Epic in American Culture
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The first thanks go, of course, to my wife, Emily. She has not yet read this book. This is because she has not needed to. She has heard and discussed every idea of every page, including the ones that didn’t make it into the final version. She has mourned the deletions, nodded politely at the digressions, and taught me when enough was really enough. In addition to her patient listening, she has loved, encouraged, cooked, played, and done more than I can say to make this book a part of our lives and not the only (or most important) part of our lives. Together, we have welcomed two boys into the world since this project began, which means that for two people in our house, their father has always been at work on this book. I hope we all have a swift, smooth transition to the next stage of life—before we have Aliki’s How a Book Is Made memorized.

My family has continually shown their support throughout this project. My father, Richard, is my most important imagined reader, and whatever is clear about this book is through the effort to do what he has taught me about writing over what is now decades. My sister, Britta, helped me see the importance of Milton to poetry many years ago and has kept asking brilliant questions about this work that helped me say what I needed to say. My mother, Elizabeth, may be the
most basic influence on my path as a scholar of literature, and her love of the word and of people has left its mark on this book.

Many friends and colleagues have helped to hone, elevate, and articulate this project. Luke Bullock has always asked the needed questions, leaving the easy skepticism of “What is an epic?” aside for more important matters, such as this scholar’s duty to the texts he studies. He has nurtured this study’s human character. Matt Garrett, Jolene Hubbs, Steffi Dippold, Patty Roylance, and Joe Shapiro gave invaluable criticism and encouragement in this study’s early stages. Conversations with many colleagues have shaped the development of this work, too many to thank in this space; especially important have been those with Shelley Fishkin, Sam Otter, Max Cavitch, Ed Larkin, Marcy Dinius, Jason Shaffer, Paula Bennett, Lawrence Buell, and David Shields. Mark Thistlethwaite gave generously of his prodigious knowledge of American art criticism and helped energize my study of history painting.

Libraries and librarians have been central to this work, which has been supported by the generous funding of a Mellon Fellowship at the Library Company of Philadelphia and a Diana Korzenik Fellowship from the Friends of the Longfellow House in Cambridge, Massachusetts. My time at the Library Company was full of discovery and scholarly engagement, thanks in large part to their remarkable staff, particularly Connie King, who tirelessly helped me search out materials and connected me to scholars who helped me situate the epic more richly into American and other cultures. Anita Israel and the staff at the Longfellow National Historic Site were a delight to work with, and their making Longfellow’s library available to me gave rare insight into the poet’s prodigious reading (and furnishing) in the epic tradition. John Mustain, Polly Armstrong, Peter Whidden, and the rest of the staff at Stanford University’s Special Collections Library have helped, cheered, and fed this project from its first stages to completion. The library staff at Lafayette College, especially college archivist Diane Shaw, frequently went beyond the call of duty, in particular in securing a crucial acquisition that I am honored to introduce to scholarship in this work (see chap. 2). The Academic Research Committee at Lafayette provided timely funds to support the later research and other expenses of this book, in particular allowing for Katie Thompson and Nicole Ceil to spend a summer poring through curatorial records and manuscript collections with me in New York and Philadelphia institutions; Katie and Nicole’s work was invaluable in bringing together a wide range of materials on art, law, and poetry. Thanks to the staff at the National Academy in New York, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum
of Art, the New-York Historical Society, and the New York Public Library for their accommodation and help during that summer.

Working with Matt McAdam and the rest of the staff at the Johns Hopkins University Press has been a joy and a privilege; everyone has demonstrated a level of enthusiasm and professionalism in producing this book that has continually impressed me and sustained my own efforts in seeing this project through to completion.

An earlier version of the introduction has been previously published as “Lighting Out for the Rough Ground: America’s Epic Origins and the Richness of World Literature,” *PMLA* 122.5 (2007), and is used with the permission of the Modern Language Association of America. Parts of chapter 1 have appeared in altered form as “Epic, Anti-Elocution, and Abolitionism: Thomas Branagan’s *Avenia* and *The Penitential Tyrant*,” *Early American Literature* 44.3 (2009) and “Fragmenting the Bard: Sarah Wentworth Morton’s Intertextual Epic,” *Literature in the Early American Republic* 4 (2012); these are used with permission from the University of North Carolina Press and AMS Press, respectively. My thanks to the editors and readers of these journals for their insight and guidance.

Finally, two people stand apart as special guides to this project. Gavin Jones has been a treasured teacher, supporter, and critic in my life for over a decade, and his ability to be detailed and succinct in his praise, his critiques, and his advice continues to amaze me. I have learned much from Gavin about being a professor, a professional, and a lover of texts. And Jay Fliegelman, to whom this book is dedicated, poured himself into supporting and improving this study just as he has so many other works of American literary and historical scholarship, some of which appear in the bibliography of this book. Working with Jay made one quickly aware that strong scholarship must operate in a tradition, formed often from chosen relations, and the company I have enjoyed in my chosen tradition has been good indeed. An earlier version of this study was the last dissertation Jay signed, and though he did not live to see the volume you (dear reader) now hold, his faith that my story of the epic in America was a story worth telling has sustained the research and revision that became this book. Another career is launched, thanks to a man unreservedly committed to nurturing new professors.
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