The distinguished South Carolinian planter and merchant Henry Laurens, imprisoned in the Tower of London during the last years of the War for American Independence on charges of high treason against the British crown, had plenty of time to contemplate the origins and meaning of the enduring imperial contest. While awaiting judgment in the Tower, after he was caught on a boat sailing to Holland to negotiate a loan for his struggling republic, Laurens kept a prison journal into which he spent “many days in penciling large extracts from Gibbon’s Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire.” Throughout the journal, the former president of the South Carolina provincial congress compared the British and Roman Empires, and drew “parallels and reflexions from the conduct of Great Britain in the commencement and prosecution of the war against the American Colonies.” As Laurens viewed it, the example of the demise of the Roman Empire paralleled “the impolicy and folly” of Britain’s conduct, as well as her “injustice and cruelty of proceeding in the War.” Laurens, in understanding and representing Britain in terms of the corrupt Roman Empire was by no means expressing an eccentric position, but rather drawing on a historical paradigm that Americans had been circulating for more than two decades.¹

The transformation of the historical paradigm that Laurens articulated amounted to an intellectual revolution that took place in North America in the decades following the French and Indian War. Whereas colonists repre-
Figure 1. “Henry Laurens, esqr. President of the American Congress, 1778.” Mezzotint by V. Green after the portrait by John Singleton Copley. Copley portrayed Laurens in a decidedly aristocratic manner when he executed this work in 1782, shortly after Laurens was released from the Tower of London. Collections of the Winterthur Museum and Library.
resented Britain as a conquering, glorious, world-dominating Rome in the early 1760s, over the course of the next two decades they proceeded to characterize the metropole by using the image of a different Rome, the Rome of the corrupt tyranny of the most hated Caesars. Recognizing this rapid deterioration in the representations of Britain from heights of glory to depths of tyranny and madness provides a richer understanding of the ways in which the political and psychological separation from Britain became possible, acceptable, and finally inevitable. Furthermore, the ways in which Americans shed their British identity through transforming their classical imagination suggests possible meanings of the classicized representations patriots would produce throughout the War of Independence and beyond. Moreover, the trajectory of the process of “Nerofication,” the deteriorating representations of Britain and imperial magistrates in terms of the Roman Empire, questions notions advocated by the so-called republican synthesizers of undisrupted domination of Whig ideas in the colonies throughout the eighteenth century. Indeed, by concentrating on the revolutionary classical discourse we may gain a better understanding of a largely overlooked framework through which civic humanistic ideology could be expressed and articulated. Focusing on the revolutionary use of antiquity, or on classical form rather than on republican content, reveals a remarkable historical hermeneutics and underscores the centrality of the classical discourse to our understanding of the American Revolution and its unlikely creation, the United States of America.

During the Seven Years’ War, the global fighting conducted by France and Britain was not confined to the fields of Mars. As a contemporary French journal concluded, “the future will scarcely believe it, but the war between the English and the French has been as lively on paper as on the high seas.” One of the issues of the intellectual mêlées between France and Britain was the dispute over *translatio imperii*, or who was to be anointed as the new Rome. Early on in the war, after the French victory in Minorca, the Abbe Seran de la Tour published his *Comparison of the conduct of the Carthagians with respect to the Romans in the Second Punic War*. The subtitle of that work revealed the author’s intention: *with the conduct of England with regard to France in the declared war between these two powers in 1756*. Seran’s dissertation, among several other works published in those years, viewed the rivalry between Britain and France as a reenactment of one of the great rivalries of antiquity, the fierce competition between republican Rome and commercial Carthage. That epic battle was preserved in European collective memory as a struggle in which a reluctant, virtuous Rome was forced to engage in three “Punic” wars, before finally annihilating the avaricious, commercial Carthage on its way to
world domination. Thus, as one scholar has commented, “the Punic wars became a dramatic if not always revealing way for the rivals to think about their respective strengths and the designs each had upon the other.” The French were tempted to view themselves as Romans, and the commercial, seagoing England as Carthage. The British, however, were potentially more ambivalent in regard to their ancient identity, because they could not ignore the fact that indeed they were a seafaring, commercial nation, just like Carthage of old.

However, when William Pitt’s war strategy finally bore fruit, leading to a string of crushing British victories, identifying the heirs of the Romans seemed an easy task, at least in the minds of the inhabitants of the Anglophone world. The successive conquests that gave India and North America to the little island kingdom had made Englishmen, in Horace Walpole’s phrase, “heirs apparent of the Romans.” After the successes of the year 1759 English national self-esteem and self-assertion grew, as did that already deep-rooted sense that Britain was especially favored by providence. By the end of the war, as Britain gained territory and power unequaled by any of its contemporaries, Britons began frequently and seamlessly to identify their imperial achievements with those of the empires of antiquity. During the 1760s and 1770s, Britons proclaimed time and again the affinity of their imperial project to that of classical Rome’s, and understood their achievements in light of the Romans’. They made such claims despite the profound historical differences between Rome and Britain: “Unlike Rome—Britain had become a guarantor of a balance of power in Europe . . . unlike Rome again—it stood at the head of an empire of commerce rather than [of] conquest.” The changing representations of Britain as Rome by American colonists—turned rebels, and the function and significance of those representations are remarkable. We shall now turn to examine how Americans abruptly deviated from the British glorying discourse after 1765, and the patterns of the changing representations of Britain as Rome by American patriots.

2. Quoted in David A. Bell, The Cult of the Nation in France (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 83. Charles Salas describes how throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries both the French and English attempted to appropriate the struggle between ancient Rome and Carthage to their benefit. Charles G. Salas, “Punic Wars in France and Britain” (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, 1996), 5, passim. The common and partisan position, which glorified Rome and berated Carthage, was stamped by the works of Livy, a Roman, and Polybius, nominally a Roman, and was thus heavily slanted toward the Roman point of view.

3. Cited in Carl L. Becker, The Eve of the Revolution (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1918), 31. Some doubt could remain, however, as even after the victory in the Seven Years’ War, an English historian pointed out that “of all free
After the Treaty of Paris of 1763, British historians and geographers were busy producing narratives and histories of the late war in which like Romans, Britons were depicted as possessing the *civitas* that enabled them to extend dominion over cultural and national outsiders throughout a vast territorial space. Rome therefore filled an important intellectual space within which Britons reflected on their extensive empire, its virtues, and historical significance during the 1760s and 1770s. Their recent achievements were validated, assessed, recognized, and imagined in relation to the antique and awesome Mediterranean empire. Americans, too, participated in this imperial discourse, showing by the late 1750s an unbounded pride in taking part in the greatest venture “since the days of Julius Caesar.”

When the American minstrel Benjamin Prime Young published his lyric poem *The Unfortunate Hero* in 1758, the war in America was still far from being determined. Nonetheless, following the Greek poet Pindar’s style Young chose to write a Pindaric ode, and thus classicize the memory of the fallen British general George Howe. In this eulogium Young compared Howe, “the unfortunate hero,” and represented him as a famed Roman soldier. The poet compared Howe to the greatest warriors of the Roman republic, in a manner that would repeat itself numerous times in different occasions during the coming decades: “such were the warriors of days of old / such Cincinnatus, such Camillus bold, and the great Scipio’s [sic] rose.” Young described Howe as virtuous as Rome’s famed soldiers, envisioned him in a

states whose memory is preserved to us in history, Carthage bears the nearest resemblance to Britain, both in her commerce, opulence, sovereignty of the sea, and her method of carrying on her land by foreign mercenaries”; Edward W. Montagu, *Reflections on the rise and fall of the antient repubicks. Adapted to the present state of Great Britain* (London: A. Millar, 1759), 176. For a detailed account of the development of British nationalism and of British belief in England as a Nation Elect see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1992), especially chapter 1. J. G. A. Pocock comments on descriptions of Britain as “Augus-
tan,” which apply to the second half of the eighteenth century as well; Pocock, *Barba-

4. Nicholas Rowe, “Romans and Carthaginians in the Eighteenth Century: Impe-
rial Ideology and National Identity in Britain and France during the Seven Years’
War” (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1997), 204. For a historical work engaged in a
geographical survey see Montagu, *Reflections*. Quotation from James Otis, “The
Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved,” in Bernard Bailyn (ed.), *The
Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1765*, with the assistance of Jane N. Gar-
Colonists also produced representations of their British allies as Roman heroes such as this portrait of William Pitt as Roman senator. Collections of the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property of the Maryland State Archives.
classical context, and imagined him as inflicting defeats on Rome’s enemies: “Heroes like these extensive vengeance hurl’d / on Rome’s perfidious foes . . . By thunderbolts like these she once subdu’d the world.” Once Young established the Roman quality of Howe and his soldiers he promised his readers that “Thro’ every Age, Th’ historic page, Their deeds with honor shall rehearse.” The imperial soldiers would go down in memory like their Roman predecessors, Young reassured his readers, and would share historical glory with the empire that nurtured Cincinnatus, Camillus, and Scipio, the venerated soldier-republicans.5

While the outcome of the Seven Years’ War was still uncertain and Britons could only dream of an outcome as favorable as they would embrace in a mere few months, Young extensively used allusions from the symbolic world of republican Rome. Americans, however, did not restrict themselves to emulation of Roman virtue, but also appealed to Roman expansion and enormous territorial growth during the last two centuries BC that ignited their imagination. Accordingly, The Conquest of Louisburg by John Maylem classicized William Pitt’s first major victory in the war. Maylem did not depict the warriors in the fields as classical types as did Young, but rather glorified the imperial throne of George II, which he claimed surpassed “Olimpus’s craggy height.” Maylem went on to claim that George II, “Like Jove,” the supreme Roman god, “who while on Olympus shone, so shone he,” was the supreme British leader. The monarch was not represented unaccompanied on the “Olympus,” but “throng’d by sages in the Dome, Like the fam’d senate of Imperial Rome.” In this imagined, heavenly Roman senate, the monarch proceeded to use “his sacred tongue” and delivered a heroic, Roman-like speech. Here Maylem equated Britain to, and understood it as, the ancient Roman Empire not solely through its martial boldness or by its republican virtue but through a deification of the realm’s monarch and the representation of the king’s advisors as the Roman senate. Where else than in a classical empire could Jupiter command a Roman senate? The use of Roman symbolism emphasized imperial aspects in lieu of republican features. Once the contest with England started, American representations of Britain as the Roman Em-

pire—and not its preceding republic—would become the norm. Those portrayals, however, would depict Britain as a corrupt, tyrannical Rome.6

The victory on the Plains of Abraham and the capture of Quebec in 1759 triggered a jubilee in America, as the French menace subsided significantly. After that battle a string of victories ensured the Anglo-American triumph, and Americans deemed the cooperation of British redcoats and American soldiers to have been crucial in the successful conclusion of the war. Once the amazement and celebration over the defeat of the “the American Carthage” faded however, colonists began to look forward to the glorious future of the British Empire. The perception of the British Empire as a new Rome could hence proceed virtually uninterrupted and, in effect, undisputed.7

The Philadelphian ode The Military Glory of Great Britain endowed British achievements with epic, classical splendor. This literary piece from 1762 defined British territorial gains by the fact that British regiments had exceeded the Roman legions’ conquests: “Laurels gather’d in those golden Climes, Where the first Sun beskirts the Eastern Clouds. And where the Roman Eagle never flew.” Astonishingly, the British Empire had surpassed the Roman in conquering the whole of North America. Obviously however, British subjects still needed such comparisons and juxtapositions with Rome to derive their empire’s meaning and historical significance. Another lyric poem from the same year, Nathaniel Evans’ Ode on the Late Glorious Successes of his Majesty’s Arms, further articulated the comparisons of Britain and Rome. Evans, a Philadelphian poet, actually implied in this poem that Britain indeed was a new Rome. The mode, tone, and language of the ode (itself a Horatian, classical genre) were thoroughly classicized: as in a classical epic, Evans called on the “sacred Muse” to “stamp her Honours on the Page of Time,” a time destined to see Britannia’s rule. He went on to evoke “the harmonious sounding lyre,” in order for “sweet Clio,” the Roman goddess of history, to “Pour the rich Tide of Melody along!” Narrating “the late glorious successes” of his majesty’s armies, Evans advised Britain how to rule its newly conquered


7. Sermons given during 1760 in Boston, a city much relieved when the Carthaginian-French danger to the north abated, illustrated how victorious Britain could be glorified through Roman allusions. See for example Jonathan Mayhew, Two Discourses Delivered October 9th (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1760), 64; and Thomas Foxcroft, Grateful Reflexions on the Signal Appearances of Divine Providence for Great Britain and its Colonies in America, which Diffuse a General Joy: A Sermon Preached in the Old Church in Boston, October 9, 1760 (Boston: S. Kneeland, 1760).
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territories: “Well doth Britannia take the noble ways / Which ancient Rome victoriously pursu’d, At home her People’s peerless Worth to raise, While by her Arms abroad the Foe’s subdu’d.” Evans was encouraging England to adopt expansionist, Roman-like imperial policies in which metropolitans and provincials should enjoy equal rights, as in Rome. As colonists, Evans and his American brethren would naturally qualify for equal rights. The poet then turned to narrate the British victory by using the well known *figura* of the Punic Wars: “dauntless Hannibal withstood; T’ill Latian [British] Ardor” subdued “Punic [French] rage,” and “drenched the field with Carthaginian [again, French] blood.” Evans’s work represents the fullest elaboration of the Roman–Carthaginian British–French scheme by an American voice, which left no doubt about his verdict in the decades old debate of who was to qualify as the Romans’ heir. In a piece he wrote in the following year, Evans compared the British king to one of the early and benevolent Roman kings before the foundation of the republic: “Rome’s glorious Numa shall be seen in thee,” he promised the king. The poet thus articulated the ambivalence inherent in comparing the Roman *republic* with the British *monarchy*, an ambivalence that did not seem to bother his peers, and apparently did not much trouble him either.8

A symbolic verse by George Cockings published in New Hampshire in 1762, entitled *War: An Heroic Poem*, again described military British leaders in terms of Ancient warriors. Robert Clive, who in India, “made Nabobs, [and thus] Nabobs could depose,” had achieved “what conqu’ring Rome has,” although the latter’s conquests had not reached as far as the Indian subcontinent. Cockings’s militaristic poem described British victories over the French as those of Ajax, the Homeric Trojan hero, who “turn’s and frown’d

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8. *The Military Glory of Great-Britain, an Entertainment, Given by the Late Candidates for Bachelor’s Degree, at the Close of the Anniversary Commencement, Held in Nassau-Hall New-Jersey September 29th, 1762* (Philadelphia: William Bradford, 1762), 6. Yosef Haim Yerushalmi instructively conflates the notions of “history” and “meaning in history.” See Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996); Nathaniel Evans, *Ode on the Late Glorious Successes of his Majesty’s Arms and Present Greatness of the English Nation* (Philadelphia: William Dunlap, 1762), 5, 7; Nathaniel Evans, “An Exercise Containing a Dialogue and Ode on Occasion of the Peace,” in *Poems on Several Occasions with some other Compositions* (Philadelphia: John Dunlap, 1772), 77. After the Glorious Revolution the British monarchy was usually considered by contemporaries nominally as a republic, as it was perceived as governed by a mixed constitution with the legislative branch superior to the executive. The main proponent of this line of thought was Montesquieu, notably in *The Spirit of the Laws*. 
at Illium’s tower; when Grecians fled, from conquering pow’rs.” In another scene, Cockings said that one Captain Macdonald, described as “a Scotch gentleman,” acted “like Scipio,” who “took his father on his shoulders, when in danger and carried him thro’ the enemy’s battle.” Similarly, “’Midst volleys, flame, &c deaths, &c Gallie fire,” McDonald lifted “his fallen friend,” and “bore him from the field of battle dead.” In one of the poem’s climaxes, Cockings juxtaposed General Wolfe’s heroic death in battle to the Spartan king Leonidas’s epic death in Thermopylae. Like “the gallant king of Laca-deamon . . . faint with loss of blood, at pain, his body throng’d with wounds . . . he [Wolfe] fell, a notable instance of that magnanimity, with which the spirit of freedom animates a patriot’s soul.” If Wolfe’s death surpassed that of Cato the younger who committed suicide when the Roman republic was doomed: “Cato, self wounded dy’d and scorn’d to yield: But, Wolfe was slain, amid the glorious field.” Thus, Wolfe’s death, Cockings concluded “Who may be equall’d! never be outdone! . . . Like great Leonidas, and Titus dy’d!” Wolfe’s death, sublime as those of Leonidas and Titus, took part in Cockings’s tapestry of comparisons between British and Roman soldiers. Such tropes were significant not only due to their literary and rhetorical effects, but also because they articulated a correlation between the ancient and modern empires, a correlation that would shortly come back to haunt British imperialists.9

Cockings described Britain as a new, conquering Rome, again in a tragedy published in 1764, The Conquest of Canada, and so did a host of other American writers after the fighting was concluded. These colonials left no doubt regarding the intellectual and historical prisms through which they believed British-American imperial achievements ought to be interpreted. Linking the British Empire to Rome provided it not only with respectability and awe, but historical meaning and significance as well. To Americans who viewed themselves as Britons occupying peripheral imperial outposts such imaginative liaisons were crucial for evaluating and advancing their own understanding of their role as participants in the imperial framework.10

We have seen how the British Empire, its leaders and its victories, were repeatedly understood and presented in America during the short pax-Britan-

either as equaling or even as surpassing Rome at its height. Like participants in the contemporary oppositional Whig discourse, the writers glorifying the British imperial achievement looked back to Rome for inspiration and precedent. However, if Whig language was preoccupied with liberty and encroachments upon it, the imperial discourse, which Herbert Butterfield has called “the real Tory alternative” to the Whig interpretation of history, was based on colonization and overseas expansion. This imperial discourse did not have much time to develop uninterrupted in America, however. Soon after the Treaty of Paris of 1763, British leadership felt the need to deal with the fiscal and governing crises of the American colonies, which became more pronounced after the conclusion of the war. As we shall soon see, Americans’ angry reactions to the Proclamation of 1763, the Sugar Act of 1764, and especially the Stamp Act of 1765, led them to reformulate their understanding of Britain as Rome. Once an idiom of Tory veneration, antiquity rapidly became a venue for expression of anger and frustration, aligning with the classical vernacular of radical Whiggism. As this language escalated it expressed and articulated the centrifugal forces which would eventually tear apart the First British Empire.11

A close examination of the cursory years of the pax-Britannica may cast doubt upon certain hypotheses forwarded by the “republican synthesis” school. Bernard Bailyn, a founder of that historiographical school, argued for a continuing American suspicion of British civic morality throughout the eighteenth century. Bailyn claimed that the defiant voices of the Whig opposition, marginal in British politics, became dominant in colonial debates leading up to independence. As evidence he pointed to colonists who described British lavishness and decadence, occasionally depicting Britain in terms of a corrupt Rome. As an example Bailyn quoted young John Dickinson who summed up his impression of England in 1754 in a letter from London, where he was studying law: “I think the character of Rome will suit this nation: ‘easy to be bought, if there was but a purchaser,’” referring to Livy’s depiction of Rome in the years of the decline of the republic. Descriptions such as Dickinson’s, conveying England as a corrupt Rome, have apparently persuaded historians who consider themselves among the republican synthesizers that by the eve of the Revolution the inhabitants of the colonies were intellectually conditioned for rebellion and eventual separation from a corrupt

England. However, through an examination of the texts reviewed above, it is clear that Americans residing in the colonies repeatedly referred to the might and glory of the British Empire—not to its corruption—in Roman terms. The classical idiom has thus employed Rome for Tory, not radical Whig, ends. In fact it is hard to find examples of Americans describing British decadence in terms of a corrupt Rome during the 1750s and early 1760s while residing in the colonies. Examining how Americans employed images of Rome in relation to Britain reveals an abrupt discontinuity in the use of the classical language before and after the Stamp Act. Such language certainly does not support the continuity of the commonwealth idiom that Bailyn suggested. This transformation from prominently Tory to radical Whig classical representations of Britain implies that the time may be due for revisiting other assumptions made by the republican synthesizers.12

We will now observe how once the pax-Britannica disintegrated, Tory conceptualizations of Britain as a glorious and conquering Rome were transformed, giving way to interpretations aligned with the radical Whig persuasion of Britain as a malevolent Rome of the emperors. We realize then, that the radicalizing influence of oppositional Whig thought should not be given full credit for harnessing antiquity to the revolutionary cause. As we have just seen, imperial Tory imagination might have had an important role in this transformation. Once Britain donned the garb of a Roman victor, it was only

12. The quintessential surveys of the Republican synthesis are Robert Shalhope, “Republicanism and Early American Historiography,” *William and Mary Quarterly* (WMQ) 39, 1 (1982): 334–56; and “Toward a Republican Synthesis: The Emergence of an Understanding of Republicanism in American Historiography,” WMQ 29, 1 (1972): 49–80. Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York: Vintage, 1970), Chap. 1; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1967), 35–54; Dickinson quoted in Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 90. As we shall come to see, other Americans, such as John Adams and William Hooper would use the same Livian language to describe Britain of the 1770s, after the imperial crisis was well on its way. Americans, however, could employ a civic humanistic idiom to chastise themselves; for example see “Philo Britannicus” in *American Political Writing during the Founding Era, 1760–1805*, Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983). The only historian to address the images of Britain as a corrupt Rome in the context of the impending American Revolution is Bernard Bailyn. However, not only does Bailyn comment about this phenomenon in a footnote, he adds offhand that “analogies to the decline and fall of Rome sprang to the lips of almost every commentator as the crisis in Anglo-American affairs deepened” and goes on to provide a few examples in the same footnote; Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, 137.
too easy for Americans a decade later to imagine the metropolis as wearing the blood-stained toga of a tyrant.13

In the years that elapsed between the Stamp Act and the beginning of the War of Independence the relationship between the metropole and the North American colonies deteriorated rapidly. With each new round of taxation, opposition, violence, and repeal this imperial connection, described repeatedly by both sides in filial terms, was fractured and weakened. We shall now consider a certain strand of the American-Whig discourse, which will shed new light on the way Americans understood their troubled relations with Britain after the Stamp Act. By concentrating on the creative uses made of the image of the Roman Empire to explain the British Empire after 1765, I intend to demonstrate how Americans attempted to historicize their desertion by a once benevolent “mother” country, and how such perceptions substantiated claims to political as well as historical independence. The imaginative use of a classical rhetoric, which, as we shall see, time and again depicted Britain as a tyrannous Rome, was a significant factor in expressing and elaborating colonials’ increasing animosity toward Britain and hence their own nascent patriotism.14

The depictions of Britain as a tyrannous Rome were part of a civic human-

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13. The two positions I discuss above, “radical Whiggism” and “high Toryism,” were only the extreme ends of an intellectual spectrum which included, among other variants, Walopolitan, or court Whigs, and country, or oppositional Tories (who paradoxically tended to oppose involvement in foreign wars). My aim here is not to schematize the varieties of eighteenth-century British political thought, but rather to juxtapose contemporary notions of “liberty” and “Empire,” which manifested their extreme adherents in radical Whigs and high Tories, respectively. For important works on the complexities of the Whig and Tory persuasions see J. G. A. Pocock, “The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform,” in Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 215–310; Isaac Kramnick, Bolingbroke and his Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992); and Linda Colley, In Defiance of Oligarchy: The Tory Party 1714–60 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

istic discourse, in which corruption, virtue, luxury, and self-sacrifice framed the backbone of an intellectual paradigm that understood the present in terms of antiquity. However, by examining the classical discourse on its own terms as an autonomous language, not as a subsidiary dialect of civic humanism, we may gain new perspectives on American historical consciousness, and its debt and relation to classical antiquity. Because of the relative lack of focused attention on the classical idiom in scholarship, historians have failed to notice the role Rome has played in the imperial disintegration. By paying as much attention to form as to content, and to imagery and metaphor as well as to ideology, I intend to demonstrate hereby how revolutionary Americans used the classics creatively to express and understand their separation from Britain and the dissolution of imperial ties.15

The discourse I am about to describe brings to the fore an important facet of revolutionary logic: the colonists’ historical similes suggest that the way they experienced and made sense of reality was deeply indebted to their classical-historical imagination. Americans perceived Britain as a corrupt Rome and its leaders, and colonial representatives, as depraved Romans of the time of the Caesars. The cognitive aspects of the republican-civic humanistic language cannot be fully understood without recognizing the major role played by the historico-imaginative components of that discourse. The form in which the republican message was delivered, namely the classical figurae and types, was a crucial component of American understanding and adaptation of the civic humanistic language.

The shifting representations of Britain as an imperial Rome took place on two levels: on one level colonials depicted the whole British nation, or rather the metropole, as a corrupt, tyrannical Rome, while on an ad hominem level, they portrayed colonial magistrates and English officers as malevolent, debauched Romans. Equations and juxtapositions on the national level were the first to emerge, before the stakes were raised and the transatlantic rift became apparently unbridgeable. The early equations of Britain to Rome tended to be general and impersonal, and primarily concentrated on structural resemblances and similar historical patterns. Attacks on Britain as a corporate body could indeed wound the pride of Englishmen and Loyalists, but were usually less damaging and generally less effective than ad hominem diatribes. Indeed it was the train of evil emperors, from Caesar to Caligula and Nero, which

epitomized and materialized the perverse and tyrannous image of Imperial Rome.

When Americans extended their imagery into the realm of the personal, comparing Loyalists and crown magistrates, native and Britons, to the Julio-Claudian emperors from Caesar to Nero, they crossed a Rubicon. Those Caesars, who epitomized the perverse and tyrannical image of Imperial Rome, became models in service of the patriot imagination in a gradual and escalating process. The increasing anger and desperation on behalf of colonial resistance was the motivating factor behind the outraged depictions of British magistrates as Roman emperors. After all, describing royal colonial agents, ministers, and finally the monarch himself as the most despised rulers in Western collective memory required deep rage that gradually increased over time. As the stakes became higher, writers interpreted occurrences and developments within a radicalized cognitive framework. Thus, if at the beginning of the transatlantic contest the references to Britain as a tyrannical Roman Empire were withheld and abstract, as the years went by the discourse became not only more aggressive but suggestively ad hominem. This dynamic discourse ultimately culminated in the desecration of the monarch’s persona, in the “Nerofication” of George III.16

Even before an overt quarrel between Britain and the colonies erupted in 1765, colonists began to rankle at the first signs of what they would soon interpret as a dramatic change in imperial policy, or worse, as a conspiracy to rob them of their liberties. They saw the renewal of the Writs of Assistance, the Proclamation of 1763, and the Sugar Act of 1764, among other measures, as unprecedented and as violations of the British constitution as interpreted from the western shores of the Atlantic. The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved, a passionate rebuttal of Parliament’s right to tax the colonies that was published after the passage of the Sugar Act and the spread of rumors about impending revenue legislation, foretold a new mode of employing antiquity and a break with earlier rhetorical styles. Comparing the Roman and British constitutions, the author of this pamphlet, the Bostonian lawyer James Otis, asserted that Britain had the greatest opportunity for

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16. By “Nerofication” I mean not necessarily the act of depicting Britons in terms of Nero Claudius Caesar Germanicus, the last of the Julio-Claudian emperors, but the process in which Roman Caesars were employed to describe Crown magistrates. However, not only was Nero’s figure prominent in those depictions, his image was arguably the most ferocious of the evil train of emperors.
“honest wealth and grandeur” since the days of Julius Caesar. His message, however, was rather pessimistic. Addressing the question of standing armies in North America, he asked, “are all ambitious generals dead? Will no more rise hereafter? . . . the experience of past times will show that an army of 20 or 30 thousand veterans half [of them] 3000 miles from Rome, were apt to proclaim Caesars.” Not withstanding that Britain was still a potentially prosperous Rome, one can already sense the ambivalence that Americans were feeling toward their Roman “mother.” By linking standing armies (alluding to the Redcoats stationed in North America) to the rise of the Caesars in Rome, Otis prefigured the discourse of the next twenty years. Still, Otis had to wait until others would follow his lead not only in resisting Parliament’s authority to tax, but also in embracing a depiction of Britain as a potentially tyrannical Roman empire.17

The Stamp Act was indeed a watershed in the way Americans imagined their mother country. After that act passed, references to Britain as a glorious Rome became the mainstay of Englishmen and Loyalists. As mobs burned effigies and tore down houses belonging to stamp distributors, it soon became evident that the loudest voices in the colonies were no longer willing to portray the mother country as a magnanimous Rome. Soon those voices began to make use of a less glorious stage in Roman history to describe the actions and historical significance of their mother country. One of the earliest examples of the conflation of British and Roman imperial histories is found in Patrick Henry’s renowned “treason speech,” given in the Virginia House of Burgesses. Reacting to the Stamp Act, Henry introduced a set of radical resolutions denouncing the British Parliament’s usurpation of powers vested in the colonial legislature, which alone, according to Henry, had the power to tax. He supported the resolves in a heated speech, and ended by warning: “Caesar had his Brutus—Charles the first his Cromwell—and George III—may he profit from their example.” According to another account Henry supposedly cried “Tarquin and Caesar had each his Brutus, Charles the First his Cromwell, and George the Third—”; upon which cries of “Treason” prevented him from continuing. Henry was evoking notorious autocratic rulers who were murdered and dethroned by their own people. Both Tarquin, the

17. Otis, “The Rights of the British Colonies,” in Bailyn Pamphlets, 429, 469. Otis followed what Pocock calls “the Tacitean Narrative” of the decline of the Roman Empire, in which Romans discovered the arcanum imperii as the ability of armies to proclaim their lords as Caesars away from Rome. Thus decline and fall have emerged as a narrative in which the republic lost its libertas, and was transformed into a principate capable of governing the imperium that libertas has acquired. See Pocock, Barbarism and Religion, 59–60.
last king of prerepublican Rome, and Julius Caesar, its first dictator for life, were dethroned by Roman citizens belonging to the Brutus gen. But while Tarquin was driven out, Caesar was stabbed to death by a group of senators in the Forum. Charles I was of course the last monarch to suffer regicide in recent British memory. This early and inflamed use of the Roman analogy, however, seems to be the exception that proves the rule of the relative tranquil Roman discourse of the mid 1760s. The Rome-inspired depictions of Britain and its leadership during the Stamp Act crisis were usually mild, avoiding personal attacks. The colonists had not yet crossed the Rubicon.  

Less than two months after Parliament passed the Stamp Act, the Providence Gazette published A Letter from a Plain Yeoman in which a “Yeoman” asserted: “Pharaoh, Caligula, and but a few more, have been instances of such abusers of power.” The writer hurried to add though, that he did “not mention those monsters with any design of making an odious parallel between them and any person now in authority.” Whether the Yeoman wished to make odious parallels or not, his analogies were ominous. References to the raving, cruel, and perverse Caligula (AD 12–41), one of the most notorious Caesars of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, and Pharaoh, the enslaver of the Hebrews during their Egyptian captivity, were potentially explosive. If the mention of Caligula in 1765 still required a disclaimer, which the Yeoman was quick to provide, that infamous Caesar would appear often in coming years in attacks on British magistrates without any such disclaimers.

Stephen Hopkins, the Rhode Island governor, claimed in a pamphlet published that same year that sending Americans to the courts of the vice-admiralty to be tried without peers “must call to everyone’s remembrance Tacitus’s account of the miserable condition of the Romans, in the reign of

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18. Unlike the British colonists on the North American mainland, colonists in the British West Indies and the other the American colonies that did not rebel “conspicuously failed to join the pamphlet campaign against Britain.” Accordingly, they also apparently failed to join the classical discourse describing Britain as the Roman Empire. Andrew Jackson O’Shaughnessy, An Empire Divided: The American Revolution and the British Caribbean (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 81. On the different accounts of Henry’s speech, and the nature of his stance, whether bold or timid, see Edmund S. Morgan and Helen M. Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis: Prologue to Revolution (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 121–31. However, since we have only a vague idea of what actually was said on that occasion, Henry might have been much more subtle in his language, and might have even apologized for the language he had used, if not for the ideas he expressed, before his speech was over.

Tiberius their emperor, who let loose and encouraged the informers of that age.” Pointing out the resemblance between the situation of the Romans under one of the cruelest emperors, remembered for his reign of terror and draconic legislation in Rome, and the American colonists under Grenville’s administration, Hopkins conveyed deep distress at the colonists’ current condition and suggested the despotism inherent in an apparent subversion of the British constitution. Nevertheless, his unflattering reference to Tiberius’ Rome was quite detached and abstract, as Hopkins deliberately chose his words. Such juxtaposition, although conveying similarities between the situation of British and Roman colonists, was still cautious in linking Britain and Imperial Rome.20

In the ensuing debate over the Stamp Act, American Tories attempted to justify the British position by claiming that “the Roman coloniae did not enjoy all the rights of Roman citizens; on the contrary, they only used the Roman laws and religion, and served in the legions, but had not the right of suffrage or of bearing honours. In these respects, our English colonies exactly resemble them.” James Otis replied to this argument soon after in *A Vindication of the British Colonies*, in which he denied the validity of comparing the American situation to the severe Roman model, and endorsed instead a comparison to the more humane Greek example. Hence, while Loyalists compared the British colonial project to that of Rome’s, Whigs answered by pointing out the severity and inappropriateness of Roman demeanor. In the years to come, Whigs would repeatedly denounce Britain for reviving and reenacting the Roman Empire’s ways.21

From the early stages of the contest, colonial Whigs deemed colonial officials, especially governors, as the main culprits for what they saw as a danger—


21. Martin Howard, “A Letter from a Gentleman at Halifax” in Bailyn, *Pamphlets*, 539; James Otis, “A Vindication of the British Colonies, against the Aspersions of the Halifax Gentleman, in his Letter to a Rhode-Island Friend,” in Bailyn, *Pamphlets*, 570. In this context it is interesting to consider an English opinion of the “Romanization” of the Anglo colonies: “Anti-Sejanus,” in the November 28–30, 1765 issue of the *London Chronicle* asserted, “the mother country is entitled to the support of her colonies, as a parent to the obedience of her children, is not only demonstrable from reason . . . but from history and experience. The Romans, who were the most generous of all other people, and cared for little more than the bare extension of the majesty of the Roman name, asserted the right of tribute over their colonies, which they diminished or augmented at pleasure.” Quoted in Morgan, *Sources and Documents*, 100.
ous metropolitan policy. Believing such people to have been offenders against the American interest, they often compared those magistrates to corrupt Roman provincial governors. However, perhaps because the public sphere was not yet ready for full-blown representations of Britain as a tyrannical Rome during the Stamp Act crisis, American publishers had recourse in reprinting earlier works that dwelled on similar themes. Such was Jeremiah Dummer’s *A Defense of the New England Charters*, some four decades old by 1765. That tract, while comparing British to Roman governors, described corruption and luxury as emasculating and degrading civic virtue to such a degree that even virtuous Romans could not stand up to “their proconsuls, consuls or governors [who] were very guilty . . . their corruption was so notorious.” Contemporaries would soon blame the whole spectrum of British magistracy in indulging Roman-like corruption, in a language steadily becoming more inflamed.22

Nevertheless, during this early imperial crisis the majority of the colonists still maintained a courteous and respectful position toward their sovereign, however contemptuous they may have been toward his colonial agents, Parliament, and ministers. The Connecticut Resolves demonstrated how while denouncing the Stamp Act Americans could still “most expressly declare, recognize and acknowledge his majesty king George the third, to be lawful and rightful king of Great Britain, and all other the Dominions and Countries thereto belonging, and that it is the indispensable duty of the people of this colony . . . always to bear faithful and true allegiance to his majesty.” Most other colonies used a similarly reverential and respectful language toward the monarch. In just a few years, repeated attacks coming from the patriot camp would severely damage and eventually dissolve this deference, together with British authority. The intellectual process of transforming Britain’s image from the embodiment of Roman glory and virtue to the incarnation of its worst vices and most infamous rulers not only expressed the crumbling of the practical and psychological authority of Great Britain and its monarch but has also induced the breakdown of metropolitan authority. By the end of that process that “rightful king of Great Britain” would be portrayed as the vilest of Caesars, as Nero.23


23. Quoted in Morgan, *Sources and Documents*, 54. Similar language can be found in the resolves of other colonies; see Morgan, *Sources and Documents*, 57 ff.
The repeal of the Stamp Act early in 1766 defused tensions and removed momentarily the immediate reason for further agitation and comparisons between Rome and the mother country. When, for a brief time, the rift between the colonies and Britain seemed healed, it was no longer necessary to cast Britain’s conduct in an unfavorable Roman light. The Stamp Act, however, was but the first in a series of contests that ended in the dissolution of the North American British Empire. As such, it gave rise to the first signs of the aggressive Whig discourse, which eventually depicted Britain and its leaders in Caesarian terms. Nevertheless, if by the end of the Stamp Act crisis the colonists had laid down the line where they believed that Parliament should stop interfering with their legislative business, that line, as Edmund Morgan points out, was “far short of independence.” Their continued, if attenuated, allegiance to the king meant that they could not yet use the harsh language that we encounter in the following years. Consequently, even when comparisons between Britain and Imperial Rome were evoked during 1765 and 1766, they still portrayed the mother country in terms of a glorious, if flawed, Rome.24

With each new crisis, the atmosphere of anger and distrust toward Britain grew stronger. However, even as the quarrel lengthened and became more and more bitter and the images of Britain became harsher, as long as the colonists saw the situation as redeemable, the process of Neronification would not begin in earnest. A decade passed before a critical mass of the colonists became convinced that they were suffering under a government ruled by “the worst passions of the human heart and the most subtle projects of the human mind”; or in other words, Britain has become a latter-day Roman tyranny. Such representations did not develop evenly, though. Depictions of Britain as a corrupt Rome developed earlier than those of Britons as tyrannical Romans, presumably due to the fact that ad hominem diatribes required an alienated and inflamed public sphere, which not yet developed in the early years of the conflict. I shall describe first the earlier Romanization of Britain, and then will turn to the Neronification of its leading men in the years following the Stamp Act crisis.25

24. That language, however, did not disappear but merely became less blunt; see for example, George Mason, Letter to the Committee of London Merchants quoted in Morgan, Sources and Documents, 161; and “An Ode Occasioned by the Repeal of the Stamp Act” in The Virginia Gazette, August 15, 1766. Quote in Morgan and Morgan, The Stamp Act Crisis, 152.
25. Josiah Quincy, Observations on the act of Parliament commonly called the Boston Port-Bill; with thoughts on civil society and standing armies (Boston: Edes and Gill, 1774), 81.
Arthur Lee used the vocabulary of antiquity extensively in a series of influential essays entitled *The Monitor Letters* that appeared throughout 1768 in the *Virginia Gazette* in response to the introduction of the Townshend Acts (1767). Lee’s rhetoric was nevertheless still similar in many ways to the language circulating during the Stamp Act crisis. While he still regarded the monarch as “our most Gracious Sovereign,” Lee identified an evil nexus based in Parliament, “the most tremendous tyranny that ever existed would be the House of Commons in England if it were independent of the people.” Lee measured the extent of potential parliamentary tyranny vis-à-vis the notoriety of the despotic assemblies of Greece and Rome; he answered that an independent Parliament would be even more tyrannical both from the Roman *decmviri*, the commission of ten men in early Rome that collapsed into a violent and corrupt rule, and the Athenian Thirty, the board of the thirty tyrants that ruled Athens after its capitulation in the Peloponnesian War (404 BC). Instructively, Lee lamented America’s current situation, which he understood to be similar to that of “the wretched Romans, in the times of their slavery, when grievously taxed by their emperors.” Lee’s use of ancient imagery, as well as a majority of writers during the late 1760s, although placing America in the perspective of a historic tyranny, is reminiscent of the mild language used during the Stamp Act. Lee’s language still lacked the hyperbole and personal focus that characterized the classical discourse of years to come.26

Hence, even the second round of taxation and repeal did not bring about substantive change in classical representation. However, with the revival of the dispute after the “Period of Quiet” a dramatic escalation in the articulation and extremity of the depictions of Britain as a corrupt and tyrannical Rome took place. In a letter to James Iredell dated April 26, 1774, William Hooper fully elaborated the comparison between Britain and Imperial Rome. Written just as the Intolerable Acts were passed, Hooper, a North Carolinian, enumerated the causes of decay the two empires shared: “The extent of the British dominion [like the Roman] is become too unwieldy for her to sustain. Commerce hath generated a profusion of wealth, and luxury and corruption. . . . Venality is at the standard it was when Jugurtha left Rome . . . what strikes them [the British] as the glow of health, is but the flushing of fever . . . Rome in its greatest luster was upon the verge of dissolution.” Significantly, as

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he described the descent from greatness to corruption in perfect civic humanistic form, Hooper alternated the references between the empires to an extent that makes it hard to determine at times to which empire he was alluding. Rome, he continued, “from being the nursery of heroes, became the residence of musicians, pimps, panders, and calamities . . . The Empire . . . fell a sacrifice to a herd of savage miscreants, and the most polished state in the world sunk at once into absolute barbarism. She had been some time ripe for this fate. Some one of enterprise was wanting to make the attempt.” Hooper’s long elaboration, much longer than the portion I have reproduced here, was not composed for antiquarian sake or to show off the author’s classical knowledge. Hooper foresaw the fate of England through Roman history, a fact revealed in his remarkable conclusion: “Reverse the catastrophe, and might not Great Britain be the original from which this picture [of Roman decline] is taken?” Hooper provides us with a key with which to unlock the operation of the American classical imagination and the complex role it played in shaping the relationship between American and classical history, “the original” and “the picture.” We now see how approximately a decade after the conflict between Britain and its colonies has erupted, Americans began expressing notions that conflated their experiences with those of the ancients in ways that surpassed mere analogy and metaphor. They began articulating a typological interpretation of history, which related classical and American persons and events as type and antitype, shadow and fulfillments of each other.27

Similarly, Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts elaborated the image of Britain as a despotic Rome in his Observations on the Act of Parliament Commonly Called the Boston Port Bill, a pamphlet full of classical allusions. The principal villain in Quincy’s essay was Julius Caesar, whose benign smile “deceived the Roman Common-wealth, till the increase of his power bid defiance to opposition . . . the complaisant courtier made his way into the hearts of his countrymen. They would not believe . . . that the smiling Caesar would filch away their liberties, that a native born—born and bred a Roman—would

enslave his country.” Quincy was reproaching loyalist, native born Americans who in his view were condemning their brethren to servility, just as Caesar had done to his fellow Romans. The real danger that Caesar posed, however, was that in his actions he “prepared the way for a succeeding Nero to spoil and slaughter” Rome. If currently the danger seemed containable, it was only because the real peril was lurking unseen, and would emerge when Americans put their guard down, Quincy suggested. Leaving the Roman institutions only in name but devoid of any meaning, “Caesar soon became Senate, magistracy and laws.” The imminence of a similar process occurring in America was eminently clear: “Is not Britain to America, what Caesar was to Rome?” Quincy asked. If one only bothered to see what Caesar had done to Rome then the relationship between Britain and America became clear, as Quincy used the classics as a key to understanding the present. By 1774 the example of Rome, so recently and often cited for its glory, had been transformed into a paradigm of debauchery. To use Hooper’s terminology, the British “picture” was intelligible through the Roman “original.”

After hostilities commenced, patriots continued searching for similarities in the historical patterns working in both the Roman and British empires. A South Carolinian addressing General John Burgoyne had pointed out that “the Romans were enslaved by men, who under the specious pretext of names and offices, which had been the safeguard of the liberties of the people, introduced unlimited power.” Similarly, the British Empire, “extended thousands of leagues, and contained millions of subjects,” still insisted “on the unlimited supremacy of the representatives of one part over every other part,” subverting the constitution “which is the only safeguard of liberty.” “Arbitrary power,” it was clear, has “been introduced under the sanction of respectable words” both in Rome and in Britain.

The revolutionary historical imagination was further discussed in William Henry Drayton’s *A Charge on the Rise of the American Empire*, published in the year of American Independence. In this tract we encounter another detailed description of Britain as a fallen Rome, in which Britain’s trajectory from glorious empire to a complete tyranny is traced along the lines with which we should already be familiar. Addressing his South Carolinian compatriots, Drayton recalled: “Three and thirty years numbered the illustrious Days of

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28. Quincy, *Observations*, 45–46. Such understandings were common as other Americans were comparing the British Parliament to the corrupt Roman Senate under Caesar, retaining merely its formalities but nothing of its early perfection. For example, see Samuel Langdon, *Government Corrupted by Vice, and Recovered by Righteousness* (Boston: Benjamin Edes, 1775), 17; Quincy, *Observations*, 57.
the Roman Greatness—Eight Years measure the Duration of the British Grandeur.” Indeed British greatness was achieved in “the Year 1758, when they victoriously pursued their enemy into every quarter of the Globe.” Their days of glory were numbered, however, and their cause of decline different than the Romans’. While Rome was corrupted by the introduction of “Asiatic Luxury,” Britain’s decline was due to the “injustice displayed by the Stamp Act.” Therefore, the intellectual transformation we are tracing here was acknowledged by contemporaries: Britain had indeed been a glorious Rome during the years 1758–65, as Drayton pointed out. Unfortunately, by taxing America for revenue purposes she was transformed into a despotic, corrupt Rome.29

John Leacock’s The Fall of British Tyranny represents a curious juncture in the road to the romanification of Britain. In the third act of this tragi-comedy, Lord Boston representing General Thomas Gage, Massachusetts’ governor since 1774, states: “I should have been able to have subdued the rebels, and gain’d immortal laurels to myself—have returned to Old England like a Roman Consul.” If Boston is preoccupied with being perceived as a Roman, Elbow Room, a character representing General William Howe, commander of the British military in America, disillusions him: “You must not look for laurels (unless wild ones) nor expect triumphs (unless sham ones).” With this mocking depiction of British generals imagining themselves as victorious Roman officers subduing the colonies, the transformation of Britain from a benevolent Roman-like empire into a corrupt and paralyzed giant, trying unsuccessfully to defeat America, was complete. By 1776, Americans were scorning Britons for trying to attain the standards they were believed to embody a mere decade before. In 1778 George Mason asserted that Americans “have been forced into it [revolution], as the only means of self-preservation, to guard our country and posterity from the greatest of all evils, such another infernal government (if it deserves the name of government) as the provinces groaned under, in the latter ages of the Roman commonwealth.” American patriots had completed the intellectual transformation of Britain as

a Rome, from a magnanimous empire in the early 1760s to a tyrannical empire in the late 1770s.\textsuperscript{30}

As we have just seen, by the mid-1770s the depth and complexity of the presumed correspondence between the corrupt Roman Empire and Great Britain was remarkable. Additional and potentially even more meaningful expressions of this discourse were the ad hominem comparisons between British officers and magistrates and Roman emperors, which emerged after 1774. The significance of such comparisons stemmed from the fact that the analogizing between individuals, between specified Britons and Romans, demanded an even deeper merging of British and Roman narratives. As the relationship between the colonies and Britain deteriorated, colonials increasingly demonized the British, and consequently imagined and portrayed them as Roman villains. Such attacks, we shall now see, escalated both in ferocity and in the rank of targets chosen for deflation.

During December 1766, a mere month after Samuel Adams has denounced the royal administration in Boston for inducing treachery “as was never encouraged under any Administration but such as those [of] Nero or Caligula,” the Bostonian Patriot invoked the cruelest of Caesars once again. “The Stamp Act was like the sword that Nero wished for, to have decollated the Roman people at a stroke,” Adams wrote in a letter to South Carolinian Christopher Gadsden. Notably, this comparison was communicated in a private letter, and its reference was to an impersonal piece of parliamentary legislation. However, the fact that the Caesarian imagery prevailed in the master agitator’s rhetoric after the Stamp Act’s repeal was foretelling. Adams was referring to Caligula Gaius Caesar, the paranoid, brutal, and presumably mad emperor of the years AD 37–41, and to the murderous, incest ridden Nero Claudius Caesar, last emperor of the Julio-Claudian dynasty reigning during AD 54–68. The two villains conveyed to the Patriot sensibility irredeemable debauchery; those Caesars were among the “few men . . . unalterably excluded from every degree of fame.” Early in 1767 John Adams, following the example of his older cousin, remarked, “Nero shall wish the People had but one Neck that he might strike off at one blow, Caligula shall swear to tear up all remaining Virtue among the People.” Adams was referring to his belief in the existence of a general conspiracy against liberty in the

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colonies when he invoked the notorious Caesars, and probably he had in mind Massachusetts’ governing elite in general and specifically Governor Francis Bernard. If still hesitant to establish a direct link between Roman Caesars and crown representatives, Adams’s choice of words was foretelling.31

In the following year John Dickinson published his renowned Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania. In his sixth Letter, published in January 1768, Dickinson warned against civil complacency, which created the situation in which “the Caesars ruined the Roman liberty, under the titles of tribunical and dictatorial authorities.” In his mild manner, Dickinson compared British rule to Roman Caesarism, contrasting the harmful historical patterns at work in both states. The Farmer went on to indicate in his next letter that “this mode of taxation [such as practiced by the British] therefore is the mode suited to arbitrary and oppressive governments,” adding that “this policy did not escape the cruel and rapacious NERO.” In 1768 it had been still statutes of taxation, not personalities, that colonials were juxtaposing with the policies of Nero Caesar. Accordingly, Arthur Lee, like Dickinson, set side-by-side what he described as “the slavish condition of the British people” and American liberty in his second Monitor letter. To dramatize the stakes, which he understood were at hand, Lee described the pitiful Roman people, which “were already wicked . . . [and] were soon to be weak and miserable; they were soon to groan under the most execrable monsters that ever blackened human nature: Tiberius, Nero, Caligula, Commodus, and Domitian,” all Roman emperors, all notoriously wicked. Despite the fact that he evoked this formidable succession of tyrants, Lee left the readers to guess at the modern-day incarnations of the historical villains: was he referring to a colonial magistrate, a crown advisor or perhaps a minister? Lee, however, went on to pose a rhetorical question: “shall we not then, my countrymen, combine to oppose this fiend, whenever he shall invade us? Shall we not use every caution, work every nerve, to repeal his open, or elude his concealed attacks?” Roman tyranny was assaulting America, and Lee admonished his brethren for their complacence and encouraged them to confront the impending danger.32

The rhetorical groundwork laid in the late 1760s came to fruition during the 1770s, as comparisons to the Caesars became increasingly overt. The early


1770s saw an escalation in the depiction of crown magistrates as Roman emperors, simultaneous with the construction of the image of Britain as a tyrannical Rome. Even during the Period of Quiet, Samuel Adams employed Roman emperors to vilify the foes of the Patriot cause. Now he compared Julius Caesar and Thomas Hutchinson, Massachusetts Bay’s governor. Adams warned that Hutchinson’s ambition and lust for power might very well transform him into the Caesar of Massachusetts. “Had not Caesar seen that Rome was ready to stoop,” Adams reminded the readers of the *Boston Gazette*, “he would not have dared to make himself the Master of that once brave people . . . [he] led them gently into slavery. . . . What difference is there between the present state of this province, which in course will be the deplorable state of all America, and that of Rome?” This comparison, however, “would not in all parts hold good,” Adams admitted sarcastically: “The Tyrant of Rome, to do him justice, had learning, courage, and great abilities,” he mocked Hutchinson. Adams consciously, and polemically, established a direct link between a Roman Caesar and a royal Governor.33

During the year 1773 the figure of Nero seems finally to have emerged as a leading *figura*, captivating Americans’ fears, abhorrence, and hatred of Britain. Nero epitomized the despised imperial Rome and served as a metonym for the worst type of tyranny, the extreme opposite of everything the Whig worldview stood for. His notoriety was passed down the ages mainly by Tacitus, who attributed to him cruel rapacity and sadistic luxury, and Suetonius, who in his biographical sketch portrayed him as the epitome of luxury: vain, wanton, greedy, lecherous, brutal, and degraded. Such was the government that a “British Bostonian” envisioned when he described the government of the American colonies: there has not been “such tyranny since the days of Nero” he cried. Mercy Warren’s play *The Adulateur*, a thoroughly classicized allegorical tragedy, demonstrates obvious parallels between the situation in the imaginary Upper Servia and Massachusetts. The main villain of the play, *Rapatio*, representing Thomas Hutchinson, is repeatedly compared to a Roman tyrant, primarily to Nero. Early in act four, after describing “Servia” (Massachusetts) as a corrupt state in which each post is filled with Rapatio’s creatures, Rapatio-Hutchinson promises to “show my pow’r, and trample on my country.” Rapatio’s crony *Gripall* assures Rapatio-Hutchinson, in what he considers a compliment, “‘Twas nobly spoke, there breath’d the soul of Caesar.” Soon after, *Rapatio* imagines the sufferings he will bestow on the people of Servia, a thought that gives him “throbs of joy,” as he exclaims: “Nero, I

33. *Boston Gazette*, October 14, 1771.
tow'r above thee.” During the fifth act, Rapatio envisions once again the miseries of the people he governs, and promises to break their resistance and to “execute what Nero durst not.” By the end of the play Rapatio dreams of becoming “like Nero, At one dread blow to massacre his millions,” attributing to Hutchinson the same wish that seven years earlier John Adams linked to the Stamp Act. Such a systematically Neroified picture of a royal governor demonstrated not only the intensity of what historian Kenneth Silverman has called “Whig sentimentalism” and tendency for hyperbole, but also the accelerated pace with which colonists were coming to understand their imperial superiors as irredeemable, murderous creatures of historical proportions. Mercy Warren again evoked Nero in her 1775 satiric play The Group by alluding to the heinous image of the raving Caesar playing his musical instrument over a roof top as he watched Rome burn, a symbol of the most egotistical and psychopathic of reigns. In that short play, the character Brigadier Hateall, a pugilistic military leader, did not posses the gentility of the Roman. “I,” claims the Brigadier, “Nero like, the capital in flames, Could laugh to see her glutted sons expire, Tho’ much too rough my soul to touch a lyre.”

Historian Vincent Carretta has demonstrated how British satirists mocked their monarch to the point of depicting him ironically as Nero, as shown in an engraving from the title page of the 1773 edition of The New Foundling Hospital for Wit depicted Nero as the blackened figure of George III in an equestrian posture, crowned with laurels and draped in a togalike cape. The engraving’s caption reads, “One of the Headmen of Gotham caused a Statue of himself to be erected in the Character of Marcus Aurelius; but the Statuary, knowing nothing of that Prince, took his likeness from NERO.” However, for these satirists, as Carretta points out, the monarch was a Nero not out of strength but out of weakness. If the Island dwellers took their cue for depicting George III as a Roman Caesar from their colonial brethren on the American mainland, their western kin represented the monarch on different

34. Tacitus, The Annals, books 13–16; Suetonius, The lives of the Caesars, “Nero.” John Allan, The American alarm, or The Bostonian plea, for the rights, and liberties, of the people (Boston: Kneeland and Davis, 1773), 3; Kenneth Silverman, A Cultural History of the American Revolution: Painting, Music, Literature, and the Theatre in the Colonies and the United States from the Treaty of Paris to the Inauguration of George Washington, 1763–1789 (New York: Crowell, 1978), 82; Mercy Otis Warren, The Adulateur, A Tragedy (Boston: Printing Office near Concert Hall, 1773), 25–30. The picture of Nero fiddling on a rooftop while Rome is burning is one of the most memorable images of that notorious Caesar, although highly doubtful. Another version is Tacitus’s in which Nero did not play an instrument, but sang on the destruction of Troy as Rome was consumed in flames.
Nerofied terms: Americans understood George III as a vicious and powerful Nero tyrant.35

Indeed in 1773 the colonists took a major step toward independence when they began to treat not merely colonial appointees, the Parliament or cabinet ministers, but significantly the king’s person as a Roman tyrant. John Allan was among the first to assert that if the rights of Americans were intentionally subverted, “then that man, that King, that minister of state, be who he will [that masterminded the alleged conspiracy], is worse than a Nero TYRANT.” While this was not yet a full-fledged identification of the monarch as a Nero—the expression was provisional and “Nero” used as an adjective describing a type of tyranny—Allan was walking on a thin line. This harsh idiom nevertheless cut colonial boundaries by 1775 as Southerners too were engaged in transforming the way they perceived and depicted their British leaders. Virginius had revealed to his readers that what they were viewing “with horror and detestation” as “a Grenville and a North, a Bute and a Mansfield” were reincarnations of “a Catiline, a Clodius, and even the polished Caesar.” By 1775 the king’s ministers were not deemed the only culprits. Virginius went on to admonish the monarch that “had [Julius] Caesar thought . . . that the laurels posterity would, instead of honour and estimation, pay him the full tribute of their sovereign execration, while they load the memory of his assassins with the most unbounded honors, he never would have acted the patricide of his country.” Similarly, George III should be careful not “to sanctify the most corrupt measures of the most corrupt servants.” Otherwise, “history hereafter will do him all the justice he shall be found to deserve,” just like it has done to Caesar’s memory. The Nerofication of George III was imminent.36

As the war broke out, American writers drew parallels more freely and explicitly between Roman tyrants and British leaders. If just before hostilities commenced John Adams ruminated vaguely that “the present reign may be that of Augustus, but upon my honour I expect twelve Caesars will succeed it,” Philoleutheros Americanus, a Connecticut poet, accused the military governor Thomas Gage (“Tory Tom”) of committing atrocious behavior after skirmishes began: “Nero like, [Gage murdered] the aged . . . The blooming virgin and the beardless boy . . . snatch the infant from the streaming breast, Whose

36. John Allan, An Oration Upon the Beauties of Liberty or the Essential Rights of the Americans (Boston: Keenland and Davis, 1773), ix; “Virginius,” The Virginia Gazette, February 9, 1775.
Figure 3. George III as a ridiculed Nero in *The New Foundling Hospital for Wit*, 1773. Collections of the Huntington Library.
spouting veins should maculate his vest.” Such was indeed behavior well suited to Nero Caesar. *Cosmopolitan* accused Thomas Hutchinson for acting “Caligula like . . . determined to sever its head from all its members with one stroke,” recanting the rhetoric of the Adamses in an earlier and different context. *Orthodoxus*, writing in the *New-Hampshire Gazette*, accused the “unfit men,” namely the British legislators, for acting whimsically and mischievously for the sake of “ambition, lust, avarice,” just as Caligula did when he carried “coccole shells from the sea shore, in triumph over Neptune.” Orthodoxus was referring to Caligula’s absurd (and most likely apocryphal) behavior in the campaign of AD 39, when he amassed a large army in preparation for an invasion of Britain. At the last minute, Caligula allegedly panicked, changed his mind, and ordered the troops to gather cockle shells from the beach instead, claiming to have won a great triumph over Neptune, the god of the oceans. Like the worst of tyrants, British legislatures were depicted as unworthy and unfit to rule an empire.37

Independence brought with it yet another radical change in the American sentiment towards Britain and its supreme leader. Historians seem to agree that “Americans of all classes on the patriot side sustained their loyalty to the king throughout the period from 1760 to 1776.” Colonists have narrated the repeal of the Stamp Act, for example, as the work of the king intervening as protector of the rights of Englishmen. By declaring the colonies in a state of rebellion, however, George III convinced many that he was the chief architect of the conspiracy to rob the colonies of their rights. Following soon after, the Declaration of Independence signaled how “all grievances [were thrust] onto the person of the king.” After Independence, George III was reconstituted as the enemy, his equestrian statue hacked to pieces in New York, and his effigy burned and buried many times over throughout the colonies. The monarch’s rapid fall out of grace indeed seems to some as “striking.” The overt post-1776 discourse of Nerofication both portrays and helps to explain this swift change in the monarch’s esteem in America. The mock killings of George III during the year of Independence may therefore have not only constituted ritual murder and funeral, as historian David Waldstreicher instructively

points out. They also symbolized George III’s resurrection as a Nero-Sed Caesar.38

With the war in its second year and the psychological and legal affiliations between the colonies-turned-states and Britain torn since July 1776, Jonathan Sewall produced a remarkably classicized literary piece, writing *A New Epilogue to Cato* as the concluding section to Addison’s tragedy, the most popular play in the colonies throughout the eighteenth century. Sewall asked early in the Epilogue, “Did CAESAR, drunk with pow’r and madly brave, Insatiate burn, his Country to enslave? Did he for this, lead forth a servile host, And spill the choicest blood that Rome cou’d boast?” immediately he answered: “Our BRITISH CAESAR too, has done the same, and damn’d this Age to everlasting fame!” Referring to the monarch as a “British Caesar” (“Caesar” not denoting a Roman emperor in general, but Julius Caesar, the first of Rome’s dictators for life and the villain of Addison’s *Cato*), Sewall blamed George III for the destruction of the flower of America, as “COLUMBIA’s crimson’d fields still smoke with gore! Her bravest heroes cover all the shore!” The Epilogue went on to depict General William Howe as a crony in a Caesarian-Georgian court: “W’ve had our DECIUS too, and Howe can say / Health, pardon, peace G----e [Gage] sends America; yet brings destruction, for the olive wreath.” The depiction of the British monarch as the tyrant who
has murdered the Roman republic is unmistakable: George is a British Julius Caesar, his Generals playing the part of Caesar’s servile cronies. After Americans described the monarch as Caesar as we have just seen, the last logical step in the escalating discursive ladder of defiling the king would be to equate him with the diabolical tyranny of Nero Claudius Caesar, the most hated of the emperors of the notorious Julio-Claudian dynasty.39

Philip Freneau was among the first to conflate the king’s figure with that of Nero. In America Independent, published in 1778, “the poet of the Revolution” compared George III to “the dregs of human kind,” among them Nero, Herod, and Domitian, all Roman tyrants. By the end of the poem he asserted that the British king was “the Nero of our times.” The image of the worst of Caesars had apparently appealed to Freneau’s poetical imagination: in 1782 he charged the king over the pages of the Freeman’s Journal: “O Nero! The blood of thousands calls aloud for vengeance on your guilty head.” An anonymous tract, A Dialogue, between the Devil and George III. Tyrant of Britain, & c. &c. &c. published too in 1782, happened to be one of the last instances of Nerofication before this discourse lost its meaning as the war with Britain ended. The Dialogue epitomized the Nerofication of King George with a hyperbole matched by few other texts, while conflating the Biblical and classical readings of the Revolution. Paraphrasing a Scottish tract from 1746 entitled Dialogue between the Devil and George II, this dialogue satirically depicted the British monarch as a slavish coconspirer with the devil. At the very beginning of this outrageous, satanic dialogue between Lucifer and king, the devil reassures George of his trust: “I doubt not you will equal my antient servants Nero, [and] Caligula.” George himself, however, makes sure that the point is driven home: “I have a heart of a tyrant,” he declares, “and I hope to prove that my head is equal to my heart . . . Should I succeed,” the British monarch continues, “I’ll surpass in barbarity any tyrant that ever lived.” Willingly, George lets the devil know exactly which tyrants he has planned to surpass and how: “I will have a saw-mill,” he divulges in his diabolic plan, “carried by a stream of virgin blood to saw off rebels heads! . . . Did ever Nero, or Caligula, perform any thing equal to this?” “Tyranny,” George finally admits, “has been the plan and pursuit of my life.” The British king, sovereign of the American colonies only six years before the publication of the Dialogue, has surely outdone the psychotic machinations of the Roman tyrants. In 1783, with the war officially over and the British marginalized as enemies both on

the battlefield and in the war of words, the process of Nerofication of the British Monarch was complete.40

Throughout the chain of events that led to the political and psychological undoing of the imperial connection, the Romanization and Nerofication of Britain and its leadership played a key role in expressing resentments and eroding the sentiments that tied the colonists to the mother country. If Americans did indeed make sense of their separation from Britain in classical terms, as this essay attempts to demonstrate, such separation did not involve illustrious Brutus and Cato, nor heroic Cincinnatus or Cassius, the daring heroes of republican Rome. The disintegration of the imperial connection was imagined through the narratives of imperial Rome of the Caesars. Understanding Britain and its chiefs through such historical types, however, did not serve merely as an allegorical or metaphorical backdrop, but rather constituted a cognitive framework for analyzing, justifying, and comprehending contemporary reality. American Whigs transformed Britain into a reincarnation of imperial, corrupt Rome as their contemporary experiences have acquired a typological quality, intertwining contemporary narratives with Roman history. Such hermeneutics, consisting of reading the present as if it was prefigured by the past, opened the prospect of interpreting classical history as an exegetical *typos*, an interpretive vehicle to inject meaning into present occurrences.

American rebels employed multiple discursive strategies when detaching themselves from Britain. A parallel, and in several respects quite similar intellectual transformation in which “British Israel” devolved into tyrannical and blasphemous, devil-serving “Assyria” and “Egypt” has been described as the “commanding metaphor” of revolutionary America. In spite of its ubiquity, however, biblical symbolism significantly lacked during the late eighteenth century a constructive content that would not merely furnish separation but could also provide an alternative identity instead of the British one that was just lost. While we have seen how antiquity was useful in defining the “political other,” namely, the British Empire, we are still not well enough acquainted with the ways in which the classics contributed to the intellectual processes spurred by the Revolution. The narratives and antiheroes of antiq-

uity, which helped to make sense of separation and were handy in justifying war, may also be helpful in illuminating one of the most puzzling and enduring questions of the American Revolution: how were colonists converted in a matter of years from faithful British subjects to ardent American citizens? As this essay demonstrates, ancient Rome and its notorious battery of vices and villains were a major vehicle in that conversion.41