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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.

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.”


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.


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.


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.


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.


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.

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.


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.


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.


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*.


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.

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.


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.


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.


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.


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.


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.

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.


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.


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.


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.


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.


A study of the representation of myth and ritual in Homer’s *Odyssey* and in visual media such as Greek vase paintings.


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.


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


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.

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.”


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.


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.


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


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


Analysis of Tennyson’s engagement with contemporary social questions in the Idylls of the King, such as the deliberate avoidance of representing 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.


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

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.


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.


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.


Discusses Aurora Leigh in the context of Barrett Browning’s extraordinary classical learning and her preoccupation with gender and genre.


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.


Influential essay on Aurora Leigh as an epic in which Barrett Browning adapts epic tropes to the poem’s modern setting.


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.


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.


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.


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).


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.


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.

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.

Examines the questioning of biblical narratives such as Noah’s Flood in the aftermath of the rediscovery of the ancient Mesopotamian Epic of Gilgamesh.

Examines the influence of W. E. Gladstone’s Studies in Homer and the Homeric Age (1858), which attempted to represent the Homeric epics as a pre-Christian step in an ongoing process of divine revelation. Argues that Victorian poets’ attempts to produce “Universal Epic” from a combination of Homer, Milton, and the Bible responded to Gladstone’s reading of Homer.

Reading of Edwin Arnold’s The Light of the World: Or, The Great Consummation (1891) and George Barlow’s The Pageant of Life: An Epic Poem in Five Books (1888) as late examples of Christian epic which refocus the subgenre on the historical Jesus of Nazareth rather than theological issues.

An article which examines how the literary term “epic” came to be associated with grand narratives about geology, time, and the creation of the earth.

Argues that readings of Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura from the 1860s onward focused on the poem’s relationship to contemporary scientific theories. Lucretius was appropriated as a key figure in debates about religion and science, often in attacks on scientific naturalism.

Chapter on Victorian authors’ use of Lucretius’s De Rerum Natura in relation to religion and science (pp. 83–111).