

# MASCULINITY IN FOUR VICTORIAN EPICS

A Darwinist Reading

**CLINTON MACHANN**

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CLINTON MACHANN  
*Texas A&M University, USA*



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# Acknowledgments

My fascination with Victorian literature has been central to my entire career as a teacher and scholar. Over the years my publications have focused to a large extent on the poetry and critical prose of Matthew Arnold, and since 1994 I have contributed each year an essay on Arnold to the annual “Year’s Work” series in the journal *Victorian Poetry*. However, it was writing about Tennyson that inspired me to undertake the study that has led to this book, and my 2000 essay “Tennyson’s King Arthur and the Violence of Manliness” (*VP* 38:200–26) was an early version of Chapter 2. I want to thank *VP* editor John Lamb for his permission to use the essay in this way. Gender studies, specifically the study of masculinity, has also been a longstanding interest of mine, and among my essays and reviews published in the *Journal of Men’s Studies*, “The Male Villain as Domestic Tyrant in *Daniel Deronda*: Victorian Masculinities and the Cultural Context of George Eliot’s Novel” in 2005 (*JMS* 13.3: 327–46) contains some references to Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* that I have incorporated into Chapter 5.

As for my use of ideas and interpretive strategies associated with literary Darwinism, I have become intensely interested in that critical approach in recent years, and I am grateful to Joseph Carroll for his pioneering work and for the opportunity to discuss with him important ideas concerning literature, evolutionary psychology, cognitive studies, and related issues. I am pleased to say that Joe visited our campus here at Texas A&M to deliver a lecture and visit my literature classes in 2003, and he was followed by two other prominent scholars in the field who did the same thing: Brian Boyd came in 2006, and Nancy Easterlin in 2008. I was delighted to meet and visit with them, as was my friend and colleague Brett Cooke, a specialist in Russian literature, who himself has significant publications in biopoetics, closely associated with literary Darwinism. Brett and I together taught a graduate seminar entitled “Darwinian Approaches to Literary Studies” in the spring of 2007, and I appreciate and enjoy our continuing collaboration on plans for related activities in the future.

Looking back much further, personal experience – spending my youth in an agricultural, “farming and ranching” environment – helped me to understand, intellectually and emotionally, from an early age that indeed human beings are part of the natural world, that biology transcends human culture and language, long before I became acquainted with scientific theories about biological evolution. This book is dedicated to the memory of my mother and father.

Finally, the sympathetic patience and intellectual support and advice of my wife Ginny have been invaluable during the long period in which I worked on this book.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

This is a study of the representations of masculinity – the trait of behaving in ways thought to be typical of or appropriate for males – in four important Victorian long poems: Alfred Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* (various publishing dates, 1842–91), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1857), Arthur Hugh Clough’s *Amours de Voyage* (1858), and Robert Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69). “Ideal manhood closed in real man,” alluding to King Arthur, is a phrase Tennyson added to the epilogue of his poem in 1891, as he made his final corrections.<sup>1</sup> Questions of gender are of the greatest concern to Tennyson, as they are to Barrett Browning, Clough, and Browning, and the topic of masculinity is central to our understanding of Victorian literature: its major themes, its idealism and social criticism, its perplexities and uncertainties.

In this chapter I review the importance of the long poem as a literary genre in mid-to-late nineteenth-century British literature, with an emphasis on the classic poems represented here. Then I discuss my critical and theoretical assumptions about masculinity in the context of literary gender studies and, at a more basic level, about the function of literature. In particular, I outline my use of concepts and methods associated with “literary Darwinism,” a relatively new critical approach to literature that in my view offers a fruitful way to explore issues related to the traditional concept of “human nature” that have been largely ignored since the advent of “postmodernism” and the prevailing assumption that literature – like all cultural formations – is “socially constructed.” I retain the term *construction*, especially when referring to gender, because it has been ubiquitous in gender studies, with the understanding that social or cultural constructions are not independent of human nature.

In recent years, open-ended discussions about the continuing relevance of Victorian studies (especially studies of Victorian poetry and within that subdivision especially studies of the “long poem”) have been prominent in the field, questioning the direction such studies should take in the future. As postmodernist literary theories lose some of their momentum, scholars explore a variety of historicist approaches while taking care to maintain a general allegiance to the political and feminist values that have been dominant in literary studies for the past few decades and avoid a return to traditional, “humanist” approaches or what are now often seen to be misguided assumptions about the coherence or unity of “Victorian” culture symbolized by Britain’s longest reigning monarch.<sup>2</sup> In advocating a

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<sup>1</sup> According to his son, Hallam Tennyson, as discussed in Chapter 2.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the variety of approaches discussed in the two special issues of *Victorian Poetry* (somewhat whimsically) entitled “Whither Victorian Poetry?” 41.4 (2003) and 42.1 (2004). These issues were edited by Linda K. Hughes, who provides an editorial introduction in each case.

serious consideration of literary Darwinism as we revise our approach to Victorian poetry, I am asking that readers and critics be willing to recognize and take into account a body of scientific literature by anthropologists, evolutionary scientists, cognitive scientists, and other researchers about the “human condition” that has been accumulating over the years. Like most others who have recognized this important contribution, I assume that individual human volition, social culture, and a “universal” human nature work together in complex ways.

The term *literary Darwinism* might be misleading to some who are unfamiliar with this “rapidly evolving” critical tradition because Darwin was not only an important scientist whose landmark contributions to theory and research will always be associated with evolution but also an author whose literary voice is a vital ingredient in British Victorian culture. For example, in *Darwin's Plots: Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (1983), Gillian Beer studies Darwin's narrative “plots” in *The Origin of Species* and other books and shows how George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and other novelists were influenced by Darwinian versions of “life struggles” in plotting their novels. Of course, Darwin exerted an enormous influence of this kind, and his “cultural relevance” to Victorian literature in general, including works by the poets whom I discuss in this book, is important. In a broad sense, Darwin shares the Victorian cultural scene with Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Clough, and Browning. Furthermore, Darwin's own literary style is engaging and continues to charm readers today; however, as noted above, the concept of literary Darwinism is based on a constantly expanding body of research – in the tradition of Darwin – concerning how our knowledge about the adapted human mind is related to the study of literature.

Literary Darwinists do not believe in “genetic determinism,” nor do they assume that the evolutionary process has ended, but they do offer compelling reasons for the continuing interest today in, for example, Homer and the ancient Hebrew scriptures, not to mention British Victorian literature, in various national and ethnic contexts and after many generations of cultural change. They help to explain the universality of themes and motifs in contemporary literatures across the world, the remarkable connections we find among various literatures, and the fundamental value of comparative literary studies and, simultaneously, interdisciplinary literary studies that combine the insights gained by those literary studies with the findings of biological and social scientists. They help us understand why literature of the distant or recent past retains a powerful potential for engaging the interest of students – and the general adult reading public – in ways that may seem surprising today, when academic discourse about literature has become increasingly isolated from anyone outside the specialized disciplines of the university.<sup>3</sup> After outlining

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<sup>3</sup> In a 2007 article that focuses on Lionel Trilling's perceptive – and still relevant – 1955 essay about Matthew Arnold's poem “The Scholar-Gipsy,” David Rampton notes that critics who published studies of Victorian poetry during the period 1950–75 still “had a very significant audience for their work, one that extended far beyond the confines of the discipline” but that now “literary criticism has almost completely lost whatever popularity it once had outside the academy” (13).

my reasons for believing that both the genre of the Victorian long poem and representations of masculinity in Victorian literature are deserving of new critical attention at this time, I discuss my critical assumptions in greater detail.

## Victorian Long Poems

The four poems announced in my title remain generally familiar to students of Victorian literature – after all, one was based on a “national myth” and occupied the efforts of the most celebrated poet of the age throughout his career, one was an immensely popular poem in its day and has now re-emerged as a feminist classic, one expressed characteristic doubts and confusions of the age in a particularly effective way, and one is the acknowledged masterwork of the poet whose experimental style most influenced poets (and novelists) in the twentieth century. However, it has become increasingly difficult for readers and critics to understand and appreciate the prominence of the long poem among the Victorians. In fact, it might be generalized that Victorian poetry as a whole has had a smaller audience of readers and critics in recent decades,<sup>4</sup> although selected short poems by poets persist as assigned readings from British literature anthologies used in university classrooms. (Of course, in some cases, anthologized poems are excerpts from the long poems.) I hope to encourage fresh readings of these poems that fully recognize their historicity as expressions of “Victorian” ideas and attitudes while appreciating their continuing relevance as explorations of deep and timeless human issues. To do this implies a renewed appreciation for traditional, “humanist” scholarship, and in the course of my discussion below I make some references to this work, but always within a context that rejects misguided assumptions about the fundamental incompatibility between literary and scientific scholarship and instead assumes a consilience in our search for knowledge about human culture and the natural world.<sup>5</sup>

In the late twentieth century some important scholarship in the field of Victorian poetry focused on the formal or generic experiments of poets faced with dilemmas in extending both Romantic (lyric) and classical (lyric, narrative, dramatic) modes of poetic expression within a dynamic aesthetic and critical environment

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<sup>4</sup> In a rough survey of MLA Bibliographies beginning in the early 1960s (referring to the standard MLA headings), I found, for example, that the total number of entries for Tennyson scholarship climbed from 384 during the decade 1963–72 to a peak of 526 in 1973–82 and that there was a decline to 423 in 1983–92 and 296 in 1993–2002. The rise and fall of (Robert) Browning studies was even more dramatic, from 425 in 1963–72 to a peak of 653 in 1973–82, and then a rapid decline to 427 in 1983–92 and 244 in 1993–2002. This trend has continued.

<sup>5</sup> “Consilience,” referring to a synthesis of knowledge from different specialized fields and efforts to unite the sciences with the humanities, is a key term in biologist E. O. Wilson’s *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* (1998).



increasingly given to social or cultural critique.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the long poem with overt or implied pretensions to the genre of epic, the pressures on the Victorian poet were particularly severe. Matthew Arnold is a well-known example of a conflicted Victorian poet who spontaneously composed poetry in the mode of the Romantic lyricist but (in the opinion of most of his major critics) rejected his own best efforts to compose long poems<sup>7</sup> while persistently attempting to recapture a classical poetry of the “grand style” in dramatic and epic narrative verse. Arnold himself accepted the idea that poetic form changes in response to cultural change, and although in his early lectures as Oxford Poetry Professor he applied himself to the perplexing question of how best to translate Homer for a Victorian British audience, he went on to develop his critical prose based on the idea that criticism must help prepare for an age in which great poetry – like the epic and dramatic works of ancient Greece – could be written once again.

Beyond his classicist idealism, Arnold, like most Victorian poets, yearned to write substantial, that is, *long*, poems, and many of his contemporaries with less purist views of classical models adapted them freely in combination with various historical, Romantic, and innovative modes. The final version of Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King* consists of 10,289 lines of blank verse organized into 12 books. Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* is of similar length – 10,938 lines of blank verse in 9 books – and Browning’s *The Ring and the Book* is about twice as long: 21,116 lines of blank verse in 12 books. Clough’s *Amours de Voyage*, 1,243 lines of unrhymed hexameters, is by far the shortest of the four poems. As we will see later in extended discussions of these poems, all four authors associated their works with “epic” generic traditions, with Clough’s poem as a kind of “mock-epic.” But even Browning’s massive poem was only about half the length of P. J. Bailey’s *Festus*. This version of the *Faust* story, featuring scenes with God

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<sup>6</sup> Among the most influential studies of this kind have been Isobel Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Politics, Poetics* (1993); W. David Shaw, *The Lucid Veil: Poetic Truth in the Victorian Age* (1987); and E. Warwick Slinn, *The Discourse of Self in Victorian Poetry* (1991).

<sup>7</sup> Many critics today consider Arnold’s 1852 “lyric-drama” *Empedocles on Etna* (1,121 lines of blank verse) to be one of his most successful and important works: he saw the plight of the ancient philosopher as analogous to that of the Victorian intellectual, with his scepticism, acute self-consciousness, sense of isolation and loneliness, nostalgia for a lost world. But Arnold soon became dissatisfied with this poem because it did not “charm” or “delight” the reader and because the suffering it portrays finds no vent in action. He excluded the poem from his 1853 collection of poems and sought to justify this exclusion in his famous critical “Preface” to that volume. Other (moderately) long poems published by Arnold include *Sohrab and Rustum* (892 lines of blank verse, the 1853 poem of classical simplicity and action that in a sense supplants *Empedocles*) and *Tristram and Iseult* (789 lines of various meters). Arnold’s was the first modern treatment of the Tristram myth in English, published along with *Empedocles* in 1852, 30 years before Algernon Charles Swinburne’s much longer *Tristram of Lyonesse* (4,468 lines of heroic couplets). In some ways, however, the most intriguing long poem planned by Arnold was one about the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius that he never completed. (See Machann, *Matthew Arnold*, 24, 27, 40–41, 43, 71–2.)

and angels in Heaven, was originally published in 1839 and then revised – and expanded – in subsequent editions: the 11th “Jubilee” edition of 1889 consisted of about 40,000 lines of blank verse. In his day, Bailey, whose reputation rested almost entirely on *Festus*, was associated with the “Spasmodic” school of poetry, faulted by some critics for a characteristically morbid, psychological intensity,<sup>8</sup> and of course he is almost entirely unread today; nonetheless, he had a large contemporary audience. An even longer poem, apparently the longest published poem of the century, was by a poet who remains canonical: William Morris’s *The Earthly Paradise: a Poem*, in four volumes, 1868–70. Morris, still known today for his designs and paintings as well as his poetry, was strongly influenced by Geoffrey Chaucer, and the 25 individual narrative poems that make up the whole are various in metrical form (much like the *Canterbury Tales*), adding up to a grand total of 42,681 lines.<sup>9</sup>

A closer look at one of the Spasmodic poems, however, will help us to understand the remarkable popularity but also volatility of the genre of the Victorian long poem, and it will serve to contextualize important aspects of the major works under consideration in this study. William Edmondstoune Aytoun coined the critical term *Spasmodic* in an 1854 mock review in *Blackwood’s Magazine* of his own imaginary poem, a parody entitled *Firmilian*. He subsequently completed and published this parody, which he called a “Spasmodic tragedy.”<sup>10</sup> Along with Bailey, Alexander Smith and Sydney Dobell were poets associated with this “school” whose work came to be widely ridiculed as a result of Aytoun’s effective critique, and Smith’s career in particular, based on the outstanding initial success of his long poem “A Life-Drama” (3,086 lines), first published along with shorter works in his *Poems* (1853), suffered a dramatic reversal.

The construction and critical fate of “A Life-Drama” have important implications for the discussions of the long poems by Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Clough, and Browning, in Chapters 2–5. For that reason, I offer here a short discussion of Smith’s remarkable career.

The son of working-class parents who lived in Kilmarnock and later moved to nearby Glasgow, he followed his father into the textile trade and became, like him, a designer of calico printing and sewed muslins. Although Smith had little formal education, his mother taught him Gaelic songs and Ossianic legends, and his youthful love of poetry led him to read the English Romantics and then Tennyson with enthusiasm. In 1850, at the age of 20, he began to publish his own poems in the Glasgow *Evening Citizen* and developed friendships with other young men

<sup>8</sup> A recent revival of critical interest in the Spasmodics is illustrated by a special issue of *Victorian Poetry* (Winter 2004), including essays by Herbert F. Tucker, Jason R. Rudy, Kirstie Blair, Linda K. Hughes, Antony H. Harrison, Charles LaPorte, Emma Mason, and Florence S. Boos.

<sup>9</sup> Morris’s gigantic collection of tales based on Greek and Norse mythology is structured by a narrative device similar to that used by Chaucer in *Canterbury Tales* and does not possess a unified plot like that of *Festus*.

<sup>10</sup> See Mark A. Weinstein, *William Edmondstoune Aytoun and the Spasmodic Controversy* (1968).

in Glasgow with literary interests, including Thomas Brisbane, who would later write his biography.<sup>11</sup> When Smith submitted a collection of his poems to the influential critic George Gilfillan in Dundee, Gilfillan praised them and helped to publish some of them in the *Eclectic Review*, but he advised Smith to write a longer poem that would make a stronger public impression. Smith responded by constructing a narrative that allowed him to incorporate some of the poems he had already written. The result was “A Life-Drama,” which made him famous – at least for a few years.

The protagonist in this poem is Walter, a poet with an aristocratic background, whose ambition is to write a poem that will make him famous: “Poesy! Poesy! I’d give to thee, / As passionately, my rich-laden years / ... / As Hero gave her trembling sighs to find / Delicious death on wet Leander’s lip” (6) and “O Fame! Fame! Fame! Next grandest word to God! / I seek the look of Fame!” (9). Not surprisingly, a love interest is added to Walter’s literary ambitions. While he is sleeping in the woods on his estate, a mysterious Lady comes by and is attracted both to the young man and to the book of poetry that lies by his side. Their mutual love of poetry is the catalyst to their brief romance, which is doomed from the beginning by the Lady’s commitment – vaguely suggested – to marry a man she does not love, and apparently she dies of unhappiness after she marries him, as she expects she will. Two years later, Walter, still brokenhearted, is in London, where he tells his sad story to his friend Edward. Edward invites him to his manor, where he introduces him to Violet, the beautiful young woman who becomes Walter’s second love. Like the first Lady, Violet is enchanted by Walter’s recitation of poetry as well as poetic ambitions, but apparently Walter takes advantage of her during their courtship and violates her sexually – at least that is what is implied in his conversation with a prostitute he encounters on a bridge at midnight. After an absence of three years, a repentant Walter returns to his home, resolving to begin his life anew. A conversation between his friends Edward and Charles reveals that the “great poem” that Walter had planned from the beginning has been published and has met with success, but he remains unhappy until he is rejoined with Violet at the end of the poem. In the final scene the two have been together watching a sunset and then the emerging moon and stars – formerly associated with Walter’s poetic engagement with “the infinite” – but as they turn to enter Walter’s house, he remarks that “A star’s a cold thing to a human heart, / And love is better than their radiance” (160).

As suggested in this brief synopsis, the plot of the poem is not well developed or even fully coherent. The 13 “scenes” that make up the poem contain a few dramatic exchanges between Walter and the other characters, but neither his relationships with the two women in his life nor with those with his friends are explored in any depth. All too clearly, Smith constructed the flimsy plot as a device to string together a series of lyric moments in which the poet Walter responds emotionally to the natural world and expresses his romantic feelings for the two women. Furthermore, there are narrative poems and “songs” recited by Walter – and by

<sup>11</sup> *The Early Years of Alexander Smith, Poet and Essayist* (1869).

the women – within the larger narrative that have a kind of allegorical function. In Scene IV Walter has been reading to his own Lady a poem about a Page in love with a Lady: “I drop the mask; / I am the sun-tanned Page; the Lady thou!” (65). In Scene VIII, Walter tells the tale of a suffering young poet who yearns for fame but is frustrated in his ambition and loses confidence in himself, and when Violet asks “Did you know well that youth of whom you spoke?” he answers, “Know him! O, yes, I knew him as myself –” (113). Surely very few readers were surprised by Walter’s autobiographical revelation in either case, but such devices tend to serve as digressive interludes and distract the reader from the dramatic situations. Smith, of course, incorporated previously composed poems in this way.

Nevertheless, early readers of “A Life-Drama” responded favorably to the sensuous imagery in the Romantic tradition incorporated into this poem, and indeed some individual passages are striking. In Scene V, Walter watches the sunset as he walks down a rural lane:

The flying sun goes down the burning west,  
Vast night comes noiseless up the eastern slope,  
And so the eternal change goes round the world.  
Unrest! Unrest! The passion-panting sea  
Watches the unveiled beauty of the stars  
Like a great hungry soul. (70–71)

Here he is discussing his favorite topic of poetry with his friend Edward:

To set this Age to music, – the great work  
Before the Poet now. I do believe  
When it is fully sung, – its great complaint,  
Its hope, its yearning, told to earth and heaven, –  
Our troubled age shall pass, as doth a day  
That leaves the west all crimson with the promise  
Of the diviner morrow, which even then  
Is hurrying up the world’s great side with light.  
Father! If I should live to see that morn,  
Let me go upward, like a lark, to sing  
One song in the dawning! (85–6)

Among the admirers of Smith’s poetry were George Meredith and Herbert Spencer, who was “strongly inclined to rank him as the greatest poet since Shakespeare” (Duncan, *Life and Letters*, 67), and Smith’s *Poems* had already reached a fourth edition by 1856. When Clough reviewed the 1852 volume of his friend Matthew Arnold’s poems, he compared Arnold’s poems unfavorably with those of Smith. At this point, Clough admired Smith’s work and was impressed by the achievements of this Scotsman despite his working-class background.<sup>12</sup> Arnold was angry with

<sup>12</sup> In fact, Clough’s admiration for Smith’s poetry was short-lived, fading soon after the 1852 review, but Charles LaPorte points out what he thinks are affinities between Clough’s own poetry and that of Smith and other Spasmodics in his essay “Spasmodic Poetics and Clough’s Apostasies.”

his old friend, especially since he did not respect Smith's work. In the famous "Preface" to his 1853 volume of poems, in which he explains why he had omitted his own long poem "Empedocles on Etna" from that volume, Arnold makes references to the unfortunate "dialogue of the mind with itself" in "Empedocles" – a feature he found to be characteristic of the age and that he was determined to avoid in his own work.<sup>13</sup> As shown in their correspondence, Arnold and Clough had longstanding disagreements about the proper subject matter of poetry, and I return to this issue in Chapter 4. Smith's extreme subjectivity was a strongly negative example for Arnold; however, it was Aytoun who made the devastating attack on Smith and the other "Spasmodics," and soon the majority of critics tended to take a negative view of Smith's (sometimes morbid) psychological intensity, passionate subjectivity and egoism, and emphasis on the physical body. Public opinion about Smith's poetry shifted quickly.

In an 1853 letter, Barrett Browning wrote that although Smith "has noble stuff in him," he "has more imagery than verity, more colour than form" (*Letters* II, 120). Nevertheless, her own *Aurora Leigh* is sometimes associated with the Spasmodic school, and certain features of that poem can be compared with "A Life-Drama" in ways that suggest an interesting influence, so I will have more say about the "Spasmodic" Smith in Chapter 3, as well. In a larger sense, the example of Smith illustrates the emphasis on the long poem as a genre – and the special status of the poet in mid-Victorian culture. Smith, who acknowledged the stylistic excesses of his first volume, spent the rest of his career trying to recapture his youthful fame, but he had only moderate success as an essayist and poet. He turned to a historical subject in his final volume of poetry, *Edwin of Deira* (1861), a poem of 3,275 lines in relatively straightforward, unadorned blank verse that treats the story of the Northumbrian king who, according to the Venerable Bede, ruled from 617 to 633 and founded the city of Edinburgh. Clearly, Smith had set aside his Spasmodic style, but critics pointed out his apparent imitation of Tennyson, who published his first version of the *Idylls* in 1859.

Tennyson had of course established himself as a poet with the publication of *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (1850), the long collection of elegiac lyrics occasioned by the sudden death of his close friend Arthur Henry Hallam in 1833. Smith admired Tennyson, who had successfully molded his series of personal, short lyric poems into one of the major long poems of the age (and built the reputation that secured his position as Poet Laureate). When Smith's initial success with his own generic leap from short lyrics to long narrative poem turned suddenly into failure, he attempted to follow Tennyson's lead in writing the story of a historical or mythic king, but the new direction of his work was widely seen as unoriginal and did little to restore his popularity.

Overall, however, the long poem was a strong, vital, and popular literary genre throughout the Victorian period. In addition to *Idylls* and *In Memoriam A. H. H.* (2,900 lines), Tennyson published *Maud* (1,325 lines), *Enoch Arden* (911 lines), and *The Princess* (3,309 lines). Besides *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning

<sup>13</sup> See Machann, *Matthew Arnold*, 35–9.

produced *The Battle of Marathon* (1,462 lines – written at the age of 13), *An Essay on Mind* (1,262 lines), and *Casa Guidi Windows* (2,002 lines). Clough's poetic reputation was based largely on *The Bothie of Tober-na-Vuolich* (1,732 lines) and *Dipsychus* (2,020 lines, unfinished), in addition to *Amours de Voyage*. Most prolifically, Browning, after *Paracelsus* (4,151 lines) and the notorious *Sordello* (5,982 lines),<sup>14</sup> went on to publish *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* (2,399 lines), *Balaustion's Adventure* (2,705 lines), *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* (2,155 lines), *Fifine at the Fair* (2,463 lines), *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (4,247 lines), *The Inn Album* (3,079 lines), *Aristophanes' Apology* (5,711 lines) and *Parleyings with Certain People* (3,495 lines), in addition to *The Ring and the Book*. And other titles by other poets found large readerships. Hundreds of thousands of copies of *Festus* were sold as it ran through 11 editions, for example, and *The Earthly Paradise* was a popular success as well. Victorian readers did not simply tolerate long poems: they had a special taste – and respect – for them,<sup>15</sup> and poets strove for the prestige and moral authority traditionally associated with the genre. Of course, the productions by Tennyson, Barrett Browning, Clough, and Browning focused on here not only retain their significance in historical terms for their status among contemporary nineteenth-century audiences but continue to fascinate modern readers because of their technical experimentation and their negotiations with cultural and ideological issues, although they would not serve to rejuvenate the long narrative poem as a popular genre in the long run. Historical studies such as Matthew Reynolds's *The Realms of Verse 1830–1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation Building* (2001) remind us that the poems featured in this book were very much involved in a complex rethinking of important issues involving cultural and political unity and nationalism.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, today it is easy to forget that these works were written, published, and read in a time when the long poem was widely

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<sup>14</sup> Browning's *Sordello*, the product of nearly 10 years' work, is a historical poem set in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Italy. It had the reputation of being one of the most obscure and confusing poems of the early Victorian period, and Browning's reputation suffered from this negative reception for many years, although twentieth-century critics were more sympathetic to Browning's struggles with poetic meaning in the poem.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Roberts's *Romantic and Victorian Long Poems: A Guide* (1999) is a particularly useful handbook that incorporates descriptions and summaries of British long poems (approximately 1,000 lines or longer) published during the nineteenth century. In his introduction, he discusses the popularity of the long poem during this era, emphasizing the significance of epic traditions. He notes that "Victorian literature is some of the most prolix in the canon. It is a shame, indeed, that 'prolix' carries such negative connotations, because it is part of the Victorian literary project that it was able to dilate upon its subject" (9).

<sup>16</sup> I do not mean to suggest that the long poem has disappeared as a literary genre today. On the contrary, although the genre has lost its dominant status, a few long poems continue to find enthusiastic readers. For example, in a recent article John P. Farrell compares Arnold's own *The Scholar-Gipsy* as a "celebration of the continuous life of poetry" with the modern long poem *The Continuous Life* (1990) by Mark Strand. A special issue of *PMLA* "On Poetry" (120.1, January 2005) calls attention to uncertainties in the current status and significance of poetry in the widest sense.

assumed to be the most prestigious literary genre, but we must remind ourselves of that fact when we study Victorian literature in its historical context.

*The Ring and the Book* has long been considered the most interesting of these poems as a cultural experiment. The genre of dramatic monologue, pioneered by Browning, is widely assumed to be the most significant contribution of Victorian poetry to modern literature. Here a series of monologues, already a hybrid of lyric and drama, is based on the plot of a lurid crime story drawn from original documents dating from seventeenth-century Rome and extended to epic proportions in a way that implies the unity of experience and discourse for critics; it inspired further experimentation with interior monologues and stream-of-consciousness techniques by twentieth-century novelists. More recently, Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*, which she considered a modern epic and a novel in verse and which enjoyed the reputation of being a major work before suffering from neglect by post-Victorian critics, has also been discussed as a major cultural and literary experiment, with emphasis on gender – Barrett Browning's construction of the self-conscious autobiographical voice of the woman poet, and modernity – her insistence on contemporary settings and the representation of contemporary social and political issues.

Barrett Browning deliberately placed her work in opposition to Tennyson's Arthurian epic project:

I do distrust the poet who discerns  
 No character of glory in his times,  
 And trundles back his soul five hundred years,  
 Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,  
 To sing – oh, not of lizard or of toad  
 Alive i' the ditch there, – 'twere excusable,  
 But of some black chief, half knight, half sheep-lifter,  
 Some beauteous dame, half chattel and half queen,  
 As dead must be, for the greater part,  
 The poems made on their chivalric bones;  
 And that's no wonder: death inherits death. (V, 188–98)

and

King Arthur's self  
 Was commonplace to Lady Guenever;  
 And Camelot to minstrels seemed as flat,  
 As Regent Street to poets. (V, 209–12)

However, from the time that Tennyson, at the age of 24, began to plan his series of "idylls" based on the Arthurian legends, he himself had been keenly aware of the risks he was taking and uncomfortable with the "epic" generic label. In his narrative frame "The Epic," consisting of a sort of prologue and epilogue to the first version of "Morte d'Arthur" (later entitled "The Passing of Arthur" as the final book of the *Idylls*), he has his epic poet-protagonist Everard Hall attempt to burn all 12 books of his Arthurian epic:



"Nay, nay," said Hall,  
 "Why take the style of those heroic times?  
 For nature brings not back the mastodon,  
 Nor we those times; and why should any man  
 Remodel models? These twelve books of mine  
 Were faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth,  
 Mere chaff and draff, much better burnt." (34–40)

Hall's friend fortuitously rescues one book, the "Morte," from the hearth, and after the poet reads it aloud to a group of friends, the unnamed speaker remarks, "Perhaps some modern touches here and there / Redeemed it from the charge of nothingness" (328–9). Tennyson's defensiveness is evident and can be compared to Barrett Browning's concerns about her ambiguous identity as a woman poet and her poem as a curious modern epic or a novel in verse and Browning's anxieties about his reputation as an odd and obscure writer as well as the radically experimental form of his work. For his part, Clough, in the voice of his protagonist in *Amours de Voyage*, openly expresses doubts and uncertainties that he knew would be associated with his own life, and his innovative adaptation of the hexameter gave his verse a distinctive quality indeed. Of course, I return to these issues in later chapters.

Although Tennyson did not complete his epic poem until about five years after the publication of Browning's *The Ring and the Book*, I think it is appropriate to discuss Tennyson first because he had begun to publish parts of the work, already conceptualized as a 12-book epic, 15 years prior to the publication of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh*. In contrast to *Amours de Voyage*, *The Ring and the Book*, and *Aurora Leigh*, *Idylls of the King*, although clearly "experimental" in its linking together generically uncertain "idylls" (quite unlike the idylls of Theocritus) in order to create a modern, classically epic-length version of an ancient Celtic myth best known in its Medieval prose version, was from the beginning seen as essentially archaic by both its admirers and detractors. Modern critics, while not ignoring Tennyson's vision of the rise and fall of civilizations, generally do not categorize it as a cultural experiment to be compared with *The Ring and the Book* and *Aurora Leigh*. I will, however, suggest that *Idylls* is in some ways speculative and experimental in ways that have not been fully appreciated.

The relationship between *The Ring and the Book* and *Aurora Leigh* is also complex and interesting, and some of the links between them are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Although Browning dedicated his epic poem to the memory of his wife Elizabeth, who had been dead for about seven years by the time he published it, there is evidence that Barrett Browning did not much like her husband's preliminary plans for the poem.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it has been argued that one of Browning's fundamental aims in his poem was to metaphorically "kill" his dead wife again and appropriate her poetic vision by identifying her with the

<sup>17</sup> See William Irvine and Park Honan, 409.



saintlike, victimized heroine Pompilia.<sup>18</sup> Clearly this claim is related to issues of gender roles represented in the two poems.

Beyond specific issues of intertextuality among the poems is a shared thematic and formal concern with tensions between historicity and an ahistorical or universal vision. In *Idylls*, Tennyson is ambivalent about associations between historical time and great mythic cycles, between the current need for British leadership within its world empire and the heroic ideal of the once and future king. In *Aurora Leigh* Barrett Browning indeed focuses on the contemporary world, but her historically situated poet–heroine in the tradition of Romantic metaphysics places her trust in a transcendent God and experiences an apocalyptic vision of the future. In *Amours de Voyage* Clough emphasizes ties between the contemporary Roman setting and the ancient city of history and myth. In *The Ring and the Book* Browning offers a narrative based on archival documents from a particular historical moment and, as Carol Christ puts it, “represents man’s consciousness as determined by history” but at the same time “implies a point outside of history from which that consciousness can be judged and the structure of history comprehended.”<sup>19</sup> In the discussion below, I show how my own critical approach deals with the tension between historically (or culturally) based literary interpretations and those that imply “universal” human experiences. In this sense my work is in the tradition of recent studies that have analyzed the complex relationship between the historical present and ancient historical or mythic traditions in long poems by Victorians attempting to adapt an epic vision: Colin Graham’s *Ideologies of Epic: Nation, Empire and Victorian Epic Poetry* (1998), Simon Dentith’s *Epic and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (2006), and Herbert F. Tucker’s *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse 1790–1910* (2008).

Tucker’s massive work is especially helpful in demonstrating the pervasive presence of epic ideas in major and minor poems of the nineteenth century, a factor given little attention by mainstream literary critics. He treats three of the major poems discussed here as major Victorian epics, discussing Barrett Browning’s success in channeling the “spasmodic impulse” into “the most important epic poem” of the decade 1850–60 (340), Browning’s decision “to make a major Victorian epic out of the trial documents he found one day bound together for on a bookstall in Florence” (437), and Tennyson’s reluctance to adopt the term *epic* but then “making an epic virtue of the pluralist necessity to which the title *Idylls of the King* committed him” (455). However, “generic scruple” prevents him from

<sup>18</sup> An extreme form of this argument is made by Nina Auerbach in her article “Robert Browning’s Last Word” (1984). According to Auerbach, “Having survived a poet who had made epic claims for herself, Robert Browning perpetuated her voice by turning it into his own: he ‘married’ Elizabeth Barrett one more time when he appropriated her after her death, weaving her declarations into the corrosive fabric of his dramatic monologues” (173).

<sup>19</sup> Carol Christ, *Victorian and Modern Poetics*, 114. Christ’s chapter “Myth, History, and the Structure of the Long Poem” (101–41) is particularly insightful in its discussion of how Victorian poets such as Arnold, Tennyson, and Browning strive to reconcile historical and ahistorical elements in their works and how they anticipate the modernist experiments of Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and William Butler Yeats.