be required reading for anyone interested in women’s history, gender history, consumer culture, and the early republic.

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Early American historians have tended to consider widows primarily in terms of their status: either as poor “relicts” or as liberated femmes sole. Vivian Bruce Conger focuses her attention on widows’ own desires. Through an extensive study of widows’ wills, Conger creatively demonstrates the ways that those widows’ testamentary decisions reflected their ideals for family and community relationships.

Scholars have long deliberated whether women’s status rose or fell throughout the colonial period. Conger places herself squarely in the camp of those who argue that women’s power in the community and household did not decline over time. Instead, she suggests, widowed women were able to “[shape] familial, kin, and community structures, as they understood them” (p. 8). As new heads of households, these women became “virtual fathers” (p. 154), and thereby felt free to participate more extensively in the community than their married counterparts. Like married women, widows were subject to the patriarchal expectations of early American societies and governments. Courts and children might try to block widows’ attempts to control their estates even when these women were no longer formally controlled by coverture. “Even so, in comparison with other colonial women, widows enjoyed great powers” (p. 155). Widows used these powers, Conger argues, in order to give other women more economic independence.

The base of the book is a solid foundation of quantitative work done in Massachusetts, Maryland, and South Carolina. Conger then weaves this material together with narrative, often prescriptive, sources to explain the cultural context for women’s decisions. Chapter one, for example, demonstrates the conflicting messages widows received about whether to remarry in order to safely contain their sexual impulses or to remain widows in order to preserve their children’s patrimony from stepfathers. Yet Conger’s own research shows that women’s decision to remarry was largely informed by their wealth, the age of their children, and their locale (widows in the Chesapeake and South Carolina were far more likely to remarry than those in Massachusetts). The relationship between the advice literature and remarriage patterns is not precisely clear in this instance. Overall, however, Conger finds that there were few striking regional differences between the north and the south.

Women who resisted the advice to marry often had to struggle with the court system to obtain the autonomy that widowhood could offer. Competing demands of male property holders, their widows, and their children reveal the patriarchal and paternalistic bent of colonial courts. Nonetheless, some widows did manage to wrest more than the bare minimum of their “dower” and “widow’s thirds” from their husbands’ estates.

Widows’ practices in their neighborhood communities—petitioning, acting as informal arbiters, dispensing charity—were indications of their participation in a larger political community. Conger’s argument that widows were both constrained by a prescriptive literature insisting that “an ideal widow lived a solitary, private life” (p. 111) and at the same time important members of a Habermasian public sphere through their self-consciously humble petitions is somewhat contradictory. Nonetheless, Conger’s convincing quantitative evidence indicates that women’s legacies to other women, and particularly to other widows, created a strong female network that was influential, if not “political.”

The most compelling parts of the book show the ways that widows turned their “mite” into “might.” When widows themselves became testators, they had the power to make decisions that affected the next generations. In several intriguing examples, Conger demonstrates the changes widows made to their husbands’ last wishes. By privileging some children over others (particularly widows’ own children over stepchildren), “colonial widows often stepped in to construct and restrict the family structure as they saw fit” (pp. 100–101). These colonial widows continued their husbands’ practices of favoring sons over daughters, but they were far more likely to leave bequests to their daughters. In one of her boldest claims, Conger suggests that the result of more women receiving inheritances was to give women increasing authority in their families throughout the eighteenth century. Widows’ legacies not only “subtly and unintentionally changed the character of American families” but also pushed later generations of northern fathers as well as mothers to leave equal amounts to their sons and daughters (p. 106), upending nearly two hundred years of male favoritism.

The work on widows and economic activity has seen a recent resurgence of interest. Conger’s original contribution to this literature is not in her explanation of widows’ livelihoods, but in her explanation of widows’ economic activity after their death. As widows participated in the world of credit and debt, their economic networks were often primarily female. As a result, widows used their wills to pay off or forgive debts. Widows’ final testaments were more than vehicles for the orderly transfer of property. Women used them to reshape the lives they had lived and to fashion new worlds for the future, and Conger’s sustained attention to these wills testifies to their creative powers.

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Eran Shalev. Rome Reborn on Western Shores: Historical Imagination and the Creation of the American Re-
Eran Shalev’s book is a fascinating and sophisticated study of the American founders’ relationship with the ancient Romans and what it reveals about their historical consciousness. Not content to provide powerful additional support for the view that the Greek and Roman classics were crucial to the American Revolution, imbuing its leaders with courage derived from a strong sense of purpose and furnishing the thirteen colonies with a unifying ideology and vocabulary, Shalev blazes new trails, arguing persuasively that the founders’ classical references reflected conceptions of time and history that were very different from our own. He demonstrates that the Roman world was ever present to the founders with a vividness that is now difficult to appreciate. When Joseph Warren donned a toga to deliver a speech commemorating the Boston Massacre, when Mercy Otis Warren wrote plays in which contemporary American political figures were given Roman names and set in a Roman context, and when pamphlet and newspaper writers employing a wide range of classical pseudonyms engaged in rhetorical exchanges that utilized the historical details of their conflicting Roman personae, they expressed a profound sense not merely of the continued relevance of the ancients to modern concerns but of their continued presence in almost tangible form. Not only did the distinction between past and present nearly vanish in such moments, but so did that between various eras of the past. The founders’ references often combined Greeks and Romans from diverse periods, the British Whigs, and themselves into a single unit. This refusal to make distinctions now central to academic historiography was rarely the result of ignorance; more frequently, it was the product of a way of thinking about time that was directly opposed to the modern tendency to see history as a succession of isolated, discrete events.

Yet Shalev also demonstrates that while the American revolutionaries shared a penchant for conflating diverse eras and historical figures, they were divided by two competing conceptions of time. He distinguishes between New Enganders’ typological view of history, in which America was a newer and better version of Rome destined to transcend the cycles of the past, and southerners’ more classical conception, in which America was bound to fall as Rome had. (Even southern revolutionaries managed to maintain an optimistic tone despite this pessimistic view, however, since they located America’s position at the rising portion of the historical cycle.) Not surprisingly, citizens of the middle states were split between the two conceptions. Shalev is mindful of exceptions to these regional generalizations, of course. For instance, John Adams was more pessimistic than most of his fellow New Enganders during the revolutionary era, though even Adams was more optimistic at that time than he later became.

Indeed, Shalev contends that during the constitutional period, many of the formerly millennialist New Englanders sank into a pessimism that eventuated in the same classical, cyclical conception of history as that espoused by their southern brethren. During the constitutional debates, New England Federalists were as apt as southern Antifederalists to express the fear that the American republic would join its Roman model on the ash heap of history, although each faction proposed different causes for the impending decline.

Shalev’s excellent epilogue reveals that while it is difficult for modern Americans to appreciate the depth of the founders’ identification with ancient Rome, we have not lost completely their fear of decline and, thus, their belief in the cyclical nature of history. He notes that the enduring Cincinnatus and Caesar tropes in American political rhetoric presuppose a cyclical view: even a Cincinnatus can only delay a republic’s inevitable decline, and a Caesar can only destroy a destructible entity. Shalev’s concluding passage detailing the lengthy history of American longing for a Cincinnatus and dread of a Caesar, from the days of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton to those of Wesley K. Clark and George W. Bush, is a tour de force, compressing in twenty pages of lucid prose a wealth of impressive research and intriguing insights. Shalev uncovers a fascinating combination of continuity and change in the characteristics of American nominees for the titles of Cincinnatus and Caesar. While American Cincinnati are still revered for their martial prowess and their willingness to surrender power and American Caesars are still lambasted for their ambition and their lust for power, the Cincinnati of modern, urban America have been divorced from their agrarian roots.

In making a persuasive case for its provocative thesis, Shalev’s work constitutes an original and significant contribution to the study of the influence of the Greek and Roman classics on the American founders. Even those who disagree with the book’s thesis will find a treasure trove of solid research, trenchant observations, and lucid writing within its pages.

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In this book Gordon S. Wood puts republican ideology front and center (seven of nineteen chapters have “republican” or “republicanism” in the title) and ties it fast to a social interpretation of revolutionary “transformation” from a traditional to a middling, democratic, capitalist order. Readers familiar with Wood will recognize his signal style and interpretations. A “social struggle” between middling sorts and gentry that was “real” but not class warfare translated into the battles between the Jeffersonian Republicans and the Federalists during these years. The democratization of politics and culture was the outcome, one that disappointed some of those who participated in those battles, especially the Fed-