Caroline Winterer lucidly and skillfully expounds the various forms and patterns that American feminine classicism took between 1750 and 1900 and shows how the roles that the classical world played in women’s public and private lives changed over that century and a half. She demonstrates how feminine classicism in America evolved during that seminal period in two large parallel arcs: from a disposition to Roman republicanism to an interest in Greek democracy (thereby closely following the general trend of masculine American neoclassicism), and from a mode (however limited) of political participation during the revolutionary period to a language of reclusive, internal self-perfection and cultivation by the late nineteenth century.

One wonders why we have waited so long for a book on feminine classicism, since we have witnessed over the past few decades notable contributions to our understanding of the classics’ role in early America, from Reinhold Meyer’s *Classica Americana* (1984), to Carl Richard’s *The Founders and the Classics* (1994), and Winterer’s earlier book, *The Culture of Classicism* (2002). We learned from those seminal studies about the various timings and forms in which classical antiquity affected early Americans, and the processes whereby it lost its grip as a leading paradigm in the intellectual life of the United States. The picture that Winterer now provides us in *The Mirror of Antiquity* deeply enriches current understanding as we can no longer see the discourse of and through the worlds of Greece and Rome in America as merely political, public, or masculine, or as an exclusively elite, white, and male endeavor. Winterer demonstrates in a remarkable and nuanced monograph how colonial, revolutionary, early republic, antebellum, and Gilded-Age American women, each in their own distinct and ingenious ways, operated through and made use of this long-gone world in ever-changing circumstances.

Classical antiquity has dominated Western minds ever since the collapse of the Roman Empire, especially since the revival of classical wisdom and learning in the era we have come to call the Renaissance. Subsequently, the ancients were present in the New World since the
Discovery by setting scientific and intellectual benchmarks and providing moral and political support to diverse Europeans, from conquistadores to missionaries, from natural historians to imperial administrators. But until now we have understood this fascinating intellectual cosmos largely as a men’s world. Early American historians have documented how jurists, politicians, artists, and polemicists operated seamlessly in an antiquarian culture that preferred the public to the private, the civic to the domestic. No more. Winterer demonstrates how through a variety of discourses, from the political to material consumption and aesthetic preferences and literary inclinations, women gained entry into this masculine sphere and made their presence noticed. She observes, “women, no less than men, were responsible for America’s spectacular resurrection of classical antiquity during the period of nation formation” (2).

Winterer begins her analysis at mid-eighteenth century, which she and other historians have identified as a time of increasing popularity, accessibility, and penetration of the classics. The context of this dramatic popularization was the rising prosperity, commercialism, and aspirations for gentility across a broad swath of Americans; these processes were closely linked to the powerful current that historian Jack Greene described as cultural convergence, reinforced by Timothy Breen’s recent identification of a new consumer culture during the late eighteenth century.¹ New cultural aspirations supported by the proliferation of print and the expansion of the public sphere exposed numerous middling Americans across the colonies to mores and spheres of knowledge traditionally out of their cultural reach. Among those areas was the world of antiquity, and the new beneficiaries were elite colonial women who “began in growing numbers to immerse themselves in the wondrous literary and material vestiges of classical antiquity” (12). Generally excluded from institutionalized learning and barred from professional or public roles, “they found other means by which to avail themselves of classical learning, and other ends to which to put that knowledge” (13). Within the new vibrant Atlantic world of taste, products, religion, and learning, Anglo-American women practiced a “vernacular classicism”

consisting of translations, which would prove useful for revolutionary ends. During the disintegration of Britain’s North American empire a small but coherent elite group of white women, usually wives and sisters of leading Patriots, “began to identify themselves in one way or another as Roman matrons” (41). We have known for some time how influential was the paradigm of the “republican mother” during the Revolution, but we did not know how much that fundamental model derived from classical history. Winterer has demonstrated how the image of the Roman matron enabled American women to participate in “the elite male fiction that the classical past was a shared, historical origin point for the new nation” (41).

If the “new nascent political voice” of classical antiquity was confined during the 1770s to a limited group of elite women, Winterer demonstratess how classicism progressively opened its doors thereafter to exponentially larger feminine audiences; it also addressed a wider array of concerns. As the culture of polite salons and coffee shops was supplemented by the democratic and vibrant print world of magazines and books, the growing cohorts of literate women witnessed “a major change in the verbal and visual lexicon” of the early republic’s feminine sphere (102). The early decades of the nineteenth century were also determinative for the decisive movement from an ethos of ascetic and aristocratic republicanism of the late eighteenth century to the turbulent populism of the Jacksonian Democracy. Only then did the reputation of Athens go through extensive reevaluation and become a dominant classical paradigm. Winterer demonstrates how during these decades American women’s vocabulary shifted abruptly from a preoccupation with the “austere aesthetic of Rome to a rage for Grecian luxuries” (102). Once again we see how “Women were central nodes in the matrix” in the crucial cultural and intellectual transformations associated with neoclassicism (110).

Yet another significant transformation of feminine classicism exposed that familial and domestic discourse to public arenas such as colleges and museums. This was also a move from a relatively reclusive identifi-

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cation with Roman matrons to a new sense of how antiquity and its store of prototypical women could “be used to reform self and society” (163). A case in point was the debate over slavery, in which antebellum women, both North and South, practiced “civic activism and reform on the national stage” through constant reference to classical antiquity (177). Winterer’s analysis concludes at a bittersweet moment, one when Victorian American women achieved competence and parity in knowledge of the classics just as Greece and Rome lost their cultural primacy. This moment witnessed the “privatization” of the classics as they were “transformed from a prerequisite for entry into public life to a platform for the perfection of the inner self” as the nineteenth century was about to conclude (201). The road thence to their irrelevance to American women’s lives, as well as men’s, was all too short.

Winterer skillfully traces this grand trajectory of the feminine classical sphere in seven chronological chapters. She makes use of her distinctive modes of analysis that concentrate on parables (such as the “Roman charity” of the lactating ancient matron), figures (the goddess Venus), or objects (the Greek dress and sofa), to demonstrate how this intellectual voyage was riddled with paradoxes. Women’s place in classical antiquity was precarious to begin with: If ancient males pursued public and masculine ideals, epitomized through the dual role of the warrior–farmer, women were perceived as domestic creatures and categorically denied institutionalized power. Yet within this unpromising setting, American women from the late colonial period on, we now learn, were able to carve within their respective contexts political and cultural niches by and through the world of antiquity. Another paradox, as we have seen, was that American women had become fully classicized in training and orientation by the last decades of the nineteenth century “just as classicism was slipping away from its central place in political life”: a “Pyrrhic victory” indeed (202–3).

The Mirror of Antiquity greatly expands our appreciation and understanding of the complexity and paradoxical nature of the feminine American world of classicism while opening a new set of questions related to the nexus of the intellectual, cultural and social in American history. To appreciate the continuing resonance and significance of the feminine classical tradition in American culture that Caroline Winterer has so competently uncovered one need go no farther than to the final scene of The Grapes of Wrath. In the closing pages of that great American novel, the Joad daughter, Rose of Sharon, follows the footsteps of her imagined,
Roman matron predecessors by breastfeeding a starving man. Rose of Sharon may or may not have been from Venus. She was, however, definitely from Rome.

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