

Christopher Columbus:  
An Analysis of Myth Creation and Longevity in Early America

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Evaluative Paragraph: Marta Bauer, “Christopher Columbus: An Analysis of Myth Creation and Longevity in Early America”

Marta Bauer’s honors thesis is an excellent example of literary criticism that blends a cohesive combination of history, biography, close-reading, and American cultural studies. By exploring the intersection of American literature written by Philip Freneau, Joel Barlow, and Noah Webster just after the Revolutionary War and scholarship that supports the dynamic behind cultural myth-making, Bauer sets forth a compelling argument for Columbus’s persistence and importance in American culture and in perpetuating national identity. The analysis is deftly organized and persuasively argued, weaving the disparate aspects of close-reading, historical context, and cultural studies: as a result, she is able to foreground not only the reasons why Columbus was an apt figure for representing national origins, but how the literature of the authors she studies capitalized on the qualities or characteristics of Columbus and his life that would prove powerful in constructing a national identity. Most impressively, Bauer’s discussion includes an analysis of the prevailing ideologies concurrent with Columbus’s emergence in the Early Republic. This is a particular strength of her essay because tying the close-reading of the literature to the worldview of this era lends strong support for her claims about the cultural work the literature is doing. Then, by supporting this reading with scholarship surrounding how national pride and identity are formed and “resonant frames” are established, Bauer successfully answers any questions her audience might have about why the Columbus myth has endured.

Columbus Day 2010 took place on October 11, and was met with fanfare and parades in cities like New York, Boston, San Francisco, and Chicago. In New York City, over “35,000 marchers, more than 100 bands and more than a million spectators” turned out to celebrate Columbus Day and Italian-American heritage (CBS New York). That congenial response to Columbus Day, however, was far from universal. In Pittsburgh, a statue of Columbus had the word “Butcher!” “scrawled in black paint and underlined [...] with a symbol of anarchy above it” (Sostek). The statue had been vandalized three times that year; “in April, Columbus's hands were painted red and ‘Death of civilization’ was written in orange paint on the statue” (Sostek). Rob Kaczorowski, the public works director for Pittsburgh, mentioned that the statue “normally gets hit once a year,” but that this year has been excessive (Sostek). Providence, RI has experience similar trouble with their Columbus statue, which was splashed with red paint and adorned with a sign that read “Murderer” (Naylor).

What is it about Columbus that elicits such varied reactions from the American public? Why is an Italian born and Spanish backed explorer who never set foot on American soil so integral to American culture that 32 out of 50 states have some type of monument in his honor (Van der Krogt)? The answer can be found in the literary works of a few American authors who published works about Columbus just after the end of the Revolutionary War. Philip Freneau, Joel Barlow, and Noah Webster all used Columbus as a figure around whom the newly minted Americans could rally, and their work was so effective that the role of Columbus in American history is still being contended today. In fact, these authors made Columbus the first American hero, a decision which has made the explorer an inextricable part of our identity. How Freneau, Barlow, and Webster manage to turn Columbus from man into myth, the vitality of the myth in

contemporary America, and what Columbus means to American identity are all elements I will explore in the following paper.

### **Who Was Columbus?**

There has been a large amount of literature published about Columbus' biography, and most of those sources have slightly different stories about the explorer. As historian Jeffrey Burton Russell, author of *Inventing the Flat Earth*, put it:

History is precarious for three reasons: the good reason that it is extraordinarily difficult to determine "what really happened" in any series of events; the bad reason that historical scholarship is often sloppy; and the appalling reason that far too much historical scholarship consists of contorting the evidence to fit ideological models.

While all of Russell's reasons affect the accuracy of Columbus' biography, his third reason for the volatility of history is particularly important to Columbus scholarship; many sources are polarized into two camps: those who revile him and those who laud him. His lack of consistent biographical information allows "the nationality and preference of the writer" to not only paint him as a hero or villain, but also to portray Columbus' origins as "a citizen of Genoa or of any of sixteen other Italian cities, as a Portuguese, as a Catalan, a Catalonian Jew, a Majorcan Jew, a Galician, an Andalusian, a Swiss, an Armenian, a Greek, and heaven knows what else" (Landström 23). Before I discuss the making of the Columbus myth, which takes certain liberties with the incidents of Columbus' life, here are the components of his life which most biographers can agree upon.

Cristoforo Colombo (Columbus' original Italian name) was born in the year 1451 in Genoa, Italy to a woolweaver. He received little education and began sailing during his teenage

years, which “was the common local practice” (Landström 23). In an effort to bypass the Muslim-controlled Middle East in finding a trade route to Asia, Columbus calculated that “a route across the Atlantic would be quicker and safer” but his estimates were quite inaccurate; he supposed “the circumference of the earth to be 63% its actual size” (Biography). Due to these miscalculations, which differed vastly from expert opinions of the size of the earth, his proposed expedition was rejected by Portugal, Italy, and, initially, by Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. After concluding war with Spanish Muslims, however, the monarchs agreed to finance Columbus’ expedition to find a new route to Asia. They also agreed to grant him the title of Admiral and Viceroy of the lands he discovered. He departed from the Canary Islands on September 6, 1492 with three ships: the Niña, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria. He faced the prospect of mutiny by October 10. Columbus convinced the crew to allow him three more days to locate land, and they spotted the Bahamas on October 12. He left 39 men in the new world when he returned to Spain in January but, when he came back, the men had either murdered each other or been killed by natives. Various attempts at colonization followed, resulting in the destruction of the native culture and the erosion of Columbus’ authority with the Spanish settlers. Learning of the discontent in the colonies, Ferdinand and Isabella had Columbus investigated and sent back to Spain as a prisoner. He was then temporarily banned from visiting the colonies, but later returned to the colonies twice more. When he returned to Spain for a final time in November of 1504, he was depressed, unhealthy, and poor. He died in May 1506. (Landström, Biography, Hoogenboom).

### **Why Choose Columbus?**

The above summary of Columbus’ life, while informative, reveals nothing that clearly recommends Columbus to be America’s national hero. Columbus, after all, only sailed around

the Bahamas, and so technically never found what we consider to be “America” at all (Biography). So what made him such an attractive figure to Freneau, Barlow, and Webster?

Thomas Schlereth, a professor of American Studies at the University of Notre Dame, points out that “Americans first discovered the discoverer during their quest for independence and nationhood; successive generations molded Columbus into a multipurpose American hero, a national symbol to be used variously in the quest for a collective identity” (937). After the Revolutionary War, Americans keenly felt the lack of a uniting national figure. “America” before the war had been an association of colonists who considered themselves to be British. After the Revolution, however, this connection to their mother country could no longer be used as a uniting force. During the Revolution, Americans had been somewhat united against the British enemy, although the presence of Loyalists made this unification incomplete. Also, regional identities after the conclusion of the Revolutionary War were gaining strength. People who considered themselves Virginians and Pennsylvanians outnumbered those who considered themselves to be primarily American. Such an outcome would be disastrous for the leaders who were working out America’s entire system of government at the Constitutional Convention. If individual state identities were allowed to manifest before a universal American one, the United States could never function effectively and cohesively. America needed a uniting force to be pulled from somewhere in its history that citizens could look to and take pride in; “nations are constructed through their common rituals [...] Through enacting our government and our common ideals of citizenship we become a nation” (Kubal 168).

Due to America’s nascent state, however, national heroes were difficult to procure. Dr. Jeremy Belknap, “the founder of the Massachusetts Historical Society,” attempted in 1794 to compile “a two-volume *American Biography or An Historical Account of those persons who*

*have been distinguished in America* (Larner 51). According to John P. Larner of the University of Glasgow, Belknap's list of potential American heroes included:

“Biron the Norman” (that is to say Bjorn Herjolfson, the Norseman, the first European to see Newfoundland); Madoc, Prince of Wales (whose supposed deeds he doubts); and the Venetian Zeni brothers (whose pretensions to have discovered America in the fourteenth century he discounts). He goes on to consider the no less contentious Martin Behaim, a Nuremberger, whose claim to have been the true first discoverer had recently been canvassed in the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society. After this range of dubious characters Columbus inevitably loomed much larger. (51-52).

None of these historical figures have a strong attachment to America; Columbus is simply the most viable option taken from a pool of ubiquitously unqualified candidates. There are two main things that make Columbus a historical figure ripe for myth-making: his historical information is dubious, and he experienced some quintessentially American ordeals which could connect him to the experiences of the American public.

The fluidity of Columbus' biography is an essential part of constructing his myth. By the end of the eighteenth century, Columbus had been dead for almost 300 years. First-person accounts of the explorer would not compete with the version of Columbus that Freneau, Barlow, and Webster chose to create. There was, at the time, a biography of Columbus written by his son Fernando Colon, but this biography could be discredited since it included fanciful imagery such as dragons (Landström 22). Author Bjorn Landström also points out that Fernando “obtained his information from a dying man, whose mind was probably impaired. Moreover, Fernando was only seventeen when his father died, and he did not write the biography until many years later”

(Landström 23). Even the physical appearance of Columbus is debatable, since “there are many portraits of Columbus, but it is not likely that any were painted during his lifetime” (Landström 23). Europe’s lack of interest in Columbus, and resulting lack of literature about Columbus, gives Freneau, Barlow, and Webster an extraordinary amount of artistic freedom when they construct Columbus’ exploits and personality. The authors use this *carte blanche* to their advantage, transforming the Italian-born Columbus into a figure that is “as Yankee as they come” (Summerhill and Williams 13).

### **How Myths are Made**

It would be helpful to have a formula by which all historical myths are constructed, but unfortunately no such outline exists. However, there are sources such as Timothy Kubals’ *Cultural Movements and Collective Memory: Christopher Columbus and the Rewriting of the National Origin Myth* which, when connected to other sources of sociological, political, or literary theory, offer a general outline of what one can expect from a successful national origin myth.

Kubal is ultimately more concerned with the political agendas of various groups which have adopted Columbus, and many of his examples are specific to each group. However, he does offer some general guidelines for what a group must do to successfully use Columbus for their own agendas. His most commonly reiterated point is that “Through framing and reframing, people constructed a common identity as proud Americans, and by spreading a patriotic interpretation of the national origin story, they constructed a patriotic collective memory” (29). Literature, then, is central to this concept of framing and reframing, since the meaning of a piece of literature hinges upon what frame of reference an author creates through their language. Sociologically, this can be phrased as symbolic interaction theory, which “looks at how



individuals create meaning and reality through our interactions with other using language, signs, texts, and other symbols” (Sanders). In sum, positive and negative language has the capability to determine whether or not people categorize an event as positive or negative, and so feelings, such as patriotism and community, may be manipulated through deliberate use of language and the framing of literature.

Kubal also suggests that Columbus’ story may be particularly resonant simply because it is an origin story:

Although some people suggest the term “myth” should be used only for stories about gods or near-gods, when the stories are about group or institutional origins, they are stories about sacred origins of the community. In other words, origin stories are not simply stories we retell that reinforce our own culture and institutions, but also these stories transform a collection of secular entities into a body of sacred cultures and institutions. By reproducing and rewriting origin myths, we are venerating our own society (170).

This suggests that Columbus’ story may be long-lasting simply because it represents the origins of America. Freneau, for instance, spends the most time in his poem building up to the moment when Columbus finally discovers Hispaniola, and then adds a few episodes afterward to bring closure to the story. Webster also focuses on Columbus’ discovery of America, but he cares very little for the actual exploration of Hispaniola. Although Barlow’s poem takes place while Columbus is lying destitute in prison, the text of the poem focuses on the glorious discovery and fate of the country which Columbus has “discovered.” Thus, from Kubal, we can say that myths are created through focus on origins which are then framed through positive ways and marketed to a particular audience.

It is important, however, to remember the audience for which these three authors were writing, since America's adoption of Columbus as a national figurehead was by no means certain. Therefore, it is also important that Americans accept Columbus, and view him not as an intruder but as an ancestor. According to Mikeal Hjerm, a professor and Swedish sociologist, "both civic national identity and national pride go together with xenophobia, whereas the reverse holds for ethnic national identity" (335). Hjerm also characterizes national identity as "an awareness of affiliation with the nation that gives the people a sense of who they are in relation to others [...] National identity is based on similarity to some people and difference (perceived or actual) from others." (337). America follows Hjerm's model about national pride, and it is crucial that Columbus possesses the traits and values which Americans hold most dear since in reality he has no cultural connection to the people of the United States. Freneau, Barlow, and Webster, then, must also make sure that Columbus is relatable, since otherwise the American public will reject him as an unsuitable representation of their national origin.

### **The American Cultural Climate**

Freneau, Barlow, and Webster were using these tools of nebulous information, a compelling story, and analogous experiences to sell Columbus to the American public. However, the creation of a national myth requires more than creativity and some biographical similarities; Barlow et al. must also construct a character that is complimentary to American cultural ideologies. Timothy Kubal notes that one way of "Creating a subjective class of people that share a common identity, history, and future" is through "Resonant frames" which "are strategically produced when activists borrow from and reuse accepted ideas from their audience and environment" (8). Much of the work that Freneau, Barlow, and Webster do in their literature can be considered "resonant" framing, since their goal is to induce the "successful collective action"

of adopting a national identity (Kubal 8). To do this, they must cater to the cultural values of their audience.

It is important to establish a cultural context in which Freneau, Barlow, and Webster are writing, since it is the authors' attention to cultural needs that drives the effectiveness of their works. The history of American culture is not one of creation, but rather evolution into a culture "no longer simply English, nor even just English inflected by foreign experiences," but American (Jehlen and Warner 195). Englishmen, faced with the pressures of colonization and inhabiting a wilderness, gradually established a culture that valued skills needed for day-to-day survival in the colonies. The result was a developing American value system which stressed hard work, determination, and the abandonment of "the pleasures of England" (Jehlen and Warner 195). This value system, created in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, was reinforced throughout the period of colonialism in America and was safely entrenched in American culture by the time Freneau, Barlow, and Webster begin writing.

American values were also heavily influenced by the presence of religion and religious schools of thought throughout colonial history. New England was incredibly influential in the colonies due to heavy involvement in transatlantic trade, and "the culture of the entire North Atlantic Coast was strongly anchored in south-eastern Massachusetts," itself "dominated by Puritan leaders and institutions" (Jehlen and Warner 306). The Puritans established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 and they "built their experiment squarely on the concept of covenant" (Hughes 28). This concept suggests that the Puritans have personally entered into a "joint promise with God" that must be honored if they are to be successful (Jehlen and Warner 430). John Winthrop, the original governor of Massachusetts Bay and a major influence on New England culture, preached that "We are entered into a Covenant with him [...] Now if the Lord

shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission” (Hughes 29). The influential nature of the Puritans and their commitment to the covenant had two substantial effects on American culture: it heightened emphasis on religious discourse and strengthened the idea of American exceptionalism.

American exceptionalism is the idea that America is the chosen nation of God, destined for great things. Nowhere is this clearer in Puritan discourse than in Winthrop’s “Modell of Christian Charity,” where he says:

The Lord will be our God and delight to swell among us, as his owne people, and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes [...] Wee shall finde that the God of Israell is among us, when tenn of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies, when hee shall make us a prayse and glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England. For we must Consider that wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us... (Jehlen and Warner 159)

Winthrop’s sermon reflects the popular idea that America was not only the chosen nation, but also that America would serve as an example to all other nations. God had led the Puritans out of Europe just as he had led the Israelites out of Egypt, and this parallel endowed the Puritan mission to the New World with incredible religious resonance. Richard Hughes comments in his book *Myths Americans Live By* that immigrants “found this story immensely compelling and adopted it as if it were their very own. In this way, the myth of the Chosen Nation became a permanent part of the American consciousness” (33). Thus Puritan influences created a cultural

sensitivity to religious imagery and the idea of predestined greatness that became central to not only New England, but American culture as a whole.

During the revolutionary and early national periods, however, the cultural climate changed. The Enlightenment, a cultural movement in which reason is especially valued, and Deism, a religion focusing on a unified version of God which can “be known through human reason [and is] attentive to the natural order” were popular movements, embraced by Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine, and other notables in the Revolutionary War (Hughes 49). Both of these movements bring emphasis to the idea that “the American experiment simply reflected the way things were meant to be” (Hughes 49). Examples of Enlightened thought are present in the Declaration of Independence, which claims that “we hold these truths to be self-evident,” *Common Sense*, and other literary works of published just before, during, and after the Revolutionary War. “In other words,” says Hughes, “the American system was not spun out of someone’s imagination or contrived by human wit. Instead it was based on a natural order, built into the world by God himself” (56).

America defined itself as contrary to established world powers, drawing its superiority from its very alienation from established nations. This is another example of American exceptionalism, transformed into a more universal concept that could be applied to all religious sects, not only Puritanism. Jay Fliegelman, author of *Prodigals and Pilgrims: The American Revolution against patriarchal authority 1750-1800* points to the pervasiveness of this naturally-sanctioned separation: The “overarching revolution replaced patriarch with benefactor, precept with example, [and changed...] the understanding of the nature of authority that affected all aspects of eighteenth-century culture.” (?) The Enlightenment and Deism led to increased

emphasis on the values of freedom and equality, and an overall departure from the patriarchal traditions of Europe which underscored an innate and ordained American supremacy.

### **Columbus and Philip Freneau**

It is in this cultural moment, and with the previously discussed cultural history in mind, that Freneau, Barlow, and Webster begin to write about Columbus. Freneau is the first to write about the explorer in 1774, although it is worth noting that “Pictures of Columbus” first appeared in 1788 and was backdated by Freneau “in order to indicate that he had been at the idea before Joel Barlow” (Kyle 69). In 1774 Britain passed the Intolerable Acts, closing Boston Harbor as punishment for the Boston Tea Party, requiring citizens to house British soldiers, and giving power over Massachusetts to the Royal governor. As a result of these stressors, the first Continental Congress was held in Philadelphia, where it was resolved to boycott British imports until the Intolerable Acts were repealed. At this time, Freneau was not long out of college, having graduated in September of 1771 from Princeton where he and his classmates unanimously decided to wear American-made clothing to their commencement (Freneau xx). His patriotism extends into his poetry, and drives his efforts to “reconstruct through a series of images a myth that includes and supersedes even the Edenic myth in its exciting legendary and epic possibilities: Christopher Columbus in the act of discovering America” (Kyle 62). In his poem “Pictures of Columbus,” Freneau constructs Columbus as a national hero through language which highlights Columbus as the mythic ancestor of American heritage and values, dramatizing his actions to make the explorer simultaneously relatable and epic.

“The Pictures of Columbus” tracks the Genoese explorer’s trials from his first suspicions of a land to the west until his time in Valladolid just before his death. Freneau includes the major

highlights of Columbus' adventures: the appeal to Ferdinand and Isabella, the mutiny against Columbus, the discovery of San Salvador, and the journey back to Spain in chains. These adventures are presented as a series of "Pictures," which switch between different places and times in order to present a comprehensive view of the explorer's personality, which is both familiar and epic. Freneau must strike a careful balance between advertising Columbus as simultaneously relatable and inspirational. If the explorer is too mundane, he will fail to enrapture the imagination of the American public and cease to be a larger-than-life hero; if Columbus' heroic personality traits are overemphasized, however, then the American public will reject him because of his caricatured otherness. Freneau's attempt to mythologize Columbus succeeds precisely because he manages this balance, using poetic language to dramatize quintessentially American experiences.

There are several avenues which Freneau uses to make Columbus relatable, but all his methods fall into two basic categories: similar experiences and similar values. Columbus as depicted by Freneau resembles early American settlers in many ways. In one picture, Columbus lists the traits he requires for his crew that will man the first voyage in search of China. These traits are:

most patient fortitude,  
Strict vigilance and staid sobriety,  
Contempt of death on cool reflection founded,  
A sense of honour, motives of ambition,  
And every sentiment that sways the brave.—

"Fortitude [...] vigilance [...] sobriety" and bravery are all characteristics which were necessary for Americans to exhibit if they wanted to prosper throughout American history. Letters written

by early settlers to their families illustrate that settlers “live[d] in fear of the Enemy every hour” for there is “nothing to be gotten here but sickness and death” and only those with the strength to endure hardship could find success in the New World (Jehlen and Warner 124).

Values of fortitude and bravery also applied to Freneau’s contemporary audience, as they were virtues in the Revolutionary War. A letter written by George Washington states that:

To see the men without clothes to cover their nakedness, without blankets to lie upon, without shoes...without a house or hut to cover them until those could be built [...] is a proof of patience and obedience which, in my opinion, can scarcely be paralleled (National Park Service).

Hardship, then, is an integral part of the American experience, as is the ability to overcome it through the virtues of patience and perseverance. Positive sentiment surrounding fortitude would have been particularly high when Freneau published *Pictures of Columbus* seven years after the victory at Yorktown. Freneau highlights Columbus’ ability to tackle adversity many times throughout the poem, fashioning the explorer’s experiences as complimentary to the values of his audience.

For example, Freneau imagines the scene in which Columbus has to calm his rebellious crew and prevent a mutiny in order to reach the New World. “Now all is discontent,” Columbus says, “—such oceans pass’d,/ No land appearing yet, defects the most;/ Yet, fertile in expedients, I alone/ The mask of mild content am forc’d to wear.” Freneau’s language in this portion clearly highlights Columbus’ perseverance; everything is in a state of “discontent,” but he is “fertile” in the necessary advantages to endure. However, his language characterizes this perseverance as specific to Columbus. Freneau uses phrases like “I alone” and “defects the most,” to indicate that



Columbus is exceptional in his patience; when all others have fallen to fickleness and weakness, only Columbus possesses the strength of character to continue and prevail.

This emphasis on superhuman traits which the character possesses in excess are found in epic conventions, and Freneau uses those epic conventions precisely for their ability to create a larger than life character which inspires people. In a portion of the poem that was later edited out, Freneau creates a situation in which Columbus goes to find an Inchantress so that she might tell him the fate of his journey. When the Inchantress asks Columbus to explain his presence in her ghoulish home, he responds:

Hither at the midnight hour  
Over hill and dale I've come,  
Leaving ease and sleep at home:  
With daring aims my bosom glows;  
Long a stranger to repose (II. 10-14)

Here again Freneau uses more "I" language, reinforcing the idea that Columbus is a character of singular and peerless importance. However, this portion of the poem is a more obvious example of Freneau taking his inspiration from epics such as the *Odyssey*. The image he fashions in these lines is one of a bold traveler who will undertake long, treacherous journeys in order to reach his goals; this description resembles both American journeys to the new world and classical epic travelers like *Odysseus* or *Beowulf*. Lines like these, which act as bridges between the American experience and classical epic conventions, contribute to Freneau's goal of simultaneously elevating and familiarizing the Genoese explorer.

Freneau also focuses on Columbus' opposition from European authority in "Pictures of Columbus," a trait American's no doubt found appealing so soon after the Revolution had ended.

When Columbus attempts to recruit sailors for his ship, he appeals to their common upbringing, saying that:

Princes should join me now!—not those I mean  
Who lurk in courts, or revel in the shade  
Of painted ceilings:--those I mean, more worthy,  
Whose daring aims and persevering souls,  
Soaring beyond the sordid views of fortune,  
Bespeak the lineage of true royalty (XII. 8-13)

The language in this passage is clearly derogatory; typical princes “lurk [...] in the shade.” Freneau’s use of the word “lurk” evokes an image of an undesirable creature that is outcast, and contradicts the more common propaganda which deifies those of royal lineage. Freneau then continues to establish an inverted social hierarchy by allotting any desirable traits to non-royal citizens. Those citizens are “daring [...] persevering [...] and true royalty,” implying that a member of the monarchy can be expected to be cowardly, fickle, and invested with power through deceit.

Columbus’ alienation from Europe is a trait which makes him very appealing to Revolutionary authors. Freneau, Barlow, and Webster all focus on ways in which Columbus is undervalued and mistreated by Spain and other European nations. Columbus was repeatedly rejected by European countries when attempting to finance his first voyage; he attempted to get financing from Portugal, Italy, England, before Spain reluctantly agreed to finance his voyage (Biography). After Columbus proved to be an ineffective governor of Hispaniola:

The Spanish Crown sent a royal official who arrested Columbus and stripped him of his authority. He returned to Spain in chains to face the royal court. The

charges were later dropped but Columbus lost his titles as governor of the Indies and for a time, much of the riches made during his voyages (Biography).

Although Columbus was eventually allowed to return to the Caribbean, he never regained his former wealth and prestige.

These aspects of Columbus' life in which he finds himself at odds with European authority were particularly attractive to Freneau, Barlow, and Webster. The American Revolution was a reaction against the policies of an oppressive British government; thus one of the first components of American identity became an opposition to preexisting European models. British infractions on colonists' rights such as the Stamp Act (1765) or the Intolerable Acts (1774) had fostered a relationship between Americans and the British in which Americans felt resentful for being unjustly punished. This resentment was fresh during the years in which Freneau, Barlow, and Webster published their works (1787, 1788, and 1791, respectively), and the authors frequently feature this similarity in their works.

Sentiments like Freneau's, which promote the power of the common man over that of a monarch, would not have been as well received in 1492. In fact, if Columbus had been ardently opposed to the monarchy, as Freneau paints him to be, his voyage would have most certainly been even more difficult to finance than it already was. By infusing Columbus with philosophies which modern Americans hold but which were undoubtedly not his own, Freneau gives the illusion that Columbus was a visionary, well ahead of his time in his thoughts and actions.

For example, one of the most pervasive instances of anachronistic values is Columbus' rather conspicuous devotion to principles of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, as previously described, is a cultural movement in which reason and nature are of particular

importance; balance is also another component of the Enlightenment. When Columbus first conceives the idea of a voyage to America, Freneau writes that:

As o'er his charts Columbus ran,  
Such disproportion he survey'd  
He thought he saw in art's mean plan  
Blunders that Nature never made; [...]  
But copying Nature's bold design,  
If true to her, no fault is mine [...]  
Yet to the west what lengthen'd seas!  
Are no gay islands found in these,  
No sylvan worlds that nature meant  
To balance Asia's vast extent? (I. 1-4, 12-13, 17-19)

Lines 12-13 and 17-19 are unambiguously enlightened, since it clearly advocates natural design as the superior method of organizing the world. However, these lines also use the principles of the Enlightenment to advocate American superiority and a great American destiny. Columbus is never explicitly told that lands lie beyond the ocean; he infers this information from his own perusal of maps: “He thought he saw in art’s mean plan/ Blunders that Nature never made” (I. 3-4). These lines associate “art”—or falsehoods—with European mapmakers, again reinforcing the idea of European inferiority. Also, since these European made maps do not include America, then it is a “blunder” to not represent America in a larger world picture. Since “Nature” did not make this error, the implication is that America is deliberately created by Nature to restore global balance. The fact that Columbus—a humble mariner and amateur cartographer himself—recognizes this error further legitimizes his claim as an America’s ancestor; Freneau describes

him as the first European creative and intelligent enough to recognize that a great land must lie undiscovered across the Atlantic. Columbus, then, is a forward thinking man, ahead of his time. This elevates him above his peers, for he shares the same principles as the reason-driven culture of America roughly 300 years before the country's founding.

So far, Freneau has set up Columbus to be a hero for the American public. He is relatable enough to be accepted as an American. He is determined, brave, smart, and forward-thinking. *Pictures of Columbus*, however, includes the image of Columbus in chains as he is transported back to Spain. The rather gloomy aftermath of that incident creates a small problem for Freneau, because in real life this situation rendered Columbus powerless, broke, depressed, and altogether un-heroic. Freneau responds to this challenge by turning Columbus from a prisoner into a martyr whose suffering is alleviated by the thought of the greatness his discovery will bring to the world.

Columbus has some inkling early on in the poem that what he will discover will be significant: "Who knows but he that hung this ball/ In the clear void, and governs all,/ On those dread scenes, remote from view,/ Has trac'd his great idea too" (I. 28-31). Here, the New World is characterized as an exceptional discovery designed by God, which is consistent with the early Puritan rhetoric about America. This idea that America is destined for greatness comes up again in the very last lines of the poem, where Columbus, pensive after the degradation of his situation, muses:

Yet in this joyless gloom while I repose,  
Some comfort will attend my pensive shade,  
When memory paints, and golden fancy shows  
My toils rewarded, and my woes repaid;  
When empires rise where lonely forests grew,

Where Freedom shall her generous plans pursue (XVII, 3-8).

There can be no doubt that the country whose future brings light to his “joyless gloom” is the United States. No other empires were present in the area, and certainly those settlements that did exist were not characterized by “Freedom.” Even after being misused by Europe and ending his life destitute, the glory of America is so palpable that Columbus can not only accurately imagine it, but finds it sufficiently positive to “repay” his troubles. Freneau uses Columbus to paint America as a tool through which “Freedom [...] Nature” and even God will bring balance and order to the world. America’s destiny, ordained by powerful forces and a heroic ancestor, is clearly one of greatness.

### **Columbus and Webster**

Freneau focuses on using poetic language to frame Columbus as an epic hero and worthy ancestor of American greatness; but his approach is by no means the only approach for characterizing Columbus as a national hero, nor is his audience of the literate and scholarly the only effective way of promoting this myth. Noah Webster, who is better known for his dictionaries, also created a version of the Columbus myth. According to Jehlen and Warner, his piece titled “The Story of Columbus” was published in 1791 as a part of *The Little Reader’s Assistant*, a publication meant for teaching children “morals as well as letters” as well as a “first lesson in national mythology” (798).

Noah Webster, like Freneau, does his utmost to connect the Americans to Christopher Columbus. The lines about how kings “refused to encourage him [Columbus], because they thought his scheme was wild and foolish” held particular potency for post-revolutionary Americans; the citizens of the United States had just won a war many thought to be a foolhardy endeavor that would never succeed. Webster also says that “Thus it is sometimes the fate of the

best men to receive the worst treatment,” a fact with which Americans fresh off the battlefield would be well acquainted (Jehlen and Warner 799). The goal of these connections mirrors Freneau’s, since the American people could not accept a hero with whom they felt no fraternity.

Because Webster’s *Little Reader’s Assistant* is aimed at an audience of children in primary school, he forms his story less like an epic poem and more like a fairytale in which the acquisition of morals, along with entertainment, is a primary goal. It is no surprise, then, that Webster’s account of Columbus’ life reads like an adventure story:

When he was first returning to Spain [...] there arose a violent storm, and he [Columbus] was in danger of being swallowed up by the sea; in which case all his discoveries would be lost to the world. His courage and coolness did not forsake him in the hour of danger; he wrote a short account of his voyage [...] and his discoveries thus have been preserved (Jehlen and Warner 799).

There is no historical evidence for this incident, in which Columbus protects his findings by stuffing his story into a cask and tossing it overboard. What this story lacks in accuracy, however, it makes up for in entertainment. In his book *How Children Learn*, John Holt writes that “vivid, vital, pleasurable experiences are the easiest to remember, and [...] memory works best when unforced” (3). Webster’s emphasis on remaining calm in the face of death and danger is exciting, and paints Columbus as an action hero children can look up to. This creates a “pleasurable experience” that is likewise “unforced,” making his story an effective means of conditioning children to have a positive response to Columbus.

Rather than implying Columbus’ greatness as Freneau does, Webster prefers to explicitly say what attributes readers should associate with the explorer. He refers to Columbus as a “learned and brave man,” a man “with the calmness of a hero,” a “brave commander,” the “great,

the amiable,” and the “noble” explorer who discovered America (Jehlen and Warner 798-799). Webster’s focus on making Columbus’ traits palatable and obvious to a younger audience is a highly effective strategy. Columbus’ tale has a very clear protagonist and antagonist, spelling out for children the values and attributes they are meant to find desirable. More importantly, they are meant to follow the example of Columbus. According to *The Moral Intelligence of Children*, written by Robert Coles, “Morality is best learned through stories—the morality plays of real life.” Columbus, then, becomes a figurehead of the morals and values which children should espouse, while also being described as an action hero whom children can look to as an example of America’s great past.

### **Columbus and Barlow**

Thus far, Freneau and Webster have created an image of Columbus that is fairly secular. Freneau only alludes to the existence of God, preferring to categorize him as a nebulous “higher authority,” and religion is totally absent within Webster’s text. Like today, America had no national religion around the time of the Revolution, and so it can be reasonably assumed that Freneau and Webster wished to reach as large an audience as possible and avoid alienating what was already a fairly small pool of American readers. Joel Barlow wrote *The Vision of Columbus* in 1787 and actively embraces religious references, using America’s history of looking to religion as a means of asserting their great destiny to his full advantage. Freneau’s Columbus pulls from America’s philosophic climate; Webster’s Columbus embodies the spirit of adventure; Barlow’s Columbus speaks to the religious justifications for glory which led to the colonization of America.

As stated earlier in this paper, a large portion of the Early American promotional materials centered around the idea that America would be a new Canaan, destined to act as



God's own chosen nation. This idea of America as a "city upon a hill" remains popular today; former presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan have both used the phrase coined by John Winthrop in their political speeches dated 1961 and 1984, respectively. Barlow's focus on this idea is evident throughout the poem, which was meant to be "an epic" which "presents this history of empire in the New World in the form of a vision offered by an angel to Columbus (Jehlen and Warner 1094). Throughout *The Vision of Columbus*, Barlow attempts to do what Timothy Kubal calls "resonant framing," which uses specific focus on an event to produce the desired result of collective identity (8). To do this, Barlow borrows from one of the most vibrant American myths, American exceptionalism, which asserts that America is preordained for greatness in a way that no other country can claim.

Barlow begins his poem with the image of Columbus in prison, which is "always a favorite moment for the English in the Discoverer's biography, since it illustrates the Spanish failure to appreciate the promise of the New World, which will only be finally realized by the American republic" (Jehlen and Warner 1094). Like Freneau, Barlow opens using images which soldiers of the American Revolution can associate with; his description of Columbus begins when the explorer is rotting in prison, "from the promised empire hurl'd/ [with] chains for a crown, a prison for a world" (Jehlen and Warner 9-10). Furthermore, he is assaulted by "Cold mists through opening grates [...] and deathlike terrors [that] haunt the midnight shade" (Jehlen and Warner 15-16). Barlow also uses many other methods of eliciting a positive reaction which Freneau and Webster use, such as the derision of Europe: "While kings and nations, envious of his name,/ Enjoy'd his toils and triumph's o'er his fame" (Jehlen and Warner 1094). These lines, and the numerous others like them, are important for making Columbus relatable to the post-Revolutionary Americans who experienced their own "terrors" and were dangerously close to

having their dreams of independence “hurl’d” from them by “kings and nations.” With this initial connection to Columbus, the people of the war-weary United States saw themselves in the poor explorer, setting him up as a likeable, relatable character Americans could adopt as a national hero.

Barlow’s chief point of relating Americans to Columbus, however, is through biblical references and religion. His biblical allusions can be classified into two categories: relations between America and the Promised Land, and parallel experiences between Columbus and biblical figures. America had been touted as a New Canaan for the early settlers, and a place in which they could construct a grand social experiment grounded in the will of God. It makes sense, then, that the ancestor of such an establishment would also have to be blessed by God and informed of that grand destiny. To highlight the explorer’s place in biblical history, Barlow connects Columbus to the lineage of the biblical patriarchs through allusions to Joseph. Joseph, son of Jacob and direct descendant of Abraham, was born the 11<sup>th</sup> son of 12 brothers. He was his father’s favorite and his brothers were jealous of him, so he was thrown into a pit and then sold to Ishmaelite merchants. Joseph prospered as a superintendant of an Egyptian household until he was falsely accused of adultery by his master’s wife and thrown into prison. Joseph’s talent for interpreting dreams, however, allowed him to secure his freedom by helping Pharaoh to make sense of his dreams; eventually, at the age of 30, Joseph became viceroy of Egypt and helped the country to prosper (Tanakh).

This cyclical process of glory, destitution, and then a return to glory is a model that Barlow uses in his epic poem. Barlow writes that:

While kings and nations, envious of his name,  
Enjoy’d his toils and triumph’d o’er his fame,

And gave the chief, from promised empire hurl'd,  
Chains for a crown, a prison for a world [...]  
Dissembling friends, each earlier joy who gave [...]  
The garb of friendship and the viper's heart,  
Pas my loath'd cell with smiles of sour disdain,  
Insult my woes and triumph in my pain (Jehlen and Warner 1094).

The image of “kings and nations,” who covet Columbus’ life and subsequently throw him in prison over their jealousies is parallel to the story of Joseph, which elevates Columbus to biblical importance. Barlow, however, goes one step further. While Joseph is constantly driven from one sanctuary to another, Columbus is deprived of both a “crown” and a “world” (Jehlen and Warner 1094). Also, he is betrayed by monarchs and entire countries, instead of a group of siblings. Also, Columbus is visited by an angel “in golden plumage dressed” to tell him of the wonderful destiny of America (Jehlen and Warner 1097). This visitation by the angel also makes Columbus exceptional, since he merits a visit from God’s own personal messenger. Through biblical allusion and the visit of the angel, Barlow constructs a glorious image of the explorer which labels Columbus as superior even to Joseph. America’s ancestor bears resemblance to this important biblical figure, but also surpasses him. .

Columbus is made to be the ancestor of America and a figure of biblical proportions, and Barlow’s efforts to define America as a new and greater Promised Land compliment that version of an explorer; a figure as important as Columbus must be the patron of an equally exceptional country. At the end of Book I of *The Vision of Columbus*, the angel describes to the explorer the wonderful land which he has discovered. He says:

As that great Seer, whose animating rod

Taught Israel's sons the wonder-working God,  
Who led, thro' dreary wastes, the murmuring band  
To the fair confines of the promised land, [...]  
In nobler pomp another Pisgah rise,  
Beneath whose foot thine own Canaan lies; (Jehlen and Warner 1098)

First, this passage equate Columbus with Moses, the man who began the movement of the Israelites out of Egypt and to the Promised Land; Columbus is infused with importance through his connection to Moses, one of the most influential figures in biblical history. The angel goes on to say that “thine own Canaan” is destined to arise in the future. This means that not only is America equated to the Promised Land, but that Columbus is directly responsible for and can take ownership of that land. By suggesting that America is the new Canaan, Barlow affirms the American perception that their mission to colonize the New World is divinely ordained. He situates Columbus within that idea, turning him from a humble explorer into a 15<sup>th</sup> century version of Moses who, through many tribulations, has lead a future people to a place superior even to the Promised Land meant for God's own people. Such an assertion is very powerful, since it combines an origin myth, American nationalism, and biblical resonance.

### **How has this myth fared?**

The true test of the Freneau, Barlow, and Webster's success is the endurance of the Columbus myth to a contemporary audience. Kubal suggests that the resonance of a national myth such as Columbus may be because “these stories are about important moments in the history of our groups or institutions [and so] the stories take on a mythic character—they become symbolic reflections of something important in our present society” (167). According to a survey done by Howard Schuman, Barry Schwartz, and Hanna D'Arcy, American continue to

respond positively to Columbus. Their data shows that when asked “to explain what Christopher Columbus” had done for a “niece or nephew about 14 years old,” 6.2% of those interviewed spoke of Columbus in heroic terms, and 84.7% spoke of Columbus in the traditional terms of “he discovered America” (Schuman et al. 9-10). When asked to elaborate more specifically about the explorer, however, the number of respondents who viewed Columbus in heroic terms doubled to 12% (Schuman et al. 12).

The heroic version of Columbus, however, is being increasingly challenged by historical revisionists who place far greater emphasis on the destruction of indigenous cultures than on laudatory characteristics typically associated with the explorer. In Schuman, Schwartz, and D’Arcy’s study, “older cohorts are more likely than younger cohorts to hold a Heroic [...] view of Columbus” (14). While many of the younger cohorts also expressed traditional views about Columbus, the people who asserted a “Villainous response”—8% of the total polled—were mostly younger (14). Schuman et al. attribute this not necessarily to historical revisionist efforts, although they acknowledge those as important factors; “Schwartz [...] has documented an erosion of historical representations that affects collective memories of past U.S. Leaders in general” (14). Therefore, “the waning of spontaneous heroic characterizations of Columbus [...] fits well with a general diminution of past heroic reputations in the eyes of a larger public” (Schuman et al. 14-15).

The 500 year anniversary of Columbus’ landing on Hispaniola took place in 1992, and a “U.S. Quincentenary Jubilee Commission” was appointed to be in charge of the festivities surrounding the anniversary (Summerhill and Williams 34). Peppered with different committees, the Quincentenary Commission was charged with organizing the “mega-event” that was meant to celebrate the nation’s past; the result, however, ended up being far different; “Hollywood sank—

the operative word—\$95 million into two Columbus movies, whose audiences stayed away in droves” (Axtell 649). The replicas of the Nina, Pinta, and Santa Maria which were meant to tour the country could not find a friendly port (Axtell 649). Schoolchildren celebrated by holding pageants in which mother earth rises up and removes Columbus from the face of the earth (Axtell 650). Stephen J. Summerhill and John Alexander Williams, who wrote the book *Sinking Columbus* and worked with the Commission, characterized the entire affair as a “shipwreck,” and commented that most people “built up such a large reserve of resentment” around the entire affair that “many people tried to avoid it and everyone was relieved when it was finally over” (3). The Quincentenary, in other words, was a failure, characterized by either disinterest or hostility.

### **Conclusion**

Freneau, Barlow, and Webster all work to make Columbus into a suitable ancestor and, judging by the continued presence of Columbus in textbooks today, have been successful. Freneau bestows upon Columbus all of the behaviors and traits indicative of a archetypal American; Webster creates an action/adventure hero that captures the imagination of young Americans; Barlow designs a Columbus who is the father of the new Promised Land and is chosen by God to catalyze America’s greatness. All of these methods help to create, from fairly nebulous historical facts and dissimilar circumstances, a man who represents those things which America takes pride in and admires.

Even though Columbus’ heroic reputation is currently being eroded by ethnic groups who advocate a more accurate and historically revised version of the explorer, it is important to remember the profound affect which Columbus has had on American history and will most likely continue to have. Columbus is inextricably tied to our national origin and national identity, which explains the heated debate over the actual circumstances surrounding his discovery and

personality. It cannot be debated, however, that a national origin myth is an incredibly powerful creation which is meant to inspire and form cohesive national identities. We cannot view early Americans such as Washington and Jefferson, who we now look to as a part of our nation's origin, as persons independent of a need for identity. Just as we view figures like Benjamin Franklin in reverent terms today, so the early Americans needed a figure to inspire them. Columbus, for better or worse, was an ideal candidate for this, and continues to be a central figure in what it means to be an American.

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