ANCIENT MASKS,
AMERICAN FATHERS:
CLASSICAL PSEUDONYMS
DURING THE AMERICAN
REVOLUTION AND EARLY
REPUBLIC

Eran Shalev

“Can’t repeat the past?” he cried incredulously. “Why of course you
can! . . . I’m going to fix everything just the way it was before.”

Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

When we look into the scores of pamphlets published during the American
Revolution and early republic by Cato, Brutus, Caesar, Aristeides,
Helvidius, Catullus, as well as Determinatus, Junius Americanus, Philo
Publicus, The Tribune (and many, many more), we ask ourselves: Cato?
Brutus? Caesar? Did they not die centuries before the struggle for
American independence? The vigorous neoclassical discourse in
eighteenth-century America favored the use of classical pseudonyms in
polemical writings during the war to rid the colonies of foreign rule and in
the ideological debate over forging a nation out of the newly independent
states. 1 An appraisal of the genre of classical pseudonyms offers a fresh

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1 Although excellent accounts of the diverse classical influences on the creation of the
American Republic are available, they tend to overlook the semiotic profundity of the use
of the ancient world. Among them see R. M. Gummere, The American Colonial Mind and
the Classical Tradition (Cambridge, MA, 1963); Howard Mumford Jones, O Strange New
World, American Culture: The Formative Years (New York, 1964); Paul Anthony Rahe,

look at the young American republic and its creation. The intense use of such pseudo-names provides, as we shall see, a framework to understanding the political imagination of the creators of the American polity. Faced with various crises, Americans turned to ancient authority, above all Rome, to justify their republican experiment and to construct a coherent narrative out of their volatile political reality. Through the importation and permutation of the Whig custom of pseudonymous writing, Americans presented a deep and original explanation of their republican experiment. By drawing on classical pseudo-names authors proffered not only justifications but also a mytho-historical rationalization for the revolt against England and eventually for the creation of the American Republic.

An act of communication—such as a political essay signed with a classical pseudonym—may be better understood if we can answer the following questions: Who; Says What; in Which Channel; to Whom; with What Effect? This article will touch on such questions, with an emphasis on the first and the last. These classical names assumed by political writers have not been analysed on their own merits in recent scholarship. Scholars concerned with classical influences on the founding generation often mention the classical pen names usually when referring to the pamphlets selected for analysis. Much less attention has been given to the reasons and consequences of writing as the ancients. An inquiry into the meanings of those pseudonyms will provide a thicker description of the complex phenomenon of moderns conversing through the totems of the past, bringing to the fore the dialectical relationship of rhetoric and history, and

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hence the rhetoric of history, extensively elaborated by Americans of the early republic.

Appealing to the classics helped Americans express their hopes, desires, and fears; their particular use of language and history throws much light on the American imagination.\textsuperscript{4} For revolutionary Americans, classical pseudonyms performed a double function. On a surface level, they were used as rhetorical devices to gain the high ground in political debates. At a deeper level, they proposed a meta-explanation of American society in terms of antiquity. The deliberation of republican ideology through classical guises facilitated the articulation of tensions, setting in motion the crystallization of the ideology and sentiment modern scholarship calls Nationalism. Their pseudonyms, like masks, attempted to impose upon identities.\textsuperscript{5} As with masks, true identities lurk beneath them. What truths were the pseudonyms concealing behind their classical façades? Were they truths of antiquity dressed in an American guise, or those of America dressed in togas?

False names, aliases, \textit{noms de plume}, and pen names all signify authors assuming fictitious voices. However, pseudonymity, anonymity, and forgery should not be lumped together; interpolation, mistaken ascription, and textual alteration also differ from pseudonym. A text will here be considered pseudonymous only when “the author is deliberately identified by a name other than his own.”\textsuperscript{6} Pseudonyms as a topic do not seem to interest those engaged in critical and literary theory. “Pseudonym” entries are hard to find in literary dictionaries,\textsuperscript{7} and there is no standard textbook on the subject of pseudonyms in the English language (although compilations attributing pseudonyms to authors are abundant). \textit{The Encyclopaedia Britannica} devotes a very short entry to pseudonyms, which declares: “The same end [as with pseudonym] is gained by publications without any name, or anonymously.”\textsuperscript{8} \textit{The Britannica} could not have got it more wrong: the prefix “pseudo” entails the sense of falsity and pretension,

\begin{itemize}
\item For discussion of the discourse of masquerade, see below, 155-56.
\item “Pseudonym,” \textit{Encyclopaedia Britannica} (Chicago, 1960).
\end{itemize}
of something that is apparent, but not real. Unlike anonymity, which leaves the reader in a void, deception is inherent to the idea of pseudonymity. A writer is evidently present, but only an assumed identity is encountered. The reader, trying to visualize the one whose words are perceived, is barred by a wall of deceitful pretence, false existence, impersonation.

Pseudonyms as literary measures go back to biblical times and canonical writings and became popular in early modern Europe in political pamphlets and newspaper proclamations. The main reason for writing anonymously and pseudonymously in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe was the harsh censorship imposed by absolute regimes. In the political culture of the ancien régime any set of ideas that competed with those of the government was considered heretical. Political debate unfolded more easily under mediation that would not expose writers to the severity of the censor.\(^9\)

A pseudonym is here considered “classical” if it borrowed the names of ancient historical figures (e.g., Pericles) or abstract Latin augural terms (e.g., Sincerus). Sub-dividing further we can distinguish three types of augural names: the first drawn from a classical republican virtue (e.g., Candidus); the second reflecting upon, and actually summarizing, the thrust of the text they signed (e.g., Benevolus, which implied a condemnation of the hardships of poverty); and the alluding to a position in the Roman magistrature (e.g., The Censor). These augurative names have in common the quality of dealing with concepts and allusions to antiquity without any reference to any specific individual. The borrowed pseudonym, on the other hand, either a Roman or Greek name (the majority were Roman), posed a challenge to readers, a cipher that had to be cracked in order to understand the essay’s inner meaning. One had to grasp the writer’s intention in order to understand the thematic relation between pseudonym and text. That could explain why Alexander Hamilton did not choose the best-known historical characters as his noms de plume: he expected his readers to invest some effort in recognizing them.\(^10\)

By the end of the seventeenth century, English Whig opposition had made common the custom of anonymous and pseudonymous political writings; but it was Milton’s prose (such as Areopagitica, 1644), laden with Greco-Roman allusions and exercising an “authority rarely granted” in the colonies, that captured the minds of Americans. During the century after


\(^10\) Richard, Founders and the Classics, 43. There were, however, borrowed pseudonyms that merely ornamented the text they signed without correlating with its meaning.
Milton, other English authors, especially but not exclusively those writing in the Whig persuasion, expanded this tradition. Thus, in the pseudonymous *Cato’s Letters*, published in Britain in 1720-1723, John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon produced one of the most popular, quotable, and esteemed sources of political ideas of contemporary Anglophone political thought throughout the empire. Here the pseudonym commemorated Cato the Younger, the great Roman patriot who committed suicide when his beloved republic fell into the hands of Julius Caesar. Cato was a symbol of public liberty and virtue, the merits most esteemed by Whig writers. By linking a radical Whig ideology with classical pseudonymous writing, Trenchard and Gordon, writing in England, participated in and contributed to a widespread tradition of signing political essays with classical pseudonyms. Though it has been by no means fully studied, this phenomenon no doubt extends to all parts of the Anglophone world, including Ireland, Scotland, and the American colonies in the West Indies and North America. When revolutionary turmoil arose in the New World, that tradition was already well developed. At least since the 1720s, colonial British Americans, inspired by the authoritative example of *Cato’s Letters* and other British writers, had been publishing political essays, social commentary, and pamphlets under a classical nom de plume. Yet the use of classical pseudonyms in revolutionary America underwent certain permutations as it evolved in response to the developments after 1760. This essay is intended as a first step in the construction of a functional analysis of the American use of classical pseudonyms during the revolutionary era.

As was the case throughout the Anglophone world, the last decades of the eighteenth century in North America was a turning point in the distribution of information and in the transition, long underway, of American society from one less dependent on oral communication and more dependent on print. Reading practices, tastes, and objectives were expanding dramatically and were increasingly receptive to the creation of a new republican culture of print. According to Michael Warner, the novel republican universe understood texts to be normally impersonal, written by an unknown writer to a readership that was anonymous; readers received printed communications as part of a network (potentially limitless) of unknown and unknowable others, who might be participating incognito in the politically oriented discourse. The impersonality of such public discourse became both a trait and a norm of this republican sphere,

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propagating what Sandra Gustafson calls “distinct preference for fictitious personae.” According to Dror Wahrman, through “heightened attention to the significance of language and performance,” issues became public—for an abstract community—not by establishing an interaction between particularized persons, but through the printed representation of fictitious figures. In parallel to the ascent of a new oratorical public sphere in which the patriot voice clearly sounded, formed by orators such as Patrick Henry and James Otis, the ventriloquized performances of the ancients provided an agency for the elaboration of colonial objections to metropolitan behaviors, the articulation of arguments over the shape of new republican regimes in the states, the creation of national government, and even the concrete embodiment of an embryonic national identity.12

In their attempts to solve the dilemmas stemming from their unfixed national identities, Americans engaged in a discourse of disguise and masquerade. Such discourse included not only textual masks, but also veiled embodied acts, such as the Tea Party, carried out by Bostonians dressed and painted as Indians. Cognomens, those fancy epithets bestowed on individuals, were frequently used, serving as alter personae by which writers were known in literary exchanges. Thus in private societies, lying outside state control, writes David S. Shields, the frequent use of neoclassical cognomens “aestheticized conversation by distancing it from mundane talk of familiars.” By the end of the eighteenth century belles-lettres circles were accustomed to the ancients serving as fictitious guises through such frequent use of cognomens. Yet the explanation for the use of pseudonyms during the first half of the eighteenth century does not account for their prolific use by the century’s end.13

As the quarrel with Britain intensified, American writers were busy generating a spectacular amalgam of pseudonymous essays and pamphlets, many of them classical in reference. The names used in these years seem mostly to have been restricted to the augurative. In Boston, 1764, “Philo


13 David S. Shields, Civil Tongues and Polite Letters in British America (Chapel Hill, 1997), 263; ibid., 265; ibid., 264.
Publicus,' the "public friend," lamented the decline of American society, which had "grown more and more luxurious every year." "Britannus Americanus" rejected his mother country in 1766 and called Americans provocatively to "tax their fellow subjects in England." "The Tribune," assuming the position of defender of the Roman plebs in Charleston in 1766, exclaimed that "security of freedom can only be in public virtue." The total number of classical pen names used in the revolutionary era and early republic is unclear, since no full compilation as yet exists. Some believe it was "beyond counting."\(^{14}\)

The colonists who used classical pseudonyms in the early 1760s still thought of themselves as aggrieved Britons and provincials, not as the voices of a rising republic. As such, they made use of a common rhetorical device, introduced by Whigs in Britain. But such notions were changing rapidly: together, the expansion of print culture, the contest with Britain, the formation of state governments, the war, and the struggle to construct a national government and identity encouraged the further use and alteration of the nature of classical pseudonyms. To take one small example, between the years 1750 and 1753 eleven classical pseudonyms were employed on the pages of the Boston Gazette, and a mere eight between 1760 and 1763; between 1770 and 1773, when tensions between colonies and England became explosive, the same newspaper published 121 classical pseudonyms. When "Spartanus," self-appointed as a member of the Greek polis Sparta known for its frugality and militarism, argued in 1776 that the colonies must have the right "to alter their form of government," he was already part of a flood of pseudonymous writings.\(^{15}\)

This dramatic expansion of the genre was accompanied by a qualitative transformation: by the end of the Revolution, classical pseudonyms served less as stylistic gestures, but emerged more as vehicles through which substantive political ideas could be expressed. A noticeable shift seems to have occurred from the predominance of abstract (augural) classical pen names to the frequent use of borrowed pseudonyms, employing the actual names of honored ancients as pseudo-writers of political texts. In shaping their republic, writers chose ancient masks, enabling them to convey their arguments through a more authentic and intimate performance, which reflected the ideological anxieties and aggressions that poured out of those

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tracts. This change seems to have taken place after the expansion of the early 1770s: thus, again to take a limited example, a mere twenty percent of the classical pseudonyms employed throughout the years 1768-71 in the Boston Gazette were names of persons; augurative pseudonyms made up the remaining eighty percent. Between 1786 and 1788, the period during which classical semiotics fully developed, approximately fifty percent of the classical pseudonyms in the same publication were borrowed names. Yet not only do the borrowed pseudonyms seem to have been employed to a wider extent, they also appear to have carried more symbolic significance than their augural predecessors. Writers chose to personify and embody their arguments by identifying themselves and their ideology with ancient figures that carried powerful allegorical and metaphorical capabilities. The evolution of the classical pseudonym from the augurative to the borrowed, from the abstract to the person, placed the pseudonymous texts in a position to elucidate the American situation in the light of antiquity.

What caused the popularity and wide use of classical pseudonyms? For one thing, British authorities in America were extremely sensitive, in rapidly changing political contexts, to anything that looked like agitation. Another explanation for preferring pseudonyms might have been the belief that a worthy cause would be better served by the reverberation of many voices, while maintaining the impression that the newspaper essays and pamphlets were spontaneous expressions of American public opinion. Thus Benjamin Franklin recommended blanketing the colonies with anonymous and pseudonymous writings because they would “render the discontented general . . . and not the fiction of a few demagogues.” Further, the use of pseudonyms indeed “enabled men of honor to behave dishonorably,” making responses to such attacks challenging: a reply might have given undeserved weight to a pseudonymous (or to that matter, an anonymous) confrontation, while overlooking it could considerably harm a reputation. Still, none of these general reasons explain why writers chose a large part of their pseudonyms from the Greco-Roman world.

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16 For discussion of pseudonyms during the debate over the constitution see below. The count of the classical pseudonyms in the Boston Gazette, which I have conducted, is only rudimentary, but points to a trend. Other issues, such as the outflow of pseudonymous writings at different times, the ratio between “regular” and classical pseudonyms, and the diffusion of classical pseudonyms on a geographical basis, may be illuminated by the accumulation of further statistical data from additional contemporary newspapers.

It seems as if American patriots chose their disguises to make themselves heard by an audience “steeped in the classics” that had “felt the force of the ancient example.” Antiquity provided the rhetorical high ground in an argument; it imbued writings with a classical air of disinterestedness that rose above particular interests, it displayed the writer’s education, and it suggested his social rank in an act that can be referred to as “intellectual window dressing.” Further, references to antiquity suggested the weight of wisdom and tradition two millennia old, providing a sense of security and continuity. An identified personage was not essential; “The Censor,” assuming the role of the Roman official in charge of morality, was good enough to endorse industry, frugality, virtue, and religion. The classical pseudonyms possessed rhetorical power due to the conditions of their reception and authorization. Changing the narrator via pseudonym at once altered the force imposed by the utterance on the audience and the way it was received and enacted claims for authenticity and power through the semiotic use of speech and text.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the main reason for mobilizing Roman antiquity (and not, for instance, the Bible) to promote republican ideals was that the ancients were seen to embody and epitomize those ideals. The Greco-Roman tradition was seen by Whigs as the true origin of republicanism and civic virtue. Appeal to the ancients and to their political culture positioned the emblems of the past as guardians, validating pamphlets and pamphleeters by their mere presence. The decision to adopt a pseudonym marked a crucial moment in the making of a text, and so was the choice of what pseudonym to employ. Distance denies us the knowledge whether writers chose their alias before their convictions, although in some essays the pseudonym played a dominant role, interlocked tightly with the text and its message. The sheer quantity of classically signed essays must have made writers feel at ease under such signatures—and readers comfortable reading them. So common did that measure become that classically masked figures overlapped into private discourse. In 1792, for example, Alexander Hamilton proposed a cipher in which twenty-two out of twenty-four politicians (including the president, several ministers, and senators) were

¹⁸ Rahe, Republics Ancient and Modern, 571; Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution (Cambridge, MA, 1967), 23; “The Censor” in Hyneman and Lutz, eds., American Political Writing During the Founding Era, 1:659; Pierre Bourdieu and John B. Thompson, Language and Symbolic Power (Cambridge, MA, 1991), 46, 66; Gustafson, Elocution Is Power, 24. Augurative names were inherently connected to the texts they were signing, yet, as we shall see, with less dramatic effect. Borrowed names enabled writers to stage embodied performances, and could, on the other hand, be mere “intellectual window dressing.”
given classical aliases. Washington was “Scavola,” Adams was “Brutus,” Jefferson “Scipio,” and Madison became “Tarquin!” Thus the ancients took hold of America’s reins of power, at least in Hamilton’s mind. Americans called each other by such names as “Demosthenes,” “Cincinnatus,” and “Catiline.” The pseudonyms most frequently employed by different writers included “Brutus,” “Phocion,” “Cato,” and “Americanus.”

Although the themes covered by the masked writers included social, moral, and even scientific topics, the dominant themes were political. The whole spectrum of partisan politics appeared in the pamphlets and newspaper essays signed with classical pseudonyms; they were polemical vehicles intended to convert readers to a political camp. All partisans exploited the literary means that resurrected the past and the glorious dead. Pseudonymous essays appeared in newspapers or pamphlets that exercised “a vital influence on the minds of the reading public.” Thousands of political essays and readers’ letters proved vehicles of propaganda, meant not only to inform but also to persuade. By 1775, there were forty-four newspapers published in colonial America; that number grew to sixty-three in 1784 and to well over 200 by 1800. “The press” did not refer to a large corporate newspaper establishment but rather the many independent printers who circulated small newspapers or published a writer’s pamphlets for a fee.

Like the pseudonym genre, American newspapers derived and copied from English models and developed in a distinct fashion within the American context. Each paper was designed primarily to be read in the town and province in which it was printed and became an instrument of self- and world-awareness. By the mid-eighteenth century, newspapers occupied “an essential niche in the social ecology” and presented a self-contained vision of the world. It was the worldview of the middling and upper classes: cultivated, ethnocentric, Protestant, patriotic, English, and predominantly male. Publishers usually aimed their newspapers’ contents towards the political attitudes of whatever groups dominated the local

19 Alexander Hamilton, “Letter to Gouverneur Morris,” June 22, 1792, The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, ed. Harold Syrett and Jacob E. Cooke (27 vols., New York, 1961-1987), 11:546. “Phocion” was used by both Alexander Hamilton (1784) and Fisher Ames (1801); there was a “Cato” publishing in New York in 1787, and another in Connecticut in 1786-87; “Brutus” was used by Fisher Ames (1786) and by an unknown writer in New York (1787). “Americanus” was used by John Stevens (1787), Alexander Hamilton (1794), and Timothy Ford (1794).

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political culture and economy, and most subscribers naturally came from this class, concentrated in the cities. Yet newspapers "almost certainly reached well beyond the audience most publishers had in mind."21 Not only were the bounds of literacy broader than the publishers’ intended readers, but accessibility to newspapers in homes and public places must have been easy. Because most newspaper content was a reproduction of articles appearing in other newspapers, the pseudonymous essays, repeatedly reprinted in different newspapers and districts, eventually reached wide audiences. Such dissemination enabled those essays to take part in the construction of communal identities, in the affirmation of common values and the reflection of collective mentalities. The republican paradigm, propagated via the evolving mass media, elevated popular culture to a high degree by embracing broader audiences than those engaged in belles-lettres.22

The repetitive use of pen names, allusions, and metaphors of antiquity constructed a sprachspiel (language game), which permitted an alternative reading of the texts. The classical sprachspiel offered Americans a frame of reference in which statements and arguments that otherwise would not have made sense acquired coherence and meaning. So imbued with the sprachspiel did readers become that they might have referred to the three writers of the "Publius" essays (as Washington did in a letter to Hamilton) as "Your Triumvirate," extending Hamilton’s own metaphor of calling himself and his fellow writers by the name of "Publius."23 This kind of language reflects the way the classical discourse was internalized.

The use of pseudonyms, itself part of a larger phenomenon of bestowing classical nomenclature upon slaves, towns, political institutions and one’s peers, helped to accustom Americans to make their daily lives and the people inhabiting them meaningful in terms of antiquity. Washington could be talked about as an American Fabius, the Roman general who defeated Hannibal by his cautious tactics. Jefferson was cast

as a Demosthenes, the great Athenian orator. Accordingly an "American Solon" could claim in 1771 "to write a system of government . . . for the united provinces in America." 24 Such semiotic logic, which involved the reallocation of temporal cognitions from a modern constitutional proposal to the Athenian lawyer Solon, merged past and present into a smoother system of thought. The notion of America as a latter day embodiment of Rome was not a meaningless cliche but a system of thought and speech employed by Americans at the turn of the eighteenth century.

White American women did occasionally write anonymously or under a pseudonym. Upper-class women showed a lively interest in political affairs (they could astonish male observers, as Mrs. Robert Carter did, with their "perfect acquaintance with the American constitution"). Mercy Otis Warren's pseudonymous pamphlet, "Columbian patriot," linked the American situation explicitly with classical contexts. An even more remarkable example is found in her 1774 neoclassical play, The Adulateur, an allegory of the situation in Boston after the Massacre of 1770. Brutus, Cassius, and Portius, the play's heroes, represent James Otis, John Adams, and John Hancock, while the villain, Rapatio, stands for the colonial governor Thomas Hutchinson. 25

The servile state of women in antiquity, however, echoed the conspicuous lack of sexual equality in American society and could not have appealed to female writers as a possible source for textual alter egos. James Wilson in 1790 thought that in classical societies "the fair sex were [sic] . . . neglected and despised." Even Roman women, much more effective in the political sphere than their Greek counterparts, provided few models for public action. This feminine silence parallels the classical preference for a grammar of virility. Early American political writers employed a similar male centered language, steeped in a "culture of manhood," which ignored women as potential public figures. Consequently most women (Mercy Otis Warren was the outstanding exception) found it incongruous to perform as classical personas. When they did choose to

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participate pseudonymously in the political discourse, it was very rarely under (feminine or masculine) classical masquerade.26

In 1775 John Adams and the Tory judge Daniel Leonard exchanged a famous series of pseudonymous blows over American independence. Leonard assumed the name “Massachusettsensis” and Adams replied as “Novanglus,” literally Latin for “New England.” In those early revolutionary years, ideological arguments were less personal than in years to come, a fact reflected by their employment of augurative masks. After the Revolution, antiquity was helpful in the process of constructing viable republican identities and as a means of envisioning the infant republic on a continuum of a republican tradition. Age-old assumptions about the westward movement of learning, the translatio studii, reinforced the ancient drama taking place in public prints, with notions of the rising glory of the new nation.27 Classical morals and predications were conveyed through the prism of pseudonymity, justifying and explaining the acts of the ancient moderns. The reflective distancing, achieved by the affiliation of the “Founding Fathers” with the ancients and demonstrated by their repetitive assumption of fictitious personae, was imperative in the creation of a linguistic space through which historical perceptions and social visions, the fundamental constituents of political imagination, were crystallized.

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26 James Wilson, “Of the Natural Rights of Individuals” [1790], in James Wilson, Works of James Wilson, ed. Robert G. McClosky (2 vols., Cambridge, MA, 1967), 2:600. Abigail Adams indeed signed letters to John as “Portia” (calling her husband “Lysander,” the Spartan hero); see David McCullough, John Adams (New York, 2001), 26, 57. For more detail, see Kerber’s concept of Republican Motherhood in Linda K. Kerber, Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America (1980; rep., Chapel Hill, 1997); and Jan Lewis, “The Republican Wife: Virtue and Seduction in the Early Republic,” William and Mary Quarterly, 44 (Oct. 1987), 689-721, Mark E. Kann, The Republic of Men: The American Founders, Gendered Language, and Patriarchal Politics (New York, 1998), 16-18. Although men (such as Benjamin Franklin) did write under feminine pseudonyms, they did not take cover under feminine classical masks. Both the classical and the American political spheres were intensely masculine in nature and aspirations, and to choose a feminine cover in order to embody classical republican notions would have been a blow to one’s self perception as an ancient modern. Aurelia, a pseudonym chosen by a woman for an essay on July 27, 1778, in the Boston Gazette, may be the exception that proves the rule. She admits that “ladies have no benefits in politics,” and that it is only when her husband has “gone forth in defence of his country” that she “indulges [herself] in the privilege of reading the newspapers.”

Politics acquired a confrontational and vituperative character once post-revolutionary Americans started to reflect upon their future identity. It no longer was enough to define oneself as merely non-English. Yet in the 1780s and 90s, Americans had not yet established a unitary definition of what it meant to be an American. As a result there developed what Andrew Robertson calls "two parallel imagined communities, proclaiming themselves in print, celebrating the same rituals, appropriating the same symbols." These two communities—roughly equivalent to Federalists and Republicans—denied each other's legitimacy, forming a political culture governed by a grammar of political combat, which entailed "politics of anxious extremes." This temperament fostered the intense employment and further construction of the classical semiotic space of political culture, as many texts began appearing as duels between classical personae, responding to and disputing with their pen-rivals.28

Both Federalists and Republicans relied on a common pool of ancient figures to pseudo-author their texts. The figures, chosen from the mainstream of republican tradition, did not necessarily correspond to "left" or "right" positions. Federalists, unsurprisingly, made use of some of the more dynamic ancients—such as Caesar and Mark Anthony—for cheering the kind of strong national government they endorsed, while Republicans used personae who made political sense for promoting their cause such as Cato and Brutus, the defenders of the Roman republic. Yet Federalists also used names such as Publius and Fabius, two eminent Romans who easily could have embodied anti-imperial notions, while Republicans summoned ancients such as Agrippa, the powerful deputy of Augustus, the first of the Roman emperors. Some names were unacceptable to both sides; for example, neither die-hard Federalists nor Republicans would assume a name such as Spartacus, the rebel slave commander. The republican ancients whom Americans preferred enabled them to find themselves in the mirror of antiquity, dressed in borrowed togas.

In a string of intellectual debates whose themes outline the quintessence of republican thought and its relation to the forming American polity, classical pseudonyms came forward as vehicles through which identities and experiences were synthesized. The debate about the Society of Cincinnati provides an early example. This argument over equality and hereditary rights in a republic offers a glimpse of the role the ancients played in early national politics. The Society of Cincinnati was founded in

28 Freeman, Affairs of Honor, 10; Andrew W. Robertson, ""Look on This Picture.... And on This!": Nationalism, Localism, and Partisan Images of Otherness in the United States, 1787-1820," American Historical Review, 106 (Oct. 2001), 1267.
1783, named after the legendary Roman patriot who left his plough to defend the Roman republic and, after victory, rejected dictatorial powers in order to return to his farm. The society aimed at aiding retired officers of the Continental Army, and it was named emblematically, suggesting that self-effacing officers, like Cincinnatus, were renouncing power to return to private life. However, the society aroused public hostility due to its apparently aristocratic and hereditary tendencies, manifesting the growing rivalry between Republican and Federalist points of view.

The fact that the president, George Washington, perfectly modelled the behaviour of Cincinnatus did not suffice to check attacks against the society. Opponents found a popular spokesman in a pamphleteer who called himself “Cassius,” effectively drafting another Roman patriot to compete with Cincinnatus’ patriotism. In 44 B.C., Cassius Longinus, together with Brutus, had led the conspiracy to slay Julius Caesar and then committed suicide after being defeated by Mark Anthony. Like Cincinnatus, Cassius was perceived as one who attempted (albeit unsuccessfully) to save the Roman republic from its enemies. In American collective associations, the two Romans embodied public virtue and patriotism. The “Cassius” pamphlet was published in Philadelphia, New York, Hartford, and Newport, its writer later identified as Aedanus Burke of South Carolina. The symbolic significance of the implicit dialogue between two great Roman patriots could not be ignored. “Cassius” attempts to expose the concealed aristocratic intentions of the Cincinnatii. Thus we see two pivotal figures in the republican tradition adopted and incorporated by Americans in their own nation-building struggles.

Constitutional debates in 1787-88 continued the classical sparring. Throughout the period of ratification numerous newspaper articles and pamphlets, written pseudonymously for and against the proposed constitution, expressed a symbolic dimension of classical epistemology. A letter by an unidentified “Cato,” September 27, 1787, elicited a furious reply from “Caesar” five days later. The two antagonists of the late Roman republic, Marcus Porcius Uticensis Cato and Gaius Julius Caesar, were re-enacting their age-old battle. No one would assume “Caesar” as a pseudonym except to resuscitate this ancient quarrel, and we need not
wonder that it was a Federalist promoting a strong national government who chose Cesar as his alter ego.30

“Caesar’s” rhetoric was full of classical allusions. “Cato,” he cried, was “an ally of Pompey, no doubt.” Washington appeared as “the American Fabius,” the Roman general who defeated Hannibal. “Cato” was ridiculed as “this prudent Censor” and “demagogue,” both epithets a suitable (derogative) description of the historical Cato. “Caesar” warned that “Cato, in his future marches, will very probably be followed by Caesar,” undertaking to shadow Cato as Julius Caesar hunted the historical Cato, eventually driving him to suicide. The symbolism of the discourse created by the classical pseudonyms thus unfolded, intensified by the fact that few readers knew or guessed the writers’ true identities.31

In rebuttal, “Cato” claimed that “Caesar” objected to free deliberation, just as his namesake had in Rome. In thus referring and cross-referencing to the historical Cato and Caesar and their contemporary namesakes, the contenders exploited the metaphorical and symbolical possibilities of the situation. A formal debate on the matter of Federalism was in progress, but knowledge of Roman history was necessary in order to capture the symbolism embedded in the text.32

After a week “Brutus” weighed in for the first time. The Roman Brutus stood for patriotism, virtue, and disinterestedness. Even braver than Cassius, he dared commit regicide for the sake of his beloved republic, ridding it, he hoped, of Caesar’s tyranny. The American “Brutus” agitated fiercely against the Constitution, aligning himself with “Cato”: “The Grecian republics were of small extent; so also was that of the Romans.” When their size was extended, their freedoms were lost and their governments became “the most tyrannical that ever existed.”33

So the exchanges continued. During the first month of 1788, “Brutus” accused “Caesar” of transforming Rome into an “absolute despotism.” Then a new, vituperative contender, “Mark Anthony,” assaulted “Brutus”: his “patriotism is pretension; his zeal is suspicious;” and he had “sacrificed

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30 Cooke identifies “Cato” with George Clinton and argues convincingly that although many think that “Caesar” was Alexander Hamilton, it was probably not he after all; Jacob E. Cooke, “Alexander Hamilton’s Authorship of ‘Caesar’ Letters,” William and Mary Quarterly, 17 (Jan. 1960).
the truth." "Mark Anthony" played up his rebuttal by quoting the immortal monologue from Shakespeare's drama, in which Anthony ironically denigrates Brutus: "For Brutus is an honourable man; so are they all, all honourable men." The great drama of the last days of the Roman republic was unfolding week by week in the newspapers of the United States, staged by American actors.

Near the end of 1787, "Americanus" tried to break open this extended metaphor: "Away with this Spartan virtue." Later identified as John Stevens Jr., "Americanus" drew upon the histories of Greece and Rome. In his fourth essay he declared, "should an angel come down from heaven and present us with a constitution... spotless... would there not be Cato's and Brutus's ready to disseminate groundless jealousies and vain fears?" The Latin form of expressing his identity as an American was Stevens's way of confronting those who assumed the visages of the great men of Rome. He claimed to be no less a patriot than his rivals, if only in converting the classical tradition into his Americanus mode.

The quintessential example of classical disguise is found in the "Publius" essays published in New York during the winter of 1787-88. Acknowledging the tripartite connection between the pseudonym (the "text"), the words it signed (the "context"), and the classical history it suggested, allegorized, and metaphorized ("hypertext"), helps to recognize the semiotic profoundness of the appeal to the ancients, which developed fully in the constitutional debate. Publius Valerius, who established the Roman republic after the last king of Rome was expelled in 509 B.C., was the pseudonym adopted by Hamilton, Madison, and Jay in a series of essays supporting the proposed constitution. The mere name of Publius enriched the arguments presented in the essays with supplementary contexts, illuminated meanings and goals. It served to entrench the notion of republican virtue within the classical allusions deployed throughout the essays. When "Publius" compared America to the "vast projects of Rome," and spoke of the "glory of the Achaeans," his words acquired an aura of tradition and authenticity. The fact that each essay was signed by "Publius" (the "text") supplemented the constitutional arguments (the


“context”) because of classical allusions and appeals to ancient history (the “hypertext”). What became known as The Federalist Papers thus were defined by the conspicuously false pretense of having been written by the founder of the Roman republic.

Many more ancients followed: “Agrippa,” “Fabius,” “Marcus,” “Philadelphinesis,” “Civis,” and “Solon Junior” (which seems an extraordinary way to imply kinship to the great Athenian lawgiver) are just a sample of the writers who published in every state, for and against ratification. On July 2, 1788, with the ratification by nine state conventions, the great debate ended.

Yet a functioning constitution could not solve all the problems of the inchoate American nation, and the substance of national life continued to be fiercely debated between Hamilton and Jefferson supporters, clashing bitterly during Washington’s presidency. Time after time, those debates took cover under classical identities, partisans struggling to control the form and content of republican politics by employing their strongest ammunition, republican history. By embodying their arguments in ancient figures they could convey implicit messages, interpret ominous situations, and set themselves as classical agents acting on an American stage.

One of those matches began when “Aristedes,” a writer assuming the immaculate name of the Athenian general who fought in the Persian war, wrote an apology for Jefferson in August 1792. “Aristedes’s” essay appeared in the National Gazette, a pro-Jefferson paper, and drew a reply from Hamilton, who titled his rebuttal Catullus to Aristedes. Quintus Lutatius Catulus was an ally of Cicero, the great patriot and orator who was among the most commanding of ancients for America, against the notorious conspirator, Catiline. By assuming “Catullus” as a pseudonym, Hamilton was attacking his adversaries as “insidious . . . hypocritical demagogues,” calling them “the Catilines and Caesars of the community.” Hamilton had called upon a Roman (Catullus) to face a Greek (Aristides), but in the universe of ancient semiotics such temporal blurring was possible as long as the assumed protagonists conveyed the right “hypertext.” In this case Hamilton used Catulus to support the allegation that he was fighting scheming rivals, as Catulus had done in a different time and place. Conveying the American situation by means of the ancient narrative,

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Hamilton wanted his fellow Americans to believe that their republic was on the verge of ruin due to malicious plotters (although he had a problem with historical Aristeides’s character, which was spotless). By choosing an opponent of the Roman Principeate as his mask, Hamilton demonstrated that Federalists too opposed the tyranny of the Roman Caesars (thus they were no “monarchists”).

Another striking example is the “Pacificus-Helvidius” debate, which again involved two of the most prominent founders. When Washington issued a proclamation of neutrality in 1793 during the war between Britain and revolutionary France, supporters of France criticized him for overstepping his authority and usurping the powers of Congress. Hamilton defended Washington’s position in eight separate articles published under the pseudonym of “Pacificus” in the Philadelphia Gazette of the United States. By using the Latin word for peacemaker as his *nom de plume*, Hamilton made his stance clear. Before considering the constitutional arguments in the article, even before reading the text, one knew that Hamilton was promoting non-belligerence and neutrality (in what might allude to the *pax romana*). Hamilton’s writings threw the Republican camp into a state of ferment. Furious, Jefferson urged his friend and protégé, James Madison, to rebut Hamilton’s arguments: “For God’s sake, my dear Sir, take up your pen, select the most striking heresies and cut him to pieces in face of the public.” Madison’s reply came predictably under the pseudonym of an ancient. He chose as his mask “Helvidius,” the Roman patriot who showed opposition to Nero’s imperial aggrandizement without resorting to treason or conspiracy. A hero of republicanism who celebrated Brutus’s and Cassius’s birthdays under the most tyrannical of regimes, Helvidius was chosen to embody the anti-Federalist argument. The use of this pseudonym points to the Jeffersonian Republican common objection against Hamiltonian Federalists: namely, that the consolidation of power in government would end in tyranny.

We have seen how throughout the years of the creation of the Republic the discourse via the ancients helped Americans reduce their experiences into manageable and recognized terms and forms. The semiotic space of antiquity turned the interpretation of reality into something less intimidating and puzzling. Samuel Adams understood the Stamp Act to be “like the sword that Nero wished for to have decollated the Roman people at a stroke.” Josiah Quincy wondered, “is not Britain to America what

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Caesar was to Rome?” “Philadelphiensis” admonished that “the days of a cruel Nero approach fast; the language of a monster, of a Caligula, could not be more imperious.” Hamilton debated, under the pseudonym of “Catullus,” whether “Caesar, who overturned the republic, was the Whig, [and] Cato, who died for it, the Tory of Rome?” The troubles of young America were transmuted into those that struck the great republics of the past, by setting it on the continuum of a republican time dimension. Glory and coherence were the rewards of such a setting.

The use of classical pseudonyms eventually declined. There is no simple answer to the questions why and when this happened. Meyer Reinhold believes that the shattered dream of a disinterested society correlates with the decline of classical education, while Edwin Miles points out that as Americans constructed their own history, they “talked less of Thermopylae and Marathon, more of Lexington and Concord; less of Cato and Cicero and more of Washington and Jefferson.” The appearance of notions such as “authentic” authorship, ownership, and authority within American society of the late eighteenth century reflected the fact that the public sphere was evolving and indicated that the pseudonym would eventually disappear from political writing. The remarkable explosion of circulation of political speeches may have contributed to the eventual demise of the pseudonym as well. The role of the nom de plume as mediator between constituents and the political debate was outdated by the accurate, frequently verbatim, political report.

If the exact moment of the disappearance of the pseudonym remains obscure, the repeated neoclassical appeals still make sense to modern audiences, despite the paradoxes they entail. An American republic (res publica, a thing of people) with a local senate (senatus, a gathering of older men) and a congress (con gressus, a coming together) functions in the Capitol (a citadel on a hill). Americans still live betwixt a classical landscape, formed by numerous towns, cities, and natural features bearing classical names, and an abundance of public buildings ornated with massive

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marble colonnades and Latin epigrams.\textsuperscript{42} The reappearance of the revered ancients in the wake of republican uncertainties to guide the Founders during the creation of the Republic seems to us, still, so natural.

More than two hundred years after the height of their use, the reasons for adopting classical \textit{noms de plume} and their effects upon the commonwealth of readers may appear at first glance obscure. Americans bastardized a European textual gesture by transforming their bond with antiquity into a meaningful symbolic space of classical emblems. Pseudonymous texts functioned as metaphors explaining America in terms of antiquity and mediating between the American mind and the world. They selected, organized, and transformed daily experiences into manageable and intelligible data, providing Americans with vehicles for synthesizing their cognitions. Americans’ transference of present-day problems into terms of antiquity was an active undertaking, involving the vigorous search for, and eventually construction of, parallel lines in the histories of antiquity and of the new American states to be united. Thus, writing in 1805, John Adams could find “the history of all ages . . . in our country for forty years past. Change the names and every anecdote will be applicable to us.” History, which served as an archetype and organizing metaphor, was invoked to displace historicism. The world, seen from the point of view of that metaphor, changed its face.\textsuperscript{43}

By espousing classical tradition Americans adopted a set of practices that sought, in the words of Eric Hobsbawm, “to inculcate certain values and norms by repetition which automatically imply continuity with the past.”\textsuperscript{44} The “invention” of a republican linkage and its contextualizing within American politics entailed certain beliefs, value systems, and conventions of behaviour. Thus, the union with age-old republicans was actually a bond Americans tied amongst themselves. Through the numerous harangues and diatribes, differing historical interpretations and political outlooks, the classical space constructed via pseudonyms provided a

\textsuperscript{42} According to Wilbur Zelinsky, 2,870 of such names ornament the United States, which was the only New-World region and ex-colony to adopt such unique nomenclature. See Zelinsky, “Classical Town Names in the United States,” \textit{Geographical Review,} 57 (Oct. 1967), 474.

\textsuperscript{43} John Adams as quoted in Richard, \textit{The Founders and the Classics,} 84. In Cotton Mather’s \textit{Magnalia Christi} it was the prophet Nehemia, not an ancient Roman, who was the center of an archetypal metaphor; see Sacvan Bercovitch, \textit{The Puritan Origins of the American Self} (New Haven, 1975), 5. For the way metaphors affect cognition, see Eugene F. Miller, “Metaphor and Political Knowledge,” \textit{The American Political Science Review,} 73 (Mar. 1979), 162.

\textsuperscript{44} Eric Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger, eds., \textit{The Invention of Tradition} (Cambridge, UK, 1983), 1.
common medium and framework within which Americans could articulate their disagreements and reach consensual assumptions regarding their shared identity.

Did the pseudonymic acting out actually affect peoples' understanding of contemporary situations and the way they explained them? Perhaps. This persistent recourse to the classics points to the predominance of a cognitive state that interpreted reality with classical colors. Yet the overdeterminativness of classical history, of any history, provides legitimacy for a wide spectrum of reasoning and explanations. Whether we recognize the pseudonyms as a manifestation of an ancient modernity, or rather as a modern antiquity (that is, whether authors were influenced by the classical narrative or were molding it to their own purposes), they have surely augmented the conceptual universe of the founders. Political and social idioms such as republic, government, virtue, class, and many others were ruminated and defined in light of the classical world through the use classical masks. The political cosmos of early Americans, articulated and formed in a dialectic dialogue with antiquity, indicates the centrality of the classics to political discourse in the early United States and to the formation of American identity.

Within the broad context of classical republicanism, the pseudonymous texts acquire their full meaning and significance as means through which educated American chose to define, explain, and narrate their political experiences, conveyed as tales of a venerated past. Seeing the pseudonymous texts as symbolic and performative forms of language, rather than discrete entities, opens up understanding of the ways that language power is related to, and often flows from, claims to authenticity. Analysis of the classical rhetoric of late-eighteenth-century America reveals the paradigms that captured the founders' imagination throughout the formative years of the creation of the Republic. Honor, virtue, and disinterestedness were not mere codes of conduct but ancient roles to be acted out on an American stage. The linguistic universe in which such a performance took place made the patriots of the past referees of the present, defining and redefining the relationships of the dead and the living.