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### Cover Page Footnote

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# Happy the People: The Use of Classical Literature in John Dickinson's *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*

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## Abstract

John Dickinson is well noted as an influential writer of the American Revolution, particularly in his series of twelve letters known as the *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*. While previous scholarship has noted the significant effect these widely circulated letters had upon the colonies and has further explored the purpose for the pseudonym “Farmer,” it has overlooked one major feature of the writings: the inclusion of a Latin quotation at the end of each letter, pulled from various Roman authors. Though the classics at that time were often employed in pamphlet writing to invoke a sense of kinship with the political ideology of the Roman Republic, particularly through the use of classical pseudonyms, Dickinson’s choice to forgo the pseudonym in place of excerpts of Roman literature speaks to the unique purpose he had in mind when employing them. This paper not only traces the origin of each quotation but also examines their relevance to the twelve letters, arguing that each passage is meant to succinctly articulate and augment the arguments made, while simultaneously building the larger theme of history—especially Roman history—as a source of wisdom.

*Keywords:* John Dickinson, Classical Literature, Colonial Literature, American Revolution, Political Rhetoric, Pamphlets

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## Body

Dubbed the “Pen of the Revolution” by his contemporaries, John Dickinson was viewed as an ardent supporter of the colonial cause before his rejection of the Declaration of Independence. Amongst his most famous works and one of the most successful pamphlets of the Revolution was his *Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania*, written in response to the stream of acts passed by Parliament beginning in 1767 known as the Townshend Acts (Calkin 36-8; Middlekauff 161). Despite being circulated amongst wide public audience, the *Letters* have a very intellectual style, especially in its inclusion of a Latin quotation concluding each letter, pulled from ancient Roman works. The feature is striking, as it calls upon the classics without the use of an allegorical pseudonym, as many of his contemporaries did (Shalev 157-8). Given that a singular classical pseudonym alone could invoke a number of meanings, especially that of kinship with antiquity and the political ideology of the Roman republic, Dickinson’s choice to employ a unique Latin quotation at the conclusion of each letter signals the author’s intent to imbue each letter with its own distinct meaning, parallel to the meaning derived from the original Roman source (161-2). Opting against a unique pseudonym, Dickinson signs his *Letters* with Latin quotations to succinctly express and enrich the argument in each letter, while simultaneously building the larger theme that history, especially Roman history, could be a source of wisdom and guidance to the American cause amidst their constitutional quarrel with Britain.

Dickinson enters the arena of public dialogue with cries for unity and American solidarity in the face of Parliament’s Townshend Acts. Explaining at the outset of his first letter that he has “a greater knowledge in history, and the laws and constitution of my country, than is generally attained by men of my class,” Dickinson prominently features this vast knowledge throughout

his letters as a framework for recognizing and combating threats to their liberties (3).<sup>1</sup> Immediately putting this knowledge to use, Dickinson confronts the recent New York Restraining Act of 1767 as “a violation of the liberties of the people of that provinces” given its unconstitutional attempts to establish the supremacy of British Parliament over the colonial legislature (4, 5-6). In the face of this “pernicious” threat, he argues that the act jeopardizes the rights of all the colonies, since “the cause of *one* is the cause of *all*,” and accordingly he declares the greatest bulwark of their liberties to be their internal bonds of unity (6). Encapsulating these sentiments at the end of the letter is a passage from Sallust’s *War with Jugurtha*: “*Concordia res parvae crescunt*. Small things grow great by concord” (7; original line from Sallust, *The War with Jugurtha* 10.6). Originally spoken by the king of Numidia to Jugurtha on granting him a share in the line of succession, the excerpt comes from a speech emphasizing the importance of loyalty in binding the nation together (Sal. *Jug.* 5.1, 11, 10.3-5). These words become prophetic when Jugurtha, prompted by jealousy and ambition, ignores them and assassinates his fellow heirs, eventually leading to tumultuous division, war with Rome, and his own execution (10.6, 12.1-5, 13.1-4, 113.3-114.4). Dickinson hints at the similarities between themselves and this ancient kingdom; much like the Roman territory of Numidia, the American colonies were the province of a mighty empire but could be torn asunder through regional jealousies and indifference, alluding to the second half of the quotation Dickinson omits: “... *discordia maximae dilabuntur*” (10.6). The greatest things are decayed by discord. Holding this maxim in view, Dickinson notes that two colonial assemblies had already met with no mention of the act, despite the fact that Parliament’s decree by extension placed them above every colonial

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the original publication of the *Letters from a Farmer* uses a number of typographical effects for emphasis, ranging from italicization to capitalization; these have been kept throughout this essay to retain the spirit in which they were written, even if dramatic at times. Likewise, any of Dickinson’s misspellings are also preserved.

authority, and he forcefully argues against this inaction (6). In undeniable logic, Dickinson reasons, “If the parliament may lawfully deprive *New York* of any of *her* rights, it may deprive any, or all the other colonies of *their* rights; and nothing can possibly so much encourage such attempts, as a mutual inattention to the interests of each other. *To divide, and thus to destroy*, is the first political maxim in attacking those, who are powerful by their union” (6). When viewed in the full context of Sallust’s quote, Dickinson’s message becomes explicit: Parliament intentionally plans to prey upon the colonies’ presumed discord to divide and conquer them, extinguishing the rights of all by setting an unnoticed precedent in New York. If instead, the colonies were to unite under a common interest for their collective rights, as Dickinson suggests, they may yet fend off Parliament’s encroachments. With this admonition for concord over discord, Dickinson forges a direct link between American and Roman history for those familiar with Sallust while also making the argument memorable to any reader.

Dickinson continues connecting ancient history with modern events in the second letter, carefully choosing a line that serves a double meaning. Disputing the legality of the Revenue Act of 1767, Dickinson points out that the preamble calls for “*further defraying the expences of defending, protecting and securing the said dominions*” through a tax on Americans alone, without their consent, in direct contradiction to age-old English property rights (10-1). To admit Parliament has “... an authority *expressly* claimed and exerted to impose duties on these colonies; not for the regulation of trade ... *but for the single purpose of levying money upon us*” would therefore ruinously expand legislative powers past their historical bounds (10-1, 13-4). Calling upon the colonists to “ROUSE yourselves, and behold the ruin hanging over your heads,” Dickinson insists that the new taxes present a threat to the right of representation and warns that if they allow Parliament to “legally take money out of our pockets, without our consent,” then

“... our boasted liberty is but *Vox et praeterea nihil*. A sound and nothing else” (14, 15). Quoting this line from “The Sayings of Spartans” in Plutarch’s *Moralia*, the complete proverb sees a man discover that the loud and boisterous nightingale he plucks has no real meat to its bones, demonstrating the disparity that can exist between words and substance (233B).<sup>2</sup> For Dickinson, if the colonists fail to rise in defense of the liberties they so boast of, they risk being like the petite nightingale who jabbars a meaningless song.

Even more than this explicit use of Plutarch’s words, Dickinson further employs the maxim to insinuate the duplicity of British Parliament, whose airs of legality, like the nightingale, betray themselves as mere farce when pulled apart. Reason demonstrates that if Britain can control what the colonies may import and export alongside the power to tax any exports to the colonies, Americans would be forced to pay the tax as if it were placed directly over their heads, which Dickinson argues was Parliament’s true design: to create “a law THAT WOULD EXECUTE ITSELF” (11-2). If anyone doubts the legitimacy of his claims, Dickinson draws from the classical example of the Sardinians, explaining how with regulated trade and a system of taxation without representation, the Carthaginians “drained from the miserable Sardinians any sums they pleased,” rooting out any attempts of opposition by starving the people (14). Allowing Parliament to tyrannically repeat these tactics in their own time would ensure that “the tragedy of *American* liberty is finished” (14). Though Parliament and the reigning ministry may try to disguise their artful methods, Dickinson contends that their assurances of good will and protection for the colonies, like the song of the nightingale, are meaningless—a sound and nothing else.

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that while Plutarch’s *Moralia* is originally in Greek, Plutarch still lived under the Roman Empire, contributing to its culture, and his works were at some point translated into Latin. By Dickinson’s time, the Latinized version of this particular phrase (*vox et praeterea nihil*) was well-known and can be found in other works of the period, like Joseph Addison’s *Spectator* (535).

Having established a firm basis of the need for resistance and vigilance in the vindication of their sacred rights, Dickinson addresses the two extremes of craven timidity and rash sedition in his third letter, urging both bravery and moderation in the classical fashion. Finding it madness to wait silently for the uncertain benevolence of the ministry that caused the constitutional dilemma in the first place, Dickinson still admits that resorting to violence would be a grave mistake, holding instead that the people ought “to exert themselves in the most firm, but most peaceable manner, for obtaining relief” (16-7). In his mind, the American people should take from the Spartans, who could face “scenes of havoc, and horror” in war with a “happy temperature of soul” and a sound mind rather than a frenzied fit of rage, given that “The cause of *liberty* is a cause of too much dignity to be sullied by turbulence, and tumult” (17). Viewing liberty as the most precious of all political achievement, nothing else but an undaunted exercise of virtue could appropriately honor and defend the cause. In accordance with this advice, Dickinson writes at the end of the letter, “*Nil desperandum*. Nothing is to be despaired of,” realizing that despair leads to two tendencies: hopeless submission or rash rebellion (20; original line from Horace *Odes* 1.7.28). Pulling the line from the *Odes* of the Roman poet Horace, Dickinson hopes to inspire his countrymen to reasonable, moderate actions and to go, in Horace’s words, “Whithersoever Fortune, kinder than my sire, shall bear us” (1.7.25-7). The colonies should first “complain to our parent” with “the language of affliction and veneration,” and if this does not work, “let us then take *another step*” and not leap to full insurrection (Dickinson 20). Not yet knowing the response of their government, they must follow fate little by little where she leads, rather than preemptively separate and “bleed at every vein” (19). At the same time, they should not believe their subjection is predetermined, for their complaints may well be heeded. Recalling the righteousness and success of American protests against the Stamp



Act, Dickinson reasons, “If the behavior of the colonies was prudent and glorious then, and successful too; it will be equally prudent and glorious to act in the same manner now, if our rights *are* equally invaded, and may be as successful” (16). Emulating Teucer, who in Horace’s *Odes* viewed the impending battle as a chance for his men to proudly claim their own “second Salamis in a new land,” Dickinson equally regards the Townshend Acts as an opportunity for the Americans in the New World to triumph over tyranny like their Old World ancestors before them (Hor. *Od.* 1.7.29). Like Teucer, he could well say to his fellow colonists, “O ye brave heroes, who with me have often suffered worse misfortunes, now banish care with wine! Tomorrow we will take again our course over the main” (Hor. *Od.* 1.7.30-2). Indeed, Dickinson does actually mimic the spirit of Horace’s call to action in his final exhortations:

Then let us try, if our ingenuity, industry, and frugality, will not give weight to our remonstrances. Let us all be united with one spirit, one cause. Let us invent—let us work—let us save—let us, continually, keep our claim, and incessantly repeat our complaints—But, above all, let us implore the protection of that infinitely good and gracious being, “by whom kings reign, and princes decree justice.” (20)

Even the religious note at the end harkens to the *Odes*, as it displays a Christianized reliance on Providence in the same manner Teucer relies upon the pledge of Apollo (Hor. *Od.* 1.7.28-9). Imitating this Roman appeal to bravery, Dickinson suggests that the American cause should learn from those ancient principles of moderation, mustering valor instead of wrath and reason instead of passion to challenge the onslaught of Parliament’s pernicious acts.

Having received several objections since his first letters, Dickinson turns his pen in the fourth letter away from the subjects of bravery and moderation and back towards legality and constitutionality. Though some in the colonies and Britain insisted the latest round of taxes was legal due to their nature as external taxes upon trade, Dickinson advances “a total denial of the power of parliament to lay upon these colonies any ‘*tax*’ whatever,” based upon the

constitutional understanding of a tax as “*an imposition on the subject, for the sole purpose of levying money*” as opposed to an imposition for the purpose of regulating trade (21). Using statutes and decrees from as far back as Edward I or Henry V, Dickinson avows the rich history of property rights in England, claiming any revenue given to the crown by the colonies was endowed as “*gifts of the people to the crown*” and not mandatory taxes (21-2). The body of English law and the rights secured through the people’s struggles allows Dickinson to paraphrase Cicero, the Roman orator and statesman, in his speech against Catiline: “*Habemus quidem senatus consultum, tanquam gladium in vagina repositum*. We have a statute, laid up for future use, like a sword in the scabbard” (26; original line from Cicero, *Against Catiline* 1.4).<sup>3</sup> In the original line, Cicero reveals that through the law, they have the power to check Catiline’s illegal conspiracy (1.4). Dickinson’s use of this quote in conjunction of the historical precedent of English property rights imply that, though “laid up” and perhaps forgotten by some, the law is on the side of the colonies, providing their own argumentative sword against Parliament’s recent conspiracies. It is these same laws that provide the basis for the New York Congress’ “bill of rights,” which explicitly upholds Americans as citizens under British law and consequently demands the same rights an Englishman would claim (Dickinson 23). Through this, Dickinson clearly demonstrates not only the legal basis of American rights but also the vital importance of history in the protection of liberty, for it is a firm grasp of legal history that allows Dickinson to advance and validate his claims, like Cicero long before him.

Continuing his defense of these property rights in his fifth letter, Dickinson grapples with America’s unique relationship with Great Britain by relying upon their mutual history, framing

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the line as quoted by Dickinson deviates slightly from Cicero’s original phrasing, which is as follows: *Habemus enim eius modi senatus consultum, verum inclusum in tabulis, tanquam in vagina reconditum, quo ex senatus consulto confestim te interfectum esse, Catilina, convenit*. Mostly likely, this difference is simply to make the selection more succinct, quotable, and generalized, allowing it to better serve Dickinson’s purposes.

their connection in familial terms conventional to the time. While Dickinson admits that England as the mother country has natural superiority over her colonial children, he still insists that her parental powers were always limited: at the outset of British colonization, “the parent country, with undeviating prudence and virtue” established reasonable legal boundaries upon herself, limited to the regulation of the empire’s trade (27, 28). In return for the benefits provided by the colonies, the “mother country” tenderly bestowed a full “communication of her rights,” with property rights being the “foundation of all the rest” (29). To now ignore this central relationship after centuries of amity would be unnatural and disastrous to the strength to their bond; if these injustices were to continue, Dickinson predicts:

[The colonies] will execrate, with the bitterest curses, the infamous memory of those men, whose pestilential ambition unnecessarily, wantonly, cruelly, first opened the forces of civil discord between them; first turned their love into jealousy; and first taught these provinces, filled with grief and anxiety, to inquire—*Mens ubi maternal est?* Where is maternal affection? (33; original line from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.499)

Pulled from a section of poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* where Althaea debates killing her own son, the quote captures the perverse horror of when a mother turns on her child, a horror that the colonies felt they were living (8.481-511). Beyond the more obvious misery of the colonies, Dickinson’s use of the myth suggests that Britain, too, may come to regret her brash decisions, just as Althaea later feels such regret for destroying her son that she kills herself (Ov. *Met.* 8.531-2). Dickinson hints at this throughout the essay, insinuating that the English are now “inflamed into an attempt to tear a privilege from her own children” by artful and devious conspirators, forgetting the “affectionate intercourse, the reciprocal benefits, and the unsuspecting confidence” that normally binds the two people (32-3). Were they to properly consider the meek and dutiful “filial submission” the colonies hitherto had exercised, the English would see that a breach of American liberties is not only unnecessary, but unjust (29). As Dickinson constructs them, the

cries of the colonists ask only for their rightful inheritance as devoted children of England; if England breaks her maternal bond, then she, like Althaea, will find herself full of lamentation and dismay (27).

Despite this gathering peril, Dickinson in his sixth letter would still not have his readers lose hope, as they are not passive observers of a predestined fate but potent agents who, with right on their side, may yet avert catastrophe. Undoubtedly, Parliament's recent acts engender the greatest concern, for as Dickinson alarmedly informs his audience, "UNLESS THE MOST WATCHFUL ATTENTION BE EXERTED, A NEW SERVITUDE MAY BE SLIPPED UPON US, UNDER THE SANCTION OF USUAL AND RESPECTABLE TERMS," thereby soiling the name of liberty and appropriating the letter of the law for despotic purposes just as Caesar and King James II had done centuries before (35-6). Nevertheless, Dickinson, confident of his beloved colonies, reminds them, "They will always have the same rights, that all free states have, of judging when their privileges are invaded, and of using all prudent measures for preserving them. *Quocirca vivite fortes / Fortiaque adversis opponite pectora rebus*. Wherefore keep up your spirits, and gallantly oppose this adverse course of affairs" (38; original line from Horace, *Satires* 2.2.135-6). By invoking this poetic expression of Stoic principles in Horace's *Satires*, Dickinson suggests that the Americans should adopt a similar bravery in the face of misfortune, holding the highest regard for integrity and justice, even if they must, for a time, become outspoken harbingers of peril. Raising opposition in this way is not only useful, but crucial, as a watchful eye from the people would reveal "encroachments" on their rights from the governments; as Dickinson writes, "A FREE people therefore can never be too quick in observing, nor too firm in opposing the beginnings of *alteration* either in *form* or *reality*, respecting institutions formed for their security" (36). It is the people's vigilance which acts as a

check upon the government, uncovering dangers to their liberties through their attentiveness to the letter of each law. Even if Parliament adopts “*the appearance of using legal prerogative*,” manipulating past legal precedents to covertly gain novel powers, the true intent of the bill would inevitably reveal itself through the debate, analysis, and scrutiny of the people, which should not be silenced (36, 37). Demanding an answer from those who would censure the colonists, Dickinson inquires, “Ought not the people therefore to watch? to observe facts? to search into causes? to investigate designs? And have they not a right of *JUDGING* from the evidence before them, on no slighter points than their *liberty* and *happiness*?” (36). Exerting the spirit of bravery and nobility proper to a free people, Dickinson implies that the Americans ought to follow in the example of the ancient Stoics provided by Horace and brave the storm before them, preserving their rights from illegitimate extensions of power.

If these exhortations were not enough, in his seventh letter, Dickinson forewarns the consequences of allowing Parliament to broaden their powers, dressed fraudulently in the vestments of legality. Counseling his readers, Dickinson expounds how demagogues and tyrants alike “accommodate their schemes as much as they can to the appearance of justice and reason” in order to “deceive those whom they resolve to destroy, or oppress,” citing the “cruel and rapacious” Roman Emperor Nero as historical proof of this claim (41). In Dickinson’s view, history is filled with cautionary tales of the deceit of tyrants, who treat the people with “false generosity,” not unlike Parliament’s generously small tax (41, 43). He concludes by warning that the Americans, like the Trojans, may be duped by the blessings of a hollow image and be made, in the words of Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “*Miserabile vulgus*. A miserable tribe” (45; original line from Virgil, *Aeneid*, 2.798). Just as Laocoön in this legend attempts to warn the Trojans that the Greeks’ horse is not “free from treachery” but an “engine of war” to dupe them, so too does

Dickinson warn the Americans that they allow a threat into the lawful bastion of their liberties, writing, "... I am convinced, that the authors of this law would never have obtained an act to raise so trifling a sum as it must do, had they not intended by *it* to establish a *precedent* for future use. To console ourselves with the smallness of the duties, is to walk deliberately into the snare that is set for us, praising the *neatness* of the workmanship" (Verg. *Aen.* 2.40-9; Dickinson 43). The truth of this is evident in itself, for as Dickinson reasons, "... if they have a right *to* levy a tax of *one penny* upon us, they have a right to levy a million upon us: For where does their right stop?" (44). In a slippery slope of consent, allowing even the smallest tax without representation would by extension grant Parliament the general principle of taxation without representation. Lacking redress through direct representation, the colonies would then be placed at the whims of Parliament. Walking through this logic in the clearest and harshest of terms, Dickinson continues, "This money is to be taken from *us*. *We* are therefore taxed. *Those* who are *taxed* without their own consent, expressed by themselves or their representatives, are *slaves*. *We are taxed* without our own consent, expressed by ourselves or our representatives. *We are therefore—SLAVES*" (44). By consenting to a seemingly harmless tax, Americans would inadvertently usher in the very act capable of destroying their rights as Englishmen, degrading them from the status of citizen to that of serf. Unless the colonists learn from the example of the Trojans, they are doomed to repeat their fate: they become either "a band gathered for exile, a piteous throng," or they become the slaves of a distant ruler (Verg. *Aen.* 2.789).

This duplicity in Britain's acts are further revealed in Dickinson's eighth letter, which shows that the Townshend Acts, far from benefiting the colonies as Parliament claimed, would directly harm them. Noting that the Stamp Act at least promised to provide for the protection of the American colonies alone, Dickinson observes how the Townshend Act deviates from this,

instituting the tax for the protection of all “*his Majesty’s DOMINIONS*,” thus forcing the colonists to contribute to lands like Canada, Florida, and Nova-Scotia, in which they had no interest or claim (47). Voicing the complaints of the colonies, Dickinson incredulously demands, “What justice is there in making us pay for ‘defending, protecting and securing’ THESE PLACES? What benefit *can WE*, or *have WE* ever derived *from them*?” Answering his own question, Dickinson argues that in point of fact, the Americans are hurt by the preservation of these “rivals” who cheapen their land, drain the density of their population, and served no strategic value in the Seven Years’ War (47-8). Such an act clearly stands contrary to the most ancient principles of freedom, as an “old maxim of the [Roman] law” states: “*Qui sentit commodum, sentire debet et onus*. They who feel the benefit, ought to feel the burden” (50).<sup>4</sup> In this case, the Americans clearly feel the burden of the tax without receiving any benefit; having the largest population, the vast majority of money collected would originate in the American colonies but be used for the benefit of Canada, Nova-Scotia, and Florida, who in contrast “will not pay *one quarter as much as Pennsylvania alone*” (49). By measure of the Roman maxim alone, the Townshend Acts seem rather unjust; added to the lack of representation in these taxes, they must be declared draconian abuses of liberty. Were Parliament to consult the wisdom of the ages as well as their consciences, such an act would not exist.

As it stood though, hazards to their liberties clearly existed, which Dickinson again strives to stir action against in his ninth letter. Convinced that they must defy trespasses upon their rights, a need for acute vigilance permeates his argument, imploring the people to maintain their “*constitutional check*” upon the administration by right of representation so that they might be “brought into order *without violence*,” without which “... oppression proceeds uncontrolled in

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<sup>4</sup> As Dickinson states in the letter, it seems that the phrase originates as a maxim of law sometime during Roman rule, with no known specific source.

its career, till the governed, transported into rage, seek redress in the midst of blood and confusion” (51). As Dickinson recognizes, any singular hazard to these rights introduces vulnerability to the mainstay of liberty, which is why he urgently enjoins the colonists: “*Venienti occurrere morbo*. Oppose a disease at its beginning” (58; original line from Persius, *Satires* 3.64). Pulled from a section of Persius’ *Satires* in which the speaker chastises himself for his indifference and depravity despite being versed in philosophy, Dickinson implies that the colonists exhibit a similarly tepid detachment towards their rights as Englishmen (3.1-118). Surely, he wishes to chastise his uninterested compatriots with Persius’ harsher words: “Whom are you trying to take in? What do you mean by these whimpering evasions? It is *your* game that’s playing, you are dribbling away like a simpleton as you are” (3.19-21). One day, the colonists might look upon their beloved liberty “and pine that they have lost her forever” if they do not attend to the perils facing them, realizing the preciousness of their rights only after they are gone (3.38; Dickinson 52). Even if these wise principles cannot prove themselves, the history Spain demonstrates the slippery slope to subjugation, as a “single concession” to raise money without the consent of the people became “a PRECEDENT for other concessions of the like kind,” until inevitably “the *people* ceased to be *free*” (58). To those colonists who claim the Townshend Acts are “of no consequence,” a small injustice ailing the people in the scheme of things, Dickinson echoes the message of Persius: “You had better attend to it, though, of whatever consequence it may be,” lest their beloved liberty die with them (Pers. *Sat.* 3.94-5). As with other letters, vigilance is the safeguard of the people, the medicine which can cure the pestilence of tyranny, yet it only works if applied in the early stages of the disease. Consequently, Dickinson urges Americans to treat the cancer of oppression immediately, before it becomes incurable, obliterating all their rights.



As Dickinson continues in his tenth letter, even these dreaded ramifications are not the “limits of our *misery* and *infamy*,” for the Townshend Acts additionally provided for the creation of customs offices to oversee the colonies’ taxation (59). Employing the contemporary history of Ireland to illustrate how expansive governmental power develops from ministerial oversight, Dickinson entreats his countrymen to learn from their example, reiterating his conviction in the insights of the past. Writing what gives the impression of an aside, Dickinson tells his fellow colonists:

Happy are the men, and *happy the people who grow wise by the misfortunes of others*. Earnestly, my dear countrymen, do I beseech the author of all good gifts, that you may grow wise in this manner; and if I may be allowed to take such a liberty, I beg leave to recommend to you in general, as the best method of attaining this wisdom, diligently to study the histories of other countries. You will there find all the arts, that can possibly be practiced by cunning rulers, or false patriots among yourselves, so fully delineated, that changing names, the account would serve for your own times. (60)

Of all the themes that underscore Dickinson’s *Letters*, it is this motif of history as a guide that presents itself most prominently, save that of representation, as virtually every argument presented is backed by the wisdom and example of the past, already played out upon the great stage of history. It is in this spirit that Dickinson advises the colonists: “*Et majores vestros & posterios cogitate*. Remember your ancestors and your posterity” (68; original line from Tacitus, *Agricola* 32). While this phrase from Tacitus’ *Agricola* originally endorses reverence towards forebearers rather than the study of history, Dickinson purposefully adapts the meaning to emphasize that history provides the knowledge necessary for understanding and directing the modern-day course of action (Tac. *Agr.* 32).

Yet even taken literally, a remembrance of England’s ancestors would lead the colonists back where Dickinson intended them: in the examination of their own history, which includes the events of Tacitus’ *Agricola*. In the section the excerpt comes from, Calgacus, a leader of the

Britons, gives a speech to animate his fellow soldiers before they go to war, strikingly similar to Dickinson's own exhortations centuries later (Tac. *Agr.* 29). Calling their people the "choice flower of Britain," Calgacus mentions how their liberty has been "shielded till today by the very remoteness and the seclusion for which we are famed" and protected by "the impressiveness of the unknown," much in the same fashion Americans had by their vast distance enjoyed an autonomy unique even when compared to Englishmen back home (30). Envisioning a future in which they fail, Calgacus sees "Our goods and fortunes are ground down to pay tribute, our land and its harvest to supply corn, our bodies and hands to build roads through woods and swamps—all under blows and insults," their people reduced to mere tributaries of the conquering empire, stripped of the rights to the fruits of their own labor (31). Much in the same way, Dickinson warns that if Parliament's barrage of taxes, collectors, and ministers are abided, Americans too will find themselves drained of their produce by the mercantilist empire (Dickinson 59, 67). Likewise, Calgacus' bold appeals to fight for liberty "uncorrupted, unconquered as we are" resembles Dickinson's urge to "unite ... in a firm opposition" to Britain's current assaults (Tac. *Agr.* 31; Dickinson 65). If the colonists do not speak out against the Townshend Acts in this bold manner, the prognoses of history already predicts their wretched downfall, and Dickinson supposes that a future historian may well bewail their "SUBMISSIVE CONDUCT" in spite of the fact that "they had before their eyes *so many illustrious examples* in their mother country, of the *constant* success attending *firmness* and *perseverance*, in opposition to dangerous encroachments of liberty" (67, 68). Only by continuing the legacy of their courageous ancestors, learned through the annals of history, could the colonists avoid the scorn and contempt of posterity.

This theme of history carries on into the eleventh letter, which once again exhorts the people to have a “perpetual jealousy, respecting liberty,” for without it the people would quickly become buried under a mountain of “oppressions and dissatisfactions” (Dickinson 68). Citing both Sallust and Cicero, Dickinson explains that men generally are too slow to act, recognizing the danger after it has arrived, thus leaving them no option but to “voluntarily fasten their chains” in the face of such a dominating government (71-2). Far from utilizing “*open* acts of force,” the cunning despot disguises his intentions, as the examples of Julius Caesar, Oliver Cromwell, the Grand Seigneur, and the King of France reveal (74). Dickinson warns that if allowed to persist, the Townshend Acts will be “*Infelix vates*. A direful foreteller of future calamities,” just like the Harpies of Virgil’s *Aeneid* the quotation draws from (77; original line from Verg. *Aen.* 3.244). Much like the Trojans of Virgil’s tale, if the colonists do not heed the omens before them, they shall be cursed by these events, and a hunger for liberty will plague them until “dread hunger” leads to destructive violence, the very unrest Dickinson warns of at the beginning of the letter (Verg. *Aen.* 3.253-7; Dickinson 69-70). The auguries of history, like Virgil’s harpies, already foretell their downfall and the loss of liberty unless they act.

After this gloomy prediction, Dickinson’s final letter attempts once more to stir the colonists to action against the acts of Parliament on the basis of duty and their love of liberty. More than any letter, Dickinson’s concluding excerpt enhances his argument, as his own exhortations run parallel with the appeals of Gaius Memmius, whom he quotes from Sallust’s *War with Jugurtha*, the same text he began with in his first letter (Sal. *Jug.* 30-2). Opening with the bold statement that their own predicament is caused “generally owing to the *decay of virtue*,” Dickinson rails against those who selfishly and mistakenly “consider *their* interests as distinct from *those of the public*,” holding a love of “*wealth, power, and credit*” higher than their

country, thus mimicking Memmius' words against unvirtuous members of the Senate placing their private interest above the public's common good (Dickinson 77; Sal. *Jug.* 31.1-5). Just as Memmius declares that there are "Men stained with crime, with gory hands, of monstrous greed, guilty, yet at the same time full of pride, who have made honor, reputation, loyalty, in short everything honourable and dishonourable, a source of gain," so too does Dickinson denounce those "Miserable men" in Parliament who in their avarice "either hold, or expect to hold certain advantages, by setting examples of servility to their countrymen" (Sal. *Jug.* 31.12-3; Dickinson 78-9). It is these men lacking virtue which caused their present constitutional crisis, seeking to drain the colonies for their own gain; it is these men who try to coax Americans into submission. In the face of such conniving, calculating men, Dickinson reminds the colonists, "Our *vigilance* and our *union* are *success* and *safety*. Our *negligence* and our *division* are *distress* and *death*. They are *worse*—They are *shame* and *slavery*," implying that they must either "submit to slavery or use force to maintain your freedom" as Memmius said centuries before (Dickinson 79; Sal. *Jug.* 31.22). As in the first letter, their unity and concord would reinforce their defense against despotism, but their disunity and discord would allow Britain to snatch their liberties unhindered, essentially enslaving the colonies to the Parliament's will. If the fruits of their labor were to be taken from them, Dickinson demands of his countrymen, "... WHY should we [willingly] repeat the unprofitable toil? *Horses* and *oxen* are content with *that portion of the fruits of their work*, which their owners assign them... but even *these beasts* will not submit to draw for their *masters*, until they are *subdued* by *whips* and *goads*" (81). Silent submission to Parliament would make Americans even less than beasts, as even animals must first be coerced into servitude. Easily, he could have added the question Memmius poses to his compatriots: "Slaves bought with a price do not put up with unjust treatment from their masters; will you, Roman citizens

born to power, endure slavery with patience?” (Sal. *Jug.* 31.11-2). Even if these prospects do not move the colonists, Dickinson implores them to be “*affected* by reverence for the memory of our ancestors, who transmitted to us that freedom in which they had been blessed,” and to further be “*animated* by any regard for posterity, to whom, by the most sacred obligations, we are bound to deliver down the invaluable inheritance,” having only to add Memmius’ stinging questions to his plea: “... will you not exert yourselves to the utmost in order to retain the liberty which they bequeathed to you? And will you not show the greater ardor, because it is more shameful to lose what has been won than never to have won it?” (Dickinson 81; Sal. *Jug.* 31.17). Having received liberty, the greatest of all inheritances, Americans owe it to their English ancestors and to their children to preserve that inheritance, lest they dishonor both their ancestors and their posterity by losing it. In these entreaties, Dickinson imitates the impassioned appeals of Memmius in order to rouse the Americans’ love of liberty and strong sense of familial duty before their rights vanish forever.

Despite this very real peril, Dickinson, like Memmius, would still have his listeners act not in a blind rage but rather with a clear mind and a cool but animated disposition. Counseling them to remain “*faithful subjects*” even as they resist the acts of Parliament, Dickinson warns the Americans not to “take up arms against your oppressors,” instead holding, as Memmius says, “there is no need of violence, none of secession” (Dickinson 84; Sal. *Jug.* 31.6). To Dickinson, it is not bloodshed and turmoil that allows them success but the “*justice of your demands* and the *purity of your intentions*” (84). Calmly, he tells them, “You have nothing to do, but to conduct your affairs *peaceably—prudently—firmly—jointly*” (84). Having taught the Americans all he can about the true cause of liberty and the exemplars of history, Dickinson leaves them with his

final quotation from Memmius in Sallust's *War with Jugurtha*, a humble expression of his efforts to contribute what he may to the cause of liberty:

*Certe ego libertatem, quae mihi a parente meo tradita est, experiar: Verum id frustra an ob rem faciam, in vestra manu situm est, quirites.*

For my part, I am resolved to contend for the liberty delivered down to me by my ancestors, but whether I shall do it effectually or not, depends on you, my countrymen. "How littlesoever one is able to write, yet when the liberties of one's country are threatened, it is still more difficult to be silent."<sup>5</sup> (84-5; Sal. *Jug.* 31.5)

With this quote, Dickinson like Memmius absolves himself of culpability, having written all he could in liberty's defense, and he hands responsibility over to his countrymen, who may act or let liberty die; as he writes, "Whether [posterity] shall arise the *generous* and *indisputable heirs* of the noblest patrimonies, or the *dastardly and hereditary drudges* of imperious task-masters, YOU MUST DETERMINE" (84).

With this final, somber charge, Dickinson concludes his defense of the colonists' rights and his urgent recommendations for action, laying his arguments upon a bedrock of historical precedent and wisdom epitomized in the Latin maxims concluding each of the *Letters*. Through these quotes alone, the most important of Dickinson's thematic assertions are thoroughly represented: the need for unity and integrity; the necessity of justice and legal equity; the assurance of historical precedence and tradition; the duty owed to ancestry and posterity; the probity of vigilance and action; and above all else, hope. Those familiar with these excerpts or who hunt them down are well-rewarded with an expanded understanding of his stances. More than anything else though, Dickinson's classical allusions in and of themselves speak the lesson he teaches his readers: "Happy are the men, and *happy the people who grow wise by the*

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<sup>5</sup> The reader will note that Dickinson tacks on an additional quotation after his translation, which comes not from Sallust but from Jeremiah Dummer, *A Defense of the New-England Charters*, 88, originally published in 1721. As the name of this work suggests, Dummer defends the right of New England Charters and, much like Dickinson after him, ends his work with a quote from Sallust's *War with Catiline*, 3.1.

*misfortunes of others*” (60). With a rich understanding of their own historical roots, the insights of the ages, and the advice of the ancients, Dickinson hoped the colonists would employ that wisdom in defense of what he deemed the happiest cause of all: “*humanity and liberty*” (3).

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