The Myth of Aeneas and Plymouth Plantation:

William Bradford’s Synthesis of the Classical Epic

Though William Bradford finished writing his History of Plymouth Plantation in about 1650, the text remained unpublished until 1896, when a photographic facsimile appeared in London. Of Plymouth Plantation was published for the first time in the United States, thanks to the efforts of the State of Massachusetts, in 1898. The initial interest in Bradford’s book was due to its historical significance—as a detailed account of the self-named Pilgrims who were among the first Europeans to establish a colony in the New World—but once it became available to readers on both sides of the Atlantic, it did not take long for scholars to recognize the manuscript’s literary value as well. For about a century, then, scholars have been positing theories to account for some of the oddities of Bradford’s work, like its conspicuously asymmetrical structure and its author’s erratic tone. Several writers have put forward plausible analyses, and it is not my purpose here to discredit their conclusions. Rather, my purpose is to show that by and large the academy has overlooked a crucial element in its attempts to come to terms with Bradford and his account of the Plymouth colonists: namely William Bradford’s synthesis of classical texts and how that synthesis manifests itself in his writing, particularly the First Book of Of Plymouth Plantation.
One reason for the academy’s missing Bradford’s classicism is that there are very few classical allusions in the text—in plain sight, anyway. However, a close reading of *Of Plymouth Plantation* reveals that Bradford must have been influenced by his knowledge of Homeric and Vergilian epic tradition—a *pagan* tradition that was consistently omitted from *public* Puritan discourse. And there is no question that Bradford was writing public discourse. As introduction to his first chapter, Bradford writes, “And first of the occasion and inductions ther unto; the which that I may truly unfould, I must begine at the very roote and rise of the same. The which I shall endeavor to manifest in a plaine stile[. . .]” (23). If Bradford were writing for himself only, he would not have to qualify the veracity of his text, nor would chronology and simplicity of “stile” be chief concerns. He clearly has a reader in mind as he composes—one who does not know him personally (that is, one who does not know his integrity) and one who does not already know the story of the Pilgrims. Bradford’s opening suggests further that he is writing for Pilgrim and non-Pilgrim alike, and that he is writing for the ages, for an unborn reader. Consequently, he would want to put the best face forward, as it were; and for the Puritans of the seventeenth century, the best face was a homogenously Christian one.

Recent scholarship, however, has argued convincingly that Puritans were not influenced solely by their Geneva Bible but by Greco-Roman classicism, too. In his introduction to *The American Aeneas: Classical Origins of the American Self* (2001), John C. Shields writes, “From the earliest days when ‘America’ emerged as an idea, that entity, rather than being alienated from classicism, was conceived in terms of classical as well as biblical” (xxv). Shields has labeled the classical half of the American self the
“myth of Aeneas,” and the Christian half the “myth of Adam.” Shields’ argument, greatly simplified, is that learned colonial men (and women!) were well aware of classical texts because of the structure of the English school system:

In the early forms [grades], the curriculum was devoted largely to the study of Latin. Vergil and Cicero were studied intensively in the later forms, and in the last form some Greek (and occasionally, on demand, even some Hebrew) was introduced. [...] The myth of Aeneas, then, was internalized by those whom one could identify as an intellectual elite, including virtually all persons who governed the American colonies[. . .] (xxxiv-xxxv)

William Bradford was elected governor of Plymouth Plantation in 1621 and held the position of leadership virtually until his death in 1657, except for a handful of years here and there during which he acted as assistant to the governor. Moreover, William T. Davis points out that Bradford had a gift for language study. In addition to the contemporary languages of French and Dutch, Bradford mastered Latin, Greek, and Hebrew (8). There is little doubt, then, that Bradford would have known the epics of Homer and Vergil. The latter in particular, writes Shields, “provided a practical, secular justification for the pursuit of a horizontal paradise imbued with the moral and spiritual virtues of Roman republicanism, as represented by Vergil’s hero” (xxxiii). But while the colonial intellectual elite knew—and thought in terms of—classical literature, the lesser educated (or uneducated) masses were limited to their knowledge of the Bible. Rather than complicate the message of the necessity of Christian devotion by also incorporating the myth of Aeneas, Puritan leaders, like Bradford, expunged classical references from
their public discourse. It was proving difficult enough to keep the flock pure in the New World without muddying the waters with pagan models of virtue.

As further evidence of the likelihood of Bradford’s intimate knowledge of classicism, non-Puritan contemporaries made regular use of Greco-Roman mythology in their public discourse. For example, Marc Lescarbot, writing at Port Royal in 1606 and 1607, composed a number of classical odes and sonnets, including a verse drama titled *Neptune’s Theater* (published as part of a collection, *Les Muses de la Nouvelle-France*, in Paris in 1618), according to Norman S. Grabo, who describes Lescarbot’s play as “dominated by classical allegory but domesticated by local American personages and ideas” (278). Grabo continues, “[Lescarbot] has appropriated the frontier by turning Indians, sagamores, and canoes into ancient Greek and Roman mythological figures. He has made the frontier literary [. . .]” (279). Closer to home (Bradford’s home, that is), Thomas Morton of Merry Mount, in his *New English Canaan* (1637), responds to the Pilgrims’ attacks—both rhetorical and literal—by creatively fabricating a classical past for America’s indigenous population. Grabo writes,

Morton subtly implies an ethnic connection between Indians and Englishmen.

The argument, based on the grounds of supposed Latin and Greek roots in Indian languages, declares that the Indians were Trojans who escaped Achilles but did not join Aeneas. Morton writes of these displaced heroes with respect, frequently finding them more honorable, hospitable, and humane than the so-called civilized Europeans. (280)

A final seventeenth-century example of unabashed classicism is Gaspar Pérez de Villagrán’s *Historia de la Nueva Mexico*, a 34-canto epic that tells of Cabeza de Vaca’s
expedition to the New World from 1596 to 1610. Referring to Villagrá’s “classically learned imagination,” Grabo writes, “It is not surprising, then, that he recounted the adventure of this New Mexican party of discovery, conquest, and settlement under the consciousness of Homer and Virgil, his own mentors” (285). Given the profound influence of classicism on educated men of Bradford’s own time and place, it seems ludicrous to suggest that the Pilgrim governor’s only substantive literary influence was the Bible. His formative years in England and Holland quite simply could not have been so insular. Bradford—like Lescarbot, Morton and Villagrá—knew Homer and Vergil; and the classical epic had to seep into Bradford’s imagination as he described the Pilgrims’ trials in coming to the New World.

Concrete evidence of Bradford’s knowledge of Greco-Roman classics—though it, in itself, does not prove an intimate knowledge—are the few overt allusions he does make to classicism in the text. For example, Bradford refers to the classical figures Cato, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Pliny, and Plato. Bradford alludes to Roman mythology in his often anthologized chastisement of Thomas Morton of Merry Mount. He compares the men of Merry Mount, in their “dancing and frisking” and consorting with Indian women to be like “so many fairies, or furies rather” (238). He further writes, “As if they had anew revived and celebrated the feasts of the Roman Goddes Flora, or the beasly practises of the madd Bacchinalians” (238). As was often the case among church leaders, reference to classicism was reserved for negative examples—like describing the licentiousness of Morton and his fellow colonists. The classical allusions are few in Bradford’s text, but it is filled with biblical names and events. This preference of the Christian allusion in public discourse is described by Shields (regarding Edward Taylor,
but it could easily be applied to Bradford: “[H]e appears to have chosen not to broadcast this fondness [for classicism] but rather publicly to endorse the better known (that is, known to more people) Adamic mode of discourse” (55). Bradford’s use of classicism, though limited, is even further evidence of a deeper understanding of the myth of Aeneas.

Before looking at the classical elements in *Of Plymouth Plantation*, some time must be spent with the question of why scholars have not seen these elements previously. Shields notes that a number of recent studies by Americanists have come close to identifying the important strain of classicism in colonial and early American literature:

The tendency to conjure up the classical past [. . .] and then to disavow it
constitutes a pattern of acceptance and denial that we shall see repeatedly[. . . .]

Here we see an entrenched refusal to entertain the possibility that the idea of “Americanness” might be rooted in classical sources. (xxvii)

Shields’ book, and his selection of its title, is contrapuntal to R. W. B. Lewis’ 1955 work *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century*. Lewis’ purpose is to demonstrate how the Adamic myth influenced “articulate thinkers and conscious artists” in nineteenth-century America (1). From the beginning of his book, Lewis writes of a dichotomy in American culture: “Every culture seems, as it advances toward maturity, to produce its own determining debate over the ideas that preoccupy it” (1-2). He continues to use language, like “debate,” that underscores the two-sided nature of American culture. Lewis talks of a “distinctive dialogue” and says that “[t]he historian looks, too, for the coloration or discoloration of ideas received from the sometimes bruising contact of opposites” (2). Furthermore, Lewis writes, “[T]he narrative art inevitably and by nature invests its inherited intellectual content with a
quickening duplicity; it stains ideas with restless ambiguity” (3). I suggest that Lewis was sensing the competing myths of Adam and Aeneas but was unable to recognize the specific “debate” more than a half century ago—in spite of using Vergil’s *Aeneid* as an illustration of his application of the terms *myth* and *mythology*. In fact, Lewis concludes that the Roman myth was “[u]nlike” the American myth (5). To borrow Shields’ language: Lewis appears loath to consider the possibility that Americanness is rooted significantly in classicism. Twenty years after Lewis, Sacvan Bercovitch has not progressed very far in his *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (1975). In spite of terming Bradford’s work “the colonial classic,” Bercovitch devotes only four pages to its discussion. Still, his assessment of *Of Plymouth Plantation* is curiously similar to Lewis’ view of American culture as a whole; Bercovitch writes that “Bradford assumes the traditional dichotomy between secular and sacred, and he sees the plantation itself, accordingly, in terms of common providence” (44). Again, Bercovitch is sensing two competing strains in Bradford—“secular” (classical) and “sacred” (biblical)—but Bercovitch chooses to focus on (*focus on*, as the phrase is related to the word *see*) only the latter in his reference to “common providence.”

Lewis and Bercovitch are not the only scholars who suffer from what Shields terms “cultural blindness” (xxv) regarding the myth of Aeneas and America’s classical origins. Grabo, for example, in his careful study of Bradford’s literary contemporaries (Lescarbot, Morton and Villagrá), ultimately decides that the Pilgrim governor “could not [. . . absorb] his frontier into natural experience by treating it as literature” (280). In part, Grabo blames the frontier itself, which was “beyond handling by literary means” (281). Yet was Bradford’s frontier experience so far removed from Lescarbot’s, Morton’s and
Villagrá’s? Grabo seems led to his conclusion because of the scarcity of overt classical allusion in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. I will attempt to show that the classical is present in Bradford’s text, but it is often buried beneath a mantel of Adamic myth. Another scholar suffering from cultural blindness is David Read, who discusses Bradford’s “contributions [. . .] to a particular form of American mythology [. . .]” (291). Read notes several aspects of Bradford’s text that could be attributable to classical influence—for example, its “clear emplotment” (294) and occupation with “the deeds of individuals” (297)—and he even acknowledges Greco-Roman influences in Bradford’s writing (296). However, Read decides that the Bible is “surely the authoritative text for Bradford on matters of narrative as on most other matters” (294). Kathleen Donegan’s 2002 analysis of *Of Plymouth Plantation* leans toward classical influence on several points, but her cultural blindness reveals itself when she writes,

For Bradford to emphasize the hardship and affliction his people suffered would affirm, to the faithful, the sanctity of their efforts to establish a holy church in the New World. This paradigm of suffering and purification would be entirely in keeping with the tenets of early providentialism. Indeed, most of Bradford’s critics have read these fearful invocations just so. (13)

Donegan acknowledges, then, that “most critics” have analyzed Bradford through a biblical, or Adamic, lens. She goes on to offer an alternate reading of Bradford’s text as an example of early providentialism, but she does not look to classicism as a possible influence. I will revisit the analyses of Grabo, Read and Donegan as I discuss the classical aspects of *Of Plymouth Plantation*. 
One of the most striking oddities of Bradford’s book is its asymmetrical structure. *Of Plymouth Plantation* is comprised of two books, the first being a series of ten chapters, the second a year-by-year accounting of the Pilgrims’ exploits in the New World. The First Book opens with a discussion of the Reformation and the beginnings of Separatism; and it concludes with the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth. The Second Book chronicles the years 1620-1646. The First Book is less than one fifth the length of the Second. According to Walter P. Wenska, Bradford wrote the First Book in about a year’s time, from 1630-1631; and he wrote nearly the entire Second Book from 1644-1650 (154-55). Both books, then, are retrospectives; neither is a diary, as such, in which Bradford has recorded his daily observations and musings. Wenska sees the books as distinctly separate histories, with the first being a “coherent narrative” and the second a series of “annals” whose main purpose is to record events for posterity (153). I believe the narrative quality of the First Book is due to Bradford’s ability to see the Pilgrims’ westward migration in Vergilian terms—as an epic adventure worthy of epic narration. And Bradford ends his First Book just as Vergil ends the *Aeneid*: with transplantation achieved but much, much more to be done.

There are some obvious similarities between Bradford’s adventure and Aeneas’—similarities that must have been obvious to the bookish and astute Bradford, too. Shields comments, “The parallel advanced by the structure of the *Aeneid* is more compatible to the American adventure than that provided by the biblical narrative” (xxxiii). There is, first of all, the Pilgrims’ westward movement from Europe to the New World, just as Aeneas has to travel from Troy to Hesperia, the Western Land, Italy—“‘an ancient land with strong arms and fat soil’” (1.749). Aeneas must transport his own brand of religion.
He says to Queen Dido, “‘I am pious / Aeneas, and I carry in my ships / my household gods together with me [. . .]’” (1.534-36). And once Italy is reached, the wandering Trojans must displace the native inhabitants. It is foretold that Aeneas “shall wage tremendous war in Italy / and crush ferocious nations and establish / a way of life and walls for his own people [. . .]” (1.367-69). Here, then, in the most basic outline of the *Aeneid* is the story of the Pilgrims: their forced flight westward, unique version of Christianity firmly in hand, to “crush ferocious [Indian] nations and establish a [Puritan] way of life.” Bradford must have seen himself and his Pilgrims in Aeneas and his uprooted Trojans. Even if he did not make the connections while in the midst of their flight, Bradford had ten years of reflection to draw the parallels before beginning the First Book of his history.

Painting the Pilgrims’ adventures in epic terms is natural given the fundamental aspects of the literary form. Paul Merchant writes,

>The double relation of epic, to history on the one hand and to everyday reality on the other, emphasizes clearly two of its most important original functions. It was a chronicle, a ‘book of the tribe’, a vital record of custom and tradition, and at the same time a story-book for general entertainment. (1)

The First Book is most definitely a book of the Separatist tribe which seeks to chronicle events, and record customs and traditions in story-book (or narrative) form. Bradford, a long-time leader of the Separatists, even before being elected governor in 1621, must have seen himself as a type of epic hero, something along the lines of Aeneas, at least in the Trojan’s piety and paternal concern for his people. Of the epic hero, Merchant writes, “We are confronted not by a man at a moment in history, but by Man in History. We are
all involved in what becomes of him” (4). Bradford was surely sensing himself as Man in History as he wrote chapter 4 of the First Book wherein the Pilgrims resolve to colonize “those vast and unpeopled countries of America, which are fruitfull and fitt for habitation, being devoid of all civill inhabitants, wher ther are only salvage and brutish men, which range up and downe, little otherwise then the wild beasts of the same” (46-47). In language fit for epic heroism, Bradford further writes, “It was answered, that all great and honourable actions are accompanied with great difficulties, and must be both enterprised and overcome with answerable courages” (48). Bradford then references the truce between Holland and Spain that would be ending soon: “[T]her was nothing but beating of drums, and preparing for warr, the events wherof are allway uncertaine. The Spaniard might prove as cruell as the salvages of America, and the famine and pestilence as sore hear as ther [. . .]” (48-49). Bradford was Man in History with hard choices to make in a perilous world. Furthermore, it makes sense, based on Merchant’s analysis, that Bradford would relate his life and times to the Aeneid more so than to Homer’s epics: “Resembling [. . .] more the Old Testament than the Iliad or Odyssey, the Aeneid is written with a strong sense of national identity and destiny—so strong, in fact, that it has been called ‘nationalistic’ and ‘propagandistic’ by its detractors [. . .]” (22).

Beyond the broadest—though crucial—similarities between Bradford’s First Book and the Aeneid, there are several curiously similar details. For example, both involve dangerous and protracted journeys by sea. The Trojans have already been at sea many days after the fall of Troy when they encounter a great storm. Aeneas tells the tale: “But after we were well upon the waters, with land no longer to be seen—the sky—
was everywhere, and everywhere the sea—
a blue-black cloud ran overhead; it brought
the night and storm and breakers rough in darkness.” (3.254-58)

Bradford reports, “[A] fearfull storme at sea, being 14. days or more before they arrived
at their porte, in 7. wherof they neither saw son, moone, nor stars [. . .]” (36). He further
relates that even the experienced sailors were afraid: “[T]he water rane into their
mouthes and ears; and the mariners cried out, We sinke, we sinke [. . .]” (36). In both
cases, the ocean journeys are early in their overall adventures. Aeneas is telling his story
to Queen Dido of Carthage; Bradford is relating the Pilgrims’ travels from England to
Holland. Herein is another of noteworthy similarity. Both the Trojans and Separatists
have lengthy lay-overs in places that nearly prevent them from reaching their lands of
destiny. Aeneas spends a year with Dido “in lust, forgetful of their kingdom, / they take
long pleasure, fondling through the winter, / the slaves of squalid craving” (4.255-57).
Succumbing to base desires, then, Aeneas begins to forget his loftier purpose of founding
Rome. Bradford’s Separatists linger in Holland nearly twelve years—until “old age
began to steale on many of them, [. . .] so as it was not only probably thought, but
apparently seen, that within a few years more they would be in danger to scatter, by
necessities pressing them, or sinke under their burdens, or both” (45). Moreover, the
younger members of the group, like Aeneas, were succumbing to temptations of the flesh.
Bradford writes,

But that which was more lamentable, and of all sorowes most heavie to be borne,
was that many of their children, by these occasions, and the great licentiousness
of youth in that countrie, and the manifold temptations of the place, were drawne
away by evill examples into extravagante and dangerous courses, getting the raines off their neks, and departing from their parents. (46)

Bradford could have easily seen the Pilgrims’ time in Holland as a Carthage-like deviation that was destructive to their great cause. Once the truth was realized, Bradford helped lead his people from temptation, just as “pious Aeneas carries out the gods’ / instructions [. . . and] turns back to his fleet” (4.544-45).

Another connection between Vergil’s poem and *Of Plymouth Plantation* is the use of arrested imagery to establish historical perspective. As writers—and not painters or sculptors—both Vergil and Bradford had only language with which to create visual images. This technique is obvious in the first book of the *Aeneid* where the hero views murals in a Carthage temple: “He sees the wars of Troy set out in order: / the battles famous now through all the world[. . . .] With many tears and sighs he feeds / his soul on what is nothing but a picture” (647-48, 658-59). Merchant says of the episode, “One presumes that [. . .] Vergil would [not] have suggested that it was likely in literal terms for a man’s fame to precede him so rapidly, but the point is surely being made that for the great hero the events of his own lifetime have already become subjects for epic” (2). Vergil’s ekphrastic scene serves several functions. It efficiently establishes Aeneas’ history, and it attaches a sort of tragic majesty to Aeneas, a phoenix-like persona risen from the ashes of great Troy—a tone and perspective that Vergil will maintain throughout the poem. While Bradford does not employ ekphrasis per se, several scholars have noted the picture-like quality of several scenes in the First Book. The sea storm episode mentioned earlier would be one example, with the water running in the sailors’ ears and mouths as, panic-stricken, they shout that the vessel is going to “sinke.” Though
less dramatic, Bradford paints a picture of his group’s halcyon days in Holland: “Being thus settled (after many difficulties) they continued many years in a comfortable condition, injoying much sweeet and delightefull societie and spirituall comforte together in the wayes of God, under [...] able ministrie, and prudente governmente [...]” (39-40).

Wenska writes of Bradford’s technique, “[T]he [first] book is essentially static. It presents a series of still-life portraits of the Pilgrim [...]” (153). Similarly, Read notes that the scenes (the shipboard ones especially) are “all in the context of a radical containment which is also—paradoxically, given the circumstances—a form of stasis: the Pilgrim community functions here as a simple and cohesive body, open to the ways of providence [...]” (295). Donegan, meanwhile, refers to Bradford’s reflective style as “a memory best laid to rest without mourning. Today, there is work to be done” (26). It is easy to imagine Donegan making precisely the same remarks about the temple scene in the *Aeneid*. In both works, Vergil and Bradford capture the past in word-images that effectively compress information and set a specific (generally *heroic*) tone.

Another common element of the epic is violence. Though Merchant does not make this point straight-forwardly, the opening sentences of his book *The Epic* (1971) reference the *Iliad*, *War and Peace*, and a contemporary newspaper clipping about the Vietnam War. Certainly the graphic nature of violence in Vergil makes the *Aeneid* stand apart from even Homer, who was not shy about describing bloodshed. Examples in the poem are numerous. Here are two, with the first being the death of Camilla:

> But [Camilla] herself was heedless of the sound,
> the rush of wind, the weapon from the air, until
> the shaft drove in below her breast,
held fast and drank deep of her virgin blood.

[. . .]  
Dying,

Camilla tries to tug the lance out with

her hand; but its steel head holds fast her bones

within the ribs in that deep wound. (11.1064-67, 1082-85)

Aeneas also deals out death:

Aeneas comes upon Rutulian Sucro—

this combat was the first to check the Trojans’
rush—but without delaying much, he plunges

his naked sword there where the end is quickest:

right through the ribs, the grating of the chest.

[. . . Rutulians are thrown from their horses] then,
on foot [Aeneas] charges them, striking one

before he had reached Turnus, with his long

lance; and he stabs the other with his sword;

he lets two severed heads hang from his chariot

and carries off the pair, both damp with blood. (12.681-92)

Bradford does not rival Vergil in his description of violence, but there is some in *Of Plymouth Plantation*. He writes of the prospect of going to America:

And also those which should escape or overcome these difficulties [drowning, famine and disease], should yet be in continuall danger of the salvage people, who are cruell, barbarous, and most treacherous, being most furious in their rage, and merciless wher they overcome; not being contente only to kill, and take away life,
but delight to tormente men in the most bloodie manner that may be; fleasing [flaying] some alive with the shells of fishes, cutting of the members and joints of others by peesmeale, and broiling on the coles, eate the collops of their flesh in their sight whilst they live; with other cruelties horrible to be related. (47)

Moreover, Bradford often speaks of warfare, either literally or figuratively. Earlier I mentioned Bradford’s contemplation of a possible war with Spain. Elsewhere in the text he uses war imagery as metaphor for the Pilgrims’ overcoming of their earthly difficulties. For example, he compares “povertie” to “an armed man, with whom they must bukle and incounter”; and to do so the Pilgrims “were armed with faith and patience against him [. . . and] by Gods assistance they prevailed and got the victorie” (38).

Donegan’s study pays particular attention to such parts of Bradford’s text, and she asserts that “the deeply embodied language of affliction, misery, and bewilderment to which Bradford turns time and again in his history has a [. . .] specific function in the colonial project[. . . .] The more urgent and immediate significance of catastrophe [. . .] was shaped by (and gave shape to) the distinctive problematics of coloniality” (13). It seems that Vergil and Bradford are simultaneously heightening the drama of their narratives while also underscoring the life-and-death realities of colonization and empire-building.

Bradford concludes his First Book on a positive note, by recording their landing at Plymouth: “[B]ut the 16. day the winde came faire, and they arrived safe in this harbor. And after wards tooke better view of the place, and resolved wher to pitch their dwelling; and the 25. day begane to erecte the first house for commone use to receive them and their goods” (105). Thus ends the largely narrative portion of Of Plymouth Plantation, this final section written about 1631, some eleven years after the fact. Bradford’s style,
about thirteen years later, is markedly different, as he “shall, for brevitis sake, [. . . note] only the heads of principall things [. . .]” (106). Bradford’s brief year-by-year accounting of events will ultimately constitute eighty percent of his manuscript; much of the Second Book is comprised of secondary material: letters from various persons, plantation documents, and, of course, the Mayflower Compact. It seems that Bradford could view the Pilgrims’ journey to America in classical epic terms, but once they arrived the narrative of their lives and of their mission became less clear to him. Interestingly, Vergil’s poem ends in much the same way as Bradford’s First Book. Aeneas, “aflame with rage,” kills Turnus, thus assuring the Trojans’ successful transplantation to Italy (12.1264). The story is hardly over, however; much remains to be done. In like fashion, the Pilgrims have found their designated place in the New World, but their story is far from concluded. The style of the Second Book is different from the First, as is the tone. Daly adroitly describes the transition in Bradford’s history: “its movement from a beginning selective in detail, coherent in structure, and confident in tone, through a large central welter of detail in which all coherence and confidence seem gone, to a truncated ending [. . .]” (557). Read, meanwhile, says of Bradford’s book as a whole that “its relation to genre is always in question, since it offers no precise fit with most of the conventional categories” (291). I believe Bradford had a conventional genre in mind (at least unconsciously)—the classical epic—and he wrote as much of the Pilgrims’ story as would seem to “fit,” using Read’s word.

Colonial life, however, did not fit the Vergilian paradigm (or the Homeric for that matter), except perhaps in one accidentally ironic way. George deForest Lord, in Trials of the Self: Heroic Ordeals in the Epic Tradition (1983), writes,
Aeneas’s entire career, while succeeding in its fated goal of founding a new Troy in Italy, is beset at almost every step by a melancholic recognition that each apparent gain is accompanied by a loss, a loss so bitter and so contrary to expectations as virtually to cancel out the gain. (29)

Bradford must have seen the Pilgrims’ colonial project similarly—for every gain, a bitter loss. Of Bradford’s second attempt at chronicling, Daly writes, “By 1632, the congregation [. . .] was beginning to disperse[. . .] Success, for Bradford’s group proved failure. [. . .] In the annals after 1632, there are few triumphs, few events that Bradford can read as providential” (565-66). In essence, Bradford can detect no epic narrative arc in the Pilgrims’ story after their arrival in the New World in 1620—no consistent overcoming of obstacles as they move forward . . . move westward. There are merely the vicissitudes of colonial life, which are best recorded as a series of “annalls, noteing only the heads of principall things.” Bradford, by the 1640s, was no longer an epic hero, but rather a melancholy bureaucrat, dutifully governing Plymouth Plantation, keeping track of its business for history’s sake, and trying (without success) to make sense of God’s plan.
Works Cited


The book is considered the first American history book ever written and is known by many names, such as The History of Plymouth Plantation, History of the Plantation at Plymouth and William Bradford’s Journal. When Was Of Plimoth Plantation Written? The book was written between the years 1630 and 1651, and is a 270 page manuscript written in the form of two books. Why Was Of Plimoth Plantation Written? William Bradford explains, in chapter six of the book, that the reason he wrote the manuscript was so that the descendants of the Pilgrims would know and appreciate the hardships their ancestors Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647 book. Read 109 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. The most important and influential source of inf...Â William Bradford was the governor of Plymouth Plantation almost every year from 1621 to 1657 when he died. He relates first hand our legends of Squanto, the first Thanksgiving, the Mayflower compact, etc. Some much beloved words come from his pen: The term Pilgrim coined: "So they left that goodly and pleasant city which had been their resting pace near twelve years; but they knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lift up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country, William Bradford was the governor of Plymouth Plantation almost every. Of Plymouth Plantation William Bradford. And first of the occasion and inducements "hereunto; the which, that I may truly unfold, I must begin at the very root and rise of the same. The which I shall endeavour to manifest in a plain style, with singular regard unto the simple truth in all things; at least as near as my slender judgment can attain the same.Â As witnesseth Socrates in his second book. 3 His words are these: The violence truly (saith he) was no less than that of old practiced towards the Christians when they were compelled and drawn to sacrifice to idols; for many endured sundry kinds of torment often rackings and dismembering of their joints, confiscating of their goods; some bereaved of their native soil, others departed this life under the hands of the tormentor, and some died.