cicero, then continuing to allude to his writing on the ‘tyranny’ (line 32) of Catiline, Mark Anthony and Verres (Brown, 1920). The accolade flatters whereas the historical allusion offers illustrations to legitimize the argument that “the conducts of a dynamic mind are fashioned in dealing with adversities” (Adams & Adams, 1848). The current problems that Abigail’s denotes to involve the birth of a new country and American Revolution from Great Britain. Therefore, Abigail invokes a patriotic feeling in her son and rise from his present languid state by highlighting worlds such as “Desolation, tyranny and war” that the country is experiencing (Adams Family Papers, 2013). In addition, she uses biblical allusions in her letters to her husband and son. To his son, she inspires him to conduct his life in a way that will assist the nation by relieving it from the above-stated evils, which are “plagues of God” (Adams & Stewart, 1947). By invoking God’s name or using biblical allusions, Abigail strengthens the requisite for her son to transform so that he will be able to amendment the shape of the nation’s future. In a letter to her Husband, Abigail employs biblical allusion to demonstrate her support and prayer for her husband’s new position as the U.S president despite her absence at the ceremony. She writes, “And how, O Lord, my God, thou has made thy servant a ruler over the people. Provide on to him a heart of understanding, that he may learn how to go out and come in before the great people; that he may distinguish between the bad and good” (Adams, John & Charles, 1840). She uses biblical allusion to request God to guide her husband through his political role and journey and give him the needed knowledge to rule the people.

The above analysis attests that the letters of Abigail Adams exhibit a profound and exemplary epistolary though Abigail never attained formal education. Apart from being her husband’s confidant, Abigail’s correspondence showed her supportive nature to present women issues and desire that women achieve equal rights to education. She believed women could empower themselves and care for their families more than just being companions to their husbands. Abigail’s letters serve to illustrate the status of the eighteenth -century women and their experience, the political temperature, and events that took place then that made America attain its independence.

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