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A Vernacular Republican Rhetoric: William Manning's *Key of Liberty*

Jennifer R. Mercieca & James Arnt Aune

Our analysis of farmer and tavern-keeper William Manning's 1798 Key of Liberty extends the concept of American republican rhetoric to include both elite and vernacular forms. We find that the key components of Manning's vernacular republicanism are: an aggressive use of the rhetoric of critique; the demand for transparency in public argument; the rejection of elite leadership; and the belief that decisions must be made in the interest of the common good. We compare vernacular to elite republicanism and conclude that the vernacular perspective has endured in American reform rhetoric.

Keywords: *Rhetoric; Elite Republicanism; Vernacular Republicanism; William Manning; Key of Liberty*

In a free government the few, finding their schemes & vues of interest borne down by the many, to gain the power they cant constitutionally obtain, Always indeavour to git it by cunning & corruption, contious at the same time that usurpation when once began the safty of the userper consists ondy in grasping the hole. To efect this no cost nor pains is spared, but they first unite their plans & schemes by asotiations, conventions, & coraspondances with each other. The Merchants asotiate by themselves, the Phitisians by themselves, the Ministers by themselves, the Juditial & Executive Officers are by their professions often called together & know each others minds, & all letirary men & the over grown rich, that can live without labouring, can spare time for consultation. All being bound together by common interest, which is the strongest bond of union, join in their secret coraspondance to counter act the interests of the many & pick their pockets, which is efected ondy for want of the meens of knowledge amoung them.¹

BillERICA, Massachusetts farmer and tavern-keeper William Manning believed that the republicanism of the Revolution had been hijacked by a cabal of elites who, because of their “common interest,” conspired to rob the rightful rulers of the nation of their

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fair share of power. In the *Key of Liberty*, a manifesto written shortly after the House of Representatives agreed to fund “the monster” known as Jay’s Treaty, he poured out his frustrations with the ruling elite and called on his fellow sufferers to unite to reclaim the government. His extended essay is noteworthy in the context of early American history because he clearly demonstrates the rift between the promise of a republicanism in which the people held power and the reality of a republicanism in which the people held very little power. While the duality of appearance versus reality was plain to Manning, the question on his mind was how to temper the “cunning & corruption” of the elite in a “free government” where the few have power and the many have the duty to stem the tide of such corruption. His answer was that while it was natural for “common interest” to bind the few, the many had not realized that they also shared a common interest that was distinct from the few. He believed that if the many would associate and educate themselves, then the corruption of the elite would end. Manning thus imagined himself to be duty-bound to expose the elite’s machinations of power and to motivate the many to associate, educate themselves, and save the republic.

We take Manning’s essay to be representative of what can be called a “vernacular republicanism,” or, a republicanism that views the few as corrupt and the many as the rightful rulers of the government.² Manning earnestly believed that the many should hold political power, and his essay is thus also noteworthy as an embodiment of vernacular republican rhetoric. In other words, Manning drew from a republican rhetorical tradition that is distinctly egalitarian and used the *topoi* of that tradition to advance his arguments. By calling Manning’s rhetoric “vernacular republicanism” we mean to suggest both that republicanism can be vernacular in Benedict Anderson’s use of the term as the existing indigenous languages or dialects that people use in specific locations, or as he calls it “the warp and woof of their lives,” and a view of republicanism that political taxonomists would recognize as direct participatory democracy. Our discussion of Manning’s essay is meant to demonstrate the existence of this form of republicanism and to delineate some of the important features of its rhetorical embodiment. It will become readily apparent to students of republican rhetoric that Manning’s essay shares little in common with Cicero’s “republican style” described by Robert Hariman or Thomas Jefferson’s “felicitous republicanism” described by Stephen Browne. Manning’s essay is not the eloquent treatise that one would expect in the high republican style, but what Manning lacks in refinement he makes up for in earnestness and emotion. Manning’s vernacular republicanism is based upon the fear of corruption and is motivated by the common good just like “elite republicanism,” but whereas elite republicanism found corruption in the tyranny of monarchy, vernacular republicanism extends the locus of corruption to the tyranny of the elite in all of their forms, be they monarchs, aristocrats, or the monied class.

Michael P. Kramer writes that after the Revolution:

Americans realized that their experiment in self-government put an extraordinary burden upon public opinion and, hence, upon the dissemination of information

and political debate; and discourses on language—whose subject is, in these terms, the very foundation of the American polity—are rich repositories of nationalist hopes and fears.³

Manning was keenly aware of the role of public opinion in the American republican experiment; indeed, his goal in the *Key* is to create a new consensus among laborers and to rally them to take a more active part in forming and communicating their opinions. The great controversies of the 1790s—over the Bank, Jay’s Treaty, the Alien and Sedition Acts, and the French Revolution—were, Thomas Gustafson writes, a “Thucydidean moment,” where a republic confronts the reality that political and linguistic disorders are one and the same: “when fortune or necessity or corruption defeats virtue, or when moral and political stability—and the code of language that sustains that stability—collapses into confusion and the muteness of violence.”⁴ Manning’s solution for the Thucydidean crisis of the republic was for the many to improve their own organization, communication, and education. He believed that the republic could be saved from the corruption of the elite if a national society of laborers was founded and a monthly magazine of political education was made cheaply available to all.

Although Manning has been treated as a proto-Marxist because of his call for a society of laborers, it makes more sense to read him as an example of how a vernacular republican style developed alongside more elite forms. He provided an essentially communicative definition of class power, a democratic alternative to classical eloquence, and a political theory that relies more on equal access to the means of communication than to the means of production. Demonstrating that he was not aware of his own rhetoricity Manning distrusted political elites in part because they used “all the arts & re trick Hell can invent” to deceive the many. Thus, Manning himself has suggested an interpretation of his text: there are two kinds of republican rhetorics, one that is trickery and one that is transparent. Like the elites of his era Manning rehashes “the causes that ruen republicks” in considerable detail, yet Manning diverged from an elite republican view of corruption by blaming the problem of corruption on the merchants, physicians, ministers, writers, and especially lawyers who organize themselves efficiently; who restrict access to useful information; and who conduct public argument in artfully misleading ways.⁵

We believe that Manning’s *Key of Libberty* is interesting both as an example of the use of vernacular republican rhetoric and for how he envisions the ideal American republican political community. With this analysis we hope to broaden the conception of republican rhetoric to include both elite and vernacular forms. We believe that it is necessary to broaden our conception of republican rhetoric for two main reasons. First, our current understanding is one-dimensional, and therefore necessarily incomplete. Second, we believe that the language of criticism embodied in the vernacular republican form remains a prominent feature of American political discourse, and therefore requires further study. We proceed first by briefly discussing the circumstances of the composition and recovery of Manning’s work. Next, we describe Manning’s response to the political controversies of the 1790s. Finally, we delineate the main features of Manning’s vernacular republican public sphere. From

this analysis it becomes clear that Manning believed that while elites were battling for political power during the age of Federalism, he and the rest of the many were relegated to the margins of political debate and forced into the position of helpless spectators.

Composing the *Key of Liberty*

Manning submitted his treatise in April 1798 to Thomas Adams, editor of the Boston *Independent Chronicle*, the only republican newspaper in the area. It was not an auspicious time for submitting the manuscript. The XYZ Affair occurred in the same month, resulting in an explosion of popular support for Federalist policy towards France, and culminating in a quasi-war as well as the Alien and Sedition Acts. Thomas Adams and his brother Abijah were arraigned for seditious libel. Thomas died before his trial, and Abijah served 30 days in jail. The manuscript of the *Key* was returned unread. A year later Manning tried again, shortening the treatise, adding some religious and moral arguments, and toning down attacks on George Washington. It is unclear what Abijah Adams did then, since no correspondence survives, but the *Key* was never printed in the *Chronicle* or elsewhere until 1922.⁶ It is unlikely that the paper would have printed the *Key* anyway. As Samuel Eliot Morison points out, it was hardly in the paper's interest to encourage the publication of a much cheaper monthly magazine.⁷ Further, it is unlikely that the editor was able to make it past Manning's spelling.⁸ Finally, it appears that the press of the time was moving away from longer, reflective essays toward what we would recognize as "news" stories and entertaining features.⁹

The 1798 version of the *Key* was privately printed in 1922 by the Manning Family Association, which had retained Manning's papers. The young Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison provided a brief introduction and some notes, as well as adding some punctuation and paragraphing to make the text more readable. This edition was reprinted in *William and Mary Quarterly* in 1956. For the convenience of readers, we will use the *William and Mary Quarterly* version, since it is more widely accessible than the 1922 book. Morison found in the *Key* "a lonely American whisper of Karl Marx's cry, 'Workers of the World, Unite!'"¹⁰ The first extended discussions of Manning appeared in two radical newspapers of the 1920s, *The Call* and *The Freeman*.¹¹ Subsequent references to the *Key* reveal the shifting paradigms of American historical scholarship. Eugene Link in 1942 praised the work and analyzed it in the larger context of the Democratic-Republican societies of the 1790s.¹² Merle Curti made a brief reference to its "crude but vigorous idiom" in his *Growth of American Thought*.¹³ A counter-Progressive reading was provided by Richard Hofstadter in *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, where he saw Manning as representative of the "primitivist and anti-intellectualist populism" that took over popular parties at the beginning of the 19th century. He claimed that "to Manning learning and knowledge were of interest mainly as class weapons."¹⁴

More recent discussion of Manning follows the growth of social history since the 1960s, with its concern for writing history "from the bottom up." The critical legal

studies theorist Christopher Tomlins uses the *Key* as the opening anecdote of his history of labor law in the United States, claiming that Manning had forged “a republican language that was also a language of class.”¹⁵ In 1993 the radical labor historians Michael Merrill and Sean Wilentz published the 1799 version of the *Key* with an extensive introduction and notes (Harvard University Press: the choice of publisher would no doubt have shocked William Manning). Merrill and Wilentz’s edition is a remarkable scholarly achievement; they have ferreted out what must be every available bit of information about Manning’s life, down to the fact that his house in Billerica is now a Szechuan restaurant.¹⁶ Merrill and Wilentz are clearly enthusiastic about Manning, and view their project as part of the larger attempt to recover what they call “the plebeian intellectual life of the early Republic.” Edmund S. Morgan, in his review of their book, argues that Merrill and Wilentz are responding to the urgent need of the American left to “discover native non-Marxian roots” after the collapse of Communism, and sees little to value in Manning other than the entertainment provided by his conspiracy theory about the Society of the Cincinnati.¹⁷ Our analysis of Manning thus builds on and diverges from these former accounts. Rather than reducing Manning’s arguments to “entertainment” or “proto-Marxism,” we believe that a careful reading of the *Key* reveals the tension between the promise of a republicanism resting on the will of the people and the reality of a republicanism controlled by the elite. Reconstructing the Thucydidean crises of the 1790s from Manning’s perspective allows us to view these events as he did—as evidence of an elite cabal. It was this elite cabal that motivated him to write the *Key*.

Beginning of Party Politics, Hamilton’s Economics, and Jay’s Treaty

It is difficult to know exactly where one should begin when describing the origins of the political animosities between Alexander Hamilton’s Federalists and Thomas Jefferson’s Republicans. Any narrative describing the brewing hostilities of America’s first political parties would seem reductive and simplistically linear. William Manning viewed the events of the 1790s and the attendant elite debates over public policy with such simplistic linearity; he saw the political world that unfolded before him as portentous of a slippery slope to despotism. Not only was the nation heading for “ruen,” but also it was abundantly clear to Manning that while the Federalists and the Republicans debated the important questions of the day, common folks like him were excluded from the conversation. The vernacular republican perspective found in the *Key* allows Manning to critique the elite’s machinations of power and to encourage the many to save the republic from corruption. We therefore gain both insight into how Manning viewed the political questions of the 1790s and an example of the vernacular republican language of critique by listening closely to Manning’s arguments.

In 1789 Americans experienced a brief moment of hopeful perceived political unanimity when then Federalist James Madison acquiesced to Anti-Federalist concerns and proposed what became the Bill of Rights to the First Congress.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the utopian moment of party unanimity could not be sustained in the face of real political differences and philosophical interpretations of American republican political theory.¹⁹ The American economy was in dire straits and Treasury Secretary Hamilton's proposals—assumption of state debts, funding, and the first National Bank—smacked of an attempt to create a British capitalist empire to many of those who had been Anti-Federalists during ratification. The old Antis coalesced around their distrust of Hamilton and his policies and became the Republican opposition party. Madison, like most Southerners, found himself more sympathetic with the Republican vision of an agrarian, middling economy, and became a regrettable loss to the Federalist cause.²⁰ Hamilton was able to use the Federalist majority to get his economic plans passed, but the seeds of bitter discontent were planted and what was initially merely opposition became an internal war between what Republicans argued was the party of the people versus the party of the elite; the party of France versus the party of Britain; and the party of the agrarian interests versus the party of the capitalist interests. Republicans like Thomas Jefferson were able to present a vision of republicanism to the masses that ambiguously promised more democratic control of the government. Such arguments may have resonated with William Manning because he sided with the Republican perspective over the Federalist majority. The Society of Cincinnati, Hamilton's economic policies, the military suppression of the 1794 Whiskey Rebellion, and the final straw, the ratification of Jay's Treaty with Britain, were all evidence of

the unweryed pains & the unjustifiable measures taken by large numbers of all orders of men who git a living without labour in Elections & many other things to ingure the interests of the Labourer & deprive us of the priviledges of a free government.²¹

We believe that Manning identified with the Republican Party because he agreed with their rhetoric of opposition and critique, although it is clear in retrospect that the Republicans did not wish to share political power with the many any more than the Federalist did.²² We will briefly review each of these controversies and Manning's reaction to them in order to describe the exigency that he felt when composing his *Key of Libberty*.

The Society of Cincinnati

While late 18th-century America was nominally egalitarian, as Gordon Wood has noted, a sense of hierarchical entitlement lingered in the minds of many of the country's elite. According to Wood the Revolution confused many of the traditional relationships between the many and the few:

Everywhere ordinary people were no longer willing to play their accustomed roles in the hierarchy, no longer willing to follow their callings, no longer willing to restrict their consumption of goods. They were less dependent, less willing to walk while gentleman rode, less willing to doff their caps, less deferential, less passive, less respectful of those above them.²³

One way in which the few had previously displayed their superiority was through accepting officer commissions during the French–Indian War (which introduced George Washington to Americans) and the American Revolution. It was quite common for retired officers to use their rank for the rest of their lives. For example, people referred to Aaron Burr as Colonel Burr even while he was the Vice-President; in a classless society like America such titles amounted to an American version of an aristocracy. Such was the complaint anyway when at the close of the Revolution American officers formed the Society of Cincinnati. While the Society was named after the Roman legend of Cincinnatus, who was “called from his plow to rescue Rome, and return[ed] to his plow when danger had passed,” Manning viewed the Society of Cincinnati as part of an aristocratic plot to prevent hard-working average citizens from exercising their fair share of political power.²⁴ Manning demonstrated his vernacular understanding of republicanism by devoting several pages to demonstrating exactly how the Society had exploited its position, and how average people could take the country back from “this ordir.”²⁵ Manning was not alone in his criticism. For example, on February 8, 1787 a group calling itself “Massachusetts Soldiery” condemned the Society for using the legend of the Roman hero to further their own, less heroic ends:

[W]hy do these officers assume the appellation of Cincinnati, without imitating the virtues of their patron? . . . Do they, like Cincinnatus, cheerfully return to tread those humble paths, in which they patiently walked before the war, the occupation of mechanicks and the pursuits of husbandry? Did he claim the favour of his country, and wish to be the sole master of the labour of that people, and the property of that country, which he fondly imagined he had saved?²⁶

Manning agreed with this critique of the Society as a cabal of elites without virtue who made claims to the “favour” of the country.

The Society was made up of officers serving at the end of the Revolution, “or those who had served for three years at the end of the Revolution, or those who had served for three years at the officer level, and their direct male descendants.”²⁷ It was the hereditary character of membership that worried many Americans, and not just Morison’s “plain folk.” John Adams wrote to Lafayette in 1784 that the Society was “the first step taken to defame the beauty of our temple of Liberty.”²⁸ A pamphlet by Aedanus Burke, under the name of “Cassius,” entitled “Considerations on the Order or Society of Cincinnati” was widely circulated and Manning’s beloved *Independent Chronicle* published extracts in 1784. Town meetings throughout Massachusetts passed resolutions condemning pensions granted to members by Congress in 1783 (members were to receive five years’ full pay in government securities bearing 6% interest).

The General Court protested as well, and on March 22, 1784 the Massachusetts legislature adopted a resolution condemning the Society.²⁹ George Washington was so concerned about the public image of the Society that he asked for Thomas Jefferson’s advice. Jefferson hated the Society, but encouraged Washington to ask them to change the hereditary aspect of membership. The national proposal to eliminate hereditary membership, adopted in 1786, defused some of the opposition,

although the Massachusetts chapter, which was the largest (some 300 members), reversed itself in 1788.³⁰

The name of the Society must have seemed a characteristic sort of “aristocratic” trickery to our labourer, who had actually touched a plow. He cast doubt on the honesty of the Society’s alteration of its constitution and its public defense of itself, since immediately afterwards “their was a continual noys & wrighting from one end of the Continent to the other against the badness of publick credit, & the weekness & inefitancy of the Federal Government.”³¹ The next sentence seems to imply that the Society actually fomented Shays’ Rebellion in order to have an excuse to suppress it: “When the Shais affair happened in Massachusetts it was heded by one of this ordir & many of the rest of them put under pay to suppress it.” It is true that two members took part in the Rebellion, but they were expelled from the Society afterwards. Further, Manning believed that the Society had attempted to “establish a monorcal government in ordir to have their president [George Washington] made king,” but had failed at the Constitutional Convention. Still, they “rigeled themselves into almost all the posts of profit & honour in the federal Government,” and proceeded to create the funding and assumption system, start the Indian War, and make the Jay Treaty.³²

At first sight, this appears to be yet another instance of Hofstadter’s “paranoid style,” but by the standards of the day it was actually rather a mild critique (compare the High Federalists’ considerably more elaborate Illuminati conspiracy).³³ Manning’s criticism of the Society is of specific interest to our argument; his understanding of republicanism is distinctly vernacular because he argued that the Society was the planner and leader of other organizations of the few.³⁴ He lists a number of “ordirs of the few” who use government in their own interests, including “speculators, Stock & Land Jobers,” “Doctors,” “Marchants,” “Literary Men and Coledges,” and especially lawyers who:

have established their Bar Meetings & become the most formidable & influential ordir of any in the Government, & though they are nither Juditial nor Executive officers, but a kind of Mule ordir, engendered by, & many times overawing both. This ordir of men git their living intirely from the quarrils follyes disputes & destreses of the Many & the intricacy of our Laws.³⁵

The fact that this “ordir of men” earns its living “intirely from the quarrils follyes disputes & destreses of the Many & the intricacy of our Laws” suggests that the many viewed the political crises of the 1790s as the result of the tricky elite republican rhetoric of the few. As Manning argued, without a free press and more transparency in legal and political rhetoric, the many will continue to be oppressed. This version of republicanism is distinctly different from more elite forms, which would have argued that these orders of men were precisely the right rulers of the government. By labeling the elite as leaders of a cabal Manning reverses the assumptions of elite republican order and demonstrates that elites are just as corrupt as monarchs. This is of specific importance to vernacular republican rhetoric because the only solution to this form of corruption is for the many to seize power from the elites and save the republic from corruption.

Hamilton's Economic Program

The first great controversy of the newly created United States of America centered on Alexander Hamilton's economic program. For many Federalists the primary reason for supporting the new Constitution had been the hope that through the federal system American credit abroad could be rescued from its near bankrupt state, ending the financial depression that had begun in 1785. Thus, Federalists were generally supportive of Hamilton's plan. However, some of the old Federalists and Anti-Federalists were still skeptical of federal concentration of power and upon Hamilton's September 11, 1789 nomination as Secretary of Treasury, James Madison argued that the Treasury should not be run on the British model of a single, supremely powerful and odious officer, but by a more democratic board of officers. Federalist Fisher Ames reminded such skeptics that the state of America's finances "presents to the imagination a deep, dark, and dreary chaos; impossible to be reduced to order without the mind of the architect is clear and capacious, and his power commensurate to the occasion; he must not be the flitting creature of a day."³⁶ Madison's side of the argument lost and Hamilton was confirmed as the Secretary of the Treasury on the same day as his nomination.

Hamilton's plan was controversial for several reasons. First, many Americans distrusted Hamilton and therefore did not want to grant him so much power over the new nation. Second, many Americans wanted the economy to remain agrarian, rather than capitalist. And third, Hamilton's programs seemed to be the means of consolidating federal power for dangerous ends.³⁷ Hamilton believed that the American economy required a standing debt (the higher the better, he reasoned), freely circulating currency, and the prompt payment of foreign loans. His Federalist friends and predecessors from the Confederation Finance Department, Robert Morris and his assistant, the Constitutional stylist Gouverneur Morris (no relation), agreed with Hamilton's plan, as did most of the Federalists who voted it into effect. For example, President Washington was so pleased with the House's approbation of Hamilton's system that he included mention of it in his January 8, 1790 message to Congress:

I saw with peculiar pleasure, at the close of the last session, the resolution entered into by you, expressive of your opinion that an adequate provision for the support of the public credit, is a matter of high importance to the national honor and prosperity. In this sentiment I entirely concur.³⁸

Specifically, the Hamiltonian finance plan required three controversial maneuvers: first, the assumption by the federal government of state debts contracted through the Revolution and a new federal loan to pay off all such debt; second, new taxes on wines, spirits, teas, and coffees and a more stringent collection of customs duties to pay down the big debt that the federal government was to assume; and third, the creation of the Bank of the United States. Support for Hamilton's measures came mostly from the merchants, manufacturers, and shipping industries of the northeast, from southerners whose states had not paid off their revolutionary debts, and from those who had personally bought up large shares of old depreciated notes and who

now stood to make a great profit on the federal government's plan to pay back current holders of these state and Confederation notes at face value. Opposition to Hamilton's plan came from strict Constitutional constructionists who did not agree with Hamilton that Congress had implied powers to effect his system, from representatives from states that had paid off their Revolutionary debt and did not think that they should now be punished by paying for the debt of others, from representatives who found Hamilton's proposal to pay current note holders instead of the original holders (and patriotic Revolutionary War soldiers and supporters) unjust, and from those who feared that the whole plan seemed a little too British and capitalist for their view of American republicanism. In the end Hamilton's plan passed as proposed with a little help from Madison and Jefferson, who bartered (and who later regretted bartering) the location of the seat of the federal government. The fury over Hamilton's economic system set Republicans on the path of opposition.³⁹

As we would suspect of someone who held the vernacular republican perspective, Manning viewed the assumption of state debts, increased taxes, and note redemption as an aristocratic plot to deprive the common man of his livelihood. Consistent with his vernacular critique of the Society of Cincinnati, Manning viewed Hamilton's economic program as further evidence of the corruption of the elite and the ruin of the Republic:

[the burden of the national debt] is 25 Dollors apeas for each man woman & child to pay, & seposing there is as many women as men & all of it assessed on the males, makes it 50 dollers apeace, which according as taxes are leveled in Massachusets it would come to near two hundred dollars apeace for common or midling farmers to pay, And this is not halfe the dammages of the funding Sistim, for it is ondly made a pretext for al the imposed dutyes excises & land taxes that are laid upon the people, when the real intent is to make places for numerous sets of Officers with high saliryes & fees to colect them & is always so managed that it takes the hole Revenue to pay the interest & seport government, & seldome doth that.⁴⁰

Hamilton's economic program was a plot by "Officers with high saliryes," namely the Federalists and Cincinnati, to deprive average citizens while making themselves rich in the process. Manning's vernacular republican critique clearly sides with the many over the few. The few have plotted against the many by taking over the country's finances; in short, the few have corrupted the government and exposed the many to economic ruin. The beverage taxes—especially the one on whiskey—would cause economic havoc for America's farmers and lead to another of Manning's complaints against the elite.

The Whiskey Rebellion

Hamilton's tax on whiskey required that growers of grain, turned into whiskey, pay an excise tax to federal agents and that failure to comply with said tax would result in a fine from 50 to 500 dollars. The country was divided into districts, under the control of the President, where federal officers collected the tax and investigated those suspected of avoiding it. Pennsylvania Senator William Maclay voted against the tax,

as “the most execrable System that was ever framed against the liberty of a People.”⁴¹ Maclay believed that the excise tax was evidence of Hamilton’s British sympathies, of a Federalist cabal, and of a dangerous disregard for public opinion:

How Abandoned is the conduct of these Men! Abuse, rail at, vilify, and traduce the European systems of excise, As much as You will, demonstrate their Absurdity, Villainy, and deplorable Effects on Society As much as You please.’Tis all right. They echo every Sentence. Ours is no such thing in their Language; quite innocent and harmless. . . . Were Eloquence personified and Reason flowed from her Tongue, her Talents would be in vain in our Assembly; or, in any other Where business is done in dark cabal, on the principle of interested management. The Excise bill is passed, and a pretty business it is. . . . War and bloodshed is the most likely consequence of all this.⁴²

Maclay considered himself to be a “true republican.” He therefore risked his reputation and re-election by arguing that Hamilton’s system was “Absurdity, Villainy,” and that its passing would cause “deplorable Effects on Society.” However, Hamilton was the head of a powerful “dark cabal,” and Maclay was powerless to prevent what was sure to end in “War and bloodshed.” Maclay’s perspective, like Manning’s, was distinctly vernacular even though he was a member of the elite ruling class. He firmly believed in and vigilantly argued for policies that he hoped would promote the liberty of all of the people, not merely the elite. When he found himself powerless to stop the cabal he, again like Manning, poured out his frustrations in his *Diary*. The goal of his *Diary* was to expose the cabal to his constituents; therefore, Maclay’s perspective supports our general argument that vernacular republicanism was a prevalent critical perspective, and that it was useful for those at the margins of power. Maclay’s *Diary* was portentous indeed; Hamilton’s excise tax did result in “War and Bloodshed.”

Whiskey producers tended to be outlying small farmers who found it more profitable to distill their grain into alcohol than to pay the exorbitant costs of shipping their grain to larger markets. These small farmers—especially those in four counties in western Pennsylvania—thought that the merchants who actually sold the whiskey should pay the taxes and they immediately petitioned Congress for a redress of their grievances. Hamilton responded to such criticism in his March 6, 1792 REPORT of the SECRETARY of the TREASURY, respecting the ACT imposing a DUTY on SPIRITS, & c. In it he argued that the federal government was justified in creating the tax, that the tax was not unjustly targeted against small farmers, and that the Fourth Amendment was not violated by the officer’s power of inspection. On May 2, 1792 Congress approved the Militia Act, which gave the President the power to call out the state militia during emergencies, largely as a response to perceived threats from the then docile excise tax protesters. By September 15, 1792 President Washington issued a proclamation condemning the farmers who attempted “to obstruct the operation of the laws of the United States for raising a revenue upon spirits distilled within the same.”⁴³ The problems of the whiskey producers became entangled with international politics and growing hostilities between the Federalists and the Republicans when in 1793 Citizen Genet conducted his ill-fated tour of

America, and in the process whipped democratic-republican clubs into a frenzy of French sympathy and raised the ire of Washington and other Federalists—even Republican Thomas Jefferson thought that Genet had overstayed his welcome. Party animosity between the Republicans and the Federalists increased dramatically and Jefferson resigned from Washington’s cabinet at the end of 1793. Washington believed that the Republicans were overtly trying to undermine and destroy the federal government and such incidents of open rebellion as the whiskey farmers’ refusal to pay taxes seemed to Federalists to be a part of the Republican plot.

Despite the tense political problems both internationally and nationally, for the farmers who were plagued by mounting debt and who were forced to watch as their neighbors were carted off to debtors’ prison while the federal government was unable or unwilling to secure shipping rights for them on the Mississippi, the tax still seemed unreasonable. These farmers may have felt as “Whisky” had in April, 1792, “I am clear against an excise; therefore I would not submit my property to any authority. . . . I will cry out re-publi-can-ism and the rights of man, by which I don’t mean the laws of the land.”⁴⁴ The argument of Whisky may seem anarchical, but it can also be read as a reasonable critique of the existing laws and as evidence of elite republicanism. As Whisky understood the situation the law itself was un-republican because it infringed on the rights of farmers like himself, and was supported by a cabal of elites. Eventually, on July 15, 1794 the anger of the beleaguered Pennsylvanian farmers of Washington, Westmoreland, Fayette, and Allegheny counties erupted in several tar-and-featherings and the burning of excise officers’ homes and offices. At first the Washington administration attempted to negotiate with the insurrectionists, but when it appeared that a peaceful resolution would not be forthcoming and that the insurrection might spread to western Virginia and Maryland, and when a reported 7,000 people stormed Pittsburgh in protest of the tax, the administration took direct action. The response was meant to restore order and to show the force of the federal government—Washington and Hamilton would not suffer another embarrassment at the hands of the insurrectionists. President Washington invoked the 1792 Militia Act, called up a massive force (larger than the Revolutionary Army) of 15,000 militiamen from Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey, and Virginia, and marched them out west to quell the rebellion.

When the troops got there they met little resistance and 150 men were eventually arrested and then given presidential pardons for their involvement. Manning was not a whiskey producer, but he did own a tavern that sold whiskey and seemed to have always sympathized with the common farmers, who he must have encountered on a daily basis. With Hamilton’s funding program the perceived cause of the rebellion, and with the Society of Cincinnati leading the charge against Manning’s common man, he could not help himself from viewing the military suppression as yet another blunder of the Washington administration:

the Pitsburg Insurrection would never have hapned if it had not bin for some unreasonable irritations imposed on the people by trying to inforce the Excise Law their before it was put in execution in other parts of the Coontinant, or if they had known the mindes of the people on it in other parts, & after it had break out might

have bin settled for a trifel if fatherly & kinde measures had bin used. But as it was maniged, it cost the Continint, upwards of twelve hundred thousand dollars.⁴⁵

Not only were the elite self-serving, but the constant pursuit of their own self-interest caused them to make poor decisions and to waste taxpayer money. In short, Manning extended his vernacular republican critique of the few by arguing that their hubris and self-interest led to the further ruin of the country. If in Manning's eyes the federal government's handling of the Whiskey Rebellion was an "unreasonable irritation," then John Jay's 1796 treaty with Britain could only be viewed as a "Monster."

Jay's Treaty

The Republican fury over Jay's Treaty was complicated. First of all, this was not John Jay's first diplomatic mission. Rather, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Jay were the diplomats who negotiated the Paris Peace Treaty, which ended the Revolutionary War on September 3, 1783 and ostensibly granted that "The navigation of the river Mississippi, from its source to the ocean, shall forever remain free and open to the subjects of Great Britain and the citizens of the United States." In 1785 Jay was asked to negotiate with Spanish minister Don Diego de Gardoqui over the promised right to navigate the Mississippi. Jay was unsuccessful with Gardoqui who was under strict orders from Spain to keep the Americans out of the Louisiana Territory, and in 1788 petitioned the Confederated Congress to revise his strict instructions about navigation rights on the Mississippi in favor of better shipping rights for the northeast. Southerners were none too pleased with Jay's request, but the question became moot as Jay was recalled due to the adoption of the new federal Constitution.

A decade later the United States still had not secured (and would not completely secure until Jefferson's administration made the Louisiana Purchase with Napoleon in 1803) their British-granted rights to sail the Mississippi. But more than this was at stake in 1795 when the Senate ratified Jay's Treaty with Britain. France had declared war on Britain on February 1, 1793 and with Spain on March 7, 1793, and while Spain negotiated treaties with both France and the United States in 1795, France and Britain were still fighting and, more importantly, were trying to get the United States to break its vow of neutrality by bringing captured merchandise into American ports, "molesting" American ships in the West Indies, and in other ways stirring up domestic discord (à la Citizen Genet's public tour in 1793). James Monroe had been attempting to negotiate with France in 1795 when news of Jay's Treaty with Britain became known, and the French became even more suspicious of America's motives, a suspicion that would lead to the quasi-war with France during the Adams administration.

Jay's instructions from Congress asked Britain to consent to: remove themselves from their military posts on the western border of the United States; make restitution for property (slaves) taken by Britain during the Revolution; settle the western and northeastern boundaries of the United States; create a commercial arrangement; and cease capturing American ships. The commercial agreement Jay negotiated was so

bad that Americans burned him in effigy and protested his Treaty all over the country.⁴⁶ However, Washington and the Federalist-dominated Senate agreed that in their situation a bad treaty was better than no treaty at all, and ratified. The Republicans controlled the House of Representatives and forced a debate over whether or not to fund the provisions of the Treaty, but eventually acquiesced. Federalist journalist Peter Porcupine wrote against the Republican delay tactics in the House:

What! Did these opposition members desire to see something that would reconcile the people to the treaty! These very men who had, in ways more or less direct, stipulated with the mob to oppose it. It is a fact well known, that the leaders among them had all written or made public speeches representing it as inimical to the rights and liberties of the people.⁴⁷

According to Manning the Federalists were as guilty as the Republicans of misrepresenting the Treaty to the average citizens.

Manning said of the Treaty: “[W]hen the Monster came first into view, it was reprobated from one end of the Continent to the other. Scarcely one dare say a single word in favour of it.” But after the heated debate in the House, Manning reported: “[T]he Monster must have dyed for want of seplyes, had it not bin for the most treasonable arts & doings of the few.” The few, said Manning, had sent circular letters and petitions containing:

the most horred & frightful falsehoods that ever was invented by the Diavel. In ordir to fright the people to petition the house to grant said Seplyes, representing that the house ware unconstitutianly with holding the seplys and trying to userp all the powers of Government to themselves, & that unless the tetry took place Britain would sartainly make war with us, & that their power over us & Vengeance upon us would be such that they would rouse off a grate gun 3000 miles distance & blow all our brains out if we stept out to piss.⁴⁸

Despite all the threats and designs of the treasonable few, Manning blamed the ratification of the Treaty on the common folks, who “for want of the means of knowledge amongue the people they ware so fraited with these lyes that they hastened to see which cold git his name to the memorial first.” Manning asked his friends and neighbors why they had signed the petition, and “some would say they singed for the treaty, some for the good of the cuntry, some to keep from war, some for Washington & some to stand by the Constitution.” We can almost feel Manning’s acute anger at the few and grief about the democratic process when he described what followed: “[W]hen I told them the true circumstances of the affair they would like lambs that are dumb after they are sheared, turne away & wish to hear no more about it.”⁴⁹ Manning witnessed first hand the duplicity of the elite few and the shame of the common mass as they realized their deception. Such observation compelled Manning to solve the problems he found inherent in America’s un-republican republican government and reaffirmed his intense hatred of the few who would so easily manipulate the many. We believe that this is the moment when Manning decided to craft the *Key* as a statement of protest against the “lyes” of the few. We believe further

that he felt duty bound to expose the machinations of the elite cabal in hopes of restoring republicanism to the masses.

The question then arises: If the interests of the few and the many are so distinct, why do the many acquiesce? This was the most rhetorically difficult question for our advocate to answer, as it has been for all social critics ever since. As sociologist James C. Scott poses the question in *Weapons of the Weak*, an important recent critique of hegemony and false consciousness theory: “Why . . . do people seem to knuckle under when they appear to have other options?”⁵⁰ In answering this question, Manning provided a catalogue of what Russell Hanson calls, following Habermas, conditions of “systematically distorted communication” in the early republic.⁵¹

According to Manning there are eight ways in which the few rule. First, they keep the many ignorant. Although one normally would think this a characteristic of a monarchy, it also arises in republics after a successful revolution. Since a successful revolution requires leadership; there is a natural tendency for the common people to “reverance & respect such men,” and the result is that “they go on old ways & neglect to search & see for themselves & take care of their own interists.” Manning deplored the inability of the average voter to get a clear “knowledge of the carictor, abilityes & politicle sentiments of those they vote for,” and the resulting low voter turnout that allowed the few to decide elections. Second, the few organize and “join in their secret corraspondance to counter act the interest of the many & pick their pockets.” Here Manning gives us a list of the occupations of the few: Marchents, Phitisians, Ministers, Lawyers, Letirary Men & the over grown rich.” All of them share the secret of forming associations. Third, the few advance their own “Larning,” through “costly collages, national acadimyes & grammar schooles,” yet oppose “cheep schools & woman schools” for the many. Fourth, the few make newspapers expensive and biased against the interests of the many. Here again our labourer defends the liberty of the press as “the gratest & best means of obtaining the knowledge nesecary for a free man to have.” He condemns the few for raising the price of newspapers and for using “all the arts & retrick hell can invent to blackgard the Republican printers & all they print.” Fifth, the few make laws “numerous, intricate & as inexplicit as possible.” This increases the number of lawyers and executive officers. Sixth, the few manage money to the injury of the many, controlling banks and the money supply. Seventh, the few engage in flattery, bribery, and threats in order to influence elections: “I will wager a ginna that you dare not vote for such a man—if you do you shall have a bloody nose for it.” Finally, the few encourage wars in order to justify the raising and keeping of standing armies “to deprive their own subjects of their Rights & Libbertyes.”⁵²

Generally, what we might today refer to as an elite “hegemony” was constructed, in Manning’s eyes, by complex, lawyerly language and by blockages in the free flow of information among the citizenry. The Jay Treaty, for example, illustrated how the “inexpliset” character of the Constitution makes it difficult to implement clearly. Supporters of the treaty relied on the fact that it was so complex that “but few of the common peopel could comprehend it,” and that the relative prosperity of the times made the legislatures less vigilant than they should have been. The few also, under the

lead of “the adultrious Hambleton,” trumped up the Whiskey Rebellion as an excuse for a show of military power. The net result would be war with France, which Republicans in general believed “seems to have bin the design of our Administration ever since the treaty was in contemplation.”⁵³ Manning concluded this section with an analysis of the French Revolution and the efforts of the few to undermine it, and saw the few as extending their power to the whole world: “Gog & Magog are gathered together, to destroy the Rights of Man & banish Libberty from the world.”⁵⁴

Next, Manning turned to his solution to the problem of corruption. This section seems comically tame compared to the inflammatory language of the rest of his treatise. Once you have identified your opponents as Gog & Magog it would be more logical to take up arms against them than to create a society and a magazine for the dissemination of political information. Yet this is precisely Manning’s solution, which leads to the conclusion that Manning was so enraptured by his belief in vernacular republicanism that he believed that mere vigilance by the many could cure the ills of the few’s cabal.

The Reamidy

The final section of the *Key* is a brief discussion of Manning’s proposed plan for political reform. It rests on the principle that “if elections are closely attended to by all the peopel & they look well ever after their Representatives, their is no dainger but that they will do their duty. Therefore the ondy remidi is knowledge.” Manning then provided a list of the knowledge necessary to participate effectively as a citizen. The list is not unlike the knowledge already imparted to a reader of the *Key*: “a knowledge of Mankind,” “of the differend interest that influence all ordirs of men,” “a knowledge of the prinseples of the government & Constitution he lives under,” and so on. He concludes by describing how the society might work. A paid librarian would keep the magazine for a whole neighborhood to read. The magazine could be printed and distributed for about nine shillings, or \$1.50 per year (compared with the estimated cost of a newspaper of three or four dollars a year). If members would put in \$25 to a fund, the interest could fund the magazine permanently, without the trouble of collecting annual payments. In fact, if the state or national government would fund the magazine it would still cost less than either the Shays’ Rebellion or the Whiskey Rebellion, which could have been prevented by the existence of the magazine. He even proposed that such a magazine and society established throughout the world would prevent wars.⁵⁵

The author concludes with a return to the theme of his introduction, “my frinds I have tried to describe to you (not in the language & stile of the Larned for I am not able) But in as plane a manner as I am capable, the Causes that have always destroyed free governments,” and the remedy. He places his draft constitution at the end so that the reader will put the remedy

immediately on foot & neaver give over untill such a Society is established on such a strong & lasting foundation that the gates of hell can never prevail against it—which may the Almighty grant is the sinear desire of A LABOURER.⁵⁶

After discussing his constitution, the *Key* concludes with a covenant to be signed by all members in which they promise to support the society, but most importantly to

take pains to informe ourselves into the true prinsaples carictor & abilities of all those we vote for into any office in the Government we live under, & that we will attend on all elections when we can & put in a vote for those persones we think will serve the publick the best. (254)

We have no information about how Manning reacted to the election of 1800, but it is not difficult to imagine that he would have viewed it as a victory for his more vernacular form of republicanism, in contrast to the elitist republicanism of the Federalists, even if the few remained in control. By the end of the 1790s, as Alan Taylor writes, elections had come to serve two contradictory purposes: “to determine the proper gentlemen fit to rule *and* to preserve the Republic from aristocratic plots.”⁵⁷ Eventually the Republicans “triumphed by persuading the majority that professed friendship for the people was the proper and fundamental basis for authority. . . . Elections almost invariably turned on who could best depict the opposition as crypto-aristocrats out to corrupt the Republic.”⁵⁸ The Republicans won by reviving “the old populist rhetoric of an ongoing class struggle between common producers (farmers and artisans) and parasitic Federalist aristocrats.”⁵⁹ If Republicans exploited vernacular republican rhetoric it is nonetheless useful to examine the *Key of Liberty* as a sort of index of the *mentalité* of those common producers for whom the populist rhetoric was persuasive. This vernacular republican rhetoric included not only a set of characterizations of American class structure, it also included an implicit view of rhetoric and language.⁶⁰ In the final section of this essay, we pursue the theoretical implications of Manning’s vernacular republican rhetoric.

Vernacular Republicanism

As we argued at the outset of this essay, William Manning’s *Key of Liberty* embodies a different form of republicanism to the elite republicanism previously studied by rhetorical scholars. Four prominent features characterize vernacular republicanism: (1) the aggressive use of a rhetoric of critique; (2) the belief that public debate should be transparent and open to all opinions; (3) the rejection of elite leadership; and (4) the belief that liberty, freedom, and republicanism exist for the common good, not just for the benefit of the few. It must be noted that vernacular republicanism *prima facie* seems to have much in common with elite republicanism. However, while elite republicanism made pretensions to each of these four republican characteristics, vernacular republicanism earnestly demands immediate action to rectify the discrepancy between the promise of republicanism that serves the interests of the many and the reality of republicanism that serves the interests of the few. In other words, elite republicanism is characterized by its satisfaction with the status quo, while vernacular republicanism extends the locus of critique to all forms of oppression, whether the oppression is based upon economic, class, power, or (eventually) race and gender injustices. The overarching logic of vernacular

republicanism is a critique of *argumentum ad verecundiam*, a critique of argument by authority. The promise of the American Revolution, according to the vernacular republican perspective, was to create a government that derived its just powers “from the consent of the governed”; a government in which the people were to be the foundation of power; and a government that existed to effect the “safety and happiness” of the people. Simply, vernacular republicanism argues that the proper authorities are not in power and seeks reform. We will briefly discuss these four features of vernacular republicanism before returning to the differences between elite and vernacular republicanism. We conclude by arguing that vernacular republicanism is not restricted to William Manning’s *Key of Liberty*, or to early American republican rhetoric, but that the logic of vernacular republicanism is the cornerstone of American reform rhetoric.

Rhetoric of Critique

The *Key of Liberty* is first and foremost an exercise in political criticism. Manning’s survey of the Thucydidean crises of the 1790s is a steamrolling account of the mistakes made by the leaders of the newly formed United States of America. While Manning’s goal is also to unite his fellow laborers and to empower them to educate themselves, these goals are desirable because they will help more people to critique the government. In other words, part of the goal of Manning’s criticism is to encourage more skeptical criticism of the few. The *Key* demonstrates to its readers that criticism is healthy for the Republic because it functions as a check on the power elite. Further, good republican citizens were duty bound to protect the Republic from corruption, and thus duty bound to scrutinize those in power very carefully. The first lesson to be learned from William Manning’s vernacular republicanism is that citizens are supposed actively and vigilantly to act as a “watchdog” over the government.

Transparency and Openness

Throughout the *Key* Manning argued that the language of the elite was purposely dense so that the many would not be able to comprehend political controversies; such opaque language also prevented the many from entering into public debates. The *Key* functioned as a cure to these maneuvers by the few by first demonstrating that anyone, even Manning, could with but a little bit of diligence find out what the few were doing and speak of their opinions to the public. Manning hoped that some “larned Republican” would correct his spelling, but he otherwise was remarkably self-confident about addressing an audience of the whole republic. It was, as Gordon S. Wood writes, this lack of deference that was the truly radical result of the American Revolution.⁶¹ Transparency and openness were key to Manning’s vernacular republicanism because the many could not exercise their fair share of political power or actively critique the few if they could not comprehend or enter into the public debates. The second lesson to be learned from William Manning’s vernacular

republicanism is that corruption reins supreme when elites use “rhetrickery” and access to the public sphere is limited.

Rejection of Elite Leadership

Manning’s whole argument hinged on exposing the elite’s appeal to misplaced authority: he argued throughout the *Key* that the few have claimed the authority to rule the many, but that these few have stumbled and blundered from one disaster to the next. His discussions of the Society of Cincinnati, Hamilton’s funding system, the Whiskey Rebellion, and Jay’s Treaty proved that the few had no right to be in charge because they were corrupt, made mistakes, and did not act in the interest of the whole. In other words, the few had not embodied republican virtue, which means that they lacked the legitimacy necessary to rule the Republic. While the Revolution had been fought so that the people would rule, the many had granted the few too much power and the few had abused the trust of the many. The *Key* therefore explicitly rejects the leadership of the few and urges the many to take a more active part in political affairs. The third lesson to be learned from William Manning’s vernacular republicanism is that the few will always seek and abuse power.

Common Good

The final noteworthy feature of the *Key* is its demand that the weighing mechanism for political decisions—whether made by the few or the many—should be the common good. While elite republicans had often placated the masses with empty talk about the common good, Manning demonstrates that the few considered their own interests above the common interest at every opportunity—from the Society of Cincinnati to Jay’s Treaty. The culmination of his critical perspective, his mandates for transparency and openness, and his critique of the legitimacy of elite power, was to argue that in sum total the United States of America has constantly made decisions based on the interests of the few, rather than the interests of the many. His solution was for the many to recognize that they form a distinct interest and wrest the balance of power back from the few; ostensibly this would allow the many to make decisions in the interest of the common good. The fourth lesson to be learned from William Manning’s vernacular republicanism is that when political decisions are not made in the interest of the common good, the many will suffer.

Elite and vernacular republicanism

Robert Hariman’s groundbreaking *Political Style* devotes a chapter to the republican political style. A political style generally consists of a combination of rhetorical designs, philosophical arguments, and institutional practices. The republican style itself is

particularly imbued with a set of ideas about human nature and good government. This conception of political life celebrates self-government as the highest moral calling, insists that citizens' political activities should be motivated and guided by civic virtues, and cautions against the influences of private, especially commercial, interests.⁶²

Republics, by their very nature, are always at risk of devolving into anarchy or empire. In order to protect the fragile republic, institutions such as the legislature, public practices such as eloquent oratory, and heroic public figures such as George Washington must work together to cultivate the citizenry's moral sense. The type of communication valued by republicans is decorous, oratorical, and elitist. Hariman writes that "the republican hierarchy is distinguished by both its elevation of oratory and its broad valuation of all other forms of verbal artistry."⁶³ Hariman thus describes the republican style as the realm of elite discourse, or "artistry," over plain speech. However, as the *Key* demonstrates, American republicanism also contains a more populist, even democratic, strand of political theory and an attendant rhetorical style. The vernacular republican style privileges plain speech over trickery (not necessarily eloquence) because everyone can use and understand plain speech. In this sense, rhetoric functions as the medium of the political process—nothing more or less.

If we were constructing a rhetorically artful author of the *Key* we might conclude that he is enacting for the reader a kind of republican civic education, and his rhetorical style, bad spelling and all, has the effect of showing the reader: "Hey, if I can do it, you can do it, too." This perspective would mirror Stephen Browne's analysis of Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural address. Browne persuasively argues that Jefferson's particular felicity of expression was a portrayal and an embodiment of his republican faith, that his "call to nationhood" was a "conspicuous display of its author's style and thought."⁶⁴ Jefferson's detached eloquence stands in stark contrast to Manning's emotional diatribe, yet both are rhetorical embodiments of each author's republicanism. Vernacular republicanism is not only premised on the notion that the many should hold power, but also that every person's opinion has value. Vernacular republicans believe that whether or not opinions are presented with refinement and eloquence they are still worthy of being heard in public discussions. Manning and other 18th-century republicans agreed on the value of self-government, the fragile nature of republics, and the threat to civic virtue posed by commercial and other special interests. Where Manning differs, however, is in his rejection of decorous oratory as a privileged mode of public communication and in his rejection of "top-down" republican oratory in favor of information circulating freely among the citizenry and public leaders. The themes of critique of power, transparency and openness, and the common good are distinctive of Manning's vernacular republicanism.

The themes represented in William Manning's *Key of Liberty* are quite familiar to students of American political discourse, which is why we believe that vernacular republicanism must be considered equal to elite republicanism. At a normative level, we would argue that many of the same forces that made Manning take up his pen continue to limit popular civic participation in the United States and that the rhetoric

of vernacular republicanism remains prominent in critiques of power. The displacement of political questions by legal questions, the cult of secrecy in high government circles, and the concentration of political power in Washington today are eerily similar to Manning's criticism of the 1790s. We suspect that when rhetorical scholars take another look at the rhetoric of the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and other critiques of existing power structures, they will find that the vernacular republican perspective has lingered in the American repertoire. For example, Berkeley Free Speech Movement leader Mario Savio spoke on December 2, 1964 to students sitting-in at Sproul Hall. His speech exhibits all of the markers of vernacular republicanism: he critiques the U. C. Berkeley power elite, calls for more transparency and openness, and asks for decisions to be made for the common good. "Last summer I went to Mississippi to join the struggle there for civil rights," Savio began. "This fall I am engaged in another phase of the same struggle," he continued,

this time in Berkeley. The two battlefields may seem quite different to some observers, but this is not the case. The same rights are at stake in both places—the right to participate as citizens in democratic society and the right to due process of law. Further, it is a struggle against the same enemy. In Mississippi an autocratic and powerful minority rules, through organized violence, to suppress the vast, virtually powerless majority. In California, the privileged minority manipulates the university bureaucracy to suppress the students' political expression. That "respectable" bureaucracy masks the financial plutocrats; that impersonal bureaucracy is the efficient enemy in a "Brave New World."⁶⁵

So 166 years after Manning wrote the *Key* Mario Savio argued for similar positions, using similar premises, which tells us that the vernacular republican perspective has endured as a prominent feature of American political discourse. After 200 years we still find that the language of critique embodied in vernacular republicanism is prevalent today. We find that it is still the duty of average citizens to act as watchdogs and to speak truth to power; that corruption still reins supreme when elites use "rhetrickery" and access to the public sphere is limited; that the few will still always seek and abuse power; and that when political decisions are not made in the interest of the common good, then the many will still suffer. Neither the right nor the left has a coherent program for improving civic education, local politics, or the transmission of information to the public. Vernacular republicanism, for these reasons, deserves renewed attention from scholars and activists. That farmer and tavern-keeper William Manning, in the depths of a Massachusetts winter, expressed his discontent with elite rule is part of his small, but enduring, contribution to the American "democratic imagination."

Notes

- [1] Samuel Eliot Morison and William Manning, "The Key of Liberty," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 13, no. 2. (1956): 202–254, see 221.
- [2] On vernacular rhetoric see: Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 13; Gerard A. Hauser, *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric and Publics of the Public Sphere*

(Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1999); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities; Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 43. The scholarly literature on civic republicanism as a political language is vast. Some useful works for rhetorical scholars include: James Jasinski, "Rhetoric and Judgment in the Constitutional Ratification Debate of 1787–1788: An Exploration in the Relationship between Theory and Critical Practice," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 197–218; Zoltan Vajda, "John C. Calhoun's Republicanism Revisited," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 4 (2001): 433–57; Bradford Vivian, "Jefferson's Other," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88 (2002): 284–302; J. G. A. Pocock, "Between Gog and Magog: The Republican Thesis and the Ideologia Americana," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 325–46; J. G. A. Pocock, "Verbalizing a Political Act: Toward a Politics of Speech," *Political Theory* 1 (1973): 27–45; J. G. A. Pocock, "Machiavelli, Harrington and English Political Ideologies on the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22 (1965): 549–83; Stephen Howard Browne, "'The Circle of Our Felicities': Thomas Jefferson's First Inaugural Address and the Rhetoric of Nationhood," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 5 (2002): 409–38; M. N. S. Sellers, *American Republicanism: Roman Ideology in the United States Constitution* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern: Classical Republicanism and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Susan Zaeske, *Signatures of Citizenship: Petitioning, Antislavery, and Women's Political Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Stephen H. Browne, *Jefferson's Call for Nationhood: The First Inaugural Address* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2003); Michael William Pfau, "Time, Tropes, and Textuality: Reading Republicanism in Charles Sumner's 'Crime Against Kansas,'" *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 385–414.

- [3] Michael P. Kramer, *Imagining Language in America: From the Revolution to the Civil War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), ix.
- [4] Thomas Gustafson, *Representative Words: Politics, Literature, and the American Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 14.
- [5] Or in "rhet-trickery" ways according to Wayne Booth. Presentation to Alliance of Rhetoric Societies, Evanston, IL, September 12, 2003.
- [6] Morison, *Key*, 204–207; Michael Merrill and Sean Wilentz, "William Manning and the Invention of American Politics," in *The Key of Liberty: The Life and Democratic Writings of William Manning, "A Laborer," 1747–1814* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 3–86. In this essay we use the Morison edition of the *Key*, mainly because Merrill and Wilentz's decision to correct Manning's spelling and syntax causes the text to lose much of its charm. The decision also seems odd in light of Merrill and Wilentz' own radical democratic beliefs. Edmund S. Morgan accuses the editors of violating the canons of historical editing: "Pioneers of Paranoia," *New York Review of Books*, October 6, 1994, 12. The fact that Manning's essay was unpublished and lacked an audience in his immediate context may remind rhetorical critics of John Jay Chapman's "Coatesville Address" as discussed by Edwin Black in *Rhetorical Criticism: A Study in Method*, 2nd ed. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 78–90. Like Manning, Chapman was unable to attract an audience for his anti-lynching speech, but, as Black writes, "The context of the Coatesville Address is not the vacant grocery store in 1912. Rather, the discourse must be understood as joining the dialogue participated in by Jefferson, Tocqueville, Lincoln, Melville, Henry Adams, Samuel Clemens, Santayana, and Faulkner—a dialogue on the moral dimensions of the American experience" (83–84).
- [7] Morison, *Key*, 204.
- [8] There were precedents for "dialect" writing, notably the letters written by John Adams under the name "Humphrey Ploughjogger" to the *Boston Gazette* in January 1767; see Robert J. Taylor, ed., *Papers of John Adams, I* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1977), 174–82 (we are

- indebted to James M. Farrell for this reference). See also the discussion of Jedediah Peck (who also used the *nom de plume* “Plough-Jogger”) in Alan Taylor, *William Cooper’s Town: Power and Persuasion on the Frontier of the Early American Republic* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 242–43. There is linguistic evidence that Manning was writing in his own dialect rather than “dumbing down” his language for rhetorical purposes. His phonetic spelling is consistent with the dialect spoken in his region of Massachusetts during this period; see two articles by Henry Alexander, “A Sidelight on Eighteenth-Century American English,” *Queen’s Quarterly* 31 (1923): 173–81, and “Early American Pronunciation and Syntax,” *American Speech* 1, no. 3 (1925): 141–48. Alexander oddly refers to Manning as “a self-educated farmer-politician who in his anti-Jeffersonian fervor leaves his orthography to take care of itself and obviously reflects very faithfully his native New England speech” (“Early American Pronunciation and Syntax,” 143).
- [9] William David Sloane, “The Media and Public Opinion,” in *The Significance of the Media in American History*, ed. James D. Startt and William David Sloane (Northport, AL: Vison Press, 1994), 97.
- [10] Morison, *Key*, 207.
- [11] “The Key of Libberty,” *The Freeman* 7 (May 2, 1923), 173–74; James O’Neal, “An Early Labor Philosopher,” *The Call Magazine*, June 10, 17, 24, 1923. Harold Laski, the British socialist leader, wrote to Oliver Wendell Holmes on June 16, 1922, that he had just read Morison’s edition of the pamphlet by Manning: “I thought it very interesting, and though the retention of the original spelling was a pedantic crime, I must say it confirmed all my admiration for the men of the revolution.” See *Holmes–Laski Letters: The Correspondence of Mr. Justice Holmes and Harold J. Laski 1916–1935, Vol. I*, ed., Mark DeWolfe Howe (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1953), 432–33.
- [12] Eugene P. Link, *Democratic Republican Societies, 1790–1800* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), 49, 91, 96, 159, 175.
- [13] Merle Curti, *The Growth of American Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 141–42.
- [14] Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 151–57.
- [15] Christopher Tomlins, *Law, Labor, and Ideology in the Early American Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 8.
- [16] Merrill and Wilentz, however, made the strange choice of modernizing Manning’s spelling, which seems to make the text lose some of its charm. They also use the 1799 version of the *Key*, which does not include the more inflammatory comments on President Washington that are in Morison’s version.
- [17] Edmund S. Morgan, “Pioneers of Paranoia,” *New York Review of Books*, October 6, 1994, 11–13. Another negative review came from the labor historian Marcus Rediker, who claims that Manning was actually part of an “American Thermidor,” since he did not support the Shays’ or Whiskey Rebellions. Rediker finds him to be “a man of cosmic vanity, naive provincialism, and contentious self-righteousness, the combination of which very likely made him unbearable to those who knew him”; see Review of *The Key of Liberty* by Michael Merill and Sean Wilentz, *International Labor and Working Class History* 47 (Spring 1995): 147–49.
- [18] The Virginian Anti-Federalists’ opposition to the Constitution as ratified made Madison’s election to Congress contingent upon his reversing his previous opposition to a national Bill of Rights.
- [19] Stephen J. Hartnett and Jennifer R. Mercieca, “‘Has Your Courage Rusted?’: National Security and the Contested Rhetorical Norms of Republicanism in Post-Revolutionary America, 1798–1801,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* (forthcoming, 2006).
- [20] Roger G. Kennedy argues persuasively in *Mr. Jefferson’s Lost Cause: Land, Farmers, Slavery, and the Louisiana Purchase* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) that Republicans in

general, and Jefferson in particular, may have ostensibly desired such a middling economy, but consistently constructed policy to aid large planters rather than their cherished small farmers.

- [21] Morison, 211–12.
- [22] Jennifer R. Mercieca, “‘We, the People,’ the Rhetorics of Republicanism and the American Political Fiction, 1776–1845” (Ph.D. diss, University of Illinois, 2003), 27.
- [23] Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 145–46.
- [24] Garry Wills, *Cincinnatus: George Washington and the Enlightenment* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 13; see p. 36 for Parson Weems’ more elaborate version of the tale.
- [25] Morison’s footnote to this section reads, “The author here repeats charges against the Society of the Cincinnati which were generally believed by plain folk at that time, but without foundation in fact,” 223.
- [26] The Massachusetts Soldiery, “Having observed in one of your late magazines,” *Worcester Magazine . . . Containing Politicks, Miscellanies, Poetry, and News*, February 8, 1787, 2, 45.
- [27] Wills, 140.
- [28] Cited in Wallace Evan Davies, “The Society of the Cincinnati in New England, 1783–1800,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 5 (January 1948): 11.
- [29] Davies, 4–9.
- [30] Wills, 139–48.
- [31] Morison, 224.
- [32] Morison, 225.
- [33] For a recent reworking of the Illuminati conspiracy, see Pat Robertson, *The New World Order* (Dallas: Word, 1991), 67–68.
- [34] Davies seems to think that fears about the Society’s monarchism were justified, 22n, 89. So does Robert Ferguson, *Law and Letters in American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 20. On conspiracy reasoning in the 18th century, see Gordon S. Wood, “Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 39 (1982): 401–41.
- [35] Morison, 230. Readers who grew up in rural America will understand Manning’s joke here, but, given the continued drift of the Republic away from its agrarian roots, it may be helpful to point out that a mule is the sterile (and remarkably stubborn) offspring of a horse and a donkey.
- [36] Cited in Broadus Mitchell, *Alexander Hamilton: A Concise Biography* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1999), 179.
- [37] Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).
- [38] *Journal of the House of Representatives of the United States, 1789–1793*, Friday, January 8, 1790, 136.
- [39] For a very readable recent defense of Hamilton’s proposals, see John Steel Gordon, *Hamilton’s Blessing: The Extraordinary Life and Times of Our National Debt* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 11–41.
- [40] Morison, 244.
- [41] William Maclay, *The Diary of William Maclay and Other Notes on Senate Debates, March 4, 1789–March 3, 1791*, ed. Kenneth R. Bowling and Helen E. Veit (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 377.
- [42] Maclay, 377.
- [43] *National Gazette*, September 29, 1792. Cited in “The Diaries of George Washington, Vol VI Jan. 1790–Dec. 1799,” ed. Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 171n, 8.

- [44] Whisky, "Whisky versus Government" *The American Museum, or, Universal Magazine*, April, 1792. 171–176.
- [45] Morison, 241. Manning was incorrect—the excise tax was enforced throughout the country.
- [46] Reportedly graffitii could be found in Boston that read, "Damn John Jay! Damn everyone who won't damn John Jay!! Damn everyone that won't put lights in his windows and sit up all night damning John Jay!!!" See discussion of the Jay Treaty at *Digital History*, http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/documents/documents_p2.cfm?doc=335.
- [47] William Cobbett, "Papers Relative to the Treaty with Great Britain," *Porcupine's Political Censor*, April 1796, 117.
- [48] Morison, 237.
- [49] Morison, 238.
- [50] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 71.
- [51] Russell L. Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination: Conversations with our Past* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 22–53.
- [52] Morison, 221–23.
- [53] Morison, 238. On the "adultrious Hambleton's" affair with Maria Reynolds, see Forest McDonald, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), 227–30.
- [54] Morison, 245–46.
- [55] Morison, 247–51.
- [56] Morison, 251.
- [57] Alan Taylor, 23.
- [58] Alan Taylor, 287.
- [59] Alan Taylor, 361.
- [60] On populism as a distinctive American political and rhetorical style, see Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). Kazin locates the populist impulse in Thomas Jefferson's "producerist" view of democracy, a view clearly shared by Manning and, later, Andrew Jackson. The tension between producerist and elitist strands in American republican ideology and language needs further study.
- [61] Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*. But this is not to say that orality is insignificant in the *Key*. It is important to note Manning's background as a tavern-keeper. As David W. Conroy argues in his fascinating study, *In Public Houses*, "Manning's style reflects the kind of tavern-oratory more men had come to expect from their leaders. He admired but also distrusted the eloquence traditionally striven for in political expression." David W. Conroy, Jr., *In Public Houses: Drink and the Revolution of Authority in Colonial Massachusetts* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 313.
- [62] Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 96.
- [63] Hariman, 112.
- [64] Stephen Howard Browne, "The Circle of Our Felicities," 409; *Jefferson's Call for Nationhood*. See also Jennifer R. Mercieca, Review of *Jefferson's Call for Nationhood* by Stephen H. Browne, *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91 (November 2004), 519–521.
- [65] Mario Savio, "An End to History," December 2, 1964, *Free Speech Movement Online Archive*, <http://www.fsm-a.org/stacks/endhistorysavio.html>. This speech was recorded during the December 2 sit-in at Sproul Hall. After first considering revising the speech before allowing it to be circulated, Savio gave his permission for it to be published in its original form in *Humanity, An Arena of Critique and Commitment* 2 (December 1964), 2. It is also reprinted in "Takin' it to the streets": *A Sixties Reader*, ed. Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 111–15; in *The Berkeley Student Revolt*, ed. Lipset and Wolin, 216–19, and elsewhere.