Ancient Rome and Modern America

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Ancient Rome and Modern America

Margaret Malamud

WILEY-BLACKWELL
A John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., Publication

This edition first published 2009

Blackwell Publishing was acquired by John Wiley & Sons in February 2007.
Blackwell's publishing program has been merged with Wiley's global Scientific, Technical, and Medical business to form Wiley-Blackwell.

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, United Kingdom

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Malamud, Margaret.
Ancient Rome and modern America / Margaret Malamud.
p. cm. – (Classical receptions)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-1-4051-3933-5 (hardcover : alk. paper) – ISBN 978-1-4051-3934-2 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. United States–Civilization–Roman influences. 2. United States–History. 3. United States–Foreign relations. 4. National characteristics, American. 5. Rome–History. 6. Imperialism. I. Title.
E169.1.M238 2009
973.1′1–dc22

2008019006

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Set in 10/13pt Galliard
by Graphicraft Limited, Hong Kong
Printed and bound in Singapore
by Utopia Press Pte Ltd

01 2009

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Illustrations

Acknowledgments

Writing a book about the relationship between Roman antiquity and modern America has made me very grateful to the classicists, Roman historians, and American historians who have supported and enriched my project. Karl Galinsky has been a cheer leader and source of intellectual support from the beginning. Emily Albu, Peter Bondanella, Jamie Bronstein, Mark Lause, David Montgomery, Seth Rockman, and Alan Taylor gave me advice and encouragement at the beginning of the project. Emily Albu, Jamie Bronstein, Amy Richlin, Alan Taylor, and Marsha Weisiger read and offered suggestions and corrections on various chapters. Karl Galinsky, Sandra Joshel, Michael O'Brien, Arthur Pomeroy, Amy Remensnyder, and Caroline Winterer read a first draft of the manuscript and each offered very helpful comments and constructive criticism. Peter Edward and Martha Malamud read the manuscript in all its various iterations and I am enormously grateful to them for their comments and editorial suggestions. Thanks also to Maria Wyke for many years of friendship, shared research, and fun in and out of universities and archives. Last but by no means least, I have greatly appreciated many animated conversations with my colleagues in the History Department at New Mexico State University. It is a rare and wonderful privilege to work in such a collegial and intellectually stimulating environment.

I cherished my year of uninterrupted research and writing as a Bye Fellow at Newnham College, University of Cambridge. I thank Helen Morales for nominating me as a Fellow and Mary Beard for facilitating my affiliation with the Classics Department. A generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities supported my research leave at Cambridge.

An early version of what became chapters 1 and 2 appeared as "Manifest destiny and the eclipse of Julius Caesar" in *Julius Caesar in Western Culture*, ed. M. Wyke (2006), Oxford: 148–69. Part of chapter 6 appeared as "The imperial metropolis: Ancient Rome in turn-of-the-century New York City," *Arion* 7/3 (2000): 64–108. An earlier version of chapter 7 appeared as "An American immigrant in imperial Caesar's court: Romans in 1930s films," *Arion* 12/2 (2004): 127–59,

and chapter 8 appeared as "Cold War Romans" in *Arion* 14/3 (2007): 121–53. Earlier versions of what became chapter 9 appeared as "As the Romans did? Theming ancient Rome in contemporary Las Vegas," *Arion* 6/2 (1998): 11–39, and "Living like Romans in Las Vegas: The Roman world at Caesars Palace, 1966" (co-written with Donald McGuire) in *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, eds. S. R. Joshel, M. Malamud, and D. T. McGuire, Jr. (2001), Baltimore: 249–69.

My parents William Malamud and Camille Malamud, my sister Martha Malamud, Amy Remensnyder, and Peter Edward have all been sources of love and support, and for that I am very lucky. This book is for them, with love.

Introduction

West Virginia Senator Robert C. Byrd takes his responsibilities with the utmost seriousness. He carries a worn copy of the United States Constitution in his breast pocket, regularly brandishing it when making a point on and off the Senate floor. Byrd has been in the Senate since 1958, making him its longest-serving senator. In an era of sound bites, Byrd orates. His speeches are laced with references to classical history, frequently quoting the great Roman orator Cicero and the Roman historian Tacitus. His allusions to Rome are nearly always warnings to his colleagues against repeating Rome's slide from republican liberty to imperial corruption under the tyranny of the emperors.

Byrd is passionate about the study of history and one of his favorite quotes from Cicero is on the importance of understanding the past. "To be ignorant of what happened before you were born is to remain always a child. For what is the worth of human life, unless it is woven into the life of our ancestors by the records of history?"[1] In 2004, when accepting the American Historical Association's inaugural Theodore Roosevelt–Woodrow Wilson Award for Civil Service, Byrd emphasized that "history has not only been my constant, close companion throughout my life, it has also been an inspiration and a guide throughout my career in public service."[2] And no history, Byrd believes, is more relevant to America than Roman history. In speech after speech he cites Roman precedents as warnings about the decline of the American republic. It was his understanding of Roman and American history, Byrd said, that inspired him in opposing the Reagan and both Bush administrations' efforts to grasp more and more power at the expense of the legislative branch.

Between April 19 and October 13, 1993, Senator Byrd delivered 14 one-hour orations on ancient Rome to the Senate. These were published in 1995 as *The Senate of the Roman Republic: Addresses on the History of Roman Constitutionalism*. Byrd called them his "Philippics," the name Cicero gave to his 14 speeches criticizing Mark Antony. The impetus for these speeches was his opposition to

legislation giving the president authority to veto specific line-items in a spending bill without vetoing the entire bill.

> "What does Roman history have to do with the line-item veto?" Byrd asked rhetorically. "To put it simply and elementally," he answered, "by delivering the line-item veto into the hands of the president, any president, Republican or Democrat or Independent, the United States Senate will have set its foot on the same road to decline, subservience, impotence and feebleness that the Roman Senate followed in its own descent into ignominy, cowardice and oblivion."[3]

In his congressional speeches, he linked the line-item veto with the rise of Julius Caesar and the fall of the Roman Republic. The Senate, he said, "handed to the President just as the Roman Senate handed to Caesar and to Sulla the control over the purse. When the Roman Senate ceded to the dictators and later to the emperors the power over the purse, they gave away the Senate's check on the executive power. They gave away the Senate's check on executive tyranny, and that is what we have done."[4] The result in the United States, Byrd argues, is a weakening of the Senate's authority and an expansion of the power of the executive branch.

How do his colleagues in the Senate view Senator Byrd? Some admire him as a relic of a distant American past. Illinois Senator Barack Obama described his impressions of the senator after he listened to his speech welcoming the 2004 newly elected members of the Senate:

> As he spoke, his voice grew more forceful . . . the dark room seemed to close in on him, until he seemed almost a specter, the spirit of Senates past, his almost fifty years in these chambers reaching back to touch the previous fifty years . . . back to the time when Jefferson, Adams, and Madison roamed through the halls of the Capitol, and the city itself was still wilderness and farmland and swamp.[5]

But according to one senator, many are irritated by Senator Byrd's long speeches, his classical allusions, his posturing, and his delaying tactics. He is "dragging it on and on ad infinitum, which is not necessary. Make your point. Have a vote. And move on. He's not willing to do that. He's from a different school. At some point you have to say, 'Enough is enough.' "[6] Another senator has called Byrd "the weirdest man in the Senate."[7]

It wasn't always so. From the early American republic until well into the twentieth century, members of Congress frequently invoked the example of ancient Rome in their speeches and writings. Senator Robert C. Byrd may seem odd to some of his fellow congressmen but he belongs to a long line of United States politicians – and reformers, political activists, writers, and artists – who have used analogies to and metaphors of the rise and fall of Rome as a way of commenting on and debating the state of the nation.

The narrative of a slide from republican virtue into imperial corruption and decline lies in the works of Roman historians, especially Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus, and it has acquired a mythic and malleable resonance. The myth, in its simplest form, is this: once there was a virtuous Republic of citizen-farmers who embodied *pietas*, a term that encompasses respect for the patriarchal family, selfless devotion to the laws and traditions of the civic order, and reverence for the gods who watched over the affairs of the family and the Republic. Simplicity, sobriety, frugality, and fortitude were all characteristics of good citizens. Republican virtues and military technology and prowess enabled conquest, and soon the Republic acquired an empire. The acquisition of wealth and imperial power brought in its wake corruption, decadence, and a loss of the qualities that had once made the Republic great. The vices of luxury, materialism, avarice, and a lust for power undermined the social and political fabric of the Republic. And so, the Republic collapsed and dictators then emperors seized power. Corrupt emperors dominated a cowed Senate, and a decadent citizenry ceased to observe and respect the old customs and traditions. Later Roman and post-Roman writers argue that this dissipation of Roman citizens and the corruption of the government enabled the success of the "barbarians" who invaded and conquered Rome in the fifth century. Permutations of this paradigmatic myth appear as explanatory devices for decline in a number of European historical narratives up through and including those Enlightenment writers whose views were so influential in shaping the thought of eighteenth-century European and American leaders and thinkers.[8]

This vision of Rome as a virtuous Republic undermined by imperial corruption haunts the American imagination. The central point of this book is that ever since republican independence in 1776 and right up to the present day, images and narratives of the rise and decline of Rome have played a vital role in how Americans have understood themselves and their history. Americans have legitimated, debated, and contested their political and cultural identities and concerns through selective references to the Roman past.

Senator Byrd's use of Roman history exemplifies this process. When the senator criticizes American presidents for acting like Caesars, and his cohort in the Senate for failing to stop them, he is writing the Roman history he adduces. At the American Historical Association's 2004 award ceremony he declared that he regularly warns his colleagues that "it was when the Roman Senate relinquished control of the purse to Caesar and to the emperors who followed him that Rome ceased to be a republic."[9] Some in the audience surely knew that Byrd's analysis that the major reason for the loss of political independence in Rome was the Senate's loss of economic control was not in agreement with modern historians' views of the reasons for the decline of liberty in ancient Rome. Byrd's view of Roman political power is filtered through the modern lens of the US Constitution's system of checks and balances on the power of the president. Like the framers of the Constitution, Senator Byrd understands political power as a matter of assent

and acquiescence on the part of the people: "Caius Julius Caesar did not seize power in Rome. The Roman Senate thrust power upon Caesar deliberately with forethought, with surrender, with intent to escape from responsibility. The Senate gave away power; the members . . . abandoned their duty as senators, and, in doing so, created in Caesar the most powerful man in the ancient world."[10] As Senator Byrd cites Roman history and Roman authors, he creates his own history of Rome as a way of commenting on contemporary political concerns. He admires Cicero, whom he reveres as the principal defender of the Roman Senate, the institutional bulwark against a military usurper, Julius Caesar. Byrd envisions himself in this Ciceronian role, saving the United States Senate and the country from arrogant and dangerous presidents.[11] But, as we shall see, to be compared to Cicero is not always desirable. Senator Byrd may admire Cicero, but socialist C. Osborne Ward and Marxist Howard Fast, among others, despised Cicero for what they saw as his elitism and self-serving politics.[12] There is a long history of criticizing American political and economic elites through comparing them and their exploitative practices to the behavior of the ancient Roman elites. Rome's history has been appropriated by diverse groups at different historical moments for varied ends – most especially, for debates, explicit and implicit, about politics and culture.

In the following chapters, we will investigate the utility and mutability of images of Rome from the Revolutionary era to the present. This book joins recent work that investigates re-creations and interpretations of ancient Rome and the variety of ways Rome has been used to articulate and address contemporary concerns.[13] These other studies have focused on high culture or deal exclusively with film or, when they deal with other media, lack a consistent focus on one historical culture. My book focuses on the United States and shows how images and narratives of Rome have been adopted and adapted right across American culture, from high-brow to low-brow, and through the course of American history. I take as a point of departure that representations of the Roman past tell us little about the "real" Rome but a lot about the prevailing attitudes and perspectives of the times when the representations were made. We will explore rich and complex dialogues with the Roman past, their richness residing precisely in the ways the Roman past is reformulated for each present moment in time.

To this end, the book focuses on points of particularly intense identification – especially moments of political and economic turbulence. I have selected charged moments in United States history when Rome has been appropriated in order to debate the state of the nation and address internal tensions and anxieties. We will look at portrayals of Rome in different media and forms – writing, architecture, theatre, painting, World's Fairs and Expositions, and film. Following a chronological scheme, I situate different responses to Roman antiquity within changing historical contexts and periods, revealing the ways in which diverse references to Roman history have been utilized by different classes to articulate or contest political and cultural identities.

We begin with the American Revolution. The Revolutionary generation admired the Roman Republican model of government and found exemplary models of behavior in the actions of Roman elites. Cato, Cicero, and Brutus were celebrated for their principled defense of liberty against the "tyranny" of Julius Caesar, the dictator who Americans at the time viewed as the destroyer of the Roman Republic. Then, during the 1820s and 1830s, members of the American middle and working classes extended these analogies to Rome with a new twist. American workers who felt oppressed by the beneficiaries of industrial capitalism compared them to Roman "aristocrats" who exploited the Roman plebeians. To the supporters of President Andrew Jackson's popular democracy, the ruling political elites of Republican Rome offered a negative model of aristocratic and oligarchic domination. In newspapers, magazines, and theatre, Democrats looked into Rome's republican past and identified with champions of the Roman plebeians, such as Caius Marius, or slaves, such as Spartacus. Whig opponents responded by denouncing Andrew Jackson as a dictator and a demagogue – a modern Caesar.

In the antebellum years, as the economic and social divide among classes widened and as the economic and ideological divisions between the North and the South increased, two controversial Roman politicians who worked on behalf of the Roman poor, Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus and his brother, Caius Sempronius Gracchus, emerged as figures for debate, praise, and criticism. In the North, working men praised the Gracchi brothers for their efforts at agrarian reform on behalf of Rome's impoverished citizens and invoked their example in their own struggles for land reform in the United States. But in the South, in a revealing example of the way an episode from the Roman past can be used to argue vastly different positions, planter elites admired the Gracchi for their oratorical skills and their attempts to reform a corrupt Senate, even as they rejected the land reforms the Gracchi and their supporters in the North attempted to enact. Over the course of the 1840s and 1850s debates over the Gracchi's agrarian reforms, Roman slavery, and Roman decline were linked together in support of both pro- and anti-slavery arguments.

In the wake of the Civil War, Northern industrialists acquired monopolies, increasing their profits and those of their shareholders through what appeared to be increasingly ruthless exploitation of workers. Concerned Americans worried that a plutocracy beset by civil strife would destroy the American republic just as had happened, they argued, in Rome. Analogies and allusions to the collapse of the Roman Republic and the emergence of imperial rule help to map these anxieties, as they continued to be widely invoked in America to stake out and articulate ideological positions. Labor reformers, socialists, and other political reformers and activists deployed references to Rome both to describe and to combat the new Caesars: the robber barons and corrupt politicians.

Yet in the same era we also discover in popular historical fiction a new trope for the Roman metaphor: an interest in Romans as the persecutors of virtuous Christians and Jews. Over the course of the nineteenth century, invocations of

Romans as exemplars of commendable moral and civic behavior declined and were replaced – in popular fiction – by Romans as oppressors of pious and courageous Christians and Jews. The new evangelical Protestant culture embraced a triumphal and progressive narrative of early Christian resistance to, and eventual victory over, pagan Rome. This linear narrative was more relevant to the concerns of middle-class Americans than was the eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century cyclical model of the rise and fall of empires along with the Founding Fathers' and Mothers' emulation of heroic Romans of the Republic. To this new, increasingly prosperous, generation of Americans, America was exceptional: America's embrace of evangelical Christianity meant that the country could embrace wealth and empire and yet avoid Rome's cycle of imperial decline.

Over the course of the 1890s and into the twentieth century, Rome's fabled might was translated into power and wealth in the built environment and in material culture as a positive ground of identification. Across America negative references to the decadence and imperial overreach of ancient Rome, previously common in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, were overshadowed by a celebratory linking of the ancient Roman and modern American empires. Analogies drawn between the ancient Roman and modern American empires now helped to articulate and legitimate America's recent acquisition of an overseas empire, whilst fabricated connections with the imperial Roman world came to undergird new cultural and class hierarchies. In mass culture, entertainment entrepreneurs played the role of populist emperors and offered the public voyeuristic access to a sumptuous and titillating realm of imperial pleasures. Imperial pleasures were no longer frowned upon but instead were increasingly to be consumed, enjoyed, and displayed by all classes.

Within a few years though, the Great Depression was calling into question such celebrations of progress and empire. The Hollywood entertainment industry responded by utilizing Roman imagery to frame the middle-class reaction to hardship and political turbulence during the crisis. Cecil B. DeMille's sword-and-sandal epics wed the popular appeal of spectacles of Roman decadence to plots glorifying conservative religious values. Reacting to the mixed messages sent by such films, Jewish studio owner Samuel Goldwyn commissioned a comic parody, *Roman Scandals*, starring Jewish film star Eddie Cantor. Absent from Goldwyn's film is any hint of the popular trope of Romans as persecutors of Christians; corrupt officials and monopoly capitalism are the evils in this Rome, and ordinary citizens are the oppressed. *Roman Scandals* entertained the Depression-era audience by exposing political corruption within the body politic, both Roman and American.

Later, during the Cold War, Roman metaphors were deployed again in mainstream Hollywood films, but now both as allegories of the global geo-politics of the times and as analogues of domestic politics and tensions. Two interrelated texts used the slave revolt of Spartacus as a way of commenting on American politics and culture: Marxist Howard Fast's 1951 historical novel, *Spartacus*, and its

1960 cinematic adaptation of the same name by Hollywood actor and producer Kirk Douglas. In Fast's subversive novel, published at the height of the witch hunts of communists in the McCarthy era, Rome stands for capitalist, class-divided America, and the slaves stand for modern wage slaves, the exploited proletariat. Fast's novel was a clarion call for revolution. Kirk Douglas's Hollywood film drew on Fast's novel and offered a critique of domestic politics, while downplaying the revolutionary impetus of Fast's tale.

The final chapter brings us into the late twentieth century, exploring the shifting uses of Rome in Las Vegas. In sharp contrast to the negative view of imperial Rome in both Fast's and Douglas's Spartacus, the casino-resort Caesars Palace (inaugurated 1966) deliberately exploited the cultural force of the myth of a decadent and fabulously wealthy imperial Rome to encourage patrons to indulge, consume, and spend. Since the 1960s, the merging of the entertainment, hotel, and retail industries has resulted in the incorporation of more mainstream forms of consumption and leisure in this Las Vegas resort. At the Forum Shops, a shopping mall built in 1992 next to Caesars Palace and named after the Roman Forum, images of an opulent and elegant imperial Rome promote ever-increasing consumerism and consumption in a Roman-themed civic space. By the end of the twentieth century Rome was no longer a tool for articulating working-class concerns: consumer culture had co-opted Rome for mass consumption.

What emerges powerfully throughout this book is the malleability and remarkable continuity of Rome in the American imagination. Since the founding of the nation, Americans have used images and connotations of ancient Rome to define themselves and take the measure of their own cultural, political, and material achievements. Different classes have appropriated the Roman past to legitimate, debate, or contest the pressing issues and concerns of the times they lived in. Rome's history therefore has shifted and changed its meaning depending on who is invoking it and for what purpose. When we analyze differing interpretations and uses of Roman history within a given historical context we uncover the competing attitudes and world views that resonated at those times. History moves on, "rewritten by the victors," but long-forgotten visions and alternative world views remain, buried but unaltered in the sedimented layers of history, in newspaper articles and political speeches, plays and novels, architecture, painting, and film, waiting for us to recognize them. History may be rewritten but these artifacts remain, eloquent witnesses of the thoughts and mind-sets of our forebears.

This book has been a journey of discovery. I set out to write a book that showed how Roman antiquity remains relevant for today, how its malleability keeps it alive in surprising and often overlooked forms. In part that is what I have done, but along the way I have surprised myself because what has emerged is an excavation of modern American history. This book is about cultural reception and the relevance of Rome in the United States, but it is also a book about the often forgotten, marginalized, or silenced history of modern America.

Notes

1 Cicero, *Orator* 120. "Nescire autem quid ante quam natus sis acciderit, id est semper esse puerum. Quid enim est aetas hominis, nisi ea memoria rerum veterum cum superiorum aetate contexitur?"
2 Byrd (2004a).
3 D. J. Saunders, "Tax dollars at work," *New York Times* (December 31, 1993).
4 N. A. Lewis, "Byrd's eloquent voice continues to fight to honor tradition in the Senate," *New York Times* (November 29, 1997).
5 Obama (2006), 74–5.
6 The unnamed senator was annoyed at Senator Byrd's delaying tactics for the establishment of a homeland security department. J. Tierney, "Threats and responses: The Senate; Byrd, at 85, fills the Forum with Romans and wrath," *New York Times* (November 19, 2002).
7 S. Fritz, "Senator Byrd learns from, shapes history," *St. Petersburg Times* (September 23, 2002).
8 Pocock (1975). Bondanella (1987) tracks and analyzes the myth of Rome from antiquity to the present.
9 Byrd (2004a). "In speech after speech opposing the line-item veto, I warned that it was when the Roman Senate relinquished control of the purse to Caesar and to the emperors who followed him that Rome ceased to be a republic. As long as I am in the United States Senate, I am determined this mistake will never happen here."
10 Byrd (1995), 161–3; also quoted in Maddox (2006), 148.
11 As the title of his most recent book makes clear (2004b): *Losing America: Confronting a Reckless and Arrogant Presidency.*
12 Like Cicero, Senator Byrd has his critics. He has been called the "King of Pork" for his success in funneling federal funds to his West Virginia constituency. He joined the Ku Klux Klan when he was young, opposed civil rights legislation in his earlier years in the Senate, and vilified those who protested against the Vietnam War. Senator Barack Obama was aware of historical irony as he listened to Senator Byrd conjuring up "the spirits of Senates past" to warn of the "dangerous encroachment, year after year, of the Executive Branch on the Senate's precious independence." Senator Byrd's presence brought Obama "back to a time when neither I nor those who looked like me could have sat within these walls. I felt with full force all the essential contradictions of me in this new place, with its marble busts, its arcane traditions, its memories and its ghosts. I pondered the fact that, according to his own autobiography, Senator Byrd had received his first taste of leadership in his early twenties, as a member of the Raleigh County Ku Klux Klan, an association that he had long disavowed, an error he attributed – no doubt correctly – to the time and place in which he'd been raised, but which continued to surface as an issue throughout his career. I thought about how he had joined other giants of the Senate, like J. William Fulbright of Arkansas and Richard Russell of Georgia, in Southern resistance to civil rights legislation." Obama (2006), 74–5.
13 Bondanella (1987); Vance (1989); Galinsky (1992); Liversidge and Edwards (1996); Wyke (1997); Edwards (1999); Wyke and Biddiss (1999); Joshel, Malamud, and McGuire (2001); Winkler (2001a); Cyrino (2005); and Wyke (2006a).

1

Exemplary Romans in the Early Republic

In September 1777, the British army captured Philadelphia, defeating George Washington's Continental Army. Through the long and difficult winter that followed, the demoralized troops camped out at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania. The situation was dire and the physical discomforts the men endured during the winter were exhausting, as this excerpt from the diary of Albigence Waldo, a surgeon stationed at Valley Forge, makes vividly clear:

> December 14: I am Sick – discontented – and out of humour. Poor food – hard lodging – Cold Weather – fatigue – Nasty Cloaths – nasty Cookery – Vomit half my time – smoak'd out my senses – the Devil's in't – I can't Endure it – Why are we sent here to starve and Freeze – What sweet Felicities have I left at home; A charming Wife – pretty Children – Good Beds – good food – good Cookery – all aggreable – all harmonious. Here all Confusion – smoke and Cold – hunger and filthyness – A pox on my bad luck. There comes a bowl of beef soup – full of burnt leaves and dirt, sickish enough to make a Hector spue.[1]

By early May of 1778, the weather finally improved. After long months of training under the Prussian Baron von Steuben and as new recruits and supplies arrived the ragged insurgent force was transformed into a disciplined fighting unit. Seeking to rally his troops for the new season of campaigns, General George Washington requested a performance of Joseph Addison's 1713 play, *Cato*, confident in the tonic effect that Cato's clarion call to fight to the death for liberty would have on the army as it prepared to regroup and engage the British:

> So shall we gain still one day's liberty;
> And let me perish, but in Cato's judgment,
> A day, an hour, of virtuous liberty,
> Is worth a whole eternity in bondage.[2]

Washington was not relying on novelty to invigorate his troops, nor was he an isolated commander out of touch with the tastes of his men. He was well aware that his fellow Americans defined themselves in relation not only to the British of the day, but also to the Romans of the past.

Cato was first performed in the American colonies in 1735 in Charleston, South Carolina, some twenty years after its opening performance in London.[3] Within a few decades, *Cato* had become the most popular play in pre-Revolutionary America.[4] Its theme of liberty opposing tyranny clearly struck a chord in the nascent republic. Addison had based his play on Plutarch's lives of Cato the Younger and Julius Caesar, texts well known in the American colonies.[5] According to Plutarch, Cato committed suicide in 46 BCE, unwilling to live in a world led by Caesar and refusing to grant Caesar the power to pardon him.[6] Addison's play focuses on the last days of Cato's life and his suicide in Utica. Part of the popular appeal of the plot lies in the intertwining of the fall of the Roman Republic with the two imaginary love stories of Cato's daughter, Marcia, with the Numidian prince Juba, and of Cato's son, Portius, with Lucia, daughter of the Roman senator Lucius. But the parallels between the desperate situation of Cato's men in the North African desert and the American army's trials during the winter of 1777 must have had special meaning for Washington and his men, who were living, not acting, the Republicans' fierce embrace of liberty (voiced below by the fervent Sempronius, unsuccessful suitor of Marcia):

> When liberty is gone,
> Life grows insipid, and has lost its relish.
> O could my dying hand but lodge a sword
> In Caesar's bosom, and revenge my country,
> By heavens I could enjoy the pangs of death,
> And smile in agony.[7]

Analogy with the virtuous Cato lifted the Revolutionary soldiers' struggle to a grand or mythic level, and out of the misery described by our surgeon.[8]

The exemplary qualities of the Roman tragedy were clear to Washington. Its hero, Cato, the charismatic Stoic who, almost from his death, was the very model of a patriotic hero, embodied the qualities most admired in eighteenth-century America: civic virtue, unselfish patriotism, and courage. Its antagonist, Julius Caesar, stood for their opposites: unchecked ambition and tyrannical oppression. "Dost thou love watchings, abstinence, and toil, / Laborious virtues all? Learn them from Cato; / Success and fortune must thou learn from Caesar."[9] Caesar was emblematic of tyranny, and resistance against tyranny even when hope of victory was gone, the central theme of Addison's play, resonated with Washington's army. His soldiers packed the playhouse to the doors.

At the time of the American Revolution, Caesar was popularly represented as a tyrant whose ruthless ambition brought down the Roman Republic. Colonists

invoked Caesar's political opponents Brutus, Cassius, Cato, and Cicero as heroes in their own struggle against the British monarchy. The colonists made these Roman liberators' struggle against Caesar analogous to their own struggle against the British crown, disparagingly referring to English government officials as "Caesars." In 1771, for example, John Adams drew this comparison of Massachusetts' new royal governor, Thomas Hutchinson: "Caesar, by destroying the Roman Republic, made himself a perpetual Dictator; Hutchinson, by countenancing and supporting a System of Corruption and Tyranny, has made himself Governor."[10] But, while Cato and his men were doomed to ultimate defeat, in the American context there was still the possibility of victory.[11] The new liberators could correct the course of history, overthrow the "tyranny" of the British, and establish an American republic that would be stronger and better than the Roman Republic.

The Founders embraced Enlightenment views of the inevitable historical cycle of the rise and fall of empires. John Adams believed that if America established a republic, America, like Rome, could rise to glory, grandeur, and empire: "Immortal Rome was at first but an insignificant Village, inhabited only by a few abandoned Ruffians, but by beginnings it rose to a stupendous Height, and excell'd in Arts and Arms all nations that preceded it," Adams wrote in 1755.[12] The unvarying cycle of imperial rise and decline suggested that America was on the rise; Adams pointed out that

> If we look into History we shall find some nations rising from contemptible beginnings, and spreading their influence, 'till the whole Globe is subjected to their sway. When they reach'd the summit of Grandeur, some minute and unsuspected Cause commonly effects their Ruin, and the Empire of the world is transferred to some other place.[13]

In European thought this had evolved into a commonplace presumption that the seat of empires had emerged first in the ancient Near East, before moving to Greece, Rome, and then Great Britain. Now, some Founding Fathers believed, it was America's turn to rule an empire. According to this view, the British Empire was in decline, undermined by wealth and decadence, but in America, as Adams put it, "it is the time of Ennius with us."[14] Furthermore, Enlightenment views that humanity had embarked on an unprecedented march of progress freed from the superstitions and traditions of past ages suggested that a new American republic could match and even surpass the glories of Rome while avoiding, or at least delaying for an indefinite period of time, any subsequent decline and fall. This, however, would require the cultivation of virtue on the part of citizens. Civic virtue would be the "moral cement" of republican society, reflecting the widely held belief that Greek and Roman polities had fallen when their citizens lost their sense of virtue.[15]

Livy, the great chronicler of the Roman Republic, advised his readers that in his history "you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings;

fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid."[16] John Adams gave his 14-year-old son, John Quincy Adams, the same advice in a letter he wrote on May 18, 1781: "In company with Sallust, Cicero, Tacitus and Livy, you will learn Wisdom and Virtue. You will see them represented, with all the Charms which Language and Imagination can exhibit, and Vice and Folly painted in all their Deformity and Horror."[17] The perceived affinity between Republican Rome and Revolutionary America led the Founders to look for instructive exemplars of virtue and corruption in Roman authors.[18] Roman accounts of the expulsion of the Etruscan monarchy and the foundation of the Roman Republic, and then Rome's subsequent slide from republican virtues to a corrupting materialism and imperialism, offered a series of exemplars to emulate or avoid. Eighteenth-century Americans, like their European counterparts, avidly scanned the classics for suitable – and unsuitable – models of behavior. Ancient exemplars helped men and women know how to live well and, even more important in these troubled times, how to die well. Nathan Hale recalled Addison even on his way to the gallows for espionage; his "I regret that I have but one life to give to my country" is a paraphrase of Addison's Cato saying, on receiving the dead body of his son, "Who would not be that youth? What pity is it / That we can die but once to serve our country."[19] An epilogue written by Jonathan Sewall for a 1778 performance of Addison's *Cato* at the Bow Street Theater in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, makes clear what was at stake in contemporary performances of the play:

> In Caesar's days had such a daring mind
> With Washington's serenity been joined
> The tyrant then had bled, great Cato liv'd,
> Rise then, my countrymen! For fight prepare,
> Gird on your swords, and fearless rush to war!
> For your grieved country nobly dare to die,
> And empty all your veins for Liberty.
> No pent-up Utica contracts your pow'rs,
> But the whole boundless continent is yours![20]

Sewall's epilogue links the fight for liberty with conquest and expansion. Imitation of the Roman Republican heroes would result in a virtuous and healthy polity stretching across "the whole boundless continent," whereas following the example of Julius Caesar would corrupt the moral and political state of the young nation. "What is a Roman that is Caesar's foe?" asks Decius in Addison's play. "Greater than Caesar, he's the friend of virtue," Cato replies.[21]

The contrast between Cato and Caesar was paradigmatic and drummed into children from a young age; their textbooks regularly included passages from Addison's *Cato* and Sewall's epilogue.[22] The *Columbian Orator*, a widely used school reader, also includes in its lessons the lines spoken at a school exhibition by a seven-year-old boy, whose poem ends:

> These thoughts inspire my youthful mind
> To be the greatest of mankind;
> Great, not like Cesar [sic], stain'd with blood;
> But only great, as I am good."[23]

Another textbook recommended adopting Cato as a sort of internal personal surveillance monitor: "That when we are by ourselves, and in our greatest solitude, we should fancy that Cato stands before us, and sees every thing we do."[24] Similarly, Alexander Pope's prologue to Addison's play sums up the aim of the performance:

> To wake the soul by tender strikes of art,
> To raise the genius and to mend the heart,
> To make mankind in conscious virtue bold,
> Live o'er each scene, and be what they behold.[25]

Eighteenth-century Americans believed in the educative mission of the arts, as Diderot declared: "To make virtue attractive, vice odious, ridicule forceful: that is the aim of every honest man who takes up the pen, the brush or the chisel."[26]

The pen, the brush, the chisel . . . neoclassical aesthetic theory suggested that writers, painters, and sculptors could capture moral virtues on paper, canvas, or stone, shaping and molding not only the raw material of art, but through art, human souls. Plays, classical texts, paintings, and even statues and busts of eminent individuals in marble or bronze served to inspire men and women to virtuous action.[27] According to the theory of contagion, virtue or vice could be induced simply by being in the presence of an exemplary figure or in contact with one through literary description or artistic representation.[28] This helps us understand why Thomas Jefferson's tea-room in Monticello contained busts and 28 portraits of exceptional men, while John Quincy Adams had six bronze busts of ancient exemplars, which he called his "Household Gods."[29] Indeed, Addison's play shows the process of "contagion" at work: for his Juba, the mere presence of Cato inspired virtuous behavior. Cato's son Portius calls attention in act 1 to his passionate emulation of Cato:

> Behold young Juba, the Numidian prince!
> With how much care he forms himself to glory,
> And breaks the fierceness of his native temper
> To copy out our father's bright example.[30]

Juba expresses his admiration to Cato in similar terms: "I'm charm'd whene'er thou talk'st. I pant for virtue! / And all my soul endeavors at perfection."[31] Early American art and education aimed at nothing less than this: the (re)production of classical heroes – and heroines.

Elite educated white women were encouraged to study Greek and Roman history, usually in English or French translations.[32] One widely used school text published in 1792 recommended the study of history:

> What more agreeable entertainment to the mind than to mark the rise, progress, declension, and final extinction of the most flourishing empires; the virtues which contributed to their greatness, and the vices which drew on their ruin? It is an unpardonable ignorance in persons, of whatever sex or condition, not to be acquainted with the history of their own country, together with the histories of ancient Greece and Rome.[33]

Elite women believed in the same theory of imitation as their male counterparts, and Noah Webster's 1789 *An American Selection of Lessons in Reading and Speaking* (issued 40 times before 1801) offered various exemplars for American women to emulate. Roman matrons were admired for their dignity, courageousness, and piety. The Sabine women were exemplary for their loyalty to their abductors for the sake of peace. Portia, the wife of the Roman senator Brutus, was admired for her staunch support for her husband and for his conspiracy against Caesar. According to Plutarch, Portia's support was so unwavering that she committed suicide by swallowing hot coals after hearing of Brutus' death.[34] Abigail Adams, wife of John Adams, so admired Portia that she signed her letters to her own husband "Portia."[35] Cornelia, the patriotic mother of the Roman politicians Tiberius and Caius Gracchus, was another favorite, as was Arria, wife of the politician Caecima Paetus, who had been condemned to take his own life during Nero's reign. Arria showed him how to die nobly: she plunged a dagger into her own breast saying, "Paetus, it does not hurt." Marcia the Younger, daughter of Cato, who features in Addison's *Cato*, was exemplary for unmarried women. In Addison's play, Marcia models herself after her father.

> Cato's soul
> Shines out in everything she acts or speaks,
> While winning mildness and attractive smiles
> Dwell in her looks, and with becoming grace
> Soften the rigour of her father's virtues.[36]

Like a good republican daughter, Marcia defers to her father and country and refrains from a romantic involvement with the Numidian prince Juba so that he can fight Caesar.[37]

American women commented on the health of the nation through writing history and creating fictional worlds peopled with ancient Romans.[38] Mercy Otis Warren, a historian, poet, and playwright, frequently signed herself "Marcia" in her long correspondence with both John and Abigail Adams. Warren is here referring not to the unmarried Marcia the Younger but to her mother Marcia, wife of Cato: a woman of reputed excellence, according to Plutarch.[39] In one of her

poems, Warren urges American women to emulate the austere patriotism of Roman matrons:

> Let us resolve on a small sacrifice,
> And in the pride of Roman matrons rise;
> Good as Cornelia, or as Pompey's wife,
> We'll quit the useless vanities of life.
> America has many a worthy name,
> Who shall, hereafter, grace the rolls of fame.
> Her good Cornelias, and her Arrias fair,
> Who, death, in its most hideous forms, can dare.[40]

Some years later, alarmed, perhaps, at the emerging factionalism, materialism, and open pursuit of commercial wealth that characterized the 1780s, Warren's didactic play *The Sack of Rome* (1790) makes Rome vulnerable to barbarian conquest because luxury has made citizens dissolute.[41] Warren clearly intended the play to show how luxury and self-centeredness can undermine polities. She dedicated the play to President George Washington, who, living up to the selfless standards of his Roman Republican heroes, had resigned his commission as commander in chief of the Continental Army after the peace treaty between Great Britain and the United States was signed in 1783, and returned to private life.

Washington's self-abnegating gesture was astonishing, but even more astonishingly, he repeated it 13 years later. To the surprise of European contemporaries, Washington did not hold on to power when he was president. He stepped down from the presidency in 1796 after serving two terms. His contemporaries saw him as modeling the Roman values admired in the early Republic so well that they often portrayed him with Roman symbols. Antonio Canova sculpted Washington in Roman military dress, his sword laid down to symbolize his relinquishment of power, his pen poised to write his farewell address on his departure from the presidency (figure 1.1). Jean-Antoine Houdon sculpted him as a modern American gentleman with his hands resting on the fasces, a symbol of Roman authority. John Trumbull and Charles Willson Peale painted him as Cincinnatus, the Roman farmer famously called from the plough to be dictator and lead the defense of Rome when the neighboring Aequi had surrounded the Roman army.[42] After saving the Republic, Cincinnatus relinquished power and went back to his farm. On his death, Washington was eulogized both as a Cato and a Cincinnatus.

In America, Washington's avoidance of Caesarism made his life an example for his immediate presidential successors and for generations of American citizens.[43] It also provided a basis for believing that America would remain exceptional as long as its citizens cultivated virtue and acted with the best interests of the republic in mind. On the other side of the Atlantic, Napoleon, the general turned imperial monarch, was making very different uses of Roman models, and appealing to a very different set of Roman virtues. In contrast to Washington's abhorrence, Napoleon

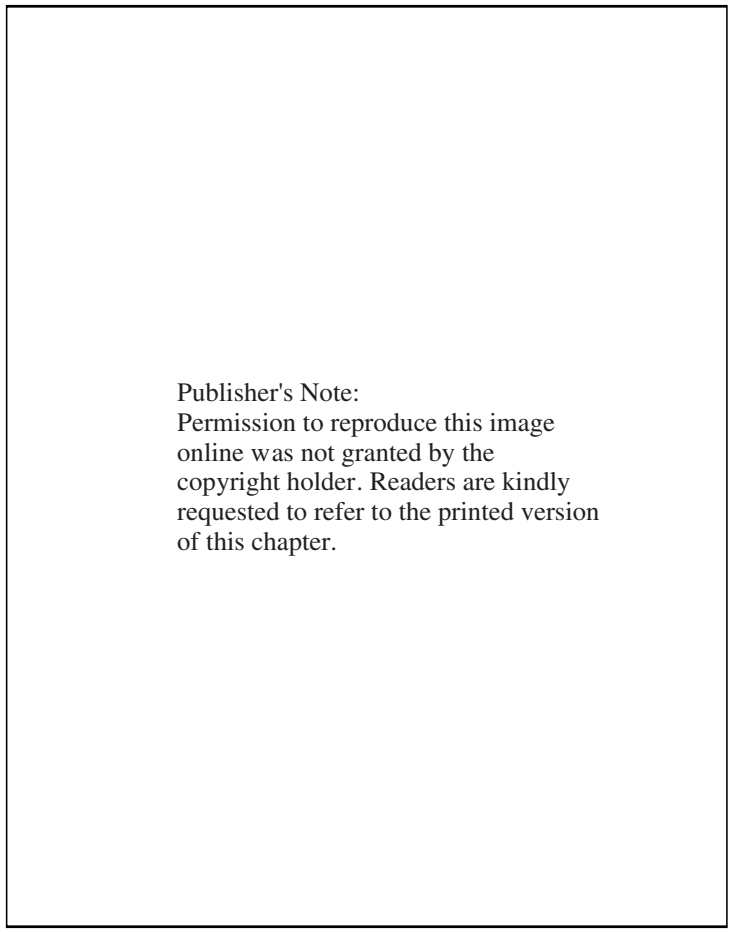

Figure 1.1 Antonio Canova, *General George Washington*, 1820–1. Courtesy of the North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Raleigh, North Carolina.

clearly admired Julius Caesar, and admired his imperial successor, Caesar Augustus, even more. French artists active at the court in Paris utilized references to both Roman rulers in art and iconography to illustrate and celebrate Napoleon's move from victorious general and first consul of the French Republic to Napoleon I, emperor of France.[44] By 1802 it had become clear that Napoleon intended to eliminate the newly created French Republic: he named himself first consul for life and in 1804, with the pope presiding, he crowned himself emperor (figure 1.2). As emperor, his face and name adorned coins, engravings, paintings and public monuments, a campaign of propaganda modeled on that of Augustus, the Roman emperor who claimed to have brought peace to the strife-torn republic and to have launched a golden age of prosperity and culture.

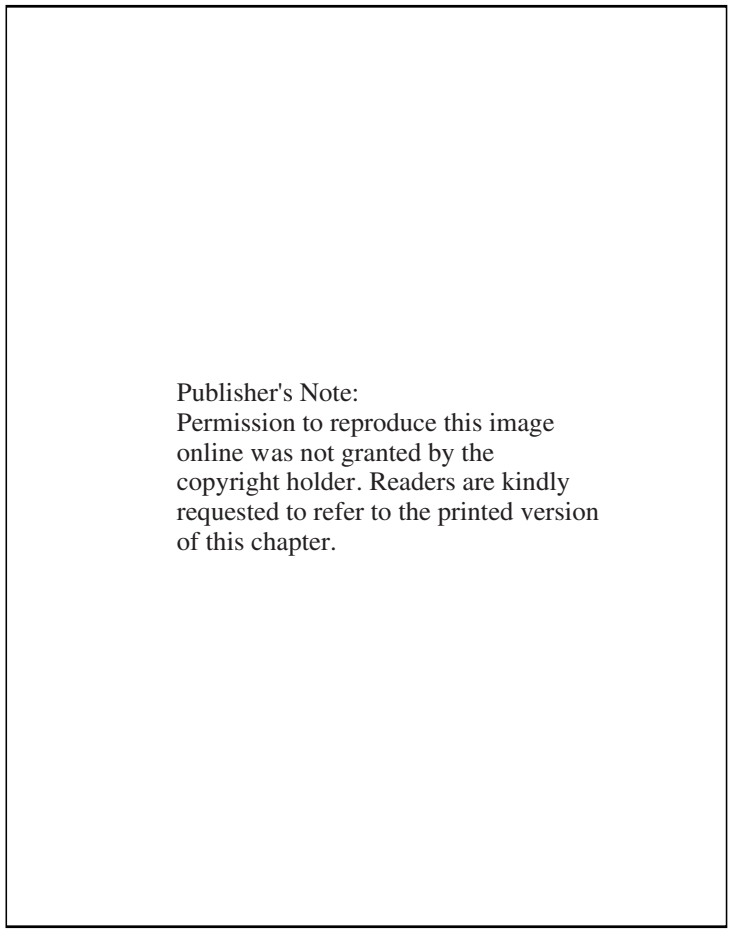

Figure 1.2 Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Napoleon on His Imperial Throne*, 1806. Oil on canvas. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rennes, France. Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

For American observers, the failure of the French Republican experiment and its descent into absolutism in the person of Napoleon was disturbing but not surprising. The trajectory of the French Revolution and its aftermath was consistent with the classic cycle of imperial rise and fall in which republican democracy leads to mob rule, then autocracy and tyranny. It was the different outcome of the American Revolution that was the real surprise.[45]

In Roman and European political history Julius Caesar has been an ambivalent figure who has signified both tyrant and champion of the people.[46] But in the United States Caesar was so firmly painted as a negative tyrant in Revolutionary political discourse that the more positive aspects of Caesar and his political accomplishments have rarely been invoked. Caesar has almost always signified a

dictator or tyrant. Absent as well from American political discourse is a positive model for the political accomplishments of the first Roman emperor, Augustus.

The republic of George Washington's day lasted only a generation; like France after its revolution, America had evolved into an empire, though its governmental model remained republican. Vast new territories were added to the Union, including Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase in 1803 and Florida in 1819, transforming the United States into a continental commercial power. Americans built new cities and ports, and new roads and canals enabled increased trade and commerce. Factories and mass production changed the work experiences of many Americans and the consumption experiences of many more. Would the new wealth from industrialization and territorial expansion bring in its wake political and moral corruption? Worrying that *luxus* (luxury) and the deleterious effects of the rapid accumulation of wealth on morals were insinuating themselves into the new republic, John Adams asked Thomas Jefferson in 1819: "Will you tell me how to prevent riches from producing luxury? Will you tell me how to prevent luxury from producing effeminacy, intoxication, extravagance, vice, and folly?"[47] Factionalism and the pursuit of power and wealth by ambitious and self-interested men soon led some to worry that the new republic was in danger of replicating Rome's trajectory of decline even as others celebrated its rise as a commercial power.

An American Caesar?

Some Founding Fathers hoped that an enlightened aristocracy, inspired by civic virtue, would govern the republic with the good of the collective in mind. But the sweeping changes from the 1790s on undermined the social, political, and economic fabric of the republic of Washington's time. Many Americans sought a greater share of the new economic wealth and the expansion of commerce and so they increasingly demanded a more direct form of democracy. Resentment of the aristocratic establishment and the new mercantile monopolies grew increasingly more outspoken and strident as factions and divisions within the republic called for political egalitarianism. Suffrage was expanded to include all white men with the abolition of property ownership and tax payments as qualifications for voting. This was quickly followed by the election to the presidency of the Tennessee general-turned-politician, Andrew Jackson, signaling a decisive shift in American politics from the aristocratic government of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the popular democracy of Jackson and his supporters. As democracy swept the country, fifth-century Athens was elevated as the exemplary ancient polity. To supporters of Andrew Jackson, Republican Rome now offered a *negative* model of aristocratic domination. Jackson's opponents, on the other hand, feared the rise of an American Caesar, civil strife, and the collapse of the new republic.

In 1829, Andrew Jackson became the seventh president, defeating the incumbent, John Quincy Adams. Adams was the last in the line of classically educated