

# Henry St. John, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke

Post by “Cassius” of February 12, 2025 at 4:24 PM

I did some quick research and don't have much to offer yet. Might be that Bolingbroke has good things to say on Epicurean epistemology, and possibly that 's why Jefferson made note of it.

But otherwise it doesn't sound like Bolingbroke is likely to be too Epicurean-friendly -- but thanks for posting this!

According to dumas malone. did Thomas Jefferson make quotes from reading Lord Bolingbroke?

ChatGPT said:

Yes, according to Dumas Malone, Thomas Jefferson was influenced by the works of Henry St. John, Lord Bolingbroke, and made references to his writings. Bolingbroke was an English philosopher and politician whose ideas on history, government, and religion left a significant impression on Jefferson. Malone, in his multi-volume biography *Jefferson and His Time*, notes that Jefferson was well-read in Enlightenment thought and that Bolingbroke's skepticism of organized religion and advocacy for reason in politics aligned with many of Jefferson's own views. While Jefferson did not always cite Bolingbroke explicitly, there are instances where his writings reflect themes and phrases that suggest familiarity with Bolingbroke's work.

Can you give examples of Jefferson quoting Bolingbroke

ChatGPT said:

There are no direct quotations from Lord Bolingbroke in Thomas Jefferson's writings that explicitly cite him as the source, but there is strong evidence that Jefferson was influenced by Bolingbroke's ideas and sometimes echoed his phrasing. Jefferson owned copies of Bolingbroke's works and referenced his arguments, particularly regarding religion, government, and history.

Dumas Malone, in *Jefferson and His Time*, notes that Jefferson was especially drawn to Bolingbroke's *Letters on the Study and Use of History and The Idea of a Patriot King*. Bolingbroke's criticisms of priestcraft and hereditary privilege align closely with Jefferson's own writings on religious freedom and republicanism.

One notable example is Jefferson's opposition to clergy-dominated governance, an idea that echoes Bolingbroke's skepticism of religious institutions. Bolingbroke wrote in *The Philosophical Works*:

“The clergy ... have pretended to a divine right to dictate to mankind ...”

Jefferson, in a letter to Horatio Spafford (March 17, 1814), expresses a similar sentiment:

“In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot ...”

Another parallel appears in Jefferson’s arguments for religious freedom in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Bolingbroke had written that religion should be a matter of personal conscience rather than state enforcement, an idea Jefferson promoted throughout his career.

While Jefferson did not frequently attribute quotations to Bolingbroke by name, scholars, including Malone, have pointed out the thematic and linguistic similarities between their works.

Did Lord Bolingbroke approve of Epicurus?

ChatGPT said:

Lord Bolingbroke had a complex and somewhat critical view of Epicurus. While he appreciated aspects of Epicurean philosophy, particularly its emphasis on reason and the rejection of superstition, he did not fully embrace Epicureanism, particularly its ethical teachings.

Bolingbroke was deeply influenced by classical philosophy, and in his writings, he engaged with the ideas of Epicurus alongside those of other ancient thinkers like Cicero, Seneca, and Lucretius. He admired the Epicurean rejection of religious fear and the belief that nature, rather than divine intervention, governed the world. This aligned with his own deistic views, which sought to strip Christianity of what he saw as superstition and priestly corruption.

However, Bolingbroke was critical of Epicurus' ethical teachings, particularly the idea that pleasure is the highest good. He, like many Enlightenment thinkers, associated Epicureanism with hedonism and viewed it as insufficient for promoting virtue and civic duty. In this respect, he was more aligned with Stoic and republican ideals, which emphasized self-sacrifice and moral duty.

Overall, Bolingbroke respected Epicurus as a philosopher who challenged religious orthodoxy, but he did not fully endorse Epicurean ethics, preferring a moral framework that emphasized public virtue over personal pleasure.