Gender Reshaping Genre in *Aurora Leigh*

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This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Research at Macquarie University. I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented reference to the work of others. The thesis has not previously, in part or in whole, been submitted elsewhere for examination.

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Abstract:

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* is an important nineteenth-century, female-authored epic that has had a significant impact on the way gender is defined within the epic genre. Before the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, gender representations in epic were defined by the seminal work of the genre, Homer's *Iliad*, which focuses on stereotypically masculine concerns such as war, nationhood and male relationships in a world where status is gained through competitiveness. *Aurora Leigh* reconfigures these epic and heroic conventions into a form more suited to her female protagonist.

This research responds to the current lack of dedicated analysis into the broader influence of gender on the epic tradition, and will show how gender representations in *Aurora Leigh* deviate from the traditional epic model as defined by *The Iliad*. *Aurora Leigh* reframes the epic in three significant ways that make female representation and discourse more viable. Barrett Browning reshapes the heart of the epic by inserting into it her female protagonist; by the reframing of the locale to the domestic and wider world of nineteenth-century English social politics; and through the personalisation of the narration from the third-person omniscient bard to an internalised individualistic first-person narrative. Through these processes of feminisation, Barrett Browning challenges and remodels the widely held belief that the epic is a genre inherently and exclusively equipped to sing of arms and the *man*, or of the ways of God and *man*.

Introduction

Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856) is an important nineteenth-century female-authored epic that has had an enduring impact on the genre and its accessibility to women. The epic is a genre in which gender distinctions and expectations of gender representations continue to be measured against the yardstick of the seminal work in the epic tradition, Homer's androcentric *Iliad.*[1] Prior to the publication of *Aurora Leigh*, the epic was dominated by stereotypically masculine concerns such as war, nationhood and male relationships and status.[2] *Aurora Leigh* positions itself within the epic tradition, but the work reshapes traditional gender representations of heroism, the gendered setting and the omniscient voice of Homer's epic narrative. Through these three classifications this thesis will illustrate the way *Aurora Leigh* reshapes traditional nineteenth-century gender and epic generic conceptions of gender roles and female agency. It will do so in order to create a new pattern of acceptable norms within the genre, revealing the importance of *Aurora Leigh* as a work that forges a feminised epic literary culture.

Critical analysis of *Aurora Leigh* typically considers Barrett Browning's use of gender to be an intentional subversion of accepted gender representations typical of both the Victorian period and the epic genre.[3] Yet, scholarly interpretations of *Aurora Leigh* are often significantly abstracted from the core considerations of gender and genre. Existing analyses

1 Susan S. Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5.2 (1986) 203, and Alison Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'", *Victorian Poetry* 29.1 (1991) 17.

2 Jeremy M. Downes, *The Female Homer: An Exploration of Women's Epic Poetry* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010) 2–3.

3 Downes, *The Female Homer: An Exploration of Women's Epic Poetry*; Marjorie Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: '*The Princess*' and '*Aurora Leigh*'", *Victorian Poetry* 25.2 (1987); Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets"; and Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'".

usually focus exclusively on singular aspects of *Aurora Leigh* as an epic;[4] as a reaction to specific literary texts;[5] as a response to prescriptive Victorian gender representations;[6] or it is considered in relation to the development of the novel. *Aurora Leigh* is also often discussed in terms of its plot rather than structure or form. These works often focus extensively on Aurora and Romney's romance as Aurora's primary influence,[7] rather than, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, the revisionary nature of Aurora's heroic humanitarian aims. Such focused analysis on the comparative construction of *Aurora Leigh* does prove useful in the consideration of Barrett Browning's literary influences and reiterates the significance of *Aurora Leigh* as a nineteenth-century epic. However, there remains a lack of dedicated research into the broader influence of gender as a revisionist mechanism in *Aurora Leigh* for reshaping the epic with its long tradition of androcentric prioritisations and gender representations.

This critical positioning of *Aurora Leigh* as a revisionary force, however, is not universal. Some scholars, such as Adelene Buckland and Anna Vaninskaya, argue that Barrett Browning is too often cast as the sole representative of the female-authored epic in the nineteenth century. They argue that when using a wider survey of the genre such as Herbert Tucker's *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790–1910*, whose extensive mapping of

4 See, for example, Downes, *The Female Homer: An Exploration of Women's Epic Poetry*, or for discussion of *Aurora Leigh* as both a novel and epic, Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'".
5 For discussion of *Aurora Leigh* as a response to other texts, see Sarah A Brown, "*Paradise Lost* and *Aurora Leigh*", *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 37.4 (1997) 723–40; and Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: '*The Princess*' and '*Aurora Leigh*'", *Victorian Poetry* 25.2 (1987).
6 Friedman discusses *Aurora Leigh* as a response to Victorian gender representations in "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets" 203–28. For investigation into the way gender conflict and feminist concerns are expressed in *Aurora Leigh*, see Joyce Zonana, "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8.2 (1989) 240–62.
7 For discussion of the influence of the novel on Aurora Leigh and its narration see Case, "Gender and Narration in 'Aurora Leigh'".

English epic works discusses a significant number of works by women writers, female-authored epics do not vary significantly enough to require independent consideration in analyses of the genre.[8] One problematic aspect of that position is that by not investigating the upsurgeance in female written epics during and after the nineteenth-century, it can perpetuate the idea of the 'death of the epic' subsequent to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667).[9] This oversight mitigates and devalues female and minority participation in epic works, which were only produced with increasing frequency after the nineteenth century due to the growing emancipation of women and cultural minorities, and the increased availability of education and literacy for these groups.[10] By overlooking these contributions as a part of the evolution of the epic, it becomes a genre which has not only ceased to evolve, but that has restricted itself to telling stories of the privileged few men of history.

Barrett Browning's feminisation of the epic form is evident in *Aurora Leigh* through three key areas, each of which is significantly influenced by her re-envisioning of acceptable patterns and expressions of what is typically cast as 'female'. Barrett Browning reshapes the heart of the genre, first by inserting into it her female protagonist, whose mutually ennobling and sustaining relationships with the fallen woman Marian and with her future husband Romney, illustrates an alternative feminised heroism to that of *The Iliad*ic hero, whose masculine courage defines the exclusively male domain of physical combat and action. *Aurora Leigh* re-imagines its central heroine as a being capable of creating social change and

8 Adelene Buckland and Anna Vaninskaya, "Introduction: Epic's Historic Form", *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14.2 (2009) 164–5, 169–70.

9 Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985) 167; also Bernard Schweizer, *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982*. (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006) 5–6, 10–11, 14, 37–38.

10 Schweizer, *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982* 4, 6–7, 10–12, 14.

enlightenment through poetry; Aurora extols the spiritual, and its poetic "mouthpiece" as a necessary half of the human who is both "body and soul".[11]

Secondly, the shifting of locale to the domestic world of the home, and the wider world of nineteenth-century English social politics – rather than the distant mythological past of *The Iliad* – allows *Aurora Leigh* to function as an implicit social critique of ideas of female agency and capability in a setting synonymous with Barrett Browning's own day.[12] Another aspect of this discussion of place is how *Aurora Leigh* endows natural environments with an explicitly feminised capacity to nurture. This nourishing capacity of the environment is used to differentiate and contrast the landscapes of England and Italy through their capacity to nurture or to repress Aurora's spiritual and physical growth. A final aspect related to the feminisation of geographical landscape is the way images of isolation and the female sex are often conflated to highlight how both place and gender work in concert to exacerbate Aurora's isolation from the wider political world that males like Romney can freely enjoy, to their benefit.

Thirdly and finally in this analysis of Barrett Browning's re-conceptualizing of Iliadic traditions is the narration. *Aurora Leigh*'s female narrator is no longer an objective and omniscient voice for the actions of a distant hero. Instead, Aurora is an autodiegetic narrator,

11 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh*, ed. Margaret Reynolds, Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996) 8.550. Aurora maintains and reasserts this belief in the duality of man as both spiritual and corporeal throughout. This is first raised by Aurora to Romney, 2.476-485, and again in more length as Aurora muses to herself on the mutuality of the poet and the philanthropist's aims, 6.199-225. Subsequent references to *Aurora Leigh* are from this edition and will be cited in text with book and line number.

12 Barrett Browning had written more explicit social critiques of child labour and slavery in poetic works. See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh*: 44 note 7, for further publication details. It is notable that Barrett Browning does highlight the capacity of poetry for social critique through her allusion to these works in *AL* 2.194.

who is both present in and central to the narrative perspective. This foregrounds Aurora's internal thought processes and judgements which are an important aspect in defining and expounding Aurora's brand of female, socially situated heroism. Another significant diversion from Iliadic tradition is how this narrative positioning of Aurora as central to the plot and narrative presents her as occasionally unreliable in her recounting of her experiences and perceptions, especially during her youth.[13] These deviations from and modifications to the traditional epic genre highlight the way Barrett Browning has reshaped the epic to allow a broader range of emotional and personalised narrative and gender representations, while still remaining identifiably a part of the epic tradition.

The epic has been considered the pinnacle of literary achievement in the Western tradition, essentially from its conception with Homer's 750 BC work *The Iliad*.[14] As the seminal work in the genre *The Iliad*, represents the standard model for gender representation through its focus on stereotypically androcentric concerns such as war, nationhood and male relationships, in a world where status is gained through competitiveness.[15] Even in the nineteenth century, gender representations within the epic genre continued to be measured against the yardstick of Homer's androcentric *Iliad*.[16] Fuelled by Victorian England's fascination with all things Hellenic the epic remained a prominent and prestigious genre

13 Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'" 19, 21.

14 For two in-depth discussions on the Western literary tradition and our relationship with Greek writings at large, see Bernard Knox, *The Oldest Dead White European Males and Other Reflections on the Classic*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 12-22, 27-31, and Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1994) 1-12, 16-41. For specific discussion of Homer's role in the literary tradition, see Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790—1910*: 33-37, 316-318, 447.

15 Downes, *The Female Homer: An Exploration of Women's Epic Poetry* 2–3, and Tucker, *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse 1790—1910* 28.

16 Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets" 203, and Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'" 17.

throughout the nineteenth century, until its popularity, though not its prestige, began to wane under the encroachment of the newly popularised novel.[17]

Aurora Leigh and the Epic Tradition

While this study compares *Aurora Leigh* to an epic written more than two and a half millennia earlier, it is not without acknowledging the historical evolution of the epic over the intervening centuries, or the influence of the novel on *Aurora Leigh*. Taking the latter issue first, the novel, unlike the epic, does not dwell on the formulations and function of its forebears in the works of Behn or Defoe.[18] Instead, the novel is widely embracing of forward movement and deviation of form and function as a part of its stylistic integrity. By contrast the epic is a recursive literary form that continues to look back to its origins in Homer's *Iliad*, which remains a defining standard for the genre. It is against *The Iliad* that all epic works are inevitably measured.[19] Paradoxically to this reflexive epic instinct, there are aspects within both the form and the content of the epic, which have remained open to the influences of the time in which it was produced. The epic, while structurally rigid in its adherence to the following features, "derived by way of […] the epics of Homer;" The hero, superhuman

17 Adelene Buckland, and Anna Vaninskaya, "Introduction: Epic's Historic Form," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14.2 (2009) 164–5.

18 While Behn and Defoe are not unanimously deemed the origin of the novel, their use here mirrors some consensus that both works were significant in the evolution of the epic to its then nineteenth-century form. For a more in-depth time line of the development of the novel see Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956) 4–7, 35–50. Also see Alison Booth. *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993) I.

19 Jefferson echoes a widely held conception of the epic—that, Homer is the goal towards which all epics advance and that Homer is "an origin that cannot be supplemented or improved". Jeremy M. Downes, *Recursive Desire: Rereading Epic Tradition*: 147–8. For further discussion specifically in relation to *Aurora Leigh* see Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5.2 (1986) 203, and Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'" 17.

deeds, gods and supernatural beings or "'epic machinery' and ceremonial style, distanced from everyday language, lists of names, wide ranging allusions, epic similes and epithets."[20] But within this construct is an endless capacity to retain cultural memories and events of significance which change with each age and in accordance with that period's literary conventions. True to the bardic oral origin of the epic it is *how* the story is retold and emblazoned with the poet's own focus and flourishes – while still remaining true to the cultural origins of the story recounted – that is most important. Georg Hegel appropriately calls the epic a "communal bible" in the cultural role it performs.[21] This paradoxical framework placed the author or orator at the very heart of the tradition, allowing for a tale with social and cultural relevance to its audience while still participating in an epic tradition that confers on the author exclusive access to the prestige and authority reserved for the epic, a genre conveying and preserving stories of cultural or moral significance.

John Frow's epistemological approach to the role of genre and the ways of understanding generic codifications argues that "genres actively generate and shape [our] knowledge of the world".[22] Rather than previous "prescriptive" "neoclassical" conceptions of genre as simply taxonomical classifications to which texts belong,[23] as Meyer Abrams puts it, the interrogation of "the role that generic assumptions have played in shaping the work that an author composes and also in establishing expectations that alter the way that a reader will interpret and respond to a particular work."[24] Frow's approach to genre provides a way to interrogate and consider the types of knowledge and authority conferred on *Aurora Leigh* –

20 M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* 7th ed. (Boston: Heinle, 1999) 77–8.
21 Masaki Mori, *Epic Grandeur*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) 34.
22 John Frow, *Genre*. (London: Routledge, 2006) 2.
23 John Frow, "Reproducibles, Rubrics and Everything You Need: Genre Theory Today", *PMLA* (2007) 1627, 1630.
24 Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 110.

primarily, through its affiliation with the epic, and the ways in which Barrett Browning then uses the epic weight of authority to advance her re-imagining of appropriate female representation and agency.

Frow also argues for the understanding of "a poetics in which the structural components of genre are taken to be historically specific rather than obedient to a purely formal logic".[25] What this approach to genre lends to the discussion of Aurora Leigh is a focused examination of historical nineteenth-century conceptions of the epic. This method of investigation takes into consideration both the structural aspects of the epic and their historical context. Structural elements explored here are the serious topic and the formal and elevated style that centres on heroic or quasi-divine figures whose actions impact the fate of his people.[26] It is necessary that these aspects be considered in a historical context, though, and this accounts for Barrett Browning's epic following the trend of "much writing of the [Victorian] period [… that] dealt with or reflected the pressing social, economic, religious and intellectual issues and problems of that era".[27] The role the historical convergence of "scores of women writers on the literary landscape [… along] with the upsurge in the number of published epics […] accompanied by prodigious theorizing over what it means to write and read epic texts", is a further aspect of Victorian literary culture that engages with and shapes its expression of the more structural elements of the epic in the nineteenth-century.[28] By understanding these historical inflections of the epic genre in the period, as well as questioning historical gender representations during the same era, a much deeper comprehension of how *Aurora Leigh* responds to these historical and generic elements can be

25 Frow, "Reproducibles, Rubrics and Everything You Need: Genre Theory Today" 1628.
26 Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 76.
27 Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 215.
28 Schweizer, *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982* 11.

seen – through *Aurora Leigh*'s challenging of gendered forms of heroism, its rejection of the masculine epic setting and through the focus on the contemporary condition and individual courage rather than the valorisation of a long dead past.

Barrett Browning was a British author whose work is inextricably linked to the English literary milieu.[29] As such she was heavily influenced by earlier British epicists such as Milton,[30] Wordsworth,[31] Lord Byron and Pope (the effect of the latter's translation of Homer's *Iliad* clearly impacts upon her own epic production).[32] I will discuss the ways in which Barrett Browning interwove aspects from all four authors into *Aurora Leigh*, but I would also mention here that a number of female writers were also influential in terms of Barrett Browning's overall poetic aesthetics and her interest in the female impetus of the novel. Because of the focus of this thesis on the nature of Barrett Browning's envisioning of the epic, through her use of re-gendering practices, these female compatriots will not be discussed here.[33] Similarly, while this work will discuss the influence of Milton, Wordsworth, Byron and Pope in shaping *Aurora Leigh*, there are other contemporary and Romanticist

29 Although *Aurora Leigh* was published in 1857 while Barrett Browning was living in Italy, Barrett Browning's upbringing and lifelong association with British literary society, along with the setting of the poem and its primarily English characters locate it within the frame of British rather than European literature. Stone, "Genre Subversion and Gender Inversion: '*The Princess*' and '*Aurora Leigh*'" 1; also Beverly Taylor, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning", *Victorian Poetry* 52.3 (2014) 523.

30 Schweizer, *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982* 8.

31 Emily V. E. Kobayashi, "Feeling Intellect in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Prelude*," *Studies in English Literature 1500–1900* 51.4 (2011) 823-828.

32 Mary S. Pollock, *Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning*. (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003) 27.

33 There are however a growing number of works which discuss the Victorian female literary milieu and Barrett Browning as a significant nineteenth-century female author is frequently discussed. See for instance: Mary S. Pollock, *Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.* (Hampshire: Ashgate. 2003) 27, for the influence of Mary Wollstonecraft; Jodi Lustig, "The Modern Female Sonneteers: Redressing the Tradition", Diss. (New York: New York University, 2008) 114-115, Mary Robinson; Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 184-185, Madame de Staël and Charlotte Brontë.

writers such as Tennyson and Shelley who also shed light on the poem's construction.[34] However, the significance of the impact of each author has guided my choice in limiting my discussion to the previous four authors who, for the purpose of this thesis, will maximally show the extent to which Barrett Browning's modifications of the epic are a part of the overall trend of the epic in the nineteenth century; and which aspects are Barrett Browning's own revisions of the Homeric tradition.

Of the epicists I have identified, John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1674) had a huge and enduring influence on all English poets including Barrett Browning. Milton's work seeks to "justify the ways of God to men" through his retelling of God's creation of and the subsequent fall of man. Pollock argues that "after Pope, Barrett's most important early models were Milton and the Romantic poets, whose works dominated the literary scene during her childhood.[35] *Aurora Leigh*'s reshaping of Miltonic depictions of women in the epic and the biblical subject matter are the focus of many comparative critical works, the nature of which is exemplified in Brown's study of Barrett Browning's revisionary remodelling of Milton's biblical conceptual frame for female epic characters, "*Paradise Lost* and *Aurora Leigh*", from which I will draw much of my discussion. For an epic that begins with the impression of the biblical lines from Ecclesiastes 12:12, it is perhaps surprising that Milton's *Paradise Lost* exerts its influence so "subtly, inconspicuously, but [nonetheless] powerfully from the background", rather than from centre stage as the promise of another

34 Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 134-136, 176-183, discusses the influence of Alfred Tennyson and Percy Bysshe Shelley on Barrett Browning's writing, as does Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers, and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2006) 16, 58-59, 111.

35 Mary S Pollock, *Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning.* (Hampshire: Ashgate. 2003) 27.

biblical British epic might have suggested.[36] Barrett Browning's use of Miltonic imagery in *Aurora Leigh* is notable in a number of occasions, such as her repurposing of Vallombrosa from the site of the angel's fall from grace, to Aurora's idealised Italian countryside, which she goes on to contrast favourably against her new home in England, which she aligns with the biblical Garden of Eden (*AL* 1.627–629).[37] Along with the implied shared geography between *Aurora Leigh* and *Paradise Lost*, Brown argues that Romney and Aurora are affiliated with Adam and Eve through Barrett Browning's mirroring of both Aurora and Eve's association with ivy leaves and laurels (*AL* 2.46–57), and through recurring scenes involving hand-holding which re-imagine Milton's imagery of the clasped and unclasped hands of Adam and Eve (*AL* 1.541–543, 5.1188–1190, 8.78–79, 9.509–510, 9.950).[38] What is most significant about Brown's alignment of Romney and Aurora with their biblical counterparts is how Barrett Browning disrupts and mirrors these images. For example, the fallen crown of ivy Adam crafts for Eve becomes the eventual metaphorical crowning of Aurora by Romney who says that he "came here to abase [him]self, / and fasten, […] on her regent brows / a garland", which he had prevented her from crowning herself with years before, in her aunt's garden (*AL* 8.1219–1221. Cf. 2.55–67). Formally, *Paradise Lost* perpetuates many of the themes common to *The Iliad*, such as war, nationalism and the construction of empire, and stories of (biblical) origin. It contains many classical and Renaissance epic conceits, which invites the reader into a more sophisticated understanding of the work as an epic; such as it's *in medias res*, the focus on heavenly and earthly beings

36 Erik Gray, "Victorian Milton's", *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 197.
37 Brown, "*Paradise Lost* and *Aurora Leigh*" 726-727, 729.
38 Brown, "*Paradise Lost* and *Aurora Leigh*" 730, 733–734.

and the conflict between them. It uses numerous epic conventions, such as catalogues of places and people, invocations to the muse, and its wide ranging use of epic similes.

In writing a semi-autobiographical epic, which, like the künstlerroman, charted the growth of the artist, Barrett Browning faced a number of challenges in combining the "expectations for vatic grandeur" established in Wordsworth's 1850 *The Prelude* (also titled *Growth of a Poet's Mind; An Autobiographical Poem*)[39] against the "expectations for modesty in women poets".[40] Wordsworth's own mind and imagination are the subjects of *The Prelude*, which was published six years before *Aurora Leigh*, and which details the journey of the artist as epic hero. This holds obvious parallels with *Aurora Leigh*'s treatment of its eponymous artist hero. Barrett Bowning as an "ardent Wordsworthian"[41] also inherits formulaic influences which shift the ground of the epic away from the focus on war, refocusing on the life and growth of the poet in the English countryside. *Aurora Leigh*, however, extends this domestication of the epic setting even further by situating her epic in the decidedly modern and contemporary urban sprawl and decay of the poorest areas of the industrialised cities of London and Paris as well as into the more familiar drawing rooms of her middle class readers.[42] Wordsworth's re-gendering of the epic setting through his use of the domestic and bucolic landscape, with its traditionally feminine ideology, is extended by Barrett Browning to include the urban environment.[43] This can be viewed as Barrett Browning feminising and problematising the traditional gender alignments of place along

39 For further discussion of the autobiographical influences of William Wordsworth's *The Prelude* and Madame de Staël's *Corinne* on *Aurora Leigh* see, Charles, La Porte, "*Aurora Leigh*, A Life-Drama, and Victorian Poetic Autobiography", *Studies in English Literature* 53.4 (2013) 830-831.

40 Taylor, "Elizabeth Barrett Browning" 532.

41 Kobayashi, "Feeling Intellect in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Prelude*" 823.

42 Barrett Browning writes of her desire to "write a poem completely modern" and to bring her epic "rushing into drawing-rooms and the like, 'where angels fear to tread' […] and speaking the truth as I conceive of it plainly". See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 330: Letter to Robert browning 1845.

43 Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) 45.

with her examination of the role of the female artist within it. Barrett Browning's use of and modifications to the Wordsworthian "feeling hero" is discussed by Kobayashi, who argues that direct first-person representation allows the audience to identify with the emotional development of the hero, enabling them to become the moralistic type of hero we also see in Aurora, who while still being individualistic in her growth as an artist also works for the greater good of women especially, within a contemporary nineteenth-century socio-political world.[44]

Barrett Browning wrote to her sisters at Mitford in 1814 to expresses an admiration for Byron that was to last throughout her life: "Ld. Byron with all his wrongs & his sins – & he had many of both – seems to me worth ten Walter Scotts, as a man to be loved".[45] However, Lord Byron's 1824 *Don Juan*, which Byron himself called an "Epic Satire", was problematic for both Barrett Browning and Wordsworth.[46] It is a variation on the epic form that became an increasingly popular trend from the eighteenth century onwards, in response to the idea that the epic could no longer be usefully employed for the un-heroic modern age.[47] Byron's Juan is a satirical version of the older version of the legend of Don Juan and Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, who Byron transforms as Don Juan, from an active, powerful hero who delights in seducing women to a passive hero who is used by women.[48] *Aurora Leigh* is a response to the immoral content of *Don Juan* as much as it is to the idea of the failure of the heroic impulse. On this point Aurora says she does not think that epics have necessarily died

44 Kobayashi, "Feeling Intellect in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Prelude*" 826, 828-829.
45 Pollock, *Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning* 27.
46 Lord Byron, *Don Juan*. (Boston: Phillips, Sampson and Company, 1858) 14.99.
47 Hegel argues that the modern age "has become diametrically opposed in its prosaic organisation to the requirements … irremissible for the production "for the genuine epic". Georg W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957) 11089.
48 See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 221–2 note 7, for further details about the influence of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) on *Aurora Leigh* as referenced in Book Seven (*AL* 7.227).

out because the modern world is lacking in heroic potential (*AL* 5.139–141), arguing that "every age / appears to souls who live in't (ask Carlyle) / most unheroic" (*AL* 5.155–156). Poets should have a "double-vision" that accounts both for seeing things "comprehensively" and also "intimately deep" (*AL* 5.184–187). Aurora sharply criticises the drive to focus on medieval or other past ages. The modern poet ought to "never flinch, / but still, unscrupulously epic, catch / upon the burning lava of a song / the full-veined, heaving, double-breasted age" (*AL* 5.213–216). Aurora asks herself what form may be best for the age, and answers that the spirit of a poem should be left to shape itself, with the influence of "spirit / as sovran" (*AL* 5.223–229).

Ultimately, the biggest influence on Barrett Browning and the epic is Homer. From a young age Barrett Browning was translating sections of Homer under the guidance of a private tutor who schooled her alongside her brother in the classics,[49] and who introduced Barrett Browning to Homer's works through Pope's still widely read translations of *The Iliad* (c.1715–20).[50] Dorothy Mermin writes of the ten-year-old Barrett Browning: "For a long time Pope's *Iliad* remained her measure both of poetic excellence and of her own ambition" and that . . . [Barrett Browning had] "expected to become 'the feminine of Homer' or even a little taller".[51] Throughout her life Barrett Browning remained interested in Homer and she read and discussed a number of different translations in letters to her well-read social circle, freely discussing her thoughts on differing standards of recent Homeric translations.[52] Throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries interest in *The Iliad* remained high. There

49 Victor Shea, and William Whitla, *Victorian Literature: An Anthology*. (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2015) 266.
50 Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 21.
51 Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 21.
52 Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 146–7 note 9.

were more than a dozen new English translations before the publication of *Aurora Leigh*.[53] The interest in and prestige of the epic as part of a 'proper' classical education had, during the nineteenth century, instilled in the hearts of every great English poet the aspiration to produce an epic – one that would be a mark of their mastery of the form and would show their breadth of literary knowledge.[54] Mermin states of *Aurora Leigh* that "Aurora becomes, in effect, the feminine of Homer, and so, by writing Aurora's bold modern story, does Barrett Browning",[55] and that the "argument [of *Aurora Leigh*] is that writing a poem can itself be an epic action that leads, like an epic hero's, to the creation of a new social order".[56]

The epic is a genre that has been a bastion of masculine concerns in the literary world, in terms of both content and authorship. However, *Aurora Leigh* challenges that exclusive focus on masculinity by providing gender representations of female heroism that deviate from the traditional epic model as defined by *The Iliad*. *Aurora Leigh* retains its association and membership in the epic genre through its preservation of a number of elements typical of the epic tradition, such as a central plot revolving around a singular hero whose deeds stand outside and above the realm of others; the elevated formal language and poetic style; and to

53 See G. W. Most, A. D. Schreyer, M. C. Lang, and D. Wray, *Homer in Print: A Catalogue of the Bibliotheca Homerica Langiana*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Library, 2013), for a comprehensive list of early nineteenth-century English editions of *The Iliad*. Translations specifically discussed in the letters of Barrett Browning include A. Pope, as discussed earlier as influential on her poetic style and her interest in *The Iliad* and Homer; also Richard Payne Knight's 1820 Latin and Greek edition of *The Iliad* drew such ire from Barrett Browning for omitting many scenes, as to warrant a disparaging reference within *Aurora Leigh* (5.142–145). See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 146-147 notes 9, 2, for a direct quotation from Barrett Browning's letter to Mr. Boyd on the subject.

54 For discussion of the epic being an encyclopaedic-like exposé of current knowledge and thinking see Natasha Moore, "Epic and Novel: The Encyclopedic Impulse in Victorian Poetry", *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 68.3 (2013) 396–422.

55 Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 217.

56 Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 183.

some extent the vastness of setting that typifies the genre.[57] Within this epic framework there are certain ideologies and motifs of acceptable gender roles for females that *Aurora Leigh* continually reframes and reflects from those of the seminal work of the genre.

Nineteenth-Century Construction of Female Identity

The nineteenth century marks a turning point in literary history as female writers were entering the field in ever-greater numbers, in part in response to the invention of the novel, which provided a richer landscape and language for female readers and authors.[58] Barrett Browning's female-authored epic Aurora Leigh bucks the trend of increasing female literary contribution through the novel. As such Aurora Leigh has had a significant impact on the way gender is defined within the epic genre.

While the importance of *Aurora Leigh* as a female-authored epic may be disputed by some,[59] there nonetheless remains an enduring call for the construction of a female literary tradition. The nineteenth-century saw an increase in feminist writing, or writing on the topic of women in ways which challenged pre-existing roles for women including their status in the political sphere.[60] Writers such as seminal feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft and late nineteenth-century feminist writer Virginia Woolf, argue that women need a distinct tradition to write from and build upon other than the traditional male literary reservoir with which the likes of Shakespeare and Milton found themselves furnished. To this

57 Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 77–8.
58 Emily Blair, *Virginia Woolf and the Nineteenth-Century Domestic Novel*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007) 2, 43, 79.
59 Adelene Buckland, and Anna Vaninskaya, "Introduction: Epic's Historic Form," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14.2 (2009) 164–5.
60 Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000) xii.

effect, Susan Friedman describes Barrett Browning's modifications to the epic genre as creating a capacity for the expression of authentic "female vision and voice".[61] Alison Case, along with other feminist writers such as Woolf, argue for the need for women's writing to have a place distinct from the tradition of men's writing in order to flourish.[62] These arguments illustrate the necessity for Barrett Browning to modify the epic in order to make a place for female representation. This thesis focuses on *Aurora Leigh* as a key female-authored work in the epic tradition, and seeks to contribute to the historical reconstruction of existing instances of female contributions across the expanse of literary forms, including even the most traditionally androcentric of genres, the epic.

To discuss any nineteenth-century epic and its depictions of women, first the historical frame of gender in the nineteenth century needs to be examined. *Aurora Leigh*'s reshaping of traditional nineteenth-century conceptions of gender roles and female agency reflects and amplifies trends already present within the socio-political sphere of nineteenth-century England, which had become increasingly more accessible to females from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.[63] Critics such as Joyce Zonana have called *Aurora Leigh* an "'unscrupulously epic' Feminist poem" and argue that it provides a "striking image of a woman artist who is […] empowered by her acknowledgment of her love for her cousin [while remaining central as] the poem's narrator-heroine".[64] Zonana and Gail Houston both highlight the friction between the public and private spheres of Victorian life, which both limited females to the sphere of the private through ideologies of women's place being in the

61 Friedman, "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets" 203.
62 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001) 56.
63 Bridget Hill, Women, *Work and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England*. (New York: Blackwell, 1989) 196.
64 Joyce Zonana, "The Embodied Muse: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Feminist Poetics", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 8.2 (1989) 241.

private sphere,[65] while at the same time resisting the increase in female incursion into the public socio-political sphere through phenomena such as female authorship and their newly endowed political rights to property and less restrictive access to divorce.[66]

Aurora Leigh extends even the newly established gender boundaries for female agency in the socio-political sphere, in the context of female authorship. Contemporary 1856 reviews of *Aurora Leigh* highlighted the text as revisionist of gender politics with Henry Chorley's column in the popular paper the *Athenaeum* arguing against the perceived gender politics of *Aurora Leigh* as a "contribution to the chorus of protest and mutual exhortation, which woman is now raising, in hope of gaining the due place and sympathy which, it is held, have been denied to her".[67] In her letters as in *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning indicates her engagement with and interest in the discussion of the "woman's question" (*AL* 5.607) in England and records her collecting articles from Bessie Parks who writes on the subject of the woman question, against one of the opponents of the movement for increased women's rights, and author of *The Angel in the House* (1854), Coventry Patmore.[68] Current feminist critical readings such as Houston's which states "*Aurora Leigh* aggressively depicts, analyses, and refutes the Victorian idea that women writers are just poor imitators of great male authors",[69] also support readings of *Aurora Leigh* as an intentionally revolutionary voice for the extension of traditional women's roles. Barrett Browning's agenda for presenting

65 Gail Houston, "Gender Construction and the Künstlerroman: *David Copperfield* and *Aurora Leigh*", *Philological Quarterly* 72.2 (1993) 213.
66 Sydney DuPre, "Married Woman's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882," *British Literature Survey Reference Pages: The Brownings Group*, 2007.
67 Marjorie Stone, "Criticism on *Aurora Leigh*: An Overview," Elizabeth Barrett Browning Archive, n.d.
68 See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 335 for a direct quotation from Barrett Browning's letter to Isa Blagden in 1856.
69 Houston, "Gender Construction and the Künstlerroman: *David Copperfield* and *Aurora Leigh*" 213.

alternate modes for acceptable female agency can best be understood through the lens of the hugely popular and impactful nineteenth-century institution, the Victorian conduct book.[70]

Sarah Ellis produced some of Victorian England's most popular conduct books for middle-class women, including *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* which extols strict ideas of the separate spheres of ideology. Ellis argues that a woman's place is in the domestic sphere and that it is through the domestic role of raising children, performing domestic tasks, taking care of their husbands and guiding them to make morally sound choices that the greatest benefit for the nation lies. Ellis asserts, that the strong family a woman nurtures is also the sphere most beneficial to a her own happiness.[71] Ellis states, "The sphere of a domestic woman's observation is microscopic. She is therefore sensible of defects within that sphere which, to a more extended vision would be imperceptible". Through subsuming one's self to these "home comforts and fireside virtues" women may transcend themselves for "the woman herself is nothing in comparison with her attributes".[72] Ellis specifically cautions against the "obstructiveness of work" which draws women from their domestic realm and causes the deprivation of their moral characters "rendering them less influential, less useful and less happy than they were [when correctly situated within their domestic sphere]" and that in neglecting their proper womanly nature as the "fountain of blessedness," one who seeks to do only good for others they, risk their fount "die[ing] away, fruitless and unproductive, in th[ier] breast".[73]

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70 Susan Brown, and Isobel Grundy, "Sarah Stickney Ellis," *Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Online, 2006).

71 Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1839) 28-29.

72 Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* 37.

73 Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* 21-22.

Aurora's 'womanly education' of "instructed piety" (*AL* 1.398), homely "accomplishments" (*AL* 1.426) and "a general insight into use[less] facts" (*AL* 1.414), at the hands of her aunt is modelled on this gendered ideology of women belonging in and remaining focused on the private sphere of the home. Aurora imagines her aunt's thoughts on educating her as saying "I know I have not ground you down enough / to flatten and bake you to a wholesome crust / for household uses and properties" (*AL* 1.1040–1042), imagery which Ellis similarly uses as a metaphor when discussing women in the private sphere as grains of sand on the sea-shore, their societal importance being comparable to that of a mere grain of sand.[74] As a result of her aunt's feeble education consisting of "books on womanhood / to prove[…] women do not think at all" (*AL* 1.427–428), Aurora becomes malnourished to the point she considered the torture of it likely to be the death of any feebler soul than hers (*AL* 1.470-472). Faced with this deprivation she is forced to "nibble" knowledge from her father's books like a "small nimble mouse" (*AL* 1.837–838). This hunger for knowledge aligns Aurora with intellectual life and portrays her as a knowledge-driven hero for whom the domestic world of vacuous education designated for women is not adequate sustenance, unlike the poetry and philosophy contained in her father's books (*AL* 1.709–716).[75]

Along with challenging traditional fundamentally domestic-centric roles for women *Aurora Leigh* depicts and seeks to redress the victimisation of poor and lower-class women. Through the depiction of Marian working for next to nothing as an assistant in a team of seamstresses working on a dress for Lady Waldemar, the life of a seamstress is harshly but realistically depicted as being worth less than the gown itself. The predation on lower-class

74 Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* 30.

75 For Aurora, as a woman, higher education was not considered a birth right as it had been for her father and, as such, her self-education is similar to Barrett Browning's own which was prematurely cut off when her brother, with whom she studied, with left for university and their tutor was no longer employed. See Shea and Whitla, *Victorian Literature: An Anthology*: 266.

women for the provision of luxury items to wealthy women was so severe a social issue that it was presented to Parliament in 1843, according to which an estimated 15,000 women were involved in dressmaking in largely impoverished conditions.[76] Throughout the 1840s, the impoverished seamstress became a widely depicted symbol of the consequences of a hypocritical society that circumscribed women's lives and education, meaning that while poor women were forced to seek employment most lacked the education and skills to access higher paid work, such as governesses, and certainly that of the unlikely vocation of author.[77] Aurora stands in opposition to Ellis' discouragement of women working and instead provides a model of female education which enables her to be financially independent and to interact with the wider world, while simultaneously depicting how Marian's lack of education does not offer her the same opportunities.

The misfortune of Marian and all that she endures also highlights the status of fallen women, who were typically seen as pariahs who willingly indulged in sexual exploits and wantonly spread sexually transmitted diseases and were considered unmentionable in polite society. Barrett Browning's depiction of Marian was one of the areas which drew the most significant criticism and claims of unbelievably in her writing.[78] The Catholic Dublin based publication the *Tablet* called Aurora a "brazen-faced woman" and denounced *Aurora Leigh* as highly improper "like a novel by Frédéric Soulié", the infamous French sensationalist novelist.[79] Barrett Browning's brother even considered *Aurora Leigh* "more indecent even

76 Richard D. Grainger, "Reports from Commissioners: Children's Employment, Trade and Manufactures, Sessional Papers XIV", *House of Commons*, (1843) 555.
77 Beth Harris, "'Slaves' of the Needle': The Seamstress in the 1840s", *The Victorian Web*, 2014.
78 For a collection of contemporary reviews of *Aurora Leigh* see Betsy Boyd, "A Contemporary Review of *Aurora Leigh*", *The Victorian Web*, 1995.
79 See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 337-339 for a direct quotation from Barrett Browning's letter to her sister Arabella Barrett in 1856.

than *Don Juan*", saying that it should be excluded "from the boudoir–table of any lady".[80] In her correspondence of 1856–7 Barrett Browning very often expressed surprise at the overall lack of criticism *Aurora Leigh* received for its unorthodox depictions of Victorian-era women. Noting that it was typically the depictions of Marian rather than Aurora which drew comment and criticism.[81]

In the face of increasing public concern about the numbers of women engaged in prostitution, their conditions and especially the spread of disease, in 1850 leading essayist, reviewer and social commentator, William Greg published "Prostitution" in the *Westminster Review.* This was followed in 1857 by the work of practising surgeon William Acton's *Prostitution, considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects*, with both works discussing the dangers of prostitution for the women themselves and arguing that prostitution was caused by the limited education and employment options available to women, rather than a moral or mental failing of the women themselves.[82] Barrett Browning explicitly writes of her revisionist intentions in depicting the prostitution of Marian, in her 1857 letter to Julia Martin saying "I don't habitually dabble in the dirt; it's not the way of my mind or life. If therefore, I move certain subjects in this work, it is because my conscience was first moved in me not to ignore […] the condition of women in our cities, which a woman oughtn't refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition", a proposition which Barrett

80 See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 335 for a direct quotation from Barrett Browning's letter to Isa Blagden in 1856.

81 A number of examples are included in Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh*: 337-339 Barrett Browning's letter to her sister Arabella Barrett; 340-341 to Anna Jameson; and 343 to Julia Martin.

82 William R. Greg, "Prostitution", *Westminster Review,* 53 (1850); William Acton, *Prostitution, considered in its Moral, Social and Sanitary Aspects*. (London: John Churchill, 1857).

Browning refutes concluding, "Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If a woman ignores these wrongs, then may women as a sex continue to suffer them".[83]

This commitment to reframing representations of women in the public eye can be seen through Barrett Browning's reshaping of traditional gender representations in the epic literary culture, *Aurora Leigh* challenges not only the normative gender roles for the epic but also extends typical nineteenth-century standards for women's behaviour and agency. This analysis of *Aurora Leigh* will interrogate the text for concepts and ideas of female representation and agency depicted in relation to both historical gender norms of the nineteenth-century socio-political sphere, and as generic norms for the epic as defined by the "symbolic fountainhead of epic poetry,"[84] Homer's *Iliad*, taking into consideration the ideological structures, trends and societal mores of the nineteenth-century English socio-political world, in which *Aurora Leigh* was set and produced, particularly in regards to representations of the resistance to gender norms for women in the Victorian period as markers of the foundations of nineteenth-century feminism, and then uses this as the basis to consider the ways in which *Aurora Leigh* adheres, responds to or reworks female gender norms. Together both *Aurora Leigh* and *The Iliad* are contributions to the epic and are a part of the wider language of the epic.

Barrett Browning's remodelling of the androcentric epic hero, setting and narrative, often through the inclusion of techniques more typically found within the novel, extend the acceptable patterns of gender modelling to make female representation and discourse more viable within the typically essentialist views of gender and acceptable roles for women in

83 See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 343-345 Barrett Browning's letter to Julia Martin.

84 Friedman. "Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. As Epic Poets": 203.

society of the traditional epic and the nineteenth-century English socio-political sphere.[85] It is works like *Aurora Leigh*, through their reshaping of acceptable gender patterns that work to undermine "the ontology grounding 'Western' epistemology" and to create a space in which to question and reinterpret identity and social politics.[86]

85 For a more in-depth discussion of essentialist ideology in regards to race, gender and sexual orientation see Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century", *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 160; Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s", *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed. B. Vincent Leitch (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012) 2196.

86 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" 153.

Chapter One: The Female Heroine

. . . well, you know the world,
And only miss your cousin, 'tis not much.
But learn this; I would rather take my part
With God's dead, who afford to walk in white
Yet spread His glory, than keep quiet here
And gather up my feet from even a step
For fear to soil my gown in so much dust.
I choose to walk at all risks. Here if heads
That hold a rhythmic thought, must ache perforce,
For my part I choose headaches

Aurora Leigh 2.99–108

Barrett Browning's modifications to the epic conventions of heroism, as a strictly masculine trait, reframe heroism by allowing Aurora, through her status as the central narrator and protagonist of an epic, to challenge and reshape traditional nineteenth-century ideas of female agency. She does this by extending ideas of courage beyond masculine-oriented, action-based paradigms to also encompass female independence through vocation and financial means as acts of courage; and by raising the profile of female authors as being capable of literary greatness, which can create a socially enriching product.

Epic conventions of the hero are one of the many malleable aspects of the genre which has allowed the epic to remain relevant to successive generations. However, the

Homeric archetype of the hero remains singularly influential to the extent that epic heroes are always at least in dialogue with Homeric conceptions of heroism as defined by *The Iliad*. In the discussion that unfolds in the present chapter, the comparison between *The Iliad* and *Aurora Leigh* shows how *Aurora Leigh* reshapes patterns of acceptable gendered behaviour in ways that extend typical nineteenth-century ideas of independence in an industrialised era and the new and advancing conceptions of women's roles in an educated society.[1] *Aurora Leigh* moves beyond even these Victorian norms to immortalise Aurora as a revolutionary heroine even by nineteenth-century standards.

Heroism in *Aurora Leigh* is deeply related to the didactic and authoritative nature of the epic form itself.[2] Epics until the modern and postmodern works of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries typically carried with their narrative a social critique or commentary, if not an explicit lesson or moral reasoning. This is one of the notable features of the epic which has allowed these works to stand as representations of their own ages and not merely as records of times gone by and the ancient world.

Depictions of heroism in *Aurora Leigh* differ from the masculine standards defined by *The Iliad* in both the formal representations of gendered heroism and in the contextual ways female behaviour is represented as anti-masculine and un-heroic. Female heroism in *Aurora Leigh* is not a record of physical prowess as in *The Iliad* where Achilles' reputation as the finest warrior of the Achaeans is directly related to his strength at arms that Agamemnon calls "invincible" (*I* 1.216) and "worth an entire army, the fighter who Zeus holds dear with

1 See Hurst's discussion of nineteenth-century ideas of independence in an industrialised era and the new and advancing conceptions of women's roles in an educated society. Isobel Hurst, *Victorian Women Writers, and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 78–81.

2 Mary R. Bachvarova, "Manly Deeds: Hittite Admonitory History", *Epic and History*, ed. David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2009) 77–78.

all his heart" (*I* 1.140).[3] Nor is it a matter of outsmarting an opponent and showing mental superiority, as Odysseus is described as doing throughout *The Iliad.* He is known as the "tactful", the "great tactician" (*I* 2.202), and even "that mastermind like Zeus" (*I* 1.524, 2.730). While Odysseus is portrayed as a hero who readily outwits his foes, this does not mitigate the requirement to also physically outstrip the other assembled heroes (*I* 2.309–314, 11.496–511), to ensure he retains his position as one of the most honoured and respected of the assembled heroes. Intellect and tactics are not enough alone to be worthy of honour. Honour is social currency in *The Iliad* and, as such, is deemed to display nobility of spirit and is a primary way to show the eminence of an individual's social standing. Therefore, Achilles' accusation against Agamemnon of a lack of nobility (*I* 1.264–270), attempts to defame and discredit Agamemnon's social standing by saying that his impeachable social status as "lord of men" (*I* 1.8) is simply because of his possession of Hephaestus' staff (*I* 2.117–126), rather than a rightfully earned battle-won achievement. Achilles' argument that it is an impersonally earned honour, which allows Agamemnon to recall Achilles' prize, thus diminishing his own literal status and masculine honour in the form of Briseis (*I* 1.217–221), shows the centrality of honour as being intimately part of the gendered depiction of male heroism demonstrated in *The Iliad*.

Aurora is not chained to outward demonstrations of honour or nobility of spirit in order to secure her place in society, instead there are three key ways in which *Aurora Leigh* reframes Iliadic ideas of appropriate (masculine) heroic behaviour as either gender-neutral, or as compatible with female forms of heroism. *Aurora Leigh* reverses *The Iliad*'s focus on action as heroic and its denigration of action's antithesis, idleness and talk, which are in *The*

3 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles. (London: Penguin Books, 1998). Subsequent references to *The Iliad* are from this edition and will be cited in text with book and line number.

Iliad associated with womanly, un-heroic behaviour.[4] *Aurora Leigh* re-imagines Iliadic positioning of courage as a key masculine and heroic quality which is under threat by women and womanly behaviour, by providing a model of courage and heroism that originates from women, through Aurora's writing and poetry, which is capable of ennobling and empowering both sexes,. The final and most significant feminisation of Iliadic heroic standards is the change from a socially competitive male-focused relationship framework, which entails a continual jockeying for power, to a cooperative social framework, which as I have suggested in my discussion of courage, is capable of elevating both sexes towards an egalitarian utopia-like image of New Jerusalem when both Romney and Aurora work together for the benefit of man (*AL* 9.945–964).

Representations of female heroism and agency in *The Iliad* are narrow in comparison to Aurora's broader scope of heroic expression and typically fall into one of three archetypes, Athena and Hera are both powerful goddesses who prove themselves cunning, quick-witted and sharp-tongued, and in the case of Hera even capable of incapacitating Zeus through the use of her womanly charms and Venus' girdle (*I* 14.257–420). Aurora's heroism is unlike the female goddesses of *The Iliad*; she is instead an intrinsically moral character and hero as befitting the work's Victorian origins, and thus is distanced from the heroic realms of the gods in *The Iliad*, who are often too debauched to be associated with a moral female Victorian hero like Aurora. The women of Troy are also unacceptable as models of heroism, for Aurora wields real power to change the fate of mankind in her own world, unlike the women of Troy, whose significance lies not in themselves or their own agency, but in the ways in which they distinguish the men around them. For example, Andromache's obedience

4 See Ransom's discussion of the feminisation of inaction as a contrast to correct masculine, action-oriented behaviour, in Christopher Ransom, "Aspects of Effeminacy and Masculinity in *The Iliad*", *Antichthon* 45 (2011) 36–39.

to her husband in remaining home weaving, as Hector has commanded, while the battle rages on outside the walls of Troy (*I* 22.514–540) or Helen's dutiful answering of her father in law's questions as she stands with Priam on the walls of Troy (*I* 3.295–288). Similarly the mothers of the two greatest heroes, Thetis, Achilles' mother and Queen Hecuba, mother of Hector, are stereotyped mothers who are seen essentially in the context of their involvement with, or weeping over, the affairs of their sons, rather than in the capacity of their own volition and agency. Such as Thetis' tearfully telling her nereids of her pain at her inability to stave off Achilles' fate, (*I* 18.62–83) or Hecuba's futile tears for her son's death (*I* 22.503–513). Therefore Barrett Browning cannot draw inspiration from these archetypes from *The Iliad*, but is forced to take her inspiration from masculine heroic action which she repurposes for her female epic hero.

The Man of Action

At the heart of the production of the Homeric masculine hero lies the issue of action as heroic, and passivity and inaction as failing heroic standards. Talk in *The Iliad* is typically portrayed as a form of inaction inappropriate and shameful for the male heroes for whom action and demonstrations of strength and courage are paramount in defining heroic worth. This presentation of heroic action is best seen through its absence in the representation of Thersites who is the worst and weakest of the Achaeans in *The Iliad*. He is portrayed as a "the ugliest man who ever came to Troy" (*I* 2.250) a "foulmouthed fool" (*I* 2.322) who, lacking in heroic courage and acceptable masculine physicality is an "outrage" to the Achaeans for speaking out against his betters (*I* 2.290). Instead he relies on ranting slander and is left in tears in the face of pain and shame at the meting out of Odysseus' culturally appropriate, physical retribution (*I* 2.212–219). Christopher Ransom discusses the function of

accusations of inaction and talk as "rebukes and insults" in *The Iliad*, arguing that accusations of talk in place of action are used to negatively feminise warriors and are a cause of injury to the recipients' honour, often requiring action be taken to negate the accusation.[5] *Aurora Leigh* reverses *The Iliad*'s focus on action as heroic and its degradation of action's antithesis, idleness and talk, which are associated with womanly, un-heroic behaviour. Instead *Aurora Leigh* offers ways in which the female heroic impulse can move both men and women through words alone.

Two of the most important and most heroically heightened moments in the narrative for Aurora are her letter to Lady Waldemar and the impact of Aurora's poetry on Romney at the end of the epic. Aurora uses her letter, not unlike the rebukes and insults of *The Iliad*, to attempt to force Lady Waldemar into behaving as a model wife towards Romney (whom Aurora believes she is intending to marry). Aurora accuses Lady Waldemar of being "falsely" fair of face and "vile" at heart (*AL* 9.945–949), explicitly aligning Lady Waldemar's cunning with that of Lucifer and his fall from heaven (*AL* 7.300–301).[6] In the letter, Aurora's threat to Lady Waldemar is exclusively textual and knowledge based. Aurora threatens the release of information about Lady Waldemar's conniving actions in sending Marian abroad, leading to her rape and destitution. Aurora does not need to threaten physical retribution, simply stating that if her demands to Lady Waldemar to be a good wife to Romney are not met, then Aurora will cause Lady Waldemar to be shunned by both men and women of society. Aurora threatens that if necessary she and Marian will "open mouth, \ and such a noise will follow,

5 See Ransom, "Aspects of Effeminacy and Masculinity in *The Iliad*" 35–6, 54, for discussion of how accusations of inaction and talk feature as "rebukes and insults" in *The Iliad*.

6 This image of Lucifer's fall also, unavoidably for her contemporary audience, brings to mind Milton's most famous lines from *Paradise Lost* depicting the host of fallen angels cast from heaven, and tightens *Aurora Leigh*'s connection with Milton's epic. John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, (London: Holborn-Bars, 1821) 1.295–303.

the last trumph's \ will scarcely seem more dreadful, even to you; \ you'll have no pipers after" (*AL* 7.366–369). Aurora is very aware that the weight of her words is enough of a threat to convince Lady Waldemar to capitulate, ending her letter by drawing attention to how through her occupation as a popular writer she has the capacity to ruin Lady Waldemar, by saying, "And so I warn you, I'm . . . Aurora Leigh" (*AL* 7.374). Aurora, much like the heroes of *The Iliad*, is more than willing to use her *kleos*[7] to reprimand and restrain another. For Aurora, however, the whole weight of her power to rebuke and cause change is in her words. No longer is talk inferior to or even a precursor to action; instead for Aurora talk and knowledge are the primary sources of her heroic power over Lady Waldemar.

Aurora's knowledge and language-driven heroism is initially set in contrast to the action-driven philanthropic actions of her cousin Romney, who seeks to correct the physical deficiencies of the poor through food and shelter rather than by acknowledging their individual spiritual and emotional needs, which Aurora feels poetry can and must nourish (*AL* 2.450–497). This difference in approach is a recurring source of conflict between the cousins as Aurora and Romney both resist ideas of inclusivity in their personal approaches to life and art. From the outset of Book Two, Aurora and Romney argue over the capacity of women as artists and about Romney's expectations for a wife to join him in serving his practical and physical implementation of philanthropy (*AL* 2.370–391).[8] The cousins meet again when Aurora learns from Lady Waldemar that Romney is engaged to Marian, and both Romney and Aurora remain unchanged in maintaining their contrasting positions on life and art that had caused friction years earlier in Aurora's garden (*AL* 4.310–345). Later Aurora muses on Romney's previous scorn of the value of art and how she views art as a natural part of the

7 *Kleos* meaning "praise[worthiness]", "glory": Margaret Beissinger, Jane Tylus, and Susanne Wofford, *Epic Traditions in the Contemporary World*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1999) 308.
8 There is a full synaptic account of the nine books of *Aurora Leigh* in the Appendix.

dichotomy of the natural and the spiritual that humans require (*AL* 7.49–83). The conflict is only resolved when Romney, having read Aurora's poem and having experienced the failure of his philanthropic endeavours, comes to Aurora in Florence to confess how much her words have uplifted and changed him (*AL* 8.83–88). Romney tells Aurora how her book has touched him (*AL* 8.536–580). Aurora amends and corrects her argument from Book Two, which enables the final triumphant union between Aurora and Romney; life and art; and the natural and the spiritual at the end of the poem. Romney's admission to Aurora of the influence and power of her words, following a series of philosophical clashes between them spanning ten years, is a product of the power of Aurora's words to inspire and influence others and is an embodiment of the female heroic impulse through words rather than action.

The Gender of Courageousness

Barrett Browning's revision of the masculine hero is not linked only to active and passive behaviour, but also encompasses other facets of *The Iliad*'s template for masculine heroism through courage (especially in the face of temptation or idleness), which is one of the defining features of correct masculine heroic behaviour in *The Iliad*. Bravery defines masculine identity, with heroes on both sides of the battle of Troy being reminded that to be a man is to have courage.[9] The tragically fated Trojan hero Hector is the very epitome of consistent dauntlessness in the face of temptation, and at his finest Hector outshines even the ferocious overwrought courage of Achilles. Hector is defined by his bravery both on the

9 The command "Be men" is used to inspire courage in the Achaeans by their leaders (*I* 6.10, 15.651, 15.769), and is used by Hector to the Trojans in stock battle rhetoric commanding courage (6.130–131, 8.298, 11.334, 17.212). Similarly both Hector and Patroclus both use "fight like men" (15.567, 16.317) for the same purpose of inspiring courage. See also Ransom's "Aspects of Effeminacy and Masculinity in *The Iliad*" 50, for discussion of the role of cowardice and lack of courage in the feminisation of characters.

battlefield as a fighter and commander of men, and in the treacherous lull of his return to Troy where a series of important women attempt to delay his return to the Trojan troops. Hector first meets his mother who insists he is weary and would be revived by sweet wine and the pouring of libations to Zeus (*I* 6.300–311). Then, while attempting to rouse Paris to battle, Hector meets Helen, who tells him that she holds herself accountable for the battle Hector fights, and offers him a seat beside her to rest on (*I* 6.420–423). Finally, Hector's wife Andromache begs Hector to have pity on her and to stay within the walls of Troy as she has already lost all the other members of her family and so would be alone in the world should Hector be killed (*I* 6.480–520). Although respectful of the validity of each woman's claims upon him, to each he explains that his courage and honour will not allow him to remain apart from the other men on the battlefield. While Hector's bravery and masculine identity are heightened by his refusal of the comforts offered by these women when he returns to the city, women are nonetheless shown to be a source of temptation that could diminish masculine courage or divert their actions from 'proper' heroic outlets, as they lead men away from the public sphere of battle where honour can be won, into the private world of home comforts, thus weakening their masculine identity.[10]

Barrett Browning reverses the ideas of the eminence of masculine, action-centred courage which Romney exemplifies. Romney's masculine impetus towards action is shown to be unsuccessful and impractical, his action-oriented attempts to change the lives of the poor leading to the disastrous failure of his philanthropic programs, the razing of his ancestral home, Leigh Hall, and to his being blinded (*AL* 9.542–560). Instead it is Aurora's courage as a woman committed to her own financial independence which is highlighted through her refusal to accept Romney's suit in marriage (*AL* 2.407–414) and a gift of money which

10 Ransom, "Aspects of Effeminacy and Masculinity in *The Iliad*" 51–3.

Romney attempts give her under the auspice of providing her with an inheritance (*AL* 2.1002–1007). When warned of the destitution she will face with no inheritance of her own, Aurora states "my soul is not a pauper; I can live / at least my soul's life, without alms from men; / and if it must be in heaven instead of earth, / let heaven look to it,—I am not afraid" (*AL* 2.681–684, similarly repeated at 5.1211–1216). Aurora with similar sentiments extends her desire for financial freedom to encompass her rejection of idle popularity if her work is not truly worthy of such praise, regardless of her gender (*AL* 2.239–259, 3.42–50). Aurora's commitment to independence and her intended vocation as a writer can be seen despite Romney's repeated dismissal and denigration of women's poetry (*AL* 2.92–96, 2.218–225, 2.180–184, 2.226–243, 2.372–375). Lady Waldemar writes to Aurora with the blatant insult that, "male poets are preferable, straining less / and teaching more" (*AL* 9.56–66). Aurora's work does however win both praise and an income from her public and critics (*AL* 3.66–87), but even in the face of this modest public success, Aurora remains self-critical and resolves to work harder for something greater than "frivolous fame". So she dedicates herself to work for "better ends", feeling that while her prose writing pays the bills, she has yet to prove her poetry is as honed and indicative of the greatness she feels capable of producing (*AL* 3.205–324). It is this combination of Aurora's courage to remain single and to commit her life and financial stability to her vocation as a writer which is heralded as the most successful and impactful form of courage.

Aurora Leigh re-envisions courage away from a masculine, action-based standard, to a new paradigm which encompasses, and even prioritises, being rather than doing – a form of courage significant in allowing for a wider scope of gender representations than the pre-

existing traditional heroic model of courage,[11] thereby creating a model of heroic courage more inclusive to representations of female heroic action.[12] Aurora's commitment to and defence of her independent life as a writer is expressed as a product of her own innate self-assured sense of direction, rather than as with the warriors *The Iliad* who have to be reminded to "be men" and to have courage. Instead Barrett Browning depicts Aurora's courageousness as being internalised and centred on being rather than doing.[13] Aurora's enduring perseverance despite opposition to her desire for financial independence, and the repeated social resistance to her vocational choice to be a writer, coupled with the positive impact of her life choices on Romney and Marian show Aurora's feminisation of courage to be highly impactful, improving her own life and the lives of others.

The effect of Aurora's writing on Romney is one of the key ways that *Aurora Leigh* reshapes existing masculine, action-oriented ideals of courage into a model where the courage of being is elevated above that of doing. This is most clearly seen through the failure of Romney's philanthropic activities and his blinding, which are depicted not as an utter fall from grace or failure, because through it Romney has come to understand what Aurora has always known, that humanity needs both life and art, both the natural and the spiritual, to be truly raised up. The words of Aurora's book teach this to Romney while he recovers from the accident at Leigh Hall and his new understanding allows Aurora and Romney to have a new

11 Stewart discusses the gender-based "sex role distinction between doing and being" in relation to Goethe's Faust. Grace Stewart, *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877–1977* (Quebec: Eden Press Women's Publications, 1979) 2 note 4.

12 Notably, Barrett Browning is simultaneously writing against the epic conventions for masculine courage and also the female conventions of behaviour prescribed by Ellis which recommend confining women to the domestic sphere of the home and family concerns. Instead Aurora walks between these two constraints, but not apparently in danger from her precarious positioning. See Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1839) 28–29.

13 See 36 note 9 for reference to "be men".

strengthened outlook on the condition of mankind, through the combining of their vocations, Romney as a philanthropist and Aurora as a poet (*AL* 8.278–297, 8.297, 8.323–466). Romney explains to Aurora how her book has enabled him to see the truth of her words from Book Two, that "it takes a soul, / to move a body" and that he was doomed to failure because, like so many other well-intentioned philanthropists, he was "not poet enough to understand / that life develops from within" (*AL* 8:430–431, 8:435–436).

Aurora's courage also shapes the life of Marian, who before the birth of her son and her time living with Aurora, was a powerless victim of life's circumstance whose fortunes were dictated by the evils dealt to her by the mother who sold her (*AL* 3.1193); by the women who turned her away from employment with too little provocation (*AL* 4.28–43, 7.70–74); and by the intentions of Romney who calls her "poor child" (*AL* 3.1199) and seeks to teach her the love of his Christian God in whose name he aids her (*AL* 3.1226–1232). It is in service to God that Romney asks for Marian's hand in marriage (*AL* 4.109–117). While it is not Aurora's vocation as a writer that has a significant impact on Marian, Aurora's status as a financially independent woman acts as a model for Marian's decision to remain unmarried in order to focus on the care of her fatherless son (*AL* 8.246–247, 8.363–390), and for the self-reflection that allows Marian to see that her love for Romney had perhaps been only worship, which reinforces her decision to remain unmarried (*AL* 8.363–390). Through her combined involvement with Romney and Marian, Aurora is able to bring about the promised egalitarian future that dawns at the close of *Aurora Leigh* (*AL* 9.900–964), which is unmistakably the product of Aurora's courageous commitment to her independence and to her role as a writer, which allows her to facilitate such positive change for her world.

Socialising the Epic Hero

The reframing of the concept of heroism in the epic from that of a competitive masculine combatant into a new social contextualisation of heroism is one of the important ways *Aurora Leigh* feminises and socialises the epic to be more in line with the socio-centric nature of modern Victorian sensibilities. Representations of the social nature of Aurora's heroism and the feminised nature of her courage displayed in her relationships with Marian and Romney show that Aurora is situated within a paradigm of social rather than individual heroism. It is the eponymously named Aurora and her relationships with Marian and Romney who Barrett Browning has made the subject of her epic, just as Achilles' anger and isolation from his rightfully honoured place among his heroic companions as a result of the social slight upon him when Agamemnon's takes away Achilles' prize and undermines Achilles' social standing, thereby rendering his heroism meaningless without the social recognition, might be said to be the central theme of Homer's *Iliad*.

A key aspect of Aurora's heroism is its social nature which derives from her embrace of the virtues of empathy and caring, which define and elevate Aurora as a more heroic figure through her offer to be Marian's protector, and to care for and shelter her (*AL* 6.778–793, 7.114–132). This aligns Aurora with traditional nineteenth-century notions of the female role in the community as a provider of selfless benevolence and sympathy,[14] but with her words "ye are my own / from henceforth" (*AL* 7.119–120). Aurora also adopts the role of defender and protector of the less empowered woman, thus aligning Aurora with Hector in *The Iliad*, who through his gentle correction and guidance of his mother (*AL* 6.312–336) and wife (*AL* 6.521–590) sets out a correct code of civil conduct for the women of Troy. Barrett Browning

14 Sarah Stickney Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits*. (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1839) 27–28.

similarly models Aurora's care for a fallen women, whose plight is raised a number of times (*AL* 3.1043–1069, 4.1181–1185, 6.770–771, 6.780–801, 6.1182–1234, 7.866, 9.194–195). Aurora's actions towards Marian and her son model appropriate moral behaviour which works to counteract contemporary Victorian beliefs that a lady's virtue could be tarnished by associating with fallen women. It is this empathy endowed with heroic vital courage that allows Aurora, as a social hero, to cure the ills of society through aiding the destitute fallen woman, and to be able to write works that raise God's philanthropist Romney back to his feet to continue to care for the poor even after his previous failings led to the burning of Leigh Hall and his blinding.

The theme of social heroism is not exclusive to Aurora: it is through their relationships with Aurora that both Marian and Romney are similarly endowed with aspects of her heroism. Through Aurora's nurturing and protection, Marian is able to become an independent mother to her son and Aurora, through her own financial independence is able to shelter and care for Marian (*AL* 6.778–793, 7.114–132),[15] allowing Marian to gain purpose and self-worth through the course of the narrative (*AL* 9.328–330). While living with Aurora, Marian is empowered to refuse Romney's marriage proposal in order to continue what she sees as her holy duty to raise her son (*AL* 9.414–439). Similarly for Aurora, her time with Marian enables her to recognise her own love for Romney.[16] In preparation for her union with

15 Stewart discusses the role of mothering as an essential aspect in women's novels and künstlerroman; the relationship between Aurora and Marian could usefully be considered a surrogate mother–child relationship which then allows Marian to reach the state of self-reliance and individualisation which enables her to refuse Romney's proposal. Stewart, *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877–1977* 41.

16 I will discuss the native role in obfuscating the love relationship between Romney and Aurora at length in Chapter Three: Feminised Narrative.

Romney, Aurora's time with Marian and her son allow her to experience the domestic life of a loving family, something she never knew because her parents died during her childhood.[17]

For Romney it is Aurora's book that enables him to return to the duty of caring for the poor that he had abandoned after the loss of his home and sight, as a changed man now armed with the knowledge of the dual nature of man, which requires sustenance for both body and soul. Previously Romney's care for the poor had focused on resolving their practical deprivations like housing and food, naively expecting these physical solutions alone to be capable of elevating the impoverished to healthy productive lives. Romney now recognises the necessity of Aurora's role, saying "the task of the poet" nourishes the spirit, and that "poets get directlier at the soul, / than any […] economists:—for which / you must not overlook the poet's work / when scheming for the world's necessities." (*AL* 8.540-543). Aurora's art has nourished and enriched Romney, leaving him better equipped to work for societal change through affirmative action. Notably in this new joint endeavour, Romney is content to allow Aurora to take the leadership role in their combined efforts (*AL* 9.848–858), a reversal of his original marriage proposal to Aurora where he sought her as a 'helpmate' in his own philanthropic plans. First Aurora and then Marian accuse Romney of wanting not a wife but a "helpmate", (*AL* 2.402, 9.370), showing a disparity between gendered beliefs of marriage. Romney finally comes to see marriage as an equal venture where Aurora will "work for two" while Romney "for two, shall love" (*AL* 9.911–912).

17 The re-introduction of the domestic, familial setting once Aurora has already proven herself successful as a financially independent woman and writer, allows Aurora to carry these capabilities on into her married life, with the Victorian standard proviso that they meet with her husband's approval. The argument for this is a key subject of *Aurora Leigh*'s demonstration of egalitarian equality in marriage and working rights for women. Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* 103–104.

To reach appropriate egalitarian equilibrium, Aurora also is influenced by Romney, coming to understand that her art can be an extension of Romney's philanthropic dreams of raising the state of the poor without subsuming her own vocation as a writer: "Thus is art / self-magnified in magnifying a truth / which, fully recognised, would change the world / and shift its morals. If a man could feel, / not a day, in the artist's ecstasy, / but every day, feast, fast, or working-day, / the spiritual significance burn through / the hieroglyphic of material shows, / henceforward he would paint the globe with wings / and reverence fish and fowl, the bull, the tree, / and even his very body as a man". Aurora now shares Romney's philanthropic aims, seeking to write no longer only for herself or for wealth (*AL* 9.849–869; cf. 1.2–4), but for the good of others. This combination raises the heroic profile of both characters and brings about the prophetic-like promise of a New Jerusalem–like, egalitarian utopia (*AL* 9.950–964).

This chapter considers the role of the female heroine in re-gendering traditional depictions of heroism in *The Iliad*. *Aurora Leigh* reverses the prioritisation of action over inaction and talk, and instead shows how talk and especially writing are key weapons in the female heroic arsenal. While courage or bravery are exclusively aligned with masculinity in *The Iliad*, indeed masculinity can be threatened by women who lure men away from the public sphere where courage can win honour. In *Aurora Leigh* courage, especially that of Aurora, is shown to be no longer exclusively action oriented and instead can lie more in commitment to being a self-authoritative individual who commits to their own independent moral and spiritual path. This ennobles both sexes by depicting them as being capable of an individualistic form of heroism which can be morally improving and redemptive for society on a wider level. Finally this chapter considers the aligning of Aurora as a Victorian heroine within the socio-centric mores of Victorian society whereby Aurora as a poet of the people

feels and responds to her moral duty to improve the lives of others as opposed to the socially competitive nature of masculine heroism in *The Iliad*.

Chapter Two: Gendered Locale

> And so I am strong to love this noble France,
> This poet of the nations, who dreams on
> And wails on (while the household goes to wreck)
> For ever, after some ideal good, —
> Some equal poise of sex, some unvowed love
> Inviolate, some spontaneous brotherhood,
> Some wealth that leaves none poor and finds none tired,
> Some freedom of the many that respects
> The wisdom of the few. Heroic dreams!
>
> *Aurora Leigh* 6.53–61

Barrett Browning's domestication of the epic setting from the masculine realm of *The Iliad* to that of a contemporary continental Europe almost anthropomorphises the character of nations and their geography with Aurora's own mental state. This level of intimacy in the entwining of place and the self reworks reader expectations of the static and often bellicose epic landscape and allows Aurora to be an epic hero who is intimately associated with her environs in a modern time period which was culturally relevant for her readers. Thus, challenging the normative "relationships between gender divisions and spatial divisions" and also "uncover[ing] their mutual constitution […] to problematize the […] apparent naturalness" and hence unquestioned nature of the gendering of spaces and locations,[1] Linda McDowell thusly describes the impulse of the feminist geographer to reconsider historically

1 Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999) 12.

natural associations between the sexes and different geographical and natural landscapes, highlighting the similar revisionist approach *Aurora Leigh* takes to both the masculine template of *The Iliad* and to prescriptive Victorian gender associations such as those prescribed in *The Angel in the House,* which sought to restrict female influence to the domestic realm.[2]

The Iliad tightly defines the milieu appropriate for women. For the captured maidens Chryseis and Briseis, their status as spoils of war provide them with little control over their fates; they are strictly relegated to the private world as domestic and sexual slaves (*I* 1.215–218, 9.332–334). Even though the women of Hector's family are not restrained in this way, Hector strictly defines the setting appropriate for Hecuba and Andromache (*I* 6.300–311 6.480–520), as does Aphrodite for Helen (*I* 3.480–493). Spatial placement for the goddesses is often more ephemeral than physical. However, the wounded retreat of Aphrodite, injured by Diomedes who embodies the tradition of heroic values during his glorious *aristia* (*I* 5.1–994),[3] can be read as another example of a male returning a woman to her proper and appropriate setting away from the battlefield of Troy (*I* 5.370–414). Athena alone, who is also frequently present on the battlefield, seems immune to this association with the private domestic setting, her presence on the masculine domain of the battlefield perhaps made palatable to readers and to the warriors alike through Athena's masculine alignment given her unique birth, having sprung to life from Zeus' head, already fully grown and armed.[4] Hera's

2 Gail Houston, "Gender Construction and the Künstlerroman: *David Copperfield* and *Aurora Leigh*", *Philological Quarterly* 72.2 1993 213.

3 *aristia* "a higher than usual level of prowess attained by a warrior" enabling the great deeds of a hero. The Bruce Louden, *Iliad: Structure, Myth, and Meaning*. Baltimore: JHU Press, 2006. 317.

4 The earliest version of birth of Athena is detailed in Hesiod's *Theogony*. Hesiod. "Theogony", trans. William B. Tyrrell. *Hesiod, Theogony 924–926.*

most decisive role in *The Iliad*, her seduction of Zeus, is followed by her inevitable submission to his indomitable decision to destroy Troy. This submission aligns Hera with the enslaved Chryseis and Briseis. While Hera's status as the most powerful female goddess makes this an inexact comparison, it is still useful to see the associations between sexual power as a temporary means for Hera to once again return her influence to the battlefield, but only so long as Zeus sleeps (*I* 14.420–15.5). For these reasons none of the feminine archetypes outlined above are appropriate for Aurora, who has unprecedented engagement with the varied environments she encounters, as well as in her volition and capacity as a woman to move between different countries as best suits her needs.

Contemporising the Time Line

The epic is a genre with an enduring didactic intent to immortalise an ideology or cultural activity worthy of preservation. Barrett Browning sought to record her own time and society while also showcasing its capacity for reform and transformation through her epic *Aurora Leigh.* Barrett Browning's modern setting is materially a part of the knowledge that *Aurora Leigh* contains and seeks to immortalise. By situating it in a contemporary time frame and through its presentation of the modern Victorian questioning of traditional attitudes towards women Barrett Browning depicts the modern Victorian era as being capable of maintaining a heroic standard and thus refutes conceptions of the morally impoverished nature of the modern condition[5] and instead reveals it to be a period on the cusp of cultural transition.

5 Victorian England's most published author of morality guides for women, Ellis laments the "humiliating" moral failure of modern woman and finds it representative of the failure of the strength of England, in the person of its domestic angels. Sarah Stickney Ellis. *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits.* (Philadelphia: E. L. Carey & A. Hart, 1839) 14. Ellis' opinion is representative of the widely held Victorian belief that the modern condition was no longer analogous or relatable to the heroic nature of the epic, modern life having become petty and insubstantial.

Aurora Leigh optimistically portrays individuals evolving from their isolationist and absolutist moral frames concerning societal participation and independence of women, towards an imagined future that promises a position of politicised gender equality, a better, more sympathetic, more egalitarian future that will allow individuals to flourish regardless of gender or past misfortunes and inequalities.

The setting of *Aurora Leigh* is significantly removed from the battlefields of Troy. Just as Aurora's heroic nature is altered to fit a nineteenth-century era of social responsibility and intellectual independence, the landscape of Barrett Browning's epic is transformed into something at once fictional and yet familiar to her readers. Levi Strauss' definition of myth holds much for this discussion of temporality in the epic. Strauss states that "myth always refers to events alleged to have taken place in time: before the world was created, or during its first stages [...] but what gives the myth operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting; it explains the present and the past as well as the future".[6] Strauss' definition of myth can similarly highlight how epic also is a literary form distinctly aware of temporality and the temporal distance between the action of the epic and the contemporary writer. Mikhail Bakhtin argues that a major difference between the novel and the epic is the novel's "maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality)", in contrast with the "absolute epic distance that separates the epic world from the contemporary".[7] Yet it is exactly this contact with the present that Barrett Browning presents as her epic setting. The distanced familiarity of *Aurora Leigh* is significant in that it allows Barrett Browning to re-gender and reframe the modern era as one that does sustain the epic impulse (*AL* 5.213–216).

6 Grace Stewart, *A New Mythos: The Novel of the Artist as Heroine 1877–1977* (Quebec: Eden Press Women's Publications, 1979) 2 note 4.

7 Both quotations are from Mori's discussion of the polemical aspects of Bakhtin framing of the epic in order to distinguish it from the novel. Masaki Mori, *Epic Grandeur* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) 34, 35.

The contemporary time frame allows Barrett Browning to critique and reshape current Victorian ideas of gender roles and treatment of women by presenting her revisions to acceptable gender roles in a comfortingly fictional context. This was a successful strategy and the contemporary reception of *Aurora Leigh* was on the whole positive, for example by fellow poets Oscar Wilde and Algernon Charles Swinburne and art critic John Ruskin,[8] Barrett Browning also wrote widely from 1856 to 1858 in her personal correspondence of her surprise at the positive response to her work from both males and females.[9] This positive critical reception along with the brisk sales of reprinted editions,[10] show that the message of *Aurora Leigh* was not only heard by Barrett Browning's intended audience, but was overwhelmingly embraced and consumed far in excess of her expectations.

Aurora Leigh challenges normative nineteenth-century gender expectations through its re-imagining of the range and types of acceptable locations women are able to act within. Aurora's capacity to travel alone from continent to continent unaccompanied by a male chaperone, and indeed playing the role of chaperone herself for Marian,[11] breaks down traditional expectations of independence and volition to travel for pleasure typically

8 Dorothy Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 220.

9 Excerpts of a selection of these letters are copied in part in Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 340–346. where Barrett Browning explicitly discusses the positive response from female readers in a letter to A. Barrett 342.

10 In a letter to A. Barrett December 1856 Barrett Browning discusses the success of her poem and its enthusiastic reception that necessitated a second printing only two weeks after the original. Copied in *AL* 339, 338. Barrett Browning saw five editions of *Aurora Leigh* in her lifetime and it had a total of nineteen editions in its first twenty-eight years. Michele C. Martinez, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Aurora Leigh: A Reading Guide*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012) 16.

11 See Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 193, for details of Aurora's chivalric role in escorting Marian.

associated with masculine rather than feminine agency.[12] Aurora's financial independence, which stems from her career as a successful writer, allows her to choose to leave England for Florence,[13] and to publicly travel alone to Paris. After discovering Marian and her baby there, Aurora continues to Florence with them in tow, thereby challenging the normative "relationships between gender divisions and spatial divisions"[14] through her unusual tenacity in travelling alone for her own betterment.[15]

Aurora Leigh's feminisation of the hero and the expansion of the geographical locations associated with women extends existing classifications of acceptable roles and types of agency for women. Barrett Browning's epic work especially reframes contemporary representations of the state of fallen women by allowing them to attain redemption and to maintain a pure spiritual life regardless of the physical misfortunes that have befallen them. This stance is one of the areas of most significant contemporary criticism of *Aurora Leigh*, due to its transgressive depiction of its empowered female protagonist and its depictions of both the victim of prostitution Marian and Lady Waldemar as her transgressor.[16]

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12 McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place*, 207, also 233 for a succinct table regarding the gendering of space, and 1–33 for a wider contextualisation of how gender is related to normative spatial associations.

13 This is one of many occasions where the details of Aurora's life mirror Barrett Browning's own. Barrett Browning's reasons for leaving England to marry, which her father had forbidden any of his children to do, reinforces her portrayal of a stiflingly patriarchal England epitomised by Romney. Romney's evolution to a more egalitarian mind-set before his marriage to Aurora, serves as a critique of his former insistence on female subjugation and their unsuitability for the vocation of writing. See Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 178, for details of Barrett Browning's life at this time.

14 McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place*, 12.

15 McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place*, 207.

16 Betsy Boyd, "A Contemporary Review of *Aurora Leigh*", *The Victorian Web*, 1995; Lynda Chouiten, "Irony and Gender Politics in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*", *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 11.3 (2012) 1–2; Bernard Schweizer, *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982* (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2006) 7. See also Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 220. Which discusses more fully the impact of Barrett

Aurora Leigh challenges existing assertions around the condemnation of Victorian prostitutes using associations with the feminised ideologies of the natural world and the bucolic environment, to cleanse the urban stain of their condition as fallen women. Aurora repeatedly asserts that Marian is spiritually pure regardless of her untutored background, her rape and pregnancy. On their first meeting Aurora describes Marian in terms of "soft flowers" and a "full-blown rose", which had formed from "such rough roots" where "the people under there, / can sin so, curse so, look so, smell so" (*AL* 3.806–818). This pleasant and pure floral imagery is repeated in the flower market in Paris where Aurora finds Marian again (*AL* 6.425), before Marian slips from her grasp like a "cyclamen" (*AL* 6.445). Aurora continues to associate Marian with flowers which are a synecdoche for the feminised, idyllic natural world, thereby aligning her with purity and innocence through her association with bucolic and biblical images reminiscent of The Garden of Eden (*AL* 6.493–495), which *Aurora Leigh*'s contemporary audience would be expected to recognise.[17] This sympathetic view of female prostitution through Marian's story argues that the woman herself is not stained by her experiences at the hands of men, and explicitly vindicates the women themselves as victims of sexual greed, and not perpetrators.

Barrett Browning draws attention to Marian's innocence through Aurora's initial condemnation and blame of Marian for her pregnancy (*AL* 6.612–623, 6.742–747), but upon hearing Marian's circumstances Aurora begs forgiveness and assures her that she is both

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Browning's positioning of her work within the context of a fictional nineteenth-century English setting while criticising the inherent blame of female prostitutes but not the males who patronised them.

17 See also Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* 28–29, 39–40, 81, for a comparative ideology of the young ladies of England as perpetual flowers.

blameless and unblemished (*AL* 6.779–793).[18] After Marian's forced prostitution the flower imagery is then passed on to her son (*AL* 6.595–597), providing a similar benediction of innocence for illegitimate children born in such conditions. Aurora further advances Marian's redeemed status by associating her with images of light (*AL* 6.610–611, 6.750, 6.775–776, 7.88–90, 7.114) whereby Marian becomes a transcendently pure figure.[19] This refutation of contemporary beliefs and treatment of fallen women is one of the significant critiques Barrett Browning achieves by situating her epic in the contemporary nineteenth century rather than in the distant past.

The Epic Battlefield Rewritten

In the epic setting of *The Iliad*, nature and the physical natural world of Troy, if discussed at all, is depicted in relation to the suffering of the warriors in an inhospitable environment (*I* 12.292-294, 21.350-369),[20] or in the epic's many metaphors of nature that are used to temper and make palatable the extreme violence and chaos of the battlefield.[21] The dangers of the geographical landscape of *The Iliad* can be best exemplified by Achilles' battle with the personification of the Scamander River. Scamander becomes enraged that Achilles is choking his waters with all the men he has killed (*I* 21.238–250) and tries to drown Achilles (*I* 21.265–306), but is stopped by Hera and Hephaestus (*I* 21.374–380). To ensure Achilles

18 See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh* 218 note 1 for further details about Barrett Browning's intention and desire to raise awareness about the conditions of prostitutes through *Aurora Leigh* and Marian's story.
19 Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 203.
20 For further discussion of the depictions of the physical weather conditions, which are notoriously scant in *The Iliad* in comparison to the *Odyssey* see John A. Scott, "Appreciation of Nature in the '*Iliad*' and the '*Odyssey*"' *The Classical Journal* 12.2 (1916) 145-146.
21 For further discussion of nature imagery in *The Iliad* see John A. Murray, *Writing about Nature* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003) 75–6.

meets his intended fate elsewhere (*I* 23.97–99). This largely confrontational relationship with the natural world is reversed in *Aurora Leigh*.

In contrast to the combative geography of *The Iliad*, *Aurora Leigh*'s environment is endowed with the power to nurture and exemplify Aurora's cultural foreignness and her intellectual isolation. Nature itself is a reflexive entity in *Aurora Leigh* that mirrors Aurora's emotional life. Her youth is spent in the "green reconciling earth" of Italy (*AL* 1.242). However, Aurora's upbringing is first uprooted by the death of her mother, causing Aurora and her father to move to the mountains of Italy, where her father seeks to substitute an overabundance of "Mother Nature" (*AL* 1.109–114, 1.204–210) for the lack of an actual mother for Aurora. Nature becomes a source of sustenance and nurturing for Aurora in the mountians.[22] The death of Aurora's father means she is transported from her Italian motherland (*AL* 5.1266–1271) to "frosty" and "indifferent" (*AL* 1.251, 1.269) England where Aurora is to live with her father's sister within the confines of a domesticated English countryside, under the strict and constraining guidance of her aunt, leaving the once wild and unrestrained Aurora feeling like a "wild bird scarcely fledged, [that] was brought to her cage" (*AL* 1.310).

Aurora's aunt seeks to tame Aurora, who through her upbringing in Italy is associated with natural wilderness and wildness (*AL* 1.615–627), which Aurora is drawn to (*AL* 9.703). Aurora's aunt instigates a regime of English schooling in what she considers appropriate feminine manners and decorum, consisting of useless facts and accomplishments such as the nonsense knowledge of "the royal genealogies / of Ovideo" (*AL* 1.407–408) and the need to be "womanly" (*AL* 1.443) and ceaselessly productive by manufacturing with needle and

22 Mermin argues that *Aurora Leigh* endows "nature, Italy, and the modern age" with the capacity to nurture and to act as a surrogate or supplementary mother figure. Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 190.

thread things of little use or value (*AL* 1.455–464).[23] This restrictive and confined learning environment is mirrored in the landscape of the English countryside—hedged in, trimmed, "a nature tamed / and grown domestic like a barn-door fowl" (*AL* 1.634–635). Yet even this manicured version of nature is perceived by her aunt as representing too much temptation towards wildness and freedom, and she forces Aurora to sit with her back to the lime tree outside the window (*AL* 1.484–486). Aurora's discovery of her father's books frees her from her pale existence, transporting her to the worlds in her father's forgotten library (*AL* 1.710–716). So begins Aurora's secret self-education while the household sleeps, Aurora supplementing the education she finds so lacking with the classics and romantic poetry left behind by her father (*AL* 1.779–791, 1003–1014). Nature and the nourishment it instils in Aurora are entangled with the way she views her quest for knowledge and her self-education. In response to her confining life in England, Aurora catches moments of "life" by means of her own thoughts and study and through her daily walks alone in the countryside (*AL* 1.692-709).

The paradoxically nurturing and isolating role of Aurora's education is also related closely to her geography, which can be seen through Aurora's likening of her freedom outdoors away from her aunt's gaze to the feeling of invigorating growth and freedom Aurora experiences as she reads in secret in her room (*AL* 1.841–844). Aurora's un-English desire for a different education and a more untamed environment is what drives her to nourish herself and to withstand the privations of her aunt's education and rule. Yet her disobedience isolates Aurora, as she is forced to keep her untamed desire for forbidden knowledge a secret to avoid it being actively pruned from her life by her puritanical aunt.

23 A regime which is aligned with Ellis' dictates for women's education. Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* 20, 55–60.

The Isolation of the Hero

The role of women in *The Iliad* is to remain in the private, domestic milieu of their home or temple, largely isolated from the public and political world of males. This is one of the reasons that both Hector and Helen scold Paris for lingering in his bedroom, like a woman, talking with Helen and looking at his unworn armour instead of taking his rightful place on the battlefield with the other warriors.[24] Yet for Achilles', his self-isolation in his tent is a source of potency and productiveness that causes the Achaeans to capitulate to Achilles' wounded pride and to acknowledge that Agamemnon had wronged the best of the Achaeans, and were now hopelessly suffering and losing the battle as a consequence of his absence (*I* 1.483–490). What distinguishes Achilles' retreat to his tent from Paris' reluctance to enter the battlefield is the distinctly feminised association with cowardliness and the location Paris is found in, whereas Achilles' isolation is a way to protest the theft of his honour and to demand its recompense.

While *Aurora Leigh*'s geography has the capacity to nurture, especially the spirit of the orphaned young Aurora, it is also enlisted to codify both mental and physical isolation. Aurora is defined in her aunt's eyes by her foreignness. Her aunt seeks to right the wrong of Aurora's father falling in love with a foreign beauty and never returning to England (*AL* 1.326–331, 338) by suppressing what she sees as the foreign elements in Aurora (*AL* 1.33–34, 385–391), and by re-aligning Aurora with an English tradition of womanliness for which "English women […] were models to the universe" (*AL* 1.444–445). Aurora feels oppressed by her aunt's desire to isolate her from the wildness and thirst for knowledge that nourish her.

24 Hector chastises Paris for dallying within Troy's walls (*I* 6.382–391), shortly followed by Helen doing the same (*I* 6.415–419).

In addition to Aurora's mental isolation her physical isolation in her Aunt's house also impacts her development.

The physical isolation of Aurora's upbringing in the English countryside where she "hear[s] nothing of it [the world,] through the trees", (*AL* 2.306), along with her gender, has isolated Aurora from the wider concerns of the age. This allows Romney to argue with impunity that the vocation of poet is not appropriate for women, who only "play at art, as children play at swords" (*AL* 2.229), and that Aurora has not seen enough of the world to comprehend its many ills and vices (*AL* 2.219), and women's art and her generalities of feelings towards the unfortunates have no place against that of men's voices through which Christ can be truly heard (*AL* 2.224–225). Aurora is forced to concede to Romney that he knows more of life than she, as news does not easily reach her, because a "woman's always younger than a man / at equal years, because she is disallowed / maturing by the outdoor sun and air, / and kept in long-clothes past the age to walk" (*AL* 2.329–333). Because of her isolated location and her gender Aurora, who has enough self-knowledge to know her deficiency, is forced to defer to Romney's opinions of the dismal state of the world because she feels (and Romney tells her) she cannot know enough to correct him, which hampers her arguments against him, as she is forced to concede to his superior knowledge based primarily on his gender and not their similarly matched ages and intelligence (*AL* 1.1104-1109). This is brought into focus along gendered lines through their similarly intellectual, but also distinctly gendered, interests; Romney's in statistics and economics (*AL* 1.525–526, 2.483) and Aurora's in literature and the classics (*AL* 2.75–77).

Aurora leaves the countryside after the death of her aunt and goes to seek her fortune as a single, independent writer in London. There she is consumed by her work and spends long days and nights working alone, with only the attendance of her maid, whom Aurora

"pettish[ly]" turns away while she works (*AL* 3.36). Aurora finds satisfaction and financial independence in the success of her writing;[25] however the production of art is not a nourishing experience (*AL* 5.410–420, 5.1167–1171) and so after her long solitude (*AL* 5.439–451, 5.540–542) and labours to produce her poem (*AL* 3.25–40), Aurora, feeling worn and overworked, leaves London to seek respite and renewal in her motherland, Italy (*AL* 5.1190–1196, 5.1266–1278). Aurora is not instantly wealthy upon publishing her book, and just as she turned down money from Romney, she must also cast aside her father's patriarchal legacy in the form of his books to raise the initial capital for her journey to Italy. Aurora sells her father's books through Vincent Carrington, who also brokers the price Aurora is to receive for her book, and sends the proceeds to her in Paris and Italy (*AL* 5.1211–1245, 5.1258–1265, 7.543–551). In a strange parallel with Aurora, Achilles' isolation is also productive, yet both he and Aurora are dissatisfied and diminished by their extreme solitude, with Achilles coming to question a core concept of his Greek heroic identity, the idea of fighting for glory, on which he reflects there is little point, when honour and reward can be taken back and in the end "the coward and the brave. They both go down to death." (*I* 9.320).[26]

This chapter considers the impact of the gendering of the epic setting from the androcentric battlefields of Troy in *The Iliad* to the domesticated socio-political nineteenth-century in *Aurora Leigh*. By contemporising the time line and setting, Barrett Browning is able to critique the treatment of women in her own society while still presenting her revisionist intentions through the guise of a fictional epic work. While *Aurora Leigh* was

25 Also see Mermin, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry* 199.
26 For further discussion of the isolation of Achilles see Adam Parry. "The Language of Achilles". *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association,* 87 (1956) 7.

criticised by some (largely male) literary critics for what was seen as its role in forwarding the call for increased rights for women, on the whole the contemporary printing numbers of *Aurora Leigh* were far in excess of Barrett Browning's expectations, demonstrating the relevance and popularity of the woman question in Victorian England and abroad throughout the period. *Aurora Leigh* genders its modern setting to become a female model of maternal nurturing which sustains Aurora. Nature and knowledge are conflated in this model and it is through both that Aurora is able to thrive and grow. This contrasts the violent and dangerous landscape of *The Iliad* which literally rises up with intent to kill Achilles. Locale and gender are also similarly depicted in *Aurora Leigh* as having a related and restrictive power over Aurora's education. As a young woman, Aurora finds herself to be less informed and engaged with the wider world than she would like to be, because as a woman she is restricted to the isolating private sphere of her home in the English countryside, whereas her cousin Romney as a male has much greater access to outside knowledge and travel. This friction between location and gender is reversed when Aurora as a successful writer travels to Europe alone, thus refuting ideas of a woman's place being contained within the private sphere of home.

Chapter Three: Re-gendering Narrative

Of writing many books there is no end;
And I who have written much in prose and verse
For other's uses, will write now for mine,—
Will write my story for my better self
As when you paint a portrait for a friend,
Who keeps it in a drawer and looks at it
Long after he has ceased to love you, just
To hold together what he was and is.

Aurora Leigh 1.1–8

In these opening lines of Barrett Browning's epic poem, Aurora outlines her intention to hold together the fractured aspects of her past and present self through her writing, and states her intention to write this work for her "better self" (*AL* 1.2–3). Aurora's identification of herself as a successful writer in these lines and throughout (*AL* 3.66–87, 5.353–356, 7.738.743), along with her literal role as an epic narrator, provides her with a certain level of authority, requiring that her work be read with "faith in the narrator/ poet's literary control".[1] However, Aurora's personalised form of narrative instead provides the reader with, at times, a narrator who no longer knows or is able to report on the truth of her own heart and yearnings – as she disavows all love of Romney now and in the future (*AL* 2.506, 2.841–841, 3.400–403, 8.139–140), only to recant saying the she has always loved him in Book Nine (*AL* 9.685). Yet even

1 Alison Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'", *Victorian Poetry* 29.1 (1991) 19, 21.

with this narrative instability Aurora clearly fulfils her role as the authoritative narrator of an epic work.

In contrast to *Aurora Leigh*'s internalised narrative, the tradition-defining epic narration of *The Iliad*'s omniscient third-person narrative is largely distant from the subject of the work both in tone and narrative influence.[2] As Meyer Abrams says, "Homer established for his successors the demonstration that 'the fall of an enemy is no less than that of a friend or leader, is tragic and not comic' and that with this 'objective and disinterested element' the epic acquired an authority based on the vision of nature as an impersonal order".[3] It is within this disinterested narrative framework that the plot of *The Iliad* takes place through the combined efforts of the muse and the willing bard, who embraces the idea of being the mouthpiece for a voice greater than his own. *The Iliad*'s distant narrative position of third-person reporting provides a more discreet heroic archetype – one where much of the characterisation is only seen through action and reactions to events rather than from the perspective of personal motivation, which would, if present, more readily detail character growth and change. This leads to a more masculine, static characterisation which is presented as fully formed, providing a deceptively whole or consistent image, which the third-person external narrator of *The Iliad* is unable to pierce or dissect. The omniscient third-person form

2 Technically *The Iliad*'s symmetrical chiastic structure thematically aligns the first and last books, the second and second-to-last books etcetera in a technique also known as ring composition. Along with the artistic clarity the symmetrical ring composition provides, the doubling up or return to previous themes signals closure of narrative sections which allows the audience and oral poet to fluidly locate which section of the work they are currently engaging. Tucker discuses a similar pattern in Herbert F Tucker. "*Aurora Leigh*: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends." Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure (1993) 63–65.

3 Meyer H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms,* 7th ed. (Boston: Heinle, 1999) 76–77–7.

of narration is one most that epic authors, at least into the nineteenth century, felt obligated to consider the epic standard.[4]

From the introductory lines above Aurora, as an epic narrator, goes out of her way to proclaim herself as both bard and muse of her own gynocentric, female narrated epic story which charts the life and growth of a woman poet in the nineteenth-century (*AL* 1.2–4, 9.26).[5] With a heightened nineteenth-century understanding of genre and a Victorian, classically focused education (both Barrett Browning and Aurora), the narration of *Aurora Leigh* is not constrained by standard epic reporting of elevated action that underplays the context of personal intentions as in *The Iliad*, where action is weighted with greater importance than personal intentions and motivations are. Instead, *Aurora Leigh* explores the contexts and personal motivations for the actions of its epic narrator in a narrative that moves tumultuously from a past-tense recollection of Aurora's childhood to the present; from the record of a life already lived to diary-like direct entry, present-day accounting of Aurora's life, thence to a final prophetic vision of a future yet to be realised. Barrett Browning's discursive, feminist revisioning of the androcentric narrative forms typical of the epic is also mirrored in her depiction of the fragmented reflexive heroine.

The Fragmented Hero

4 A notable exception to this is Wordsworth's "more intimate mode of narration" which Stephen Bygrave discusses in *Romantic Writings.* (London: Routledge, 1996) 115–118. However with Wordsworth's epic *The Prelude* being published only six years before *Aurora Leigh*, a work which Barrett Browning had toiled at for at least twelve years, it seems likely that Barrett Browning's narrative intent to personalise the epic hero predates with Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.

5 Peggy Dunn Bailey "Hear the Voice of the [Female] Bard": Aurora Leigh as a Female Romantic Epic. *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006) 118.

The Iliad, as the first of its kind, plays an important role in defining epic expectations of the representation of the heroic form and mentality. Indeed, as a written work it is almost unparalleled in its genre-defining nature, with some critics considering all other epic works as capable of representing little more than mere fragments of Homer's epic whole: "The legendary coherence and completeness of Homer, point[s] to an origin that cannot be supplemented or improved: All endeavour since that ideal is marginal, fragmented", writes Thomas Jefferson.[6] This envisioning of the state of all subsequent epics as partial and incomplete is also valuable in the assessment of the epic hero. Jeremy Downes discusses the parallels between the fragmented narrative of the epic and its heroic counterpart, saying: "Since much fragmented epic directly concerns the 'making' (poiesis) of a fictionally whole self – a mirage – that works to heal the fragmented poetic psyche, it is worth exploring this typical formation of the genre, which earlier criticism might have called an 'epic hero'".[7]

The fragmented narrative and heroic figure are useful tools in reshaping acceptable gender patterns that work to undermine "the ontology grounding 'Western' epistemology",[8] as I have quoted from Haraway earlier, but these same impulses can also be aligned with the destabilising of masculine alignments with ideologies of time as an enduring incorruptible state – an idea that is rooted in Victorian understandings of a patriarchal ordered society.[9] The fragmenting of time, like the literal death of Cronus, creates a period of instability and

6 Thomas Jefferson quoted in Jeremy M. Downes, *Recursive Desire: Rereading Epic Tradition*. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997) 147.

7 Downes, *Recursive Desire: Rereading Epic Tradition*, 158.

8 Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century": 153.

9 Patricia Murphy, *Time Is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001 3.

transition in which the questioning and reinterpreting of identity and social politics, as well as generic norms are able to flourish.[10]

It is the aforementioned idea of the fragmented hero that this thesis will discuss next before returning to a discussion of narrative and then temporal unfixity. There is, however, one final scholarly position to examine first, and that is Case's analysis of *Aurora Leigh* as a fragmented narrative. It can be argued, as Case does, that the narrative unreliability of *Aurora Leigh* is a response to the combining of "seemingly incompatible plots; a female künstlerroman and a feminine love story", which requires Barrett Browning to juggle the conflicting roles of the female artist and the female heroine.[11] Case contends that the first four books of *Aurora Leigh* follow the artist's journey, and the final four books are a female romance, with the two plots converging in Book Five, in this central book Aurora details her failing attempts to write whilst reiterating her determination not to be constricted by women's roles in society. The culmination of which is her decision to leave England to escape its suffocating social pressures for her motherland Italy where Aurora believes she will be less constrained and will be able to write and live more freely, leading, Case argues, into the work's essentially exclusive focus on the feminine love story (*AL* 5.1168–1171).

In counterpoint to Case's arguments about how Aurora is a fragmented epic hero and her foregrounding of the conflicting interests of the künstlerroman and the romance plot, I suggest that this same narrative unreliability is caused by the representation of Aurora's heroism as a process of growth and evolution.[12] Where change is brought about through

10 Patricia Murphy, *Time Is of the Essence: Temporality, Gender, and the New Woman*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001 2.

11 Case, "Gender and Narration in '*Aurora Leigh*'", 17.

12 The evolution of species is raised by Aurora who shows a thorough knowledge of Darwin's early works on the subject See Reynolds, *Aurora Leigh*: 47 note 7.

challenging personal thought patterns and beliefs, and through the blending of the ideas of others with one's own to reach a higher understanding and a higher state of being. Aurora strives for this self-mastery of thought as a part of her role as a woman, self-consciously challenging traditional gender (*AL* 2.433–497, 7.178–190) and generic conventions of the pastoral (*AL* 5.130–134), the epic (*AL* 5.155–183), the poem (*AL* 5.223–229), and the play (*AL* 5.229–273). This focus on the incomplete hero who strives for growth and knowledge necessarily requires the heroine/ narrator to be incomplete and vacillating in her knowledge and understanding, which will then progress and be enriched throughout the work. In *Aurora Leigh* this is best seen in Aurora's incremental reconsideration of Romney's intentions to improve the state of the world by aiding the poor. As a young woman, Aurora vehemently refused his call to aid him as his wife, saying "*me* your work / is not the best for, – nor your love the best" (*AL* 2.450–451). However, as Aurora matures she challenges the role of her own work, which, though it had won praise and fortune (*AL* 3.204–206), still merely embodied only the embryo and not the full heart of what she hoped her work to contain (*AL* 3.246–249). It had yet to move hearts towards a betterment, which at this stage Aurora is as yet still unable to identify. "So I ripped my verses up", she reports, as she redoubles her writing efforts (*AL* 3.250–343). Through Aurora's commitment to intellectual growth and as well as her acceptance of new concepts and ideas from Romney about the state of mankind being in need of aid, she learns how to expand her skillset to represent "truth" and to work for a greater moral good through her art (*AL* 7.854–857, 889–894). In the same way, Aurora comes to challenge her false belief that she "did not love [Romney] … nor he me" (*AL* 2.506). This growth of both Aurora's artistic self and her romantic maturity allows for the fulfilment of the romance plot and for the unification of two evolving epic characters who

have had to construct their current happiness from fragmented pieces of themselves which have been held together through Aurora's words (*AL* 9.283–286).

The first-person fragmented representation of Aurora provides a heroic figure capable of growth and uncertainty. This makes her a heroine who is much more relatable than the traditional more obfuscated epic hero for a nineteenth-century audience, who had come to regard the individualistic, knowledge-driven character as the archetype of modern heroism.[13] Barrett Browning's representation of the growth-oriented incomplete hero stands alongside the similarly fragmented representation of temporality, embodying claims such as Jefferson's and Downes', that all epics after Homer are merely fragmented. Barrett Browning turns the fragmented evolutionary hero into a way to modernise and feminise the epic narrative to enable it to better depict the growth of the female epic hero.[14]

Reflexive Temporality

The Iliad is a record of the heroic immortality of Achilles, and its timeframe encapsulates the moments leading up to Achilles' choice between a long and prosperous but un-heroic life, and unfading immortality at the cost of his return home from Troy (*I* 9.410–416). The temporal span is linear and progressive, but is intersected with discursive remembrances of past events and mythic interludes that retard the primary story of the attack on Troy. Whereas the battle takes place over the course of only 51 days, because of the discursive nature of the epic with its meandering historical contextualisations and mythical references, the entirety of

13 Elisa Beshero-Bondar, *Women, Epic, and Transition in British Romanticism*. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2011) 19.

14 Downes also discusses Byron's *Don Juan* as a similarly fragmented epic narrative and hero. Downes, *Recursive Desire* 152.

The Iliad's epic narrative spans multiple generations and also the historical battles on Olympus, taking up 15,693 lines. Even with these interludes the narrative movement remains progressive and leads towards death and destruction with the fall of Hector heralding the unseen fall of Troy. Collin Hughes suggests that the linear structure is also represented by "the chronology of the three major duels—past, present, and future".[15] He also aligns the duel between Menelaus and Paris, whose conflict is the source of the Trojan War, with the past; he sees duel between Ajax and Hector as signifying the present war between the Greeks and the Trojans; and considers the final duel between Hector and Achilles as foretelling the impending fall of Troy.

The narrative structure of *Aurora Leigh*, like its female heroic narrator, is inconstant and digressive, sometimes leaving the reader surprised as to what time change has occurred or the sudden narrative immediacy of Aurora's voice.[16] The fractured and inconstant nature of the epic's hero, Aurora, who changes and evolves throughout her autodiegetic narrative, is also mirrored in the narrative form through its unreliable temporal scale and narrative voice, and through the varied narrative reporting forms Aurora uses. *Aurora Leigh* begins with a distanced narrative throughout Book One, as Aurora recounts her childhood. Yet Book Two's narrative slows to focus on the day of her twentieth birthday. This immediacy of the focus allows the narrator to report in minute detail Aurora's rejection of Romney, and her confirmation of her commitment to the work she feels God has dedicated her to do, the life of the writer.

The Iliad's glorification of the golden age of heroism before the fall of Troy looks sentimental backward-looking to an unalterable past, which contrasts strongly with the

15 Collin Hughes, *A Prelude to The Iliad* (Pullman: Washington State University, 2002).

16 Herbert F Tucker. "Aurora Leigh: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends." *Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative* Closure (1993) 66.

forward-reaching outlook of Book Nine of *Aurora Leigh*, which glorifies a future potential for an egalitarian utopia.[17] Barrett Browning remodels *The Iliad*'s valorisation of the past heroic nature of man and the eventual fall of a golden age through its foreshadowing of the fall of Troy. Instead, *Aurora Leigh*'s closing sentiments are of Aurora's elevation of Marian from her socially isolated destitution and Aurora's unification with Romney as equals in work and love (*AL* 9.634), which creates an ending promising a positive egalitarian utopic future aligned with the birth of the biblical New Jerusalem.

Temporality in *Aurora Leigh*, both in its feminised, unreliable reactionary temporal positioning and in its forward-looking conclusion, is unlike the masculine, progressive linear construction of *The Iliad* that records with essentialist efficiency the best of mankind. *Aurora Leigh* instead allows for variance and inconsistency in the narrative modes and reporting used to relate this female epic tale, with a reactive and reflexive narrative that changes to suit the narrator's needs. *Aurora Leigh* also rejects *The Iliad*'s epic role in the valorising of the past leading to an inevitable fall of man from a golden age: instead closing by depicting a hope-filled egalitarian utopic future which takes its roots in contemporary Victorian society.

The Fate of Man

In line with *Aurora Leigh*'s revising of the sentimental historically focused epic conclusion of *The Iliad*, Barrett Browning's epic also rejects of the fate of mankind as being controlled by the gods of Greek mythology, whose own proclivities and political rivalries define the fate of men. In *The Iliad*, Heroes and civilisations stand or fall based not on individual action or

17 Downes' argues that positive forward-looking position makes *Aurora Leigh* unusual for a nineteenth-century British epic, which are more typically sentimental, in comparison to the American or colonial epics which have a more utopic vision (Downes, *Recursive Desire: Rereading Epic Tradition*, 277).

personal merit (the core tenets of Greek heroism), but on divine whim. Fate, once decided, is inescapable even for Achilles – who takes courage from the fact he knows he is destined to escape from the river god's seemingly overwhelming clutches (*I* 21.308–320), to die as fate has appointed at the foot of the walls of Troy (*I* 23.97–99). Yet knowledge of his own impending death also hardens Achilles' heart against the pleas of his captives, being unmoved by their pleas to be spared from death, saying, "but even for me, I tell you, / death and the strong force of fate are waiting" (*I* 21.123–124). Through the awareness of their mortality and the indomitable will of the gods, Homer renders Achilles and Hector; who is also aware of the inevitability of his own death and the fall of Troy (*I* 16.925–929, 16.996–1000), as more idealised and compelling heroic archetypes. Knowledge of their fate turns them into tragic heroic figures who, with great humility, go to their doom in willing submission to the will of the gods and to a fate they recognise but cannot evade.

In contrast, *Aurora Leigh* presents fate as lying in the hands of man rather than the gods: individual and social responsibility are thus foregrounded. *Aurora Leigh* centralises its narrative perspective on its female protagonist as being capable of socially and spiritually redeeming individuals, as Aurora does with Marian when she is alone in Paris (*AL* 7.117–132), and for Romney through her writing (*AL* 8.283–297). While Barrett Browning does use God as a moralising imperative, the distance of Aurora's God, in contrast to the immediacy of the will and desires of the gods in *The Iliad*, gives Aurora a certain agency. It enables her to use religion to argue for her divine right to be an author, which she believes is the intention and will of God (*AL* 2.455–457). While this distanced figure of God is shown as a positive force in Aurora's sense of divine empowerment. The unshackling of fate allows a level of spiritual independence which is used to humanise the role of social responsibility and so re-

evaluates Marian's rape as a human act and not a part of God's wider unknowable plan for her fate, or that of mankind (*AL* 6.1180–1185) as *The Iliad* may have done.

Barrett Browning's mitigation of the role of the gods mean that the rape of Marian and her brutal misuse by her mother who beat her and sold her to an unknown man (*AL* 3.868–870, 3.1050–1064), her female employers who used her and cast her aside (*AL* 4.9–40, 6.1150–1235, 7.14–74), and even by Romney who for his part, failed to protect her (*AL* 4.955–985),[18] are all crimes which rest on man's conscience, not on God's. These degradations and torturous betrayals by both men and women show Barrett Browning's criticism of Victorian society's treatment of fallen women, who were seen as irredeemable seducers of men rather than as the victim that Marian portrays. Aurora's heroic position and her redemption of Marian highlight the possibility of individual participation having a role in correcting the moral social deficiency in English nineteenth-century Victorian urban life, which both Aurora and Barrett Browning fled in search of a better life in Italy.

At its conclusion, *Aurora Leigh*'s fractured and imperfect, contemporary world is depicted as one that is capable of becoming a hope-filled utopia brought about through the change and growth that Aurora, its heroic, individualistic, first-person narrator undergoes. In the conclusion of *Aurora Leigh* its signature characters Aurora, Romney and Marian are all shown to be independent of any preordained outcomes and thus, unlike the characters and the city of Troy in *The Iliad*, are capable of forging a new future where equality and personal responsibility are individually and collectively possible.

This chapter shows the unreliability and digressive unfixity of the feminised narrative form of *Aurora Leigh* whose personalized, interior protagonist showcases ways to be a

18 Brown instead aligns Romney with the Milton's Satan through his role in the fall of Marian/Eve, rather than arguing as I have, that the fate of mankind rest in man's hands (Brown. "*Paradise Lost* and *Aurora Leigh*" 735–738).

modern, knowledge driven heroine, as contrasted with the static hero third person omniscient narrative reporting of *The Iliad*. Along with the disrupted female epic hero, *Aurora Leigh* also features inconsistent temporal and narrative variation, introducing a feminised repurposing of time as a way of challenging the patriarchal, narrative and temporal unity typical of masculine epics like *The Iliad*. Finally this chapter argues that Barrett Browning rejects the backward looking model of the epic that valorises a historical golden age of men, in favour of depicting a world in which individuals and not gods define the fate of their fellow humans. This socio-centric model disavows fate and enables the possibility of a transformative future utopia brought about through the egalitarian unification of the sexes.

Conclusion

In order to identify the mechanisms by which *Aurora Leigh* modifies the gendered ideology of the epic form, this analysis has focused on three aspects of female representation in *Aurora Leigh* – the female heroine, the domestication of the setting of the work and the re-gendering of epic narration – to elucidate the significance of Barrett Browning's reshaping of traditional models of gender representation in the epic, thereby contributing to the existing epistemological structure of the epic on a wider literary studies level. This is seen through three interrelated depictions of female gender in the form of female heroism and the artist's quest for glory, the domestication and feminisation of the setting from the battlefields of Troy to the drawing rooms of nineteenth-century Europe, and thirdly the re-gendering of epic narration as an aspect of female agency.

Through analysis of the way *Aurora Leigh* reshapes the epic genre, we can then consider the implications of how such modifications to the epic, along with the critical success of *Aurora Leigh*, impact subsequent female involvement in this, the oldest, most historically privileged and most historically androcentric of genres. This research highlights that the Victorian desire for contemporary heroes, as a validation and also method of critique of their own time and culture, was alive and strong as seen by the frequency of these contemporary epic portrayals and publications throughout the nineteenth century, of which Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Wordsworth's *The Prelude* are two I have discussed in this thesis. This, therefore, rebuffs the notion that the era was an age unsuited to heroic commemoration. A natural, though newly expressed, extension of this is the desire to regard

the lives of women as similarly capable of heroic imperative and action. This research has also shown that the nineteenth-century impulse to bring masculine Greek heroic characters into contemporary settings requires a socialisation of the hero to enable the newly repurposed hero to fit into the Victorian socio-centric mindset, which is itself in response to previous Romantic ideals of the isolated hero archetype. The research also enriches the existing feminist narratological examination of the necessity of fragmented narrative patterns. To enable a feminist revision of the monolithic masculine heroic archetype, which already had a moratorium on whole, progressive, linear forms of representation. This left women writers to fashion an epic gender identity from the fragments, scraps and leftovers from patriarchal forms of representation, which could then be used to foreground differences in the gendered ideologies of heroism. Finally, this is a contribution to the wider feminine literary studies project by assisting in the reclamation of female, and other minority works in the epic landscape, which have previously been undervalued.

The research undertaken for this study highlights the fact that there is more to say and to be discovered about the influence of gender on nineteenth-century and later epics, and their relational meanings to modern thought and literary influence. There is significantly more work to be done in extending the research of authors like Bernard Schweizer, whose *Approaches to the Anglo and American Female Epic, 1621–1982* is a milestone in discussions of female epic. However, Schweizer's work only maps a limited number of early epic or epically aligned female works, and ceases its discussion of epics later than the late twentieth century. By extending the examination of the female contribution to the genre through subsequent authors who each relate their own epic tales of female heroism, we extend the range of genres or modes of narrative that can be seen to convey female expression. This, in turn, makes the epic not only fertile ground to examine women's stories

of heroism, but also to consider the ways women use gender as a revolutionary tool to reforge existing generic classifications.

Appendix: Synopsis of *Aurora Leigh*

The poem opens in Florence, Italy, where Aurora, born to an English father and an Italian mother, lives happily surrounded by the natural Italian wilderness. Both of Aurora's parents die while Aurora is still young, so she is forced to leave Italy to live with her father's puritanical sister in England. Aurora meets her cousin Romney Leigh and the two become friends through much time spent together and shared interest in literature and learning. However, this amiability comes to an end in Book Two, which opens on the morning of Aurora's twenty-first birthday, when Romney proposes to Aurora, which she turns down. Aurora moves to London to live alone and write in Book Three, where Lady Waldemar visits her and announces Romney's plans to marry Marian, 'a child of the poor' in the name of his philanthropic principles of raising up the underprivileged and insists Aurora intervene.

Book Four recounts Aurora's meeting with Marian, whom she finds unimpeachable in her purity and generosity of spirit, despite being uneducated and penniless. Tragedy befalls Romney's wedding day, however, when Marian fails to arrive, and the occasion becomes a riot when the guests, an uneasy mix of the upper class from the Leigh side and the poor from Marian's background and those associated with Romney's philanthropic endeavours clash, leaving a devastated Romney trying to maintain some kind of order.

In Book Five, Aurora breaks her self-imposed solitude and work to visit a long-time friend of the Leighs, Lord Howe. There, Aurora overhears people talking about Romney marrying Lady Waldemar, a situation Aurora despairs of, feeling it has cheapened his love for Marian to replace her honest beauty of spirit with Lady Waldemar's physical beauty.

Aurora finishes her book and soon after resolves to leave England, which she has come to find oppressive, to return to her homeland, Italy. Book Six discusses Aurora's journey, during which she discovers Marian on the streets of Paris and accosts her to find out why she had mysteriously abandoned Romney on their wedding day. Book Seven continues with Marian's recounting of her abduction by Lady Waldemar's agent and her subsequent sale into sexual slavery and rape. Although initially sceptical of Marian's child, Aurora meets the baby and on hearing Marian's story, pronounces Marian blameless in the situation. Aurora is so moved by Marian's story that she asks Marian to accompany her to Italy where they will live together and raise Marian's son. Aurora writes bitterly to Lady Waldemar accusing her of victimising Marian as a ploy to take her place at Romney's side.

In Book Eight, Aurora and Marian settle into life in Italy. During their time there, Romney appears unexpectedly and confesses to Aurora that he was wrong about her capacity to improve the world through her art. He explains how her poetry has touched him deeply when he was most disheartened in his own life after suffering the razing of Leigh Hall at the hands of the very people he had welcomed into it. Book Nine continues with Romney's tale, and he reveals that he has heard from Lady Waldemar that his one-time fiancée still lives and that he wishes to marry Marian, regardless of the illegitimate birth of her son. Marian refuses Romney on the grounds of her wish to be solely devoted to her son and God alone. In this emotional void Romney confesses that he has loved Aurora from afar since they were children, and that along with the loss of Leigh Hall he lost his sight in the fire, which he had not previously disclosed. Initially shocked and saddened, Aurora proclaims her reciprocation of Romney's love and the pair agrees to marry and work together to forge a new life dedicated to alleviating the problems of social inequality through their combined skills. The

epic ends with the promise of their union and Aurora's glorious vision of a utopic egalitarian future towards which they look.

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