

## The Diary of William Maclay and Political Manners in the First Congress

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*This is the last day of the Year and I have faithfully noted every political transaction, that has happened to me in it. And of what avail has it been? I thought it probable, That I would be called on with respect to the part I had acted in Senate by the legislature of Pennsylvania, or at least by some of them. But is there a Man of them, who has thought it Worth while to ask me a single Question? No. Are they not every Man of them straining, after Offices, Posts and preferments. At least every One of them who has the smallest chance of Success. Yes verily. Nor is there a Man who seems to care a farthing, how I acted. But wish me out to make a vacancy. Reward from men it is in vain to look for. It is however of some consequence to me, That I have nothing to charge my self with.*

Diary of William Maclay, 31 December 1790<sup>1</sup>

As the sky darkened, and the first year of the new nation drew to a close, Senator William Maclay of Pennsylvania took stock of himself and his country. He could only conclude that the First Congress was turning into an abject failure. Politically, despite all his efforts, he feared a system was already in place to destroy "Our so much boasted equality liberty & Republicanism" (p. 352). Personally, he complained that he had "sacrificed both health and happiness at the schrine of my Country" (p. 352). Worse, no one seemed to care. Why, he thought, had he bothered to keep his diary?

We can only imagine the feelings of the Senator from Pennsylvania as he went to New York City for the First Congress, leaving his rustic life behind for the burgeoning metropolis. Virtually no one outside of his home state had heard of Maclay, which caused complaints. Abigail

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1. All page references to Maclay's diary will be noted in the body of the text. Quotes come from *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates*, ed. Kenneth Bowling and Helen Veit, volume IX of the *Documentary History of the First Federal Congress of the United States of America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988).

Adams reported that one acquaintance "did not like pensilvana's chusing a man who had never been heard of before, he might be a good man, but he wanted those men in office whose fame had resounded throughout all the States."<sup>2</sup> His friends felt obliged to recommend Maclay to their associates in other states. Attempting to allay fears that Maclay was a country bumpkin, Tench Coxe wrote James Madison that Maclay had "a very straight head, of much more reading than the country Gentlemen in the middle states usually are."<sup>3</sup> To a friend in Boston, Benjamin Rush wrote, "Mr. Maclay possesses great talents for government. He was bred a lawyer but has spent the last twenty years of his life in a succession of public employments. He is alike independent in fortune and spirit. In his manners he is a perfect republican."<sup>4</sup>

Although not as well educated or as well known as many of his colleagues in the Senate, Maclay was a noteworthy figure on the state level. Educated at a Presbyterian academy, Maclay chose not to go to college but to travel to western Pennsylvania to make his fortune. Better educated than most of the men from this region, Maclay quickly rose to prominence in the large, heterogeneous frontier county of Northumberland. He served in the military during the French and Indian War, surveyed, and speculated in land. On the eve of the Revolution, he was one of the county's wealthiest citizens and one of its most powerful political figures. Maclay supported the revolutionary war effort and served in a number of offices at the state level during the 1770s and 1780s. He contributed to the effort to create a new constitution for Pennsylvania (an issue that dominated Pennsylvania politics throughout the 1780s), an effort that finally bore fruit in 1790 when Pennsylvania's radically democratic constitution was replaced with a more conservative one. He also supported ratification of the federal Constitution. Despite his success in Pennsylvania politics, Maclay was something of an anomaly. The state was noted for its fierce partisanship, but he largely avoided taking public stands on partisan issues, suggesting discomfort with par-

2. Abigail Adams to John Adams, *The Documentary History of the First Federal Elections, 1788-1790* (Merrill Jensen and Robert Becker, eds., vol. 1, Madison, 1976; Gordon DenBoer and Lucy Brown, eds., vols. 2-3, Madison, 1984-86) II, 29.

3. Tench Coxe to James Madison, 22 October 1788, in *The Papers of James Madison*, William T. Hutchinson, John Stagg, et. al., eds. (Chicago, 1962) XI, 313.

4. Benjamin Rush to Jeremy Belknap, 7 October 1788 in Benjamin Rush, *Letters*, ed. L.H. Butterfield, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1951) I, 490. Rush also wrote a letter to Adams praising Maclay. Historians have often written rather dismissively of Maclay. Countering that view and arguing that Maclay had a coherent political philosophy, see Philip Klein, "Senator William Maclay," *Pennsylvania History* 10.2 (April 1943): 83-93.

tisan politics and also perhaps reflecting the diverse nature of his constituency.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, his own selection as a United States Senator was the result not of his connection to a particular faction but because of his lack of a connection, which allowed an uneasy coalition of state legislators to form. For one group of legislators, Maclay was a good choice because of his ties to land and agriculture and his residence near Harrisburg, west of the area dominated by Philadelphia (represented by Robert Morris, Pennsylvania's other senator). Recognizing the need for balance, the other party of state legislators chose him because his attitudes toward both the state and federal constitutions were atypical of his own region of the state, and they believed his personal and business ties with Philadelphia made him familiar with and sympathetic to the city's interests. Despite his nearly unanimous election, he and everyone else knew that this coalition would soon be re-evaluating its choice because Maclay drew only a two-year term.<sup>6</sup> During his term, Maclay would cling to his independent ways, refusing to align himself with either faction in Pennsylvania. When the time came to choose a new senator, his independence failed to win him any supporters, and he did not receive a single vote from the Pennsylvania legislature.

Although nearly all politicians of this period claimed as good republicans to disdain partisanship and to seek only the common good, Maclay clung to this ideal more fiercely than most. In this respect, he was like certain other independent-minded politicians of the day, such as John Adams or Massachusetts native Elbridge Gerry. Maclay's diary provides a window into the collision between the classical republican belief in the public good and the fierce partisanship that soon charac-

5. For a fuller discussion of Pennsylvania politics, see O.S. Ireland, "The Crux of Politics: Religion and Party in Pennsylvania, 1778-1789," *William and Mary Quarterly* 42.4 (October 1985), 453-475; Jackson Turner Main, *Political Parties before the Constitution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973) 174-211; and Robert Brunhouse, *The Counter-Revolution in Pennsylvania, 1776-1790* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971). Because of Maclay's efforts on behalf of a new constitution, Constitutionists (those who wanted to keep Pennsylvania's 1776 Constitution) twice contested his election to state office. See Main, *Political parties*, 190.

6. For biographical information on Maclay, see Kenneth Bowling and Helen Veit, Appendix E, from *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates*, 431-444; Lewis R. Harley, "William Maclay, United States Senator from Pennsylvania," read at a meeting of the Chester county, Pa., Historical Society, February 18, 1909; and Heber Gearhart, "The Life of William Maclay," *Northumberland County Historical Society Proceedings*, 2:46-73.

terized the First Congress.<sup>7</sup> Maclay already had first-hand experience with the failure of states to work together. Before and during the Revolution, Pennsylvanians such as Maclay found themselves embroiled in boundary disputes with both Virginians and New Englanders, an experience that must have made many Pennsylvanians somewhat wary of their fellow countrymen.<sup>8</sup> His diary provides insight into the early attempt to transform revolutionary political theory into a working government that would meld thirteen different colonies into one United States. Maclay probable anxiety about his social credentials made him an ideal observer. He could not have avoided recognizing that he was among men who were generally better educated, better known, and more experienced in national politics. Coming from a farm outside of Harrisburg, which was almost a frontier town at the time, he likely felt self-conscious about his breeding and refinement.<sup>9</sup> All of these differences from his colleagues made him a particularly sharp observer of the First Congress. Highly sensitive to the political and social milieu, he noted and commented on the various rituals of interaction that others, more comfortable in the new Congress, took for granted.

This paper explores the question that Maclay posed to himself about why he kept his diary, addressing not simply the various motivations he had for writing the diary but the role it served in helping him work through one of the primary problems facing the First Congress—the problem of political manners. Long before Emily Post or Miss Manners, questions of etiquette and style bedeviled America's first national politicians.<sup>10</sup> These questions of political behavior were not simply the wrap-

7. For the intense feelings and violent rhetoric that characterized this period, see John R. Howe Jr., "Republican Thought and the Political Violence of the 1790s," *American Quarterly* 19.2 (Summer 1967): 147-65; Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," *William & Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 401-41; Marshall Smelser, "The Federalist Period as an Age of Passion," *American Quarterly* 10 (1958): 391-419; Richard Buel, Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1972).

8. For a brief discussion of these boundary disputes, see Brunhouse, *The Counter-Revolution*, particularly 112-131.

9. According to Charles Beard, "Maclay was a bit awkward in the presence of grand Virginia gentleman and plutocratic merchants from Boston or Philadelphia." Charles Beard, introduction, *The Journal of William Maclay*, by William Maclay (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1927) v.

10. Many historians have commented on this. Most recently, Joanne Freeman has discussed with great insight the importance of manners in early political life. See Joanne Barrie Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001). Gordon Wood has written about the wider significance of manners, noting, "Legislators worried that a degeneracy of manners could reduce people to slavery... It was not the force of arms which made the ancient republics great or which ultimately destroyed them. It was rather the character and spirit of their people." Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic* (New York: Norton, 1969) 51-2.

ping given to the actual substance of politics.<sup>11</sup> Issues of etiquette were intimately related to the major issues facing the First Congress. In the broadest sense, no one was certain exactly how the new government would function. Although most accepted this new experiment in republican government, there was wide disagreement about exactly how it would work. As John Adams famously said of republicanism itself, "I confess I never understood it, and I believe no other man ever did or ever will."<sup>12</sup> Some favored a government that approximated that of Great Britain and hoped to create a society based on deference and hierarchy. Others eschewed the trappings of monarchical government. Wide disagreements also existed about the extent of the powers of the new national government. Finally, debates about policy were tied to larger debates about the character of the nation. For example, the Tariff of 1789, particularly Madison's proposal on tonnage, which would have discriminated against British shipping in favor of the French, related not simply to economic issues but to whether the nation would lean toward a monarchical government in Great Britain or the newly republican government in France.

In fact, almost all of the important issues addressed in the early days of the First Congress had not only a practical importance but a symbolic one that was closely tied to the debates over political etiquette. Almost every major question before the First Congress, such as foreign policy or the nation's indebtedness, were seen not only as crucial in themselves but as potential precedents in establishing the character of the government and the nation.<sup>13</sup> Issues of etiquette were bound together with these policy issues and with the larger question of national character. When Congressmen disagreed about something as seemingly trivial as their own titles, they also were arguing about more fundamental matters, such as the amount of deference necessary in society, the relationship between government and society, and even the type of society that the founders were hoping to create. Maclay's diary, virtually the only account in existence of the day to day proceedings of the Senate from

11. Michael McGerr writes, "Style not only affects the perception of substance; it is substance." See Michael McGerr, "Political Style and Women's Power, 1830-1930," *Journal of American History* 77 (December 1990) 864-85.

12. John Adams to Mercy Warren, 20 July 1807, *Warren-Adams Letters: Being Chiefly a Correspondence Among John Adams, Samuel Adams, and James Warren*, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1925) LXXIII, 353.

13. For a fuller discussion of this connection, see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), particularly 31-54.

1789 to 1791, reveals certain tensions and ambiguities that were central to the troubling question of political manners. Maclay used the diary to judge others' behavior, but the diary also revealed the difficulty in establishing the proper grounds for judgment, unwittingly dissecting not simply the political behavior of others but the assumptions about the meaning of that behavior.

Maclay's diary revealed conflicting standards of behavior, which affected all of his colleagues to one degree or another. All were aware of acting in a newly created political arena, of playing a part in an unfolding drama that would set the course for the nation. Seeing life as a performance was a common conception to eighteenth-century gentlemen, indeed a prime motivation for one's actions.<sup>14</sup> Early American society and the First Congress in particular, though, experienced the theatricality of life with great urgency, as they attempted to create anew a political world that they believed would affect generations to come. In the past, American elites had simply tried to match the standards of British gentlemen.<sup>15</sup> The American Revolution, by rejecting British standards and citizenship, left elite Americans without a clear model of behavior to follow.<sup>16</sup> All of their actions were, in effect, precedent setting.<sup>17</sup>

Most thought that republican government could only hope to survive if it rested on a foundation of virtuous citizenry.<sup>18</sup> People moni-

14. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, first published in 1759, Adam Smith articulated this assumption, noting the importance men placed on "to be observed, to be attended to, to be taken notice of with sympathy, complacency, and approbation." Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1976) 113. See also Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), and David Marshall, *The Figure of Theater: Shaftesbury, Defoe, Adam Smith, and George Eliot* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986). For the continuing importance of self-presentation, see Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

15. For the importance of European-influenced courtesy books in shaping elite behavior, see Richard Bushman, *The Refinement of America: Persons, Houses, Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1992) 30-99.

16. Fashioning an identity was a crucial and unresolved issue in the early republic. See Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993); Alan Taylor, *William Cooper's Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1995); Bushman, *Refinement of America*; and Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (New York: Norton, 1979).

17. American leaders debated issues of etiquette throughout the revolutionary period. The Continental Congress, even as it waged war with Great Britain, wrestled with problems of political etiquette. The First Congress, though, brought this problem to a head.

18. Most believed that republican government was fragile and ephemeral at best. See Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic* (New York: Norton, 1980); Gordon Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Random House, 1991).

tored etiquette as a kind of barometer of the nation's health. They constantly examined their environment to see if true republicanism was indeed being fostered. The First Congress experienced all of these problems at their most ambiguous and their most urgent. Maclay clearly felt the significance of the First Congress, writing that "every legislator ought to regard himself as immortal" (p. 319).<sup>19</sup> All were conscious of giving a crucial performance, but no one quite knew the stage directions. Most agreed that the nation should follow republican principles. But beyond simple precepts, no one knew quite what those principles necessitated. Should the president have a title? Was a carriage proof of aristocracy? Was a presidential levee republican or monarchical?<sup>20</sup> These questions were tied to larger questions about the character of the new nation, and answering them proved extremely difficult because they were intertwined with larger ambiguities between notions of public and private and between gentility and republicanism. Maclay's diary captures these tensions, revealing the conflicting standards of behavior guiding political life in the new nation.

Even nuances of language were read as possible signs. As Maclay wrote, congressional business was often "much wrangling about Words" (p. 85). At a time when questions pressed upon the Senate on every issue, when the most fundamental questions of government still had to be resolved, senators debated what words they should use, and they did so because they thought that the language of the republic was a crucial element in the political culture of the new nation.<sup>21</sup> Maclay's diary is littered with instances of language debates, which took on symbolic importance as indicators of the character of the new government and the nation. When the minutes of President George Washington's speech to the Senate were read, his speech was referred to as "His most gracious

19. Maclay was ultimately disappointed. He wrote, "I came here expecting every man to act the part of a God. That the most delicate Honor the most exalted Wisdom, the most refined Generosity was to govern every Act and be seen in every deed. What must my feelings be on finding rough and rude manners Glaring folly, and the basest selfishness, apparent in almost every public Transaction. They are not always successful it is true. But is it not dreadful to find them in such a place" (p. 141).

20. See Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, particularly chapter 4, for an exploration of the various debates over these questions as well as the "politicization of social interaction."

21. Many historians have noted the emphasis on language in the early republic. Kenneth Cmiel writes, "Eloquent language, almost all agreed, was critical to the new regime. Republicanism was government by discussion as opposed to force of fiat. Speech was more important to a republic than to any other kind of polity." See Kenneth Cmiel, *Democratic Eloquence* (New York: W. Morrow, 1990) 39; and Thomas Gustafson, *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1992).

Speech." To Maclay, this form, which duplicated the wording used before an English king's address, represented "the first Step of the Ladder in the Assent to royalty" (p. 16). After debating the issue, the Senate came to agree with him. Other language was more elusive. One report from a senatorial committee mentioned the dignity and splendor of the government. Maclay once again took issue, arguing that respectability should be used instead of splendor because splendor "brought into my mind... instead of the highest perfection, all the faulty finery brilliant scenes and expensive Trappings of Royal Government. And impressed my mind with an Idea quite the reverse of republican respectability" (p. 26). Maclay was eventually defeated in this case, though.<sup>22</sup> Maclay's diary is also filled with revisions, which often seem motivated by no more than a desire to find the right word, such as weighing the difference between idolatrous or base (p. 40). Seemingly insignificant, this minor indecision pointed to a larger conflict. To call someone base was to judge him by the standards of gentility ("low in natural rank," "without dignity of sentiment," "befitting an inferior person").<sup>23</sup> But to call someone idolatrous was to judge him by republican standards, for worshiping the false gods of monarchy and aristocracy. At the level of individual words, then, we can begin to uncover his struggle to develop standards of judgment for this new political world.

The uneasy mingling of public and private complicated this task.<sup>24</sup> The diary, in part, was a complex attempt to define Maclay's own place in a political world where authority rested on one's private character, where the personal was very much the political, if only because the political as yet had no concrete definition.<sup>25</sup> In part, Maclay kept the

22. When Adams rose to say that he hoped the government would be supported with "dignity and Splendor," Maclay wondered if he did it "by way of Triumph over me. For a former defeat I gave him. But may be I was mistaken" (p. 27). Both sides were correct in a sense. One commonly accepted meaning of splendor was pomp and parade, a great show of costly things. This sort of extravagance hardly seemed to fit with republican simplicity. But another definition of the time simply meant "impressive or imposing character," precisely the sort of image the new nation hoped to project. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

23. *Oxford English Dictionary*.

24. For an examination of the complicated relationship between public and private in the early republic, see Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); Jacob Cogan, "The Reynolds Affair and the Politics of Character," *Journal of the Early Republic* 16.3 (Fall 1996): 389-417; Jan Lewis, "'Those Scenes for Which Alone My Heart Was Made': Affection and Politics in the Age of Jefferson and Hamilton," in *An Emotional History of the United States*, ed. Peter Stearns and Jan Lewis (New York: New York University Press, 1998) 52-65.

25. For an exploration of the diary as genre, see Steven Kagle, "The Diary of John Adams and the Motive of 'Achievement,'" *Hartford Studies in Literature* 3.2 (1971): 93-107; Steven Kagle, *Amer-*

diary for strictly personal reasons, using it to judge his own actions. In a world with few established practices, Maclay felt that the daily self-scrutiny of his diary would help to keep him from straying. Among his many reflections on the final day of 1790, he upbraided himself for worrying too much about his chances for re-election to the Senate. To guard against future lapses, he even laid out a set of rules to follow in the future. He also complained at the start of his term about the lack of any true companionship with other senators: "I could not find a confidant in one of [the Senate], or say to my heart, here is the Man I can trust" (p. 25). The diary served as the confidant that he failed to find among his fellow senators. In these ways, Maclay's diary served private ends.

But Maclay did not keep his diary solely for private reasons. He also intended to use it to justify himself to the Pennsylvania legislature and others, and when he returned to Philadelphia, he brought his diary with him.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, he thought his diary a failure. He lamented, "But is there a Man of them, who has thought it Worth while to ask me a single Question?" In this conception, his diary had a distinctly public character, and he often seemed to write it as if others would one day read it. At times, he pasted documentary evidence, such as newspaper clippings, directly into his diary to support his positions. He also revised his notes before entering them, and he frequently added additional commentary at a later date. Perhaps most revealingly, he repeatedly felt that certain items were too private to record even in his diary, and he occasionally removed items "Which I think it best to erase" (p. 381). Only towards the end of this two-year term did he begin to record his observations of the Senate when it was in secret session, prevented previously by feelings of "delicacy" (p. 392). He also used a code to refer to certain events when he did not want others to know of them. And occasionally, he simply wrote that he could not record something. All of these different evasions highlight the ambiguous position of Maclay's diary as both a private and a public document.

The dual nature of Maclay's diary found its real world correspon-

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*ican Diary Literature 1620-1799* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1979); Edmund Morgan, "John Adams and the Puritan Tradition," *New England Quarterly* 34.4 (December 1961): 518-29; and Rhys Isaac, "Stories and Constructions of Identity: Folk Tellings and Diary Inscriptions in Revolutionary Virginia," in *Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on Personal Identity in Early America*, ed. Mechael Sobel and Fredrika Teute (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 206-37.

26. Because of this, Maclay held himself to a high standard of accuracy. He tried never to delay even a day from transcribing his notes into his diary. One time he failed to do this and expressed his dissatisfaction: "I have actually delayed making up my Journal for this day untill the Morning of the 12th. I feel how very wrong this is. There is a bluntness over my Memory already" (p. 33).

dence in his relationship with “friends,” a relationship that straddled the ambiguously defined realms of public and private.<sup>27</sup> Friendship served as the model for political relationships, even as it was often spoken of as an exclusively private relationship. In an age before political parties, one relied on political friends. When Robert Morris, Maclay’s fellow senator from Pennsylvania, attempted to share a private confidence with Maclay, Maclay found himself unsure of Morris’s intention. Was it simply a friendly gesture, or was there a hidden purpose? “Perhaps it was, that he wishes to return to some kind of familiarity with me,” Maclay wrote, “But I cannot tell what brought a Strange flash of Suspicion over me” (p. 194). Later, when Maclay heard that Morris had an agent in Europe selling Morris’s American lands, which meant that Morris had a direct interest in one of the bills being discussed, Maclay recorded the fact with reluctance: “I am wrong to minute this Circumstance” (p. 214). In the public conception of his diary, Maclay was clearly uncomfortable revealing Morris’s private business. Maclay seemed unsure where exactly to draw the line between a private friendship and a public, politically motivated one.

The kind of deception that potentially lurked behind political friendships disgusted Maclay, and he constantly noted his desire to leave the Senate and return to his family. To some extent, Maclay’s sentiments were conventional ones for republican politicians: one sign of one’s fitness for office was a willingness to relinquish power. But Maclay’s repeated denunciations of Congress went beyond posturing to a genuine conviction that domestic life represented the source of true happiness. For Maclay, the public life of a republican statesman offered little genuine opportunity for warmth and affection.<sup>28</sup> His closeness with his family is evident throughout the diary. At one point, Maclay sent diaries home to two of his daughters, writing poems to the girls on the inside covers of the books. In one he wrote, “A Father to a favourite child/

27. The literature on friendship is voluminous. For a sampling related to the complicated interplay between public and private friendships, see Allan Silver, “Friendship in Commercial Society: Eighteenth-Century Social Theory and Modern Sociology,” *American Journal of Sociology* 95.6 (May 1990): 1474-504; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “Andrew Jackson’s Honor,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 17.1 (Spring 1997); Alan Taylor, “The Art of Hook and Snivey: Political Culture in Upstate New York in the 1790s,” *Journal of American History* 79 (March 1993): 1371-96; and Andy Trees, “Private Correspondence for the Public Good: Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 26 January 1799,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 108.3 (2000): 217-254.

28. Thomas Jefferson often expressed similar feelings. See Jan Lewis, “‘The Blessings of Domestic Society’: Thomas Jefferson’s Family and the Transformation of American Politics,” in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter Onuf (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993) 109-46.

presents this little Toy/ May she thro' life, a Sunshine mild/ an happiness enjoy" (p. 248). To attempt to recapture some feelings of intimacy, despite their separation, Maclay struck upon a novel plan of bridging the distance:

I now proposed the Scheme of their Writing to me every Sunday that thus each party might act under the Sentiment of Reciprocity, and enjoy the pleasing Sensation, while they were writing to and thinking of the Object of their most tender affections the beloved Object was employed, in the same sympathetic correspondence. And That our kindred hearts and affections, beat Unisons, at the same instant, tho' separated as far as New York and Sunbury (p. 190).<sup>29</sup>

In his own mind, the First Congress was a highly theatrical world where performance ruled over the private, sincere self.<sup>30</sup> Maclay longed to leave the Senate, a place of "deceit dissimulation and Ambition, from Mere artificial life from whence both truth and sincerity are banished" and fly to "meet nature love affection and sincerity in the embraces of my wife and dear Children" (p. 376).

Such a view belied the complicated intermingling of the public and the private even in his own self-construction. At his most personal moments, when he despaired of the entire Congress, his lamentations were formulated in stiff and formal tones. As he realized he would not be re-elected, Maclay wrote, "I must stand with open breast to receive the wound inflicted by my adversaries" (p. 340), striking the classical pose of a martyr for republican virtue. When Maclay took a stand that threatened "disgrace in the public Eye," he comforted himself with a maxim from Horace, "Be this your wall of brass, a guileless heart, a cheek no guilt turns pale" (p. 234).<sup>31</sup> And when he thought of a measure that would undermine the federal basis of the government, he wrote, "O Sweet Candor when wilt thou quit the Cottage, and the lisping infants lip, and shed thy Glory round the Statesman's head" (p. 116). In

29. For an examination of the type of empathetic reading and writing that Maclay seemed to be striving for, see Robert Darnton, "Readers Respond to Rousseau: The Fabrication of Romantic Sensitivity" in Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre* (New York: Vintage, 1984) 215-256. For an examination of the various uses of letter writing, see Andrew Burstein, *The Inner Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1995).

30. For the rising importance of sincerity during this period, see Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence*.

31. Maclay's reliance on classical models was quite common. As Gordon Wood notes, all educated men of the time looked to the ancients for wisdom. See Wood, *Creation of the American Republic*, and Paul Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern* (Chapel Hill: UNC UP, 1992).

the supposedly private realm of his diary, he displayed his most public self-conception: the unbending classical republican. During his public discussions of the business of the Senate, though, he was least guarded, generally giving vent to a host of vituperative complaints. This paradox, where the most personal was marked by formality and the most public was marked by emotional excess, revealed the ambiguous nature of the performance, in which the boundaries between public and private fluid and undefined.

By addressing both private conduct and public standards of behavior, gentility seemed to offer a means of overcoming the confusion about public and private behavior. Maclay, in particular, constantly turned to genteel standards to judge the actions of others, but even as he did this, he remained profoundly ambivalent about gentility itself. In the end, it did not so much resolve the public/private tension found in his diary as subsume it.

Maclay found aristocratic pretensions insufferable. Of one man, Maclay wrote, "The cold distant stiff and let me add stinking Manner of this Man is really painful to be submitted to" (p. 236). Of another, Maclay wrote, "he is if possible more affected and disgusting than ever" (p. 263). John Adams was his favorite target. He wished that Adams had been made a tailor "so well qualifeyed does he seem to adjust the Etiquette of loops and buttons" (p. 212). For Maclay, these pretensions were indications of a desire "for becoming royalty themselves" (p. 18). But republicanism also demanded a certain amount of elitism, because only the worthy elite, the disinterested and educated, were fit to rule in a republican government.<sup>32</sup> Coupled with this built-in elitism were Maclay's own feelings about the importance of proper breeding, so that only a fine line existed between a lack of gentility and an excessive regard for it. When Maclay met Thomas Jefferson, he was disappointed by his deportment. He wrote, "his Whole figure has a loose shackling Air. He had a rambling Vacant look & nothing of that firm collected deportment which I expected would dignify the presence of a Secretary or Minister. I looked for gravity, but a laxity of Manner, seemd shed about him" (p. 275).<sup>33</sup>

32. Complicating this belief in a "natural" aristocracy were elite Americans' insecurities about their claims to being a natural aristocracy. For an excellent discussion of the slippery grounds of elite status, see Taylor, *William Cooper's Town*.

33. Dumas Malone claimed that Jefferson's casual dress was a philosophical statement. As one contemporary observer wrote, "He seems willing to stand the test of inquiry, and to be weighed in the balance only by his merit and attainments." See Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-1805*, vols. 6 (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1970) IV, 373. Maclay, though, felt that a certain level of gentility was essential.

Maclay felt obliged to maintain a certain refinement in his own life, and when he failed to do that, he worried that it affected far more than his appearance. Meeting a group of gentleman while he was still "rather in deshabelle," he worried about such a lapse:

Altho' I m not in the least given to dress, Yet I found that I was on this Occasion below par. & to know that any point about One is deranged, or improperly adjusted, imparts an Aukward Air to One. It is on this Account more than any other, That a propriety of dress should be attended to. To suspect that Your Company believe anything Wrong about you, distresses a Modest Man (p. 274).

Maclay disavowed any untoward grasping at distinction through appearance, but he felt that a certain level of dress and appearance were essential to his "Air." Maclay's feelings were widely shared. The ultimate goal was to shine in the best company, and the danger of a bad performance haunted anyone with pretensions to distinction.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps more importantly, style often served as a proxy for one's fitness to hold power in a government lacking established institutions.<sup>35</sup>

Given the conflicting demands between the public and the private, the genteel and the republican, some members of Congress became almost paranoid about the potential dangers besetting the young government.<sup>36</sup> Since republican government required men of disinterested independence, any actions that seemed motivated by private gain became evidence of corruption, but the ambiguity between a man's public and private role complicated the question, leaving Maclay forever attempting to unmask hidden dangers. Maclay's diary is a virtual catalogue of the plots and conspiracies that he saw besetting the government. Everywhere around him he saw cabals. Repeatedly, he thought that a court party was forming under the sway of the executive branch.

34. See Bushman, *Refinement in America, 181-203*.

35. As Clifford Geertz writes, "Cultural systems come most crucially into play in situations lacking institutional guides." See Clifford Geertz, "Ideology as a Cultural System," in Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Harper Collins, 1973) 218. For an examination of the lack of institutional mechanisms in the early national government, see James Sterling Young, *The Washington Community, 1800-1828* (New York: Columbia UP, 1966); Jack Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979).

36. In fact, the eighteenth century was, in many ways, the age of conspiracies. Daniel Defoe called the Augustan Age "an Age of Plot and Deceit, of Contradiction and Paradox." Daniel Defoe, *A Letter to Mr. Bisset* (London: J. Baker, 1709) 10, as cited in English Literature in the *Age of Disguise*, ed. Maximilian Novak (Berkeley: U of California P, 1977) 2. See also Gordon Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style," *William & Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982) 401-441.

He complained that one man was a tool of British agents, another acted the courtier, and another strove "to be absolute in the Senate" (p. 39). All around him he saw the gradual ruination of the country's republican government. Maclay had no doubt about the nefarious purposes of various senators, believing that "every Man like a labeled bottle, has his contents, marked in his visage" (p. 20), yet he knew that appearances could be deceptive, demanding constant vigilance. Maclay was caught in an endless game of interpretation, and he worried about whether he was seeing things correctly. "Am I too sharp sighted," he asked, "or have I observed. Some Shyness. In some People. I believe it is the former" (p. 226). Maclay was constantly probing the actions of others, deciding whether someone seemed more distant to him or perhaps acting a "tone lower," searching for what John Adams referred to as "the Secret Springs, Motives, and Principles of human Actions."<sup>37</sup>

In this atmosphere, every person and every action were open to interpretation. A person's manners became a potential guidebook to his political beliefs. But without any agreed upon standard, how did one interpret men's actions? The refinement of genteel behavior was supposed to point to an inner refinement, a moral superiority. But because of its theatrical nature, gentility could be just a hollow show.<sup>38</sup> This kind of interpretive instability heightened questions of political etiquette in the First Congress, making personal deportment an area of intense scrutiny and leaving Maclay and others in the never-ending game of unmasking the courtiers and cabals and conspiracies that they saw all around themselves.

The intense but ambivalent scrutiny that such a stance entailed is particularly apparent in Maclay's close observation of John Adams and George Washington. In fact, Adams perhaps deserves credit as the inspiration for the diary. Soon after the start of the first session, the Pennsylvanian decided to keep his diary, in no small part because of his alarm at John Adams's pre-occupation with titles. As Maclay watched him day after day in the Senate, he could only conclude, "Adams what a Wretch art thou" (p. 133). Maclay gazed across the small chamber and saw not

37. John Adams "Misanthrop, No. 2," January 1767 in *Papers of John Adams*, ed. Robert Taylor et al., vols. 1-8 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1977-) I, 187. Norbert Elias's analysis of court society seems analogous in many ways to the interpretive dilemma of the First Congress. As Elias notes, the nuances of behavior between people took on extraordinary significance in the charged atmosphere of the court. To be successful in court, one had to learn the art of observing people to detect any fluctuation in favor. See Norbert Elias, *The Court Society*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Pantheon books, 1983) 91 and 104 ff.

38. See Bushman, *Refinement in America*, 181-203.

a natural aristocrat but a vacuous fool, writing of the vice president that "he often in the midst of his most important Airs, I believe when he is at loss for expressions, (and this he often is, wrapped up I suppose in the Contemplation of his own importance) suffers an unmeaning kind of vacant laugh to escape him" (p. 11). Far from lending dignity to himself or his office, his deportment "really to me bore the Air of ridiculing the Farce he was acting" (p. 11). But what was he to expect from a man who seemed little more than a monkey dressed in fine clothes:

I have really often looked at him with surprize mingled with contempt when he is in the Chair and no Business before the Senate. Instead of that sedate easy air which I would have him possess, he will look on one side then on the other then down the knees of his Breeches, then dimple his visage with the most silly kind of half smile. Which I cannot well express in English. The Scotch Irish have a word that hits it exactly, *smudging*. God forgive me for the Vile thought, but I cannot help thinking of a Monkey just put into Breeches when I see him betray such evident marks of Self-conceit (p. 33).

That the cold wind of New England bore bad tidings was quickly apparent to Maclay, as he felt the pall cast over the once hopeful beginnings of Congress by Adams's lust for titles:

"His grasping after Titles has been observed by every body. Mr. Izard after describing his air Manner deportment and personal figure in the Chair, concluded with applying the Title of Rotundity to him" (p. 33). As the debate over the question of titles dragged out over days and eventually weeks, Maclay grew thoroughly disgusted and was ready to banish it forever: "But once more Subject of Titles farewell. May I never hear Motion or debate on thee More" (p. 39).

Worse still, Adams's unrepugnant behavior threatened the Constitution itself. When Maclay found out that Adams had been signing bills as vice president, he was immediately on his feet to protest: "As President of the Senate only do we know you, as President of the Senate only can you sign or authenticate any Act of that body" (p. 43). If Adams signed acts as vice president, Maclay argued, this "carried on the face of it, the Idea of holding the Place of the President in his absence." Besides being illogical because it was "like a Man signing an address to himself," it threatened the separation of powers laid down in the Constitution. "In this point of View," argued Maclay, "nothing could be more improper than the Vice President signing an address to the President" because as vice president, he "could not mix itself with Us in the Sen-

ate" (43). Maclay watched with growing horror during those first few weeks as he saw the noble republican experiment twisted and perverted, as he saw Adams fail as a gentleman and as a republican, as he saw the second highest official in the country undermine the Constitution. It was going to be a long two years in Congress.

Adams undoubtedly had few kind thoughts for this unbending senator from the backwoods of Pennsylvania. Far from exhibiting good republican principles, Maclay's supposed republican simplicity was "an affectation," according to Adams. Proper respect for government demanded that "attention should be paid to the customs of civilized nations. That the appearance of the affectation of simplicity, would be injurious" (p. 37). Formerly America's representative in Great Britain, Adams thought he was simply following the common usage of "civilized" nations. Adams eventually decided to sign bills as both vice president of the United States and as president of the Senate, but he refused to relinquish his title as vice president. For Adams, the issue was not the separation of powers but of his own identity. He argued, "I am placed here by the People, to part with the Stile given to me is a dereliction of my right, it is being false to my Trust. Vice President is my Title and It is a point I will insist upon." (p. 48). For Adams, so long accustomed to the lack of respect paid to America by foreign powers, titles were one way to bolster the unstable foundations of the new nation at home and abroad. He feared a return to the time under the Articles of Confederation when government representatives failed to command respect from other nations.<sup>39</sup> Titles would endow the bearers with greater dignity. They were, for Adams, not superfluous to one's identity but central. Not merely etiquette, they cut to the core of his conception of his self-identity and his vision for the nation.

The conflicting interpretations of Adams and Maclay on the meaning and effect of titles revealed the fault line in the First Congress between ideas about gentility and republicanism. The uneasy relationship between these two standards created sometimes contradictory standards of behavior.<sup>40</sup> Notions of gentility informed Maclay's thinking just as strongly as republican ideals did. While he dismissed his own

39. For a discussion of the waning ability of the Confederation to command respect, see Rakove, *The Beginnings of National Politics*, particularly chaps. 14 and 15. For Adams' views on titles, see James Hutson, "John Adams' Title Campaign," *The New England Quarterly* 41.1 (March 1968): 30-39, and Andy Trees, "John Adams and the Problem of Virtue," *Journal of the Early Republic* 21.3 (Fall 2001) 393-412.

40. This tension began to be resolved when Americans embraced respectability, rather than gentility. See Bushman, *Refinement in America*, 207-401.

manners, claiming to be “but a poor courtier,” he expected standards of gentility to be maintained (p. 46). And Maclay’s many descriptions of Adams were mainly concerned not with his unrepugnant nature but with his lack of gentility. A “sedate, easy air” was one of the necessary attributes of the well-bred man. A monkey in breeches was an affront to notions of refinement, even if they were nice breeches.

Despite his republican disdain for empty show, Maclay freely judged other’s “performances” throughout this period, expecting other men to measure up to certain standards of refinement. Washington, in particular, excited Maclay’s attention—not for his specific actions but for his performance. If the nature of Washington’s gentility could be defined, Maclay thought that he could determine whether it expressed the inward moral refinement necessary to republican rectitude. Maclay, like many of his countrymen, seemed to view Washington’s character almost as a proxy for the nation’s character itself.<sup>41</sup>

Maclay clearly felt heightened anxiety and watchfulness whenever Washington was on display. When the Senate traveled to George Washington’s house to reply to his presidential address, Maclay was far more interested in the performance than he was in the address. He complained that Adams read the first page “very badly” (p. 45). His attention was mainly focused on Washington, though, who quite literally had his hands full. Washington had his hat in his left hand, and he used his right hand to take his reply out of his coat pocket. But he still had to put on his spectacles. Maclay noted simply, “He had too many Objects for his hands” (p. 45). Pressing his hat against his body, he took out his “spoetacles” and lay the spectacle case on the chimney, although this action “embarrassed him” (p. 45). Maclay thought Washington read his reply with “tolerable exactness,” but he complained that Washington “should have received Us with his Spectacles on, which would have saved the making of some uncouth Motions....could the laws of Etiquette have permitted him to have been disencumbered of his Hat it would have relieved him much ” (p. 45). Where was the sedate ease so

41. Wendy Wick writes, “Washington was to become, in his retirement, a national symbol. His accomplishments were no longer seen as the work of a single human being but as the destiny of a new nation. His likeness came to represent the whole country; his career became its history.” Wendy Wick, *George Washington, an American Icon: The Eighteenth-Century Graphic Portraits* (Baltimore: Smithsonian Institution, 1982) 53. Jay Fliegelman also claims that in exalting Washington, the Americans were glorifying themselves. He writes, “The fact that all natives had a character such that, given the right circumstances, they might grow up to be a second Washington, reaffirmed the ultimate power of nurture to create Crèvecoeur’s ‘new man.’” Jay Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 223.

necessary to a successful performance of gentility—a fault particularly upsetting in Washington, who occupied the first station in national life. Of course, Maclay never suggested that Washington put down his hat in front of the assembled senators. Above all else, the “laws” of etiquette needed to be observed.

Nearly every encounter with Washington called forth similar commentary. When he dined with the president, he remarked how the president played with his fork throughout the meal, another small breach of etiquette. After taking the oath of office, Washington gave a short speech. But Maclay could only report on the president’s delivery, criticizing him for trembling and for making a flourish with his right hand “which left rather an ungainly impression” (p. 13). Maclay quickly disparaged this sort of display: “I sincerely, for my part, wished all set ceremony in the hands of the dancing Masters, and that this first of Men, had read off, his address, in the plainest manner without ever taking his Eyes From, the paper. For I felt hurt, that he was not first in every thing” (p. 13). But Maclay could not stop himself from critiquing and even expecting the ceremony of dancing masters, because gentility provided a standard by which to judge other politicians.

In large part, Maclay worried that the president’s example would create such a strong precedent that any false step could be fatal. When Washington instituted a weekly levee for people to visit him and thus free himself from the endless rounds of calling upon people to which he would otherwise be obliged, Maclay saw signs of creeping royalism. “Indeed from these small beginnings I fear we shall follow on,” he wrote, “nor cease till we have reached the summit of Court Etiquette, and all the frivolities fopperies and Expence practised in european Governments” (p. 70). Maclay gradually came to fear that the great man himself had unrepublican sentiments, writing at one point that “I cannot now be mistaken the President wishes to tread on the Necks of the Senate” (p. 131). Maclay worried that the president’s prestige would prove too powerful: “And the President has become in the hands of Hamilton The Dishclout of every dirty Speculation, his name Goes to Wipe away blame and Silence all Murmuring” (p. 321). He feared that the president’s influence would lead the people, through their affection for him, “into an Acquiescence in these Measures that flow from him” (p. 388).

All of these anxieties found their fullest expression when Maclay dined at the White House. Even the invitation was a source of worry. Before he received one, he took it as a compliment to his own rectitude

"That the greatest Men In the World, has not Credit enough with me to influence my conduct in the least" (p. 253). After the invitation, Maclay fretted about ulterior motives. And once he was on the same social stage with Washington, he found himself agonizingly caught between the rules of genteel conduct and a fear of playing the courtier. The first test came with the question of where to sit:

After I had made my bows and was inclining towards a Vacant seat the President Who rose to receive me edged about on the Sofa as he sat down and said here is room. But I had put myself in motion for another Vacant Seat, a true Courtier would have changed, but I am not one, and sat on the opposite Settee or Sofa. With some New England men (pgs. 364-5).

Later at dinner, Maclay found himself caught again: "At Dinner after my second Plate had been taken away, the President offered to help me to part of a Dish which Stood before him. Was ever anything so unluckey, I had just before declined being helped to anything more, with some expression that denoted my having made up my dinner. Had of course for the sake of consistency to thank him negatively" (p. 365). Maclay could finally satisfy both republican rectitude and gentility during desert: "When the desert came and he was distributing a pudding, he gave me a look of interrogation and I returned the thanks positive" (p. 365). The evening began to look even brighter when Maclay found himself singled out for attention: "He soon after asked me to drink a Glass of Wine with him, this was readily accorded to. And What was remarkable, I did not observe him drink with any other Person during dinner" (p. 365).

Maclay considered the evening important enough to return to the entry later to append some further thoughts in an attempt to understand the president's special attentions. He listed the various ways that he had opposed the administration and concluded: "But he knows enough, to satisfy him, That I will be no Senator After 3d of March. And to the Score of his Good Nature Must I place these extra Attentions. Be it so. It is at least One Amiable Treat in his Character" (p. 365). And since he had probably seen Washington for the last time, he decided to "take a review of him As he really is" (p. 365). Most of the description is lost, but what little remains is of a piece with Maclay's other observations, focusing on Washington's appearance, his outward performance, as a potential indicator of his inward virtue:

In Stature about Six feet, with An Unexceptionable Make, but lax Appearance, his frame Would seem to Want filling Up. His Motions rather low than lively, tho he showed no Signs of having suffered either by Gout or Rheumatism. His complexion pale Nay Almost Cadaverous. His Voice hollow and indistinct Owing As I believe to Artificial teeth before in his Upper Jaw (pgs. 365-6).

Perhaps Washington's artificial teeth are the appropriate endpoint, reminding us of Maclay's never-ending attempts to distinguish true republicanism from false in the early republic by examining the manners of his fellow politicians. Maclay's efforts alert us to the difficult questions of behavior being negotiated in the early years of the nation, as politicians struggled to separate the public from the private and to uphold genteel standards, even as they embraced republican simplicity.