

"The Improvements Made by America on the Ancient Mode": Classicism and
Nationalism in the Early American Republic, 1780-1850

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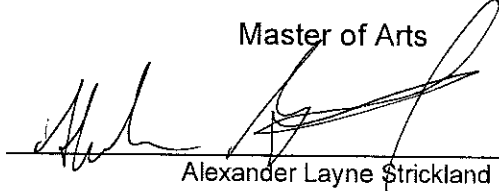
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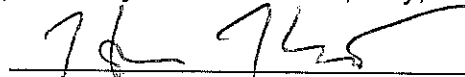
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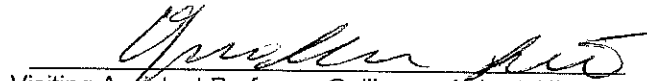
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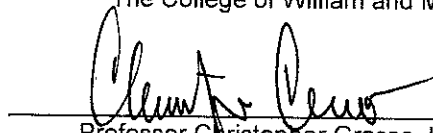


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ABSTRACT

Classicism, an interest in the history, society, and arts of the ancient world, became a staple of American culture with the first permanent European settlements, and reached its zenith in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The extant scholarship on early American classicism offers a wealth of information about how citizens of the nascent United States read and interpreted the sources of the ancient world. However, it has done little to address the political utility of that classicism. The first of the two studies presented here attempts to locate one possible utility of American classicism in the Federalist Papers. An examination of allusions to the ancient world in those texts and the educational background of its authors and audience provides evidence that a shared American classicism was a constituent part of the cultural unity necessary to justify a strong central government. The second study reexamines this culture of classicism in the first half of the nineteenth century, with a focus on the classicism of nonelite demographic units without access to conventional higher education. While nonelite subjects have been analyzed by many other historians of American classicism, they have largely been examined discretely. This study establishes the prevalence of classical culture in the early nineteenth century United States by examining the public writings and speeches of elite white men. A subsequent analysis of nonelites contextualizes their classicism in the larger American classical culture in an attempt to demonstrate the broad unity of American classicism.

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ἐμῇ μητρὶ

Intellectual Biography

In early childhood, I became fascinated with the Greek and Roman worlds of classical antiquity. Later, around the age of ten, I developed an interest in the early American republic. I balanced these interests through adolescence, drawn especially by chance or by simple narcissism to Alexander Hamilton and Alexander the Great. When I started working towards my undergraduate degree at Auburn University, I chose Hamilton, dedicating my energy to United States history. I took classes almost exclusively in that field, and wrote my undergraduate thesis on dueling and honor culture in the early American republic. Early in my junior year, however, I found Carl J. Richard's *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment*. Richard's work introduced me to a larger historiography on American classicism, and I used his model to begin synthesizing my interests.

While still studying the early American Republic, I began taking classes on classical history. I took a series of courses on Ancient Greek and Roman history, began learning to read Classical Greek and Latin, and familiarized myself with translations of Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Plutarch, Tacitus, and Cicero. In my graduate school applications, I proposed a project that would explore how and why classical models supplanted or disguised European models in American political discourse. While researching this topic, I noticed a blind spot in the historiography of American classicism that changed the focus of my research.

I found that historians like Meyer Reinhold, Carl Richard, and Caroline Winterer had spent decades defining the nature and extent of American classicism, but very little time exploring its utility. My goal in the fall semester of 2015 was to fill this historiographical gap by finding the utility of classical references in early American political discourse. Examining the drafting of the Constitution, I argued that Federalist politicians mobilized their classical educations to demonstrate the existence of an American nation. Using Benedict Anderson's definition of nation, I further argued that the demonstration of American nationalism was necessary to legitimize the strong central government proposed by the Constitution. I centered my investigations on Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and the Federalist Papers. While these were only a very small sample of people and writings defending the Constitution, they provided ample evidence for the utility of classicism in nation-building.

In the spring semester of 2016, I originally intended to continue in this vein, exploring the utility of American classicism in the early nineteenth century. However, having written a research paper entirely focused on wealthy white men, I wanted my next project to be more inclusive. As I read about the classicism of politically marginalized groups, I noticed that the historiography was divided along strict demographic lines. Classicism has been located in Black Americans, women, and lower-class whites, but is discussed by historians differently in each group. Moreover, while historians studying the classicism of political elites have discussed its political importance, those studying other groups discuss classicism as largely apolitical. In my second paper, I argue that these historiographic

divisions are unhelpful in understanding nineteenth century American classical culture, and that classicism had a broader utility that transcended demographic categories. Exploring a much greater variety of sources than I had in the fall, I found that nineteenth century Americans regardless of class, race, or gender understood the possession and demonstration of classical education as a path to greater political participation.

While both projects explore classicism in the early republic, they are thematically dissimilar. In crafting my first paper, I took a top-down approach that allowed only for the exploration of political elites, and I excluded nonelite subjects entirely. In the second, I still give a great deal of attention to this group, arguing that they were responsible for the classical atmosphere of nineteenth century American political culture. However, the bulk of this paper was dedicated to exploring how nonelites recognized, participated in, and perpetuated in this culture. I also broadened my definition of classicism between projects, arguing in the first that classicism required “deep readings of ancient Greek and Roman texts, usually in the original Greek or Latin,” while in the second project including even “a basic understanding of a few major classical figures and themes.” In both projects, I analyze only a small sample of allusions to antiquity pulled from a much larger body of American classical references. These samples are representative, but not comprehensive, and I note in both papers that American classicism is a broad topic, and that I have located only a few of a potentially great many utilities of participation in the culture.

I anticipate significant revisions for both papers. The fall project, by first attempt at graduate level scholarship, requires a great deal of attention. In particular, my focus on Hamilton and Madison is far too narrow to be representative. An exploration of classical allusions in the writings of other Federalists, especially James Wilson, will be my first priority. Following that, a general clarification of terms and conclusions will occupy my attention. I would like to reframe the argument and extend the focus of this project beyond wealthy white male subjects, but that approach might be more appropriate for a book-length study. The revisions to the second paper would be a bit more straightforward. First and foremost, I would add a discussion of the classicism of American women other than Phillis Wheatley back into the argument. I had a section on this topic drafted, but was never quite happy with it, and decided to cut it from the final product before submission. I have already begun the process of adding this section back into the project, and will have it finished before final thesis submission in June. This addition, and the filling out of every section with more primary evidence, would bring the paper much closer to being a finished product.

Ultimately, I doubt that I would attempt to publish either of these projects in anything close to their current format. I could potentially publish the second project as an article, but only with extensive revisions and a significant narrowing of the topic. For now, I will be using revised versions of both papers as writing samples for applications to PhD programs and academic job. Further down the line, one or both of these projects could serve as the foundation of a dissertation.

At my most ambitious, I can imagine a heavily revised version of the first paper serving as the introduction to a book-length survey on American classicism in the early republic, for which a similarly revised version of the second paper could serve as the first chapter. Whatever I end up using them for, I greatly appreciate the assistance I've received from the faculty of the College, and I look forward to the revision process.

“The Improvements Made by America on the Ancient Mode”:
Classicism and Nationalism in the Early American Republic

Alexander Strickland

HIST 710-02

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“The present national government has no precedent or experience to support it,” wrote Alexander Hamilton in June of 1787.¹ The words were not his own, but a paraphrase of John Lansing, Jr., Hamilton’s fellow delegate from New York to the Constitutional Convention. Though Lansing was a staunch opponent of the Constitution, and Hamilton a supporter, they had to agree on this point. The Articles of Confederation, the “present national government,” referenced by Lansing, was indeed an unprecedented system. Lansing’s statement, however, was not one of pride. Rather, he was advocating against “forming a system from theory...”² Lansing thought that a successful government could not be created from whole cloth, but must be based upon a previous model. He was not alone in this sentiment. The delegates to the Constitutional Convention, Hamilton included, believed that any new government they created must be built not only on theory, but on tested and successful models.

The most immediate and obvious model for the new state to base itself on was Great Britain. In a speech given to the Convention in June of 1787, Hamilton gave his “sentiments of the best form of government – not as a thing attainable by us, but as a model which we ought to approach as near as possible.”³ That model was the British constitution, commonly thought to be the most free and just republic in the world at the time. The British constitution, however, could only be used as a *model* for the creation of the American state. The United States had won their independence from Great Britain less than a decade prior to the

¹ Alexander Hamilton, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume IV*, ed. by Harold Coffin Syrett and Jacob Ernest Cooke, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 169.

² *Ibid.*, 169.

³ *Ibid.*, 184.

Convention. While the new government could draw from British models, the nation it served could not be based unambiguously on British ideals.

This was critical because one of the obstacles facing the Constitution was the lack of a unified American nationality, a shared identity binding Americans together as a common people. A nation, as defined by Benedict Anderson, is an artificially constructed political and cultural community that is both sovereign and limited to a particular people.⁴ At the time of the Convention, there was no single American nationality, but thirteen individual nationalities spread across the former colonies. Though these nations shared a common British heritage and could claim a common experience in the American Revolution, they remained as culturally diverse as they were geographically distant. One of the largest deficiencies of the Articles of Confederation was its inability to unify these nations. The new government would need to unify and serve one single American nation, a nation that did not exist in the minds of many Virginians, New Yorkers, or Pennsylvanians. Like the new state, this American nation must be based on a common heritage, but unlike the state, the nation could not be British. Another model would have to serve.

The solution lay in the educational background of the founding generation: whether they were raised in Georgia or Massachusetts, all had received some form of classical education. All drew on classical allusions in their writing, all tried to base their lifestyles on classical ideals, and all used classical references to

⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6.

communicate with each other and the citizens of the United States. Classicism, an umbrella term for these practices, covers a wide body of cultural, intellectual, and political behavior all related to deep readings of ancient Greek and Roman texts, usually in the original Greek or Latin. Classicism was one of the few unifying factors binding the politicians of thirteen American states together, and could be used to demonstrate the existence of a single American nationality. By relying on classical models instead of contemporary European models, the drafters of the Constitution were able to create a new American nationality. This new nationality allowed the first generations of American politicians to draw from contemporary European political thought while escaping European identities.

The primary architects of this nationality were the Federalists, especially Alexander Hamilton and James Madison⁵ By alluding to classical histories, drawing parallels between their own societies and those of ancient Greece and Rome, and adopting classical pseudonyms, the Federalists mobilized the shared classicism of the American political elite to prove a shared American nationality. The universality of classicism provided the shared identity required by Anderson's conception of nationalism. This was a unique and fundamentally American approach, as it occurred simultaneously with the state-building process. The mobilization of classicism in American political discourse thus

⁵ This is not to discount the importance of the Constitution's opponents or the non-ratifying, non-elite majority of Americans at the time. While this argument focuses on upper-class white elites with classical backgrounds who supported the Constitution, the Federalists were not the only politically or socially active body during the ratification process. However, these elements of ratification have been well-documented elsewhere: Pauline Maier, *Ratification: The People Debate the Constitution, 1787-1788* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2010). See "Critical Forum," *William and Mary Quarterly* 69, no. 2 (April 2012): 361-403 for elaboration on and criticism of Maier's arguments.

changed not only the nature and extent of American nationality, but also the very process of state-building.

Classical Education and Print Culture in 18th Century American Nationalism

Classicism was the natural intellectual ground on which the Federalists could base their arguments. The primary factor in its utility was its universality; it permeated almost every aspect of upper- and middle-class society. Caroline Winterer notes that, "Classicism was an important part of... the civic culture of the eighteenth century, in which Americans participated in a decentralized, cosmopolitan republic of letters."⁶ Classicism was prevalent not only in politics, but also in literature, art, and architecture. It enjoyed such a wide influence due to its foundational status in early American education.

As Carl Richard succinctly claims, "The eighteenth-century educational system was the institution most responsible for the classical conditioning of the founders."⁷ This was especially true on college campuses. When discussing the origins of American classicism, Winterer notes, "The cradle of classicism in America had always been the colleges."⁸ College curricula in the early republic were overtly classical. Admission into any institution of higher learning usually required a working knowledge of Greek and Latin. As the majority of attendants

⁶ Caroline Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 15-16.

⁷ Carl J. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 12.

⁸ Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 16.

of the Constitutional Convention were college graduates, they were also by necessity classicists.⁹

However, despite the importance of colleges in fostering classical sentiments, the founders who lacked access to higher education were still trained in the classical tradition. For most of the founders, classical schooling began at the age of eight.¹⁰ Young boys were taught Greek and Latin in grammar school or by private tutors. As they grew older, their education shifted from grammatical exercises to readings and translations. Here, they were introduced to Cicero, Virgil, Xenophon, Homer, and others.¹¹ Though these lessons were meant to prep the children of elite families for higher education, the few who did not go on to college still spent their childhoods steeped in classical learning. George Washington never attended college, but maintained a fascination with classical figures like Cato and Cincinnatus for the rest of his life.

If the educational institutions of the early republic lit the embers of classicism in the founders, the print culture of the period fanned the flames. Over the course of the 18th century, especially in its latter half, pamphlets and newspapers had grown in both popularity and prevalence. Janet Polasky explores the print culture of the American Revolution and early republic in *Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World*. When

⁹ For a detailed account of classicism in eighteenth century college education, see Winterer's *Culture of Classicism* and Richard's *The Founders and the Classics*. Winterer's first chapter explores classicism in the early republic, and deals extensively with the importance of classicism on college campuses. Likewise, Richard's opening chapter describes classicism in the education and conditioning of the founders from early childhood through adult life, with particular emphasis on collegiate classicism.

¹⁰ Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

describing the speed and reach of American print culture, she takes Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* as her example:

Paine, never one to underplay his own achievements, estimated that 120,000 pamphlets were sold between February and May 1776... Before long, sixteen editions had been published in Philadelphia alone. Each copy sold typically had more than one reader, as it passed from hand to hand in households and on the streets. Whether one-fifth of all colonists read it, as many historians have claimed, no other pamphlet was as instrumental in fomenting revolution.¹²

Print media remained readily available to Americans after the Revolution and throughout the ratification process, and was the most persuasive tool in the founders' political arsenal. Polasky argues that the founders, "invested the printed word with unprecedented powers of persuasion; written documents carried weight."¹³

The extensive print network of the early American republic and the universal classicism of educated elites created a written culture littered with classical allusions. The most common classical device employed both before and during the Constitutional debates was the pseudonym. Revolutionaries writing against Great Britain, Federalists arguing for the necessity of the Constitution, and Antifederalist opponents of centralized government used classical characters or terms to sign their work. These pseudonyms were not merely an attempt to maintain anonymity, but an effective rhetorical device. By identifying their writings with ancient republicans like Cato, Brutus, and Cassius, they not only lent

¹² Janet Polasky, *Revolutions without Borders: The Call to Liberty in the Atlantic World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), Kindle edition.

¹³ Ibid.,

themselves the authority of antiquity, but also implied that any who disagreed with them were akin to tyrannical Caesars.¹⁴

In addition to pseudonyms, early Americans littered their writings with classical allusions. By likening individuals and circumstances to classical counterparts, American elites appropriated the authority of the ancients, and made complex political problems understandable to a wide literate audience. Eran Shalev provides a thorough analysis of one example of this trend. Shalev argues that after the Seven Years War, a shift occurred in classical allusions in American political discourse. Before the war, Britain was most often likened to the Roman Republic, with particular emphasis placed on the righteous authority of Parliament as Senate and the autocratic decadence of a Carthaginian France. After the war, and over the course of the imperial crisis that led to the Revolution, the discourse shifted. American writers began comparing Britain to the oppressive Roman Empire, likening George III to the tyrannical Nero. The examples Shalev explores highlight the persuasive purpose of classicism in American public discourse, and demonstrate how “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.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 39-41. Cato the Younger was a prominent political opponent of Julius Caesar. Cassius and Brutus were two of the conspirators who assassinated Caesar.

¹⁵ Shalev, Eran, “Empire Transformed: Britain in the American Classical Imagination, 1758-1783,” *Early American Studies* 4, no. 1 (Spring, 2006), 112-146.

As Shalev demonstrates, classicism was already a source for unity in the American colonies before the Constitutional Convention, especially against external threats of tyranny. In *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People*, T. H. Breen argues that a sense of unified American nationality was cultivated in the common citizen during the Revolution, assisted by the extensive American print culture. Breen argues that, during the 1760's and 1770's, this culture "created a situation in which ordinary men and women could construct a new political identity. Through a developing consciousness of others, they became something different, less British, more American."¹⁶ However, as Breen implies, this new sense of "American-ness" had not yet completed the transition away from a British nationality. Instead, before the Constitution, American nationalisms were included within larger British identities. Furthermore, there was no singular American nationalism, but thirteen separate nationalisms loosely united under a single weak state. Even these thirteen nationalisms were not internally united; a backcountry South Carolinian, an upstate New Yorker, and a fisherman in what would become Maine would not maintain the same worldviews and loyalties as urban residents of their respective colonies.

Before the Constitution, then, there was no singular American nationality, but a multitude of proto-nationalities. Rectifying this disunion was only one goal of the Constitution; it also aimed to consolidate the powers of the individual states under a single sovereign government. The preceding Articles of

¹⁶ T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 128.

Confederation provided only an underdeveloped governing mechanism. Instead, it served as a treaty of cooperation between the thirteen American states, with little in the way of centralized authority or national identity.¹⁷ In effect, it created a weak state without the implied unity of a nation. The distinction between the two is critical in understanding the purpose of the Constitution: it needed to create a strong state to govern effectively and protect against threats, but its proponents also had to demonstrate a common national identity that would legitimize that government. Elites of Virginia and of Massachusetts would have to be convinced that they were fundamentally one people and owed their allegiance to one government.

The demonstration of this common nationality was the challenge of the Federalists. Their audience was the population responsible for ratification: elite white men. As Breen noted, a common sense of American-ness existed in the common colonial man after 1774, but nothing approaching a developed nationality, and elites were a different matter entirely. They had a vested interest in maintaining the sovereignty of the individual states, as they were able to more easily serve in and regulate smaller, more local governments. Moreover, the concept of nationalism is inherently egalitarian. As Anderson notes, "Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship,"¹⁸ meaning that nationalistic sentiments are inherently inclusive within the nation. A Boston

¹⁷ David Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

¹⁸ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 7.

dockworker, even if he could not vote, had just as much claim to his American nationality as a Virginia planter. The ratifying elite would have to accept that, in at least one way, they were fundamentally equal to all white American men. The Constitution assumed the existence of an American nationalism, but its proponents would have to prove it to the elites of the former colonies.

To do this, the Federalists turned to the shared classical heritage of the ratifying elite. Throughout the Constitutional debates, they relied on classical models to provide examples of virtuous citizens. By comparing their own times to the histories of Greece and Rome, and by comparing themselves and one another to their classical heroes, the Federalists turned their shared classicism into a political tool. In particular, the Federalists, and most of the founders in general, nurtured a love for the historians Plutarch, Sallust, and Livy.¹⁹ In these authors, they found both great men to emulate, and villains to beware. From Rome, the Federalists drew inspiration from Cicero and Cato the Younger, staunch republicans and political opponents of the tyrant Caesar; from Brutus, who assassinated Caesar to preserve Roman freedoms; from Cincinnatus, who served as dictator when Rome was in peril, and returned to a life of peaceful farming when the threat was gone. The Federalists also learned to be wary of modern incarnations of Catiline, who attempted to overthrow the Roman Republic with a military-aristocratic coup, and of Caesar, who nearly set himself up as a tyrant before his assassination. The Federalists particularly feared the

¹⁹ Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 53.

example of the Gracchi brothers, demagogues who threatened republican government by manipulating the people.²⁰

Though Rome was the principle source of inspiration for the Federalists, they also drew on Greek models, mostly Athenians. John Adams was likened to the Athenian admiral Themistocles for his support of a strong defensive navy. Adams himself used the example of Demosthenes, an Athenian orator who spoke against Philip of Macedon, to express dissatisfaction with nonimportation as a response to the Coercive Acts. Adams thought the colonists, like Demosthenes, should take more direct and decisive action against Great Britain's economic regulations. Another favorite of the Federalists was Solon, a lawmaker who reformed the Athenian political system. Though his reforms failed in the short term, he is credited with the birth of Athenian democracy.²¹

However, Greece was used by the Federalist more frequently as an antimodel than an example to emulate. Classical historians characterized Greece as a disorganized collection of independent city states engaged in periodic petty squabbling. The Federalists argued that this disunion caused the Greek city states to fall to the invasion of Philip of Macedon. Far more suited to their purposes was the organized, centralized Roman Republic, and its virtuous leaders. Comparing themselves and one another to these Roman heroes and to

²⁰ For Cincinnatus, see Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, 3. For Cato, Brutus, Cicero, Caesar, and the Gracchi, see Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*. For Catiline, see Sallust, *Bellum Catilinae*.

²¹ For Demosthenes, see Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*. For Themistocles, see Plutarch, *Parallel Lives* and Herodotus, *Histories*, 7-8. For Solon, see Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, and Herodotus, *Histories*, 1. For Adams' references to Demosthenes and Themistocles, see Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 56-57.

a few select Greek examples allowed the Federalists to make classical models seem closer to their own time, and to implicitly make classicism the intellectual basis for a shared American nationality.²²

Perhaps the most important Federalists in this endeavor were the authors of the vast majority of *The Federalist*, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton.²³ *The Federalist*, published in New York newspapers between 1787 and 1788, was a collection of essays defending and arguing for the necessity of the new Constitution. Though each essay is addressed “To the People of the State of New York:”, the audience of the essays also included elites and lower-class Americans of all thirteen states.²⁴ Due to the extent of American print culture, Hamilton and Madison had to know that their work would be read well beyond the borders of New York. Hamilton, raised on a Caribbean island and living in New York, and Madison, a product of the Virginia plantation aristocracy, would not only have to write with a common voice, but also present their arguments in ways that would resonate with their audience. They found the solution to this problem in their shared classicism.

²² For the disunion of classical Greece, see Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*.

²³ Madison was a Federalist only during the ratification debates. After ratification, he quickly realigned his politics, siding with Thomas Jefferson and other proponents of the supremacy of state governments.

²⁴ Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2014).

The Classical Backgrounds of Hamilton and Madison

Born out of wedlock on the island of Nevis, Alexander Hamilton spent his childhood on the island of St. Croix. Impoverished, illegitimate, and orphaned by the age of twelve, his educational opportunities were extremely limited. However, he managed to cultivate a love of Plutarch from a young age, and was largely self-educated. His account of a hurricane that struck St. Croix in 1772 so impressed the white population of the island that they collected a fund to send Hamilton to the mainland for a college education. After preliminary study in Elizabethtown, New Jersey, he enrolled in King's College in New York in 1773, and continued his classical studies.²⁵

In 1775, Hamilton joined a New York militia company comprised of King's College students. By 1776, he had been elected captain of an artillery company. In August of that year, he began keeping a detailed pay book for his company. Though his college career had been interrupted by the war, Hamilton's drive for self-education is evident in the marginal notes of this pay book. Alongside meticulous recording of global economic and demographic data, Hamilton copied excerpts of the orations of Demosthenes, and took notes on Plutarch's *Lives*. He recorded his thoughts of Plutarch's accounts of Theseus, mythic Greek hero and founder of Athens, Romulus, legendary founder of Rome, and Numa Pompilius, Romulus' successor and founder of the Roman religion. Particular attention is

²⁵ For a complete biography of Hamilton, see Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004). For Hamilton's politics in particular, see Michael P. Federici, *The Political Philosophy of Alexander Hamilton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

given to Plutarch's account of Lycurgus, founder of the Spartan legal code. Even in wartime, Hamilton found time for Plutarch.²⁶

Hamilton was recognized for his intelligence and writing ability, and was offered positions as aide to prominent American leaders. He turned all of them down save one: an invitation to the staff of George Washington. Hamilton soon made himself indispensable, carrying on the majority of Washington's correspondence while still finding time for projects of his own. In these projects, his classicism continued to manifest itself. In October and November of 1778, Hamilton wrote a series of three letters to the printer of the *New York Journal* attacking Samuel Chase, Maryland delegate to the Continental Congress, for attempting to profit from the Continental Army's need for provisions. He signed each of these letters with the same pseudonym that he and Madison would employ a decade later: Publius, after Publius Valerius, founder of the Roman Republic after the expulsion of the last king, whose biography is found in Plutarch.²⁷

After the war, Hamilton returned to New York. After serving in the Confederation Congress, he began practicing law in New York City. Here again, his classicism is evident in his public writings. In 1784, he published an open letter to the citizens of New York, arguing against a law that would strip British

²⁶ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*. Alexander Hamilton, *Alexander Hamilton's Pay Book*, ed. by E. P. Panagopoulos, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), 45-68. For Hamilton's extensive notes on Lycurgus in particular, see Hamilton, *Pay Book*, 53-63.

²⁷ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*. Alexander Hamilton, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume I, Digital Edition*, ed. by Harold Coffin Syrett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011), accessed 9 Dec. 2015, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-01-02>. For Publius, see Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*.

Loyalists of their property. Hamilton wrote, “How wise was that policy of Augustus, who after conquering his enemies, when the papers of Brutus were brought to him, which would have disclosed all his secret associates, immediately ordered them to be burnt. He would not even know his enemies, that they might cease to hate when they had nothing to fear.” Though his use of Augustus was daring and perhaps ill-conceived, as Augustus was the principle architect of the Roman Republic’s fall, the metaphor captured his message: the virtuous man must be magnanimous in victory. To drive this point home, he signed the letter with another pseudonym, Phocion, after an Athenian politician famous for his gentle treatment of prisoners of war and generosity towards his enemies. Unsurprisingly, the life of Phocion is another subject of Plutarch.²⁸

James Madison’s biography reads quite differently from Hamilton’s. Born the eldest child of the wealthiest landowner in Orange County, Virginia, Madison possessed every advantage Hamilton lacked. He studied Greek and Latin from the age of eleven at a boarding school under the Scottish tutor Donald Robertson. In 1769, Madison left Virginia for the College of New Jersey, modern-day Princeton. Passing the Greek and Latin entrance exams easily, Madison graduated a year early. From the age of eight to his graduation in 1772, Madison kept a commonplace book, similar to Hamilton’s pay book four years later.

²⁸ Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*. Alexander Hamilton, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume III, Digital Edition*, ed. by Harold Coffin Syrett (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011), accessed 9 Dec. 2015, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/ARHN-01-03-02-0314>. For Phocion, see Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*.

Richard observes, “Madison peppered [the book] with Latin quotations...

Madison quoted Plato on slander and Aristotle on bashfulness.”²⁹

During the Revolution, Madison left plantation life to begin his career in public service. In 1774, he served on the Committee of Safety for Orange County. By 1776, he had been elected as a delegate to the Virginia Provincial Convention, the colony’s governing body in lieu of the recently collapsed royal government. By 1778, he was serving on the Council of State, an advisory board to Virginia’s governor. In 1779, Madison was elected as a delegate to the Continental Congress, in which he served until 1783. It was here that he met Hamilton, and the two men, working within a larger committee, allied briefly in 1783 to formulate a viable plan of taxation for the newly free American Republic.³⁰

In 1787, they once again found themselves working together at the Constitutional Convention. Though they were both engaged with creating an effective government that the American ratifying elite would find acceptable, they were not without disagreements. According to Hamilton’s notes, for instance, Madison insisted on the first day of the convention that elective monarchies were “turbulent and unhappy.”³¹ Hamilton disagreed, arguing that the poor reputation endured by elective monarchies was merely the result of a few unfortunate

²⁹ Jack N. Rakove, *James Madison and the Creation of the American Republic*, 3rd. ed., ed. by Mark C. Carnes (New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007), 2-4. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 18, 25.

³⁰ Rakove, *James Madison*, 11-30.

³¹ Alexander Hamilton, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume IV*, ed. by Harold Coffin Syrett and Jacob Ernest Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 161.

outliers like the Roman Empire. By using the classical antimodel of Imperial Rome, Hamilton attempted to make the case that elective monarchies are only unstable if the electors are drawn solely from the military.³²

Despite their occasional disagreements, Hamilton and Madison were instrumental in the construction of the American state. Madison's original proposal, which became known as the Virginia Plan, served as the first outline of the Constitution. Madison's plan, though not explicitly based on any model, resembled the British government. In particular, Madison's plan for a bicameral legislature echoed the British Houses of Lords and Commons. Hamilton was more explicit. On June 18th of 1787, he gave a long speech proposing his own form of government. Though a complete account of the speech was never written, Hamilton made a rough outline of the speech before its presentation. In this outline, he write, "Here I shall give my sentiments of the best form of government – not as a thing attainable by us, but as a model which we ought to approach as near as possible. British constitution best form (sic)."³³

By September of that year, the finished Constitution was signed, carrying with it all the British influences that Madison, Hamilton, and other delegates had supplied. However, the delegates now faced the challenge of legitimizing their work. Without the approval of the thirteen states, the Constitution carried no authority. The delegates would have to convince state legislatures that a British-

³² Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 102.

³³ Alexander Hamilton, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Volume IV*, ed. by Harold Coffin Syrett and Jacob Ernest Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 184. For the particulars of Madison's Virginia Plan, see Rakove, *James Madison*, 63-64.

inspired centralized government was in the best interests of the American people. Moreover, they would have to prove the existence of a unified American national identity that would necessitate such a government. As this nationality was still not fully formed, any attempt to prove its existence would have to simultaneously solidify it.

The Utility of Classicism in *The Federalist*

Hamilton and Madison, aided by John Jay, led the charge in New York. While writing *The Federalist*, they filled their arguments with classical models and antimodels that would resonate with their educated audience and lend legitimacy to their points. This legitimacy was critical, as they were fully aware of how difficult the task of unifying the American states under a centralized government would be. In *Federalist No. 16*, Hamilton uses a classical reference to underscore this difficulty: “A project of this kind is little less romantic than the monster-taming spirit which is attributed to the fabulous heroes and demi-gods of antiquity.”³⁴

Hamilton relied on the Roman Republic for examples of good government. In particular, he suggests in *Federalist No. 70* that the new Executive Branch should take the Roman office of Dictator as its model:

Energy in the Executive is a leading character in the definition of good government... Every man the least conversant in the Roman story, knows how often that republic was obliged to take refuge in the absolute power of a single man, under the formidable title of Dictator, as well against the intrigues of ambitious individuals who aspired to the tyranny... as against the invasions of external

³⁴ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *Federalist Papers*, 106.

enemies who menaced the conquest and destruction of Rome. There can be no need, however, to multiply arguments or examples on this head. A feeble Executive implies a feeble execution of the government... A government ill executed, whatever it may be in theory, must be, in practice, a bad government.³⁵

Hamilton appeals directly to the common classicism of his audience, implying that a basic understanding of Roman history is a prerequisite for political involvement. He also deflects comparisons of the Executive to the British monarch by supplying his own analogy of the Roman Dictator. Hamilton was trying to associate the authority of the new government with Cincinnatus in lieu of George III.

Hamilton also used the classics as antimodels, relying for this purpose on the Greeks. In *Federalist No. 6*, when listing the dangers of disunity, Hamilton uses the example of Pericles, an Athenian general found in Plutarch's *Lives*. He argues, "The celebrated Pericles... was the primitive author of that famous and fatal war, distinguished in the Grecian annals by the name of the *Peloponnesian* war; which... terminated in the ruin of the Athenian commonwealth."³⁶ His message was clear: without a strong central government, ambitious and avaricious men like Pericles could seize power and destroy American democracy in much the same way they had destroyed that of Athens. Even in his antimodels, Hamilton demonstrates the desirability of Greek liberty. The rapacity of Pericles would not be viewed as tragic if Athenian democracy was not a good government. Hamilton knew he was helping to institute a state based on British

³⁵ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *Federalist Papers*, 493-494.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

models, but redefined American authority as Roman and American freedom as Greek.

In his portion of the essays, Madison was far more cautious with his classicism. In *Federalist No. 14*, he refutes one of the major arguments against the Constitution, that classical history proves republican government to be impracticable in large territories. Madison points out the problem of equating a democracy with a republic, and argues that the fallacy had its roots in subjects of monarchical governments misappropriating the terms to make their own governments seem more beneficial than those of Greece or Rome. Madison then defines American government, in the same vein as Lansing at the Convention, as something entirely new, not based on any historical model. While this undermines the classical approach taken in the rest of the essays, it gives Madison a chance to argue for the existence of a single American national identity. Warning against disunion, Madison writes, “The kindred blood which flows in the veins of American citizens, the mingled blood which they have shed in defense of their sacred rights, consecrate their Union, and excite horror at the idea of their becoming aliens, rivals, enemies.”³⁷

In *Federalist No. 38*, Madison continues this line of thinking, arguing that the new American government was fundamentally distinct from classical antecedents because it was formed by a convention, and not by a single lawmaker in the vein of Solon, Lycurgus, or Romulus. Distancing the Constitution

³⁷ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *Federalist Papers*, 86-91.

from the precedents of antiquity, Madison claims, “If these lessons [of classical history] teach us, on the one hand, to admire the improvement made by America on the ancient mode of preparing and establishing regular plans of government, they serve not less, on the other, to admonish us of the hazards and difficulties incident to such experiments.”³⁸ Even when trying to distance his argument from ancient models, however, Madison’s classical conception of the American nation is still manifested. In warning the new nation against the pitfalls of the past, Madison implies that the American government has enough in common with Greece and Rome to be susceptible to the same pitfalls.

Perhaps the most overt classical element of *The Federalist* was the one shared by all the essays. Hamilton, Madison, and Jay all wrote under the Publius pseudonym. Publius, as noted above, was a Roman aristocrat whose life was recorded by Plutarch. He helped to overthrow Tarquin, Rome’s last king, and was instrumental in the foundation of the Roman Republic. By using his name, Hamilton and Madison celebrated the overthrow of a tyrannical government in favor of a just republic. Even though this new republic was based on British models, Hamilton and Madison used the shared classicism of American elites to establish that they were not merely moving from one British tyranny to another. The organization of the state may have been fundamentally British, but its authority was Roman, the liberty it guaranteed was Greek, and the people it served, regardless of colonial origin, were American.

³⁸ Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, *Federalist Papers*, 255.

Conclusion

Though classicism and classical education were universal among elites in what would become the United States, they were not without their detractors. Benjamin Franklin constantly questioned the utility of classical education, and believed Greek and Latin to be of little use to the average American student. Thomas Paine tailored the language of *Common Sense* to be as clear and direct as possible, avoiding rhetorical flourishes like classical allusions.³⁹ Benjamin Rush, Pennsylvania physician and signer of the Declaration of Independence, was a tireless crusader against classicism.⁴⁰ However, even though men like Franklin, Paine and Rush were staunch in their opposition to classicism, they constituted only a very small minority in the early Republic. The vast majority of American elites, like Hamilton and Madison, maintained their classical leanings well into the early 19th century. The culture of the early American republic was defined by classicism.

The classical background of the founders has been well documented in recent decades. Carl J. Richard's *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* is the first monograph dedicated solely to classicism in the early national period. Richard dismisses the argument made by Clinton Rossiter and Bernard Bailyn that classicism was merely aristocratic posturing, and explores the formative influence of classical education on the

³⁹ Paine lacked formal classical education and did not read Greek or Latin, but acknowledged the brilliance of classical authors. Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 206.

⁴⁰ Despite their anti-classicism, all three men treasured the classicism that had been imparted on them. For the complicated anti-classicism of Franklin, Paine, and Rush, see Richard, *The Founders and the Classics* 196-203.

founders' political thought. He challenges the classical republicanism-liberalism paradigm by arguing that classicism was never eclipsed by liberalism and that the founders consciously drew on both schools, "wander[ing] the unmarked borderlands between classical republicanism and liberalism, scavenging for building materials."⁴¹ Caroline Winterer dedicates the opening chapter of *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life 1780-1910* to the foundational influence of classical education in the early republic, focusing on trends in education and culture. Winterer argues that the anti-classical narrative arose in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as educators like Noah Webster became frustrated with teaching the form and grammar of classical texts rather than the substance.⁴² John C. Shields focuses more deeply on American literary culture in *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self*, in which he argues that classical sources like Virgil's *Aeneid* was more influential than the biblical Adamic myth in the development of American literary identities. Indeed, Shields argues that refocusing on classicism would allow modern Americans to make sense of their

⁴¹ Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 6. For more on the classical republicanism – liberalism dichotomy, see Clinton Rossiter, *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Political Liberty* (New York: Harcourt, 1953); Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967); Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969). For an overview of American classicism throughout history, see Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984).

⁴² Winterer, *The Culture of Classicism*, 42.

own identities: “The American self or selves, upon reflection, should be rendered less confusing by this recovery of America’s classical, secular half.”⁴³

While all of these scholars have explored the classical background of the founders in depth, none of them have attempted to explain how that classicism was mobilized in the founding of the American nation. They have debated the nature and extent of classicism in the early American republic, but not its utility. The purpose of this paper has been to provide such an analysis, examining in particular the Constitutional Convention and *The Federalist* in a larger discussion of American nationalism. However, it is important to note that the drafting and ratification of the Constitution is only one of several origin points historians assign to American nationalism. As stated above, T. H. Breen places this genesis in the early days of the American Revolution. Both David Armitage and Eliga Gould demonstrate that the purpose of the Declaration of Independence was to announce the entrance of a unified American state into the international community.⁴⁴ Armitage argues that the very act of declaring independence “implies national distinctiveness and difference.”⁴⁵ Gould, on the other hand, posits that the Declaration functioned more as a diplomatic bargaining chip to secure international legitimacy than as a call for unification.

⁴³ John C. Shields, *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 362.

⁴⁴ Eliga H. Gould, *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012). David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007). Interestingly, Richard preempts Gould by arguing that American classicism was partially defensive in nature, meant to display the literacy and good breeding of American elites to a judgmental Europe. This line of thinking fits nicely with Gould’s approach, and supplements his effort to internationalize the American founding.

⁴⁵ Armitage, *Declaration*, 5.

If the origins of the American nation are fixed at the Revolution or the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the utility of classicism is difficult to identify. Through the lens of the Revolution, the primary unifying factor seems to be religious fervor. Through the lens of the Declaration of Independence, it seems to be Enlightenment philosophy. If the origins of the American nation are fixed at the ratification of the Constitution, however, the utility of classicism in its creation becomes abundantly clear. Madison and Hamilton demonstrate this utility in *The Federalist* by employing classical models to defend the Constitution and call for American unity. Early American classicism was not just aristocratic posturing, nor was it a stagnant vestige of imported European educational practices. It was a political tool, a source of powerful and persuasive rhetoric, and a shared culture that American politicians were aware of and could manipulate. One of the many products of this classicism was an American nation, a shared sense of identity stemming from classical roots.

**“Parallel to the Heroic Days of Republican Rome”: The Unity of
Classical Culture in the United States, 1800 – 1850**

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“All the great Classics are teachers of morals, no less than of Letters,” wrote John Quincy Adams to his son George late in the summer of 1818. The younger Adams, then studying law at Harvard University, had expressed to his father an interest in the Roman poet Horace. Warning against the more “detestable and disgusting” nature of some of Horace’s Odes, Adams nevertheless took pride in his son’s classicism, and stated that Horace was the perfect source “for maxims of sublime Patriotism, of Prudence, of Justice, of Fortitude, and even of Temperance (sic).”⁴⁶ It was not an accident that Adams employed the same language eight years later, on George’s election to the Massachusetts legislature. Congratulating him on his victory, Adams urged his son to reread the Roman biographer Plutarch for lessons in “all the Stoic virtues—Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude, Justice.” Adams associated these virtues not only with learning and individual morality, but also with republicanism and good citizenship. By locating the necessary qualities of an American politician in the works of ancient authors, Adams demonstrated his belief that a classical education was critical for good government.⁴⁷

Adams was certainly not alone in his sentiments. Throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century, American politicians continued to draw from the classical education that nearly all of them shared in attempts to demonstrate their intelligence, morality, and devotion to republicanism. This assertion is not wholly uncontroversial. Meyer Reinhold, the first historian to study American

⁴⁶ “From John Quincy Adams to George Washington Adams, 10 August 1818,” Founders Online, National Archives <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-3528>

⁴⁷ “From John Quincy Adams to George Washington Adams, 25 May 1826,” Founders Online, National Archives <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-03-02-4644>

classicism in depth, argued for a decline in American reverence for antiquity beginning around 1790. Focusing on debates over the utility of the classics relative to “useful knowledge” like engineering and modern languages, and on the anti-classical sentiments of men like Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, and Thomas Paine, Reinhold termed the early nineteenth century a Silver Age of American classicism.⁴⁸ Other historians have since disputed Reinhold’s claim, and there is little question today of the prevalence of classicism in early nineteenth century America.⁴⁹

Despite the growth of the field, most studies of American classicism have focused largely on elite white males, assuming that they were the sole beneficiaries of the education necessary to reference and comprehend classical literature. If subjects outside of these demographic boundaries are discussed at all, they are treated as outliers and relegated to separate chapters, sections, or paragraphs. In the last decade, however, some historians have produced books

⁴⁸ Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 7. For a discussion of the useful knowledge debate, see “Chapter 2: The Quest for Useful Knowledge in Eighteenth-Century America.” For opponents of classicism, see “Chapter 4: Opponents of Classical Learning in America during the Revolutionary Period.” For Reinhold’s theory of classical decline, see “Chapter 6: The Silver Age of Classical Studies in America, 1790-1830.”

⁴⁹ The preeminent scholars on American classicism besides Reinhold are Carl J. Richard and Caroline Winterer. Richard’s *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994) ends with a direct refutation of the myth of classical decline. His subsequent work, *The Golden Age of the Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009) takes issue with Reinhold’s “Silver Age” terminology, and is a focused study of American classicism in the early nineteenth century. Winterer’s *The Culture of Classicism: Ancient Greece and Rome in American Intellectual Life, 1780-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) complicates, comments on, and expands the scope of Reinhold’s work, and also provides the most comprehensive analysis of classical education in America. Her later work, *The Mirror of Antiquity: American Women and the Classical Tradition, 1750-1900* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007) bears the distinction of being the first monograph on American classicism to focus exclusively on subjects other than elite white men.

and articles on American classicism focused exclusively on a single non-white, non-male, or non-elite demographic unit. They have accomplished this by expanding the definition of classicism beyond its traditional limits. Rather than looking solely at individuals who could read, write, and quote Latin and Greek texts, these writers understand classicism as a broad cultural phenomenon that nearly all Americans were exposed to in some form. Under this more inclusive definition, it becomes possible to identify multiple levels of American classicism, from literacy in ancient languages to a basic understanding of a few major classical figures and themes.

Works using this broad framework have been invaluable in demonstrating the extent of classical education beyond its previously accepted boundaries, a process Carl J. Richard called “the relative democratization of the classics.”⁵⁰ Despite the achievements of these historians, however, their approaches are not without consequences. By examining American classicism in strictly defined, mutually exclusive demographic categories, historians are more likely to view the nature and utility of classicism within any given group as fully unique and distinct from that of others.⁵¹ These divisions are not wholly inappropriate. After all, it

⁵⁰ Richard, *Golden Age*, xiii.

⁵¹ For example, the works of Reinhold and of Richard focus almost exclusively on elite white men, and are concerned primarily with politics and education. The same is true for Winterer’s *Culture of Classicism*. Winterer’s *Mirror of Antiquity*, on the other hand, allots some space to the political contours of American female classicism, but is primarily concerned with art, fashion, interior design, and motherhood. Likewise, William W. Cook and James Tatum’s *African American Writers and Classical Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) explores only the literary aspects of Black classicism. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp’s *Setting Down the Scared Past: African American Race Histories* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010) examines Black classicism as a method of identity formation. While not entirely apolitical, these approaches still focus primarily on the distinctions between Black classicism and the forms seen in Reinhold, Richard, and Winterer, and ignore or underplay the similarities.

would be reasonable to assume that a Virginian planter's wife, a Black artisan in Boston, and a poor white Methodist preacher in upstate New York would each interpret Plutarch's *Lives* differently, if not due to their demographic disparity, then by virtue of their individuality.

The unintentional focus on these divisions, however, has drawn attention away from the common utility of all forms of American classicism. When viewed as a whole, it becomes evident that early republican Americans of all descriptions understood classicism as a method to maintain or access political power. By the early nineteenth century, the democratization of classical education in America had created a citizenry that was largely fluent in classical themes and traditions. American political elites understood classicism as a political tool with which to establish the legitimacy of their governance and the righteousness of their causes. At the same time, the politically marginalized, regardless of class, race, or sex, recognized the political power of classicism, and understood classical education as a critical prerequisite to political participation.

On February 3rd, 1801, near Bardstown, Kentucky, John Rowan defended his honor in a duel against Dr. James Chambers, who had publicly questioned Rowan's fluency in Latin and Greek. Rowan, a politician and resident of Bardstown, had been elected to Kentucky's state constitutional convention two years before, and would soon seek election to the U. S. House of Representatives. As a politician, Rowan relied on the strength of his reputation as a gentleman to demonstrate his fitness to govern. As with all American

politicians of the early republic, Rowan almost certainly understood attacks against his reputation as direct threats to his legitimacy. These sorts of insults demanded an answer, and often resulted in duels. Chambers had not merely challenged Rowan's fluency in ancient languages, he had publicly called the politician's intelligence into question, in the process implying that Rowan was unfit to represent the citizens of Bardstown. The doctor paid for the insult with his life.⁵²

Though some contemporary accounts cite other reasons for the conflict, historians examining the duel at Bardstown have generally accepted the questioning of Rowan's classical literacy as the primary cause.⁵³ By meeting Chambers on the dueling ground, then, Rowan demonstrated his belief that his knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages was a critical component of his reputation, and therefore his political legitimacy. Furthermore, Rowan was not unique in his classicism; almost all American politicians by that time had received some form of classical education. That Rowan lived in a relatively newly settled area that had only recently become a state exposes the wide extent of American classical culture by the beginning of the nineteenth century. The duel between Rowan and Chambers demonstrates the political importance of this culture.

⁵² For an account of the duel, see Richard, *Golden Age*, 45. A more thorough account of the Rowan – Chambers duel can be found in Dixie Hibbs' *Bardstown: Hospitality, History, and Bourbon* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 26-27. Hibbs' description of the duel is more detailed than Richard's, and both works cite the dispute over Latin and Greek fluency as the cause of the duel, though Hibbs identifies other possible causes. For duels and the importance of reputation in politics, see Joanne B. Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), especially "Chapter 4: Dueling as Politics."

⁵³ Richard, *Golden Age*, 45, and Hibbs, *Bardstown*, 26-27.

While the origins of American classical culture lay in the first arrival of Europeans, it did not become a truly widespread phenomenon in what would become the United States until the mid-eighteenth century. During this time, American colleges shifted their focus from primarily ministerial education to preparing students for careers in law and medicine. While college graduates were a very small minority after the Revolution, they held a vast majority of government positions. Of those who did not attend college, most had received some classical training in grammar school. This state of affairs continued and grew through the early nineteenth century, as the number of colleges in the United States increased with westward expansion and population growth.⁵⁴

For those with little or no schooling, American popular culture provided access to some basic elements of classicism. A thriving print culture made a great deal of classical works available in translation, and widespread literacy allowed many Americans to engage with these texts. At the same time, the public discourse of the late eighteenth century was peppered with allusions to antiquity, and writers frequently couched justifications for their political positions in classical metaphors and symbolism. American classicism extended even beyond the written word, with classical models informing American theatre and oratory. One of the most popular plays in the United States in both the eighteenth and

⁵⁴ For classicism in college education and the prevalence of college-educated politicians in American government, see Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 16-17, or 44-45 for the expansion of colleges after 1800. For classicism in American grammar schools, see Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 15-19.

nineteenth centuries was Joseph Addison's *Cato*, a tragedy based on the life of the eponymous Roman.⁵⁵

This culture of classicism persisted with only minor changes through the early nineteenth century. In the political sphere, especially, references to classical antiquity were prevalent in public oratory and political publications. Deft uses of classical analogies were useful not only for demonstrating the intelligence of the speaker, but also for levelling attacks against opponents. In 1821, for instance, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams gave a speech in Washington D. C. to commemorate the 4th of July. The speech was delivered publicly, and given the occasion, Adams probably enjoyed a large audience of varied social composition. After Adams delivered the speech, it was printed and published as a pamphlet, with a second edition later that year. Given the wide dissemination of the speech, it is evident that Adams was not speaking solely to the local political elite, but to a wide section of the literate population of the Washington D.C. area at least, if not on a regional scale.

Speaking about the timeless nature of resistance to tyranny, Adams said, "The names of Pharaoh and Moses, of Tarquin and Junius Brutus... stand in long array through the vista of time, like the Spirit of Evil and the Spirit of Good, in embattled opposition to each other, from the mouldering ages of antiquity."⁵⁶

⁵⁵ For American print culture and literacy, see Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 16. For classical symbols in public discourse, see Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, especially "Chapter 3: Models" and "Chapter 4: Antimodels." For Addison's *Cato* and classicism in American oratory and theatre, see Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 25 and Richard, *The Founders and the Classics*, 57-58.

⁵⁶ John Quincy Adams, *An Address, Delivered At the Request of the Committee of Arrangements for Celebrating the Anniversary of Independence: The City of Washington, On the Fourth of July*

Adams cites Tarquin and Junius Brutus to connect the history of the young republic to an ancient past. Tarquin, the last of Rome's semi-mythical kings and a notorious tyrant, is used as an analogue for European monarchy in general, and for King George III specifically. In Adams's telling, the heroic assassin Junius Brutus is meant to symbolize the American colonists overthrowing their monarchical overlords. Even for audience members unfamiliar with the specifics of that particular chapter of Roman history, it would not have been difficult to understand from the context that Tarquin was a tyrant, and Brutus a republican hero.

Near the end of the speech, when Adams lauded American inventiveness and technological progress, he included two brief passages of untranslated Latin from Virgil's *Aeneid*:

It is not by the contrivance of agents of destruction, that America wishes to command her inventive genius to the admiration or the gratitude of after times; nor is it even by the detection of the secrets or the composition of new modifications of physical nature, '*excudent alii spirantia mollius aera.*' Nor even is her purpose the glory of Roman ambition; nor '*tu regere imperio populos*' her memento to her sons.⁵⁷

It would be unreasonable to assume that the majority of Adams's audience was fluent in Latin, or familiar enough with Virgil to immediately recognize passages from *Aeneid*. While the aforementioned reference to Tarquin and Brutus functioned as an emotional appeal to highlight the position of the United States in

1821, *Upon the Occasion of Reading the Declaration of Independence*, Second edition (Cambridge: Printed at the Univ. Press, by Hilliard and Metcalf, 1821), 11.

⁵⁷ Adams, *An Address*, 34. The Latin phrases mean, "others will forge more life-like bronzes," and "to rule over the people with authority," respectively.

a long tradition of liberty, these passages should be understood as rhetorical flourishes meant to impress the audience. To the classically educated and uneducated members of his audience alike, Adams's apparent intimate familiarity with ancient languages and texts would have reinforced his reputation as a man of refinement and intelligence.

Not everyone was impressed with Adams's speech, however. Later in 1821, a commenter writing under the pseudonym Servius Sulpitius expressed dissatisfaction with Adams's 4th of July address. Specifically, Sulpitius took issue with what he saw as unfair treatment of Great Britain. To make his case against Adams, he criticized the Secretary's improper use of the classics, and peppered his accusations with classical references of his own. He began by bemoaning the missed opportunity for good oratory, writing, "The Orator might well paint in the brightest colors the achievements of the worthies, whose patriotism and zeal furnished a parallel to the heroic days of Republican Rome... On these, the legitimate themes for the anniversary of American Independence, no fervour could be excessive. But in the '*Address*,' their salutary effect is destroyed by the vindictive passions which it industriously awakens."⁵⁸ To Sulpitius, Adams's use of vehement anti-British rhetoric renders his classical allusions insincere. Instead of a classical republican hero, Sulpitius compared Adams to Clodius, a Roman demagogue.⁵⁹ He further chastised Adams for his misuse of the quotes from

⁵⁸ Servius Sulpitius, *Remarks On an Address Delivered At Washington, July 4, 1821, By John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State* (Baltimore: Printed by B. Edes, 1821), 4. The pseudonym refers to Servius Sulpicius Rufus, a Roman jurist known for his oratorical eloquence and friendship with Cicero.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

Virgil, arguing that the second Latin phrase refers to sculptures specifically, and not the machines Adams applied the quotation to.⁶⁰

Sulpitius, who was certainly classically educated, gave equal priority to the political content of Adams's speech and his misappropriation of classical language and themes. For Sulpitius, clumsy classicism delegitimized Adams's speech as much as irresponsible demagoguery. But he and Adams were far from the only early republicans who considered classical knowledge an essential component of political dialogue. In Congress in 1819, when denouncing Andrew Jackson's invasion of Florida, Speaker of the House Henry Clay urged his fellow congressmen to, "Remember that Greece had her Alexander, Rome had her Caesar... if we would escape the rock on which they split, we must avoid their errors."⁶¹ In 1834, when Jackson forcibly removed money from the national bank in order to dismantle it, Clay again compared him to Caesar in Congress. John C. Calhoun concurred, responding, "With men and money Caesar struck down Roman liberty... With money and corrupt partizans, a great effort is now making to choke and stifle the voice of American liberty."⁶² For Clay and Calhoun, the

⁶⁰ Sulpitius, *Remarks*, 7. After his tirade against Adams, Sulpitius launches into an attack against a different rival, one "Valerius Flaccus," who published pieces in the *Alexandria Herald* attacking Sulpitius. The pseudonym probably comes from Lucius Valerius Flaccus, who serves as co-censor with Cato. As with Adams, Sulpitius attacks Flaccus not only on the content of his argument, but the accuracy of his classicism.

⁶¹ *Speech of the Hon. Henry Clay, in the House of Representatives of U.S. on the Seminole War*, 15th Cong., 2nd sess., 1818-1819, microfilm, Shaw & Shoemaker Early American Imprints, Series 2, no. 47638, p. 29.

⁶² Robert Meriwether et al., eds., *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, Speech on the Removal of the Deposits, January 13, 1834 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1959-), vol. 12, p. 221.

most effective method of questioning Jackson's fitness to lead was to compare him to classical villains.

At the same time, classicism was used by American elites as justification for their political agendas. In 1824, Daniel Webster argued in Congress for greater intervention in the Greek War for Independence, which would have violated the principles of the Monroe Doctrine. Webster based his argument on the cultural debt owed by the United States to the Greek nation:

This free form of government, this popular assembly, the common council held for the common good, where have we contemplated its earliest models? This practice of free debate and public discussion, the contest of mind with mind, and that popular eloquence which, if it were now here, on a subject like this, would move the stones of the Capitol, whose was the language in which all these were first exhibited? Even the edifice itself in which we assemble, these proportioned columns, this ornamented architecture, all remind us that Greece has existed and that we, like the rest of mankind, are greatly her debtors.⁶³

In a similar fashion, Thomas Dew used the ancient world to support his cause. In 1832, while a professor at the College of William and Mary, Dew used classical rhetoric to justify slavery. He wrote:

It has been contended that slavery is unfavorable to a republican spirit: but the whole history of the world proves that this is far from being the case. In the ancient republics of Greece and Rome, where the spirit of liberty glowed with most intensity, the slaves were more numerous than the freemen. Aristotle, and the great men of antiquity, believed slavery necessary to keep alive the spirit of freedom.⁶⁴

⁶³ Daniel Webster, *Mr. Webster's Speech On the Greek Revolution* (Washington City [Washington, D.C.]: J.S. Meehan, 1824), 4.

⁶⁴ Thomas Roderick Dew, *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832* (Richmond: Printed by T. W. White, 1832), microfilm, reel 2583, p. 112.

The document was meant for print and publication, as well as for use as supporting evidence in debates in the Virginia Legislature later that year.⁶⁵

For the American white male political elite, then, classicism was understood as one of the most effective tools for demonstrating intelligence and ability to lead, as well as a necessary component of persuasive writing and oratory. However, American classicism in the nineteenth was not without detractors. Chief among the critics were the newly-enfranchised property-less classes and their representatives in government. They denounced the culture of classicism as elitist and anti-populist, and occasionally mocked politicians who publicly flaunted their command of ancient texts.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, classicism was not the exclusive purview of political elites. With the expansion of literacy and education opportunities described above, lower class white Americans in the early nineteenth century jumped at any opportunity to receive some form of classical education, understanding it as a reliable method of obtaining political power.

It is important to note the sincerity of non-elite classicism, a point that has so far been challenged uncritically. Wendy Cooper dismissed the democratization of classicism as mere pretension. Cooper wrote, “Just as Americans aped Europeans, so the fashions of the wealthy were copied by others aspiring to similar heights of refinement and fashion.” Carl Richard

⁶⁵ Dew, *Review of the Debate*, 112.

⁶⁶ Richard, *Golden Age*, 42.

repeated this claim with little comment in *The Golden Age of the Classics in America: Greece, Rome, and the Antebellum United States*.⁶⁷ While this might be true in a general sense of fashion and taste, American classicism was not a fad, but a widespread underlying intellectual culture. Lower class Americans did not “ape” the classically educated elites, but could and did sincerely engage with classicism in the early nineteenth century. John Rowan, a Kentucky politician, took his classicism seriously enough that he was willing to die for it. Abraham Lincoln, who came from similar circumstances, almost certainly appreciated the value of his classicism, as well.

Lincoln was the son of mostly illiterate parents, and spent his adolescence on the frontier. What education he received was low-quality and sporadic. However, he could read, and by adulthood had acquired Euclid’s *Elements* in translation. According to his law partner, William Herndon, Lincoln quickly mastered the mathematical proofs of Euclid, and prided himself on his knowledge of the material. Moreover, Lincoln was an accomplished orator, a skill strongly associated with classical education in the early nineteenth century. Garry Wills has noted striking similarities between the Gettysburg Address and Pericles’ Funeral Oration, a famous Greek speech summarized by the ancient historian Thucydides. Wills theorizes that Lincoln must have been familiar with the Oration,

⁶⁷ Wendy Cooper, *Classical Taste in America, 1800-1840* (New York: Abbeville Press and Baltimore Museum of Art, 1993), 73, and Richard, *Golden Age*, 45. Interestingly, Cooper’s statement mirrors those made by Clinton Rossiter in *Seedtime of the Republic: The Origin of the American Tradition of Liberty* (New York: Harcourt, 1953), 356-357, and by Bernard Bailyn in *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 24-27. Both works dismiss American classicism as aristocratic posturing, with Rossiter referring to it as “window dressing” and Bailyn more generously as “illustrative, not determinative, of thought.”

or at least indirectly familiar with its themes and structure. Whatever the case, Lincoln undeniably obtained some small elements of self-taught or culturally absorbed classicism before his rise to political power.⁶⁸

Susan Ford Wiltshire assembled a synthetic account of an episode in the childhood of Sam Houston, who, like Lincoln, spent his early life on the frontier. Houston recognized the utility of classical education from a very young age, but was frustrated by his lack of the resources necessary to learn Greek and Latin. Instead, he reportedly memorized Alexander Pope's translation of Homer's *Iliad*. Houston himself attributed his oratorical skill and political success to his early familiarity with Homeric verse. Wiltshire recounts how, "In [Houston's] first address to Congress he compared Andrew Jackson to Cincinnatus gone back to the plow; Henry Clay became 'the Ajax whose battle axe glistened aloft in the thickest of the fight for the Compromise of 1850.'"⁶⁹

Even Jackson himself, one of the most vocal critics of American classicism, was immersed in the culture. Though Jackson prided himself on his lack of classical education, Carl Richard notes that he hired a neoclassical architect to design his Tennessee home after it burned down. The new design was based on an Athenian temple. It is probable that the same architect designed Jackson's tomb. When Jackson was President in 1830, he learned that

⁶⁸ William Herndon, *Herndon's Life of Lincoln* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1942), 248, and Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 174.

⁶⁹ Susan Ford Wiltshire, "Sam Houston and the *Iliad*," *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 32, no. 3 (Fall, 1973), 249-254. Cincinnatus was a semi-mythological Roman dictator who willingly relinquished power to return to his farm. He was, with the possible exception of Cato, the most popular and iconic figure in American classical culture. Ajax was a Homeric hero of the Trojan Wars known for his massive size and keen intelligence.

Calhoun, then his Vice President, had once denounced him for political gain. In order to fully express his displeasure, and to make Calhoun understand the severity of this breach of trust, Jackson mobilized what little knowledge of classical literature he had gleaned. In a letter to Calhoun, he wrote, "I had a right to believe that you were my sincere friend and, until now, never expected to have occasion to say of you, in the language of Caesar, *et tu Brute*."⁷⁰

Beyond the members of the lower-classes who became politicians, the American population as a whole must have had some level of common classical literacy. Politicians did not only give speeches within the Senate or the House of Representatives; Like Adams in 1821, they gave public addresses to all varieties of Americans. Caroline Winterer, when describing the popularity of early republican oratory, writes that "Oratory was another way that those excluded from a college education could imbibe the culture of classicism. Classical models informed American oratorical standards during an age when persuasive public speaking was believed essential to the body politic."⁷¹ In other words, public oratory made the very basics of classical education accessible to most audiences, familiarizing them with certain recurring names and characters. While Adams's untranslated Latin would probably be too advanced for all but the most educated audiences, most Americans by the early nineteenth century probably knew the names and stories of Cato, Cincinnatus, or Cicero.

⁷⁰ Meriwether et al., *Papers of Calhoun*, Andrew Jackson to John C. Calhoun, May 30, 1830, vol. 11, p. 193, and Richard, *Golden Age*, 44-45.

⁷¹ Winterer, *Culture of Classicism*, 25.

Even with the democratization of classicism in the nineteenth century, most members of the lower-classes could probably only boast enough classical literacy to accurately allude to a very few significant people and events of the ancient world. For those who desired a career in politics, on the other hand, pursuit of a classical education was recognized as a reliable method of reaching that goal. Lincoln, Houston, and Jackson started their lives as members of the American lower classes, and worked their way into the political elite. In the cases of Lincoln and Houston, the expansion of their classical educations beyond the norm was almost certainly a factor in their rise to elected office. Both men actively sought familiarity with classical text, and both understood it in the same way as their elite counterparts: as a tool to develop and maintain political power. Jackson, on the other hand, took great pride in explicitly rejecting what he considered to be the elitism of classical studies. Once in power, however, he began to recognize the utility of classical studies, and begrudgingly participated.

That participation was much more difficult to access for Black Americans, who were keenly aware of the political benefits of classical education. In the winter of 1897, Alexander Crummell, an Episcopal minister, Howard University Professor, and former abolitionist gave a lecture at the American Negro Academy titled "The Attitude of the American Mind Toward the Negro Intellect." It functioned as an exhortation to its audience to shatter the expectations and prejudices of privileged whites. To illustrate the type of prejudice he expected his audience to face, Crummell drew from his own experience six decades earlier:

In the year 1833 or 4 the speaker [Crummell] was an errand boy in the Anti slavery office in New York City. On a certain occasion he heard a conversation between the Secretary and two eminent lawyers from Boston, Samuel E. Sewell and David Lee Child. They had been to Washington on some legal business. While at the Capitol they happened to dine in the company of the great John C. Calhoun, then senator from South Carolina. It was a period of great ferment upon the question of Slavery, States' Rights, and Nullification; and consequently the Negro was the topic of conversation at the table. One of the utterances of Mr. Calhoun was to this effect 'That if he could find a Negro who knew the Greek syntax, he would then believe that the Negro was a human being and should be treated as a man.'⁷²

The attribution of the final quote to Calhoun is consistent with other beliefs espoused by the South Carolinian. If Crummell's recollection is accurate, it reveals not only another dimension of Calhoun's racism, but also a critical assumption about the nature of classicism in political participation.

Calhoun's standard for who "should be treated as a man" was not based on a concept of natural rights, or on literacy or general education. Instead, Calhoun would only recognize the human rights of someone with the capacity for fluency in a classical language. That fluency, more than any other ability, was Calhoun's standard of intellectual capacity. Moreover, he states that a single individual demonstrating this capacity would force him to agree that every member of that individual's race "should be treated as a man," and presumably

⁷² Alexander Crummell, "The Attitude of the American Mind Toward the Negro Intellect (1898)," *American Negro Academy Occasional Papers*, 1-22 (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 10-11. The dinner Crummell mentions does not appear in Calhoun's papers, but the quote he cites is attributed to Calhoun in accounts predating Crummell's. See Cook and Tatum, *African American Writers*, 95, and Michele Ronnick's notes in William Sanders Scarborough, *The Autobiography of William Sanders Scarborough: An American Journey from Slavery to Scholarship*, ed. Michele V. Ronnick (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004), 342.

as equal to white men. Such an acknowledgement would, in theory, compel Calhoun to recognize the illegitimacy of American slavery. According to Calhoun, a vehement racist and proud Southerner, a single Black man who could read Homer untranslated would justify a complete restructuring of the southern economy and culture.

If Calhoun did set that benchmark, it would be reasonable to assume that it was mere rhetoric. Still, it is important to recognize that this intellectual standard of racial equality was met and exceeded multiple times over the course of the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, not only by Crummell but by many others; William Sanders Scarborough, W. E. B. DuBois, and Booker T. Washington are but a few examples.⁷³ More importantly, numerous Black intellectuals demonstrated familiarity with Greek and Roman literature in Calhoun's lifetime. Those who could not read Greek or Latin still pursued and achieved elements of classical education, and frequently utilized antiquity in their writings and speeches. These early Black classicists were all responding to the systems of prejudices and oppression of which Calhoun was but a symptom. Black Americans both free and enslaved were fully aware of the importance of classicism in American culture and politics, and many sought out opportunities to gain and make use of a classical education.

Phillis Wheatley is one of the earliest Black American writers known to have received a limited classical education, and used classical themes to

⁷³ For the classicism of these individuals and others, see Cook and Tatum, *African American Writers*.

reestablish her identity and heritage after the alienation of enslavement. Born in West Africa around 1753, the girl who would be renamed Phillis Wheatley was sold to John Wheatley of Boston in 1761. John Wheatley's daughter taught her to read and write, and Phillis Wheatley published her first poem by 1765. She read Homer and Virgil in translation, and John Wheatley reported that she was attempting to learn Latin in 1773. That same year, she published her first volume, *Poems on Various Subjects*, in which was featured the poem "To Maecenas." While many of Wheatley's poetic themes were taken from her Christian faith, "To Maecenas" is one of several poems in which she displays the extent of her classicism. "To Maecenas" was an overtly classical homage to a work of the same name by the Roman poet Horace, which Wheatley closely imitated in structure and themes. In his poem, Horace honored the politician Maecenas, his wealthy patron and benefactor. Accordingly, Wheatley's subjects are also her benefactors. The eponymous Maecenas is probably meant to be John Wheatley, but Wheatley also honored the Africa-born Roman poet Terence near the end of the poem, treating him as her poetic ancestor.⁷⁴

While the entire poem is full of classical allusions, a few lines near the end especially stand out:

While blooming wreaths around thy temples spread,
I'll snatch a laurel from thine honour'd head,
While you indulgent smile upon the deed.
As long as Thames in streams majestic flows,
Or Naiads in their oozy beds repose,

⁷⁴ Cook and Tatum, *African American Writers*, 7-9, 13.

While Phoebus reigns above the starry train,
While bright Aurora purples o'er the main,
So long, great Sir, the muse thy praise shall sing,
So long thy praise shall make Parnassus ring.⁷⁵

The subject of the first three lines is Terence. Wheatley took a crown of laurels, a classical symbol of poetic skill, from the head of a Roman poet, and claimed it for her own. Furthermore, as William Cook and James Tatum note in *African American Writers and the Classical Tradition*, Wheatley mirrored Horace in using a poem ostensibly meant for the immortalization of her benefactor to also immortalize herself. As long Maecenas's praises are sung eternally, Wheatley's words live forever. Wheatley used her understanding of classical themes to assert her identity as a poet. In the name and structure of the poem, she implied her equality with a revered ancient poet. In the last nine lines, she declared herself the successor of a famous classical figure and announced her claim to immortality.⁷⁶

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, Black classicists were mobilizing their classical learning in more explicitly political contexts. In 1808, the New York-based African Methodist Episcopal Church began regularly hosting abolitionist orators to both celebrate the end of the slave trade. These orators

⁷⁵ Cook and Tatum, *African American Writers*, 14. Naiads were fresh water spirits in Greek mythology. Phoebus (meaning "bright") is an alternative name for the Greek deity Apollo, emphasizing his role as god of the sun. Aurora is the Roman goddess of the dawn, called Eos in Greece. Parnassus is a mountain in central Greece once believed to be the home of the Muses, minor goddesses of arts and literature.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 14.

were often free Black preachers with little or no formal education, and they were speaking to primarily Black audiences. The speeches they gave featured predominantly religious themes, but many also included elements of classical history. The orators intended their speeches as calls to political action, and attempted to mobilize support for the cause of abolition. They made use of the classicism they shared with their audience to more persuasively establish their own intelligence, and the necessity and legitimacy of their cause.

Peter Williams, the keynote speaker in 1808, appealed to the classical rather than the biblical past when lamenting the origins of the slave trade. Williams, who identified himself on the cover of the published edition of his speech as “A Descendent of Africa,” finds the roots of the Atlantic slave trade in Genoese raids along the African coast, which in turn sparked slave raiding between different African peoples. Williams believed this type of infighting to be the downfall of all great civilizations: “By thy deadly power, the strong Grecian arm, which bid the world defiance, fell nerveless; by thy potent attacks, the solid pillars of Roman grandeur shook to their base.”⁷⁷ By drawing connections between ancient Greece and contemporary Africa, Williams was continuing the tradition of claiming the cultural heritage of the antiquity, as exemplified by Wheatley and the laurel crown. Unlike Wheatley, however, Williams implicitly claimed ancient heritage for an entire race.

⁷⁷ Peter Williams, *An Oration on the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Delivered in the African Church, in the City of New York, January 1, 1808* (New York: Printed by Samuel Wood, 1808), 14-15. For more information on the abolitionist speeches given at AME and later AMEZ, see Maffly-Kipp, *Sacred Past*, 16-21.

A year later, Henry Sipkins, also identified as a “Descendant of Africa,” served as the keynote speaker. In describing the violence of the slave trade, Sipkins said it was more brutal than “The most sanguinary massacres, committed by the nations of antiquity, at the taking or subversion of Troy, Babylon, or Jerusalem.”⁷⁸ While Jerusalem is undoubtedly a biblical reference, the fall of Babylon is recounted both in the Bible and in the histories of Herodotus, and Troy is fully classical, not appearing in the Bible at all. Critically, Troy was also recognizable. Both Sipkins and Williams made use of the type of classicism with the broadest rhetorical appeal; uncomplicated references to iconic names and events. This demonstrates that the primarily Black members of the audiences of Sipkins and Williams were at least as familiar with classical subjects as the average uneducated white man, and that the two orators were aware of the classical literacy of their audience when penning their speeches.

In 1817, the minister and schoolteacher Jacob Oson delivered a similar speech, first in New Haven, then in a New York church. Also “A Descendent of Africa,” he sought to delegitimize slavery by finding the origins of African civilization, and to disprove theories that Africans were an inferior race. Like Williams and Sipkins, Oson concentrated primarily on the biblical component of his argument, but he gave substantially more attention to classical arguments than either of his predecessors. The breadth of his classical knowledge is made

⁷⁸ Henry Sipkins, *An Oration On the Abolition of the Slave Trade: Delivered in the African Church, in the City of New York, January 1, 1808* (New-York: Printed by Samuel Wood, 1808), 8 [page not numbered].

more impressive by his lack of formal education, a fact that would prevent him from being nominated as rector of an African church in Philadelphia in 1821.⁷⁹

Oson first demonstrated his classicism by quoting Josephus, a Roman historian and a more obscure reference than those made by Williams or Sipkins, to describe ancient civilizations in Egypt and Nubia. Oson believed Egypt to be the birthplace of African civilization, and cited Josephus in arguing that it was responsible for introducing the Greeks to mathematics and astronomy.⁸⁰ When listing prominent Africans throughout history to demonstrate African physical and intellectual capacity, Oson again displayed his sophisticated classicism. After naming several African bishops and theologians of the early middle ages, Oson added, "It is needless to enumerate, for we have our warriors and poets, viz. Hannibal and Asdrubel, Terence and his competitors: with these, I close this point."⁸¹

Having demonstrated the achievements of Africans in antiquity, Oson demanded proof of African racial inferiority, comparing American racism to the armies of the Persian king Xerxes:

It is well known that the strength of a thing cannot be ascertained until tried. I am led to conjecture, if you had seen Xerxes' army when he crossed the Dardanelles to go into Greece, you would have concluded that no power on earth could have withstood them. This army consisted of from two to three millions of men; and yes this astonishing, numerous army, was checked at the straits of

⁷⁹ Maffly-Kipp, *Sacred Past*, 51.

⁸⁰ Jacob Oson, *A Search for Truth, Or, An Inquiry for the Origin of the African Nation: An Address, Delivered At New-Haven in March, and At New-York in April, 1817* (New York: Christopher Rush, 1817), 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7. Hannibal and Asdrubal (or Hasdrubal) were Carthaginian generals who successfully invaded Italy during the Second Punic War, but failed to capture Rome itself.

Thermopylae, by the Spartans, with only a body of between eleven and twelve thousand men.⁸²

To end his speech, Oson again employed the language of a classicist, this time in the form of an English translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

Earth, on whose lap ten thousand nations tread,
And Ocean, brooding his prolific bed;
Night's changeful orb, blue pole and silvery zones,
Where other worlds encircle other suns,
One mind inhabits: one diffusive soul
Wields these huge limbs, and mingles with the whole.⁸³

Oson used these lines to argue for a spiritual unity in all humanity, again questioning the legitimacy of racial divisions.

It is difficult to identify the intended audience of Oson's speech. Though speaking in an environment similar to that of Williams and Sipkins, Oson made use of much more specific and less recognizable classical figures and themes. At the same time, he did not always expect his audience to understand his references without context. For instance, Oson introduced his discussion of Josephus, Egypt and Nubia with a Biblical account of the travels Abraham, giving audience members unfamiliar with Josephus critical geographic and historical context.⁸⁴ Similarly, he told the story of Xerxes's invasion of Greece in detail,

⁸² Oson, *A Search for Truth*, 7. The account of Xerxes and the Persian Wars comes from the writings of Herodotus, who is sometimes credited as being the first historian.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

indicating an assumption that the majority of his audience was not familiar with the writings of Herodotus.⁸⁵ However, in listing the great figures of Africa's past, Oson gave only names and broad categories, identifying one group as "bishops of the church" and the other as "warriors and poets."⁸⁶ His closing lines were not attributed to Virgil, but to "the poet," implying an assumption either that some members of his audience are classically educated enough to recognize *Aeneid* in translation or "the poet" as a name for Virgil, or that the Roman poet's name would be meaningless to his listeners.⁸⁷ It is likely that Oson was attempting to reach a hybrid audience. By demonstrating deep classical knowledge, Oson was demonstrating his intelligence and the legitimacy of his arguments to academic and political audiences. At the same time, contextualizing his more obscure classical references allowed him to maintain broad rhetorical appeal.

As the speeches and writings of Wheatley, Williams, Sipkins, and Oson indicate, classicism was only one of many intellectual tools used by Black Americans for persuasive rhetoric and identity formation in the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, the influence of classicism in these processes was dwarfed by that of religion. Biblical references were common in the writings and speeches of both elite and non-elite whites as well, but they did not dwarf classicism to the extent seen in Black oratory. This is unsurprising, given that the social and political barriers to receiving a classical education, while breaking down for non-elite whites, were still largely maintained for both free and

⁸⁵ Oson, *A Search for Truth*, 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

enslaved Black Americans. Still, as Laurie Maffly-Kipp notes, some degree of classical literacy was obtained by most free Blacks from immersion in American classical culture, especially in cities.⁸⁸ Their use of classical themes and references in popular oratory indicates a keen awareness of American classical culture. Black Americans understood the power of antiquity in nineteenth century political speech, and sought familiarity with classical sources to more effectively and persuasively engage in political action.

In 1852, the last year of his life, Daniel Webster gave what would be his final public address. In an oration filled with references to classical figures and events, Webster assured the Historical Society of New York of the necessity of their profession, and lauded their dedication to studying the past. Noting that the goal of any historian should be the deduction of objective truth from a variety of sources, Webster used the ancient historians of Greece and Rome as an example: "Classical history is not a memoir. It is not a crude collection of acts, occurrences, and dates. It adopts nothing that is not true; but it does not embrace all minor truths and all minor transactions. It is a composition, a production, which has unity of design, like a work of statuary or of painting, and keeps constantly in view one great end or result."⁸⁹ The defining nature of classical history, according to Webster, is unity and coherence despite a great variety of constitutive parts. He could have just as easily said the same about American classical culture.

⁸⁸ Maffly-Kipp, *Sacred Past*, 47.

⁸⁹ Richard, *Golden Age*, 42.

As multiple historians have demonstrated, early nineteenth century American classicism extended well beyond the politically privileged class of wealthy white males. American politicians understood knowledge of the ancient past as an important indicator of intelligence and a tool with which to establish political legitimacy. Politically disadvantaged groups recognized the importance that elites ascribed to antiquity, and actively sought classical education. An expanding education system, supplemented by a thriving print culture and popular oratory, gave Black Americans and poor whites the ability to pursue classical learning, which they used to assert authority in political and cultural contexts. Nineteenth century Americans, regardless of demographic category, understood classical knowledge as a means of accessing greater political power.

The classical allusions explored here are representative, but by no means comprehensive. Nineteenth century Americans engaging with classical culture produced a vast quantity of printed and written material, much of which demonstrates a broad unity in American classical culture that transcended the demographic categories historians have traditionally used to analyze it. Unfortunately, in searching for the utility of classicism across demographic lines, it has been necessary to briefly preserve those same boundaries for the purposes of organization. The various forms of classicism examined here required exploration as individual units before the cohesive whole could be demonstrated.

There is still much to be done in the demonstration of a unified classical culture. The groups analyzed here still exclude a wide variety of Americans

engaging with classical sources. Historians of American classicism should seek the inclusion of a wider demographic variety of subjects. In particular, a great number of nineteenth century American women of all classes and races were classically educated, and published works displaying a great variety of classical references. So far, they have only been studied as a distinct category, largely removed from a greater cultural context. Analyzing their place in and contributions to a unified classical culture should be given priority in future scholarship. Additionally, while all Americans understood their classical culture as broadly political, it would be irresponsible to claim that there were no other common aspects of the culture. It was multi-faceted and mobilized in a great variety of ways by those who engaged with it, and it is quite probable that it contained many broad commonalities. As in Webster's classical histories, a wide variety of subjects did not negate the unified features of nineteenth century American classical culture.