

THE STATESMAN PRESIDENT:
JOHN ADAMS STEERED CLEAR OF PARTISAN POLITICS
TO PURSUE DIPLOMACY HEAD-ON

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Introduction

John Adams had an uncanny ability to triumph in history but fail in his own times, to save his country from war but sacrifice his career to partisan strife, and to succeed as a savvy statesman but stumble as a politician. No issue brought out these facets of Adams's character and themes in his career better than the negotiations with France that dominated the work of his one-term administration. Adams brilliantly navigated between the High Federalist war-mongers and Republican Francophiles only to end up in political purgatory and, in his mind, relative historical obscurity. He was dealt this blow despite his honorable pursuit of bipartisan negotiations with France, resulting in the Convention of 1800 and, some have argued, the preservation of an independent America. No reward for this triumph or others materialized, however, because Adams found himself in a new political environment so radically different from the unity of the Revolutionary generation he had helped spearhead decades earlier. From a

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modern perspective, with political parties being anything but a new development, Adams's administration could be characterized as a political comedy of errors. Nonetheless, Adams proved his political courage and embodied a dogged independence perhaps unmatched by any of his presidential successors to this day. Put more succinctly, Adams, in his handling of the French crisis, is the model of a President striving to stay above politics.

Partisanship Blindsides Adams

President George Washington "is fortunate to get off just as the bubble is bursting, leaving others to hold the bag,"¹ Thomas Jefferson wrote during Adams' ascension to the Presidency, and his words could not have been more foreboding. Indeed, on March 13, 1797, during the handover of power, news of the French banishment of American emissary General Charles Cotesworth Pinckney reached Adams, and reports of French seizures of American ships were soon to follow.² Two initiatives Adams had had a hand in as Vice President in the Washington administration—the Neutrality Proclamation and the Jay Treaty—were responsible for the revocation of Pinckney's credentials. The resulting developments would give Adams more of a lesson in partisan politics than in foreign affairs.

Adams's response to the outcry over Pinckney's dismissal was balanced: he promised a "fresh attempt" at negotiations with France on one hand and "effectual measures" of defense on the other, much like the American eagle clutching an olive branch and a bundle of arrows.³ In keeping with the promises made in his address to Congress, when Adams looked for a replacement for Pinckney, James Madison came to mind. When he mentioned Madison—one of the most visible Republican opposition leaders—for the assignment to France, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering replied, "Sending Mr. Madison will make dire work among the passions of our parties in Congress, and out of doors thro' the States."⁴ The politically averse Adams asked in response,

“Are we forever to be overawed and directed by party passions?”⁵ Adams’s seemingly naive question clashed with the nature of politics⁶ at the time to such an extent that Pickering proffered his resignation as a result. As appropriate as his question was—the power of parties did deserve skepticism—Adams’s idea of nominating Madison was symptomatic of his independence from politics. Not only was it improbable that Madison would assent to represent a political enemy abroad, but it was even more improbable that Federalists (like Pickering) would even entertain the notion of approving the nomination. Adams was either oblivious to the political reality or principled enough to defy it—or perhaps some of both. No matter how effective an emissary Madison would have been, Adams’s suggested nomination was an obvious political dead-end.

The concept of the diplomatic mission to France itself—regardless of who manned it—was at odds with the advice of each of Adams’s three cabinet secretaries (Pickering, Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcot, Jr., and Secretary of War James McHenry) as well as with the desires of the Federalist Party at large.⁷ Not that it mattered to Adams, though: he was primarily concerned with adhering to the foreign affairs strategy laid out in his inaugural speech and, ultimately, securing peace with France. He stuck to his foreign policy even if it meant departing from his party. Here, as before, the statesman in Adams trumped whatever politician he had in him.

Only when High Federalist puppet-master Alexander Hamilton deemed it acceptable did the mission get off the ground politically. Nonetheless, more drama was to come. Whereas the cabinet, swayed by Hamilton, insisted Federalists fill all three positions on the commission, Adams demanded that a “moderate”—Judge Francis Dana or Elbridge Gerry—occupy one of the three spots that, as a result of Jefferson’s strong disapproval, Madison was unable to fill.⁸

The XYZ Affair and the Second Diplomatic Mission

At Adams's behest, the diplomatic mission—consisting of Pinckney, John Marshall, and Gerry—departed to mend fences, only to be met in October, 1797 with the famous insulting bribe demand of a \$250,000 *douceur* (sweetener) for Foreign Minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand and a \$10,000,000 loan to the French Republic.⁹ The ensuing so-called XYZ affair—originally announced on March 19, 1798 in front of Congress before scandalous details were available—prompted two of Adams's cabinet members to call for a declaration of war. Had Adams heeded this advice, he could have ridden the wave of popular support and, according to High Federalist calculations, demolished the Republican opposition for good. Indeed, upon addressing the country on the diplomatic disgrace, Adams became equally admired by a vocal majority of his countrymen and his party, achieving near hero status. He received petitions of support from citizens; state militias formed, and donations flowed in to fund a new Navy. Volunteers ranging from artisans to farmers to merchants flocked to enlist. Every type of group and organization imaginable pledged its support in letters to Adams in such volumes that many concluded his popularity had surpassed that of the godlike George Washington.¹⁰ Not swept away in the patriotic fervor, though, Adams wrote to some Connecticut citizens, "I should be happy in the friendship of France upon honorable conditions, under any government she may choose to assume."¹¹ As would become clearer with time, only others seemed capable of winning Adams's popularity, and only Adams seemed best at disposing of it. It was by Talleyrand's insolence that he became popular, but it would be by his own actions that his political gains would evaporate.

Even with such an immense groundswell of support behind him, Adams, as always seemed to be the case, could not help but alienate others. His emphasis on Naval power rather than ground forces ran afoul of the agrarian interests—a bulwark of the

Federalist support outside of New England—and the High Federalists, who followed Hamilton’s lead in demanding a large army. Farmers objected to the Navy because they saw it as a protection of commercial interests and realized the inevitable taxation it would entail. Hamilton, along with his loyal High Federalists, took umbrage because he yearned to be military commander of a large army, and for whatever reason, did not see himself as a Naval commander. Even worse, the cost of the military buildup in the absence of outright war “put the party in an untenable position, incapable of defense at the polls.”¹² Basically, Adams’s moderate course, though perhaps best for the country, was politically unsustainable: peace would appease the Republicans and some moderates, war would draw the support of a great deal of the public, especially the Federalists; but a buildup without war would only enrage the poor, mainly Republican taxpayers, and leave the war-hungry Federalists wanting. Evidently, Adams’s domestic defense policy was heading the same way as his administration—away from nearly all supporters.

On June 21, 1798, mere months after the XYZ uproar, Adams proposed a second diplomatic mission to France, partly to replace Pinckney and Marshall, whom France had expelled. While the most agreeable members of his cabinet and party would tolerate a French diplomatic mission to America on American terms, Adams proceeded with plans for sending off envoys provided they be “received, respected and honored.”¹³ Even the apolitical Adams must have known this new mission would sow the seeds of a grand split in the Federalist Party. After all, Pickering wrote to William Vans Murray, emissary to The Hague, that the entire cabinet was shocked by and roundly opposed to renewed negotiations.¹⁴

The country was equally appalled by the decision. Philadelphia, New York City, Baltimore, Boston, and Newbury had all taken the initiative to build battleships in preparation for war, thinking it was a foregone conclusion.¹⁵ Abigail Adams and the Adams’s entire hometown of Quincy, Massachusetts had come to assume war, with Abigail describing the town, despite its sizeable

Quaker population, as “one military school.”¹⁶ It is safe to say if Adams had asked for a declaration of war, Congress would have granted it in no time. Had this been the case, his party and most of the public would have granted him immense popularity.

Still, Adams stuck to his anti-war strategy, and for good reason. His faith in the Jay Treaty and Washington’s Neutrality Proclamation reflected a long-held belief that war incurred unbearable debts and taxes, and that peace would allow the fledgling nation to chart its own course. Such a principled stance was rare in Adams’s time, with America standing divided “between two warring factions, each prostituted to a foreign power and bent upon the gratification of its own political ambitions at whatever cost to the nation.”¹⁷ Predicting that war would “accelerate the Advent of Monarchy and Aristocracy by at least fifty Years,”¹⁸ Adams often said that he would “defend my mission to France, as long as I have an eye to direct my hand, or a finger to hold my pen.”¹⁹ Just as importantly, Marshall’s return from France on June 17, 1798 and his brief report to Adams confirmed what the wise president had long held to be true, that France did not wish for war.²⁰ Clearly, what was politically astute and what was right for the nation had diverged, and Adams did not hesitate to pursue the latter at the cost of the former.

The Unconscionable Third Mission

By December 1798, Adams’s cabinet was now not necessarily keen on a declaration of war, but it was unanimous in at least demanding a French diplomatic mission come to America on America’s terms. As the predictable party contrarian, Adams in his address to the third session of Congress announced a mission to France in light of French assurances of productive, respectable talks.

Without notifying his cabinet, Adams nominated William Vans Murray to continue negotiations with France on February 18, 1799. The firestorm that would follow made clear this was no

ordinary nomination, to be voted on and passed in the Senate as a typical order of business. The dumbstruck Jefferson halted Senate business to read the nomination note before his colleagues upon receiving it:

Always disposed and ready to embrace every plausible appearance of probability of preserving or restoring tranquility, I nominate William Vans Murray, our minister resident at The Hague, to be minister plenipotentiary of the United States to the French Republic...²¹

When a declaration of war was expected, Adams in no uncertain terms declared peace. As could be expected, Adams made no political friends with this move, and lost many of the ones that he had had. Pickering compared the nomination to “sufferings of the damned,” and Federalist Robert G. Harper hoped Adams would break his neck on his return trip to Quincy.²² A “thunderstruck” Theodore Sedgwick, a Federalist Congressional leader, raved: “Had the foulest heart and the ablest head in the world, been permitted to select the most embarrassing and ruinous measure, perhaps it would have been precisely the one which had been adopted.”²³ The Republicans acted much like Jefferson, who gleefully watched the implosion of the Federalist Party rather than give Adams any credit for trying to reconcile with France.²⁴ It goes without saying that political considerations took a backseat to ones of national security for Adams, a far cry from the blending of the two in the hands of many politicians.

As shocking as this announcement was to his party and the country, many of Adams’s trusted friends had been kept in the loop. Murray, Thomas Boylston Adams, and John Quincy Adams had all urged the president to take the Talleyrand letter promising fruitful negotiations at face value and pursue talks.²⁵ Neither his party nor his cabinet nor the people, for that matter, really had Adams’s ear; only his friends and family did. This idea is almost quaint in the modern political arena, in which most Presidents have their ears tuned to their advisers and the polling data that they read like Holy Scripture. For most of these modern politicians, trusted friends and family need to come after party.

Adams, with statesmanlike resolve, resisted unabated calls for scratching the mission. Senate leader Sedgwick wrote, “[Adams] declared repeatedly that to defend the executive against oligarchic influence, it was indispensable that he should insist on a decision on the nomination.”²⁶ Murray would be accompanied by Patrick Henry and Oliver Ellsworth, a modification to the plan that did nothing to appease the Federalists. Indeed, John Fenno, publisher and printer of the *Gazette of the United States*, resigned from his post out of sheer shock. In pursuing peace diplomatically, Adams seemed to be courting war politically, and he got his fight.

To win the Senate’s approval of the mission, Adams had to threaten to martyr himself as the victim of partisan politics. He wrote:

If anyone entertaining the idea that, because I am a President of three votes only, I am in the power of a party, they shall find that I am no more so than the Constitution forces upon me. If the combination of Senator, General and Head of Department shall be formed as I cannot resist, and measures are demanded of me that I cannot adopt, my remedy is plain and certain. I will try my own strength at resistance first however.²⁷

Speaking so bluntly today about relinquishing the presidency to a political adversary would be difficult to believe, but the Federalists in Adams’s day must have taken this less than veiled allusion to resignation seriously, as British Minister Robert Liston wrote:

I am assured in confidence that...he went so far as to threaten to resign and to leave the Government in the hands of Mr. Jefferson, who would of course [under] the American Constitution hold the office of President during the remainder of the term for which Mr. Adams and he were jointly chosen at the last election. The federal party have felt the necessity of temporary forbearance, and seem determined, for the sake of the Country, to continue to give the Chief Magistrate their support.²⁸

His resignation threat saved his term, for the Federalists acquiesced to some degree. But it helped doom his reelection, with Federalists now plotting to deprive Adams of support. Still, the wiggle-room the threat had afforded Adams allowed him to closely

supervise—for good reason—the sending off of the third and final diplomatic mission to France on November 3, 1799.

The outcome of the resignation threat should not be confused with its intentions. Its effectiveness at keeping the High Federalists breathing down Adams's neck at arm's length was probably a testament to its sincerity: given Adams's undeniable history of reaching out to the opposition—to Jefferson himself early in the administration—there was a belief that he really would hand over power to Jefferson. That is, if internal party politics had continued to interfere with his negotiations with France, Adams was prepared to deprive his party of the Presidency in the interest of diplomacy.

As the political fallout from the mission spread, Adams, certainly not coincidentally, retreated to Quincy for seven months. In typical Adams fashion, the retreat attracted blame from both parties. "The public sentiment is very much against your being so much away from the seat of government. They did not elect your officers, nor do they...think them equal to govern without your presence and control," one concerned Federalist associate wrote.²⁹ Echoing the sentiment, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert wrote to Adams on September 13, "that artful designing men might make such use of your absence" to "make your next election less honorable than it would otherwise be."³⁰ Adams's response: "I have only one favor to beg, and that is that a certain election may be wholly laid out of this question and all others."³¹

His seclusion was both a symbolic and pragmatic manifestation of his conception of the Presidency, as historian Joseph J. Ellis describes so well:

Adams never doubted the wisdom of his French policy, which was rooted in convictions about American foreign policy that he had developed during a quarter century of public service. Nor did he have any second thoughts about breaking with the High Federalists, especially Hamilton. By doing so he placed himself in the most attractive position imaginable, at least for a man of his disposition: a leader without a party, whose independence is unalloyed and whose virtuous motives cannot be attributed to a crass craving for popularity.³²

Adams considered himself just as much or even more of a President hibernating in Quincy than wheeling and dealing in Philadelphia. In his mind, alienation and unpopularity were perhaps the greatest indicators of—perhaps he would go so far as to say prerequisites for—levelheaded, virtuous leadership, especially given the development of political parties.³³ Pride and popularity, he had come to realize, were the downfall of great men and empires alike. This is why fame must come posthumously, Adams thought, and why he fretted about how doubtful his legacy was as he neared his death.³⁴

An Unfitting End to the Administration

With election season approaching, the Federalists had serious reservations about Adams. In October 1799, Pickering laid bare the political consequences of Adams's negotiations with France:

... This fatal error will subvert the present administration & with them the government itself. Mr. Adams has not by this mission gained one friend among the democrats; to their former *hatred* will now be added *another sensation*: while among the federalists he has forfeited the support of his best friends and our most estimable citizens.³⁵

As much as he strove to stay above partisan politics, the heated campaign of 1800 subjected Adams's character and career to the most devastating political attacks. He, unlike the other candidates, was showered with criticism from *both* sides of the political spectrum, from the Republicans for being firm in confronting France, and from the high Federalists for not going to war with France.³⁶ It was a sad irony that the most nonpartisan man in all of politics was also the most victimized man in all of politics.

Adams anticipated the election of 1800 in a way no politician today could fathom. He wanted a Federalist victory not for what the victory would do for the party but rather what the party would do for the country. On a personal level, he hoped the election would serve as some type of mandate or vote of confi-

dence, proof that his courage in charting his own course in the turbulent political waters of the time would resonate with voters.

At the same time he was entirely realistic, and in no way possessed by his desire for success in the election. Indeed, he “at times seemed almost to court defeat, perhaps in the belief that it might prove his own continuing integrity.”³⁷ There was a certain pleasure and sense of distinction in not groveling to the public and pandering to the parties, and then seeing this noble approach to governing reflected in the polls. Historian John R. Howe articulates this approach best:

From a belief that he knew better than most men where America’s advantage lay, he came to affirm that he alone knew. Where once he had assumed that virtue and popularity could go hand in hand, he now questioned their relationship increasingly until in his own mind the two became separated altogether.³⁸ As Adams himself put it, “...flattery is as base an artifice, and as pernicious a vice, when offered to the people, as when given to others.”³⁹

And it was not that Adams eschewed political parties for political reasons in the same way some modern politicians purport to put public interest above party. His individualism was rooted in his faith in Republican values, and in opposition to the “special interests bent solely upon their own gratification”⁴⁰ that challenged these values. His aversion to the new type of politics that festered during his term was long-standing and engrained—in no way political, in the modern sense of the term. That is to say, he professed to be above politics for the sake of the country, not for the sake of cajoling voters disgusted with partisanship. As early as 1780, Adams presciently remarked:

There is nothing which I dread so much as a division of the republic into two great parties, each arranged under its leader, and concerting measures in opposition to each other. This, in my humble apprehension, is to be dreaded as the greatest political evil under our Constitution.⁴¹

He would indeed hold true to this observation as President, not making “the choice of a party for its own ends, but of the nation for the national good.”⁴² As linchpin of the united Revolutionary generation, Adams wholeheartedly resisted the transition to the

new reality of political parties. Indeed, with Americanism having given way to allegiance to either the pro-French Republicans or the pro-British Federalists, Adams lamented, "How mighty a power is the spirit of party!...How decisive and unanimous it is!"⁴³

American delegates signed the Convention of 1800 with France, though it was too late to influence the election, which Adams ended up losing to Jefferson and Burr, the highly partisan frontrunners. It seems history can reward the statesman or the politician, but not both. The arrows-and-olive-branch approach alienated Adams from his own party and from the opposition. In particular, placing Hamilton second-in-command doomed the Republican vote and sending delegations to France did the same for the die-hard Federalist vote.

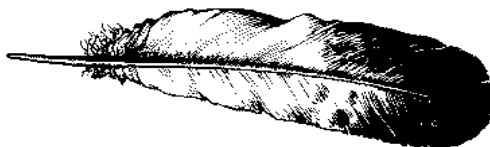
The loss revealed much more than about Adams being a President above politics, there was some degree of deliberate and unavoidable political miscalculation, no doubt out of his desire to continue the unpopular negotiations with France. Historian David McCullough puts it well:

In the last analysis, however, it was not Jefferson or the 'dexterous' Burr who defeated Adams so much as the Federalist war faction and the rampaging Hamilton. And none of this would have happened but for Adams' decision to send the second peace mission to France. It was his determination to find peace and check Hamilton that cost him the full support of the party and thus the election.⁴⁴

This is not to say Adams' foreign policy was the only right one, though historians regard it as wise. He was driven by his convictions and philosophy, not by anything else—a hallmark of the Adams model. This is perhaps best illustrated by noting the motives behind the High Federalists' plans in contrast. Their drive was not conviction but rather ambition—an alliance with England, the liberation of South America, the acquisition of the Floridas and Louisiana, and above all, the death of the Republican opposition.⁴⁵ Adams' philosophy and wisdom were a means of achieving a diplomatic end: the cessation of hostilities with France. For Hamilton, the foreign policy crisis was a means of achieving a political end: the dominance of the Federalists.

Conclusion

The Adams administration is a case study in how to save a country only to lose an election. Adams' qualities as a statesman are manifest throughout his term: an undying nonpartisan spirit, especially in his appointment of emissaries; a persistence that could weather public outcry, with his calm during the XYZ affair outrage being the obvious example, and a knack for confiding in the right people, like Marshall, to resolve a crisis. These very qualities, however, proved to be wholly incompatible with the new reality of political parties: his constant nonpartisan spirit simply alienated both parties; the dogged persistence prevented Adams from capitalizing on public support after the XYZ affair; and the exclusion of his own Federalist advisers from important decisions is what truly turned his own party against him. Diplomatic and political success, it must have dawned on Adams, seemed mutually exclusive. Perhaps knowing he could not have averted war and won reelection, Adams found no fault with his dealings with France, calling them "the most splendid diamond in my crown."⁴⁶ It is telling that he wished this achievement of a lifetime to adorn his tombstone. Since it had not been properly appreciated by the public of his time, he would have to take it to his grave for later generations to unearth.



- ¹ David McCullough, John Adams (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001) p. 476
- ² *Ibid.*, p. 477
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 484
- ⁴ Manning J. Dauer, The Adams Federalists (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1953) p. 125
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125
- ⁶ “Politics” henceforth refers specifically to party politics rather than government operation in general.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 126
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130
- ⁹ McCullough, p. 495
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 500
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 501
- ¹² Dauer, p. 226
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 142
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 189
- ¹⁵ McCullough, p. 504
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 504
- ¹⁷ John R. Howe, The Changing Political Thought of John Adams (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966) p. 202
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204
- ¹⁹ Joseph J. Ellis, Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993) p. 76
- ²⁰ McCullough, p. 503
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 532
- ²² McCullough, p. 524
- ²³ Ellis, p. 33
- ²⁴ McCullough, p. 524
- ²⁵ Dauer, p. 231
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 232
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 238
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 238
- ²⁹ McCullough, p. 526
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 529
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 529
- ³² Ellis, p. 36
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 36
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 80
- ³⁵ Dauer, p. 246
- ³⁶ McCullough, p. 544

- ³⁷ Howe, p. 213
³⁸ Ibid., p. 215
³⁹ Dauer, p. 38
⁴⁰ Howe, p. 102
⁴¹ Ibid., p. 195
⁴² Ibid., p. 196
⁴³ Ibid., p. 212
⁴⁴ McCullough, p. 577
⁴⁵ Dauer, p. 172
⁴⁶ Ellis, p. 77

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This leads me to speak of my watchmate for nine months—and, taking him all in all, the most remarkable man I have ever seen—Tom Harris. An hour, every night, while lying in port, Harris and myself had the deck to ourselves, and walking fore and aft, night after night, for months, I learned his whole character and history, and more about foreign nations, the habits of different people, and especially the secrets of sailors' lives and hardships, and also of practical seamanship, (in which he was abundantly capable of instructing me,) than I could ever have learned elsewhere. But the most remarkable thing about him, was the power of his mind. His memory was perfect; seeming to form a regular chain, reaching from his earliest childhood up to the time I knew him, without one link wanting. I called myself pretty quick at figures, and had been through a course of mathematical studies; but, working by my head, I was unable to keep within sight of this man, who had never been beyond arithmetic: so rapid was his calculation. He carried in his head not only a log-book of the whole voyage, in which everything was complete and accurate, and from which no one ever thought of appealing, but also an accurate registry of all the cargo; knowing, precisely, where each thing was, and how many hides we took in at every port.

One, night, he made a rough calculation of the number of hides that could be stowed in the lower hold, between the fore and main mast, taking the depth of the hold and breadth of beam, (for he always knew the dimension of every part of the ship, before he had been a month on board,) and the average area and thickness of a hide; he came surprisingly near the number, as it afterwards turned out. The mate frequently came to him to know the capacity of different parts of the vessel, and he could tell the sailmaker very nearly the amount of canvas he would want for each sail in the ship; for he knew the hoist of every mast, and spread of every sail, on the head and foot, in feet and inches. When we were at sea, he kept a running account, in his head, of the ship's way—the number of knots and the courses; and, if the courses did not vary much during the twenty-four hours, by taking the whole progress, and allowing so many eighths southing or northing, to so many easting or westing; he would make up his reckoning just before the captain took the sun at noon, and often came wonderfully near the mark. Calculation of all kinds was his delight. He had, in his chest, several volumes giving accounts of inventions in mechanics, which he read with great pleasure, and made himself master of. I doubt if he ever forgot anything that he read.