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## THE EPIC TRADITION

### **Introduction**

Epic occupied a prominent position as the highest test of poetic genius, yet any poet imprudent enough to attempt an epic would be faced with a daunting challenge. For a Victorian poet the attempt to rival Homer or Virgil involved complex considerations of form, theme, and history. The genre was traditionally associated with heroism and masculine strength, mythology, and the shaping of national identity, religion, and war, and with the poet's own desire to compete with and surpass his predecessors much as epic heroes seek to prove their own supremacy. The reception of ancient epic was an ongoing concern in the period, since Homer in particular was cited as a model in literature, politics, and morality. Matthew Arnold's prescriptions for translating Homer conveyed a sense of the responsibility involved in disseminating classical texts to a new readership. The *Iliad* was appropriated in debates on divorce, masculinity, authorship, and the historical criticism of the Bible. The *Odyssey* offered an alternative, novelistic version of Homeric epic, one which prioritized domesticity and highlighted the poem's female characters. Some of the most influential creative responses to the epic tradition were not poems in twelve or twenty-four books but verse novels, dramatic monologues, or theatrical burlesques. Others took up the challenge of writing at epic length and addressing national concerns. For aspiring epic poets, there were many choices to be made: should poetry inhabit a mythological world, whether Arthurian (Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* or Swinburne's *Tristram of Lyonesse*) or Norse (William Morris's *Sigurd the Volsung*), or a contemporary domain like that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*? Might the epic be used to intervene in religious controversies or political conflicts such as Chartism? Could a modern poet be the Virgil of the British Empire? Facing strong competition from the novel, ambitious Victorian poets chose to approach such questions and an astonishing range of themes in a form which evoked vast expanses of time and space, extraordinary physical and intellectual achievement, and literary renown. Yet to achieve recognition as an epic poet remains an unusual distinction. Despite recent critical attention to the proliferation of Victorian poems with epic aspirations, a small number of poems by Tennyson, Barrett Browning, and William Morris have continued to dominate accounts of the genre.

### **General Overviews**

Scholarly interest in epic as a genre is a comparatively recent phenomenon in Victorian studies, challenging earlier assumptions that *Paradise Lost* represents an end point for the English epic. Foerster 1962 surveys the reception of epic in the Victorian period, citing numerous statements by poets and critics. Tucker 2002 is an insightful introduction to the prevalence of epic in the Victorian period, drawing attention to numerous minor epics as well as familiar examples. Roberts 1999 is a useful point of reference for epics and other long poems of the period. Johns-Putra 2006 explores an important issue in accounts of the genre, the relationship between the epic and the novel. Graham 1998 and Dentith 2006 address the idea of epic as a form associated with nationalism and imperialism. Tucker 2008 is unrivaled as a rigorously researched and engaging account of the diverse epic aspirations of Victorian poets. Buckland and Vaninskaya 2009 is a collection of essays responding to a revival of interest in the epic and informed by Tucker 2008.

Buckland, Adelene, and Anna Vaninskaya, eds. *Special Issue: Victorian Epic*. *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14 (2009): 163–320. [class:journalArticle]

A journal issue which examines the use of epic form in the 19th century to represent the past, present, and future. In the “Introduction: Epic’s Historic Form” (pp. 163–172), Buckland and Vaninskaya argue that epic proved to be an apt form for the reworking of history in terms of geology, religion, and archaeology. They connect the interdisciplinary readings of epic in this special issue with the literary-critical turn to a “new formalism.”

Dentith, Simon. *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. [ISBN: 9780511484773] [class:book]

A wide-ranging study of epic primitivism and the desire for a national epic in 19th-century poetry and fiction. Dentith argues that 19th-century responses to the epic contain ambivalence toward the barbarism and heroism of the past, and that attitudes to the subject peoples of the British Empire were shaped by epic. Authors discussed include Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot, William Morris, Rudyard Kipling and writers of late-Victorian imperial adventure stories.

Foerster, Donald M. “The Pendulum Begins to Swing: Early Victorian Estimates: 1832–1880.” In *The Fortunes of Epic Poetry: A Study in English and American Criticism, 1750–1950*. By Donald M. Foerster, 116–159. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1962. [class:bookChapter]

A comprehensive survey of responses to epic by critics and poets in the Victorian period. Foerster argues that the period after 1832 was in some respects hostile to the epic, but the genre also regained some of the prestige it had lost in the Romantic era. Discusses the reception of Homer’s *Iliad*, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.

Graham, Colin. *Ideologies of Epic: Nation, Empire, and Victorian Epic Poetry*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1998. [ISBN: 9780719052859] [class:book]

A Bakhtinian reading of the cultural and national politics of the epic in the context of colonialism. Graham adapts Bakhtin’s theory of the epic as a monologic genre, arguing that epic can never exclude the dialogic. Poems discussed include examples from England, Ireland, and India: Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*, Samuel Ferguson’s *Congal*, and Edwin Arnold’s translations from the *Mahabharata*.

Johns-Putra, Adeline. “The Nineteenth Century: Epic and the Self.” In *The History of the Epic*. By Adeline Johns-Putra, 114–154. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. [class:bookChapter]

An insightful chapter on Romantic and Victorian epics within a larger examination of the genre. Discusses the expression and celebration of individualism developing as psychological exploration replaces martial heroism. Juxtaposes Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* with Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* as examples of the convergence of epic and novel, highlighting the relationship between individuals and the community, with actions by ordinary men and women taking the place of traditionally heroic deeds.

Roberts, Adam. *Romantic and Victorian Long Poems: A Guide*. Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 1999. [class:book]

Summarizes a wide-ranging selection of long poems and gives descriptions of genres such as epic, romance, and verse novel. Roberts uses the term “epic” as a descriptor for poems of over 1,000 lines, arguing that length (rather than other conventions of the genre such as the catalogue or the beginning *in medias res*) inspired 19th-century poets to attempt epics.

Tucker, Herbert F. "Epic." In *A Companion to Victorian Poetry*. Edited by Richard Cronin, Alison Chapman, and Antony H. Harrison, 25–41. Oxford: Blackwell, 2002. [ISBN: 9780631222071] [class:bookChapter]

A lucid and authoritative survey of the heterogeneous kinds of epic produced in the Victorian period. Excellent starting point for a study of the genre.

Tucker, Herbert F. *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790–1910*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [ISBN: 9780199232987] [class:book]

An indispensable resource for the development of the epic in the long 19th century. Tucker's commentary on the genre offers a rich contextualization of the more prominent long poems of the period by paying attention to subgenres such as Chartist epic, Spasmodic epic, or scientific epic. The comprehensive bibliography identifies hundreds of epics from the period.

### The Reception of Classical Epic

Jenkyns 1980 and Turner 1981 are pioneering book-length studies of the reception of Greek antiquity by Victorian readers and writers. Vance 1997 offers a similarly comprehensive assessment of the Roman inheritance. Joseph 1982 underlines the ease and familiarity of classically educated men with the Homeric epics. Harrison 2007 analyzes Victorian poets' reluctance to attempt full-length epics even as they paid tribute to the poems which had been so central to their education. Fiske 2008 and Bryant Davies 2018 engage with a wider range of sources such as periodicals and theatrical texts, extending our understanding of the popular reception of ancient epic. Vasunia 2013 demonstrates that the reception of classical epic could be used to challenge the authority of the British in India and other parts of the Empire. Talbot 2015 explores an increasing awareness that marking epic available in translation was a crucial task for classical scholars, both amateur and professional.

Bryant Davies, Rachel. *Troy, Carthage and the Victorians: The Drama of Classical Ruins in the Nineteenth-Century Imagination*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. [ISBN: 9781107192669] [class:book]

An interdisciplinary study of the cultural influence of classical ruins and responses to archaeological discoveries in the Troad and North Africa. Bryant Davies emphasizes that scholarly debates about Homer and Virgil should not be read in isolation but in the context of epic's prominence in Victorian popular culture, such as theatrical spectacles, paintings, and travelogues.

Fiske, Shany. *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008. [class:book]

Approaches the popular reception of Homer through articles in periodicals such as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and traces the influence of articles by John Wilson and Thomas De Quincey. Fiske argues that Wilson's reading of the *Odyssey* informed the representation of domesticity and homecoming in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*.

Harrison, Stephen. "Some Victorian Versions of Greco-Roman Epic." In *Remaking the Classics: Literature, Genre and Media in Britain 1800–2000*. Edited by Christopher Stray, 21–36. London: Duckworth, 2007. [ISBN: 9780715636732] [class:bookChapter]

Discusses Victorian poets who engage with classical epics in their works, such as Alfred Tennyson, Matthew Arnold, A. H. Clough, and William Morris. Argues that these poets artfully diversify and miniaturize elements of epic rather than attempting more conventional forms of epic.

- Jenkyns, Richard. *The Victorians and Ancient Greece*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980. [ISBN: 9780631109914] [class:book]  
 A wide-ranging account of the Victorian reception of Greek literature, culture, and history. In “Homer and the Homeric Ideal” (pp. 192–226), Jenkyns surveys varied literary and political responses to Homer, and connects the idea of athleticism in Homer with the masculine culture of the Victorian public school and the university novel.
- Joseph, Gerhard. “The Homeric Competitions of Tennyson and Gladstone.” *Browning Institute Studies* 10 (1982): 105–115. [class:journalArticle]  
 An account of rivalry between Tennyson and Gladstone, which included competing in spontaneous translations of Homer at social events. Joseph goes on to analyze the differences between their ideas on ancient and modern religion and mythology.
- Talbot, John. “The principle of the daguerreotype: Translation from the Classics.” In *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*. Vol. 4, 1790–1880. Edited by Jennifer Wallace and Norman Vancel., 57–78. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. [ISBN: 9780199594603] [class:bookChapter]  
 An analysis of a shift in the expectations and function of translation in a period when the translation of classical poetry was increasingly undertaken by classicists and amateur scholars rather than poets. Talbot examines debates about the translation of Homer and Lucretius.
- Turner, Frank M. *The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981. [ISBN: 9780300024807] [class:book]  
 A comprehensive study of the reception of Greek literature, mythology and religion, political thought, and philosophy by Victorian humanists. “The Reading of Homer” (pp. 135–186) is a detailed analysis of the ways in which Victorian readers and writers appropriated Homer and adapted the poems to explore contemporary preoccupations.
- Vance, Norman. *The Victorians and Ancient Rome*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. [ISBN: 9780631180760] [class:book]  
 A valuable study of the persistent Roman presence on Victorian culture. Chapters on Lucretius (pp. 83–111) and Virgil (pp. 133–153) engage with Victorian responses to the epic tradition.
- Vasunia, Phiroze. “Homer and Virgil.” In *The Classics and Colonial India*. By Phiroze Vasunia, 239–278. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. [ISBN: 9780199203239] [class:bookChapter]  
 Examines the reception of ancient epic in India, noting a significant disparity between Indian writers’ and scholars’ engagement with Homer and British writers’ increasing preoccupation with Virgil in the second half of the 19th century.

### **Victorian Responses to Homer**

Homer was reinterpreted in the Victorian period by scholars who sought to extend understanding of the texts beyond the academy and by artists and writers who created new works based on the texts. [Arnold 1960](#) is a good starting point for an understanding of the significance of providing a worthy translation. [Collins 1870](#) and [Lang 1893](#) supplement existing translations with commentary on the key episodes and characters in the poem and on the debate over the authorship of the poems. [Butler 1897](#) is a notoriously eccentric speculation on the authorship question. [Harrison 1882](#) examines the reception of the *Odyssey* in the visual arts, and [Kestner 1991](#) shows how Victorian painters responded to the poems. [Bridges 2008](#) discusses Robert Browning’s excitement about archaeological discoveries which seemed to offer personal access to the world of the epics.

- Arnold, Matthew. "On Translating Homer." In *On the Classical Tradition*. Edited by R. H. Super, 97–216. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960. [class:bookChapter]  
An influential series of lectures given while Arnold was Professor of Poetry at Oxford. Arnold argues that Homer (by which he seems to mean the *Iliad*) is "the most important poetical monument existing" and therefore a translation for non-classical readers should be a priority. He criticizes several Victorian translations of the poem and prescribes the qualities he considers Homeric.
- Bridges, Meilee. "The *Eros* of *Homer*: The Pleasures of Greek Epic in Victorian Literature and Archaeology." *Victorian Review* 34 (2008): 165–183. [class:journalArticle]  
A reading of Robert Browning's poem "Development" which places Browning's personal account of the reception of Homer in the context of advances in philology and archaeological discoveries by Schliemann at the site of Troy.
- Bryant Davies, Rachel, ed. *Victorian Epic Burlesques: A Critical Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Theatrical Entertainments after Homer*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. [ISBN: 9781350027176] [class:book]  
A collection of four burlesques inspired by the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The introduction and bibliography offer a wealth of information on the reception of Homer in the popular theatre.
- Butler, Samuel. *The Authoress of the Odyssey: Where and When She Wrote, Who She Was, the Use She Made of the Iliad, and How the Poem Grew Under Her Hands*. London: Longmans, Green, 1897. [class:book]  
A notably idiosyncratic reading of the *Odyssey* which had some influence on 20th-century writers such as James Joyce and Robert Graves. Impressed by the prominence and power of the female characters in the poem, Butler theorizes that the poem was written by a young woman and that she based the character of Nausicaa in the poem on herself.
- Collins, W. Lucas. *Homer: The Odyssey*. Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1870. [class:book]  
An introduction to the *Odyssey* from Blackwood's series Ancient Classics for English Readers. Collins also contributed a volume on the *Iliad* to the same series (1871). The book is organized in chapters on key episodes from the poem and Collins evaluates passages from a variety of translations.
- Harrison, Jane Ellen. *Myths of the Odyssey in Art and Literature*. London: Rivingtons, 1882. [class:book]  
A study of the representation of myth and ritual in Homer's *Odyssey* and in visual media such as Greek vase paintings.
- Kestner, Joseph A. "Before 'Ulysses': Victorian Iconography of the Odysseus Myth." *James Joyce Quarterly* 28 (1991): 565–594. [class:journalArticle]  
A survey of Victorian paintings based on episodes from the *Odyssey*. Includes works by artists such as Frederic Leighton, John William Waterhouse, Edward J. Poynter, Herbert James Draper, William Blake Richmond, and Edward Armitage.
- Lang, Andrew. *Homer and the Epic*. London: Longmans, Green, 1893. [class:book]  
Re-examines the "Homeric question" (whether the poems were composed by a single author or compiled from fragments sung by anonymous bards in different ages) in the light of German criticism and archaeological evidence.

### **Victorian Responses to Virgil**

While Homer was a dominant presence in Victorian culture, the influence of Virgil was contested. As an example of secondary epic or literary epic, Virgil was devalued according to

Romantic preferences for primitivism and folk poetry. [Turner 1993](#) and [Vance 1997](#) show how Virgil's reputation improved over the course of the century. [Karlin 2009](#) examines Tennyson's particular affinity for Virgil. [Vasunia 2009](#) explores interpretations of Virgil in the context of the British Empire.

Karlin, Daniel. "Tennyson, Browning, Virgil." In *Tennyson among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*. Edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry, 95–114. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [ISBN: 9780199557134] [class:bookChapter]

A detailed reading of Tennyson's 1882 poem "To Virgil: Written at the Request of the Mantuans for the Nineteenth Centenary of Virgil's Death," comparing Tennyson's poem with Robert Browning's "Pan and Luna."

Turner, Frank M. "Virgil in Victorian Classical Contexts." In *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life*. By Frank M. Turner, 284–321. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993. [ISBN: 9780521372572] [class:bookChapter]

An authoritative account of the reception of Virgil from negative assessments influenced by Romanticism and German scholarship to a reevaluation of Roman literature in the second half of the 19th century. Argues that midcentury reappraisals of Augustus as an effective political leader allowed for a more favorable reading of Virgil's *Aeneid*.

Vance, Norman. "Virgil." In *The Victorians and Ancient Rome*. By Norman Vance, 133–153. Oxford: Blackwell, 1997. [ISBN: 9780631180760] [class:bookChapter]

Examines the changing reputation of Virgil over the 19th century, from a Romantic disdain for Virgil in comparison with Homer to the recognition of parallels between Rome and the British Empire and an acknowledgment of the melancholy in the *Aeneid*.

Vasunia, Phiroze. "Virgil and the British Empire, 1760–1880." In *Lineages of Empire: The Historical Roots of British Imperial Thought*. Edited by Duncan Kelly, 83–116. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. [ISBN: 9780197264393] [class:bookChapter]

Traces readings and uses of Virgil by British writers in different imperial contexts in the 18th and 19th centuries. Argues that Victorian responses to Virgil emphasized the *Aeneid*'s prophecy of a divinely ordained empire without end and connected such themes with the British Empire.

## Tennyson

Tennyson's idea of a national epic based on King Arthur was slow to develop into a single long poem: the publication of episodes which were collected under the title *Idylls of the King* spans several decades. [Tucker 1981](#) argues that the *Idylls* present a deliberately anachronistic version of Arthurian legends to address the state of contemporary Britain; [Culver 1982](#) examines Tennyson's plan for an Arthurian epic and his poem reflecting on the writing of an epic. [Hodgson 1996](#) explores the resistance to teleological epic narrative in the *Idylls of the King*. Despite Tennyson's reservations about writing a conventional epic, reworkings of Homer and Virgil inform many of Tennyson's best-known short poems, such as "Ulysses" and "The Lotos-Eaters." [Markley 2004](#) is an illuminating study of Tennyson's classical education and his poetic responses to Greece and Rome, including his own epic ambitions. [Pearsall 2008](#) and [Hurst 2018](#) explore the ways in which Tennyson transformed epic materials into a distinctively Victorian form, the dramatic monologue.

Culver, Marcia C. "The Death and Birth of an Epic: Tennyson's 'Morte d'Arthur.'" *Victorian Poetry* 20 (1982): 51–61. [class:journalArticle]

Traces the development of Tennyson's plans for an Arthurian epic from the early 1830s to the writing of "The Epic" in 1842 as a modern frame to the earlier poem "Morte d'Arthur."

Hodgson, Amanda. "'The Highest Poetry': Epic Narrative in *The Earthly Paradise* and *Idylls of the King*." *Victorian Poetry* 34 (1996): 340–354. [class:journalArticle]

Reads the nonlinear narrative movement of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* as resisting expectations for a national epic, such as Arnold's prescriptions for serious and elevated poetry and Gladstone's identification of the Arthurian legends as a national and Christian epic.

Hurst, Isobel. "From Epic to Monologue: Tennyson and Homer." In *Reading Poetry, Writing Genre: English Poetry and Literary Criticism in Dialogue with Classical Scholarship*. Edited by Silvio Bär and Emily Hauser, 117–137. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. [ISBN: 9781350039322] [class:bookChapter]

A reading of Tennyson's attempt to claim to epic stature by writing brief Homeric poems in the contemporary and yet familiarly classical form of the dramatic monologue.

Markley, A. A. *Stateliest Measures: Tennyson and the Literature of Greece and Rome*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004. [ISBN: 9780802089373] [class:book]

An indispensable study of Tennyson's classical education and his use of Latin and Greek poetic forms and allusions.

Pearsall, Cornelia. *Tennyson's Rapture: Transformation in the Victorian Dramatic Monologue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [ISBN: 9780195150544] [class:book]

A persuasive reading of Tennyson's classical dramatic monologues. Considers "Ulysses" in relation to debates about Homer between Tennyson, Hallam, and Gladstone.

Tucker, Herbert F. "The Epic Plight of Troth in *Idylls of the King*." *ELH* 58 (1981): 701–720. [class:journalArticle]

Analysis of Tennyson's engagement with contemporary social questions in the *Idylls of the King*, such as the deliberate avoidance of representing of the adulterous relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere as a response to Victorian ideas of marriage and divorce.

## Elizabeth Barrett Browning

In her verse novel *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning explores and depicts the experience of a woman poet who seeks to rival the greatest poets of the past, such as Homer. [Dentith 2006](#) and [Johns-Putra 2006](#) discuss the defiantly contemporary context represented in the poem, as the poet-heroine Aurora pointedly argues that an epic set in the modern world is not a lifeless anachronism. Other essays emphasize how greatly the poem is embedded in a variety of literary traditions reflecting Barrett Browning's voracious reading. [LaPorte 2013](#) demonstrates that Barrett Browning was responding not only to classical precursors but also to the epic endeavors of the popular Spasmodic poets. [Brown 1997](#) shows how the poem is both informed by and reacting against Milton. Like many Victorian poems which engage deeply with the epic tradition, *Aurora Leigh* might be described as a generic hybrid which both aspires to and resists epic form. [Friedman 1986](#), [Laird 1999](#), and [Hurst 2006](#) examine Barrett Browning's use of epic tropes and her adaptations of epic tradition to fit a female protagonist. [Hauser 2018](#) argues that Barrett Browning's ideas about epic are closely connected with her reading of classical scholarship as well as ancient texts.

Brown, Sarah Annes. "Paradise Lost and *Aurora Leigh*." *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1600–1900* 37 (1997): 723–740. [class:journalArticle]

Claims that *Aurora Leigh* can be read as a palinode to *Paradise Lost*, as part of Barrett Browning's extended intertextual engagement with Milton.



- Dentith, Simon. “‘As Flat as Fleet Street’: Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Matthew Arnold and George Eliot on Epic and Modernity.” In *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. By Simon Dentith, 84–104. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. [ISBN: 9780521862653] [class:bookChapter]  
 Argues that the poem rejects the chivalric version of heroism represented by Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* and claims a version of heroism which can exist in the contemporary world.
- Friedman, Susan Stanford. “Gender and Genre Anxiety: Elizabeth Barrett Browning and H. D. as Epic Poets.” *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 5 (1986): 203–228. [class:journalArticle]  
 Examines significant parallels in the poetic development of two women writers of epic. Argues that their versions of a feminized (or demasculinized) epic react against contemporary personifications of the epic tradition in Tennyson and Pound.
- Hauser, Emily. “‘Homer Undone’: Homeric Scholarship and the Invention of Female Epic.” In *Reading Poetry, Writing Genre: English Poetry and Literary Criticism in Dialogue with Classical Scholarship*. Edited by Silvio Bär and Emily Hauser, 151–171. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018. [ISBN: 9781350039322] [class:bookChapter]  
 A reading of *Aurora Leigh* and H. D.’s *Helen in Egypt* as examples of female epic which engage in conversation with the reception of Homer in classical scholarship.
- Hurst, Isobel. *Victorian Women Writers and the Classics: The Feminine of Homer*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. [ISBN: 9780199541676] [class:book]  
 Discusses *Aurora Leigh* in the context of Barrett Browning’s extraordinary classical learning and her preoccupation with gender and genre.
- Johns-Putra, Adeline. “The Nineteenth Century: Epic and the Self.” In *The History of the Epic*. By Adeline Johns-Putra, 138–145. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. [ISBN: 9781403912121] [class:bookChapter]  
 An analysis of *Aurora Leigh* as a fusion of novelistic plot and post-Romantic epic form. The fictionalization of the poetic self and the poet-heroine Aurora’s own epic ambitions are noted as distinctive developments. Examines the poem’s generic hybridity, which embraces the epic and the female *Bildungsroman*.
- Laird, Holly. “*Aurora Leigh*: An Epical Ars Poetica.” In *Critical Essays on Elizabeth Barrett Browning*. Edited by Sandra Donaldson, 275–290. New York: G.K. Hall, 1999. [ISBN: 9780783884615] [class:bookChapter]  
 Influential essay on *Aurora Leigh* as an epic in which Barrett Browning adapts epic tropes to the poem’s modern setting.
- LaPorte, Charles. “*Aurora Leigh*, *A Life-Drama*, and Victorian Poetic Autobiography.” *SEL: Studies in English Literature, 1600–1900* 53 (2013): 829–851. [class:journalArticle]  
 Reading of *Aurora Leigh* which emphasizes the similarities between the poem and Alexander Smith’s 1853 Spasmodic epic, *A Life Drama*.

### William Morris

In his popular twelve-book poem *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–1870), William Morris engages at enormous length (far exceeding the number of lines in classical epics) with ancient mythology, medieval legends, and Icelandic sagas. *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876) is another lengthy epic undertaking, a retelling of Norse mythology in archaic language. Dentith 2009 explores debates about representing the nation’s history and culture in relation to Norse mythology in *Sigurd the Volsung*. Dentith 2006 compares *Sigurd* with Tennyson’s 1859 volume of *Idylls of the King* as competing versions of national mythology. Hodgson 1996 finds that Morris (in *The Earthly*

*Paradise*) and Tennyson approach the epic with some ambivalence toward epic authority and resistance to teleology. [Tucker 2008](#) examines the experimental style and narrative of Morris's mythological poetry. [Harrison 2015](#) juxtaposes Morris's versions of classical epics by Homer and Virgil with his own lengthy reworkings of mythology.

Dentith, Simon. "The Matter of Britain and the Search for a National Epic." In *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain*. By Simon Dentith, 64–83. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. [ISBN: 9780521862653] [class:bookChapter]

[A comparison of Tennyson's \*Idylls of the King\* and Morris's \*Sigurd the Volsung\* as national epics in which the poets contend with the problem of writing heroic epic in the 19th century.](#)

Dentith, Simon. "Morris, 'The Great Story of the North', and the Barbaric Past." *Journal of Victorian Culture* 14 (2009): 238–254. [class:journalArticle]

[A reading of \*Sigurd the Volsung\* as an example of epic primitivism, Morris's attempt to make Nordic mythology central to a national epic, the equivalent of the Homeric poems. Dentith explores the difficulties inherent in trying to make the values of an ancient warrior society cohere with progressive politics.](#)

Harrison, Stephen. "William Morris." In *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature*. Vol. 4, 1790–1880. Edited by Jennifer Wallace and Norman Vance., 559–578. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. [ISBN: 9780199594603] [class:bookChapter]

[An account of Morris's response to classical literature, including his translations of Homer and Virgil, and his reworking of epic and mythology in \*The Life and Death of Jason\* \(1867\) and \*The Earthly Paradise\* \(1868–1870\).](#)

Hodgson, Amanda. "'The Highest Poetry': Epic Narrative in *The Earthly Paradise* and *Idylls of the King*." *Victorian Poetry* 34 (1996): 340–354. [class:journalArticle]

[Interprets \*The Earthly Paradise\* as a poem which shares some insecurities about epic traditions and resistance to linear narrative with Tennyson's \*Idylls of the King\*.](#)

Tucker, Herbert F. *Epic: Britain's Heroic Muse, 1790–1910*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008. [ISBN: 9780199232987] [class:book]

[A discussion of Morris's experiment with recreating the form of primitive epic in \*The Earthly Paradise\* and the seventeen-book poem which was published separately, \*The Life and Death of Jason\* \(pp. 426–436\).](#)

## Science, Religion, and the Epic

A proliferation of religious and scientific epics in the Victorian period acknowledges the capaciousness of epic, the genre's ability to accommodate vast tracts of time and space and to engage in cosmic speculations. [Turner 1993](#) and [Vance 1997](#) examine the reception of the Roman poet Lucretius's epic *De Rerum Natura* (On the nature of things), a monumental work of natural philosophy which significantly influenced debates on science and religion in the late Victorian period. Four related essays from the "Victorian Epic" special issue of the *Journal of Victorian Culture* ([Gange 2009](#), [Ledger-Lomas 2009](#), [Cregan-Reid 2009](#), and [O'Connor 2009](#)) discuss how the epic was used to deal with questions about the age of the earth, the historical accuracy of the Bible, and the compatibility of Homer's morality with Christianity. [Barrow 2018](#) draws attention to Mathilde Blind's Darwinian epic, placing it in the context of poems which respond to geological theories.

Barrow, Barbara. "Deep Time and Epic Time in Alfred Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (1850), Matthew Arnold's *Empedocles on Etna* (1852), and Mathilde Blind's *The Ascent of Man* (1889)." *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 40 (2018): 115–131. [class:journalArticle]

- Argues that Tennyson, Arnold, and Blind respond to the conceptualization of deep time in geological studies by exploring the epic as a genre which could investigate origins.
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