The range of readings and readers of epic in colonial America testifies to the fluidity of epic as a genre even as early as the seventeenth century. Many critics have assumed that epic was a fairly fixed idea in eighteenth-century England and British America, partly from the proliferation of mock-epic poems and partly from the wide influence of French critics such as Voltaire and Bossu who sought to codify Aristotelian genre theory. These assumptions have prepared generations of critics to see early American epic as imitative, moribund, a literary dead end that would require the rise of the novel to overcome. Yet many of the later innovations in American epic writing—Cooper’s Leatherstocking cycle, Cole’s conflation of poetry and painting as epic arts, Whitman’s gazes into the future of poetry—were anticipated in the years surrounding the Revolution. New experiments with epic form grew out of and fed a crucial shift in the usage of the term “epic” throughout the eighteenth century from a formal concept to a way of narrating and thinking about heroism. English dictionaries provide a helpful cross section of this shift; before about 1750, most English dictionaries defined “epic” in terms of verse structure. For example, Edward Phillips in his A New World of Words described “Epick” as “belonging to, or consisting of Heroick or Hexameter Verse;
as An Epick Poem.” However, by the time Samuel Johnson defined “epic” in his Dictionary, the term had become popularly understood in terms of subject matter, to which Johnson added performance as a criterion: “Narrative; comprising narrations, not acted, but rehearsed. It is usually supposed to be heroick, or to contain one great action atchieved by a hero.”¹ This shift saw its clearest theoretical expression in the writings of Scottish Enlightenment critics such as Hugh Blair and Henry Home, Lord Kames. By the time of the American Revolution, the frequent use of these writings in formal schooling and in educated families’ libraries had prepared Americans such as Timothy Dwight (who read Kames’s Elements of Criticism in Yale’s library as a student in the 1760s) and Joel Barlow (who learned his Kames through Dwight) to treat epic as a malleable form ready to be updated by modern ideas, forms, and historical movements.

Both Blair and Kames rejected the rigid formalism of the French critics, but they struggled to establish viable criteria to take in the great range of texts ancient and modern that could be considered epic. Kames asserted that no one could draw a conclusive line between epic and all other forms:

Much useless labour has been bestowed, to distinguish an epic poem. . . . It is not a little diverting, to see so many shallow critics hunting for what is not to be found. They always take for granted, without the least foundation, that there must be some precise criterion to distinguish epic poetry from every other species of writing. Literary compositions run into each other, precisely like colours: in their strong tints they are easily distinguished; but are susceptible of so much variety, and take on so many different forms, that we never can say where one species ends and another begins.²

Kames’s analogy to colors suggests the affinity between epic literature and the visual arts, a relationship debated with increasing warmth after the publication of Gotthold Lessing’s Laocoön in 1763. The choice of color—a favorite topic of controversy in the wake of Newton’s experiments with light—as a category for comparison also suggests that epic form was in flux by the mid-eighteenth century, so much so that even the best critics could not systematically explain its development. A major reason for this instability was an increasingly complex web of European intertexts with which readers and writers of epic could, and often felt compelled to, engage. Two texts in particular, François Fénelon’s Telemachus and James Macpherson’s “translation” of Ossian’s Fingal, played major roles in what amounted to the invention of epic as a national form in the eighteenth century. Both texts enjoyed numerous translations and reprints
throughout Europe, and Ossian became a favorite figure for imitation among, for example, several American elegists of George Washington. A vital element of Telemachus’s and Fingal’s influence on epic theory and composition was the fact that both were written in prose—metered in the former, highly figurative in the latter, but still prose.

The popularity of Telemachus led both Blair and Kames to gesture toward a more open epic canon. Blair anticipates Lukács’s dismissal of verse form as a requisite for the epic, stating that to exclude Fénelon from the class of epic poets would be “unjust”: “His work, though not composed in Verse, is justly entitled to be held a Poem. The measured poetical Prose . . . gives the Style nearly as much elevation as the French language is capable of supporting, even in regular Verse.” His only objection to Telemachus’s status as an epic focused on content, specifically the “minute details of virtuous policy” that the highly didactic Fénelon speaks through the mouth of Mentor to the young hero. According to Blair, the “object” of an epic is “to improve us by means of actions, characters, and sentiments, rather than by delivering professed and formal instruction.” Kames also used Telemachus as his occasion for disagreeing with Voltaire’s argument that verse is essential to epic. The Scottish jurist noted that the lack of verse form is the French critic’s “single reason” for denying Telemachus epic status, while unspecified “others” who favor “substance” over form (such as Kames?) “hesitate not to pronounce that poem to be epic.” Rather than turning to his own sense of critical judgment, as Blair did, Kames resorted to popular opinion as the gatekeeper of the epic canon: “As to the general taste, there is little reason to doubt, that a work where heroic actions are related in an elevated style, will, without further requisite, be deemed an epic poem.” The rise of substance over form as the prime criterion for epic was a popular movement, as Kames understood it, at least among the educated reading public. As the voice of common sense (in the sense of “public consensus”), Kames readily admitted that reading a work as an epic carried a great deal of weight in determining a work’s status as an epic.

While the critical reception of Telemachus made the writing of modern epics more feasible, the publication of Fingal and the other Ossian poems spurred nationalist antiquarian projects in both Europe and America, as nations emerging from the fallout of eighteenth-century empires sought to establish their own cultural independence through the “discovery” of their own Homeric pasts. J. G. Herder included Ossian in his discussions of poetry as expressing the Geist of a nation. In English-speaking nations, Blair emerged as a champion for Ossian, arguing that the poetry contained native energy now foreign to civilized
nations, even exhibiting “a remarkable resemblance to the style of Old Testament.” Indeed, Blair made an almost Herderian statement on the power of “primitive” language in his often reprinted essay on Ossian: “An American chief, at this day, harangues at the head of his tribe, in a more bold metaphorical style, than a modern European would adventure to use in an Epic poem.” The ancient vigor of *Fingal* trumped the refinement of Fénelon and Voltaire, and the American analogy would be significant for the acceptance of Native American materials as appropriate to epic form. The comparison to the “American chief” also posited a natural eloquence that permitted the critic to ignore neo-Aristotelian canons with relative impunity: “To refuse the title of an epic poem to Fingal, because it is not in every little particular, exactly conformable to the practice of Homer and Virgil, were the mere squeamishness and pedantry of criticism.” Blair goes on to defend Ossian on Aristotelian grounds, however, stating that Homer and Ossian both wrote from nature, and that Aristotle used Homer to examine nature: “No wonder that among all the three, there should be such agreement and conformity.” And little wonder, too, that in the eighty years following the “Ossian revolution” numerous “primitive” European epics saw print for the first time, including the *Nibelungenlied*, *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, several of the Icelandic *Eddas*, and *The Kalevala*. Thanks to new paradigms for understanding epic, and to the new ambition to “discover” another *Iliad*, epic form changed from a structural sum of its parts to a vehicle for national and international self-assertion, paving the way for the Goethean project of world literature and the encyclopedic approach to genre mixing that it would entail. Such was the climate within which the first epic poems in America were written.

Epic writing in eighteenth-century America was a maelstrom of experimentation, cross-generic composition practices, and constant importations of other genres and modes, from elegy to prospect poetry to fragments and devotional writing. The four sections of this chapter trace the development and significance of four experiments that would prove especially influential in the nineteenth century. The first was the centrality of prospect to the narrative structure of epic; while I argued in the introduction that Milton had originated this new approach to epic narrative, the fact that it was most frequently adopted in eighteenth-century America by student writers, and usually as part of a prospect-laden commencement ceremony, points to the importance of occasion—even ephemerality—in American epic. The second experiment emerged not as a refocusing of epic to new purposes but as a critique of epic as a vehicle of memory and celebration; the dogged presence of elegy and lament in early American epics threatened to
“un-man” the epic, even as it opened new possibilities for sentimental discourse in epic form. A third experiment grew from an increasing interest in epic as a site for intertextual pluralism; as the language of sentiment began to make its way into the epic tradition, so did homiletic, ekphrastic, and hymnic discourses in ways not seen since the Renaissance—or, in the case of the poetic fragment, hardly seen before. As with the elegiac turn in American epic, women authors found intertextual experimentation as a way into the hypermasculine epic tradition, and less-educated writers found ways to make epic speak to their own discursive worlds. The fourth experiment, which I call Dissenting epic, amounted to the sharpest critique of all among writers who engaged the epic form: fueled by radical Protestant theology and a corresponding “plain-style” poetics, this approach emphasized biblical narratives while rejecting the learned style of Paradise Lost in order to create a more populist literature for a community of Christian readers that did not map easily onto the nation. More than perhaps any other strain of American epic (to borrow a biological term), Dissenting epic moved between the transnational world of Anglophone evangelicalism and the localities of the often isolated regions where this evangelicalism took root in the eighteenth century. To look at the history of American epic through these experiments gives us not only a much more dynamic and archivally grounded picture of epic traditions but also a clearer sense of how it interacted with the lives of individuals and communities in an often tumultuous period.

Commencing Epic: Prospects and Occasions

The Miltonic prospect was central to American engagements with epic from the early eighteenth century, but that prospect developed into a new convention in large part through a much more ephemeral genre, the college commencement poem. John Seelye has shown striking similarities between prospect poems and epics written by Timothy Dwight, Joel Barlow, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, and other early American poets, but he ignores that most of those prospect poems were written not as gentlemanly works of art, as Pope’s Windsor Forest was, but as student performances of learned skill and institutional aspiration. In fact, no scholar has ever before observed that the first versions of both Dwight’s Conquest of Canaan (1785) and Barlow’s Vision of Columbus (1787) were visions of futurity, presented at college commencement exercises. Dwight’s and Barlow’s epics were not a dead end of classical epic, but new attempts to use epic form as a vehicle for telling new kinds of stories about America and its future.
In addition to Miltonic prospects, American commencement poems tended to recycle the *translatio studii*/*translatio imperii* trope of George Berkeley’s often reprinted “Verses on the Prospect of Planting the Arts and Learning in America.” One element of this narrative that Berkeley created, and that young classical scholars were happy to repeat, was that epic would be a sign of America’s cultural ascendency:

> There shall be sung another golden Age,
> The rise of Empire and of Arts,
> The Good and Great inspiring epic Rage,
> The wisest Heads and noblest Hearts. 

Berkeley’s “epic Rage” saw development in the most famous of American commencement poems, Hugh Henry Brackenridge’s 1771 *The Rising Glory of America*, at the College of New Jersey:

> 'Tis but the morning of the world with us . . .
> I see a Homer and a Milton rise
> In all the pomp and majesty of song,
> Which gives immortal vigour to the deeds
> Atchiev’d by Heroes in the fields of fame.

The combination of Homer and Milton served to conflate the ancient and the modern, the pagan and the sacred. But the idea that America was destined for not just epic fame but a distinctively modern epic fame had already been argued a year earlier at Yale’s commencement exercises.

When John Trumbull gave his master’s oration in 1770, he identified the pinnacle of British greatness not in the Hanoverian age of empire but in the career of Milton, who combined “the united charms of every Muse,” “the greatest force of natural genius,” “all the aids of art,” and sources among “the inspired writers”; *Paradise Lost* was thus “almost as much superior to Homer’s [Iliad], in sublimity of conception, as it is in the greatness of its subject.” As America inherits Milton’s mantle in Trumbull’s version of the *translatio*, it must find a new, modern poetry to challenge the reigning English champion. Trumbull offers four possible scenarios for the great American poem: first, the Harrowing of Hell trumps Milton’s *Paradise Lost* by portraying Christ himself as the freedom fighter, following Milton’s strategy of choosing a biblical moment nearly devoid of description or narrative; second is an inversion of *Paradise Lost* by portraying in full the cataclysmic end of history; third involves a poem on heaven itself, which takes Milton...
head-on in seeking to surpass the heaven scenes in *Paradise Lost*; lastly, a more didactic piece, drawn from the classical store of “Nature’s themes,” might be more realistic than vying with Milton. In this last mode, a poet can settle for “shin[ing] with” the greatest eighteenth-century poets, in the vein of the *Essay on Man*, *The Seasons*, or *Night-Thoughts*. Rather than rising as a Homer and a Milton, Trumbull’s American poet lives in a distinctly post-Miltonic literary world in which Homer has already been supplanted; the prestige of the original is no longer available to the American bard, but by a careful choice of subject the new poet might trump origins with endings—or else merely reach the top shelf of English letters.

If the rhetoric of commencement *translatio* narratives hailed the potential for Americans to repeat the feats of Homer and Milton, however, the actual intentions of Americans like Dwight who undertook epic poems did not necessarily share the same terms as their encouragers. George Sensabaugh describes Dwight as “fired with a sense of mission to advance the fine arts in the New World by writing a great poem,” supporting his statement with a footnote citing Dwight’s preface as his “statement of his ambition.” However, even in the initial printed proposal for subscription in 1775, Dwight admitted that most readers “will perceive that this [poem] is an attempt at Epic Poetry” and hoped that *Conquest*, “if not precluded by deficiency of merit, will be properly denominated an Epic, or Heroic Poem.” In the preface to the published work, Dwight characterizes his accomplishment as having “thrown in his mite, for the advancement of the refined arts, on this side of the Atlantic.” Dwight is a participant in a “long American tradition . . . of trying to elevate the entire cultural enterprise, rather than a single individual, to heroic stature,” a tradition John P. McWilliams, Jr., traces back to Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana*. John C. Shields has criticized McWilliams on this point for his “failure to examine the potential for viewing all efforts to compose the so-called ‘great American Revolutionary era epic’ collectively as a single American epic writ large,” and in fact such seems to be Dwight’s own view. Dwight goes further than either McWilliams or Shields: he refers to his own work as a “mite,” however ironically, to depict the development of art and literature in the United States as a collective, democratic process rather than a tribute to the preeminence of a few Homers and Da Vincis. *Conquest* exists in American letters not as a monument for the ages but as a preface, a provisional work, an early brick in the edifice of the nation’s “refined arts.”

Dwight had in fact begun his poem without intending to write an epic. Though he began contemplating his epic project by 1771, that same year he wrote an initially
unrelated poem and shared it in manuscript with several of his friends at Yale.\textsuperscript{18} That manuscript, which no longer survives, served as a source for several subsequent poems, including \textit{America}, a pamphlet poem signed in 1780 by “a Gentleman educated at Yale-College.”\textsuperscript{19} Using the form of a commencement poem (reinforced by the collegiate connection in the signature), Dwight presents a history of the colonies, culminating in the future glory of America as that of a larger, more enlightened, richer, and more peaceful British empire:

\begin{quote}
Hail Land of light and joy! Thy power shall grow
Far as the seas, which round thy regions flow;
No more shall War her fearful horrors sound.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

This last line signals a transition from America the end of the \textit{translatio} narrative to America the beginning of the millennium: “Then, then an heavenly kingdom shall descend, / And Light and Glory through the world extend.” More so than any of the other \textit{translatio} poems, \textit{America} portrays the course of empire as a horizontal counterpart to the vertical typology of America (or New England) as the new Canaan. \textit{America} grew out of a culture of collegiate verse emphasizing the local, the occasional, and the topical within frameworks of universalized topics such as empire and prosperity. It also became the core of \textit{Conquest}’s vision of futurity in Book X, a testimony to Dwight’s effort to make the visionary prospect central to the message of his Joshua narrative. Dwight’s hesitancy to make large claims for his text in its preface should be considered along with its compositional history; \textit{Conquest}, both as a poem and as a literary event, is much more about the future than its own present. Perhaps one of the reasons why so many readers past and present have read Washington into Dwight’s Joshua is because the Israelite is a forward-oriented figure, looking ahead not only to the settlement of the nation of Israel but also to the new Canaan of Dwight’s America.\textsuperscript{21} This proleptic motive is likely in light of both the relationship between \textit{America} and \textit{Conquest} and Dwight’s influence on Joel Barlow’s own ideas about epic.

Barlow’s own epic ambitions grew out of the warm reception that greeted his 1778 commencement poem at Yale, “The Prospect of Peace.” The poem proved to be so popular that he gave another, very similar poem at the 1781 Yale commencement, and both versions would appear as most of Barlow’s contribution to Elihu Hubbard Smith’s influential anthology, \textit{American Poems} (1793). By 1779, Barlow had begun work on \textit{The Vision of Columbus}, a poem that used the Miltonic vision of futurity as its central narrative frame. While Dwight’s prospect poem
“America” had served as the core of his epic, Barlow’s “Prospect of Peace” became (at least formally) the entirety of the Vision—Paradise Lost XI–XII as an epic unto themselves. However, this is not to say that Columbus’s “vision” is only one of futurity; he first sees the North and South American continents as sheer geography, noting particularly the many rivers and mountain ranges (given in a descriptive catalog in the poem), and begins his narrative vision in his own past with the rise of the Incas. As Dwight had used Christian typology to move away from the classical translatio narrative and the implied circularity of history, Barlow revises the translatio along geographical lines, moving from Incan South America to British North America as a kind of translatio republicae. Barlow's view of America is a hemispheric one, but the hemisphere serves rather as a way to elide the violence against North American nations perpetrated by the “enlightened” colonists that Barlow celebrates in his work. Barlow’s epic does not portray natives as new Latians, precisely because a repetition of the Aeneid narrative would cast America as a conquering heir to the translatio empirii tradition rather than sharing in the republican justice of the Incans. In fact, the millennial prospect that appears at the end of Barlow’s Vision, for all its debt to Dwight, is in some sense a return to the golden age of the Incas, the great self-made American culture. Commencement poetry was always about anchoring the past in the future, and this dual-narrative momentum would continue to define American engagements with epic from Thoreau’s Walden to Melville’s Clarel.

Outside of collegiate circles, prospects often served similar roles in generating and justifying epic poems. Sarah Wentworth Morton’s Beacon Hill, the first installment of a projected serial epic (discussed later in this chapter), began as a prospect in a Boston newspaper. Richard Snowden, a Quaker schoolteacher in New Jersey, wrote an epyllion on the Revolution that concluded with a vision of futurity, but what he found was not a great future but his own reluctance in the face of such sublimity:

Then will Columbia o’er Europa shine,  
And the grand landscape swell in ev’ry line!  
E’en now I see the glowing picture rise,  
While distant nations hail our western skies!  
Yet as I sing, how great the task appears!  
Warn’d by the muse, I yield to prudent fears.

The problem, according to Snowden, is not that America has not made room for its Milton to step forward, but that the very roominess of America has rendered
the author insignificant against the vast landscape, like a wanderer in a Thomas Cole painting. In fact, Snowden admitted in the course of his poem that the American experience needed something besides epic to celebrate it—because the core of that experience for him, as for many American epicists, was mourning. And this would place the entire tradition of American epic in jeopardy.

The End of Epic: The Politics of Mourning

One key reason why lament was such a threat to American epic was because of its politics; the poems discussed in this chapter were largely written in a political climate in which lamenting wrongly or too much could be seen as an act of Toryism. Barlow seemed sensitive to this reality in his repeated cutting short of Columbus’s often extravagant weeping, as when he witnesses the destruction of the Incas at the hands of the Spanish. And yet Barlow’s continual choice to portray Columbus as both a great scientific mind and weeping visionary suggests the centrality of tears to American epic writing. Only once the tears dry can the male ideal of glory and fame be realized in epic narrative, as Sheila Murnaghan has argued; if the tears do not stop, male glory threatens to transform into female lament. Women such as Phillis Wheatley were well aware of this potentiality and exploited it to remake the epic to tell their stories; for many American men who had firsthand experience with the Revolutionary War, such rejection of epic as a celebration of masculinity would have been seen as unpatriotic—but in many of their epic poems, the mourning never seems to end, leaving the works feeling vulnerable, broken, even self-defeating at times. This breakdown of epic heroism is one of the most surprising and influential developments in American literature, one that would culminate in characters such as Longfellow’s Evangeline and Hiawatha and Melville’s Ahab and Starbuck.

Perhaps the most insistently elegiac American epic is Richard Snowden’s little-known *Columbiad* (1795). At the level of narrative, what Snowden mourns is a hero. The first scene introduces Washington’s “first glories,” as he rallies the British forces after Braddock’s defeat at Monongahela as “his country’s champion in fair freedom’s cause” (1–2), implying that he already fights as an American, even while serving Britain. Almost immediately upon his victory, Washington enters his first retirement as the American Cincinnatus, relinquishing his command for a farming life. Washington represents the ideal American farmer, living in a world of leisure and domesticity, with eyes and hands only for peace and cultivation. It may be that Snowden, who signed another work as the “New
Jersey farmer,” conflates Washington with himself in this passage, seeking to
place America in the peace of agricultural life rather than in the “dreadful” ferocity of military prowess.

McWilliams has pointed out that the *Columbiad* does not have a central organizing figure. This is because once the war with Britain begins, Washington no longer is the Cincinnatus that Snowden wants him to be; he has left retirement to return to battle. In the Washington-shaped vacuum of the poem, many men on both sides of the war earn glory in battle, often in events unrelated to Washington’s direct efforts. Majors and captains feature prominently at times in the *Columbiad*, while the epic catalog consists not of warriors but of members of the Continental Congress. Snowden’s epic is a democratic one, a poem that honors a collective effort rather than focusing exclusively on Washington or a few of his compatriots. And so, when Washington returns as a conquering hero at the end of the poem, the effect is jarring. After the British surrender, the wings of peace spread across the nation, and Washington is depicted as sailing the “bark of freedom” safely into port. In one of the strangest moments in the text, Washington is immediately compared to a “rock deep rooted on the shore,” which serves both as a metaphorical parallel and as a deadly foe to the firm-handed helmsman—as if Washington were his own worst enemy (45). The logic of the shift in metaphors lies in the narrative’s move from the war to the establishment of the Constitution, over which “great Washington presides” as the helmsman; soon after, he must put down riots and dissensions as president of the new nation, a “rock deep rooted.” However, this shift raises one of the fundamental questions of the 1790s: whether a revolutionary movement could successfully transition into an established form of government. The process of history that brings about Shays’ Rebellion, the tensions of the ratification debates, and the emergence of party politics in the new government already calls into question the values of revolutionary freedom that the war supposedly brought about.

Snowden never expected his poem to be a success. In his preface, he says that he wrote it as an “epitome” to spur “some one more favoured of the Muses” to outdo his effort (iii–iv). The poet’s impulse is to “resign,/To bards more favour’d of the muse divine” (46), but before he names his preferred heir, he looks back to Philip Sidney as his ideal, who “sung the fam’d Arcadian plains;/In verse like his, how would Columbia shine—/What glowing thoughts appear in every line” (46). Snowden wishes to transform Columbia into Arcadia, a topography outside of time, where the “rock deep rooted” will not be challenged or disrupted by the changes of history. The soothing dream of Sidney’s utopian poetry, which
would “in sweet numbers grateful to the ear, / Sing the gay charms of each revolving year” and “the rising glories of our new-born day” (45), can only come about where each year and each day are the same. The regular measure of neoclassical verse can no longer contain history after the Revolutionary War. The war had changed Snowden’s world so profoundly that he found himself unable to fit American history to existing forms—not so much from a lack of poetic skill as from a lack of new paradigms with which to see the new vistas of postrevolutionary America. At the end of the poem, Snowden expresses a wish that “Some future Humphreys . . . Shall soothe the soul amidst the pangs of death” (46). David Humphreys, an officer in the Continental Army and a Connecticut Wit, was considered by 1795 one of the most talented poets living in America, and Snowden considered Humphreys to possess the literary and military authority to produce a better Columbiad—but Humphreys’s fame was as an elegist.

His choice of poet reemphasizes Snowden’s conflicted attitude toward the war, loathing the violence while celebrating the heroism of America’s military. Snowden and his family were Quakers who emigrated from Yorkshire in the 1760s and found themselves caught up in the political unrest of the 1770s. Snowden’s father assisted in drafting reports against the revolutionaries to send to the London authorities and was imprisoned without a trial for seventeen months after the reports were intercepted; by the time Leonard was freed, he had gone insane, and he died a few years later.25 According to one source, all of the Snowden brothers were arrested for Loyalist sympathies during the Revolution, while another source states that Richard was never arrested but had undergone a military search of his personal papers for seditious writings.26 In another work, Snowden relates witnessing house-to-house guerilla warfare among erstwhile neighbors in western New Jersey.27 In any case, the Revolution for Richard Snowden had meant threats of violence against himself and his family, both for his religion and for his politics. While celebrating the war may have violated Snowden’s Quaker principles, celebrating the politics would have meant denying his family’s traumatic experiences as neutrals and Loyalists, as well as his own ambivalence over the mission of the United States.

Snowden’s text is one of the weirdest early American epics, but his fixation on lament does not make him an outlier; mourning haunts even the most famous of early epics. Laments for fallen loved ones fill the pages of Dwight’s Conquest, whose source, Joshua, is notably hardened toward the realities of scorched-earth warfare. Dwight, though he supported the Americans, lost his supportive father, who was driven from his home in Northampton for his Loyalism and died in
Diffusions of Epic Form in Early America

1777 during the Lyman venture, an attempt by a group of displaced Loyalists to immigrate to western Florida; it is difficult not to see the son’s grief for his lost father in the many laments of *Conquest*. The poem’s grief reaches its climax as Joshua, hearing his daughter’s cries for her dead betrothed, demands why God has led him and Israel to this state, and he declares that he wishes for a quiet life in obscurity instead—the idyllic Northampton life before the Revolution, as it were. The angel of the Lord suddenly appears and tells Joshua, “O Chief of Israel! let no rebel thought / Accuse the wonders, God’s right hand hath wrought.” Having banished the lament as a traitorous intrusion rather than as the leitmotif it is, the angel then shows Joshua the vision of futurity reworked from the “America” poem. Joshua’s vision of Israel’s triumph and the rise of new Canaan in the New World serves as Dwight’s theodicy, but even on the poem’s last page, Israel’s warriors weep for their fallen countrymen. In a poem called *The Conquest of Canaan*, the true center of the work, its point of compositional origin and rhetorical conclusion, is the prospect of a world without war, yet its surroundings are little but war and its effects. Dwight refused to rebel openly from the cause of the war, either Joshua’s or his own, but the loss his family suffered clearly weighed heavily on him.

Phillis Wheatley more openly turned mourning into rebellion in her epyllion “Niobe in Her Distress,” an imitation of Ovid’s account of a queen who loses her children to divine retribution after boasting of her motherhood. One of the most important interventions that Wheatley makes into Ovid’s text is where she chooses to begin and end. She ignores the original bridge narrative between Arachne’s punishment for outdoing Athena and Niobe’s challenge to the gods, thus downplaying the moral point of the original story; she also leaves out the closing account of Niobe’s metamorphosis into a weeping statue, leaving her instead as a grieving, flesh-and-blood mother. The message of the story, both in Ovid and in his several English translations, is that Niobe oversteps her bounds and is justly punished for it. However, Wheatley declares that she intends to use “lofty strains” to represent not a proud upstart but a “queen, all beautiful in woe” (101). This is the epic of Penelope, of Dido, of Eve, the forlorn woman whose greatness has been overshadowed by the masculine tendencies of epic narrative.

If Wheatley personally identifies with Niobe the stricken mother, she identifies at least as strongly with the weakest of the children, as he faces Apollo, the god of poetry and the agent of vengeance in the story. The prayer of the youngest son for mercy is heard by the god, but too late, as the arrow has already been released when Apollo relents. This futilely answered prayer of “Ilioneus, the last,”
echoes Wheatley’s plea in her invocation: “Muse! lend thy aid, nor let me sue in vain, / Tho’ last and meanest of the rhyming train!” (109, 101). While inspiration denied might not have as dire consequences as delayed clemency, Wheatley highlights her awareness of her own vulnerability as a writer in a subordinate social position, and she plays on her youth to make plain the potential cruelty of judgment by those with power over her. Her emphasis on the suffering of Niobe as a mother further humanizes her story, which closes with Niobe as both spectator and spectator: “In her embrace she sees her daughter die” (112). The act of seeing the daughter’s death is not in Ovid’s account, nor in any of Wheatley’s visual sources for her poem (which will be discussed at length in the next section). This is the last line of Wheatley’s poem, and the word “sees” leaves the reader with a mother at the moment of witnessing the destruction of her children. A conclusion is added to the poem, though a note indicates that it is not by Wheatley; the unidentified poet goes on to narrate Niobe’s transformation into a statue. While Wheatley may not have had much choice in including the added ending, the editorial choice to include it testifies to uneasiness at Wheatley’s refusal to acknowledge the story’s original moral. A mother’s grief and the cruelty of the gods are the takeaways in her version, not messages about excessive pride. A poet best known in her lifetime through her elegies, Wheatley made the epic depiction of mourning a site of bitter moral struggle.

A different kind of moral struggle appeared in the writing of Thomas Branagan, an Irish American slaver-turned-abolitionist who published two epic poems about the evils of slavery. These poems were a weird blend of epic, tragedy, reportage, and a constellation of other genres Branagan saw fit to incorporate. His first poem, *Avenia* (1805), was subtitled “a tragical poem, written in imitation of Homer’s Iliad,” and the revised version of *The Penitential Tyrant* (1807) he called “a pathetic poem.” Branagan asserted in his preface to *Avenia* that he was writing an exposé of the evils of the slave trade, based on his first-hand witnessing of, and participation in, those atrocities. At several points in both poems, Branagan’s own tears are offered as both expiation for his sins and a modeled response to the horrors of slavery, as he reimagines the horrors he helped to perpetrate:

The poor unhappy slaves rose to my view,
My former guilt, their wounds now bled anew;
I heard their sighs, and saw their big round tears,
Wept as they wept, and fear’d with all their fears[.]
Not all of Branagan’s own tears are for slaves, however. After *Avenia*'s hero, the African prince Louverture, dies in a single combat with a slave trader, he ascends into heaven, where amid the nameless crowd of the blessed, one named member of the “vast concourse” brings private grief suddenly to the fore. Just before Louverture receives his saintly uniform and joins the multinational chorus, the narrator mentions that “[h]ere little Benjamin with rapture sings/Melodious anthems to the King of kings.” In a rare footnote, Branagan identifies this Benjamin as “[t]he author’s infant son, who departed this life, the 22d of September, 1802, aged 21 months.” This eruption of specificity, the shocking detail of personal loss in the midst of a Homeric epic, changes the nature of mourning from a collective, public experience to a deeply individual one. The author unexpectedly breaks into his own epic, not because convention allows it but because his loss of his son emerges at the moment of greatest mingled grief and relief in the text: Louverture’s anticipated death has finally occurred, and the plot has nowhere to go now but down to its necessarily tragic conclusion.

While Timothy Dwight had struggled to contain his mourning, Branagan gives up the fight long before the end of either of his poems. While the opening couplet of *Avenia* had firmly placed the poem within the framework of epic narrative (“Awake my muse, the sweet Columbian strain, / Depict the wars on Afric’s crimson plain” [*Avenia*, 15]), as the poem continues, the mournful tone takes over from the narrative drive of the African war. The opening of Book V connects the continuance of slavers’ atrocities with the redefinition of Branagan’s poetic identity: “Ah! melancholy muse, strike ev’ry string, / And teach your bard, your plaintive bard, to sing” (*Avenia*, 255). The epic bard has become an elegiac one, and part of the politics behind this change is a distancing of *Avenia* from the tradition it initially claimed for itself:

No mortal eloquence can paint their [the slaves’] woes,
Depict their wrongs, and malice of their foes:
Not Milton’s pen, nor Shakspeare’s tragic lyre,
Not Homer’s flame, nor Pope’s poetic fire. (*Avenia*, 256)

Branagan had rejected classical languages in abolitionist writing before, but he now rejects the English canon (including Homer via Pope) as a source for the discourse of abolitionism. The authors that he names are the apex of “mortal eloquence,” but the Methodist Branagan argues that something more (that is, immortal help) is needed to describe the slave’s experience, but also something less: the dark eloquence of silence.
Just before a scene in which Avenia is raped by her white master, a violation that drives the heroine to suicide, the poem almost shuts down, as several of its extreme moments converge in a single reflection: “Here cease my muse, nor further paint their woe,/Too horrid for the sons of men to know” (*Avenia*, 258). The scene is in fact so horrible, that Branagan must shut it down again a page later: “The violated maid now swoons with pain,/Here cease, my muse, the sad Columbian strain” (*Avenia*, 259).

Avenia herself is someone not to praise but to lament, as she does almost nothing but suffer and give voice (often plagiaristically so) to that suffering. When she is first abducted from Africa on her wedding day, most of her lament is an extended (and uncredited) quotation of the “eternal sunshine of the spotless mind” passage from Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard,” interrupting the epic with a recognized elegy that serves to translate the suffering of blacks into white terms, as well as to question the notion of property as espoused both by the slave trade and by the literary trade. As will be shown in the next section, Branagan’s cavalier attitude toward the use of others’ texts leads him to push the imitative practices of the epic tradition to extremes. But the extreme sexual and physical violence with which Branagan at times aims to wound his readers gives a sharp edge to the politics of mourning: in moving his readers to tears and horror through his descriptions, Branagan hopes to win popular support for the abolition of slavery.

The spectacle of suffering is a trap, however; the sentimental pleasure of crying over the sufferings of slaves might end up as just that, an entertaining read that leads to no decisive action against slavery. Branagan himself seems to recognize this trap, and in *The Penitential Tyrant*, he applies to himself an extended simile from *Odyssey* VIII that describes a wife’s frantic grief at seeing her husband die on the battlefield, feminizing himself as he mourns his own ineffectuality: “For them in vain I grieve, for them I sigh,/Yet still they [the slaves] groan, weep, languish, bleed, and die” (*Tyrant*, 60). While tears are the appropriate response to the plight of slaves, the calls to action that Branagan meant *Avenia* and *Tyrant* to be are derailed by his own admission that mourning, as W. H. Auden said of poetry, makes nothing happen. It would seem that more than mourning is necessary to make epic a viable form for abolitionist propaganda, and the range of genres on which Branagan draws moved his works farther away from the classical models he claimed to imitate and closer to a mode of encyclopedic literature of the kind Edward Mendelson has theorized: a narrative superstructure for the appropriation of whatever genres might give meaning to the multifarious world of the author.
Epic Fragments: New Intertextualities for an Ancient Tradition

Branagan was one of several early American epicists who experimented with new blends of intergenres, appendices, and recast conventions to exploit the rich intertextual range of epic writing, often from a starting point that paid homage to a conservative idea of a Homeric canon. Branagan was an inveterate anti-classicist, but even as he condemned classical languages and forms as elitist, he nevertheless chose to imitate the most prestigious of all classical texts in conveying the reality of the slave trade. He seeks to resolve this contradiction by warning his readers that such imitation is not to make his writing more pleasing: “Perspicuity instead of elegance, utility instead of method, the developement of truth instead of the flowers of rhetoric, have been my primary objects” (*Avenia*, ix). This stance is a badge of authenticity for Branagan, who often seems to equate elegant writing with artifice, but he nevertheless shows that he has paid close attention to his sources in his continuing efforts to push past them to his own form of truth telling.

One of the most remarkable ways that the abolitionist conveys the horrors of the slave trade in *Avenia* is in his careful following of epic conventions and set pieces, only to violate the expectations that those conventions evoke. Single combats abound between Africans and slavers, but they are nearly always decided by covert shots from outside the duel (by slavers, of course). When the hero Louverture’s aged father reenacts Priam’s visit to Achilles, the slavers’ leader insults and summarily beheads his supplicant. The epic games, which the Africans hold in honor of Avenia’s wedding, are violently interrupted by a raid of slavers on their village. A particularly striking example of this weird imitation appears as Louverture wounds an opponent, Willmore, who pleads for his life as the African prepares his death blow. Despite the numbers of friends and relatives of Louverture’s who have fallen at Willmore’s hand, the African warrior “hear[s] with philanthropic woe” and prepares to relent against his severely wounded enemy. Just at the point of decision, however, Louverture spots a “glittering belt” that Willmore had despoiled from the African warrior’s youngest brother, Lango, after slaying him on the field. Enraged, Louverture spits out a final curse before dispatching his opponent:

“Thou wretch accurs’d, canst thou to grace pretend,
Clad in my brother’s spoils, my murder’d friend?”
Go then, a victim to his [the king’s] son below,
’Tis lango, lango, gives the fatal blow.
Thus is my sire atton’d;” (the hero said)
And bury’d in his breast the reeking blade.
A groan that moment echo’d to the shore,
Another follow’d, and he groan’d no more;
The soul rush’d furious through the gaping wound,
The body beat, the fingers grasp’d the ground. (Avenia, 112)

I quote this passage at length to emphasize its likeness to the close of Dryden’s translation of Virgil’s Aeneid: Turnus’s “Golden belt that glitter’d on his side,” the repetition of the avenged Pallas’s name, the cry “dost Thou to Grace pretend,” and the final “the disdainful Soul came rushing thro’ the Wound.” The close similarities serve to accentuate the striking reversal of roles in Avenia: the pious conqueror of Virgil’s poem becomes the defender of the ancient homeland, so that empire and native switch places, and Turnus is now an invader as well as a pillager in a moment of classical epic gone horribly wrong—or at least played out to the postcolonial conclusion of its narrative logic. Such violations of Homeric and Virgilian narrative form exemplify the ideological payoff of Branagan’s formal choice of ancient epic for the telling of modern, topical crimes: the revered form does not work, because slave traders refuse to play by even literary rules.

While such bizarre imitations threaten to undo epic form in Branagan’s works, his willingness to appropriate and blend other genres amounted to an experimental redefinition of the form itself. His borrowing of Pope’s “Eloisa to Abelard” has been noted in the previous section; Branagan also included Pope’s “Messiah Eclogue” in the appendix to the 1810 revision of Avenia as a justification for his own commitment to imitation. Other intertexts point to a different source tradition, however. The title page of the 1807 Tyrant includes a couplet from the poem: “Bold in the Lord, I know his grace is free— / Free for the vile, or it had pass’d by me!!” This John Newton–esque effusion, by emphasizing the “me,” individualizes Branagan more than Newton’s “wretch” in “Amazing Grace,” shifting from the archetypal “chief of sinners” everyman to the particular, identified confessant whose story is as much about himself as it is the “free grace” that saved him. And in the final book of the 1805 Avenia, which would also become the final book of the 1807 Tyrant, Branagan repudiates epic in favor of the didactic and hymnic:
No more of wars, of carnage, or of arms;
No more of virtue’s worth or beauties charms;
No more I paint the flocks, the injur’d swain,
The beauties of the land, or terrors of the main;
But sing the mercies of the pow’rs above,
The tyrant’s rage contrast with heav’nly love.
Celestial muse my ventrous flight sustain,
My plaintive muse, the sweet Columbian strain[.] (Avenia, 273)

Though the “ventrous flight” has Miltonic tones to it, this flight comes not from the bard but from the tradition of English hymnody associated with Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley. By contrasting “heav’nly love” with the “tyrant’s rage,” Branagan seeks to out-epic the epic, replacing the heathen virtues of classical epic with those of Christian morality. Returning to the rationale for his anti-eloquence, Branagan defends the inclusion of Book VI in a note: “I expect to be severely censured by the critics, for adding this book to the poem, as it should conclude with the death of Avenia. But they must still remember, that as my object is the good, not the praise of man, I study utility more than method” (Avenia, 343). Here Branagan goes so far as to cordon off the rules of composition as strictly the realm of the epideictic; any more useful or beneficent purpose in writing must use a different set of rules.

If Avenia tested the limits of classical epic expression, Tyrant participated in the reconceptualization of epic as a psychological form in the early nineteenth century and applied it to new ways of forwarding the abolitionist, as well as the evangelical cause. This is evident in Canto III of Tyrant, where Branagan relates a nightmare that drove him to repentance: “One night, methought about the midnight hour, / A double darkness o’er me seem’d to lower” (Tyrant, 71). The phantasmagoria of the slaves’ sufferings, as blood, sweat, and tears flow in torrents, eventually gives way to a vision of the torment in hell that awaits the perpetrators of those sufferings. The violence of Branagan’s dream, the putative impetus for the poet’s redemption, is projected as wounding the reader as well as the poet at the start of the third canto:

And now methinks, I hear the reader say,
“Your verses makes me tremble, make me pray;[”]

And as the trembling child who long has laid
Mute in the dark, and of itself afraid;
When haply conscious of the pain it feels
The watchful mother to its pillow steals,
Springs to her breast, and shakes off all alarms,
Feeling its safety in her fostering arms:
With such quick joy, thus to your Saviour fly,
He stands with open arms, his grace is nigh. (Tyrant, 87)

Here the infantilized reader turns from phantasmagoria to salvation in what is one of Branagan’s most eloquent passages. The repudiation of epic in Avenia’s Book VI here becomes a new kind of epic.

For Tyrant itself is a new kind of epic, drawing much more selectively on Homer and Milton to shape a poetics at once immense in scale and intensely personal in focus; the inner drama of gazing, realizing guilt, and repenting anticipates Jones Very’s declaration (discussed in chap. 4) that epic had become a form of internal tragedy with Milton’s Paradise Lost. Branagan’s choice of “tragi-cal” as a descriptor in the subtitle to Avenia and “pathetic” in the subtitle of the 1807 Tyrant evidences the shift that European romantics such as Schiller were positing at the time, and that Americans like Very would later reiterate. Branagan thus stands as a bridge figure between the advocates of classical emulation and imitation of Pope’s time and the proponents of individualized poetic drama of Shelley and Byron’s generation. And among American epicists, Branagan is not alone in that distinction.

Branagan’s poetry sought to relocate the narrative force of epic in the individual soul rather than the public action, and a related development in American epic was the revival of ekphrasis as a way to blend visual and verbal effects in epic poetry. This revival was begun by Phillis Wheatley. The interplay between writing and painting had been a favorite topic in Renaissance poetry and would inform the work of many later epicists, from Cooper to Melville and Cole, but Wheatley’s “Niobe” was the first serious revision of classical ekphrasis in American literature. John C. Shields has painstakingly traced the history of Richard Wilson’s painting The Death of the Children of Niobe and its prints to determine how Wheatley would have had access to the work, but no critic has ever explored in much depth the significance of the full title Wheatley gives her poem: “Niobe in Distress for her Children slain by Apollo, from Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Book VI. and from a view of the Painting of Mr. Richard Wilson.” Wheatley’s inclusion of Wilson’s interpretation of Ovid in the poem’s title signals that she is taking on
a new kind of poetic project, one that bridges artistic media, as well as revising the old narratives on which epic storytelling is based.

Wheatley is unusually attentive to Apollo’s place in the story, placing the blame for Niobe’s “woes” solely on his shoulders in the invocation (she bids the muse to sing “Apollo’s wrath” in the first line), and this is in part because of her interest in the Wilson picture. Wheatley describes her muse as

Thou who did’st first th’ ideal pencil give,
And taught’st the painter in his works to live,
Inspire with glowing energy of thought,
What Wilson painted, and what Ovid wrote. (101)

The muse invoked here is one of the pencil, not the pen; Wheatley desires a visual muse for her poem and places Wilson before Ovid in the first of several moments where ekphrasis works backward in “Niobe.” Wheatley asks the muse to “guide my pen in lofty strains to show [emphasis mine]” (101), keeping her identity as a writer but now attempting a different action in her wielding of the writer’s instrument; she seeks to make the pen a pencil, to draw with words.

Wilson’s Niobe features largest at the moment when Apollo and Diana attack Niobe’s children. As Shields has pointed out, the pose that Apollo takes in preparation for his attack is not in the Metamorphoses, but in multiple versions of Wilson’s picture (he painted Niobe three times): “With clouds incompass’d glorious Phoebus stands; / The feather’d vengeance quiv’ring in his hands.” The sublimity of the thunderstorm in Wilson’s painting was the kind of feature that helped to make landscape a prestigious form in British art, and that gained Wilson a following among both elite and bourgeois audiences. Niobe sold extremely well as a print in the 1760s, and it is likely that Wheatley knew Wilson’s picture through William Woollett’s engraving. The mythological content within the landscape was a major part of the appeal as well, and the thunderstorm provided a kind of stage for Apollo, arrow drawn back in his bow. Yet Wheatley’s punning description of the quivering arrow is a visual effect impossible to depict in a painted image. As Apollo prepares the destruction of Niobe’s sons, Wheatley rewrites both Ovid and Wilson by outdoing them; by taking the visual aspect of her poem to levels untried by Ovid and unavailable to Wilson, she further highlights the sublime (and terrible) power of Apollo the vengeful god.

Given Wheatley’s intense interest in visuality, her famous frontispiece portrait can be a fruitful site for understanding how she understood herself as a
laboring writer. In her invocation in “Goliath of Gath,” while it is up to the pow-
ers and muses to “remember” and “sing” the story, Wheatley “write[s]” them. Here a new verb enters the Virgilian cano formula; while Ovid chooses to tell rather than sing, Wheatley displaces the singing by pointing to the physical labor that she as a poet does, the labor signified in her portrait (fig. 2). Wheatley in this image works in two worlds simultaneously: the world of the mind or spirit, as she

Figure 2. [attr. Scipio Moorhead], Portrait of Phillis Wheatley, frontispiece to Poems on Various Subjects, Moral and Religious (London, 1773).
Library Company of Philadelphia.
looks above for inspiration, and the world of textual materiality, where her quill touches the written-on page. Significantly, Wheatley’s blank page is not blank; her right hand rests the quill at the top of several lines, suggesting that inspiration in this scene is not a matter of spontaneous composition but of considered revision—or even interpolation, a form of copying between the master’s lines that Frederick Douglass describes as his route to literacy. By choosing to write rather than sing, and thus to willingly cede the most “original” action of composition, Wheatley actually creates space for herself to add and adapt her source, to invent in the older sense, and thus follow in the line of Pope’s Homer, who has “the greatest Invention of any Writer whatever.”

The interplay between image and text, between imitation and invention, that pervades Wheatley’s work has inspired some critics to claim that Wheatley’s entire oeuvre constitutes an “intertextual epic,” anchored by “To Maecenas” and her two epyllia, “Goliath” and “Niobe.” While this intertextual epic may be more an articulation of a will-to-canonicity desired for her by her champions, it suggests that conceiving of the epic in pieces may be a particularly useful entry into the tradition for marginalized writers like Wheatley (as well as others like Branagan and Snowden). One writer, in fact, conceived of an epic specifically as a loosely arrayed sequence of episodes and as such may be called the first writer of intentionally intertextual epic in American literature: Wheatley’s fellow Bostonian, Sarah Wentworth Morton.

Morton’s approach to epic convention was every bit as radical as Wheatley’s. At the start of Beacon Hill, “Book I” of her projected intertextual epic, an invocation to Clio, the muse of history, prepares Morton’s speaker to reject the entire epic tradition on grounds of historical inaccuracy while acknowledging the power of the versification associated with the form:

No more the fabled action claims our care,
The tales of Ilion, and the Latian war,
The length of realms by pious Godfrey trod,
To free the city of the Saviour-God,
For those their poets wrought the crown of fame,
And all was fiction, save an empty name;
Though the full blaze of epic numbers shed
Its dazzling luster round the storied dead,
From the bright Muse the peerless wonder grew,
Invention reign’d, while blushing Truth withdrew.
The modern solution to the problem of rendering contemporary events epic, according to Morton, is to frame the telling of those events as more virtuous than the *Iliad* because they are more truthful. The speaker takes on the epic canon of Homer, Virgil, and Tasso (though, significantly, not Milton) not as a new kind of bard but as a “minstrel,” a term primarily associated in the eighteenth century with folk poetry. While minstrels occasionally appear in translations of epic—Pope’s Apollo is referred to as a “minstrel-god” in *Iliad* XXIV, for example—the main source for Morton’s use of the term is from Scottish poet James Beattie’s poem *The Minstrel* (1771).

Beattie’s poem portrays the development of a young poet in the Middle Ages from childhood to the maturity of “appearing in the world as a minstrel, . . . a character which, according to the notions of our forefathers, was not only respectable, but sacred.” Hugely popular from its first publication, *The Minstrel* has been seen by recent critics as the beginning of the romantic trend of poets using poetry to fashion their authorial selves, as in Wordsworth’s *Prelude* and Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*. For Morton, Beattie’s envisioning of the minstrel as a youthful ingénue but also a burgeoning genius served well as a model for deferring to the great bards of the past while in a sense growing out of them. *Beacon Hill* was Morton’s most ambitious work of her career, and if, as she claims in the apology, she was “terrified at [her] own temerity” (*Beacon*, viii), the stance she develops from Beattie’s Scottish Opposition poetics of self-creation represents a bold stroke—particularly since Morton’s “minstrel” always genders herself as female, a reproach to the lying, male bards of antiquity.

In the preface to her poem, Morton assumes a female audience for her project, as she mentions that her plans beyond *Beacon Hill* include the histories of the Marquis de Lafayette, Lady Harriet Acland, Jane McCrea, and Charles Asgill, and that these episodes “will occasionally diversify the scene, and awaken, at least in the female breast, sympathy and condolence” (*Beacon*, ix). The descriptions of these episodes as recounting “noble enthusiasm,” “heroic and impassioned adventures,” “tragic fate,” and “pathetic perils” place Morton’s work in the tradition of romance, both verse and prose, in which language designed to evoke sympathy predominates over the appeal to awe and admiration traditionally associated with epic poetry.

*Beacon Hill* itself began as a prospect poem and was published in its final form in 1797 as “a local poem, historical and descriptive,” with the phrase “Book I” appearing beneath the title. The title page thus enacts its own federal tension between part and whole—is *Beacon Hill* a whole “local poem,” or merely a part of
something else as “Book I”? Morton addresses this difficulty in her “Apology for the Poem,” which she begins by answering the charge that “twenty other names would equally apply” to the subject she takes up in the poem (Beacon, vii). The author at first acknowledges the arbitrariness of her choice and then retrenches by pointing to chronology as her justification: “[W]hen it is remembered, that the great events, which form the subject of the piece, originated within the view of this interesting eminence, the mind, by the natural association of ideas, will be easily led to contemplate every succeeding occurrence of the Revolution” (Beacon, vii). Viewing the entire Revolutionary War from a point in the city of Boston is allowed, in other words, because of the fact of the war’s beginning at Beacon Hill, or rather Bunker Hill, where residents of Beacon Hill witnessed the battle.

Morton had no unifying title for her project, and likely not even so much a unified project as an accumulative series of associations built from the initial vantage point of Beacon Hill; she begins, rather than ends, with the prospect, placing the variety of view not in an imagined future but in the composition of episodes to “diversify the scene.” Beacon Hill is thus not an installment but a fragment, composed within a planned network of fragments. Sandro Jung has recently shown that eighteenth-century British writers engaged intensively with the fragment well before the romantic era, and contrary to traditional narratives of American cultural development, Morton and her print world show that there was virtually no lag in the importing of fragmentary literature or the more romantic ideas about what that mode involved. In the 1790 volume of the Massachusetts Magazine alone (where several of Morton’s shorter poems appeared), at least six different poems and several prose pieces include the word “fragment” in the title. Morton was a writer of fragments in a textual world of fragments, and her choices as well as those of her compatriots demonstrate that Americans were not slow to embrace what we see as romantic modes, but were instead selective in importing elements of romanticism, a tendency that continued even among the transcendentalists, and certainly for writers like Whitman and Melville.

Morton never received enough public support to complete her episodic project, if she had ever intended to finish it at all, but the one later episode she did publish, the story of “Lady Harriot Ackland,” emphasized both the fragmentation of Morton’s long narrative poems and their intertextual connectedness; the poem appeared in 1799 under the title The Virtues of Society, signed by “The Author of the Virtues of Nature,” which had been the subtitle of her first major narrative poem, Ouâbi (1790). The poem thus connected Beacon Hill, The Virtues of Society, and (retrospectively) Ouâbi together as a series of fragments, constituting
not a whole but a set of texts that mutually informed each other. No longer solicitous to earn the public’s favor, she now seeks to present “a patient, persevering, fortitude, which, in displaying the individual, ennobles the whole species”; though taking the public pose of the republican authoress, withholding her own name but upholding that of the first lady (the poem was dedicated to Abigail Adams), Morton takes a more Miltonic tack in *Virtues*, assuming less an identification with a public sphere than with a “fit audience” of sympathetic reciprocity.

While *Virtues* works at one level as a diptych with the meditations on marital constancy in *Ouâbi*, it is also clearly a continuation of *Beacon Hill*. The opening lines renew the challenge at the beginning of *Beacon Hill*, while reintroducing the same narrator:

> Let the proud Bard of ancient virtue tell,  
> How Arria lived, and Laodonia fell;  
> In the boasted day the bard is dead.  
> The humble minstrel will a tale impart,  
> Drawn from the living efforts of the heart,  
> Adventurous beauty, love’s inspiring flame,  
> Beyond the storied page of fabling fame. (*Virtues*, 5)

Here again the ancient chauvinistic “Bard” is set against the new “minstrel,” and extreme stories of women losing their lives out of devotion to their husbands contrast with the “living” story of a woman who risked, but did not lose, her life, and by so doing achieved her own conquest. The story of Lady Ackland is one of female heroism, but without military glory: the young, talented wife of a British officer penetrates enemy lines during the Revolution to reach her husband, whom she has learned was wounded at Saratoga. Morton turns Ackland into a kind of Odysseus seeking not a homeland but a wayward love; she even adds a detail of Ackland being wounded by an American sentry while crossing a river to heighten her heroism. When Lady Ackland reaches her husband, Morton uses an epic simile to recreate a moment of rescue from the *Aeneid*:

> —Thus, when in war’s red arms Æneas lay,  
> And seem’d to breathe his heaving soul away,  
> Before his view the sea-sprung Venus stood,  
> And swathed with heavenly hand the clotted blood [...] (*Virtues*, 36)

Morton here gives her heroine divine status, and when Major Ackland promises to retire from military life and follow his wife’s desires, Lady Ackland accomplishes
what only goddesses seem to be able to do in epic. She makes the hero stop fighting. *Virtues* was Morton’s last long poem, and it was also her final answer to the *Iliad*: the hero cannot survive without the love of his woman. The romance ultimately overcomes the epic, provisionally concluding a project that seemed to take on epic tradition only to take it in directions unthinkable to most writers and readers of the time.

Though readers likely found Morton’s fragments confusing in the 1790s, many were accustomed to encountering epic poems in fragments, both in anthologies and in schoolchildren’s textbooks. In fact, that was precisely the form in which Dwight’s *Conquest* and Barlow’s *Vision* first saw print, in Part 3 of Noah Webster’s *Grammatical Institutes*, published in 1785. Webster, a Yale classmate of the Connecticut Wits, designed the third and last part of the *Institutes* as a reader to supplement his first textbook. In order to teach students reading—meaning public declamation—Webster excerpted passages of speeches from classical sources in translation, as well as selections from Pope, Milton, Shakespeare, Dwight, Barlow, and Trumbull, among others. Webster admitted in his preface to have “borrowed from British writers of eminence,” “fugitive American publications,” and “the manuscripts of my friends,” as well as interspersing some of his own work. Webster saw epic as highly useful in a pedagogy focused on public speaking and civic education, and he wryly remarks in his preface that in choosing selections from works such as *Conquest* and *Vision*, he was “not . . . inattentive to the political interests of America.”

Epic had been a crucial element of the Connecticut Wits’ education, and that Webster would see the performed reading of epic poetry as part of a young American’s primary education indicates how deeply connected elements of canonicity, nation-making, and pedagogy were at the time.

Webster’s *Institutes* also highlighted how mutually indebted his circle of Yale alumni were to each other, as well as the wide range of intertexts that informed their work. The textbook’s publisher was the firm Babcock and Barlow, a partnership that Joel Barlow had formed with a printer from central Massachusetts. The printing of Webster’s work, as well as other volumes the partnership underwrote, was financed by subscriptions to their periodical, the *American Mercury*. Barlow edited the periodical and wrote political commentary for it, but the main reason for the high number of subscriptions was Barlow’s decision to serialize the journal of James Cook’s last voyage in the Pacific, a work under royal copyright in London and difficult for American readers to acquire without great expense. American readers’ fascination with the Pacific, in other words, funded the first publication of Dwight’s and Barlow’s epic works, and indeed Barlow arranged
for his firm to print the first full edition of *The Conquest of Canaan*, also in 1785, though by the time the book appeared, Barlow had dissolved the partnership, and Babcock’s name appeared as the sole printer. Epic existed in a sea of texts for eighteenth-century Americans, and the cross-influence of those texts was as potentially generative as it was unpredictable. No intertext, however, had as much influence on American epics as the Bible, and the final section of this chapter posits an alternative tradition of epic writing predicated on specific ways of reading the Bible’s implications for poetics and politics.

**Dissenting Epic: Clash of the Canons**

One of the unexplored mysteries of early American epic poetry is the considerable resistance that authors of ostensibly epic poems mustered against the epic as a genre. Joel Barlow decried the influence of Homer in the preface to his *Columbiad* (1807); distinguishing between the “poetical object” and “the moral object” of a poem, Barlow asserts that the “high degree of interest” that the Trojan War gives the *Iliad* as its poetical object, for instance, gives the poet the responsibility to make the moral or “real design” of the poem “beneficial” to social improvement. However, Homer’s poem tends “to inflame the minds of young readers with an enthusiastic ardor for military fame,” and Virgil’s *Aeneid* similarly is designed to “increase the veneration of the people for a master, whoever he might be, and to encourage like Homer the great system of military depredation.”44 For the moral needs of the modern era, something radically different was necessary. Barlow chose not to include the word “epic” on the title page of either *Vision* or the *Columbiad*. In fact, only one poem discussed in this chapter, which has never received modern critical treatment, includes “epic” in the title. This reticence to name the genre could be traced back to Milton, who subtitled *Paradise Lost* “A Poem,” yet during Barlow’s lifetime, Robert Southey, John Henry Pye, James Lovell Moore, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and Lord Byron were among the many British epicists who applied that subtitle to their own works. The resistance to epic convention and style was often most marked in poems on biblical subjects, and I would describe these works as defining a tradition of Dissenting epic.

To speak of Dissenting epic immediately conflates religious and literary categories. For readers of Milton, this merging may have seemed inevitable. The Puritan poet’s striving to outdo the classical giants by writing into the white spaces of the Bible certainly invited the blending of faith and poetics. However, the Miltonic critique of aesthetic affect as idolatry came to be used by others to reject the
high poetics of *Paradise Lost* itself. In fact, the hallmarks of Dissenting epic—low-church religion matched by a stripped-down poetic style and, frequently, a devotional or polemical style rather than the high literary tone of *Paradise Lost*—trace their lineage to *Paradise Regained*, through a Quaker friend of Milton’s. Thomas Ellwood was involved not only with the Foxes and the Penns but also with many Dissenters of other persuasions during the time of the Civil War. He famously became the blind Milton’s reader in 1662, and according to Ellwood’s own memoirs, Milton composed *Paradise Regained* after Ellwood had asked him, upon reading the manuscript of *Paradise Lost*, where the other half of the story was. The plain style and focus on argumentation in *Paradise Regained* might indeed be a nod to Ellwood’s plain style, an aesthetic shared both by early Quakers and by Cromwellian Puritans. However, even stripped-down Miltonic verse was too ornamental for Ellwood, who in 1712 published a sacred poem in three books titled *Davideis*, a life of King David versified from 1 Samuel. His goal was to exhort and to teach, not to gain critical attention; in his address “To the Reader,” he states, “I am not so vain to seek Applause: I don’t expect to be commended. . . . I don’t affect the Title of Poet.”

While following David’s life from his anointing by Samuel to his death and burial as king, Ellwood chose to intersperse his narrative with moral and political commentary rather than the literary devices exploited by Milton and his predecessor, Abraham Cowley, whose own *Davideis*, an incomplete epic in four of a projected twelve books, is often credited as the first biblical epic in English. Cowley’s work, published in 1656, predates both Milton’s epics and Ellwood’s, but the latter claimed not to have read the earlier *Davideis* until he had substantially completed his own poem, though he knew of it. Rather than express embarrassment or regret at this oversight, however, he confessed after having read it to being “very well pleas’d, that I had not read it before: lest [Cowley’s] great Name, high Stile, and lofty Fancy should have led me, though unawares, into an apish Imitation of them; which doubtless would have look’d very odly, and ill in me, how admirable soever in him” (12). Rejecting the creative imitation that Milton so valued in what Harold Bloom has called his “misreading” of earlier writers, Ellwood prefers an originality produced out of ignorance, or at least a refusal to allow influence. The Quaker poet realized that literary influence could unintentionally distort or even supplant heavenly leanings. Part of this avoidance of influence also has to do with intended audience; in Ellwood’s view, his ideal reader and Cowley’s are so different that their poetic styles should never even mix: “He wrote for the Learned; and those too of the Upper Form: and his Flights are
answerable. I write for common Readers: in a Stile familiar, and easie to be understood by such.” He also points out that Cowley’s heavily annotated work required such annotations, but that part of his own plain style necessitates a dearth of citations (12).

Ellwood’s plain style is an act of willful originality, despite his close adherence to the biblical text. Reducing the number of layers of remove between his Davideis and its inspired source actually allows him to posit a new kind of narrative poetry, emphasizing immediacy, accuracy, and right teaching over genius and literary prowess. Such writing dissented not only from the trappings and politics of the Anglican Church but from the traps and dangerous dances around heresy exemplified in both the Puritan Milton and the Royalist Cowley, and this dissent also entails a rejection of the classical canon in favor of more prosaic forms of storytelling: “I am not so wholly a Stranger to the Writings of the most Celebrated Poets, as well Antient as Modern, as not to know, that the great Embellishments of their Poems consist mostly in their extravagant, and almost boundless Fancies; Amazing, and even Dazeling Flights; Luxurious Inventions; Wild Hyperble’s; Lofty Language: with an Introduction of Angels, Spirits, Dæmons, and their respective Deities, &c. Which, as not suitable to my Purpose, I industriously abstain from” (12). By characterizing his abstention from literary “Embellishments” as industrious, Ellwood anticipates critical objections to his much simpler poetics as a lazy or dumbed-down form of writing. For Ellwood, telling the story of David in simple form requires as much work, and as much grace, as writing Paradise Lost. And the power of this writing, he argues in his invocation (one of the very few epic conventions to appear in this text), comes from a different kind of flight, aiming higher than the muse, however heavenly, for inspiration:

I Sing the Life of David, Israel’s King.
Assist, thou sacred Pow’r, who did’st him bring
From the Sheepfold, and set him on the Throne;
Thee I invoke, on Thee Rely alone.
Breath on my Muse; and fill her slender Quill
With thy refreshing Dews from Hermon-Hill:
That what she Sings may turn unto thy Praise,
And to thy Name may lasting Trophies raise. (14)

In a Christian epic of Ellwood’s Dissenting variety, God trumps the muse, who becomes only another of his servants, in need of grace to fulfill her task to his glory.
But is this really an epic? The title, based on Virgil’s Latin *Aeneis*, certainly gestures in that direction, and Ellwood’s preface shows him to be in dialogue (or pointed silence) with the epic tradition. Yet to ask whether this work is an epic ignores the work that such engagement with epic does for shaping literary history. More useful for this study is to ask how Ellwood’s *Davideis* interacted with the epic tradition in colonial America. This question leads us into issues of reading and publication. While the first canonical European epic printed in North America, *Paradise Lost*, first appeared only in 1777, and reprints of Homer and Virgil began only in the 1790s, Ellwood’s poem went through no fewer than four American editions before the Revolution, and a total of six before the first reprinting of Homer.48 Today’s readers may find Ellwood’s *Davideis* dull; John Greenleaf Whittier mentioned in *Snow-Bound: A Winter Idyl* (1866) that his family’s only book of poetry was “Ellwood . . . A stranger to the heathen Nine.”49 Yet the idea that the Whittiers, a New England Quaker family with limited resources, owned a copy of the *Davideis* before Milton, Homer, Virgil, or Shakespeare tells the same story that the poem’s publication history does: no one read the *Davideis* as a literary monument, but almost everyone with an interest in religious literature seems to have read it. Works like the *Davideis* opened up the possibility that epic writing could be designed for purposes that trumped the kinds of aesthetic pleasure that Pope, Dryden, and Milton had led privileged readers of poetry to expect. Epic could be written not just for the elites but for the lower classes—and perhaps not written by the elites, either.

Over time, Dissenting epic behaved as an alternative tradition, one with its own genealogies and shared ideologies. Yet the connections between texts were not as direct as the kinds of borrowing that characterized the Homeric line. A case in point is Phillis Wheatley’s longest poem, “Goliath of Gath,” a verse imitation of the battle between David and Goliath, the very scene with which Ellwood began composing his *Davideis*. It is unclear whether Wheatley knew of Ellwood’s poem, though her movements in evangelical circles might have given her opportunity, even if the Wheatleys or her poetic mentor, Mather Byles, did not own copies. Yet the attraction of the ultimate underdog combat would have been powerful for Wheatley, both from her interest in George Whitefield’s much-maligned Methodism and her identity as a young slave on the margins of genteel Boston society. Whether or not Ellwood was a direct influence, both the Quaker author and Wheatley may have had motivations in common when they chose the David-Goliath battle to imitate. However, rather than expanding the narrative as Ellwood had done, Wheatley chose to stay within the confines of the epyllion, or
miniature epic. At a mere 222 lines, “Goliath” follows virtually every verse of 1 Samuel 17 and parts of 18 in order, plus an invocation that pushes the limits of Miltonic synchronicity between divine inspiration and the classical muses. Milton opens his brief epic *Paradise Regained* by asking “Thou Spirit,” the Holy Spirit that had sent Jesus into the wilderness to face the temptations that form the setting of Milton’s poem, similarly to inspire the telling of an inspired event. Wheatley uses the dual-inspiration device but addresses an entire army, and more: “Ye martial powers, and all ye tuneful nine,/ Inspire my song, and aid my high design” (31). Not only all nine muses but unspecified “martial powers” appear in this invocation, and according to Wheatley they are the same “powers” that inspired the prophet Samuel in his account of David’s battle with Goliath—a bold doctrinal revision, to say the least. If Wheatley’s notion of writing is largely a matter of interpolation and imitation, as her portrait would suggest, she wants to do her work in the best possible company.

Part of the power of Wheatley’s “Goliath” for eighteenth-century readers was its instant recognizability, both as a scripture imitation and as an epyllion or miniature epic. Thomas Brockway’s *The Gospel Tragedy: An Epic Poem in Four Books*, on the other hand, escaped notice partly because it defied definition. Brockway attended Yale with Trumbull and Dwight, but he absorbed Milton’s influence in ways sharply distinct from the Connecticut Wits’ project of writing poetry for enlightened citizens. Like Dwight and Barlow, Brockway had briefly served as an army chaplain during the Revolution, but he quickly settled into the quiet life of a country pastor in Lebanon Crank (now Columbia), some twenty-five miles east of Hartford, and stayed there until his death thirty years later. Unlike his classmates, Brockway seems to have had little public contact with either the intellectual currents of the day or the political events of the early national era. Yet out of this seemingly marginal life came the first American heroic poem to claim the term “epic” in its title, and the only blank verse poem treated in this chapter.

The first (and almost the only) indication of how Brockway’s poem may have been received appears in printer James R. Hutchins’s advertising for subscriptions in *The Massachusetts Spy*, starting in March 1795. Hutchins declared Brockway’s poem a kind of poetic theological treatise, in which “good sense and solidity of argument, breathe in every line.” Brockway had apparently found his own manuscript networks outside of the Connecticut Wits’ sphere of influence, as Hutchins cited endorsements from “the Clerical Associations in Connecticut,” as well as John Wheelock, president of Dartmouth, and “several literary characters
in Newhampshire [sic].” But Hutchins’s own appraisal helped to place Brockway’s work on the shelf: “In one word, we see the force and energy of Milton, blended in a happy union, with all the floridity and luxuriance of Thompson [sic].” If Brockway had not read much recent poetry (Dexter records that fewer than twenty books were found in his estate after his death), his publishers at least recognized echoes of two of Britain’s quasi-classical poets—and the two most prominent practitioners of nondramatic blank verse. What Brockway was doing was eminently recognizable, and its poetic merit was that of a steady seller, not a revolutionary writer.

The poem was not a steady seller, however; it does not seem to have sold very well, or very widely. And such may have been the author’s intention. His preface begins with almost aggressive indifference: “The Author has no apologies to make: He would wish to avoid those self-compliments, that often introduce publications to the world. . . . Should he in many instances, fail of affording the entertainment, that might be wished; it will be kind in the reader to remember, that his pain has been light, compared to that of the writer.” He defends his choice to publish anonymously, declaring that “[s]hould any merit be discovered in the work, he is content without the honor” (iv). His invocation also seems somewhat daring in its humility, chiding previous poets for ignoring the life of Christ:

Ye Bards sublime, whose strength has borne the Muse,
Through unknown worlds, and fame immortal gain’d,
Pardon my bold attempt, with feeble wings
To soar, on subject great that’s left by you. (7)

Brockway’s approach to the invocation is strangely modern, placing the agency of the poetry not on the muse but on the great poets’ ability to carry her “through unknown worlds,” challenging conventions of fictive story while recognizing what those conventions have done for the “Bards sublime.” While Milton had carefully chosen the interstices of biblical narrative for his own works, Brockway chooses the Passion narrative, the most extensively and redundantly recounted event in the entire Bible. Brockway clearly takes Milton as his point of departure, but his imitation is a radical one, one that uses Miltonic technique to aim for the devotional, the conventional, and the popular. The Gospel Tragedy is a kind of everyman’s Milton.

The opening scene, a council of Satan and his devils in Hell, revisits Paradise Regained as the demonic powers scheme to destroy the plan implied in the promise to crush the serpent’s heel at the Expulsion. Book II of The Gospel Tragedy in
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effect retells *Paradise Regained*, the story of Jesus’s temptation in the wilderness. Rather than the battle of wits that Milton presents, in which Christ out-argues Satan, Brockway’s version of the scene is explicitly a matter of single combat, which lasts through the forty days of fasting. And Brockway’s high Christology directs him to move away from Miltonic debate to a battle of identities: as Satan takes on different personae to lead Christ into the final temptations, Christ defeats the temptations simply by declaring that he discerns the tempter’s true demonic character. Moral and epistemic superiority negates the need for any further struggle. Following the last temptation, when Satan takes Christ to a mount of vision where “optick charms” (54) combine pastoral beauty and the four-dimensional sweep of empires (“Great Babylon, with Nineveh, and Rome” [53]), the combat concludes in another Miltonic importation, as Christ ends his speech by removing the veil of his humanity to show Satan the same face he saw in the war in Heaven. To remove any doubt that Brockway had *Paradise Lost* VI on his mind while writing this section of his poem, an epic simile comparing Satan’s flight to hell with a mortar shell ends the passage, a witty reversal of the Satanic origins of gunpowder that Milton posits in his work.

Brockway’s response to Milton is fundamentally more like Ellwood’s than Dwight’s or Barlow’s. Whereas Dwight sought to Americanize *Paradise Lost* and Barlow to secularize it, Brockway follows Ellwood in conceptualizing biblical history in verse as a matter of devotion and pedagogy. The beginning of Book III presents Brockway’s fullest challenge to the Homeric tradition. He explains that the muse used to see only as far as the beauties of nature, which he describes at length, “till Jesus rose to view/ And bade her sing” (63). The muse has more important business to do after the coming of Christ, and so the fascination with the external world that dominated the pre-Christian epics no longer suffices. Even the place of the sublime in such poetry seems to change, as the Sermon on the Mount is typologically linked to the “smoky pillars” of Mount Sinai, but only to emphasize the difference: Jesus preaches the law “not . . . with terror,” but “mix’d with grace in gentler accents” (65). Before he presents the Sermon in a comprehensive paraphrase, Brockway pits content against form in determining the greatest poetry:

> The ancient bards, have mighty heroes sung,
> And worthy deeds have grac’d the epic page,
> Where lines harmonick read, have charm’d the world
> To think the man a God. ’Tis fiction all,
The muse has done the deeds, and not the man.
Not so the one I sing . . .
Greatest my hero then though less my song. (63–64)

For Brockway, epic is a terrible way to relate the history of heroes, because the glory comes from the poetry rather than from the events. His choice of a “less[er] song” then serves to elevate his own “greatest” hero, because his poetry is less likely to distort the truth. Brockway’s reaction against eloquence arguably results in more forceful poetry, but it also shows how versatile a vehicle epic could be for varying aesthetic as well as theological and ideological positions.

*The Gospel Tragedy* may be the most theologically earnest epic poem in American history, offering not a replacement of scripture as Lawrence Buell’s “literary scripturism” entails but an authoritative explication of it, one that from a self-consciously inferior position can vie against the greatest poems ever written. The epicizing of the Bible in America was often not so much a supplanting of the Bible as it was a supplanting of epic. Dwight had argued in his 1771 master’s thesis, *A Dissertation on the History, Eloquence, and Poetry of the Bible*, that the Bible should be read not only for its theological and historical merits, but for its rhetorical and poetic accomplishments as well. Declaring that Scripture is excellent in style as well as in content, Dwight challenges the very canon that defined his studies: “Whilst we are enraptured with the fire and sublimity of Homer, and the correctness, tenderness, and majesty of Virgil, the grandeur of Demosthenes, the art and elegance of Cicero; Shall we be blind to Eloquence more elegant than Cicero, more grand than Demosthenes; or to Poetry more correct and tender than Virgil, and infinitely more sublime than him who has long been honoured, not unjustly, with that magnificent appellation ‘The Father of Poetry?’” Lawrence Buell points to Dwight’s work as marking the rise of literary scripturism; it was certainly the case that in the years before higher criticism traveled to the United States, Dwight’s name remained associated with the literary interpretation of the Bible, but it would be more accurate to say that Dwight laid the groundwork for the kinds of literary scripturism in which Emerson’s generation engaged than that Dwight was taking on such a bold project himself. The question as to whose tradition would ultimately crown American literature—Homer’s or the Bible’s—remained open throughout the chronology of this study. Other foundational texts occasionally came into contact with the epic tradition as well, and the following chapter focuses on just such a point of contact: that between epic and the United States Constitution.