The Homeric Question in Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh*

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In Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), the eponymous poet-heroine advocates the contemporary epic. Barrett Browning pours into her novel-poem both her own ambition to create an epic and her desire to write “a poem of a new class,” experimenting in creating “as interesting a story of a poem as of a prose work” to “touch this real everyday life of our age” (*Letters to Mitford* 3: 49). Critics have examined the epic concerns in *Aurora Leigh* chiefly in the light of gender issues, exploring feminization of the epic tradition and conventions, as the epic is often claimed to be the masculine genre *par excellence*, dealing with subjects belonging to the masculine, public sphere and thus traditionally an appropriate endeavour for male poets.

When Aurora invokes the epic poet Homer as her model, however, she considers him as her model of the epic poet who writes about the real life of the people living in his or her own age. Victorian criticism of the Homeric epics was deeply rooted in their belief in the realism of Homer’s poetry. Homer was “read and valued more nearly for his worth as a truthful historical narrator or recorder than as a poet” (*Turner* 137). Aurora’s ambition to create a contemporary epic of the Victorian age is therefore inexorably intertwined with the Homeric question, which was launched by the publication of the German scholar Friedrich August Wolf’s *Prolegomena ad Homerum* in 1795. This work radically shook both the belief in Homer as the original creator of the Homeric epics and the assumption that his epics were based on his own age. The Homeric question, closely connected with biblical criticism, also adds a religious dimension to Aurora’s advocacy of the contemporary epic.

In this paper, I will argue that the Homeric question plays a critical role in Aurora’s manifesto as a contemporary epic poet in Book 5 of *Aurora Leigh*, by pointing out the connection between Wolf and Richard Payne Knight, another classicist who engaged in the Homeric question. I will first examine a passage in which Aurora refers to Wolf in Book 5. Secondly, I will show how the Homeric question came to be seen as a threat to Christianity and the belief in the Creator God in Victorian society. Finally, I will focus on Aurora’s advocacy of the contemporary epic, exploring the implications of her unusually vehement attack on Knight.

“The kissing Judas, Wolf”

Towards the end of Book 5, Aurora decides which books to sell to finance her journey to Italy:

The kissing Judas, Wolf, shall go instead,
Who builds us such a royal book as this
To honour a chief-poet, folio-built,
And writes above, ‘The house of Nobody!’:
Who floats in cream, as rich as any sucked
From Juno’s breasts, the broad Homeric lines,
And, while with their spondaic prodigious mouths
They lap the lucent margins as babe-gods,
Proclaims them bastards. Wolf’s an atheist;
And if the Iliad fell out, as he says,
By mere fortuitous concourse of old songs,
Conclude as much, too, for the universe. (5, 1246-1256)\(^3\)

Despite her decision to sell Wolf’s book, Aurora deeply appreciates the physical beauty of the magnificent folio. Barrett Browning probably had in her mind an expansive edition of Homer that her friend, the classicist Hugh Stuart Boyd had given her in 1831. She recorded her delight on receiving it in her diary: “Twelve books – and the most splendid paper & type. He had wished to take me by surprise; & the surprise was complete. It is the most magnificent Greek book I ever looked upon” (Diary 57).

Aurora bestows a cosmic floating imagery on the book, elaborated with the image of a mother’s breasts and a sucking baby. One contemporary reviewer took this passage as an instance when he complained about Barrett Browning’s poetic forms as “often puzzling him [the reader] to seize their meaning” (“Aurora Leigh” 242). Marjorie Stone understands the phrase “the broad Homeric lines” as an “interpolated hanging appositive” (Barrett Browning 156-158). It is more comprehensible and coherent, however, to interpret this phrase as the object of the transitive verb “floats.” The passage is accordingly construed to mean that Aurora compares the creamy coloured paper to the flowing “cream” of breast milk, on which the Homeric lines are printed, and those lines to “babe-gods” who drink the creamy milk of the pages.

The allusion to Juno and her milk, invoked to emphasise the richness of the paper, not only enables Aurora to call these Homeric lines “babe-gods,” but also introduce the cosmic dimension through an implicit allusion to the etymological myth of the Milky Way. Juno’s milk is notably precious because it would give immortality to a baby who sucks it. When Heracles attempted to suck her breast, her spouting milk created our galaxy, the Milky Way. The magnificent, enduring folio is supposed to give the printed epic a certain immortality. Strictly speaking, it is not the epic but the paper of the book that is analogized to Juno’s milk, but the confusion of the paper which feeds the printed lines, the printed lines which convey the epic, the epic inseparable from the book and the book including all these elements seems deliberate. This cosmically expanded vision buttresses Aurora’s comparison of the Iliad to the universe in the last part of the quotation.

Wolf published his epoch-making Prolegomena ad Homerum in 1795. The book launched the Homeric question, which was to expand beyond the confines of philological study to embrace larger social, moral and religious issues. Drawing on critical methods in biblical scholarship developed in Germany, Wolf argued that the Iliad and Odyssey were put together by a compiler living long after Homer, who had been a mere singer of heroic ballads. He thus denied Homer’s authority as a single original poet and the existence of the original texts of the Homeric epics.\(^4\)

In addition to Aurora’s practical need to get money to travel to Italy, therefore, the passage alluding to Wolf indicates her and her creator’s acknowledgement of the issues raised by Wolf, but dismisses his contentions against Homer’s authorship.\(^5\) Aurora encapsulates Wolf’s denial of Homer’s authorship in the expression “The house of Nobody!” Her phrasing intimates that Homer’s epic is as well constructed out of indispensable parts as a house. She then adds a tone of playfulness by the deprecatory word “bastards,” while condemning Wolf in religious terms such as “kissing Judas” and “atheist.” The correspondence she tries to establish between the Iliad and the universe, and her accusation against Wolf in Christian terminology, appear daring and striking. In order to appreciate Aurora’s accusation, it is necessary to take into consideration the status of Homer’s epics as comparable to the Bible in the Victorian age.

The Homeric Question in Victorian Britain

In his The Greek Heritage in Victorian Britain, Frank Turner offers a detailed description of the Victorian reception of the Homeric question, and demonstrates that

\(^3\) I will hereafter designate quotations from Aurora Leigh by book number and line numbers in parentheses.

\(^4\) See Wolf with introduction; on the Homeric question, see also for example Fowler.

\(^5\) Accordingly, I cannot accept Bing Shao’s view that “Aurora ... discards other heritages from the past, such as ... the cultural or intellectual past symbolized by her father’s books which she eventually sells” (113). Alice Falk takes a more subtle approach to Barrett Browning’s relationship to the past, defining it as “productive connection” rather than “rejection” (86).
in Britain the Homeric question became an issue only in the light of Christian concerns (esp. 140-154). It was George Grote's *History of Greece* (1846) that made the British reading public recognise the Homeric question. Grote was and sometimes still is labelled "the leading English Wolfian" (Jenyns 207), though he showed great divergences from Wolf, as he admitted an original core to the *Iliad*, albeit later enlarged by interpolations, and thus an original author. The intimate association between biblical and Homeric criticism mainly originated from the fact that both were developed in Germany and shared the same methodological principles.

The *Quarterly Review* (1850) presents a fine example that illustrates how conservative Victorians responded to Wolf's assertion:

> In fact, the doctrine revived and developed by Wolf as to Homer, was an offset from the determined warfare against the Bible which throughout the last century occupied so many of the liveliest intellects in Europe....

> ...[T]hey [the Teutonic doctors] have another grand characteristic ... which vigorously promoted their Wolfomania, and revealed itself to a truly amazing degree in every stage of the complaint; — namely, want of taste — a real blindness to beauties of conception and execution which interfered with their Q. E. D.... ("Colonel Mure" 436-437, 439)

This reviewer interpreted Wolf's attack on Homer's authorship as part of the war against the Bible, characterising both as issuing from what he and others saw as the German mind. His coinage of the pejorative term "Wolfomania" captures his rhetorical strategy to alienate his readers from Wolf's supporters by showing his contempt for them.

One of the few English Wolfians was George Eliot, radical and agnostic. Her friend John Fisk wrote to his wife in 1873: "I found she [Eliot] was a strong Wolfian!" (Eliot, *Letters* 5: 464). In the same letter, Fisk also discussed Eliot's pronunciation of the name of "Casaubon," the classicist in *Middlemarch* who proclaims his ambition to write a book, entitled *Key to the All Mythologies*, which would explain all mythologies under one comprehensive system. His cousin Will Ladislaw, however, disparages Casaubon's inability to read German and his concomitant lack of knowledge of the latest scholarly trends:

> "No, indeed," he [Ladislaw] answered, promptly. "And therefore it is a pity that it should be thrown away, as so much English scholarship is, for want of knowing what is being done by the rest of the world. If Mr. Casaubon read German he would save himself a great deal of trouble."

> "I do not understand you," said Dorothea, startled and anxious.

> "I merely mean," said Will, in an offhand way, "that the Germans have taken the lead in historical inquiries, and they laugh at results which are got by groping about in woods with a pocket-compass while they have made good roads. When I was with Mr. Casaubon I saw that he deadened himself in that direction: it was almost against his will that he read a Latin treatise written by a German. I was very sorry." (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 194-195)

The "Latin treatise written by a German" probably alludes to Wolf's *Prolegomena*. Eliot recorded in her journal in 1870 that she read it on the same day when she was "experimenting in a story" that would evolve into her masterpiece *Middlemarch (Letters* 5: 124). Young Ladislaw is however "not at all deep himself in German writers" (Eliot, *Middlemarch* 195). This episode of Ladislaw's showing off his knowledge, such as it is, not only adumbrates Casaubon's outmodedness as a scholar and Dorothea's later disillusion but also shows that the Homeric question was not simply a philological issue confined to the academic community. Rather, it gradually permeated society and was recognised as a critical controversy among the reading population, including people like Ladislaw.\(^7\)

"Wolfian" became a polemic term, as Wolf's critical approach to Homer was often taken to epitomize the radical and sceptical attitudes in more general terms to——

\(^6\) See also Jenyns 207-208, Foerster 60.

\(^7\) We can perhaps detect a ripple caused by the Homeric question in the episode in Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* in which Tom Tulliver "had felt some disgust on learning that Hector and Achilles might possibly never have existed" (142). This novel was most probably set in the 1820s, yet written in 1860.
wards all traditional belief and authority. Victorian commentators manifested religious anxiety and fear that unauthorized of a sceptical approach to Homer would promote an analogous approach to the Bible. Accordingly, Victorians usually rejected Wolfian ideas, opposing the smallest concession to them.

Barrett Browning's phrase "Wolf's an atheist" in the passage quoted above, moreover, reveals that the Wolfian ideas not only shook the authority of the Bible, but also could lead to the denial of God's existence. John Stuart Blackie wrote in 1866: "Those who believe in a great poem cannot avoid thinking that the Wolfians are engaged in a perverse attempt, closely analogous to the meagre method of explaining the world without God, in which certain incomplete intellects have in all ages found an unnatural delight" (245n.). Certainly, the critical approach to the Bible is one thing, and the denial of God's existence is another thing, but the Homeric question and questioning God's existence were intuitively connected through the analogous relationship some Victorians found between the creators God and Homer on the one hand, and their creations — the universe, the Bible, and the Homeric epics — on the other hand. This analogy is meaningful for Aurora, who believes that God is the ultimate model for the artist and God's art is the living world:

O my God, my God,
O supreme Artist, who as sole return
For all the cosmic wonder of Thy work,
Demandest of us just a word . . . a name,
'My Father!' (5. 434-438)

As devout belief in the authority of the Bible requires the Creator at the centre of the universe, so Homeric texts need one original author to vindicate their authenticity.8

Knight and Aurora's Advocacy of the Contemporary Epic

Barrett Browning thus evinced her engagement in the contemporary debates on Homer's authorship. Aurora's playfulness in rejecting Wolf has its counterpart, though a more severe one, in her attack on another classicist, Richard Payne Knight (1750-1824). Knight was a leading member of the Society of Dilettanti, and a collector of Greek sculptures, gems and coins as well as modern paintings.9 He also published his own edition of Homer with prolegomena, which was one of the earliest articulations of the Homeric question in England. In Book 5, Aurora instances him in the passage where she first advocates the contemporary epic:

The critics say that epics have died out
With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods;
I'll not believe it. I could never deem
As Payne Knight did, (the mythic mountaineer
Who travelled higher than he was born to live,
And showed sometimes the goitre in his throat
Discoursing of an image seen through fog.)
That Homer's heroes measured twelve feet high.
They were but men: (5. 139-147)

Aurora's disparagement of Knight is witty, yet relentless. It is not clear at first sight why she selects Knight to reproof in this important passage, and how this attack on Knight contributes to her argument. Although this is one of the most often quoted passages in Aurora Leigh, the bracketed four lines alluding to Knight are generally omitted in quotation and have been overlooked. I will argue that Barrett Browning has Aurora accuse Knight because of his engagement in the Homeric question and his fictive reading of Homeric epics, both of which are at odds with Aurora's advocacy of the contemporary epic.

We have a few clues that might allow us to detect a possible personal distaste for Knight in Barrett Browning. To begin with, she was a friend of Uvedale Price, whom Knight criticised regarding the aesthetic idea of the picturesque; and of Benjamin Robert Hayden, one

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8 Charles LaPorte points out another aspect of the impact of biblical criticism on English poetry: the Bible's poetic nature came to be seen as an integral part of its religious significance, and hence many poets, including Barrett Browning, aspired to produce poetry which would perform a cultural role comparable to that of scripture.

9 On Knight in general, see Clarke and Penny. It is puzzling that Knight should be called a "translator" in the note on the line referring to Knight in Aurora Leigh in Donaldson's edition (292).
of the notable supporters of the Elgin marbles, the authenticity of which Knight vehemently denied.\textsuperscript{10} It is not easy to assess Barrett Browning’s opinion of Knight from these friendships after his death, but we are on much firmer ground when it comes to her evaluation of Knight’s Homeric scholarship. In a letter to Boyd on March 24, 1832, she complained about Knight’s edition of Homer, in which she discovered he had excised a number of lines from the \textit{Iliad} and the \textit{Odyssey}: “When I had Payne Knight here, I took the trouble of counting the number of lines he has thought proper to leave out of his Homer. If I made no mistake, about 2,500 lines are left out of his Iliad, and 1,926, out of his Odyssey. Is this not \textit{atrocious}?” (Diary 303, italics original).

This complaint against Knight’s edition suggests a possible link between Knight and Wolf in Barrett Browning’s mind, since this is found in a postscript to the same letter in which she responded to Boyd about Wolf’s prefaces to his twelve-volume edition of Homer, which Boyd had given her in July 1831 (Diary 57, 302-303). In his prefaces, Wolf explicated his approach to Homeric texts in a manner basically unchanged from that found in his \textit{Prolegomena}. Despite his radical denial of the authorship of a single Homer or any possible authentic ur-text, Wolf, unlike Knight, did not remove supposedly spurious lines from his edition, but bracketed them instead. In this letter (\textit{ibid.}, 303), Barrett Browning cited Wolf’s remark about the brackets in his edition: “He says that he ... has affixed the \textit{atrocem notam} (quite the right expression) to no verse which has not been remarked upon, or entirely rejected by the best Greek critics.” She continued that “The system of mutilating Homer ... is quite monstrous.” In the postscript, then, she borrowed the adjective \textit{atrocious} from Wolf’s expression about his brackets (\textit{atrocem notam}) to condemn Knight’s insolent excision (“Is this not \textit{atrox}?”), and showed her indignation towards both these classicists.

This juxtaposition of these two figures in Barrett Browning’s letter is not surprising, since, as mentioned above, Knight’s \textit{Prolegomena} was one of the earliest and best articulations in England of the Homeric question. Knight could, though with reservations, be accordingly labelled a “Wolfian.” The \textit{Quarterly Review} (1850) essay quoted above singled out Knight as an example of “Wol-

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{10} For more details, see Reynolds 629-630.}

fomania” (439):

In this controversy [Homeric controversy] our countrymen have taken a considerable part – and on both sides of it; but the cleverest of them that occupies a prominent place among the heretics, Mr. Payne Knight, had something diseased in his mind from the beginning, and was exactly the man to adopt eagerly and defend ingeniously a theory which ran counter to the old traditions and common sense of the world. ("Colonel Mure" 437)

Knight published his edition of Homer in 1820, though his \textit{Prolegomena} to it had already been published in 1808.\textsuperscript{11} Strictly speaking, Knight did not accept Wolf’s proposition, as he believed in the existence of an original version of the epics. He proposed two poets for the two poems instead of one author. He concluded that these epics included many additional lines from later periods, and accordingly believed in the possibility of restoring the original text, and above all in his own ability to do so.

His belief is attested to first in his insertion into the text of digamma, the lost consonant to which Aurora refers when she laments the short life of books (7. 887); secondly, in the title of his edition of Homer (London, 1820), \textit{Carmina Homerica, Ilias et Odyssea, a rhapsodorum interpolationibus repurgata, et in pristinam formam, quatenus recuperanda esset, tam e veterum monumentorum fide et auctariate, quam ex antiqui sermonis indole ac ratione, redacta} [Homeric carmina, Iliad and Odyssey, which are purged of interpolations of rhapsodes, and rendered into the pristine form, to the extent to be recovered, by reliance and authority of old written records as well as by disposition and reason of ancient discussion].\textsuperscript{12} It is Knight’s belief in the existence of the Homeric ur-text and his overconfidence in his own ability to restore it that led him to remove many lines.

In \textit{Aurora Leigh}, however, Barrett Browning has Aurora accuse Knight not of his excision of lines from Homer, but rather of his unreal portrayal of Homeric heroes: “That Homer’s heroes measured twelve feet high” (5. 146). Commentators on this line either refer to Barrett

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{11} The same \textit{Prolegomena} with additional notes was reprinted in 1813 in the \textit{Classical Journal} 7 (321-354) and 8 (33-79).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{12} My translation.}
Browning’s complaint about his deletion of Homeric lines in his edition (Reynolds 630), or explain it as an allusion to Knight’s view that “Greek visual and literary art depicted abstract, idealized human types” (McSweeney 345). Margaret Reynolds adds: “The reference to which EBB alludes may be found in his [Knight’s] Prolegomena, but I have been unable to locate it” (630). Since not much critical attention has been paid to Knight in the context of Aurora Leigh, it may help illustrate the implications of Aurora’s invoking him to introduce his writings in the present discussion, though I do not intend to suggest that Barrett Browning must have had his books at hand and consulted them when she composed this passage in Aurora Leigh.

In his An Analytical Inquiry into the Principles of Taste, Knight explained that Homer’s descriptions gave his heroes a supernatural image of larger stature:

Homer has no where told us that his heroes were of supernatural dimensions; and, if he had, he would have destroyed the interest of his poem; but, nevertheless, no one, I believe, ever read the Iliad without conceiving in his mind ideas of men whose ordinary stature could not have been less than ten feet. (Analytical 281)

In this passage, Knight discussed the power of elevated language in a metrical style, which enabled “the persons of the epic [to] acquire a supernatural elevation of character, which the imagination readily yields to them” (ibid. 269). Because of the enchanting power of verse, Knight insisted, the reader is made to believe that extraordinary events could happen involving heroes not “less than ten feet.” I propose that Barrett Browning alludes to this passage in Aurora Leigh. Aurora candidly refuses to be included in the readership supposed by Knight, by arguing that: “I could never deem ... That Homer’s heroes measured twelve feet high. / They were but men” (5. 141-147). For Knight, the Homeric epics were above all fictions:

I do not mean, however, to infer that, in order to relish the Homeric fictions, it is necessary to believe that Ulysses actually did swim for so long a time; or that Achilles drove a whole army before him, like so many grasshoppers. On the contrary, we only read these things as fictions; and never suppose them true, even when most interested in them: for if the events are not demonstrably false; but are such as the men, there described, could have produced, had such men ever existed; we never stop to inquire whether they ever existed or not; or whether they are such as now exist; but consider the descriptions, as embellished pictures of human nature, with the expression of which we sympathize, according to the degrees of truth and energy, with which the passions and affections are displayed. (Analytical 266-267, italics original)

Before this quotation, Knight refers to an episode in the Odyssey (5. 388-90) in which “Ulysses swim[s] during three days and two nights without food or rest” (ibid. 266). This encapsulates his approach to the Homeric epics: he did not care about the historical existence of the heroes or events described in these works, but was concerned solely with their descriptive embellishment of human nature and their poetic “truth and energy.”

Aurora furthermore mingles his fictive reading of Homeric epics and his general mythological views. Knight published two books on pagan mythology, which seem to be concerned in Aurora’s mocking reproach: A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus (London, 1786) and An Inquiry into the Symbolical Language of Ancient Art and Mythology (London, 1818). Aurora might be playfully alluding to the title of Knight’s former book when she represents him as “Discoursing of an image seen through fog” (5. 145).

The former book was distributed in a limited edition only to members of the Society of Dilettanti, while the latter was first privately printed, then serialized in the Classical Journal between 1821 and 1823, and eventually published as an appendix in the second volume of Specimens of Ancient Sculpture. These two books basically contain the same assertions, though the latter is a work of sounder scholarship with more evidence and far more examples (Clarke and Penny 63). Knight’s views on religious subjects were considered both obscene and subversive, as he argued openly that primitive fertility cults in which the male and female genitalia were worshipped as symbols of procreative power were the ultimate origin of all mythology and theology, including Christianity. He illustrated the book moreover with engravings of phallic
objects and other "indecent" drawings, some of which might be considered offensive in some contexts even today. His endeavour to capture the ultimate source of all religions might remind us of Casaubon's unfinished *Key to all Mythologies* in *Middlemarch*, though Knight, unlike Casaubon, could not be criticised for ignorance of the latest German scholarship.

Aurora rejects Knight's fictive approach, ridiculing his suggestion of the greater stature of "Homer's men" and misrepresenting Knight in an image filled with contempt and mockery: "the mythic mountainer! Who travelled higher than he was born to live" (5. 142-143). There, he is shown "Discouraging an image seen through fog" (5. 144). According to Aurora, Knight's perception of Homeric heroes is as unsubstantial and unreliable as figures seen through fog in the mountains.\(^{13}\) Aurora thus imputes his supposed measurement of Homeric heroes to his distorted, unclear perception, which is unable to discern living human reality in the epic narratives. The reference to goitre, once prevalent in mountainous areas, involves physical deformity and further intensifies the contorted mockery.

Aurora aggressively criticises the fictional nature Knight attributed to Homeric heroes because it is at odds with her advocacy of the contemporary epic. For Aurora – and behind her Barrett Browning – it is crucial to believe that Homer was writing about his own contemporary people. I will quote the text again, focusing on Aurora's counter argument:

> The critics say that epics have died out  
> With Agamemnon and the goat-nursed gods;  
> I'll not believe it. I could never deem  
> As Payne Knight did,  
> ...  
> That Homer's heroes measured twelve feet high.  
> They were but men: - his Helen's hair turned grey  
> Like any plain Miss Smith's who wears a front;  
> And Hector's infant whimpered at a plume  
> As yours last Friday at a turkey-cock.

All actual heroes are essential men,  
All men are possible heroes: every age,  
Heroic in proportions, double-faced,  
Looks backward and before, expects a morn  
And claims an epos. (5. 139-154)

Aurora argues that her own age can yield sufficient creative force and raw materials to enable a poet to make an epic out of it. She first brings the foremost epic example, the *Iliad*, to the focal point of her argument. Then, she argues that Homeric heroes were the same human beings as her contemporaries, but that it was Homer who made heroes out of them. In this respect, Holly Laird's comment on the first part of this passage, "cutting the classics down to the size of the present," is misleading (279).

Aurora asserts that her own age is not lacking in human beings with heroic potential. As if buttressing her argument, certain phrases in this quotation verbally echo the representations of two main protagonists in *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora argues, for example, that Homer's "Helen's hair turned grey" (5. 149), and she later finds a "grey hair" among the rich tresses of Lady Waldemar who "otherwise ... looked immortal" (5. 616-617). According to Aurora, moreover, "every age ... / Looks backward and before, expects a morn/ And claims an epos" (5. 151-154). At the beginning of Book 2, she writes:

> I stood upon the brink of twenty years,  
> And looked before and after, as I stood  
> Woman and artist, - either incomplete,  
> Both credulous of completion. (2. 2-5)

Aurora's representation of the age that claims "an epos" thus overlaps the representation of Aurora who anticipates her completion as woman and artist. The contemporary age demands a poet of sufficient power and ambition to perceive and express its inherent epic nature. Aurora herself stands both as an embodiment of the age and as the poet who is to capture it. Her contention is therefore partly a vindication of the Victorian age, and partly a celebration of poetic vocation, mingled with her dissatisfaction at contemporary poets and critics, her admiration of Homer and her own still unsteady self-confidence in attempting to rival Homer.

In this argument, furthermore, Aurora is responding

\(^{13}\) The mountains not only indicate his understanding of the epics as fictions but also might be a reference to Knight's having crossed the Alps on his way to Italy (having visited Italy was the original prerequisite to be a member of the Society of Dilettanti) or his climbing Mt. Etna in Sicily, an indication of his passion for Greek antiquity.
to the contemporary critical situation. Barrett Browning observed in her 1843 review of Orion: An Epic Poem: “we had lost the habit of epic poems; they have gone out of fashion like the toga” (583). John Forster similarly wrote in 1844 that “Our time is unfavorable, to the last degree, to the writers of that kind of poetry commonly called epic” (332). According to Samuel Johnson, writing on Milton, moreover, “By the general consent of critics the first praise of genius is due to the writer of an epic poem, as it requires an assemblage of all the powers which are singly sufficient for other compositions” (182). The lack of a great epic poem in the eighteenth century either in English or indeed any other European language therefore seemed to attest to the decline of poetry.

Intimating a general perception of its decline, Charlotte Brontë has Jane Eyre vindicate poetry: “I know poetry is not dead, nor genius lost ... Poetry destroyed? Genius banished? No!” (396). In his The Victorians and Ancient Greece, Richard Jenkyns devotes to the subject a chapter entitled “The Death of Poetry.” He attributes to the contemporary critical context in which Aurora Leigh was published a persisting feeling or memory of the feeling “that English poetry had sunk into insignificance” (30), which fermented in the formative years of men typically conceived as Victorian, such as Dickens, Tennyson and Ruskin, born between 1800 and 1825. In England and throughout Europe writers and critics had a strong sense of belonging to a secondary age, and felt it particularly in comparison with the literary achievements of ancient Greece, especially Homer. In this critical ambiance, Matthew Arnold in his letter to Arthur Clough grieved at “the modern situation in its true blankness and barrenness, and unpoetrylessness” (126). Aurora not only rejects contemporary critics’ view of the demise of the epic – not to mention the death of poetry – but also in the succeeding lines takes the further step of advocating “an epos” representing her own age, with contemporary human beings as “heroes” rather than people and events from the past (5, 154, 151).

Knight scarcely dealt with Homeric heroes in his books on mythology, partly because it was one of his contentions that contemporary mythological inquiry depended too heavily on literature, ignoring archaeological evidence. His explication of a statue, the Herakles of the Farnese Palace in Rome, however, might give an idea of a symbolic reading which Aurora is determined to reject:

Herakles, like Theseus, is both god and hero. As a hero he is son of Jupiter and Alkmene; and others say of Amphitryon. Juno was jealous and sent two serpents to destroy the infant. This means that the rising (infant) sun strangles (disperses) the dark morning clouds, called serpents (offspring of the great night-dragon or serpent). Herakles in this figure is the sun at noon, at his greatest strength, irresistible as a giant with a club. (Symbolic 430)

Curiously, this approach is almost indistinguishable from the solar theory of myth, an extreme example of symbolic reading proposed in the 1860s, in which, for instance, the vengeance of Achilles was interpreted as “the victory of the sun, when, at the end of a stormy day, he comes forth from the mists and tramples on the clouds which have veiled his splendours” (Cox 212-213). This reductionism, according to Turner (173), was due to the drive towards bourgeois respectability, and thus quite opposite in purpose to Knight’s sexual approach to mythology. Nonetheless, as symbolic readings, they betray a common tendency to deprive epic heroes of their ordinary humanity and living reality, on which Aurora strongly insists.

Wolf, Knight and Barrett Browning

Barrett Browning has Aurora attack Knight’s fictive approach – mingling his reading of Homer and his general view of mythology – in a doubly or thrice twisted way. Aurora wilfully misrepresents not only his assertion of the power of poetic imagination which enables the extraordinary dimension in the poetry, but also Knight himself as a pedant absorbed in his own delusion. Aurora’s passionate commitment to vindicating the contemporary epic leads her into arguing ad hominem.

Barrett Browning, as we have seen, had one more reason to dismiss Knight’s approach to Homer: his excision of Homeric texts. Knight’s engagement in the Homeric
question was generally recognised, as intimated in the Quarterly Review (1850) quoted above. Aurora’s reproach has an affinity with the review’s morbid representation of Knight: “Mr. Payne Knight, had something diseased in his mind” (437). As suggested by this quotation, Knight was a highly controversial, polemic figure, instanced by his sexual interpretation of religions and his denial of the authenticity of the Elgin Marbles. Aurora thus chooses Knight rather than Wolf to reproach in the context of vindicating Homer and the contemporary epic. I would suggest that, by dismissing Knight — whom she can tauntingly reproach without any scruples — Aurora also tries to implicitly defend the authority of Homer, before explicitly condemning Wolf.

It is possible to understand that Aurora vehemently attacks Knight and then confirms her position by selling Wolf’s folio. Comparatively speaking, however, Aurora’s religious reproach against Wolf appears sugarcoated by her description of the folio with rich creamy papers and her introduction of cosmically enlarged imagery. As I noted, the National Review quoted the passage alluding to Wolf as an instance of Barrett Browning’s undue poetic elevation and daring metaphor, “distracting the reader from the matter before him, annoying him with their inappropriateness, and often puzzling him to seize their meaning” (242).

The Wolfian approach of recognising multiple layers in Homeric epics was, with some modifications, gradually accepted by British scholars by the end of the nineteenth century. This interpretation of the genesis of the Homeric epics had much common with the theory of evolution, which also dispensed with an original creator. Ladislaw’s disparagement of Casaubon in Middlemarch intimates the inexorable encroachment of the new critical approach in England. Barrett Browning highly appreciated Wolf’s edition of Homer which Boyd presented to her, and besides went through “Wolf’s prefaces with your [Boyd’s] object in view” (Diary 57, 303). Aurora’s vehement rejection of Knight with distorted and compressed misrepresentations might suggest Barrett Browning’s awareness of the threat of the Wolfian approach, despite her determination to reject it.

I have argued that the Homeric question plays a crucial role in Aurora’s advocacy of the contemporary epic. I have focused on Knight, to whom little critical attention has been paid, and pointed out the connection between Knight and Wolf. The Homeric question — challenging Homer’s authority as the creator of the Homeric texts and, by way of analogy, the Creator of the universe — threatens Homer’s validity as Aurora’s model of a contemporary poet, and thus challenges her project to write a contemporary epic. Examining the significance of the Homeric question, moreover, has enabled us to illuminate an aspect of Barrett Browning’s fundamental attitudes and concerns in her life and art.

Works Cited
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