Mercy Otis Warren, the American Revolution and the Classical Imagination

Eran Shalev

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A rebellion to free the polity from tyranny was imminent. Cassius and Brutus, the revered heroes of the Roman republic, stood in a narrow street, discussing the precarious state of liberty. Brutus, the stern republican, censured the “insulting soldiers,” who “tread down our choicest rights.” Cassius, Brutus’s co-conspirator to free the commonwealth of the menace of Caesar, responded, “Oh! Brutus, our noble ancestors, who lived for freedom, and for freedom died,” would have been proud to see the young generation’s “generous bosoms flow with manly sentiment.” These young republicans would not put their virtuous predecessors to shame; they would react decisively against despotism. Other Romans, Junius and Portius, joined their compatriots Brutus and Cassius, helping them to plan how to stop tyranny. A revolution loomed. It was not ancient freedoms, however, that the classicized protagonists protected. Remarkably, the revolution they participated in, in Mercy Otis Warren’s drama *The Adulateur* (1772), did not belong to Roman annals. Rather, Warren’s drama “imported” the band of Romans to American shores to lead the resistance to the British crown’s policies in the colonies. The Roman republicans, in short, were about to lead an American Revolution.

Warren’s revolutionary plays *The Adulateur* and *The Defeat* (published in 1773, one year after *The Adulateur*) were, like the culture that cultivated them, thoroughly classical. Students of American history have examined closely Greece and Rome’s immense influence on the ideology and political thought of the Revolutionary Era and beyond. Literary scholars have also diligently studied Mercy Otis Warren’s life and prolific writings. By focusing however on the use of the classics in Warren’s popular, if now mostly forgotten, propagandistic dramas, this essay aims to illuminate the remarkable ways in which revolutionaries could understand and establish the relationship between late eighteenth-century American republicanism and classical antiquity. The classics were, as this essay demonstrates, a major element in Mercy Otis Warren’s literary...
rhetoric, and more broadly were imperative to the shaping of revolutionary modes of thought.

**Revolutionary American Classicism**

Decades of fruitful scholarly studies have given us a good understanding of the depth and breadth of the use of the classics in the United States' formative years. Nevertheless, we still lack an understanding of the modes of thought and action through which revolutionaries made the world of ancient Greece and Rome meaningful to their political endeavors. Scholars have already shown the impressive degree to which American patriots absorbed the ideological aspects of classical republicanism. Taking the cue of those studies, this essay will attempt to understand how one American woman patriot, namely Mercy Otis Warren (1728-1814), made use of ancient history to classicize her compatriots' political imagination.

The classics were becoming meaningful after 1750 to ever-growing numbers of North Americans, and Greece and especially Rome became particularly important throughout the era of the American Revolution (Rahe, 571). The complex cultural and economic processes that late colonial American societies experienced, from a consumer revolution to the expansion of erudition and a culture of print, enabled the reception and permeation of the classics to a degree that was unthinkable only decades earlier. While the prevalence of the classics in revolutionary culture reflected the contemporary European neo-classical resurgence, the context of that cultural surge in America was different from its European counterpart. The severe ideological strains they experienced after 1765 encouraged American leaders and patriots to use the classical world to promote revolutionary ends, and the classics became a medium for legitimizing and constructing reality in terms of a venerated republican past.

The American Revolution, which witnessed the unyoking of the British colonies in North America and subsequently the construction of republican governments and federal institutions, enticed American patriots to free the reins of their classical imagination. Patriots constructed their revolutionary present through the histories of Greece and Rome in remarkable ways, in a variety of contexts, and to diverse ends. Revolutionaries referred to the venerated ancients in their private moments and in their public performances. They appealed to the classics for consolation, justification, and validation, as they experienced an intense intellectual and emotional relationship with the narratives and heroes of antiquity. Invoking the inspiring examples of ancient republics was a vital tool in the hands of American orators and writers, who provided the *exempla* of the virtuous ancients and emphasized their relevance to the American situation. The classics encouraged and roused the Americans collectively before crossing the Rubicon of Independence, and consoled them in private at times when war tried their souls. Charles Lee, the revolutionary general, an Englishman who rallied to the American cause, asserted that Plutarch converted him into an “enthusiastick [sic] for liberty ... and for liberty in a republican garb” (quoted in Sellers, 1994, 77). Adorning reality “in a republican garb” was common practice in revolutionary America.

Revolutionaries found the classics so appealing because they perceived the ancient republics as the origin and embodiment of some of the most powerful ideals they cherished, namely the ideological bundle modern scholarship understood under the common framework of “the republican synthesis.” Indeed, many revolutionaries
envisioned a society and government based on virtue and disinterested citizenship, the
main sources of classical republicanism. Unsurprisingly, a powerful ideal of many of the
Revolution’s leaders and their followers was not a democracy (a government still
associated with the rule of the mob), but rather an organic hierarchy led by patricians
who would embody the classical virtues. It is thus republican Rome more than any other
classical polity that dominated revolutionaries’ political imaginings, Mercy Otis
Warren’s included.

7 Even if the reach of the classical world has never attained the universality of the Bible,
and the elite and educated would always feel more comfortable within its borders than
their social lowers, as the eighteenth century reached its final decades more Americans
found themselves participating, both as cultural producers and as consumers, in a wide-
ranging, continuous conversation of and through the classics. Thomas Jefferson, for
instance, thought that the entirety of the white male yeomanry, which he considered the
backbone of American society, consisted of potential classical discoursers. In a letter to
St. John de Crévecoeur Jefferson stated that, “ours are the only farmers who can read
Homer” (quoted in Kaminski, 2006, 10). From the other side of the political divide, arch-
Tory Jonathan Boucher also had an expansionary view of the prevalence of classical
antiquity in America. Boucher, as opposed to Jefferson, deplored the inflammatory
influence of antiquity on “an abundance of men” who read “only classics” (quoted in

8 The foundations of what would become in historian Caroline Winterer’s words a “culture
of classicism” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were as old as settlement
in North America. American elites had always been preoccupied with the classics, their
formal education based on a strict and uniform curriculum that stressed Latin, Greek and
Hebrew (in this order of importance), derived from the admission requirements of
contemporary colleges, of which there were nine in 1776 and 25 by 1800. Students
graduating from grammar school would be expected to read Cicero and Virgil in Latin
and the New Testament in Greek if they wished to be admitted to college. The years spent
in college deepened the familiarity of generations of Americans with antiquity and its
languages (Cremin, 1970). The holdings of public and private libraries reflected these
cultural interests, and catalogues consistently show between 10 and 12 percent of
classical materials, both of originals and of translations (Reinhold, 1984, 29). Yet even
Americans who were not privileged enough to enjoy the benefit of years of rigid classical
studies could still develop formidable knowledge and a sense of familiarity with the world
of antiquity. Men such as George Washington and Patrick Henry, and women such as
Mercy Otis Warren, never learned Latin or Greek. Nonetheless, they and many of their
likes were able to make the classics relevant to their private and public lives to a
remarkable degree.

9 The permeation of the classics during the second half of the eighteenth century went
beyond the few thousands of college graduates and traditional elites. The increasing
popularity, accessibility and penetration of the classics occurred in a context of rising
prosperity, commercialism, and aspirations toward gentility among a broad swathe of
Americans. New cultural aspirations supported by the proliferation of print and the
expansion of the public sphere exposed numerous middling Americans across the
colonies to mores and spheres of knowledge that were traditionally out of their cultural
reach. Among those areas was the world of antiquity.
The steep rise in the importation of books and multiplication of bookstores, as well as the bustling colonial scene of printers producing a growing number of local newspapers and imprints by the 1770s, provided eager Americans with a new abundance of printed matter, as prints of all kinds became cheaper and more widely available (Hall and Reilly, “Introduction,” in Amory and Hall, 2000, 378). With the increasing output of newspapers their importance increased, as by the mid-eighteenth century those prints came to occupy “an essential niche in the social ecology” (Clark, 1994, 8). By and large the newspapers, in which Mercy Warren’s early plays appeared and gained their credit, portrayed the worldview of the middling and upper classes: cultivated, ethnocentric, Protestant, and English. Most subscribers naturally came from these categories, and were concentrated in the cities (Kielbowicz, 1983). However, because of their low cost and frequent appearance newspapers were readily available in homes and in public spaces to many thousands who were not white, genteel (or male). Scholars have thus concluded that newspapers “almost certainly reached well beyond the audience most publishers had in mind” (Clark, 1994, 251). It does thus not seem a long jump “to assume that the information and the knowledge that colonists acquired through the press [...] did indeed influence them.” (Sloan and Williams, 1994, 209) The newspapers, as anyone who even superficially examined a random sample of contemporary prints can tell, abounded with classical quotations, tags, pseudonyms, histories, parallels, and parables. The staggering expansion of print culture was not confined merely to books and newspapers, however. More printed material in the form of pamphlets and broadsides, two main venues for manifesting classical wisdom, came into the view of growing numbers of readers.

Late eighteenth-century Americans developed a “vernacular classical” canon of modern histories of antiquity and translations from the Latin and Greek. Such a growing corpus of translations vastly extended the potential number of participators in the classical discourse to Americans who could read English but were not proficient in Latin or Greek (Winterer, 2007, 26). The backdrop to this sea of literary and literacy-related change was the substantial increase in private and public schooling after about 1750, as schools of all kinds were being opened across the American provinces (Monaghan, 2005, 238). Even elite white women, such as Mercy Otis Warren, who in the mid-eighteenth century still found it hard to benefit from institutional classical education, “began in growing numbers to immerse themselves in the wondrous literary and material vestiges of classical antiquity” during the revolutionary decades. The wives, siblings and daughters of patriots became more noticeable discoursers of the classics as the Revolution progressed, as they became more proficient classicists with their numbers steadily growing (Winterer, 2007, 12, 68). Intelligent and well-bred women such as Mercy Otis Warren were positioned to join the chorus of patriots who mobilized the classics for their political goals.

Mercy Otis Warren, Founding Mother

One of a handful of women who can claim the label “Founding Mother,” Mercy Otis Warren, sister to James Otis and wife of James Warren, both notable Patriots, was at the center of the radical anti-British movement in Massachusetts (Roberts, 2005, 37). Warren has begun to attract substantial amount of attention from scholars, who recognize the fascinating perspective that her life as revolutionary and writer may provide on her tumultuous times. The “republican synthesis,” and the renewed interest in language and
textual representation have made Warren’s work a rewarding subject for historical inquiry. Less known than other female contemporaries such as Abigail Adams, her literary accomplishments and political contributions to the Revolution position her in the forefront of scholarly interest, particularly driven by the development of feminist and gender studies academia. Hence, students of women’s history and writing have returned to Warren and her work in the past decades in the hopes of constructing the life of an extraordinary American acting in a revolutionary world.

Warren was surely unlike most of her female contemporaries: educated by a tutor along with her brother James, she had consumed the classics of literature, of mythology, and history and subsequently begun to compose poetry. Rosemary Zagarri, among other scholars, reminds us, however, how Warren, a woman who insisted to repeatedly step outside of her feminine “sphere,” cultivated a long-life dependence on men, without overtly challenging feminine subordination (Zagarri, 2015, xv). Other feminist scholars seem to concur that even though Warren was the only woman among a cadre of New England revolutionary patriots, she was probably not a “progressive feminist thinker,” and that her “womanly thinking,” as Nina Baym observes, did not lead her to pacifism, as one might expect (Baym, 1991, 535). Similar studies have further underscored the particular ways in which Warren could employ her gender identity to attain forms of political influence unavailable to men (Davies, 2005, 306-307).

Warren enjoyed a decades-long career as a writer, historian and political thinker in a period in which drama was positioned for the first time to influence and participate in the forefront of political battles in America. Her literary career has thus attracted continued interest from literary historians, who have noted Warren’s fine intellect and wide-ranging correspondence, commended her work as poet and historian, and speculated about her authorial status. Her revolutionary “sketches” have attracted particular interest. One authority concluded that Warren’s plays from the 1770s lacked in plot, love interest, and women characters, naming them “conversation pieces.” However, as Sandra Sarkela reminds us, since Warren’s dramatic literature is commonly considered more propaganda than art, “the power and significance of these dramatic sketches has been misunderstood and often underestimated” (Sarkela, 2009). While the debate over the merits of those pieces may continue, little has been written on Warren’s choice to merge Boston and ancient Rome, and her American compatriots with classical republicans.

Warren’s Revolutionary Plays

Mercy Otis Warren published The Adulateur and The Defeat during the so-called “quiet period” that followed the Boston Massacre of 1770 and preceded the Tea Party in December 1773. During those years the wind seemed to have blown out of the Revolution’s sails, and Warren wrote those dramatic pieces to revive a dwindling patriotic zeal at a time in which highly propagandistic political dramas emerged as a chief literary tool in the revolutionary war of belles-lettres (Schofield, 1990, 30). Placed alongside actual news and transcriptions of political speeches and assembly resolutions, the dramatized republican manifestoes were particularly potent in achieving their political, rhetorical and literary goals. In spite of their rudimentary character, The Adulateur and The Defeat successfully established a frame for understanding the actions of government officials.
Those revolutionary pieces were in many ways conventional and much the product of their time, and participated in an established eighteenth-century genre, the neo-Roman play. The most famous and popular of neo-Roman plays in the Anglophone world was Joseph Addison’s *Cato* (1718), which described Cato the Younger’s last hours besieged in Utica by Julius Caesar, and his dilemma before choosing to commit suicide once the Roman republic was doomed. Addison’s *Cato* was immensely popular in the colonies, and held enormous sway once the revolution commenced. *Cato* functioned as the quintessential neo-Roman drama, influencing a generation of American playwrights, including Warren, in setting the tone and themes proper for a Whig drama. It was known to shape revolutionaries’ attitude toward public life and provided memorable quotes, from Nathan Hale’s “I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country,” to Patrick Henry’s “give me liberty or give me death.” Another proof of Cato’s popularity came when the Continental Army’s soldiers staged the play, which was George Washington’s favorite, during the brutal winter in Valley Forge (Litto, 1966).

As noted above, scholars have pointed out *The Adulateur*’s and *The Defeat*’s shortcomings as literary pieces, their lack of development and plot, and concluded that they amounted to “propaganda.” Definitely not complete dramas in a conventional sense, Warren’s sketches were made up of a few speeches or brief dialogues between fictional but often recognizable real-life figures. While there is an agreement about the rhetorical function and literary value of the dramas, little has been devoted to explore their literary lineage as neo-Roman dramas, perhaps because they were in no way orthodox neo-Roman plays. Warren’s plays from the first half of the 1770s did not fashion events from ancient history to cater contemporary tastes and sensibilities, as neo-Roman plays traditionally did. Rather, Warren made a daring move, importing Roman heroes into contemporary settings in order to act in revolutionary Boston. In doing so those dramas did not follow standard literary convention, updating Roman history for eighteenth-century audiences. Her plays rather classicized contemporary, American history. Giving the lead roles of the revolution in America to a cluster of Roman republicans, Warren actually achieved the opposite effect from the standard neo-Roman play: rather than adorning Rome with a Boston-like appearance, Warren chose to Romanize Boston.

*The Adulateur* was Mercy Warren’s first published work in what would be a remarkable career of a woman of letters. Thematically simple, this early dramatic effort seemed to have, as Zoe Detsi-Diamanti has argued, “substantially reproduced the naïve optimism of the American Revolution and infuse the political break with England with moral fervor and idealistic depth” (Detsi-Diamanti, 1998, 9). The plot consisted of a thinly disguised attack on Massachusetts’s governor, the high-Tory Thomas Hutchinson. Issued anonymously, like all of Warren’s revolutionary work, *The Adulateur* and its successor *The Defeat* were written in blank verse and published in installments in newspapers, first in Boston and then in various other colonies. Warren set both plays in “Servia,” a subdued province which had been encroached upon by “the adulateur,” its governor Rapatio. Warren’s intentions were anything but to conceal the real-life referents of Servia and Rapatio, which readers easily recognized respectively as Massachusetts and Thomas Hutchinson, the colony’s governor since 1771. Rapatio first appeared in *The Adulateur* reflecting on the Stamp Act while sitting on the remains of his ransacked house and resolving to destroy Servia and its inhabitants in reprisal. The setting was one that no
American could misinterpret, referring to Thomas Hutchinson’s ordeal, which involved the destruction of his mansion by a Bostonian mob during the Stamp Act crisis in 1765. Most readers could without difficulty identify deputy-governor Andrew Oliver under the cover of another character, Limpet.

With the identity of Warren as the author unavailable to the general readership, most readers would not have been able to easily identify the real-life figures represented by Brutus, Rusticus, Hortensius and the other Romans that Warren resurrected to play the part of the heroic patriots in the familiar Loyalist-controlled Boston. If today we can confidently recognize James Otis Jr. in Brutus, and James Warren in Rusticus, among others, it is only because of our hindsight regarding the author’s identity. Contemporary readers, however, not aware that those eminent Bostonians were the playwright’s brother and husband, could have reasonably recognized any other eminent Patriots in the Roman figures. Alternatively, they could read the plays without making a correlation between the Roman characters and specific Americans at all. Hence, while the Tories, especially the governor and his literary alter-ego, could be easily correlated to the real-life figures they represented, the Roman Patriot leadership remained unattached to specific contemporaries. Throughout the popular plays it were thus Romans that were commanding the American revolutionary movement.

Both plays thus demonstrated a significant imbalance in the characters’ nomenclature: while the villains in both dramas were not given Roman names (certainly not a consequence of the lack of Roman scoundrels), and could be easily identified (as was the state of “Servia” as Massachusetts), the identities of the Patriot-Roman heroes remained mostly obscure. Hence, while both dramas’ villains held specific American referents, the protagonists’ identities remained Roman through and through, a fact that increased the effect of actual Romans participating in the American rebellion. Warren’s plays encouraged Americans to imagine fellow patriots as Romans, exhorting them to expel tyranny and restore liberty.

Warren’s goal in The Adulateur was to warn citizens of the evil, insidious intentions of the new, native-born governor. The apparent motive of The Defeat, a shorter and even more fragmentary piece than its coarse predecessor, was similar, as the two plays were evidently written while Warren held a similar political as well as literary frame of mind and could arguably be seen as comprising one larger intellectual whole. The Defeat made use of many of the characters introduced earlier in The Adulateur, including Rapatio-Hutchinson. Warren also employed a similar, if not identical, array of the Roman-Bostonians initially introduced in The Adulateur. Warren meant the dramas to mobilize public opinion against Hutchinson and his circle of cronies, and in favor of the Patriot leadership. Both pieces were thus tightly connected, sharing themes and personae dramatis. Both also highlighted the Roman character and virtue of Bostonian patriots and satirized and exposed the alleged threatening (if comically incompetent) corruption of British officials in Massachusetts.

In both The Adulateur and The Defeat the American-Romans lamented the death of liberty in Servia, a Latinized name that alluded not only to the servile state of Massachusetts but also to the tyrannical, Roman nature of its enslavement. The dramas pitted righteous, freedom loving Roman-Americans against evil, despotic and thoroughly corrupt Tories in a world in which good and evil, Whig and Tory, were unmistakably opposed. Warren rendered Crown representatives, though not yet the Crown itself (that would have to wait until 1776 and Common Sense), as adulating and corrupting Servia’s citizens through
“honor, places, pensions,” while the patriot heroes proved immune to such vices. For example, in order to subdue the colony he governed, Rapatio ordered his henchmen to murder innocent civilians, an episode intended to remind readers of the Boston Massacre. Rapatio-Hutchinson’s ultimate goal was, to “throw the state in dire confusion, nay, ... [to] hurl it down and bury all ... in one common ruin.” As opposed to the evil, hysterical Tories, the Roman-Bostonians protagonists called in light of such murderous schemes for “cool, sedate, and yet determin’d spirited” action to unravel Rapatio’s plots (The Adulateur, 8, 18).

Interestingly, both plays—tragedies by Warren’s own definition—ended optimistically, with the Patriots winning over their Loyalist enemies, but Servia significantly did not gain independence in either play, reflecting the still-limited goals of American resistance during the early 1770s. While at the end of The Adulateur Rapatio captures the high position he sought, in The Defeat he falls from power and is removed from his gubernatorial position.

The Adulateur’s and The Defeat’s Classicism Considered

The Adulateur and The Defeat were never staged, due to Boston’s laws against staging plays. In fact, in a city that did not even host a theatre before 1794 Warren most likely had never seen a play performed on stage. Why then would Warren choose dramas to convey and promote her ideas? Not due to a lack of available literary outlets: she could easily have used pamphlets or shorter newspaper essays, the conventional forms to convey revolutionary ideas and sentiments that she would wield throughout her prolific literary career (novels, which would first be published in America only in the late 1780s, were not yet an option). During the early 1770s, however, political dramas emerged as a major literary tool in the war for colonial hearts and minds. Unlike more formal dissertations such as pamphlets or broadsides, dramas, “tragedies” as Warren put it, allowed the author to effectively and powerfully link the American struggle, opposition Whig ideology, and classical republicanism. As the historian Lester Cohen noted, republicanism was “consistent and insistent” in Warren’s writing to the extent that it was the determining factor in the organization and shaping of her political thought (Cohen, 1983, 485-86). By rendering her revolutionary propaganda as classicized dramas, thus becoming the only author to pen such Roman-American plays, Warren was able to unsettle her audience by exposing Hutchinson’s intrigues and the Patriots’ republican virtue in a familiar, yet estranged Bostonian setting that was roamed by Romans.

The unusual fictional means of translocating Romans into contemporary Boston had implications beyond the propagandistic and literary. The Roman names with which Mercy Warren chose to adorn Boston’s Patriot leaders were striking enough, but in her attempt to harness Roman history to her cause Warren set out to enrich and deepen her plays’ classicization. Hence, both The Adulateur and The Defeat repeatedly alluded to specific historical events from Rome’s history and culture. For example, Warren named Boston’s council members “Senators” at a time when those magistrates had only a Roman connotation (during the 1780s American elected officers would be named “senators” and “congressmen” for the first time, in an act of adulation of their Roman namesakes). The author did not mean, then, that the classical ancients in her dramas would merely
ornament an American setting, but rather that they would participate in constructing revolutionary Boston as a city that was Roman as much as it was American.

Warren also imposed the Roman narratives for which Brutus, Cassius and the rest of the classical figures in her dramas earned their fame on the American present. The plays repeatedly alluded, for example, to the original act of regicide, which Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus committed upon Julius Caesar. They referred to Servia’s governor Rapatio as a Roman tyrant, either as a Caesar or Nero. Hence, in order to secure Servia’s liberty the virtuous Roman-Americans swore, in a stark reference to Caesar’s extra-legal execution by Roman senators, to “dare, what men can dare, and with our daggers force a way to freedom.” The revolutionaries were then resolved “to die, or set the country free,” as “the shining steel half drawn, its point glittering” (The Group, Act I sc.1). The American Brutus and Cassius were planning, in short, to reenact their historical namesakes’ venerated republican deeds in 44 B.C. (The Adulateur, 20, 19).

Warren’s plays did not attempt to represent Americans as the equals of, or comparable to, Roman heroes, as many of Warren’s contemporaries habitually did. Rather, the dramas’ novelty was in transforming Roman republicans into Americans. We will never know whether, had the plays been enacted on stage, the actors would have worn Roman attire to complement their Roman nomenclature. Regardless, the literary, metaphorical togas in which Mercy Warren donned her dramas’ heroes were striking enough.

Such merging of classical characters and modern settings achieved more, then, than merely providing Warren with the rhetorical high ground in the unfolding imperial struggle. This Roman presence in America expressed a remarkable attitude toward, and understanding of, history. Hence it would be wrong to interpret the function of the classical world in the plays as mere “intellectual window dressing,” in Bernard Bailyn’s famous (and wrongheaded) words (Bailyn, 1967). As Warren’s dramas virtually transported antiquity into the American present, she was not asking her audience to recognize similarities between Americans and Romans. She was not interested, as other contemporaries were, in exposing correlations between present and past events and individuals. Rather, Warren asked her contemporaries to perceive their leaders as Romans and revolutionary America as Rome. Such understanding of history, in which two societies, separated by millennia, were united, had remarkable implications. Warren’s widely read plays shrank the temporal expanse, eliding for all practical purposes eighteen centuries of history between her own and the Roman revolution. With her Bostonians as Romans fighting on behalf of republican virtue against sinister, despotic and Caesarian forces, the playwright undermined the conventional understanding of time as what separated what was, is, and will be. The battle Americans were encouraged to fight was a cosmic, millennia-old struggle between the forces of tyranny and freedom that began centuries before on the Italian peninsula.

Warren’s History

Mercy Otis Warren’s heavy reliance on the classics to make sense of American history continued throughout her illustrious career that spanned, as her grand-history’s title attests, The Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution (1805). That influential history, which she wrote decades after the her revolutionary tracts and of which President Jefferson ordered copies for all Federal department heads, provides another striking example of the ways in which she constructed, now in retrospect, the
relationship of the classical world and the Revolution (Friedman and Shaffer, 1975, 195). Warren’s history was distinct from contemporary American histories on several counts. She was the only woman among a group of gentlemen-historians who produced the early revolutionary histories; she was also the only staunch Jeffersonian-Republican among them, and hers was the only history that was published more than a decade after its completion.  

However, Mercy Warren’s history stands out also in its intense construction of the relationship between America and the classics. We have examined Warren’s unique historical outlook through her revolutionary neo-Roman plays, which fused revolutionary contemporaneity and classical history by placing Roman characters in revolutionary Boston’s Patriot leadership, thus constructing the American Revolution as a stage upon which Roman history was reenacted. Her later history of the Revolution still demonstrated many of the characteristic and peculiar attitudes toward history, particularly toward classical history, her writing manifested years before. Those similarities relate to Lester Cohen’s observation that throughout her decades-long literary career Warren employed a singular republican voice, bespeaking a single persona (Cohen, 1983, 486). Nevertheless, perhaps we should not be surprised that the distinct historical sensibilities that Warren first presented in her plays during the Revolution were somewhat altered in her grand-history, written more than fifteen years after her neo-Roman dramas, and published some thirty years later.

In *The Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* Warren made the classical ancients once more central to explaining America and its Revolution. Now narrating events that already belonged to the past, rather than writing in their midst and attempting to influence their outcome, Warren understood and projected the recent history of the Revolution as a chapter in classical history. Once more, the Revolution that emerged from Warren’s *History* seemed in many ways closer to Roman annals than to late eighteenth-century America. In her attempt to construct the past—rather than to mold the present as she had sought to do in her writings from the 1770s—Warren intertwined Roman history in her narration of the American Revolution. Once more, she made an attempt to merge the two historical epochs.

Warren’s *History* consisted of a civic-humanistic narrative that interpreted history to be made up of a set of moralistic and exemplary plots. Like other similar eighteenth-century interpretations, Warren’s metaphistorical assumptions lined up with what modern scholars consider Whig interpretations of history, a British eighteenth-century historiographical mode that understood the course of human events as progress toward greater freedom. This pejorative label (Whig historians are accused of submitting to the fallacies of teleology and to presentism) definitely suits Warren’s account of liberty’s advance toward its fulfillment in the United States. Warren saw in clear Whig fashion “freedom, long hunted round the globe by a succession of tyrants,” to appear “at this [revolutionary] period, as if about to erect her standard in America” (*History*, I: 126). Indeed, it was Warren’s Whig assumptions, the imminent relation she discerned between the on-going march of liberty from antiquity to the present, that tied so closely the classical and American societies and their similar respective roles in human annals.

Warren understood history as a “tragic theatre,” and hence classical antiquity and the American Revolution as acts contributing to a vast drama that unfolded over millennia (*History*, I: 339). As in other contemporary Whig narratives, Warren detected two antagonistic, ever-battling forces that dominated history: on the one hand there were the
lust for power, ambition and avarice, “the leading springs which generally actuate the restless mind,” that lead to luxury and corruption; on the other, and diametrically opposed to the former, stood civic virtue, frugality, and disinterestedness. This dichotomous, civic-humanistic view inevitably led Warren to interpret history as a succession of battles between evil, tyrannical forces and benign, virtuous ideals. She located the historical origins of her account of that momentous battle in the Roman revolution, when the republic was cataclysmically transformed into an empire. Even Caesar’s death could not save the republic, since “specious Augustus established himself in empire by the appearance of justice,” and “the savage Nero shamelessly weltered in the blood of the citizens” (History, I: 3). The Roman republic’s dissolution had cosmic consequences, far beyond the Italian border. “From the dictatorship of Sylla to the overthrow of Caesar, and from the ruin of the Roman tyrant to the death of the artful Cromwell, deception as well as violence have operated to the subversion of the freedom of the people” (History, III: 690). Indeed, ever since Rome’s fall luxury and corruption have caused “all the rapine and confusion, the depredation and ruin, that have spread distress over the face of the earth from ... Caesar to an arbitrary prince of the house of Brunswick” (History, I: 2). The march of corruption that Warren artfully articulated, from the Roman Caesars to the British monarchy, was stated boldly, and demonstrated how Britain and Rome shared “the love of domination and an uncontrolled lust for arbitrary” power. These poisonous traits “have been equally conspicuous in the decline of Roman virtue, and in the dark pages of British story. It was these principles that overturned that ancient republic. It was these principles that frequently involved England in civil feuds” (History, I: 5).

Where did America fit in this tragic tale of overpowering vices that topple even the greatest of empires? Warren believed that the same despotic powers that Britain inherited from Rome repulsed at least part of the inhabitants of the British Isles and “drove the first settlers of America from elegant habitations and affluent regions of the western world” (History, I: 5). The first settlers’ flight from the continent was thus an ocean crossing by radical Protestants in the search of religious liberty, an attempt to retain in America their civic purity, which stood opposed to the perceived corruption and oppression of the Anglican Church, and to avert political decadence. Unfortunately, Warren believed, “the corrupt principles which had been fashionable in the voluptuous and bigoted courts of the Stuarts soon followed the emigrants” (History, I: 9). Not only did these excesses find a footing in America but also “unhappily for Great Britain and America the encroachments of the crown had gathered strength by time” (History, I: 15). It was this lineage of corruption, from Rome to Britain and America, that eventually “involved the thirteen colonies in the confusion and blood” of the Revolution (History, I: 4).

The Revolution was, according to Warren, America’s attempt to retain its virtue in light of the frightful advance of corruption throughout human annals. In fact Warren depicted the Revolution as an era during which Americans manifested virtue on a scale rarely witnessed in history. The patriots displayed devotion, self-denial, prudence, and industry to an astounding degree. “Happily for America,” its “inhabitants in general possessed not only the virtues of native courage and a spirit of enterprise, but minds generally devoted to the best affections...[bearing] the costly sacrifices of health, fortune and life” (History, I: 98). So commendable were American revolutionaries that there was “no age which bears a testimony so honorable to human nature; as shews mankind at so sublime a pitch of
virtue” (*History*, I: 97). If Britain attempted to corrupt America, America fought back with its admirable stock of virtuous citizens. It was nothing less than astonishing to Warren that through the boycotts that left Americans devoid of many necessities, and the dissolution of government that reduced them almost to a state of nature, their virtue prevailed, and that they “did not feel the effects of anarchy in the extreme” (quoted in Cohen, 1980, 209). While she could not situate actual Romans in a history of the creation of the United States, Warren concluded that American patriots “rivaled the admired heroes of antiquity” (*History*, I: 93).

Warren’s rendition of a Manichaean struggle between luxury and virtue, corruption and disinterestedness, was anything but an original theme. Indeed, it was a mainstay of Whig histories. What was distinct in Warren’s philosophy of history was the way in which she understood Rome and America to be related. Warren, we have seen, had depicted Britain as a debauched Rome and America as a reincarnation of republican Rome for decades before the publication of her *History*. Her extraordinary conviction that during the trying years of the Revolution America raised her “Caesars and her Catilines, as well as her Brutuses and her Catos” comes to mind (*History*, I: 212). Lucius Sergius Catilina (108 BC – 62 BC) was arguably the most infamous of Roman conspirators who attempted to subvert the republic, a conspiracy memorably foiled by Cicero’s Catiline Orations in which the orator exposed the villain’s crimes. Unfortunately for the ancient republic, although Catilina failed in his subverting attempts, his legacy paved the way for Julius Caesar who finally dealt the republic its deathblow. Hence, being labeled a “Catiline” was the most denigrating of all epithets, as Caesar, successful in his mischief, was at least remembered as a dynamic and most successful chieftain. Warren, searching for American Catilinas, found her saboteur once again in Thomas Hutchinson, Massachusetts’s last civil governor.

We have seen how Warren had already devoted her energies to defame Hutchinson back in the 1770s in *The Adulatur* and *The Defeat*, when the American Tory was still in power. The decades that had passed since Hutchinson had sailed to England in 1774, never to return, did not weaken Warren’s venom toward the loyalist governor. In her history she saved no grim words to describe the man she deemed “an adulator.” Placing Hutchinson at the level of the worst villains the world has known, Warren concluded that “few ages have produced a more fit instrument for the purposes of a corrupt court” (*History*, I: 45). Warren went on to describe Hutchinson’s sinister character: “He was dark, intriguing, insinuating, haughty and ambitious, while the extreme of avarice marked each feature of his character” (*ibid.*). Like Catilina of old, Hutchinson was driven by the love of luxury and the lust for power. Like Catilina, he attempted to elevate himself to a more powerful position by subverting his country’s constitution. It is no wonder then that Warren accused Hutchinson of urging “the creation of a patrician rank,” referring to the Roman elite caste, “from which all officers of government should in future be selected” (*History*, I: 65). In choosing to describe Hutchinson’s scheme as a patriciate, and not as an aristocrat, Warren demonstrated the extent to which she understood not merely Hutchinson but America’s revolutionary past in general in Roman terms. Hutchinson fulfilled Warren’s prediction that America would find her Catilinas.

While the American populace at large demonstrated laudable collective virtue, their leaders matched those of antiquity. Warren could thus perpetuate the comparison so popular in the revolutionary days, of Benedict Arnold’s march on Canada in the dead of winter of 1775 as equating to “the celebrated march of the renowned Hannibal” (*History*, I: 143). As in her revolutionary plays, Warren did not shy from complimenting her close
circle of Bostonian patriots. Her brother James Otis, for example, demonstrated, among a long string of virtues, “patriotism marked with the disinterestedness of a Spartan” (History, I: 49). While James Otis demonstrated Lacademonian impartiality, the arch-revolutionary Samuel Adams possessed “stern manners, a smooth address, and a Roman-like firmness, united with that sagacity and penetration that would have made a figure in a [ancient] conclave.” As close as could possibly be to an American Cato, Adams “exhibited on all occasions, an example of patriotism [...] and virtue honorary to the human character” (History, I: 116). Warren and Adams, who were most likely the Brutus and Cassius of her revolutionary plays, were described once more as American-classical protagonists.

A staunch Jeffersonian Republican, Warren was not as adulating as most American authors were toward George Washington, the Federalist father of his country. Nevertheless, she repeated the conventional appraisal the general received for exhibiting “the caution of Fabius,” and “the energy of Caesar” (perhaps intentionally alluding to the problematic symbol of the ruthless Julius Caesar in relation to Washington, although alluding to Caesar’s merits as a battlefield commander and avoiding his crippling shortcomings with relation to the American future Federalist president) (History, I: 128). Even when she described men who were not wholly capable in her opinion to rise to ancient heights, Warren still employed figurative ancient comparisons. Hence, General Lee “emulated the heroes of antiquity in the field, while in private life he sunk into the vulgarity of the clown” (History, I: 160).

Warren did not restrict herself to individuals, as she bestowed ancient glory on American institutions as well. Hence, the Continental Congress was, according to Warren, “composed of men jealous of their rights, proud of their patriotism and independence, and tenacious of their honor and probity” (History, I: 264). The states’ representatives demonstrated “the most pointed indignation, against such daring attempts to corrupt their integrity.” We have already seen how Warren repeatedly tied American patriotism and fear of corruption together with the framework of the classical world. In the same vein she described the revolutionary congressmen as holding “genuine amor patriae,” leaving no doubt as to the classical nature of that revolutionaries’ patriotism. Finally, by dubbing the Congress “the Amphyctions of the Western world,” (her emphasis) referring to the ancient Greek league of city-states, Warren sealed her representation of the Congress—the name in itself being a reminder of its classical origins—as an institution to be perceived as a gathering in the revered tradition of ancient leagues (History, I: 82-3).

As in her revolutionary plays, her History represented the Revolution as a drama, and history in general as a “tragic theatre” (History, I: 339). In the historical drama players were assigned recognized roles of past figures, according to which they followed their allotted parts. Warren’s exasperation was evident when Americans did not act according to their ascribed historical role. The retired officers of the Continental Army, who formed the Society of the Cincinnati as the war ended in 1783, provided a case in point. Assuming the name of Cincinnatus, the retired dictator who capitulated and returned peacefully to his oxen and plough, the Cincinnati frustrated Warren as they did not retire “satisfied with their own efforts to save their own country” as their ancient namesake has done. Rather, Warren believed, the American Cincinnati “ostentatiously assumed hereditary distinctions, and the insignia of nobility.” The Cincinnati, she concluded, should have “imitated the humble and disinterested virtues” of their ancient Roman namesake (History, II: 618).
Conclusion: Warren, Classicism, and Revolutionary Historical Consciousness

For more than a quarter of a century Mercy Otis Warren interpreted the Founding Era as tied to and fulfilling classical, especially Roman narratives. Her classicized dramas from the 1770s already depicted the American Revolution as hosting Roman republicans, understanding time as a medium through which history could “happen” back and forth. Warren merged the present and the past not only in her public writings, she also did so in the private sphere, underscoring the significance of her remarkable historical consciousness.

Warren signed, for example, personal letters as Marcia, assuming the persona of a virtuous Roman matron, while corresponding with her “Roman” friend Portia, better known to most of us as Abigail Adams (Hicks, 2005). As Portia, Cato the Younger’s daughter and Brutus’s wife, Adams, in turn, referred to her husband John in their correspondence as Brutus. It appears that Warren and other revolutionaries were committed in their private lives to Roman role-playing that allowed them to perceive themselves as active participants in the momentous historical events that they believed equaled those of antiquity. In fact, Warren seems to have routinely set what she saw and did within two different contexts: that of eighteenth-century America and that of the classics. As the historian Lester Cohen noted, one discovers in Warren’s writings only one voice, one persona. Her self-fashioning as a Roman matron reveals, then, no interior self that is separable from its public performance. Warren’s personality as Marcia was perfectly consistent with the public presentation of America as Rome reborn.

One needs to grasp this peculiar sort of historical consciousness, so deeply at odds with our contemporary sensibilities, in order to fully appreciate how American revolutionaries constructed their worldviews. Warren may have been unique in the way in which she merged in her dramas the late eighteenth-century American present with the historical world of classical antiquity. She was anything but unique, however, in relying on the classics for making sense of the present. Contemporaries habitually transcended the volatile present by understanding the here-and-now through the well-recognized terrain of the history of the classical civilization. We have no indication that contemporaries perceived Warren’s representation of Roman republicans leading the American Revolution as odd. To the contrary, citizens of the early United States found it obliging to perceive their revolution as a reenactment of classical narratives. John Adams for example read the history of the Founding Era through the prism of classical history: “change the [Roman] Names,” Adams argued, “and every Anecdote will be applicable to Us” (letter to Benjamin Rush, 4 December 1805). In this light, Warren’s depiction of Brutus, Cassius and other Romans as leading the American revolutionary movement was merely the logical extension of a rich contemporary classical imagination.

The frame of mind that allowed Warren and others to present their acquaintances as Brutuses and Cassiuses, and their recent history as a reenactment of Roman annals, enables us to fully understand the modes of thought and action that led revolutionary Americans to make the break with Britain, to justify that rupture, and to construct their new, independent republic. Such rich classicization of revolutionary America offers, then, new perspectives for explaining the motives that drove the Revolution, as well as the
meanings that patriots and the citizens of the young United States ascribed to their revolutionary deeds.

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---, *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*, Boston, 1790.


NOTES

1. Warren, *The Adulateur*, 5-6. The drama was first published in installments in newspapers across the colonies throughout 1772, and, in 1773, published in pamphlet form, from which the quotes hereby are taken.

2. For important works on the classics in America see: Winterer, *The Mirror of Antiquity*; and also *The Culture of Classicism*; Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*. For earlier works that significantly expanded our knowledge of the classics in America see Reinhold, *Classica Americana*; Eadie, ed., *Classical Traditions in Early America*. For other important works see: Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*; and Sellers, *American Republicanism*.


4. For the extent of the influence of the cult of classicism see Shalev, 2009, chap. 1. For the European context see Honour, *Neo-classicism*.

5. Seller notes there that Lee’s was “a wholly conventional claim.”

6. For the standard account of the republican synthesis see: Shalhope, “Toward a Republican Synthesis” and “Republicanism and Early American Historiography.”

7. For the changing notions of “democracy” and “republic” in eighteenth-century America see Adams, *The First American Constitutions*, 96-114.

8. For major works on those processes see Green, *Pursuits of Happiness*; Breen, *The Marketplace of Revolution*.


11. For a valuable synthesis see Toews, “Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn.”

12. Davies, *Catharine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren*, 306-7. Scholars such as Zoe Detsi-Diamanti have also emphasized how Warren’s gender interacted with and influenced her republicanism; Detsi-Diamanti, “The Metaphors of Freedom.” Lester Cohen, on the other hand, pointed out that Warren’s notion of the equality of the sexes and her republicanism made her predict a time when men and women would be judged by the standard of “virtue alone” (Cohen, 1980, 493). Others pointed out that Warren was convinced that women and men were equal in intelligence and that all people should have an education, and yet seems to have never envisioned a society in which women could actively engage in public life. In order to function in male-dominated intellectual circles, Warren seemed to have thrived on praise from a close circle of male contemporaries and resorted to a variety of “feminine wiles” (Wilson and Bollinger, 1980, 178, 162). For a popular biography of Warren, see Stuart, *The Muse of the Revolution*.

13. For the role of theatre and drama in the American Revolution, see Shaffer, “Making ‘An Excellent Die’” and Desti-Diamanti “The Metaphors of Freedom.” The most authoritative literary biography of Warren is Richards’ *Mercy Otis Warren*, which includes an extensive, if by now somewhat dated, bibliography of the scholarship on Warren.

14. Warren finished writing her history by 1791 but published it only in 1805, most likely laying it aside because of “the virulence of party spirit” of the Federalist Era. The other woman historian writing at that time was Hannah Adams. Adams however wrote mostly religious, not political, histories (quoted in Shaffer, 1975, 149-150). Reading the parts of Warren’s history pertaining to the pre-1789 years does not reveal, according to Friedman and Shaffer, her Republican stance (Freidman and Shafer, 1975, 206).


16. Years later Warren expressed once more a similar view of historical reoccurrence when she predicted that “America has many a worthy name / Who shall, hereafter, grace the rolls of fame. Her good Cornelia / and her Arias fair / Who, death, in its most hideous forms, can dare” (in Warren, *Poems, Dramatic and Miscellaneous*, 209-10).


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**ABSTRACTS**

Students of American history are aware of Greece and Rome’s immense influence on the ideology and political thought of the Founding Era, while scholars of women studies acknowledge Mercy Otis Warren’s importance as a “Founding Mother” of the American republic. This essay focuses on Warren’s remarkable use of the classics in her popular, if now forgotten revolutionary dramas, and in her magisterial history of the Revolution written years later. In her works Warren put to use a set of powerful and unique rhetorical modes for incorporating and merging America...
and the classical world. The frame of mind that allowed her to present acquaintances as Brutuses and Cassiuses, and American history as a reenactment of Roman annals, enables us to better understand the modes of thought and action that propelled the American Revolution. Focusing on Warren’s rich classicization of revolutionary America offers, then, new perspectives for explaining the meanings that patriots and the citizens of the young United States ascribed to their revolutionary deeds and their young republic. The historical consciousness that underlies Warren’s literary work suggests that at moments the American Revolution was presented and seen, and should thus be understood, as a Roman revolution.

Tandis que les chercheurs en histoire américaine ont bien conscience de l’influence considérable que la Grèce et la Rome antiques ont exercée sur les modèles idéologiques et la pensée politique de la jeune république américaine, les spécialistes d’histoire des femmes ont souligné le rôle de « mère fondatrice » joué par Merci Otis Warren. Cet article explore les usages singuliers des classiques par Warren dans son théâtre révolutionnaire – aujourd’hui oublié, mais fort populaire en son temps – et dans l’histoire magistrale de la Révolution qu’elle rédige une trentaine d’années plus tard. Dans ses écrits, Warren a recours à des procédés rhétoriques originaux et efficaces qui lui offrent la possibilité de confondre l’Amérique et le monde classique. Le paradigme culturel qui lui permet d’ériger ses proches en autant de Brutus ou de Cassius et de faire de l’histoire américaine une répétition des annales romaines rend possible une meilleure compréhension des modes de pensée et d’action qui servirent de moteur à la révolution américaine. L’étude de cette classicisation de l’Amérique révolutionnaire ouvre ainsi de nouvelles perspectives en mettant en lumière le sens que les patriotes et les citoyens de la jeune nation donnaient à leurs actes et à la république. La conscience historique qui sous-tend l’œuvre littéraire de Warren suggère ainsi qu’à certains moments, la révolution américaine fut présentée et perçue comme une révolution romaine – et doit donc aussi être comprise comme telle.

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AUTHOR

ERAN SHALEV

Haifa University