Epic in American Culture

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All writing of epic begins with reading epic. One of the crucial reasons for the historical fluidity of epic’s definition as a form is the variety of purposes and circumstances with which readers approach epic works—works that readers understand to be epic, or wish to be epic, or have heard are meant or reputed to be epic. This allows for a practice we may call *epic reading*, the making of a text into an epic work through the assumptions and intertextual workings of the reader. The next section focuses on two very distinct examples of this: George Sandys’s translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* in colonial Jamestown and Elizabeth Graeme’s translation of Fénelon’s *Adventures of Telemachus*. Not all readers are concerned with fixing or shifting the genre of epic while they read, however; many read to learn a language, to experience an adventurous journey akin to novel reading, or to gain cultural capital as a student (and in so doing to retain or elevate one’s class status). As will be shown throughout this study, epic has often been seen as essential equipment for living, providing both a fount of commonplaces and quotations for rhetorical deployment and a way (or several ways) of thinking about one’s place in a class, a nation, or a world. Thus, before exploring more easily recognized acts of writing in the epic tradition, I begin with a brief
survey of ways that reading in that tradition became fleshed out in the British American colonies and their successors.

This survey begins with practices of translation both as ways of appropriating marginal texts into epic tradition and as strategies for dealing with personal loss, either of political support or of familial ties. As we will see, gender has much to do with the meaning of translation in epic tradition, a genre that has attracted more female translators and writers than is often recognized. The gendering of epic also has implications for the place of epic form in eighteenth-century pedagogy, whether in the informal setting of a group reading in a parlor, the intensive reading of a solitary youth, or the drilling of recitation-based college curricula. That The Power of Sympathy, America’s self-proclaimed first novel, should include such a parlor scene speaks to the consciously shared world that both epic and novel inhabited in the late eighteenth century; the more strenuous pose of the devoted reader of epic is most dramatically taken on by Phillis Wheatley in “To Maecenas,” and the college experiences of Timothy Dwight, the United States’ first recognized epic poet, show some of the dark side of the devotion that Wheatley exhibits. The final section of this survey examines the interplay between illustration, children’s literature, and epic form at the turn of the nineteenth century, as well as the often mysterious cultural uses to which epic was put in the early United States. Alexander Anderson’s Homer illustrations, which became stock images for Philadelphia children’s books in the 1810s, offer a curious parallel to Joel Barlow’s Columbiad, the sumptuously visual book that overwhelmed the poem it contained, rendering the poem virtually unread even in its own time yet lending its name to objects that Barlow intended his poem to eradicate—heavy coastal artillery. These readings (or misreadings) of epic would set the terms for many contemporary and later writers and adapters of epic in the United States. They also help us to see that engaging with epic form continually catches both reader and writer between in principium and in medias res—between the quest for origins and the sense of belatedness, as if any beginning must necessarily find itself struggling to catch up to its own story. And so to Ovid.

Translating Loss: Two Approaches

George Sandys, the first known Anglophone reader of epic in America, was one of the early treasurers of Jamestown Colony, but his reading had preceded his appointment. By the time Sandys left for Virginia, he had completed the first five books of an “Englishing” of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and he used his own corporeal
translation to the New World as his inspiration for literary translation. According to his own account, Sandys translated another two books during the voyage across the Atlantic and the remaining eight books while in residence in Virginia. We will return to the Americanness of the translation itself in a moment,¹ but the first important point is that the Metamorphoses is not manifestly an epic text, but Sandys read it as epic. He renders the opening line thus: “Of Bodies chang’d to other shapes I sing.”² Written within a generation of Virgil’s Aeneid, the Metamorphoses has long defied easy generic classification.³ The main reason for this difficulty is that while the length of the work and the use of hexameters—a meter largely reserved for epic poetry in Latin—invite comparison to Virgil’s masterpiece, the episodic structure resists subordination to narrative unity that for Aristotle characterized the epic form. Furthermore, Ovid adopts many of Virgil’s and Homer’s distinctive devices: invocations, extended similes, catalogs. However, he also slyly changes (metamorphoses?) many of these conventions so that they are clearly his own, and not nearly as obviously in line with the developing epic tradition. For example, in the invocation, which involves “singing” for Homer and Virgil, Ovid replaces the Aeneid’s “cano” (I sing) with “dicere” (to tell). That Sandys should choose “I sing” to translate Ovid’s cagey phrase pushes his poet firmly into the epic tradition, and the translator thus associates himself with the tradition as well: the greatest of genres for any Renaissance poet, but especially for a royally commissioned one, as Sandys hoped to become.

As James Ellison has argued, Sandys’s own poetics are closer to Virgil’s than to Ovid’s, emphasizing the regularity of line and expression rather than witty agility; in fact, Sandys translated the first book of the Aeneid as well, probably before his Ovid project. Aeneid I, with its explication of the Roman legacy of colonialism and its account of Aeneas landing with his crew on the shores of Carthage, the first “brave new world” of Virgil’s epic, would have been an ideal choice as a prolegomenon for an imperial project—such as the colonization of Virginia. Ellison speculates that Sandys translated Virgil as a form of political posturing, hoping to win royal favor at a moment when Sir Edwin Sandys, George’s older brother, was part of a faction seeking to seize control of the Virginia Company from within Parliament.⁴ One need not look far to find Sandys’s own politics emerging from his reading of Ovid. Metamorphoses VI and VII, the books Sandys said that he translated en route to Virginia, relate several famous voyages, most notably that of Jason and the Argonauts, a story that includes Jason’s civilizing of and marriage to the barbarian sorceress Medea.
Ovid’s treatment of the violence of the Trojan War as yet another cycle in the endless chain of metamorphoses would have served Sandys well during the aftermath of a 1622 massacre of over three hundred colonists by neighbors previously believed to be friendly. Like the Trojans, Sandys and his fellow administrators were under the impression during their first year in Virginia that the Powhatans wanted peace. The optimism surrounding renewed efforts toward education and evangelism in the Chesapeake region left Sandys and his cohorts vulnerable, despite intelligence reports and other warning signs. Having failed as a colonial administrator and eager to regain political favor from Charles, Sandys published his Ovid translation, which he titled the *Metamorphosis*, in 1626, a year after his return to England. In his dedication to the king, Sandys attempted his own metamorphosing of administrative disaster into cultural capital: “[H]ad it proved as fortunate as faithfull, in me, and others more worthy; we had hoped, ere many yeares had turned about, to have presented you with a rich and wel-peopled Kingdome; from whence now, with my selfe, I onely bring this Composure.”

Sandys in fact achieved considerable fame throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries on the strength of his Ovid translation, the only lasting legacy from his work in Jamestown. Yet part of what made the translation so valuable was the extensive commentary that Sandys wrote later for the 1632 edition, which included engravings for each of the fifteen books, plus the *Aeneid* translation, added as an appendix entitled “An Essay to the Translation of Virgil’s *Aeneis*.“ The commentary distilled classical and medieval thought regarding Greco-Roman myths and their interpretation, but Sandys also provided examples from his experience in the New World as well as his extensive reading in the history of Spain’s American empire, thus further adapting Ovid’s text in light of his own reading of America. He likens centaurs to the initial appearance of Spaniards on horseback in Mexico; the Spanish lust for gold in South America is a modern antitype to Midas; and “*Columbus* by his glorious discoveries more iustly deserved a place for his ship among the Southerne Constellations, then ever the *Argonautes* did for their so celebrated *Argo*.” In many ways Sandys, like his translation, stood between two worlds, as he commented in his dedication: “It [the poem] needeth more then a single denization, being a double Stranger: Sprung from the Stock of the ancient Romanes; but bred in the New-World, of the rudenesse whereof it cannot but participate; especially having Warres and Tumults to bring it to light instead of the Muses.” Strange indeed, reading a text into the epic canon, and then reading it further into an American history made of imperial rivalries, anxieties of unlooked-for violence, and classical tropes
being strained from their original contexts to explain the unexplainable realities of America.

While Sandys found the translation of epic to be a useful form of political damage control, a century and a half later an even more ambitious translation project would serve the young Pennsylvanian Elizabeth Graeme as therapy. While traveling in Britain in 1764, Graeme learned that her mother had died of an illness that had begun slowly before the voyage’s start. When she returned to Graeme Park, she found that not only her mother but her only remaining sister, Ann, had died. Graeme, alone with her aging father in a large, remote house, needed a way of expressing her grief, filling long solitary hours, and processing the loss that would mark the rest of her life. Already the author of hundreds of pages of prose and verse, she refocused her energies as a poet.

Her commonplace book known as *Poemata Juvenilia* provides a narrative of her 1760s experiences through poems and extracts. Following poems relating her travels and addressing new acquaintances, Graeme writes “Some lines upon my first being at Graeme Park,” reflecting on the loss of her mother, then “Wrote on the Tomb Stone of Mrs Ann Graeme,” and extracts from James Thomson “on the Death of a Friend.” Some twenty-five pages later, she writes a series of biblical paraphrases, first dealing with guilt (the Prodigal Son, David’s adultery condemned), and then with the presence of strong women in men’s spaces (Judith’s triumph over Holefernes, Moses and Miriam singing at the Red Sea). The very next item after the Moses and Miriam paraphrase is an “Invocation to Wisdom,” identified as the introduction to her translation of Fénelon’s *Adventures of Telemachus*. As Miriam is Moses’s co-worshiper in the paraphrase, so Wisdom (or Minerva) becomes the handmaiden of God by guiding “the Modest Youth” through danger.

Graeme realizes the difficulty of explaining Christian truth through classical mythology, even as she asks “Grave Wisdom” to “[i]nspire my Muse and Animate her Lays,/ That She Mellifluous may chaunt forth thy praise” (345). She explains that Jesus taught in parables, and that Fénelon’s allegory follows the same principle of “screen[ing] his purpose in the pleasing Tale,” and as she seeks “a Spark of that Celestial Fire” that inspired Fénelon’s work, Graeme claims to be following a source who follows *the* Source (347, 345). She further insists on her own personal faith as a Christian: “That sacred Name I awfully revere; / I humbly ho[p]e to reach the blest Abode / Prepard by Christ th’ Eternal Son of God” (346). Graeme had spent the two years following her return to Graeme Park paraphrasing the Psalms, an act of piety as much as it was one of personal consolation. She
gave a copy of her paraphrase as a gift to her minister and family friend, Rev. Richard Peters, but her work on *Telemachus* seemed to be more private to herself, even if she did not keep the project a secret. Her turn from biblical imitation to classical epic-romance needed some explanation even to herself, but it becomes clear as her invocation continues that, as Susan Stabile has pointed out, she is translating the guidance of specifically female virtue rather than male: “Passion and Wisdom ever are at Strife... Minerva gives true Fortitude of Soul / That does the Rage of Passions Tyde controul” (348). Using the metaphor of a flaming furnace to describe Wisdom’s tempering of the “Puerile Mind,” the Telemachus story also becomes suddenly autobiographical:

This *Fire* is *disapointment, Grief, and Pain*,  
Which if the Soul with Fortitude Sustain:  
The Furnace of *Affliction* makes more Bright  
Still higher burnishd in *Jehovahs* Sight:  
The rugged Path we joyful Shall survey  
Thro which our Passage to perfection lay;  
And Bless the Briars of Lifes Thorny Road  
Which Ends in *Peace in Happiness and God*. (348–49)

The date given for this poem in *Poemata* is June 14, 1768, three years after the loss of mother and sister, and these closing lines of the invocation point to both the hope of afterlife and the perspective of hardships receding into memory. Graeme dedicates her translation to Wisdom, a goddess disguised as a mortal man (Mentor) in Fénelon’s work; her own identification with Telemachus, the son of a great hero in search of that heroic father, magnifies her own grief to heroic proportions.

Yet it is a heroism understood through the filiopiety of the child, and for all the claims that the invocation makes for her, the notes after her pseudonymous signature, “Laura,” explain that the translation “much... amusd Her after the death of Her Mother And Sister: to amuse her was the aim” (349). Graeme spent three years, from 1767 to 1769, working on her translation, and the almost thirty thousand lines that she wrote suggest not so much a commitment to the original as a commitment to keep the project going. She returned to the translation in 1786, after her marriage to Hugh Fergusson had ended in separation, spending another year and more writing annotations and adding extracts from poets (Thomson and Milton were favorites) and critics (Johnson, Addison, and Beattie appeared frequently). Her project became in part a defense of her choice to translate
the work into verse, as Telemachus had been written in rhythmic prose, and no English translation to date had used verse; it also became an intervention in the masculine form of the learned edition. The sheer size of the project, over three thousand manuscript pages, is the usual reason given for her failure to publish her translation.¹⁰ A labor of love that occupied almost three decades of Graeme’s life would ultimately be buried like the departed loved ones for whom she undertook the work in the first place.

Graeme’s decision to render Telemachus in heroic couplets would seem to corroborate the arguments of writers such as Hugh Blair that Fénelon’s work was in fact epic, but it is worth considering what such an alignment of Telemachus with epic verse (rather than the novel) would have meant to her. Graeme’s extensive reading in epic comes across even in her short works, such as her literary history of Britain and the new United States in her later “Litchfi eld Willow” odes, in which she celebrates Pope’s Homer as well as American works such as Joel Barlow’s Vision of Columbus.¹¹ Stabile describes Graeme as “fashioning herself as a female Odysseus,” approaching the journal of her transatlantic voyage as a “heroic odyssey.”¹² That Graeme boldly places herself as the center of the action in her journal, rather than a spectator of “greater” activities, is certainly remarkable, but her reading in Homer also gives her the occasion for a total experience of the sublime during her voyage: “I saw the Sun set clear, for the fi rst Time, I was reading Priam’s Petition to Achilles, for the Body of Hector, I think my Eyes were engaged in one of the fi nest Sights in the Universe, & my Passions, interested in one of the most pathetic that History or Poetry can paint.”¹³ The simultaneous reading of Homer and gazing at the horizon is a visual tour de force, as Graeme seems empowered by her reading to take in everything at once. This sumptuous view is the fi rst American glimpse of epic as world literature, the literature of travel that transcends national and generic borders: the view, the text, and the voyage all participate in the overall effect, in a moment not unlike Thoreau’s reading of Homer at Walden Pond or Longfellow’s transcontinental nationalizing of the Odyssey in Evangeline. Signifi cantly, Graeme compresses all this into the senses and emotions of an individual experience, her own. Almost a century before Whitman devised his legendary “I,” Graeme was practicing an imperial gaze that emphasized the continuity of its vision rather than the hierarchies or categories that she might have invoked while steeping herself in the classics.

Graeme fi gures herself as a solitary fi gure in this passage, but she was far from alone in using epic as a gateway to the delights of scenery and leisured travel in her circle. Pennsylvania governor John Penn used Tasso’s Jerusalem Delivered to
learn Italian while waiting to cross the Alps from Germany on a grand tour. Julia Rush Williams, the daughter of Philadelphia physician and Declaration signer Benjamin Rush, kept a commonplace book that included pages of excerpts from Homer, Virgil, and Tasso; however, her lists were organized as descriptions of sunrise, or of love. For the highly educated Julia, epic could serve the sentimental purposes of a girl’s commonplace book as easily as the more traditional masculine virtues that another Declaration signer, John Dickinson, celebrated in his Lockean commonplace book, the hallmark of an educated gentleman of the eighteenth century. Dickinson’s gift to his 8-year-old daughter Maria of a copy of *Paradise Lost*—the only European epic printed in North America before 1790—suggests that the line between gentlemanly learning and female sentimental education may have been less rigid than has generally been assumed regarding the place of epic in eighteenth-century reading. The interplay between these two modes of education, of virile virtue and pious sentiment, runs through the next section.

**The Voice of the Student: Learning from Epic**

Women were, in fact, rarely left to read epic by themselves in the eighteenth century. William Hill Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* (1789) provides a striking scene of the politics and aesthetics of a shared reading of epic in the eighteenth century. In Letter 30, Mrs. Holmes gives the young Myra her philosophy of education through narrating her domestic life:

What books do you read, my dear? We are now finishing Barlow’s Vision of Columbus, and shall begin upon Dwight’s Conquest of Canaan in a few days. It is very agreeable to read with one, who points out the beauties of the author as we proceed. Such a one is [Mr.] Worthy.—Sometimes Mr. Holmes makes one of our party, and his notes and references to the ancient poets are very entertaining. . . . We have little concerts, we walk, we ride, we read, we have good company—this is Belleview in all its glory!  

The reading of Barlow and Dwight makes this a scene of imagining the nation through literature, but the locality of reception is of equal importance. Reading Barlow’s and Dwight’s epics is rendered “agreeable” through on-the-spot critical assessment in a parlor scene of mutual performance; Mr. Worthy’s notices of the authors’ “beauties” properly direct the attention in an anthologizing act, while Mr. Holmes’s “entertaining” notes on classical authors bring ancients and moderns
into dialogue in ways both dolce and utilis. The pleasures of the epistolary novel itself, the thrill of “listening in” on others’ correspondence, makes voyeurism the originary moment of education, as it also blurs the lines between orality, script, and print. These blurred boundaries bring us to the heart of Mrs. Holmes’s disguised instruction: not only must Myra read the right books, “American” books for the American lady, but she must also read in community, and with the right company. Reading is part of a larger communal activity that includes music, physical exercise, conversation, and the pleasure of knowing that one has chosen the right friends. All this constitutes the “glory” of Mrs. Holmes’s aptly named Belleview, where seeing and being seen are just as important as reading and being read to—both for the men and for the women.

A distinct lack of visibility seems to have motivated Phillis Wheatley’s own representation of herself as a reader of epic. In her case, she downplays the difference of gender by emphasizing her role as a solitary though mentored reader, a student of epic along much more male lines than either Mrs. Holmes or even the learned Elizabeth Graeme. Wheatley’s status as a poet depended on her being able to convince white, educated men that she could read like them, and she aimed to do just that from the first poem in her collection, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* (1773). “To Maecenas” is an apostrophe presumably addressed to a patron, as Maecenas was the name of a Roman nobleman who supported both Virgil and Ovid at various times. While several candidates for Wheatley’s actual “Maecenas” have been proposed, the fact that Wheatley opens her collection with an acknowledgment of the power of patronage in her own life is more important for this discussion than the identity of the actual patron (Wheatley had several, in fact). And the opening description of Maecenas in the poem emphasizes his role as an ingenious reader, a kind of precursor to the “alert and heroic reader” that Thoreau posits in *Walden* and a model for Wheatley herself:

Maecenas, you, beneath the myrtle shade,
Read o’er what poets sung, and shepherds play’d.
What felt those poets but you feel the same?
Does not your soul possess the sacred flame?
Their noble strains your equal genius shares
In softer language, and diviner airs.

The next lines describe the power of Homer and Virgil as poets, and the addressee shifts from the patron to Homer, “Sire of verse” (10). Wheatley recreates a sense
of Homeric sublime (via Pope), as storms evoke “deep-felt horror”; slow, elegiac lines describe his “gentler verse,” and the social contract of the sympathetic reader is fulfilled “when great Patroclus courts Achilles’ aid, / The grateful tribute of my tears is paid” (10). Wheatley shows that she is a good enough reader to react properly at the right times to Homer, and a good enough poet to capture that reaction in the rhythm of her own lines, devices that John Shields has shown that she adapted from her mentor Mather Byles’s poem, “Written in Milton’s paradise lost,” itself a poem of youthful apprenticeship to a classical master. Yet this last couplet makes a strange choice for a moment to weep. The couplet after it describes Patroclus’s death and the mourning his death inspires in his great cousin, Achilles. Wheatley does not cry at the point of death, but at the point at which Patroclus begs Achilles to let him use the older warrior’s armor as a disguise, that he might lead the Greeks to victory. It could be that the most moving thing about Patroclus’s story for Wheatley is the moment when the young hero must seek patronage, even debasing himself to get it. Considering Wheatley’s own youth in 1773 (she was around 19) and the obstacles she had faced in securing patronage as a young female slave, her tears suggest that she was a particularly sensitive reader, sensitive to both the pathos of the verse and the tragic politics of the story.

Wheatley’s penchant for imitation, her playful revision of her sources, and her emphasis on reading and display of learning all show how seriously she took her own identity as a student—a mature one, yes, but hardly a graduate. When she laments that she has not equaled Homer and Virgil (“here I sit, and mourn a grov’ling mind” [11]), this need not be an act of race treason or yet one more apology for living too late for poetic fire. The lines just before this lament suggest an expectation of development: “O could I rival thine [Homer’s] and Virgil’s page, . . . Soon the same beauties should my mind adorn, / And the same ardors in my soul should burn” (10). The word “soon” here assumes not that a muse’s magic wand will suddenly change her writing, but that once the poet can find a way to “rival,” a way that could very well exist, a growth in ability will follow in the course of further education. The subjunctive “should” further emphasizes the conditionality of poetic greatness and its unpredictability, rather than its impossibility. Even the “grov’ling mind” is one “[t]hat fain would mount and ride upon the wind” (11). She seeks not inspiration but indulgence and protection from her patron; she has her own plans for gaining inspiration, apparently. Though Maecenas’s “breast” is “the Muses home,” she aims only to “snatch a laurel” from his “head” and asks him to “defend my lays” (11–12). By claiming consanguinity with
the African playwright Terence but publicly desiring kinship with Homer and Virgil, Wheatley shows that even as a juvenile author she has a sense of her career and its political realities. Now that her patronage is secure, she subtly vies for her own space as an author.

Wheatley’s youth is perhaps the most underemphasized element of her identity as an author, even as she foregrounds her role as student. And as her example shows, even committed student readers of epic can have unexpected and potentially severe reactions to their reading. In its way, Timothy Dwight’s student reading of Homer was as radical as Wheatley’s, though done as a Yale student rather than as a slave. Early in his college days in the 1760s, Dwight had developed a passion for Homer as well as an ambition for studying him in the original. Disappointed by the inefficacy of Yale’s Greek teachers, he made a point of rising an hour before morning prayers to parse a hundred lines of Homer by candlelight, a discipline that made him one of New England’s most accomplished Greek scholars in his day, but that also permanently damaged his eyesight. Yet his passion for English letters was hardly less than that for the Greek bard. While a tutor at Yale, he started a campaign with fellow tutor John Trumbull for the inclusion of belletristic literature in the college’s academic program; Dwight went so far as to offer lectures on English literature after regular class hours, based on Kames’s *Elements*. Such investment in literature, both classical and modern, helps to explain why Dwight wrote what is often credited as the first American epic poem published in the United States, *The Conquest of Canaan*. Yet when Dwight became president of Yale years later, he not only made the first major effort to introduce English into an American college’s curriculum but also fought unsuccessfully to bar his beloved Homer from the sophomore curriculum, and when he lost his main point he insisted that the faculty not teach Homer on Mondays, as it would lead the students to study the heathen bard’s works on Sundays. Dwight’s personal interest in Homer, however great it was, could not bring the venerable educator to advocate classical studies over the sublime (and pious) grandeur of Milton—or Milton’s source. For Dwight, the classics had to be taught under very specific strictures, lest student reading lead to the wrong consequences—a position shaped by his own co-curricular reading of those same classics. He was, after all, teaching boys, or young men not much beyond boyhood, and by the start of Dwight’s presidency at Yale in 1795, he had already seen the apprenticeship of epic reading give way to the self-assertion of epic writing in his own life and that of his classmates, and it was becoming increasingly clear that the childhood consumption of epic could have unpredictable consequences, especially
as images began to take over the text. The importance of the pedagogical origins of Dwight’s and Barlow’s epic poems will be discussed at length in chapter 1, but let us first examine some of the implications for the broader movement to package and consume epic poetry as fundamentally consumable boys’ reading.

Guns, Ants, and Extravagance: Epic for Boys

As book illustration processes became more economical and widespread, the connection of image and word in the packaging of epic poetry made the form increasingly inviting for young readers. Alexander Anderson, by 1800 the preeminent wood engraver and book illustrator in the United States, considered his own reading as a child to have molded his thinking about the work of an illustrator. In his memoir, Anderson recounted few details of schooling years beyond his reading: “After devouring all the toy books of Newbury the first book of any consequence was Aesop’s Fables and the next Dryden’s Virgil, the engravings in which formed no small share of the entertainment.”

By associating Aesop, the quintessential children’s author, with Dryden, poet laureate of England and translator extraordinaire, Anderson showed how permeable the divide between high and low literature—and between adults’ and children’s literature—was in the English-speaking world. Later in the nineteenth century, British writers as diverse as Thomas Babington Macaulay, Thomas Arnold (Matthew’s father), John Ruskin, A. W. Kinglake, and Compton Mackenzie all recorded memories of reading and play-acting from Pope’s Iliad as boys, which might help to explain that translation’s loss of literary prestige in the nineteenth century: a translation that made Homer attractive to children could not be sufficiently serious for the likes of Matthew Arnold, Benjamin Jowett, or William Cullen Bryant (the latter made his own literal translation in blank verse, of both the Iliad and the Odyssey, in the early 1870s).

Anderson would in fact contribute to the recasting of Pope’s Homer as a children’s book with a series of woodcuts that he made for William Durell’s firm in New York in 1808—the first American-designed illustrations of Homer, an event Durell highlighted on the title pages for both the Iliad and the Odyssey, which were “ORNAMENTED WITH WOOD CUTS, / Originally Designed and Engraved by Dr. A. ANDERSON, of New-York.” Rather than embrace the scope of European full-page illustrations of epic poems, Anderson composed tailpieces for each book of the Iliad and several books of the Odyssey, creating miniature vignettes within an already miniaturized text; virtually all American reprints of Pope’s Homer were pocket-sized, including the duodecimo Durell imprints.
Even as Pope’s Homer appeared in cheaper and cheaper reprints for an increasing range of readers, Anderson’s illustrations were themselves recycled, but in a peculiar way. Philadelphia publishers Jacob Johnson and Benjamin Warner, Quakers specializing in children’s literature who had published the first edition of Richard Snowden’s *Columbiad* in 1795 (discussed in chap. 1), acquired the woodblocks to Anderson’s *Iliad* illustrations, most likely from Durell, and used them in several children’s books throughout the 1810s. Tracing one of these illustrations through Johnson and Warner’s catalog is instructive. In *The Budget* and *The Friend of Youth* (both 1813) appears a woodcut of a man in classical armor, reclining on the seashore and gesturing toward the ocean, suggesting both the romantic adventure awaiting the young reader and the sobering messages the stories contain. This image originally appeared at the end of *Iliad* I, illustrating Achilles’s mourning after the loss of his concubine Chryseis in his battle of words with Agamemnon. One of the most sentimental moments in *Iliad* I, Anderson’s choice of scene translates easily into other venues for sentimentalism, which was a stock in trade for Johnson and Warner’s child-friendly titles. The 1813 *A Present for Good Boys* is perhaps the most extreme example of this, as a story titled “The Travelled Ant,” narrated in the voice of the eponymous character, closes with the ant bidding his young reader “Farewell!” (fig. 1). Directly below this last “Farewell!” is Anderson’s Achilles in mourning, as if manifesting the narrator’s confessed “vain race” of the ants in all-too-human form. What began as a sentimental depiction of an epic conflict transformed within five years into sentimentality stretched to the limits of imagination, a human fantastically standing in for an already fantastic ant-speaker. If Homer was not already a boy’s book, the American visual response to Homer served to infantilize the epic even as history painters such as Benjamin West and John Trumbull sought to further fetishize it, as discussed in chapter 3. The inextricability of elevating epic and infantilizing it haunted even the most serious presentations of epic, and the prime example of this phenomenon may be Joel Barlow’s *Columbiad* (1807).

A rejection of Barlow’s earlier *Vision of Columbus* (1787), his *Columbiad* was meant to celebrate Columbus’s achievement and the spread of worldwide democracy that his discovery made possible. The title page included an untranslated epigraph from Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*, in which Fortune predicts that the mariner “will spread [his] sails so far toward an unknown pole that Fame . . . will scarcely follow with her eyes [his] flight.” Fortune goes on to say that Fame may sing of “Alcides [i.e., Hercules] and Bacchus,” but it is enough that “she only give some hint” of Columbus. This excerpt from Tasso emphasizes two elements of
us, that every thing in this world was made for our use. Now, I have seen such vast tracts not at all fit for our residence, and peopled with creatures so much larger and stronger than ourselves, that I cannot help being convinced that the Creator had in view their accommodation as well as ours, in making this world.

I confess this seems probable enough; but you had better keep your opinion to yourself.

Why so?

You know we ants are a vain race, and make high pretensions to wisdom as well as antiquity. We shall be affronted with any attempts to lessen our importance in our own eyes.

But there is no wisdom in being deceived.

Well—do as you think proper. Meantime, farewell, and thanks for the entertainment you have given me.

Farewell!

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**Figure 1.** Alexander Anderson, [illustration of Achilles], *A Present for Good Boys* (Philadelphia, 1813), p. 29.

Library Company of Philadelphia.
Columbus’s legacy that serve Barlow’s purposes particularly well: his immortality and his invisibility. While Fortune seems to elevate “the Mariner” above Hercules and Bacchus, superhuman champions and civilizers of mankind, she also gives the earlier, more remote stories over to Fame to sing; Columbus is the topic not of song but of some hint or sign (“alquanto accenne”). He is the indirect subject of fame, for Barlow as for Tasso, and the unity of Barlow’s sprawling narrative depends entirely on Columbus-as-spectator, not Columbus-as-heroic-actor. Columbus is put before the reader’s gaze only so that the character’s gaze and the reader’s can merge; Columbus is nothing more or less than the vehicle for Barlow’s literary enterprise.

And the *Columbiad* was certainly an enterprise. In its production values, it was more a monument than a poem; in its cost ($10,000 to produce, of which Barlow fronted $5,000), it was extravagant. It was printed in quarto at a time when even ambitious American poems appeared in small octavo or duodecimo formats, and it was meant to celebrate everything that America could produce involving books. The paper was American-made, the type was designed and struck by an American foundry, and the illustrations were British in origin only because Barlow’s negotiations to employ the American John Vanderlyn fell through.  

Attention to epic’s importance to the language of its composition, Barlow also used his *Columbiad* to incorporate spelling reforms, most of them advocated by his Yale classmate Noah Webster, and the poet gives his explanation of his orthography in a four-page postscript, in hopes that his poem would help Americanize English. The sheer monumentality of the *Columbiad* presented a problem for Barlow, however. While his poem celebrated the universal spread of democracy (he had become a radical after living in Paris in the 1790s), the *Columbiad*’s audience would necessarily be an audience of wealthy consumers. While the book was published on three different kinds of paper, including a “coarse” issue, this last version was priced at $10 a copy in boards and was perhaps never even offered for sale; the fine paper copies were to sell for $20 in boards or $25 bound, an extraordinary price even for a fine book in England at the time.

Such a sumptuous artifact ran so counter to Barlow’s liberal principles that he used his dedication to Fulton to shift the blame for the book’s physical appearance and suppress his own involvement in the book’s production. Barlow’s making Fulton out to be the agent that brought the *Columbiad* into being might have been bad faith, but more importantly, it was the poet’s admission that the sheer materiality of his work had taken it out of his own control. When Barlow gave copies of the book to such important Republican allies as Dolly Madison
and Thomas Jefferson and to institutions such as the American Philosophical Society, he seems to have made the presentation unbound, possibly out of embarrassment at the book’s grandiosity as it was. And yet the book seemed to only attract further luxury to itself. Later sellers inserted portrait pages of the presidents, and a two-page facsimile of the Declaration Signers’ autographs transformed Barlow’s anti-monarchical poem of the Enlightenment into a grand procession of patri patriae, with Barlow’s own frontispiece portrait concluding the sequence. Many buyers accentuated the luxury of the book through their choice of bindings; Joseph Brown Barry went so far as to have the leather boards of his Robert DeSilver-bound copy of the Columbiad painted with a pastoral landscape and a seascape—a pictorialization of Barlow’s encyclopedic ambition. This was a text not to be read, but to be dressed for displays of conspicuous consumption.

No less a tastemaker than the Edinburgh Review’s Francis Jeffrey recognized the Columbiad’s status as a luxury object in his review of the poem. After praising and damning various aspects of the writing, Jeffrey gave an effusive, though somewhat backhanded, tribute to the book’s materiality: “There is one thing . . . which may give the original edition of Mr Barlow’s poem some chance of selling [in Britain],—and that is, the extraordinary beauty of the paper, printing and embellishments. We do not know that we have ever seen a handsomer book issue from the press of England; and if this be really and truly the production of American artists, we must say, that the infant republic has already attained to the very summit of perfection in the mechanical part of bookmaking.” The very wondrousness of the book’s physical quality raised doubts for Jeffrey, first of England’s ability to compete with such fine publishing, next of the authenticity of the claim that the work was a wholly American production, and third of the place of technology in the cultural hierarchy that Jeffrey and his collaborators so tirelessly defended. The very desirability of such an object forces the issue as to whether sensual desire—for the “beauty” of the “handsome” book—should rival, or indeed supplant, the intellectual desire for good literature. That such beauty is a result of “mechanical” rather than artistic “perfection” foregrounds the class distinction that Barlow seems to have feared that his book would stand for; Jeffrey’s compliment reversed the elitist pretensions of the artifact by drawing attention to its very status as an artifact. The poem was by this point already forgotten; like Joseph Brown Barry, Jeffrey had no need to read further, as the pleasures of looking at the book were a sufficient reason to table, as it were, the question of literary merit.

Yet if the physical attributes of the Columbiad carried both the book and the poem well beyond the author’s control, the name “Columbiad” strayed even further.
In 1811, an American army engineer named George Bomford named a new smooth-bore cannon he had designed the “columbiad” in honor of Barlow’s poem. By the start of the Civil War, the name “columbiad” applied to virtually any large defense artillery piece, which had become icons of American military strength. Barlow’s vision of a millennial rise of reason had been translated into the terrible sublimity of modern warfare. Some two centuries after a failed colonial treasurer “misread” Ovid into the epic canon, Americans continued to take whatever they pleased from their reading of epic, be it power, freedom, a room of one’s own, a prize for good behavior, or a clever name for a weapon. Even when Americans did not “read” the epics produced by their compatriots, epic would continue to define—and redefine—what Americans thought their nation and its culture meant.