

sources. Clearly, Americans found the political and social conceptions these writers conveyed highly explanatory of the situations in which they found themselves from the 1760s through the 1790s, and more particularly after 1776 when they were engaged in the process of constructing republican political and social institutions.

Indeed, it was principally through this strain of civic humanist and republican writings that the literature of antiquity was disseminated among and put at the service of eighteenth-century Americans. Both Italian Renaissance writers and their early modern English followers had drawn heavily upon the texts of many of the major Greek and Roman authors, including especially such political treatises as the *Politics*\* of Aristotle (B.C. 384–322) and the *De Legibus* (Logan), *De Officiis*,\* and *De Oratore*\* of Cicero (B.C. 106–43); the histories of Polybius (B.C. 210–122), Sallust (B.C. 86–34), Titus Livius (B.C. 59–C.E. 17), and Tacitus (55–120); the *Roman Lives*\* of Plutarch (46–120), and the poetry of Horace (B.C. 65–8). The works of Aristotle and Cicero interested Americans in part because their emphasis upon a higher law that stood above and took precedence over human law seemed to provide a respectable genealogy for both the natural-law theories of Locke and his contemporaries and the fundamental law theories of the English jurisprudential tradition. Similarly, the poetry of Horace, which glorified the independent rural landowners and husbandmen of the Roman republic, appeared both to describe and to affirm the superior morality of their own mostly rural situations in the larger early modern Anglophone world.

But what interested early modern theorists most about these particular classical authors, all of whom, except Aristotle, wrote about the Roman republic from the first century B.C. through the second century C.E., were the insights they provided into the nature and history of that remarkable political entity and the lessons those insights furnished about the character and fate of republics in general. Specifically, these works provided vast quantities of evidence that a strict separation of powers among the various components of government and high levels of personal independence and civic virtue among political leaders were absolutely essential for the maintenance of a stable republican polity against the efforts of corrupt men to monopolize the power and resources of the state. In vivid detail, they chronicled the decline of the Roman republic into an arbitrary dictatorship after its senators had become dependent upon the emperor and its constitution had thereby been rendered incapable of maintaining the absolute separation of powers that for so long

had made Rome the citadel of liberty. In Plutarch's *Lives*, the classical work most frequently cited by Americans of the Revolutionary generation, men could find models in the biographies of the heroic figures—Brutus, Cassius, Cato the Younger—who, by opposing tyrants and warning against the encroachments of arbitrary power and corruption, defied and sought to stem these developments.

Along with the contemporary example of the successful mixed polity in the modern republic of Venice, the history of the Roman republic provided civic humanist and republican writers with materials for constructing an elaborate theory that analyzed the world in terms of two discrete and opposing patterns of political and social relations, which they referred to as virtue and corruption. In the virtuous state, the only sort of state in which men could attain genuine liberty, citizenship was the highest form of active life, and civic virtue—defined as public spirited and patriotic participation in a self-governing political community in pursuit of the common good—was the primary goal of citizenship and the only legitimate mode of self-fulfillment for citizens. If civic participation was an essential qualification for the achievement of civic virtue, so was absolute individual independence. For, the civic humanists believed, virtue was attainable only by men of independent property, preferably in land, whose independent holdings would permit them to cultivate the intensely autonomous behavior that alone could preserve the polity in a stable and uncorrupted state. The institutional device through which these independent citizens exercised their autonomous wills in pursuit of civic virtue and the common good was the balanced constitution, or mixed government. The necessary characteristic of such a government was that the constituent elements of the polity—usually defined as the one, the few, and the many (in early modern England, King, Lords, and Commons)—shared power in such a way that each was at once independent of the others and incapable of governing without their consent. Only by maintaining a strict balance, the primary obligation of all independent and virtuous citizens, could the polity be preserved in a perpetual stasis that would provide its citizens with full liberty, defined as the right of citizens to participate—to pursue virtue—in the public realm.

By contrast, in a corrupt state each of the three constituent components of the polity—usually the one or, as it was commonly denoted in English politics, the court—sought through the calculated distribution of places and pensions among the members of the other two branches to extend its influence over them and thereby