Water Imagery in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s

*Aurora Leigh*

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Abstract

This thesis analyses water imagery, in particular scenes of drowning, in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), paying close attention to the influence of Romantic writers Mary Wollstonecraft and William Wordsworth. I analyse the ocean and waterfalls in Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), and the relationship between drowning, flooding and subjectivity in William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude* (1850), comparing them with similar scenes in *Aurora Leigh*. This thesis asks how EBB’s feminist aim to re-write the previously masculine genre of epic poetry shaped her imaginative depiction of oceans and lakes. Focusing on the pervasive fear of drowning and on poetic descriptions in which bodies appear to dissolve, my thesis explores how the ocean in *Aurora Leigh* is key to understanding the importance of this poem in the context of its Romantic predecessors.
Declaration

I, Meredith McCullough, declare that this thesis is my original work towards the total completion of Master of Arts (Thesis only). This thesis comprises only my original work. Due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used. This thesis is 30,248 words in length, excluding tables and bibliography.

Signed:

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Meredith McCullough

January, 2016
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Introduction

In 1838 a debilitating illness forced Elizabeth Barrett (EBB\textsuperscript{1}) to move to the seaside town of Torquay. Her favourite brother Edward, or ‘Bro’ as she affectionately called him, tragically drowned while out sailing during a visit. The grief and guilt haunted EBB for the rest of her life. The shock exacerbated her illness and her state of health became almost terminal. Unable to sleep for more than a few minutes without fainting, she could not travel and was imprisoned in the house, unable to write. Her letters recounting this time overflow with grief. The handwriting shakes and sentences are left unfinished – a sure sign of trauma for someone who had been writing epic poems from the age of fourteen. The house in Torquay, previously a cosy “nest,”\textsuperscript{2} became a constant reminder of Bro. Tormented by the incessant sound of the waves, she described the noise as “that perpetual dashing sound” that “preyed on me” until she felt “crushed and trodden down.”\textsuperscript{3} Writing a year later to Mary Russell Mitford, EBB remembers how at that time her “mind seemed broken up into fragments… That was, in part, because I never could cry. The tears ran scalding hot into my brain instead of down my cheeks.”\textsuperscript{4} This image of salt-water tears burning their way into EBB’s mind vividly illustrates the internalized guilt that, like the sound of waves preying on her, imprisoned her in the house. Years later, she could not even

\textsuperscript{1} Elizabeth Barrett signed her letters and poetry with these initials throughout her life. I will therefore use this abbreviation in this thesis. For further discussion of the complicated history of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s name, see Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (London: Longman, 2003).

\textsuperscript{2} EBB to Septimus Moulton-Barrett 6\textsuperscript{th} February, 1840, Torquay, in The Brownings’ Correspondence, 4: 233. Hereafter referred to as TBC, further citations to volume and page number of this edition.

\textsuperscript{3} EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, early October 1840, Torquay, TBC, 4: 297.

\textsuperscript{4} EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, July 18\textsuperscript{th} 1841, Torquay, TBC, 5: 84.
write of a regatta or a sailing trip without Bro’s ghost emerging from the waves. The sea became a constant reminder of her loss.

William Wordsworth, one of EBB’s literary heroes, also had a brother who drowned at sea. In *Deep Distresses: William Wordsworth, John Wordsworth, Sir George Beaumont, 1800-1808*, Richard E. Matlak suggests that when it comes to reading Wordsworth’s poetry “understanding the magnitude of John’s death may have aesthetic consequences.” Matlak uncovers how Sir George Beaumont’s painting of a ship on stormy waters reminded Wordsworth of his brother’s death, leading to the writing of *Elegiac Stanzas*, and possibly influencing Wordsworth’s portrayal of the ocean in Book Five of *The Prelude*. The poet falls asleep by the sea and dreams of an Arab rider escaping from an apocalyptic ocean, a flood that threatens to destroy his two books: the stone and the shell. Upon waking and “Contemplating in soberness the approach/ Of an event so dire” Wordsworth discovers his hidden desire to escape with the Arab from the flood, sharing “that maniac’s fond anxiety.” W.H. Auden uses this passage to show how, for Wordsworth, “The sea or the great waters… are the symbol for the primordial, undifferentiated flux.” The sea becomes a space beyond life, a space where existence itself dissolves and death, or elegy, take over.

Before Wordsworth dreamed up his Arabic Cervantes, Mary Wollstonecraft was going on her own Odyssey across foreign waters. In *Letters Written During a*

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6 Wordsworth *The Prelude* 1850, bk. 5, lines 157, 159-160. Further citations to book and line numbers of the 1850 edition of *The Prelude*, unless otherwise stated.
Wollstonecraft radically rewrites Rousseau’s solitary walker, her philosophy taking her along rocky coastlines into palaces and fields, her imagination infusing every scene with vivid, poetic vitality. The ocean inspires her to imagine the beginning and end of human civilization. In many scenes the seascape enters the author’s mind, exciting either radical theories on the growth of civilization, or melancholy reveries on the solitary nature of existence. Indeed, melancholy and solitude are key themes in Wollstonecraft’s treatment of the ocean, a space offering escape from the confines of society, yet also reminding the narrator of her loneliness. Ocean travel offers freedom, yet paradoxically for Wollstonecraft it is also the stage for Empire, commerce and globalization. Making use of all her extended faculties in this text, Wollstonecraft does indeed become “the little hero of each tale,”9 constructing a powerful, imaginative and nuanced voice. The energetic interplay of emotions that converge to form Wollstonecraft’s intelligent persona in these letters inspired authors for generations. As a political heroine of EBB’s at 14, Wollstonecraft and her Letters paved the way for EBB to assert that women can rival the intelligence of men; they can create a strong, literary voice for themselves.

A different, more sombre light is shed on Wollstonecraft’s depictions of the ocean, lakes and rivers in Letters when they are put in the context of her second suicide attempt upon her return to London. Although the spirited voice of the published letters could hardly imagine an end to “this I, so much alive,”10 her

9 Ibid., 51.
10 Ibid., 96.
passionate nature and the melancholy that lingers at the margin of each letter, leads to her fateful response to Imlay’s infidelity. Virginia Woolf evocatively imagines this moment of Wollstonecraft’s life, writing: “true to her own creed of decisive action, Mary at once soaked her skirts so that she might sink unfailingly, and threw herself from Putney Bridge.” Rescued by the Humane Society in October of 1795, Wollstonecraft’s determination to live independently by her pen led to the defiant publication of Letters in January 1796. This text is not only the revolutionary creation of a woman who is at once philosopher, economist, literary visionary and sentimental correspondent, but a bid for personal autonomy and independence.

The ocean and the threat of drowning, for EBB, Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft, are themes with meanings so complex as to push the imagination to the very bounds of feasibility. Mortality, subjectivity, and the imagination take on heightened qualities when confronted with seascapes. Although Aurora Leigh is not explicitly about the ocean, its presence seeps in at the edges, especially in the characterisation of the three female protagonists who are all described in terms of dissolving or drowning, with the edges of the self at times melting away. My thesis uncovers the complexities of these strange moments by reading Aurora Leigh alongside similar scenes in the works of Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth. I am particularly interested in EBB’s goal of writing an epic poem about a woman, and thereby developing a woman’s voice in poetry. The intersection of this feminist agenda with the depiction of places like the ocean has not been explicitly addressed in contemporary scholarship. By examining this intersection in the context of EBB’s

Romantic predecessors, my thesis uncovers how representations of specific environments change with movements in the feminist literary canon, helping to inspire these literary revolutions.

**Thesis Outline**

This thesis is structured around two parallel sets of comparisons between *Aurora Leigh* and key works by Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth, authors who were major influences on EBB’s writing. My thesis traces how EBB’s depiction of terraqueous environments in *Aurora Leigh* is influenced by, and even rewrites, famous scenes from Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* and William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*. In doing so, my thesis maps the evolution of literary self-fashioning from Romanticism to the Victorian era, as well as a development in the poetic imagination of oceans, lakes, rivers, and waterfalls.

Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth are of particular interest to this study of literary interaction and influence not only because of their influence on EBB, but because of the dynamic and interconnected nature of their work. Duncan Wu notes that Wordsworth probably read *Letters* around the time that he was composing *The Prelude*. This might explain some similarities between scenes from Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* and the 1799 iteration of *The Prelude*. For the purposes of this study I will refer to the version of *The Prelude* published in 1850 (as this is the one EBB would have read); however if Wordsworth’s reading of Wollstonecraft’s work had an effect on *The Prelude*, then evidence of this interaction can more readily be uncovered in the 1799 version of the autobiographical poem.

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One example of this can be found in the first part of *The Two Part Prelude* in which Wordsworth remembers rowing out onto a lake at night. The progression of his thoughts mirror those of Wollstonecraft’s as she rows out across the ocean in Letter Eight. Fears of mortality afflict both authors as Wollstonecraft’s thoughts quickly turn to “fear or annihilation,”¹⁴ and the young Wordsworth escapes with “grave and serious thoughts.”¹⁵ Through these experiences both Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth’s ruminations turn from death towards immortality, with Wollstonecraft proclaiming that “something resides in the heart that is not perishable – life is more than a dream.”¹⁶ Wordsworth even uses similar words when he writes that the memory of rowing was “the trouble of (his) dreams,” and then proclaims that intense experiences of nature, like rowing, sanctify “both pain and fear, until we recognise/A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.”¹⁷

A scene in which the narrator energetically rows out over deep waters and contemplates immortality is just one example of many that point to the influence Wollstonecraft might have had on Wordsworth’s magnum opus. Indeed, Susan Wolfson briefly argues that Wollstonecraft’s letters and publications in literary magazines “were probably inspiration” for Wordsworth and Shelley.¹⁸ This would make for intriguing further study; however, for now, it is useful to point out the close relationship between the work of Wordsworth and Wollstonecraft to highlight the continuities between these Romantic authors.

¹⁵ Wordsworth, *The Two Part Prelude* (1799), bk 1, line 118.
¹⁷ Wordsworth, *The Two Part Prelude* (1799), bk 1, lines 129, 140-141.
Since waves of feminist criticism began crashing through literature departments in the 1970s, EBB has been rescued from the servants’ quarters of Virginia Woolf’s mansion of literature. EBB now takes her place in the higher rooms, enjoying the prospect of rolling green hills and placid lakes. She is no longer banging the crockery about and eating peas off her knife, but illuminating the path from Wollstonecraftian feminist politics to a new kind of poetic voice in *Aurora Leigh*. Criticism of her poetry from the 1980s and 90s focused on how EBB forged a space for a female voice and subjectivity in the previously masculine form of epic poetry. Critics such as Helen Cooper, Angela Leighton, and Dorothy Mermin dedicated entire volumes to critical analyses of EBB’s poetry in the late 1980s, focusing in particular on representations of the family. This critical lens remains an essential entry point for reading *Aurora Leigh*, but my thesis incorporates another approach - an ecocritical reading. To borrow Valerie Plumwood’s metaphor from the opening of *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, the tectonic plates of feminism and ecocriticism are yet to converge over this particular epic poem. My thesis begins some of the necessary seismic activity by asking how EBB’s feminist agenda also shifted her orientation towards the ocean, lakes and other bodies of water. It is my contention that EBB’s development of a feminist, poetic subjectivity also reworked a typically sublime moment: that of the poet imagining a seemingly endless ocean. Consequently my thesis positions itself both in the field of feminist criticism on EBB, and in the field of ecofeminist literary criticism.

The major trend that emerged from feminist criticism of the 1980s and 90s, and continues to the present day, is an interest in how this poem positions the speaker in relation to the family. As well as paying close attention to depictions of motherhood, critics working in this area have examined how the poet forms her voice in relation to both mother and father figures. Leighton and Cooper in particular assess how EBB configures the father as a type of tyrannical muse. Cooper also analyses, among other representations of the family in EBB’s poetry, how the body of the mother in *Aurora Leigh* becomes a symbol for the poetic age in which that poem was written. Mermin continues this analysis of representations of the family, particularly images of mothers and fathers, and how these helped to shape EBB’s quest to “find a woman’s place in the central tradition of poetry.”

Each of these critics appears to agree with Mermin, though in different ways, that EBB’s “place at the wellhead of a new female tradition remains the single most important fact about her in terms of literary history.”

These early feminist critics used theories of psychoanalysis and the philosophy of Julia Kristeva to inform their interpretations of EBB’s feminism. Sarah Brown’s *Devoted Sisters* is a good example of how feminist scholarship’s traditional interest in representations of the family, be it parents or sisters, has informed recent literary scholarship. My thesis will continue this exploration of the feminist poetics of EBB’s work; however, I extend this to critique the speaker’s relationship with the environment and how this informs her conception of herself within the family and

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23 Ibid., 3.
society. My thesis will look specifically at imagery of watery environments such as oceans and lakes in order to understand how these inspire a reimagining not only of familial relations, but also of subjectivity within the text.

Mermin declares in her review of the year’s work in Victorian literature that it would be beneficial if EBB was analysed in a category other than “woman poet.”25 This call has been partially answered by recent critical work on EBB’s innovations with genre. Recent articles have examined EBB’s genre and style, exploring in particular how the poet’s generic innovations in these areas represent a reworking of male-dominated genres via women’s experiences, with a view to forging a new space for a female poetic voice. Articles by Natasha Moore and Mary Mullen from 2013 are good examples of this kind of generic and stylistic analysis. Moore in particular points out how EBB’s generic innovations in her epic poem create a “feminisation and domestication of the epic (that) functions essentially as a novelisation of the genre.”26 In a similar, but more abstract way, Mary Mullen analyses how EBB’s depiction of overlapping temporalities separated her work generically from contemporary masculine concepts of progress, such as that of Thomas Carlyle.27 This approach typifies recent scholarly interest in how EBB evokes genres in Aurora Leigh in order to question or destabilise generic convention.

Scholarship focusing on the structure and themes of EBB’s poetry has also tended to analyse the major influences on her work, particularly that of Milton,

Shakespeare, and Wordsworth. Gail Marshall’s article “Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Shakespeare” proves EBB’s familiarity with Shakespeare by analysing her letters and the many allusions to Shakespeare’s work therein. In 2011 Josie Billington offered an interesting analysis of EBB’s innovations with Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter, and in the same year Eve Kobayashi published a structural comparison between Wordsworth’s The Prelude and Aurora Leigh in Studies in English Literature. Here Kobayashi demonstrates how a close reading of parallel passages in these two poems reveals EBB’s revision of Wordsworth’s autobiographical work. Despite close attention to the way in which EBB reworks the specific metrical and generic structures of previous authors, there is yet to be developed a critical comparison between EBB’s poetry and previous poetic representations of place.

This thesis draws upon work by Herbert F. Tucker, and in particular his article published in 1993 on Aurora Leigh. Tucker writes that with Aurora Leigh EBB both blurs the norms of traditional epic and upholds the epic fluctuations between “macrocosm and microcosm: to give imaginative currency to a fluid universe that sponsors and nourishes the fluency of her heroic narrative.” Tucker notes the importance of fluidity and scenes featuring water in order to discuss temporal aspects of the work, exploring the importance of indeterminacy to the plot. Tucker shows how EBB’s poetry structurally engages with and even mimics natural ecosystems in order

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30 Herbert F. Tucker, “Aurora Leigh: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends,” in Famous Last Words: Changes in Gender and Narrative Closure (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1993). This chapter preceded Tucker’s book Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) which is also important to this thesis.
31 Ibid., 70.
to rework and revitalise earlier epic and autobiographical poetic forms. I extend this analysis of the fluidity of EBB’s structure to assess how water imagery and the fear of drowning permeate female subjectivity in this text.

*Aurora Leigh* challenges the epic genre whilst working within this literary mode; EBB’s innovations in this area are inseparable from her feminist mission to write women into this tradition. In her introduction to *The History of British Women’s Writing 1750-1830* Jacqueline M. Labbe writes that, in place of the sweeping rhetoric of Gilbert and Gubar’s famous *The Madwoman in the Attic*, the study of women’s writing is now an understanding of “a conglomeration of differences, albeit linked by the shared experience of being female in a male oriented world.”32 My thesis builds upon previous feminist scholarship, analysing how the beliefs and social structures of this dominant male-oriented world are subverted, questioned and ridiculed throughout *Aurora Leigh*. With her “commitment to write as a woman, against the odds of tradition,”33 Barrett Browning not only reconceived the traditional masculinity of the epic poet, but also the dynamic relationship between the poet’s subjectivity and the bodies of water that flow throughout the text. It is my contention that terraqueous environments like lakes and oceans offer female characters liberation from the domestic realm as well as increased poetic understanding through an experience of the sublime, but these sites also present the threat of non-existence and death.

Throughout *Aurora Leigh* EBB uses drowning and other subaqueous natural imagery as metaphors to describe women’s perception and experience of life, usually

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the experience of being a daughter, and later becoming a mother. Focusing on the conclusion of the poem, Tucker notes the “overwhelming fluency” that defines the whole poem. He reveals how the final scene is described in terms of the ocean, with Romney imagined as a sea king and Florence as a type of "drowned city in some enchanted sea.” Tucker looks at the recurring image of a pearl dissolving in salt water arguing that, along with the natural setting of Florence at the end of the poem, this oceanic trope crystallises the “psychological fluidity that Barrett Browning has developed across the poem.” On the surface, this scene appears to re-establish traditional Victorian family structure, but the images and metaphors of watery environments destabilise this reading. Explicitly discussing depictions of the ocean, Tucker addresses the psychological and temporal implications of these natural metaphors in terms of the poem’s genre. My thesis will extend this analysis, working toward an ecocritical understanding of how women are positioned in relation to non-human environments. In order to do this it is important to understand Aurora Leigh in the context of Romanticism, mapping the way that scenes of the ocean and waterfalls travel from one historical literary moment to the next. It is my contention that EBB’s early reading of Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth shaped her poetic voice, and therefore helped construct the scenes and characters of Aurora Leigh.

In Romantic Interactions Susan Wolfson proposes that Wollstonecraft’s work acted as inspiration for Wordsworth’s literary revolutions. She argues for the social, interactive nature of authorship, asserting “the irreducible events of language as these are read and debated, written and revised, reviewed and received, constitute our most

35 Ibid., 71.
36 Ibid., 80.
fundamental resource for describing Romantic culture.” My thesis draws upon this idea of authorship as an interactive process, placing *Aurora Leigh* in conversation with its Romantic predecessors. Considering the comparative nature of this thesis, secondary scholarship on Mary Wollstonecraft and William Wordsworth’s work is critical. Barbara Taylor’s book *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* has been particularly useful for understanding the importance of imagination in *Letters*. Taylor’s seminal work has served as an entry point for me to explore the importance of an expansive, imaginative subjectivity to both Wollstonecraft and EBB. “Separations of Soul: Solitude, Biography and History,” also by Barbara Taylor, further illuminates the way subjectivity is developed through Wollstonecraft’s work, sparking the argument that solitude is not only important to Wollstonecraft, but also to EBB’s female characters. Mary A. Favret’s earlier characterisation of *Letters Written During a Short Residence* has also been useful for understanding the construction of the authorial voice in *Letters*. Both Taylor and Favret uncover the deliberate construction of female authority in Wollstonecraft’s work. Engaging with this criticism has been useful for understanding how EBB carried on Wollstonecraft’s political and literary tradition.

Since EBB was also placing herself in the literary footsteps of Wordsworth, scholarship on this poet has been equally important. During my survey of critical works on Wordsworth I discovered a small blue book titled *The Enchafed Flood or

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The Romantic Iconography of the Sea by W.H. Auden. This turned out to be a series of lectures given in 1949, beginning with a detailed discussion of ocean in *The Prelude*. Along with recent ecocritical work on Wordsworth by scholars such as Jonathan Bate, Auden’s lectures have been especially useful in exploring the significance of the ocean for Wordsworth. Geoffrey H. Hartman’s work *The Unremarkable Wordsworth* has been useful in uncovering Wordsworth’s poetics of prophecy. EBB takes up this prophetic orientation in her poetry, especially when she imagines apocalyptic floods similar to those found in Wordsworth’s verse.

The sense of adventure and horror so fundamental to the ocean has been expertly charted in Margaret Cohen’s *The Novel and The Sea*. Here Cohen outlines how the craft and practical skills of sea-farers throughout history sparked the imagination of authors, shaping the stories of Western civilisation from the time of Homer’s Odysseus to today. Developing the history of adventure and seafaring literature, Cohen reconstructs the mariner’s heroism, discovering men and women who courageously “negotiate the edges of an unknown, expanding, chaotic, violent and occasionally beautiful sublunary realm.” In her analysis of eighteenth-century sea literature Cohen locates a “decisive cultural shift in how European culture imagines the ocean.” My thesis is particularly interested in this moment in literary history, and how it changed the way that poets continued to imagine the ocean.

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41 Auden, *The Enchafed Flood*.
46 Ibid., 11.
Cohen’s argument corresponds with Auden’s characterisation of the “wilderness” of the Romantic sea when she argues that “the sublimation of the sea culminated in the empty seas of the Romantic sublime.” My thesis begins to map the way that this Romantic sea was reimagined in the nineteenth century. Drawing on Cohen’s history of the novel and the sea, my thesis looks to a moment in the history of poetry and its representation of the sea to understand the way this numinous landscape evolved to achieve such an important, yet illusive meaning in EBB’s *Aurora Leigh*.

As well as literary criticism, ecocriticism, particularly feminist ecocriticism, is central to the philosophical framework of this thesis, even though none of the work in this field deals explicitly with EBB’s poetry as yet. Valerie Plumwood’s book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* provides an excellent starting point for my analysis. Pointing out that “human domination of nature wears a garment cut from the same cloth as intra-human domination,” Plumwood argues for the close relationship between patriarchy, imperialism and the destruction of the environment. In a more recent ecocritical work, Kevin Hutchings further highlights this link between “genocide and ecocide” arguing that they are “inseparable sides of the same coin.” This close relationship between environmental destruction and human oppression is central to my thesis as I analyse how these concepts intertwine in EBB’s poetry. Overtly addressing the injustices of social oppression inherent in her society’s treatment of women, lower classes and colonised peoples, EBB covertly entangles

49 Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*.
50 Ibid., 13.
this with a philosophical reimagining of the position of nature in the hierarchy of Victorian society.

In his article “Ecocriticism: What is it Good For?” Robert Kern argues that ecocriticism’s legitimate interests “include the history of evolution of the relations of culture to nature, whatever that might be, and the perception of nature by culture.”

My thesis questions what happens when the perception of nature is taken out of a typically masculine tradition and transformed by incorporating traditionally feminine ways of perceiving and experiencing sublime environments like the ocean. By attempting to change the perceptions of poetry and women in society, EBB also reimagines terraqueous environments in terms of these shifting social power dynamics. Kern further demands that ecocriticism is not “an escape from culture into nature (even if that were possible) but precisely a productive recognition of their entanglement.” My thesis will construct an understanding of how *Aurora Leigh* reconfigures the poet’s relationship with oceans, lakes, waterfalls, and rivers by feminising previously masculine genres and modes of writing.

Therefore my thesis positions itself within the history of feminist readings of EBB’s poetry, focusing on EBB’s creation of female subjectivity in her epic poem *Aurora Leigh*. My thesis also applies the methodologies of ecocriticism to this poem. By situating itself within these two fields of literary criticism my thesis brings together modes of feminist and ecocritical literary inquiry in order to gain a new

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53 Ibid., 29.
understanding of EBB’s magnum opus, and consequently the colossal social changes that characterised the Victorian era.

**Methodology**

Comparative reading with an eye to influence is methodologically central to this thesis, especially in establishing the importance of Romanticism as an on-going force at work throughout *Aurora Leigh*. This thesis draws upon two main methodological approaches of feminist analysis and ecocriticism, with close reading at its epicentre. I am mainly interested in how EBB’s encyclopedic work *Aurora Leigh* rewrites the poet’s orientation towards bodies of water. I compare *Aurora Leigh* with Wollstonecraft’s *Letters Written During a Short Residence* to further understand how the context of Wollstonecraft’s feminism informed EBB’s depiction of the environment, and in particular the poet’s relationship with the ocean.

The term ‘nature’ becomes both important and problematic in ecocriticism. In his introduction to *Ecology Without Nature*, Timothy Morton reminds his readers that “putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman.”54 Seeking to avoid this pitfall, my thesis will not focus on all of nature or its many meanings. Rather, I am more concerned with the ways in which terraqueous environments become paradoxical places of liberty, commerce, and poetic epiphany throughout *Aurora Leigh*, and how fear of drowning is consequently configured in the text. Far from romanticising the ocean, this environment appears at several points throughout the

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poem as a terrifying “incessant” force, a landscape that threatens both physical and metaphysical death. However, drowning does not only signify the change from life to death. The constantly swelling and shifting movement of bodies of water also describes the emergence of life from the primal depths, the emergence of maturity from adolescence, even the development of a writer into a poet. The ocean, whether it is through metaphor or as a physical landscape, is consistently situated at a turning point in a female character’s life. This thesis will explore how and why Aurora Leigh creates such a strong link between femininity and water, and how this presents the reader with an alternative way of imagining subjectivity. Before outlining my ecocritical methodological framework, this chapter will summarise the principal ideas of some key feminist theorists.

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Donna Harraway theorises a scientific feminist methodology in her seminal essay “Situated Knowledges.”56 Harraway argues that knowledge is necessarily embodied and that objectivity is always partial. Aurora Leigh lends itself to this kind of approach and even develops a similar philosophy. The speaker constantly reminds the reader not only of her own partial perspective as a flawed narrator, but also of the impossibility of complete objectivity. Aurora herself adopts a stance remarkably similar to Harraway’s standpoint theory when she argues against Romney’s “universal” for “the poet’s individualism.”57 Harraway argues that “feminism is about

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55 Aurora Leigh, 6.811.
57 Aurora Leigh, 2.479; 2.478.
the sciences of the multiple subject with (at least) double vision.”58 It must have been EBB’s feminist politics that led her to argue that a poet must exert “a double vision” in order to write about the Victorian age that, for her, was “living art.”59 Writing as an English woman and a poet, EBB was acutely aware of the multiplicity of different perspectives, and the dual necessity of writing from within one of these partial perspectives, as well as attempting to understand the perspectives of others. In Book Two Romney famously expresses the dominant belief that women are too “personal and passionate” and that therefore the world remains “uncomprehended” and consequently “uninfluenced” by them.60 EBB is keenly aware of the subordinated position of the female poet, particularly one who aspires to write in the epic form.

At this point it becomes important to remember that “the standpoints of the subjugated are not ‘innocent’ positions.”61 Indeed, being the daughter of a slave-owner, EBB enjoyed a privileged upper-class childhood thanks to her father’s plantations in the West Indies. Far from adopting an innocent standpoint, EBB describes her family history as a curse, writing back against slavery in The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point and A Curse for A Nation.62 In both of these poems, EBB protests the institution of slavery alongside the conventions of patriarchal society that restricted English women’s writing. The refrain of A Curse for a Nation repeats the English writers’ demand that her voice is powerful enough to curse a nation along with the damning indictment of slavery with “This is the curse – write!” Writing against the patriarchal tradition of epic poetry in Victorian England, EBB creates

58 Harraway, “Situated Knowledges,” 598.
59 *Aurora Leigh*, 5.184; 5.221.
60 Ibid., 221; 2.19; 2.220.
distinct, individual voices throughout *Aurora Leigh* – not to speak for objectivity but to create the impression of many different perspectives. Through the contrapuntal form of the poem, created by interweaving dominant and peripheral voices, EBB begins to paint a picture “of the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge.”63 Bearing this in mind, my thesis seeks to understand the influence of Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth on this poem, without privileging one voice over another. Rather than adhere to Harold Bloom’s model of influence,64 my thesis draws more from Harraway and Plumwood’s theories of multiplicity and anti-hierarchy to understand the complicated nature of the influence at hand. In *Aurora Leigh*, the reader is invited to listen to one story amidst others, gaining knowledge of one position only to discover that this could just be one interpretation. In this way *Aurora Leigh* anticipates Harraway’s theory that knowledge itself comes from a critical and interpretative position.

Harraway notes that “Nature is the only raw material of culture, appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted, or otherwise made flexible for disposable culture in the logic of capitalist colonialism.”65 Written in the midst of the industrial revolution, *Aurora Leigh* captures a moment when capitalism surged forward at blinding speed. Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth were reacting to similar forces of commerce and revolution. Emerging out of the debates surrounding the abolitionist movement, feminism began to shape a voice of protest against the atrocities committed against human beings in the name of commerce. In “Women Writers and Abolition” Deirdre Coleman analyses the effect that the abolitionism had on women writers of the

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eighteenth century, arguing that this “movement granted women poets new opportunities for making their voices heard in the public sphere.”

In attempting to forge a new, female poetic voice, EBB draws on her Romantic predecessors to position her poem at the intersection of the major social issues of the nineteenth century. The ocean seems to swirl beneath and against the many voices of social and artistic protest that run throughout *Aurora Leigh*. Anthropomorphised, yet uncannily inhuman, the ocean appears in *Aurora Leigh* like a new kind of vengeful, benevolent and utterly feminine aspect of the natural world. It is also the site of Empire and commercial globalisation. In the 1980s Harraway exposed the problematic position of nature in the logic of capitalist colonialism. Writing over 100 years beforehand, EBB similarly positions water as a kind of raw material of culture, writing this into her protest against capitalist colonialism. My thesis analyses how this represents a reworking of bodies of water in Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth’s work, in the process reimagining the limits of subjectivity.

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*Aurora Leigh*, with its feminist aims and constant depictions of an energetic and active natural environment, is perfectly positioned for an ecofeminist analysis. Through her exploration of the dualisms inherent to western philosophical thought, Plumwood uncovers how western society systematically oppresses women, the lower classes, colonised peoples and nature by placing them as ‘other’ to reason or thought. Engaging with similar key western philosophers, EBB begins to rethink precisely that philosophical mode interrogated by Plumwood. *Aurora Leigh* does this by continuing

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to re-imagine the revolutions of Romanticism, foregrounding women and oppressed lower classes alongside the natural environment. For example, EBB draws upon Romantic poetry and prose to empower Marian Erle, destabilising the patriarchal social system in which she would have metaphorically and literally drowned. Plumwood’s framework of dualisms enables us to see how EBB begins to question some of the key dualisms surrounding class, women, and nature.

Plumwood’s methodology of identifying and subverting the dualistic hierarchies of Western thought is particularly useful for thinking through the political implications of EBB’s radical choice of subject matter and characters. Plumwood notes that the “diverse strands of feminist theory converge on the invisibility of the mother. The immensely important… skills the mother teaches the child are merely the background to… the male sphere of reason and knowledge.”

The characterisation of Marian is important because, by giving her strength to speak and by valorising her identity as a mother, EBB begins to reconfigure motherhood’s traditional invisibility. As well as giving Marian individual strength, EBB highlights how Victorian society disempowers mothers, especially poor single mothers. Marian’s story foregrounds the stigma and lack of social welfare that almost drive her to drown herself in the Siene, revealing huge cracks in the edifice of Victorian patriarchy. The combination of methodologies – Plumwood’s ecofeminism and close comparative reading – becomes important, for example, in assessing the growth of Marian’s character as a result of similar concerns held by Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth. Wollstonecraft paves the way for EBB to imaginatively reject the distinction between mother and philosopher. Wordsworth’s poetry emerges as an influence at the important rediscovery of Marian

67 Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 122.
in *Aurora Leigh*, signalling a shift not only in the plot but in the traditional power structure that would place poet above impoverished single mother.

Plumwood argues that an essential feature of ecological feminism is that it gives “positive value to a connection of women with nature which was previously, in the west, given negative cultural value and which was the main ground of women’s devaluation and oppression.”

68 EBB’s engagement with feminist politics results in her poetically rethinking the way women are valued by society, and thus women’s connection with nature. Ever the Hamlet-like flawed narrator, Aurora acts as the voice of western society, harshly condemning Marian’s fallen status. My thesis sheds light on how EBB adopts an ecological feminist position in order to refute this condemnation, simultaneously granting positive value to women as mothers, as well as to their connection with nature. Upon reconciling their differences, the two women migrate to Italy, the mountainous land of Aurora’s mother. Here, in Aurora’s home, they plan to raise the child, reasoning that the baby will not miss a father, since “two mothers shall/ Make that up to him.”

69 Plumwood argues that the movement towards positioning “the reproductive woman as subject, should also be understood as the movement to transcending nature/culture dualism.”

70 Working within this framework, my thesis seeks to understand how EBB’s complicated, layered evocations of the ocean work to reposition motherhood as well as women’s connection to nature. Plumwood theorises that, because of the way women have historically been placed in the sphere of nature, their “life-choices and historical positioning often compel a deeper discomfort with dualistic structures and foster a deeper questioning of dualised

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68 Ibid., 8.
69 *Aurora Leigh*, 7.124-125.
70 Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 39.
culture.” My thesis will focus on these sections of *Aurora Leigh* in which the limits of the self appear to dissolve and intermingle with the outside environment, dissolving the classic dualisms of western culture.

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Turning again to literary critics, I will outline how the methodology of ecocritical scholars of Romantic poetry is useful for my thesis. In her article “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism” Ursula K Heise reasons that "since metaphor is a particularly easy way of establishing… connections between mind, body, and place, it is not surprising that ecocriticism has engaged poetry more than other schools of criticism have in recent decades." Romantic poetry in particular meditates on these connections. Thus there has been an extensive amount of ecocritical work undertaken on poets such as Wordsworth that is particularly useful for my thesis. James McKusick’s book *Green Writing* has been especially helpful as a starting point for developing an ecocritical methodology. I am specifically interested in how McKusick reads closely to uncover the different ecosystems in the text.

McKusick argues that as a consequence of scientific environmental research, an ecosystem is “now regarded as a… chaotic and unstable structure.” This chaotic structure relies on organic connections between disordered living things. McKusick understands Romantic poetry to be a kind of “literary ecosystem… in which competition and synergy, exchange of ideas and flow of information, predators and

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71 Ibid., 36.
74 Ibid., 18.
prey, hosts and parasites, all coexist in a turbulent vortex of shared intellectual environment."\textsuperscript{75} I combine this approach with Wolfson’s theory of interaction, which she describes as “distinctive instances where a Romantic ‘author’ gets created.”\textsuperscript{76} Building on the understanding of literary movements, my thesis seeks to explore the scope of Romanticism, and how the influence of this important movement evolved and changed to accommodate the Victorian age. My thesis will map how certain Romantic authors are present in \textit{Aurora Leigh}. Building on this, I will look at the way the scenes, ideas and themes of these Romantic predecessors metamorphose to inspire EBB’s epic.

A striking example of this metamorphosis is the way in which Aurora references, yet dramatically changes, Wordsworth’s image of a drowned body emerging from a calm lake. McKusick comments on this scene, stating that “the immanence of death and the sudden eruption of fear into a seemingly placid landscape is a theme frequently encountered in Wordsworth’s description of his childhood.”\textsuperscript{77} Drowning and the eruption of the repressed knowledge of death, as well as childhood and the danger of the natural world, are all combined within this scene. In \textit{Aurora Leigh} the placid lake becomes the teeming masses of a Parisian marketplace, and the drowned man becomes the fallen woman. By conflating Wordsworth’s picturesque scene of nature with the cosmopolitan, modern swell of the marketplace, EBB makes the subjugation of women and the social issues of class the fearful, repressed knowledge that emerges from the deep. Linked with the transition from childhood to adolescence in Aurora’s perilous sea voyage to England, natural bodies of water come

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{76} Wolfson, \textit{Romantic Interactions}, 2.  
\textsuperscript{77} McKusick, \textit{Green Writing}, 54.
to represent adulthood, motherhood, birth and death as the poem develops. 

Maintaining the fear and mystery of Wordsworth’s lake, *Aurora Leigh* uses this allusion to frame the growth of the poet’s mind. However, this poet is a woman living in an age and a society that demanded a new kind of epic poem. Engaging questions of gender, of industrialisation and the social problems that come with it, EBB reshapes the masculine poetry of the past in order to expose the cracks in modernity’s social project of relentless and ruthless progress.
Chapter 1

Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Barrett Browning

Famous for her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft’s radical, feminist politics blend with poetic reveries and philosophical musings throughout *Letters Written During A Short Residence*. Evoking the sublime and constructing a Romantic attitude towards the natural world, in these letters Wollstonecraft recounts her solitary ramblings along the coast and through the towns of Norway, Sweden and Denmark. She writes that “Nature is the nurse of sentiment, - the true source of taste; - yet what misery, as well as rapture, is produced by a quick perception of the beautiful and sublime, when it is exercised in observing animated nature.”¹ These sublime interactions with nature often feature the immense ocean or torrential cataracts. In the midst of describing the rowing scene of Letter Eight, the depths of the ocean facilitate a transition into a meditation on the nature of existence. The idea of letting the current take her boat floating freely into the ocean inspires a belief in immortality.² My thesis will examine how this spiritual kinship with the ocean, and both the misery and the rapture that ensue, are continued in *Aurora Leigh*.

Susan Wolfson argues that Mary Wollstonecraft discovers her authority “in politically sharpened, methodologically complicated engagements with male literary traditions and male authorial voices.”³ Further, she closely assesses the radical

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¹ Wollstonecraft, *Letters*, 86.
² Ibid., 99.
philosophies of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, arguing that in this text Wollstonecraft reads poetry “against the grain” in order “to give a voice to vindication.” I contend that it is no coincidence that these arguments could equally be applied to EBB. In her short article “The Prophet Poet’s Book,” Christine Chaney argues that Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* had an important influence on the way that EBB chose to structure *Aurora Leigh*. Drawing upon Tucker’s argument that the form of *Aurora Leigh* creates a “fluid universe” within the poem, Chaney states that Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* “expressed a female selfhood through a form that reflected layerings, contradictions, circulations, circularities.” This chapter maps how the misery and rapture Wollstonecraft experienced when encountering sublime landscapes and seascapes influenced EBB’s creation of a new kind of poetic subjectivity in *Aurora Leigh*. Both authors write about the body’s complex relationship with the material, natural world. Their experiences of terraquaeous environments inspire radical philosophies on women, power, and society.

* Writing to her teenage daughter, EBB, Mary Moulton-Barrett flippantly divulges the latest gossip. Hoping that a mutual acquaintance will find happiness in a new marriage, she teases that: “I hope she has no visionary hopes of finding it upon

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5 Wolfson, *Romantic Interactions*, 68
7 Tucker, “Aurora Leigh: Epic Solutions to Novel Ends,” 70
8 Chaney, “The Prophet Poet’s Book,” 794
yours and Mrs Wollstonecraft’s system.” As her mother well knew, the young EBB energetically adopted Wollstonecraft’s ‘system’ as her own. This is somewhat surprising considering the negative turn that Wollstonecraft’s reputation took after her death. Wolfson describes the negative press on Wollstonecraft as an “acid wave that crested just after her death, thanks to Godwin, who in grieving devotion rushed into print his Memoirs of the Author of the Vindication of the Rights of Woman.” This negative press led to such a fall in popularity that in 1855 George Eliot characterised the situation as follows: “there is in some quarters a vague prejudice against The Rights of Woman as in some way or other a reprehensible book.” The insidious backlash had turned into vague associations of immorality by the mid nineteenth century. With her usual razor sharp wit, Eliot goes on to point out that Rights of Woman is “eminently serious, severely moral and withal rather heavy – the true reason, perhaps, that no edition has been published since 1796, and that it is now rather scarce.”

Despite, or perhaps because of this, Wollstonecraft’s philosophy was still embraced by the young EBB. Writing to Mary Russell Mitford in 1844, EBB remembers how Wollstonecraft’s “eloquence and her doctrine were equally dear to me at a time when I was inconsolable for not being born a man.” Ambitious almost from birth, EBB found a system in Wollstonecraft’s political manifestos that liberated her to aim for the intellectual heights commonly believed to be reserved for men. Wollstonecraft’s vehement assertion that women’s intelligence is equal to men’s and

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9 Mary Moulton-Barrett to EBB, September 1821, in TBC, 1:133.
10 Wolfson, Romantic Interactions, 91.
12 Ibid.
13 EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, 24th December, in TBC, 9:291.
only rendered weaker by a “false system of education” struck a cord that would resonate throughout EBB’s life.\textsuperscript{14} A prodigiously voracious reader, EBB devoured political works along with epic poetry, becoming fluent in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin, writing epic poems from the age of 14.\textsuperscript{15} Watching her brothers leave for formal education, EBB embraced Wollstonecraft’s radical ideas and systems. As Clifford Siskin points out, “invocations of, and accusations regarding, system are the discursive weapons with which Romanticism configured itself.”\textsuperscript{16} At 13 EBB took up Wollstonecraft’s system, finding within it discursive weapons that she would go on to deploy in her own poetry, to startling effect.

In Letter Twenty Two of \textit{Letters}, Wollstonecraft gazes at an empty throne and reflects that there are few in this world who “do not play the part they have learnt by rote.”\textsuperscript{17} Those philosophers who do learn to speak independently act as “sign posts, which point out the road to others.”\textsuperscript{18} Wollstonecraft’s figure of the solitary, female philosopher surely acted as one of these signposts, paving the way for EBB’s own poetic voice. It is significant that these signposts, so important in constructing the path that leads beyond tyranny and towards independent thought, stand in solitude, apart from society. Barbara Taylor points out the importance of solitude in understanding subjectivity, an argument that I wish to build upon here.\textsuperscript{19} Politically the two \textit{Vindications}, especially the \textit{Rights of Woman}, gave the thirteen-year-old poet an

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\textsuperscript{14} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Vindication of the Rights of Woman}, 11.
\textsuperscript{15} Specifically she wrote \textit{The Battle of Marathon}, an epic that her father published privately for the poet’s 14\textsuperscript{th} birthday.
\textsuperscript{17} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 167.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Taylor, “Separations of Soul: Solitude, Biography, History.”
\end{flushleft}
intrepid determination that would later develop into a political philosophy. The power that both women find in solitude becomes key to creating the figure of the woman philosopher. However, from youth to maturity, EBB’s constant passion was not politics, but poetry. Epic poetry in particular became the hybrid form in which politics and philosophy could fuse with the sublime and the beautiful to create meaning, affect, and perhaps even inspire social change. Mary Wollstonecraft’s epistolary travel narrative also fuses together different genres. A comparison of the generic fluidity of these two texts exposes how hybridity offers an empowering space for these early feminist writers.

It is no coincidence that, along with this hybridity of form, the solitary experience of the ocean and other watery landscapes is intimately entwined with feminist politics and subjectivity in these texts. A comparison of the treatment and position of oceans, lakes and waterfalls therefore illuminates this moment of feminist influence and innovation. As yet there has been no scholarly work undertaken to map how feminist politics and the literary imagination converge over ecosystems that threaten dissolution and submergence. Understanding how and why this convergence occurs is integral to my project of developing a feminist genealogy of place. In doing so I will uncover how real or imagined places shape literary feminist subjectivity.

It is essential to undertake this project at our current historical moment because the expansive imagination constructed in both these texts offers alternatives to the individuated, capitalist forms of subjectivity evolving during the long industrial revolution. Even as she worked within systems of commerce and inequitable politics, Mary Wollstonecraft tirelessly searched for an escape from these confining forces. It
is therefore no wonder that her politics, as well as her published *Letters*, captivated EBB in her formative years. Wollstonecraft’s legacy paved the way for further development of subjectivity in *Aurora Leigh*. It is my hope that this chapter will advance scholarly understanding of the scope of Wollstonecraft’s revolution and the influence she had on future writers. After reminding Mary Russell Mitford that she was indeed a passionate supporter of Mrs Wollstonecraft, EBB goes on to exclaim: “What a thing a book is! What power it has! It is a devil or an angel for power, - if a real, living book.”

Surely *Letters Written During a Short Residence* is one such book, and the inquiry and discussions inspired by this text live on in *Aurora Leigh*.

**Hybrid Genres**

*Political and Literary Concoctions*

Although Wollstonecraft’s text is an autobiographical account of real events and *Aurora Leigh* is an epic poem, both authors choose a genre that allows them space to place political and economic arguments alongside philosophical and literary reveries. Both authors melt together a multiplicity of genres, encompassing the economic essay, the political pamphlet, canonical literature and the conversational language of everyday life. Hybridity and flexibility are therefore key similarities between these two texts, offering rich insights into how each author reimagines subjectivity from within structures that would restrict it.

Recent scholarship, especially Ingrid Horrocks’ introduction to the recent edition of *Letters*, highlights how the old dualism that separates Wollstonecraft’s

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politics from her emotional, literary imagination, does not do justice to the complexity of the text. Horrocks uncovers how:

the emphasis on feeling and the language of sensibility in the text, for a long time seen as separate from Wollstonecraft’s political engagements, is now generally understood to be intimately intertwined with her political arguments… she extends her political thinking by creating a hybridized literary form, reworking the travel genre so that it absorbs and integrates a variety of discourses.\textsuperscript{21}

This kind of hybrid literary form intertwines politics with the language of sensibility, melting down the hierarchies of society even as it recreates them. Looking over the edge of her rowing boat, Wollstonecraft’s sea stars made of “thickened water… over an incredible number of fibres, or white lines”\textsuperscript{22} could serve as an appropriate metaphor for the lines of different genres and discourses that fluidly weave their way through Wollstonecraft’s \textit{Letters}. Horrocks further explores the hybrid nature of \textit{Letters} when she describes this text as “at once a moving epistolary travel narrative, a politically motivated ethnographic tract… a work of scenic tourism, and a sentimental journey.”\textsuperscript{23} An easy flow from economic discussion and political argument to literary musings on the life of the soul is also an important feature of the flexibility of \textit{Aurora Leigh}. Aurora muses on form in Book Five, endeavouring to represent the age “That brawls, cheats, maddens, calculates, aspires.”\textsuperscript{24} In order to represent everything that goes into the age, from mathematics to drawing-room gossip, Aurora chooses a flexible form, asking: “What form is best for poems? Let me think/ Of forms less, and the external” choosing instead to “Trust the spirit” to shape the form of the poem.\textsuperscript{25}

This organic hybridity lends itself to the encyclopedic epic and EBB’s formal

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ingrid Horrocks, introduction to \textit{Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark}, by Mary Wollstonecraft (Canada: Broadview Press, 2013), 13.
\item Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 99.
\item Horrocks, introduction to \textit{Letters}, 13.
\item \textit{Aurora Leigh}, 5.204.
\item Ibid., 5.223; 5.224.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
innovations result in a poem that flits from one genre to the next. Rebecca Scott notes the importance of this flexibility to the poem when she argues: “generic indeterminacy is at the heart of Aurora Leigh.”

Herbert Tucker takes up a similar position when he describes Aurora Leigh as “an open marriage of genres,” fluidly dissolving conventions such as a fixed person perspective, and instead embracing a multiplicity of temporalities. EBB creates a poem immediately recognisable as an epic, yet one that radically alters epic conventions. Her ambition was to write a poem “of a new class… under one aspect and having unity, as a work of art, - & admitting of as much philosophical dreaming and digression (which is in fact a characteristic of the age) as I like.”

Digression, particularly from the literary to the political and back, may have been a characteristic of EBB’s age, but it is one that she inherited from Romanticism and especially Wollstonecraft. Wollstonecraft uses the hybrid genre of letter writing to critique the limitations of subjects deemed acceptable for women. She shocks her reader as well as her host by asking “men’s questions” and incorporating economic and political digressions in her letters, especially in her attentive descriptions of the poor and the political injustice described throughout this text. Although not completely unique, this was unusual subject matter for a woman writer of this time. The confusion and condescension of some contemporary reviews are testament to this. The Monthly Review, for example, describes Wollstonecraft by complimenting her intellect as follows: “if the fair traveller will accept the epithetic as a compliment,

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26 Avery and Stott, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 116.
27 Tucker, Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 384.
28 EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, 30th Dec 1844, in TBC, 9:305.
29 Wollstonecraft, Letters, 58.
30 Helen Maria Williams’ Letters Written in France (1790) famously reports on the political upheaval of the French Revolution.
the masculine – mind of this female philosopher.” The review is careful to point out that Wollstonecraft’s apparently masculine text is not “expressed with studied elegance” and this lack is compensated by “energetic expression of feelings.” The *British Critic* also untangles Wollstonecraft’s knot of politics and literature by separating the two, privileging the author’s sentiments over her political ideas. The reviewer allows that “the politician and the moralist will each find many a reflection addrest to their attention,” thereby highlighting the many genres at play in the work. However, they take it upon themselves to chastise her political opinions because “when a woman so far outsteps her proper sphere, as to deride facts which she cannot disprove… we cannot… permit her to pursue triumphantly her Phaeton-like career.”

The confused and admonishing tone of these reviews points to Wollstonecraft’s departure from the conventions governing women’s writing. Her *Letters* move boldly outside the realms deemed permissible for women, flaunting generic indeterminacy to make a subversive political statement and refuse gendered restrictions.

The plot of *Aurora Leigh* blurs the hierarchical divisions inherent to this gendered division between masculine politics and economics on the one hand, and feminine sensibility and feeling on the other. Romney represents the masculine sphere of economic theories governing human relations. Indeed, in rejecting Romney, Lady Waldemar also rejects the theories of Adam Smith because “Smith smacks of Leigh.” Acting as the voice of a conservative society that would restrict women’s writing, Romney famously requires Aurora to give up poetry and instead work with

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32 Ibid., 242.
34 Ibid., 248.
35 *Aurora Leigh*, 9.135.
him as his wife. Aurora, seeing this as working for rather than with her cousin, rejects not only his proposal but also the generic limitations that he would place upon her work. Romney limits women’s poetry to mere sentiment: “so sympathetic to the personal pang” and yet “incapable of deepening.”

Far from remaining within his shallow parameters, Aurora goes on to write a poem in which, according to Natasha Moore, critics have found “genres as diverse as autobiography, Kunstlerroman, novel, verse-novel, sage discourse, philosophic meditation, political treatise, Ars Poetica, prophecy, epic, satire and slum naturalism.”

The work that EBB, in the voice of Aurora, finally creates famously exceeds the conventional bounds of genre, creating a poem of a “new class” just as Wollstonecraft desired to become a writer of a “new genus.” Neither author aims for novelty merely for its own sake, but as a challenge to those like Romney who have a voice in reviews and who seek to restrict the ambition of her pen.

Hybrid genres also allow these authors greater freedom when constructing the persona of their narrators, a powerful political tool for both women writers. Although partially born of personal anguish, Wollstonecraft intended her Letters Written During a Short Residence for publication. The narrative voice that she constructs is a conscious development of a specific kind of public identity. As Mary A. Favret points out, “the impetus for (Wollstonecraft’s) journey and her relationship to her correspondent stand as the two frustrating ellipses of the Letters.”

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36 Ibid., 2.185, 2.188.
38 EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, 30th December 1844, London, in TBC, 9:305.
40 Favret, Romantic Correspondence, 98.
circumstances that Wollstonecraft withholds from these accounts contrast in important ways to those that she includes; for example she replaces a fall or a moment of weakness with confident, Romantic wanderings, constructing her identity as that of a solitary philosopher striding out across dramatic coastlines.\textsuperscript{41} These omissions and inclusions reflect conscious literary decisions to forge a new kind of subjectivity within the flexible genre of public travel letters. Recreating powerful scenes for her readers, Wollstonecraft explores sea caves and ocean bulwarks. She writes “wandering there alone, I found the solitude desirable; my mind was stored with ideas, which this new scene associated with astonishing rapidity.”\textsuperscript{42} The ocean reaches into the solitary wanderer’s mind to crystallise and enhance her thoughts. The ‘I’ that Mary Shelley would later describe as the “sensitive, imaginative, suffering, enthusiastic pronoun (that) spreads an inexpressible charm over (Letters)”\textsuperscript{43} is here strengthened in relation to solitude and the ocean. Wollstonecraft may not have known that her second daughter would go on to read this text, but this description of the ocean is an active construction of a new kind of adventurous subjectivity not only for herself, but for the many other women who she knew would read this text.

In addition to creating the persona of a philosopher reflecting on the mind that creates her own thoughts, Wollstonecraft incorporates an allusive literary style in order to construct her own character. Wolfson points out that Wollstonecraft’s “interactions with the poets are diverse, even divergent.”\textsuperscript{44} Favret makes a similar argument, noting that, of all the many literary references found throughout \textit{Letters}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 103.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 116.
  \item \textsuperscript{44} Wolfson, Romantic Interactions, 68.
\end{itemize}
Written During a Short Residence, Shakespeare’s The Tempest is the most frequently cited. Wollstonecraft positions herself as a kind of Prospero, a solitary figure in command of the ocean as well as of her text. One such lyrical passage comes at the end of the second letter, when the narrator describes the fall of night in which “The waters murmur, and fall with more than mortal music, and spirits of peace walk abroad to calm the agitated breast.”45 This haunting word ‘murmur’ would be taken up by Wordsworth in 1798, again to describe the sound of moving water in Tintern Abbey. 46 I will discuss the importance of this to Aurora Leigh in the second section of this thesis. For now it is useful to note that Wollstonecraft’s murmuring waters may have inspired further poetic renditions of lakes, rivers and oceans. The gentle fall of water becomes a soft music framing the author’s equally tranquil state of mind. She goes on to echo Prospero in her rendition of this scene, remarking that “Eternity is in these moments: worldly cares melt into the airy stuff that dreams are made on.”47 She ends with the image of falling water to embrace the scene, asking “Who fears the fallen dew? It only makes the mown grass smell more fragrant.”48 This relationship with water and the natural world, combined with the thoughtful solitude of the scene, nudges the genre of Letters toward the literary, helping to develop the figure of the female poet-philosopher that later becomes so important for the character of Aurora Leigh.

While the political writer Wollstonecraft brings the literary into her politics, EBB injects politics and economics into her literature. Using the hybridity and

45 Wollstonecraft, Letters, 63-64.
47 Wollstonecraft, Letters, 64.
48 Ibid.
flexibility of the epic genre to include critiques of real-world political theories (notably those of Adam Smith, Carlyle and Fourier, with many others besides), EBB revises and reimagines female subjectivity with the political goal of showing “That every creature, female as the male,/ Stands single in responsible act and thought.”49 For EBB, writing a poem that rushes equally into drawing rooms and contemporary Parisian slums was not just tantamount to, but even exceeded a political statement in another genre. Indeed, in the voice of Aurora, EBB demands that art “Sets action on top of suffering:/ The artist’s part is both to be and do.”50 *Aurora Leigh* is as much about acting to change the real world as Wollstonecraft’s *Letters* is about fashioning a particular kind of Romantic literary self. Wollstonecraft’s keen attention to politics allows her completed work to move fluidly from poetic reveries to opinionated attacks on the ruling classes, and back. The generic hybridity and literary persona created by Wollstonecraft paved the way for EBB’s politically active Aurora Leigh. *Aurora Leigh* also operates to demand a politically liberated form of complicated, nuanced female subjectivity.

**Solitude, Subjectivity and the Ocean**

The solitary experience of the ocean, the coastline, the biblical flood, even the taste of salt in the wind, is very important in both *Letters Written During a Short Residence* and *Aurora Leigh* for it is in these places that the narrator finds the solitude she needs to refashion her subjectivity. *Solitude, I contend, leads these authors to reimagine subjectivity*. Travelling across the ocean Wollstonecraft becomes an intrepid intellectual explorer, or as she calls it the “little hero of each tale.”51 For

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49 *Aurora Leigh*, 2.37-38.
50 Ibid., 5.366-367.
Ingrid Horrocks, “perhaps the biggest innovation of the text is the way in which a highly individualised subjectivity is foregrounded throughout – a specific ‘I’ through which everything is viewed.”\textsuperscript{52} Indeed, this text is so much about the development of the narrator’s personality that Wollstonecraft warns readers to “shut the book if they do not wish to become better acquainted with me.”\textsuperscript{53} Throughout the \textit{Letters} there is a dynamic relationship between the exterior landscapes and the narrator’s interior world, each helping to form the other. The expansiveness of the ocean inspires and facilitates an equally expansive, imaginative kind of subjectivity that battles the restrictions and various kinds of confinement placed on women. Again I return to the scene in which Wollstonecraft rows out across the ocean, at one moment the image of embodied strength and control, at the next allowing the boat to be “carried along by the current.”\textsuperscript{54} At these moments in which the boat is steered by the ocean itself the narrator indulges in “a pleasing forgetfulness of fallacious hopes.”\textsuperscript{55} These fallacious hopes become much more than that when she exclaims “- How fallacious! yet without hope what is to sustain life?”\textsuperscript{56} This position above the ocean from which Wollstonecraft imaginatively dips down to mingle with the sea stars below becomes a defiant philosophical claim to her own subjectivity when she asserts that “surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable.”\textsuperscript{57} In \textit{Aurora Leigh} this claim that a woman must have an immortal soul is inextricably linked with art and writing. In Book Seven Aurora reflects on what she believes to be the good in her book, arguing that “the book has some truth in it, I believe,/ And truth outlives pain, as the

\textsuperscript{52} Horrocks, introduction to \textit{Letters}, 28.
\textsuperscript{53} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 51.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
soul does life.”⁵⁸ EBB imbues art with the political power to do nothing less than “change the world/ And shift its morals.”⁵⁹

For Wollstonecraft the ocean both separates and joins the speaker to the world and its morals, giving her the power to engage but also allowing critical distance and the solitude needed for creativity. Wandering along dramatic coastline or gazing out to the ocean, the ‘I’ of Letters Written During a Short Residence inhabits the seascape. The narrator gains the freedom to move away from reified forms of defined, rational selfhood and instead embraces an expansive, creative subjectivity. The isolation and melancholy of these scenes prompt the reader to question the narrator’s exclusion from society. This potent mix of melancholy loneliness and philosophical, literary creativity, prompted by the ocean, has strong echoes in EBB’s development of Aurora’s critical, philosophical subjectivity. The claustrophobia that Aurora feels when shut into polite society causes her to sigh: “we are sepulchred alive in this close world, and want more room.”⁶⁰ This desire for space is equally the desire for solitude, and the freedom to write not for “others’ uses” but for her “better self.”⁶¹ She yearns for the solitude needed to construct her own subjectivity.

In her article “Separations of Soul: Solitude, Biography, History,” Barbara Taylor makes the convincing case for studying the relationship between subjectivity and solitude, despite the popular belief amongst scholars in the constructed nature of subjectivity.⁶² Here Taylor argues that solitariness is key to understanding

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⁵⁸ *Aurora Leigh*, 8.744-745.
⁵⁹ Ibid., 7.856-857.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 5.1040-41.
⁶¹ Ibid., 1.4.
⁶² Taylor, “Separations of Soul: Solitude, Biography, History,” 640. Taylor points out how
subjectivity, particularly the kind of subjectivity that Wollstonecraft develops throughout her work. Beyond simply being alone, Taylor writes that solitude is the “imaginary staging of the self that is far too complex, too physically dense, to be captured by any simple opposition between absence and presence.” I would add to this that the solitude Wollstonecraft experiences when she is near the ocean is particularly intensified because, as a travelling mother, artist and social critic, the ocean is the space where absence and presence are felt simultaneously. While the ocean separates her from family and society, it also joins her imaginatively to a transnational community of travellers. Thus the ocean operates as an important space for Wollstonecraft to stage her revision of Romantic subjectivity, eluding oppositions (or what Plumwood might call dualisms) so that she can participate in, as well as critique, mainstream selfhood.

There has not been significant scholarly attention paid to the important role that solitude plays in shaping the poet’s mind, either in EBB’s wider oeuvre or in *Aurora Leigh* specifically. However, when read alongside *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, it soon becomes apparent that moments of poetic epiphany and expanded understanding often occur when the speaker is (or imagines herself to be) alone, as in Wollstonecraft’s text. The solitary and melancholy nature of writing creates one of the tensions that drives Aurora’s politics – she chooses to work alone, rather than marry and work for her husband. Significantly, her final union with Romney does not change the solitary nature of her work. In the last scene it is Aurora

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Stephen Greenblatt noticed, with some embarrassment, that subjectivity seems to “cling on” long after the pronouncement of its demise.

who must “work for two” whereas Romney “for two shall love.” This inverts the accepted social roles of husband as worker and wife in the social sphere of family and lover. Aurora’s ideal union is one in which she can continue to work alone, but with the comforts of family that, as a woman writer, she had previously been denied. Now she can choose solitude rather than have it thrust upon her. This enforced solitude is exposed as a means of oppressing women writers who, unlike male authors with loving mothers or wives, must labour on alone with “eyes undried because there’s none to ask/ The reason they grow moist.” The contrast between enforced and voluntary solitude has vast economic implications, dramatically illustrating the social barriers that stop women from working. Women writers need solitude in which to work and cannot exist purely in social settings. Yet once they opt for solitude they are pushed into social exclusion and isolation. Wollstonecraft felt these barriers keenly, and in a private letter to Imlay demanded that “we either live together, or I will be entirely independent.” It is not difficult to imagine that EBB might have been thinking about Wollstonecraft in her depiction of the lonely, melancholy yet philosophical female writer. Constantly fighting for independence, Aurora consistently rejects romantic companionship, only accepting Romney when he appreciates the importance of her continued work.

Aurora progresses from lonely isolation to productive solitude. Her narrative therefore exposes social isolation as a means of limiting women’s opportunities to work, whilst simultaneously endorsing the freedom to choose work in solitude. When the well-meaning Lord Howe teases Aurora about her shock that a man might

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64 *Aurora Leigh*, 9.911-912.
65 Ibid., 5.446-447.
consider her desirable, he describes her shocked “me?” as making the word sound “like a stone/ Dropped down a dry well.” Although less sinister, this foreshadows Marian Erle’s later description of herself as a stone “ground and tortured by the incessant sea.” The similarities between Aurora and Marian’s attitude toward marriage can also be found when Aurora rejects Romney’s proposal in Book Two. She argues that, if she agreed to marry him:

I should not dare to call my soul my own
Which so he had bought and paid for: every thought
And every heart beat down there in the bill
… He might cut
My body into coins to give away

Both women reject marriage if it is simply a commercial transaction. Aurora and Marian imagine themselves to become stones when they are made objects of male desire, denied autonomy and threatened with social ostracism if they refuse to place themselves on the marriage market. Aurora argues that the potential suitor, Lord Eglinton, does not fully appreciate her poetry and only superficially wants “A star upon his stage.” In her characterisation of Aurora and Marian’s positions in the marriage market, EBB could be referencing a similar debate that is played out within the pages of Austen’s *Emma*, a novel that was extremely popular at this time. Jane Fairfax famously compares the governess trade to the slave trade, morosely describing it as “the sale – not quite of human flesh – but of human intellect.” Lord Eglinton’s proposal reduces marriage to the sale of human intellect – Lord Eglinton is proposing to Aurora the celebrity writer, having never met Aurora the woman, assured that his riches will secure him a favourable response. The rebellious Aurora

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67 *Aurora Leigh*, 5.856-857.
68 Ibid., 6.811.
69 Ibid., 2.784-791.
70 Ibid., 5.916.
rejects the financial security that would come with this union, instead warning that, if Eglinton only wants a decorative star, “a dropped star/ Makes bitter waters, says a Book I’ve read.”72 Aurora rejects financial security and companionship because she knows her work will not be taken seriously. Where Eglinton sees a pretty celebrity whose intellect could be a decorative star to hang in his house, Aurora transforms herself instead into the “great star from heaven” dropped by the angel of the apocalypse into the sea.73

This reference to Revelations foreshadows the tragic fate and rebirth of Marian, who is dropped into bitter waters when she crosses the Channel. Jane Fairfax’s comparison between the slave trade and the trade in English women’s minds is also echoed in Marian Erle’s story. Aurora is educated, and therefore her intellect is for sale, whereas Marian and other lower class women like Rose are reduced to physical bodies on the marriage market. Though EBB is attentive to the differences between the institution of slavery and the position of women in England, she does not shy away from forcefully condemning any system that would reduce a person to a sum of money. Aurora’s reference to Revelations when she rejects Lord Eglinton also foreshadows her final union with Romney, a marriage that inverts his first offer. Aurora knows that if she becomes a mere stone, dropped into a social system that would pay for the superficial appearance of her intellect, these bitter social waters will threaten her work. EBB illustrates how a woman’s demand for independence is not only financially risky, it also means that she must choose melancholy solitude, unlike men who do the same work. The use of the flood in the book of Revelations to describe this phenomenon transforms women’s sacrifice from an everyday, accepted

72 Aurora Leigh, 5.917-918.
73 Revelations, 8.10.
social norm, to a national tragedy of biblical proportions. In John’s vision this dropped star poisons the water, meaning that “many men died of the waters because they were made bitter.”\textsuperscript{74} Solitude is necessary for Aurora to create her own poetic truth, but the social ostracism that is inflicted on a woman who chooses to work also reveals that there is limited or no space for a woman writer in society. Instead, women are thrust into company and society without autonomy; they risk becoming mere stones to be tossed about by men, bringing about nothing less than the bitter waters of apocalypse.

Thus EBB shows two different types of solitude. The first is the solitude chosen by the poet so that she might continue her work. This doesn’t preclude the companionship of people who appreciate the value and importance of that work. But EBB also exposes the more insidious, lonely solitude thrust upon women who become social outcasts because they refuse to play the part dictated to them by society. This brings to mind Wollstonecraft’s image of the philosophers as signposts pointing the way for others – solitary, individuated figures who refuse to read from the script, and go their own way instead.

Stepping off the boat on the Norwegian coast, Wollstonecraft describes the “melancholy that hung about my heart at parting with my daughter for the first time.”\textsuperscript{75} This solitude and intensely felt absence soon develops into a political and philosophical statement on “the dependent and oppressed state of (women).”\textsuperscript{76} Wollstonecraft draws out the contradictions inherent in the restrictions placed on

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{75} Wollstonecraft, Letters, 89.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
women when she writes that “I dread lest (my daughter) should be forced to sacrifice her heart to her principals, or her principals to her heart.”\textsuperscript{77} This oppressive choice imposed by society on women – that they can be either emotional or political – is a tension that Wollstonecraft dissolves through restructuring subjectivity and deliberate acts of self-fashioning. Even the logical sequence of thought that leads from the author missing her daughter to a political statement on the oppression of women, contradicts the division between head and heart. Wollstonecraft is defiantly both sentimental mother and political activist. This is an excellent example of what Ingrid Horrocks describes as Wollstonecraft’s “delicate balancing act that sets the adventure of a performed self alongside, and frequently in the service of, an analysis of the wider world that is filtered through highly personal observations.”\textsuperscript{78} I would add to this that the landscape in which these observations take place increases the intensity of the solitary, melancholic tone that is often key to developing these complicated critiques of social structures. Here the lonely coast provokes a mother’s anxiety about who her daughter will grow up to become, and this in turn gives force to her political reflections on women’s oppressed state. The ‘performed self’ that Wollstonecraft develops, a self in which politics and sentiment intertwine, shows how the author’s development of subjectivity in this text has radically emancipatory implications.

\textit{Aurora Leigh} takes up a similar project, continuing to question simplistic stereotypes of female identity by foregrounding characters that struggle with the dualisms that would restrict their subjectivities. Although Lady Waldemar is the villain of the narrative, her story explores this basic problem of binaries for women’s identities. Lady Waldemar’s tragedy is that she finally succumbs to the pressure

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{78} Horrocks, introduction to \textit{Letters}, 29-30.
placed on aristocratic women to adopt the appearance of having a heart, with none of the principles that substantiate it. Illustrating this point, in her final letter she asks

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Have we business, in our rank,  
With blood i’ the veins? … 
A rose is pink and pretty without blood, 
Why not a woman? 
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Despairing, Lady Waldemar here illustrates the intense sorrow of being cut off from her own feelings; she is deprived of her own humanity by society’s demand that she look pretty. Her tragedy is that she merely acts the part that society dictates, unable to explore her own subjectivity independent of oppressive social norms. The echoes of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* can be heard in EBB’s characterisation of Lady Waldemar. This aristocratic woman has played the part dictated to her by men, however she did not hear Wollstonecraft’s exclamation: “How grossly do they insult us who thus advise us only to render ourselves gentle, domestic brutes!” 80 Where we find Wollstonecraft “confidently assert that (women) have been drawn out of their sphere by false refinement,” 81 EBB expands on this and paints the image of a woman who has lost herself in false refinement.

Lady Waldemar has her humanity dried out of her, due to her aristocratic class; at the other end of the social ladder, Marian Erle is threatened with drowning along with other poverty-stricken women. Marian describes how Lady Waldemar abandons her, and how she is raped and cast out before being denied work because of her unmarried status. As previously mentioned, Marian recalls this experience by comparing herself to a “little stone, called Marian Erle.” 82 She argues that the word

79 *Aurora Leigh*, 9.126-130.
81 Ibid., 31.
82 *Aurora Leigh*, 6.811.
‘harlot,’ imposed on her by society, has made her feel “ground and tortured by the incessant sea.” Here the ocean is the destructive power of society that threatens to deny subjectivity to unmarried mothers, forcing them to choose either marriage, or social isolation and possible death along with the label of ‘harlot.’ Marian’s tragedy exemplifies the fate of unmarried mothers, with the ocean imagery calling attention to the social problems that faced English women at this time. However, EBB does not leave this character to drown with “the swooning sickness on the dismal sea” but instead empowers her with a second life, captured in the language of the resurrection. Marian looks at her child “drinking him in as wine” and becomes “self-forgot… drowning in the transport of the sight.” She refuses and forgets the self that would be imposed on her by society; rejecting the identity of a harlot, Marian is instead cast as a saint. In this alternative act of drowning Marian claims an expansive subjectivity, a selfhood that transcends dualisms.

Looking out across the ocean, the narrator of Wollstonecraft’s Letters Written During a Short Residence also imagines a new kind of expansive, artistic subjectivity. An excellent example of this can be found in Letter Eight, in which Wollstonecraft stands at the edge of the “unruffled deep” around which “everything seemed to harmonise into tranquillity.” She continues, describing this moment of artistic pleasure in which “my very soul diffused itself in the scene – and seeming to become all senses, glided in the scarcely agitated waves.” If “one of Wollstonecraft’s primary aims is to deconstruct the historically specific mode of masculine subjectivity

83 Ibid., 6.809-811.
84 Ibid., 6.1209.
85 Ibid., 6.599, 6.604-605.
86 Wollstonecraft, Letters, 97.
87 Ibid.
that Imlay was asking her to inhabit,“88 then this scene shows how important the ocean is in enabling the narrator to imagine an alternative, expansive identity, one that is fluid and sensual. The ocean becomes a space where Wollstonecraft can literally and imaginatively remove herself from the dominant social norms circumscribing subjectivity. Instead she is able to embrace a “sacralised sensualism”89 that is as expansive and energetic as the ever-moving ocean.

Wollstonecraft reimagines female identity in terms of a melancholy, solitary wanderer who philosophically critiques society and politics. By prioritising the importance of the imagination in constructing a politically active female self, Wollstonecraft paves the way for EBB to develop her theories on women in art, poetry and politics in Aurora Leigh. As Hutchings points out, Wollstonecraft offers “an early and remarkably potent critique of gender essentialism.”90 She does this not only by critiquing the divide between women and men in terms of education, but also by imagining a subjectivity that escapes the bounds of gender, in which the intellect thrives. Wollstonecraft achieves this by imagining an expansive, imaginative female subjectivity as she ventures out across the ocean. Beginning Aurora Leigh with the “murmur of the outer-infinite”91 to which all living things must return, and ending the epic with visions of the flood and then the new dawn of Revelations, EBB also imagines a new kind of identity for her heroine. If “it is (the) shared, confrontational,

89 Taylor, Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination, 126.
90 Hutchings, Romantic Ecologies, 71.
91 Aurora Leigh, 1.12.
emancipatory right to language which marks Barrett Browning’s sense of herself,“92 then this is a language that she inherits from Wollstonecraft.

Towards the end of her narrative, Aurora reflects on the sacrifices that she has made to become a successful poet – namely, rejecting Romney’s proposal. In a moment of despair, she wishfully imagines drowning, watching the cascade of water flow above her lifeless eyes. Desiring first to repress her memories and bury them, like Alaric, under a river, she goes on to covet “The Dead’s provision on the river-couch,/ With silver curtains drawn on tinkling rings!”93 This tempting image of death calls to mind the frivolous silks and luxuries that do consume Lady Waldemar. Aurora rejects this “melancholy Deep” and calls on God to “Sustain me, that with thee I walk these waves,/ Resisting!”94 Aurora, powerfully striding out over the waves that seek to suck her down, becomes an image of Christ. Now, from her position above the waves, she finds “No way to truth laborious”95 and can walk on alone. The expansiveness and fluidity of the ocean provide the perfect setting on which to stage this psychological drama of temptation and truth. With her complicated women characters and the long meditations on women’s place in art, literature and politics, *Aurora Leigh* continues to think through the ramifications of Wollstonecraft’s politics of self and the imagination as dramatised in *Letters Written During a Short Residence*.

In Letter Fifteen, Wollstonecraft experiences a similar spiritual encounter with mortality when she is faced with a cataract so magnificent that the spectacle pushes

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93 *Aurora Leigh*, 7.994-995.
94 Ibid., 7.1033-1035.
95 Ibid., 7.1039.
her imagination to the bounds of her own existence. Just as a view of the ocean had
previously inspired the traveller’s thoughts, here the rushing water has such a
profound effect that the narrator’s “soul was hurried by the falls into a new train of
reflections.”96 The constant movement and mystery of the dark water tempts the
narrator to take flight from existence, and the confinements that seem to accompany
the earthly body. She writes:

   The impetuous dashing of the rebounding torrent from the dark cavities which
mocked the exploring eye, produced an equal activity in my mind: my
thoughts darted from earth to heaven, and I asked myself why I was chained to
life and misery?97

Here the dynamic shuttling between the water, the narrator’s mind, and back again
expands to take in all of heaven and earth. More than just a chilling presentiment of
her second suicide attempt, this passage reflects a complicated and energetic
psychological world being created in relation to the waterfall. Just as Aurora is
tempted to lose herself in the river, reflecting that humans “covet for the soul, the
body’s part/ To die and rot,”98 so too does Wollstonecraft believe that to be chained to
the body would be a version of hell. In *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*

Wollstonecraft offers a forceful “description of damnation” as a state in which the
spirit “hover(s) with abortive eagerness round the defiled body, unable to enjoy
anything without the organs of sense.”99 Wollstonecraft argues that this is the state to
which women are reduced because, if their minds are not cultivated “women are made
slaves (to their senses).”100

97 Ibid.
98 *Aurora Leigh*, 7.1000-1001.
100 Ibid.
Wollstonecraft imbues her experience of the waterfall with political striving for intellectual equality. Rather than leave her readers with an impression of misery, she goes on to describe how “the tumultuous emotions this sublime object excited, were pleasurable.”\textsuperscript{101} Again the experience of the waterfall seems to reach into the narrator’s mind, the sight of it causing her soul to rise “grasping at immortality” – the energy of the cascade becomes the energy of her thoughts when she writes: “it seemed as impossible to stop the current of my thoughts, as of the always varying, still the same, torrent before me.”\textsuperscript{102} Such a moving scene went on to inspire many artists. As noted by Ingrid Horrocks, Richard Holmes suggests that Wollstonecraft’s experience of the cataract inspired Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan.’\textsuperscript{103} This impassioned reach over water toward immortality was not lost on EBB. Just as Aurora chooses to walk above the waves rather than allow them suck her down, so too does Wollstonecraft embody this classic sublime moment to reach beyond her immediate restrictions towards immortal life: “I stretched out my hand to eternity, bounding over the dark speck of life to come.”\textsuperscript{104}

The impact of the different kinds of oppressive identities for women is played out in \textit{Aurora Leigh}, the ocean threatening to subsume women yet also giving the poet sufficient space to re-conceptualise female identity in a fictional setting, just as Wollstonecraft did within the genre of travel writing. Wollstonecraft embraces multiplicity by creating an expansive subjectivity, a tradition that EBB continues to explore in her epic poem. Even though their texts are at a distance of sixty years from

\textsuperscript{101} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 135.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Richard Holmes, introduction to \textit{Letters} (1987), in Ingrid Horrocks’ introduction to \textit{Letters}.
\textsuperscript{104} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 135.
each other, these two works illustrate how terraqueous environments like the ocean, lakes, and waterfalls, constantly moving, seemingly infinite spaces, give these narrators room to re-conceptualise subjectivity. These environments provide a place for the solitary, melancholic female artist to refashion her own subjectivity independent of oppressive social norms.

**Critique of Imperialist, Industrial Capitalism**

Wollstonecraft and EBB destabilize Western notions of female subjectivity by creating expansive, imaginative identities for their narrators. In so doing they expose the violence and destruction of the relentless progress of capitalist industrialism, particularly for women. These authors do not demand that industrialisation end completely; indeed Wollstonecraft specifically argues that people need to have access to work. Instead they invite their readers to demand a radical revision of the classes and social hierarchies generated by capitalist industrialisation. The ocean acts as a prism, refracting the ills of globalisation and industrial capitalism, as well as offering possible liberation. The ocean enables the narrator to write from within society, embedded in the system she is criticising, and yet also analytically visualise this system from the outside, the land being the place of codified restrictions placed on women’s mobility.

The solitary position of the narrator plays a key role in facilitating critique of class division in industrialisation for both EBB and Wollstonecraft. Aurora does not position her intellectual work above physical labour, instead describing it in terms of hard work when she writes: “I laboured on alone. The wind and dust/ And sun of the
world beat blistering in my face.” Battling against the elements of a hostile world, this solitary worker describes her writing in terms of the bodily struggle of the labourer, aligning her efforts with those of the lower classes, indeed in service of, rather than above them. This idea that Aurora’s work is performed in the service of people of every class returns forcefully in the final book. Heat and the sun also return with Romney’s declaration that Aurora must “Gaze on, with inscient vision toward the sun,/ And, from the visceral heat, pluck out the roots/ Of light beyond him. Art’s a service.” This service becomes a clarion call that can “blow all class-walls level as Jericho’s.”

Wollstonecraft’s removal from society means that she can pointedly critique social structures and the inequitable division of labour and wealth that she perceives throughout her journey. Wollstonecraft adopts a more complicated position than simply condemning industry, allowing that “England and America owe their liberty to commerce, which created a new species of power to undermine the feudal system.”

This new species of power, driven by commerce, spread throughout the Empire thanks to technological innovations in sea travel. As Cohen notes in *The Novel and The Sea*, Sir Francis Bacon argued that the nautical compass, as well as gunpowder and the printing press, had changed “the whole face and state of things throughout the world.” These technological breakthroughs were instrumental to the new species of power that Wollstonecraft goes on to attack. In a prophetic voice she condemns the future of this endless ‘progress,’ warning that these great powers must “beware… the

105 *Aurora Leigh*, 5.421-422.
106 Ibid., 9.913-914.
107 Ibid., 932.
consequence; the tyranny of wealth is still more galling and debasing than that of
rank.”¹¹⁰ For Wollstonecraft this new kind of power structure in which the global rich
of England and America tyrannise over the poor was increasingly linked to the
development of industrial capitalism and by financial speculation specifically. She
makes it clear that the suffering of the most vulnerable people in society is caused by
the negligence and greed of those who profit from industry.

The isolation of the coast also lends a melancholy tone to Wollstonecraft’s
philosophical musings. This identity of the solitary, melancholy wanderer
nevertheless empowers the speaker with a critical distance from society, leaving her
in a better position to evaluate its progress. If Wollstonecraft’s “melancholic
subjectivity expresses a being-in-the-world that disengages from the status quo only
to better conceptualise it,”¹¹¹ then surely the ocean provides this speaker with both the
imaginative and the literal space needed for this kind of social critique. Wollstonecraft
captures this idea when she describes how “the view of this wild coast… afforded me
a continual subject for meditation.”¹¹² The narrator even carries her “speculations so
far as to advance a million or two years to the moment when the earth would be… so
completely peopled as to render it necessary to inhabit every spot; yes; these bleak
shores.”¹¹³ She then juxtaposes this view of teeming life and overflowing humanity
with that of a completely uninhabited world, picturing “the state of man when the
earth could no longer afford him (due to)... universal famine.”¹¹⁴ Unsustainable
growth followed by a depletion of the earth’s resources: these are imagined from

¹¹⁰ Wollstonecraft, Letters, 132.
¹¹¹ Jacques Kahlip, “A Disappearance in the World: Wollstonecraft and Melancholy
Skepticism,” Criticism 47, no. 1 (2005), 100.
¹¹² Wollstonecraft, Letters, 115.
¹¹³ Ibid.
¹¹⁴ Ibid.
Wollstonecraft’s position out on the ocean looking back at the rocky shores. From here “the world appeared a vast prison,” in which the extremes involved in the growth of society appear horrifically inescapable. Allowing her the space to ruminate on the future overpopulation of the earth, as well as to traverse the waves and consider new ways of being in the world, Wollstonecraft writes the threatening yet redemptive presence of the ocean into her work in order to re-conceptualise society as a whole.

Continuing her attack on the economic system that she believed to be unjust, Wollstonecraft links globalised investment and maritime trade with on-going social inequality. In the penultimate letter of *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft famously writes that capitalist speculators and contractors “like the owners of negro ships, never smell on their money the blood by which it has been gained.” Sea travel and the ocean facilitate her thoughts on slavery, becoming the site of Wollstonecraft’s criticism of how industrial capitalism turns humans into objects. Ingrid Horrocks describes the text as “a continuation of the utopian political project begun in Wollstonecraft’s two *Vindications*.” As in her two earlier political texts, Wollstonecraft makes social justice and politics central points of interest throughout *Letters*. The key difference is that the descriptive style of this genre allows the author to explore her utopian politics through illustrations of suffering and philosophical musings, as well as in the form of a political manifesto. An excellent example of this can be found in the way Wollstonecraft repeatedly rails against how

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115 Ibid. Here Wollstonecraft is expanding Hamlet’s famous line ‘Denmark’s a prison’ to encompass the whole world. Though it is beyond the scope of this thesis, a comparison between the way Wollstonecraft, EBB and other women writers of this period adopt the persona of Hamlet would make for interesting further study.

116 Ibid., 176.

117 Horrocks, introduction to *Letters*, 25.
“the accumulation of national wealth (in England) only increases the cares of the poor, and hardens the hearts of the rich.”

This accumulation of national wealth in England was a result of colonialism and particularly slavery, and the debate between accumulating wealth, or alternatively seeking social justice, continued into EBB’s era. Both Wollstonecraft and EBB foregrounded the plight of women to expose the violence of this system, EBB scandalously writing about prostitution to show how women’s bodies are turned into objects to be traded between men in rampant, unchecked capitalism. The intersection between capitalism, ownership of the human body and the disenfranchisement of women therefore continues as a point of tension in Aurora Leigh.

Writing at a later stage in the industrial revolution, EBB furthers her critique of the social divide generated by the march of industrialisation, foregrounding the plight of women in a similar way to that deployed by Wollstonecraft. This is made especially clear through the character of Marian Erle. A tragic point in Marian’s story is the sea voyage which enables her to escape from England. Believing herself to be bound to a far distant port, “to Sydney or to France,” she does not find freedom but is tragically raped in a brothel in Paris. Although never explicitly mentioning the slave trade or the Middle Passage, the transportation of human cargo haunts the portrayal of sea journeys throughout Aurora Leigh. Marian describes the discovery of her pregnancy by stating that she found “bedded in her flesh… Some coin of price.” This image of the unborn baby as a coin reminds readers, particularly American ones, that an enslaved woman’s worth increases if she is pregnant. The

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118 Wollstonecraft, Letters, 168.
119 Aurora Leigh, 6.1207.
120 Ibid., 6.679-681.
reader is left to draw the comparison between the practice of paying for women’s bodies through prostitution and owning human bodies in slavery – two violent extremes of capitalist ownership.

Oluadah Equiano’s famous autobiography recounting his experience of the slave trade and the Middle Passage stands as a haunting background to Marian’s story of transportation. In this widely read narrative, Equiano remembers his sister and laments that, being sold into slavery, she most likely suffered “the lash and lust of a brutal and unrelenting overseer.”  

John Newton’s pamphlet *Thoughts Upon the African Slave Trade* also brought the injustices of the slave trade to the public, with the first edition of this pamphlet selling out completely in 1788.  

Later he recounts the “wanton rudeness of white savages” on-board the slave ships and the rape and abuse that he engaged in, and which was rife throughout the Middle Passage.  

Although the slave trade itself was outlawed when EBB wrote *Aurora Leigh*, this moment in England’s history was deeply ingrained in EBB’s memory and is felt keenly throughout her poetry, most notably in *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point*.  

Indeed, as noted by John Miller, EBB continued to write poetry that rebelled against the institution of slavery throughout her career.  

Sarah Ficke argues that both *Aurora Leigh* and *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point* “attack the general hypocrisy and oppression surrounding single motherhood while not losing sight of the important differences that set the runaway slave and Marian Erle apart from one

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123 Ibid, 17.
124 EBB, *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrims Point*.
another." Colonialism and slavery are present in *Aurora Leigh* as examples of the effects of extreme commerce transported via ships throughout the Empire. Through the character of Marian Erle EBB combines these issues with those of class in order to criticise capitalist industrialism.

EBB’s oeuvre not only speaks to debates about slavery in America, but also addresses the charge of hypocrisy often levelled against English women writers who rail against slavery in America while children work in factories in their homeland. EBB attacks this argument specifically in her introduction to “Curse for a Nation.” This accusation is also present in the debate about women’s writing in *Aurora Leigh*. When Romney first proposes to Aurora he outlines his frustration with women who, seeing suffering only within the circle of their immediate neighbours, appear incapable of understanding the wider, systemic issues that cause this suffering. He states that women simply gather a few personal stories of individuals and “write of factories and of slaves, as if/ Your father were a negro.” Romney implies that women can only understand what is directly related to them, or told to them through personalised individual stories. In *Victorian Women Poets, Writing Against the Heart* Leighton reminds us that EBB is here writing of her own frustrations with sentimental literature and its tendency to focus on specific cases rather than attack the wider system of social organisation. Indeed Leighton argues that EBB’s “early reading of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication... gave her a lingering distrust of the fashionable sentimentalism which passed for creative ability in women*.”

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127 EBB, *The Runaway Slave at Pilgrims Point*.
Romney, EBB reminds her readers that suffering is not confined to individuals but that the world is

…half brutalised
With civilization, having caught the plague
In silks from Tarsus, shrieking east and west
Along a thousand railroads

Exposing the expansion of industrialisation as a kind of contagious plague that spreads from east to west, Romney here uses the trade of frivolous scarves to expose the violence behind this system that, according to him, women cannot comprehend. It is significant that Romney chooses Tarsus, the first meeting place of Anthony and Cleopatra, to narrate the spread of Empire as a disease. Aurora’s aunt condemns her for refusing Romney, admonishing the disinherited orphan with looks that Aurora felt “Still cleaving to me, like the sucking asp/ To Cleopatra’s breast.” Again, her aunt represents the social structures that economically bind women to men against their will, leading to a death not unlike that of Shakespeare’s Cleopatra. Romney asserts that women cannot comprehend the vast economic structures he seeks to redress, and therefore offers to help Aurora financially through marriage.

Marian Erle’s story exposes larger systemic social problems. EBB therefore suggests both in her own work, and by imagining the power of Aurora’s work, that women are more than capable of critiquing large economic systems. The above quotation regarding half brutalised civilization features railroads and not ships; however, globalised trade necessarily includes the movement of colonial ships, driven by greed for the wealth hidden in foreign lands. Romney’s description of the global curse of capitalism foreshadows the evil of Lady Waldemar’s export of her

\[130\] Aurora Leigh, 2.200-203.
\[131\] Ibid., 2.864-865.
unfashionable counterpart, Marian Erle. Lady Waldemar purports to be Marian’s friend but hypocritically works to get rid of a woman she sees as an inconvenient rival. Marian’s tragic sea voyage shows how wider social problems are made real in the stories of individuals. EBB’s character therefore disproves Romney’s claims that women can’t understand “universal anguish,” showing that it is women who suffer most from this universal, globalising spread of capitalism. While the world may be brutalised and diseased, however, people like Aurora can still understand, identify with and try to help disenfranchised women like Marian Erle by listening to their unique stories and providing them with safe havens. EBB’s telescopic vision, which moves from the specific story of an individual to the macroscopic problems of class, carries egalitarian implications that cut across the class divide. Wollstonecraft employs similar techniques in that she exposes the specific, material realities of the working classes in order to demand an end to political despotism.

Elizabeth A. Bohls argues that Wollstonecraft’s text “continues to evince an urgent concern with material conditions of existence, especially those of the poorer sort of Scandinavians,” and that this continues Wollstonecraft’s previous critique of Burke. Although she can look down upon members of the lower classes, particularly Marguerite, Wollstonecraft’s attention to detail and imaginative empathy vividly demand social equality. Letters foreground Wollstonecraft’s concern for the material conditions of the lower classes, such as in her attention to how “the servants have… an inferior sort of food here” before going on to state that “wages are low, which is

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132 Ibid., 2.209.
particularly unjust because the price of clothes is much higher than provisions.”

More than simply recording what she sees, Wollstonecraft expertly develops these comparative economic statements into a moving scene, reflecting on the plight of a single lower-class woman to hint at the oppressed state of her sex as a whole. After noting the low wages received by a local wet nurse, who can barely afford the care of her own children after the father “had run away to get clear of the expense,” the narrator is led to such painful reflections that she is “ready to ask whether this world was not created to exhibit every possible combination of wretchedness,” a depressing idea that she contemplates while listening to the girl in question sing “a melancholy ditty.” This is just one example of many in which Wollstonecraft combines economic and political observation with strong sentiment and philosophical reflection, in the process exposing how harsh class division has particularly cruel consequences for women.

In the scene outlined above, as in the majority of descriptions of misery in Letters, the narrator empathises and identifies with the subject in question, even to the extent that she describes her “heart writhing in anguish” at the sound of the other woman’s song. This identification of observer with subject represents a sophisticated critique of prevailing aesthetics, developed throughout Letters Written During a Short Residence. The descriptions throughout scenes like this one act as a “(critique of) disinterested contemplation by destroying the distance between a perceiver and a statically framed scene.” The active, emotional engagement of the narrator with the politicised subject then becomes an aesthetic rejection of what Jacqueline Labbe

134 Wollstonecraft, Letters Written During a Short Residence, 101.
135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 101
137 Bohls, Women Travel Writers, 151
would call the masculine “prospect view.” This way of critiquing class structure by imaginatively engaging with women of the lower classes is also explored in *Aurora Leigh*, particularly when Marian Erle tells her own story at the centre of the narrative, exposing how overarching social theories fail to explain and solve social problems because “life develops from within.”

As Barbara Taylor elucidates in *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination*, the imagination is a driving force behind Wollstonecraft’s feminist politics. Drawing on the arguments set out in Taylor’s key scholarly work, Mark Canuel continues to look at the imagination in Wollstonecraft’s idea of progress, arguing that *Letters Written During a Short Residence* disrupts the Enlightenment idea of social progress through reason and science. Here Canuel shows that, for Wollstonecraft, social improvement is not only achieved by empirically directed reason and scientific experiment, but that “justice, by which Wollstonecraft most often means general happiness or the common good – arises from an enthusiastic dream” and thus the power of the imagination. Bohls, Taylor and Canuel show that, for Wollstonecraft, artistic, imaginative understanding is very important to the development of egalitarian politics. The moments in which the narrator’s imagination appears to expand when she escapes the confines of society to wander along the wild coast, or to gaze as a tumultuous cataract, are just as important as her economic and political arguments.

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139 *Aurora Leigh*, 1.485.
The scene in which Wollstonecraft dines with the English vice-consul in Stromstad provides an excellent example. Her description of how, at this dinner, “the bottle was rather too frequently pushed about” and the women’s dress evinced an “ostentatious display of wealth”\textsuperscript{141} signals how luxury represents “a whole range of vices for Wollstonecraft… gluttony, indolence, vanity, and a general condition of decadence.”\textsuperscript{142} This contrasts startlingly with the enchanting boat ride to which the narrator escapes shortly after. She describes the scene from the boat as being so beautiful that “spirits unseen seemed to walk abroad, and flit from cliff to cliff, to soothe my soul to peace.”\textsuperscript{143} The reader is invited into the peaceful landscape, a scene in stark juxtaposition to the claustrophobia of aristocratic society. Wollstonecraft dreads returning to this structured society to simply “be shut up in a warm room,”\textsuperscript{144} instead revelling in the freedom that this expansive oceanic landscape can provide. The sound of a horn player in the rocky cliffs calls to mind the melancholy song of the wet nurse from the previous scene. Through these descriptions of the ocean and the coastline, Wollstonecraft gives her imagination sufficient space to criticise the vices of aristocratic society and the division of wealth that creates this class. Enjoying the rocky coast and the wildness of the sea, she is able to look in on society from its margins, exposing the luxuries of the rich as superficial restrictions and imagining instead a genial company of spirits who invite the reader, along with Wollstonecraft, to solemn reflection rather than to the superficial love of capital goods.

\textsuperscript{141} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 118.
\textsuperscript{142} Carol Howard, “Wollstonecraft’s Thoughts on Slavery and Corruption,” \textit{The Eighteenth Century} 45, no.1 (2004), 72.
\textsuperscript{143} Wollstonecraft, \textit{Letters}, 119.
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid.
EBB uses her characters to perform a particular kind of egalitarian politics with feminist undertones, in effect continuing Wollstonecraft’s imaginative attack on the class divisions associated with industrialisation. When told from the perspective of class, Aurora Leigh develops the story of an aristocratic, yet disinherited woman who chooses to earn her own independence, and does so by building a career as a writer and poet. Her artistic and commercial success give her the financial freedom that she needs to help her “woodland sister”\(^{145}\) Marian Erle, whom she discovers in the slums of Paris. Importantly, this discovery of Marian and her illicit child occurs after a lengthy meditation on the failure of the French Revolution, thereby revealing the limitations of the politics of “The Rights of Man” to help those who are most oppressed.

With this lengthy meditation on the failure of the French Revolution, it is as though EBB is explicitly reminding her readers that “Wollstonecraft seized on a key exclusion when she confronted the French revolutionaries with their failure to include women in the Rights of Man.”\(^{146}\) Indeed she dramatises this failure with Marian Erle’s woeful story, positing prostitution as evidence of women’s exclusion from universal rights, the outcome of an unfair capitalist system. Aurora’s lament that the bricks of the revolution were “Heroic dreams! … and sad, to use such lofty scaffoldings,/ Erected for the building of a church,/ To build instead a brothel or a prison,”\(^{147}\) foreshadowing Marian’s story of transportation over the ocean (a common

\(^{145}\) Aurora Leigh, 5.1095.
\(^{146}\) Bohls, Women Travel Writers, 140.
\(^{147}\) Aurora Leigh, 6.61, 63-65.
punishment for criminals) and subsequent rape in a Paris brothel.\footnote{148} Prostitution as an emblem of the state’s failure to protect women haunts the margins of this narrative, with the abandonment of characters like Marian’s friend Rose on Oxford St. Aurora condemns the practice in terms of consumerism, vehemently arguing that society’s leaders are “making offal of their daughters,”\footnote{149} the women here becoming the lowest form of meat to be consumed. Being reduced to a commodity is a fate worse than death for Marian, a fate that she refuses when she tells her own story.

The journey towards this redemption is perilous, the marketplace threatening to literally swallow the women in yet another apocalyptic flood. Aurora demands to hear Marian’s story and leads her out of the market place “As if I led her by a narrow plank/ Across devouring waters.”\footnote{150} Through this simile the intensely capitalist location of the marketplace turns into devouring waters that the two women must traverse. The roles of leader and follower are quickly reversed when Marian in turn insists that they instead go to her house on the outskirts of Paris. The evocative line is repeated, but now it is Marian who is leading Aurora “as by a narrow plank/ Across devouring waters.”\footnote{151} These waters represent the way in which hierarchies of class in industrial capitalism threaten to engulf the two women. Just as Wollstonecraft looked in on society from the ocean in order to critique it, so too do Marian and Aurora imaginatively stand above the threatening waters in order to traverse and move beyond the boundaries of class.

\footnote{148} This passage echoes marriage and the threat of sexual contagion in William Blake’s “London.” A comparison between Blake’s poetry and EBB’s later work would make for interesting further study, particularly considering EBB’s interest in Swedenborg.
\footnote{149} Ibid., 7.866.
\footnote{150} Ibid., 6.482-483.
\footnote{151} Ibid., 6.501-502.
Concluding Notes

There has, as yet, been no explicit attempt to write a history of the way feminist writers inhabit and imagine different landscapes. Although these texts are not explicitly about the ocean, reinventions of subjectivity, politics, work and social organisation all gain new levels of potency when placed in relation to the ocean’s mysterious depths. Further study of the importance of landscapes and environments to the development of radical literary politics would yield fruitful results. My practice of reading these texts alongside each other has led to the discovery that commonalities can often be found in watery scenes of drowning, waterfalls and the ocean. This methodology highlights concerns that both writers had in common, drawing out shared subject matter and even shared methods of critique. Writing within a hybrid form that allowed the narrator space to digress was the most immediate common feature of both texts. By dissolving traditional linear structures that would constrain their texts, and resisting gendered notions of a woman’s proper subject matter, both authors create texts that push against conventional genres by speaking instead to multiplicity and fluidity.

Subjectivity and solitude were other important themes common to these texts, and I am particularly indebted to Barbara Taylor for suggesting how intriguing and rewarding a study of solitude in feminist texts can be. As Taylor points out in her article, “solitude is one of the great debating points in Western thought, spooling out a string of oppositions – self versus society, private versus public, country versus city, contemplation versus action.”152 Both Wollstonecraft and EBB navigate through these oppositions to construct a new kind of subjectivity for their narrators. They provide us

with two oscillating poles of solitary existence, the solitude chosen by the intellectual woman in which she can develop her philosophies and her voice, but also the solitude that is thrust upon the independent woman by a society in which there is limited or no space for her. Does she stride confidently along dramatic coastlines, contemplating the end of civilization? Or does she remain in the confines of aristocratic society, to be dissolved like Cleopatra’s pearl?

I began this section with a short quote from EBB’s mother, teasing her daughter about the political views she shared with the notorious Wollstonecraft. More than just a system, these politics entail a radical reimagining of the borders of subjectivity. The ocean not only facilitates this, but its influence appears to reach into the minds of these narrators, helping to restructure their inner world just as they demand a restructuring of society. Wollstonecraft laments that women are forced to choose between head and heart, wandering alone along the coast to formulate an imaginative text that dissolves this binary. By positioning herself as a Romantic philosopher and a defiantly intellectual woman, Wollstonecraft formulates a subjectivity through which she can speak about politics and economics in the language of sensibility, with emotions adding poignancy to economic realities.

The vast economic implications of the ocean and sea travel are not lost on these authors; indeed one intriguing similarity is an ambivalent (at best) attitude toward capitalism. Most of this section of my thesis has been spent in mapping how these authors expose the violence of social hierarchies exacerbated by capitalist industrialisation. Sea travel and the traffic in women’s bodies, particularly in terms of slavery, form a key point for both authors. Both are sceptical of totalising theories of
social progress that would encourage trade and the accumulation of wealth as answers to social problems. Wollstonecraft and EBB criticise the inherent inequality of this economic system through the detailed descriptions of material hardships endured by poverty-stricken women. Whether it is the wet-nurse Wollstonecraft meets, or the story of Marian Erle, in both cases the reader is forced to confront the violence inherent to the class structures of industrial capitalism. In addition to exposing the hardships of lower class women, they attack the overly materialistic values of the wealthy classes. Both texts feature narrators who escape the confinement and cold heartlessness of aristocratic society. Instead these intrepid women turn to the ocean physically and imaginatively, to reinforce their arguments and to seek expansive, liberating alternatives.

Both Wollstonecraft and EBB ultimately aim to empower women to speak out against the structures that would oppress them and which oppress others. The difference in their approaches speaks volumes to how history was unfolding around them. The ocean and watery places like cascades and rivers play an important if subtle role throughout their work. This makes it possible to draw conclusions regarding the importance of place, travel, independence and imagination to the development of feminist ideas throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth century. The ocean offers both of these women the paradoxical opportunity for solitary space and independence, yet it also threatens them with melancholy loneliness, inevitable for the woman who chooses her own path. Perhaps this is why the pathless expanse of the ocean is such a dangerous yet fruitful place for the imagination in these texts.
Chapter 2

William Wordsworth and Elizabeth Barrett Browning

EBB was fluent in Wordsworth’s language, and in her own poetry she boldly reimagines scenes and themes from his work to fashion her own revolution. In her article “Writing the self/Self Writing William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*” Anne Mellor argues that the self or consciousness constructed in Wordsworth’s epic poem is the “heroic, masculine self (that) depends upon the conventions of classical Western literary narrative.”¹ This article makes several convincing points, especially in reference to the relationship developed by the speaker of *The Prelude* with nature, usually gendered female. Many of these tropes are echoed in *Aurora Leigh*, particularly that of replacing the human mother with Mother Nature. Mellor argues that “by the end of *The Prelude*, female Nature is not only a thousand times less beautiful than the mind of man, but has lost her gendered Otherness,”² thereby becoming a possession of the male speaker. This chapter dedicates itself to understanding how EBB writes women into this masculine project of poetic self-writing, paying close attention to the relationship the poet constructs towards the body and the natural world. Both Wollstonecraft and EBB write about desire and the ability to transcend the body’s material limitations. This is similar to what Mellor describes as Wordsworth’s ideal “pure ego,”³ a kind of escape from materiality. The material needs of the lower classes (particularly of exploited women) and the parallel desecration of the natural world are recurring themes throughout *Letters* and *Aurora*.

² Ibid., 298.
³ Ibid., 297.
Leigh, complicating the move towards transcendence. This chapter maps how EBB builds upon Wordsworth’s poetry in order to blur the distinction between pure poetic ego and bodily or natural concerns to create her philosophy that “life develops from within.”

Herbert F. Tucker and Helen Cooper both highlight the importance of the symmetrical, concentric composition of Aurora Leigh, with Book Five being the central point around which the narrative turns and unfolds. In this book we discover that EBB’s driving mission was to create something new, with her famous statement that the poet’s “sole work is to represent the age.” To achieve this lofty goal, poets must “exert a double vision,” looking backwards as well as forwards with the aim of creating a new kind of poetry but also to forging a space for a woman’s voice in “this live, throbbing age.” Looking back to her Romantic predecessors, EBB sought to refashion her literary inheritance, drawing upon and changing earlier poetic traditions. This can be seen most clearly in her relationship with Wordsworth.

In his Essay Supplementary to the Preface Wordsworth presses upon his reader the importance of originality in poetry, and the poet’s crucial task to shape the reader’s taste. According to Wordsworth, if an author’s work is original – a necessity of good poetry – “he will be called upon to clear and often to shape his own road:

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4 Aurora Leigh, 8.36.
5 Tucker, Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 381; Cooper, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 154.
7 Ibid., 5.184.
8 Ibid., 5.203.
will be in the condition of Hannibal among the Alps." Carving out a new road through the snow, the poet is charged with the task of heroically leading the way into new poetic terrain. As a poem that rushes into aristocratic drawing rooms at one moment, and into the slums of Paris at the next, *Aurora Leigh* stands as a direct challenge to public taste. EBB takes up Wordsworth’s mission to become a second Hannibal, clearing a new road and challenging the depiction of women in poetry as well as the way that the public reads poetry by women. This is at once a Wordsworthian gesture (a female Hannibal sets out to forge a place for women in epic poetry) and a challenge to Wordsworth – had his revolution gone far enough? EBB extends Wordsworth’s attack on custom and conventionality by challenging readers’ expectations of a woman poet in terms of content, genre and style.

EBB’s admiration for Wordsworth became an important weapon for her as a poet seeking to refashion conservative public opinion of what women should write about. In order to draw out the ways in which EBB refashions Wordsworth’s philosophy on poetry, my thesis will assess those moments in *Aurora Leigh* when EBB directly alludes to, revises and builds upon Wordsworth’s poetry. This will require analysing rivers, lakes and oceans, particularly scenes of drowning in both *The Prelude* and *Aurora Leigh*. For both poets these mysterious ecosystems represent a liquid space between life and death, powerful enough to bring poet and reader toward an understanding of a greater truth. For Wordsworth this truth lies in the immortality of poetry, a philosophy that EBB re-imagines by placing it in the hands of a woman navigating modern life in the midst of the industrial revolution. However, before tracing the development of these specific poetic scenes from Wordsworth to

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10 Ibid., 195.
EBB, it is important to spend a moment looking at the contextual prose and criticism that framed this moment of poetic unfolding.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Prose

Correspondence and Criticism

To begin to understand how Wordsworth is present in *Aurora Leigh*, it is important to draw out the complexities of EBB’s relationship with the poet laureate. Reading through her correspondence and her review of Wordsworth’s 1842 *Poems,*\(^{11}\) it becomes apparent that EBB thought of Wordsworth not only as an individual, but also as one of the leaders of an experimental, revolutionary poetic movement set forth in *Lyrical Ballads* and *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads.*\(^{12}\) In the 1800 *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* Wordsworth describes the poems as an “experiment” with language.\(^{13}\) This experiment famously used “the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society” to represent “every subject which can interest the human mind.”\(^{14}\) The goal of this new form of poetry was nothing less than uncovering the truth hidden in “the primary laws of our nature.”\(^{15}\) In order to eschew the changeable opinions of the fashionable reading public, Wordsworth makes one demand of his reader: “that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others.”\(^{16}\) Underlying this

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\(^{13}\) Ibid., 11.


\(^{16}\) Ibid., 38.
appeal for independent, genuine interpretation is an implicit rejection of fashionable literary taste. By asking the reader to decide for himself, Wordsworth is striving to create a new mode of reading for a new kind of poetry. Of course, EBB begins her revolution by questioning this masculine pronoun, asserting a female reader, writer and poet – the reader and poet should both write and read for herself. In her admiration for the literary tradition that Wordsworth helped to create, EBB discovered an experimental form of writing that was nevertheless rooted in literary history; a form of poetry that could use its own literary inheritance to refashion the way that poetry is read by the public.

Importantly, her reading of these influential texts gave EBB the courage to write against the dictates of public opinion. In her letters and prose she consistently reminds her readers that Wordsworth was “both simple and unpopular, when he was most divine.” This fortified her conviction that aspiring poets should not be dismayed by unpopularity or even social ostracism. EBB asks Mary Russell Mitford if great poets “ever did adapt their writings to the public taste,” using Wordsworth as an example of a poet who would rather “have to do… with humanity which is grand world-wide and time-wide, than with that limited changeful capricious thing, called a public.” Instead of adapting to public taste, it is the poet’s duty to refashion that taste. The language EBB uses here foreshadows her philosophy on art developed in Book Five of *Aurora Leigh*, where the speaker claims that “whosoever writes good poetry/ Looks just to art” and therefore will not “suffer the best critic known/ To step into his sunshine of free thought.” The courage EBB gains from her understanding

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17 EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, 24th September 1850, in *TBC*, 16:198.
18 EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, 20th April 1842, in *TBC*, 5:222.
19 *Aurora Leigh*, 5.251, 254-255.
of Wordsworth’s career contributes in no small measure to her determination to add to what she saw as an on-going poetic revolution, to continue what Wordsworth describes as “the act of doing well what is worthy to be done, and what was never done before.”

In doing so EBB re-imagines Wordsworth’s revolution to suit her own time, forging a space in literature where a woman’s voice could lay claim to all the gravitas of epic poetry.

Hanging his image above her desk, EBB half-jokingly exclaimed “I write under the eyes of Wordsworth!” and indeed this imaginary gaze permeates EBB’s poetry. It is too easy for EBB’s critics to brush aside her relationship with Wordsworth as mere hero-worship. Rather, I believe that her admiration for Wordsworth comprises a critical engagement with, and indeed an extension of, the poetic tradition that he helped to create. Holding him firmly in her gaze, EBB challenges and extends the poet laureate’s philosophy of poetry. EBB’s respect for Wordsworth exemplifies her love of Romanticism, a literary revolution that offered her the space to rewrite and re-conceptualize Wordsworth’s tradition. Wordsworth’s poetry and prose exert a significant influence throughout *Aurora Leigh* to the extent that his work is explicitly referenced. These are the moments when EBB criticises and challenges Wordsworth’s revolution, thus extending the revolution’s meaning and influence.

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21 EBB to Julia Martin, 22nd October 1842, in *TBC*, 6:116.

22 One article that puts this argument forward is Kathleen Blake’s “Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Wordsworth: The Romantic Poet as Woman,” *Victorian Poetry* 24, no.4 (1987).
In her letters of 1837, EBB reflects on meeting Wordsworth. She confesses to Mary Russell Mitford that even the idea of meeting him seemed “quite a dream.”

Indeed, throughout all her letters EBB remains an ardent admirer. Nevertheless ambivalence about setting Wordsworth above all others forms an important aspect of the critical relationship she develops with her literary predecessor. In a letter to Julia Martin, dated 23rd January 1837, she writes that she was “not at all disappointed in Wordsworth” but she follows this immediately with: “altho’ perhaps I should not have signalled him from the multitude as a great man.” She then teases out the contradictions between her perception of him and the actual man himself, describing how “his eyes have more meekness than brilliancy,” before reverting to her old faith in his poetry and claiming “there is rather the solemnity & calmness of truth itself, than the animation & energy of those who seek for it.”

EBB remains a devoted fan; when her friend asks if she was “quite at ease” when speaking with Wordsworth, EBB, in one of her many lively exclamations, returns with “how cd you ask such a question? I trembled both in my soul & my body!” At the end of this letter she confirms that hearing Wordsworth recite a sonnet of Dante’s is still “quite a dream” for her. At this point it is important to remember that this is a social letter with sarcasm and jokes shaping gossip about a local celebrity. Later EBB and Robert Browning poke fun at the idea of the great Wordsworth needing to borrow an ill-fitting wig and trousers to go to a royal ball. From admiration to cheeky humour, EBB’s ambivalence frames her opinions of Wordsworth; she is careful to show that she maintains critical scholarly distance as a key part of her deep admiration. In her letters to her former tutor Hugh Stuart Boyd, EBB adopts a more serious, scholarly

23 EBB to Mary Russell Mitford, 15th August 1837, in TBC, 3: 269.
24 EBB to Julia Martin, 23rd January 1837, in TBC, 3:216.
25 Ibid., 221.
tone, developing a simultaneously critical and venerating argument that she also deploys in her review of Wordsworth’s collected poetry.

In her review of Wordsworth’s *Poems*, published in *The Athenaeum* in 1842, EBB vividly employs her extensive knowledge of literary history to impress upon her readers the revolutionary significance of *Lyrical Ballads*. Going beyond the scope of a review and instead arguing for the importance of the Romantic movement as a whole, EBB describes Wordsworth as “the poet-hero of a movement essential to the better being of poetry, as poet-prophet of utterances greater than those who first listened could comprehend, and of influences more vital and expansive.” Characterising what we now call Romanticism as “an awakening – a turning, at least upon the pillow, of some who slept in mediocrity,” EBB places Wordsworth and Coleridge at the vanguard of this poetic revolution. She asserts the importance of the tradition set forth and reiterated in *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, in which Wordsworth demanded that poetry’s “object is truth; truth which is its own testimony” rather than the “gaudiness and inane phraseology” of other contemporary writers. In her review EBB concedes that “our great poet might… confound, for some blind moment… nature with rusticity, the simple with the bald, and even fall into vulgar conventionality.” Maintaining her high opinion of him, yet criticising some aspects of his later work, the greatest compliment EBB gives to Wordsworth’s volume is that it is “worthy of its forerunners” (being his earlier verse).

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26 EBB, “Review of Poems, Chiefly of Early and Late Years, Including the Borderers, a Tragedy by William Wordsworth.”
27 Ibid.
This admiration for what Wordsworth had achieved for English poetry, combined with a certain critical distance, is a position held by EBB since her youth. She states this clearly in her 1843 letter to Hugh Stuart Boyd, her Latin and Greek tutor who became an important intellectual correspondent. In a letter dated 14\textsuperscript{th} May, 1843, in what can only be a rebuttal in an on-going debate, EBB makes her position on Wordsworth quite clear:

He was a great poet to me always – and always, while I have a soul for poetry, will be so: yet I said & say in an under-voice, but steadfastly, that Coleridge was the grander genius- There is scarcely anything newer in my estimation of Wordsworth than in the colour of my eyes!\textsuperscript{29}

Reading between the lines of this short passage we discover EBB’s complicated relationship with Wordsworth. She does not simply consume his poetry uncritically, rather her opinion of his verse is a considered, rational one and she makes this clear to her readers, be they Hugh Stuart Boyd or readers of The Athenaeum. EBB is not the changeful, capricious public that both she and Wordsworth despised, but a critic with steadfast, long-held views. Her insistence on the authenticity and credibility of her judgments on Wordsworth are also a riposte to wider sections of conservative society that would limit women’s abilities to critique great poets. Although she venerates Wordsworth as a great poet, EBB is careful to demonstrate an understanding of his work in relation to his contemporaries and the wider literary field. At this point it is important to remember the conservative opinions entertained by some literary magazines about women critics and poets.

\textsuperscript{29} EBB to Hugh Stuart Boyd, 14\textsuperscript{th} May 1843, in \textit{TBC}, 7:122.
In the June 1847 edition of *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, George Gilfillan infamously writes on the “singular fact” of female authorship. Among compliments of womanliness and the “lovely weakness” inherent to the sex, Gilfillan carefully points out that “we dare not say that we consider them (women) entitled to speak with equal authority on those higher and deeper questions, where not instinct nor heart, but severe and tried intellect is qualified to return the responses.” Gilfillan would have us believe that women are more emotional than rational, and therefore in their critical work on other authors women are “more candid and amiable in their judgments of authors and of books.” Rather than simply candid and amiable, EBB’s review of Wordsworth’s poetry, along with her comments on his work in her correspondence, specifically maintain the critical distance necessary for scholarly appreciation of his work. By demanding that her opinions be taken as seriously as those of male reviewers, EBB is refuting conservative opinions of women held by those like Gilfillan.

Wordsworth’s poetry and his critical work (particularly *The Preface to Lyrical Ballads*) offered EBB a place where she could critically engage with the poetic legacy left to her by the Romantics. Although very well educated, EBB was aware that her knowledge of Latin and Greek was not on the same level as that of men given the opportunity to attend universities. These arenas of masculine education not only cut her off from attaining further education, but also potentially restricted her critical repertoire. EBB ends another of her letters to Hugh Stuart Boyd, written not long after

31 Ibid., 362.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 359.
the one above, by declaring: “I do not understand the Greek meters as well as you do, but I understand Wordsworth’s genius better! and do you forgive that it should console me!”

Wordsworth’s poetry, in so far as it eschewed “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” and instead wrote in “the very language of men” provided EBB with an example that she could use both critically as a serious scholar, and imaginatively as a poet. Wordsworth influenced not only EBB’s verse, but importantly her confidence and belief in her own ability to write and understand poetry, as well as to critique male poets.

Throughout her epic EBB develops and unravels the tensions between her admiration for the male poet and her ambition to succeed him as a woman. Wordsworth’s work is present at every important point of *Aurora Leigh*, with quotations and direct references lending literary gravitas and complexity to EBB’s ambitious undertaking. Rather than simply mimicking her hero, however, EBB is extending upon and critiquing some of Wordsworth’s most famous scenes. While skilfully illustrating her vast knowledge of his work she simultaneously demonstrates an in-depth understanding of some of his most crucial themes, such as the development of the mind of a poet, the importance of solitude and nature, writing in the voice of the common people and foregrounding characters of the lower classes. Moreover, EBB is opening a space for herself, radically critiquing major tenets of her most important predecessor to construct a work for her own age and importantly, her own gender.

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Youth, Poetic Creativity and the Ocean in *Aurora Leigh*

In the first of his *Essays Upon Epitaphs* Wordsworth outlines the paradoxical interplay of mortality and immortality that occurs when a poet writes on the subject of death. For Wordsworth, epitaphs are important proof of the belief that humans have an immortal soul because the epitaph enshrines that immortal soul after the corporeal body has ceased to exist. Wordsworth describes the act of contemplating mortality in terms of a child standing “by the side of a running stream” watching its movement and asking “towards what abyss is its progress? what receptacle can contain the mighty influx?” to which the child must reply “a receptacle without bounds or dimensions; - nothing less than infinity.” This mysterious river that runs toward an endless ocean recalls Coleridge’s echoing line describing Xanadu as a place “Where Alph, the sacred river, ran/ Through caverns measureless to man/ Down to a sunless sea.” This mysterious river that is flung into the air to create a “mighty fountain” on its way to the sea recalls Wollstonecraft’s experience of the resounding cataract, and her contemplations of immortality that accompany the terrifying torrent. A river on its way toward an infinite outer ocean that comes to represent both death and immortality is a recurring theme throughout Romanticism, and especially in Wordsworth’s poetry, also appearing in *Ode: Intimations of Immortality.* In plumbing the depths of the poet’s inner world EBB also takes up this question, pondering infinity and claiming an immortal voice in her own poetry.

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EBB’s admiration for Wordsworth represents a lifelong, critical literary relationship. That Wordsworth was a major influence on EBB’s poetry can be seen in the many references to his work scattered throughout *Aurora Leigh*. In the following section I focus on scenes of oceans and lakes, comparing how these bodies of water frame the minds of both poets. Book One of *Aurora Leigh* immediately makes the link between the creation of the poet’s inner self and the presence of the ocean by describing youth and the existence of the soul before life in terms of an infinite ocean, recalling Wordworth’s *Ode: Intimations of Immortality* as well as sections of *The Prelude*. I therefore look closely at the first few stanzas of *Aurora Leigh* comparing them with Wordsworth’s *Immortality Ode* and scenes from *The Prelude*. Subsequent comparison of these passages from *The Prelude* with other sections of *Aurora Leigh*, particularly those involving the character Marian Erle, demonstrates EBB’s refashioning of her poetic inheritance to give voice to her feminist politics.

The first two stanzas of *Aurora Leigh* establish the themes and ideas that are explored throughout the rest of the poem. The first stanza in particular emphasises the importance of art and memory to understanding the interior world of the self. Here a simple simile compares the composition of this epic poem with the act of painting a picture for a friend to look at “Long after he has ceased to love you, just/ To hold together what he was and is.”

40 *Aurora Leigh*, 1.7-8.

41 Ibid., 1.4.
the narrator’s writing self and her better self act as the two oscillating poles that form her inner world, as well as the world of the poem.

EBB is playing out the way she wishes the poem to be read, the reader and artist in the author’s mind enacting a mode of reading that is intimate and generative. In her own way, EBB is answering Wordsworth’s assertion that “every author, as far as he is great and at the same time original, has had the task of creating the taste by which he is to be enjoyed.”\(^{42}\) In this first simile EBB is subtly changing the setting of epic poetry. Rather than invoking an immortal muse, she invokes her better self, and places her invocation in the context of an intimate friendship, remembered through art to create the self. EBB is also alluding to the way that *The Prelude* charts the growth of the poet’s mind. Maintaining the focus on the inner world of the poet, EBB places the psychological development of the epic poet within the intimate, personal context of a friend remembering a forgotten love.

Aurora the friend (or her better self) looks to the artwork to remember and measure the journey of the soul. In *Tintern Abbey* the river Wye acts in a similar way for Wordsworth.\(^{43}\) On the banks of the river he can measure what he was five years ago, who he is now, and imagine how he will be remembered after death. In a similar way to Aurora’s portrait, Wordsworth describes how the river has lived in his memory, helping to revive the “picture of (his) mind”\(^{44}\) just as the portrait reminds


\(^{44}\) Ibid., 62.
Aurora’s (hypothetical) friend “what he was and is.”45 Dorothy Wordsworth is famously the “dear, dear Friend” to whom Tintern Abbey is addressed.46 She also becomes a place where memories live when her brother writes: “in thy voice I catch/ The language of my former heart.”47 The placement of memory shifts towards the end of the poem when Wordsworth imagines a time in the future when his sister looks to the pastoral scene to remember him. Dorothy, her memory and her mind then become a place where the poet lives on, the poem turning around the existence of the self in memory. In the voice of Aurora, EBB uses the first four lines of this opening, eight line stanza to claim authority and to assert that this story is not “for others’ uses” but for her own.48 The next four lines contain the simile that introduces the complicated, psychological justification for the work. Although in blank verse, the subtle rhyme of ‘end’ in the first line with ‘friend’ of the fifth, signals the self-awareness of the writer. Her better self is reading her mind’s work and thereby highlighting the importance of art and memory “To hold together what (the poet) was and is.”49 In a similar way to William and Dorothy Wordsworth, both male and female characters are playing out here the psychology of this particular writer (Aurora Leigh), thereby introducing the complicated tensions between gender and artistic creativity that are to continue throughout the story.

The tensions between a female artist and male reader can also be found in Sonnets From The Portuguese, particularly in Sonnet Five.50 Here the female artist
addresses her beloved, thus inverting the traditions of the Petrarchan Sonnet in which a male poet attempts to seduce a coy maiden. This sonnet is particularly relevant as it both addresses and constructs the figure of the woman artist. Adopting the stance of Electra the speaker lifts her heart and pours out the ashes that it contained at her beloved’s feet, calling these ashes “red wild sparkles” and linking these embers to poetic creativity. She initially shows how delicate this relationship is: his foot could easily tread the embers out. However, the turn in this sonnet brings the poet’s forceful claim to artistic power when she writes that, if her beloved simply waits for the wind to blow then his laurels cannot protect him from “all of the fires (that) shall scorch and shred.” When read alongside the first stanza of Aurora Leigh this sonnet shows the complicated relationship between male reader and female artist that is later used to illustrate the inner workings of Aurora’s mind. Aurora’s opening simile foregrounds the importance of memory in creating the self that is so crucial for Wordsworth in Tintern Abbey, and later in The Immortality Ode. Aurora Leigh’s short introduction invites the reader to view the following story as one written by a speaker who, identifying herself as a poet, is also seeking to understand the artistic inner workings of her own mind.

It is no wonder then that the next image is one of a decidedly Wordsworthian ocean. The poet introduces herself “writing thus” by describing herself as “still what men call young.”51 Youth is an extremely important topic for Wordsworth, one that is recalled frequently throughout his poetry but especially in Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood. Here the memory of childhood

51 Aurora Leigh, 1.9.
gives the poet strength to face the “years that bring the philosophic mind.” Wordsworth’s *Ode* is an excellent place to explore his influence in *Aurora Leigh*, particularly because EBB refashions the journey to old age and immortality that Wordsworth charts in the *Ode*. For Wordsworth “the child is the father of the man;” the memory of youth and nature becomes “the master light of all our seeing” in our later years. EBB maintains these values of youth, memory and nature, but uses them to tell a different story, the story of a woman striving to become an independent thinker and artist.

Imagining the long journey from youth to adulthood as a voyage from the dawn of existence in the east, a dawn that rises over an everlasting ocean,

Wordsworth writes that

The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature’s Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended.

Aurora claims the vision and priestly status that Wordsworth bequeaths to the youth when she imagines her life in the same terms as those set forth in *The Immortality Ode*. Not only does her name recall dawn and “The soul that rises with us, our life’s star,” she also imagines life as a journey away from the power of nature, with pre-existence figured as an ocean:

I have not so far left the coasts of life
To travel inland, that I cannot hear

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55 Ibid., 72-75.
56 Ibid., 60.
That murmur of the outer Infinite\textsuperscript{57} Aurora takes up this image of an infinite ocean, describing her story in the same imaginative framework as Wordsworth. Childhood is very important for both poets in the journey towards understanding the poetic self. The murmuring memories of childhood provide one of the most important structural features of \textit{Aurora Leigh}’s plot: the narrative follows Aurora as she journeys away from the east of her childhood and then returns to the land of her mother and memories. For the speaker in Wordsworth’s \textit{Immortality Ode} the memories of nature in childhood “Uphold us, cherish us and have the power to make/ Our noisy years seem moments in the being of the eternal Silence.”\textsuperscript{58} In a similar way, Aurora listens for the murmur of childhood memories to lend solemnity to her current moment. With the sounds of a metaphysical ocean murmuring at the coasts of life, EBB is gesturing to similar murmurs that swirl through \textit{The Immortality Ode}, \textit{Tintern Abbey} and \textit{The Prelude}.

The sound of streams, rivers and the ocean wind their watery ways throughout many scenes in Wordsworth’s poetry. Their rippling presence is so often associated with light, creativity and memory of the younger self that EBB could hardly have failed to notice and adopt this important trope. \textit{The Immortality Ode} recalls the joys of childhood or “those first affections” felt in our early years, which later become “a master light of all our seeing.”\textsuperscript{59} It is the memory of youth that gladdens and supports the older, philosophic mind. The section of the ode that EBB is alluding to in her

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Aurora Leigh}, 1.10-13.  
\textsuperscript{58} Wordsworth, \textit{Ode: Intimations of Immortality}, 158-159.  
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 153, 157.
opening stanzas is indeed a reflection on the memory of childhood and the “truths that
wake/ To perish never” from these early affections. Wordsworth writes:

Though inland far we be,
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea
That brought us hither,
Can in a moment travel thither
And see the Children sport upon the shore,
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

Foreshadowing movements later in Aurora Leigh, EBB alludes to Wordsworth, adopting a trope used by him, in this instance the image of an immortal ocean to represent the place of childhood and memory. She then reimagines this ocean and writes women into this poetic tradition. Where the speaker in The Immortality Ode remembers solitary experiences of “meadow, grove and stream” as constituting his first affections, for Aurora it is the image of her mother at the nursery door that encapsulates the “shadowy recollections” of Wordsworth’s solitary rambles. For Wordsworth the nurse and mother are the child’s jailers, unknowingly trying to make him “Forget the glories he had known.” Aurora’s mother is at once the nurse of Wordsworth’s Ode, telling the child to “hush,” yet she also departs from this characterisation with her “sweet eyes… taking part against her word.” Her mother is simultaneously jailor and liberator, a paradox that introduces Aurora’s complicated relationship with her and with mothers in general throughout the poem. For Aurora, childhood and the sounds of “that immortal sea” are linked with the memory of her mother, especially as a tumultuous sea crossing separates her from her mother’s land of Italy while her voyage along the Mediterranean reconnects the poet with her

60 Ibid., 153-154.
61 Ibid., 162-172.
62 Ibid., 1, 154.
63 Ibid., 84.
64 Aurora Leigh, 1.17, 1.18.
65 Wordsworth, Ode: Intimations of Immortality, 166.
mother’s grave. Just as Wordsworth describes the immortal soul of man as an infinite ocean surrounding the land of mortality, so too does EBB frame the story of Aurora’s life with memories of childhood and the ocean. The key difference is that, rather than act as jailor, Aurora’s mother goes on to become a tapestry of historical, literary representations of women.66

Aurora’s childhood and youthful vitality are described using the language of the ocean. Upon arriving in England she lies quiet “like seaweed on the rocks… (suffering her aunt to) dry out from my drowned anatomy/ The last sea-salt left in me.”67 The education that her aunt inflicts on Aurora is an example of the custom and convention that was so restrictive for Wordsworth. Indeed, he rhetorically describes original poetry as “breaking the bonds of custom (and) overcoming the prejudices of false refinement.”68 EBB articulates the special significance that this statement has for women, revealing how English customs restrict a girl’s youthful energy in particularly insidious ways. The lessons that Aurora’s aunt inflicts upon the young lady represent the epitome of education for women that EBB (and Mary Wollstonecraft) found so restrictive and injurious. Metaphors of restricted freedom abound in Aurora’s deliciously sarcastic portrayal of her aunt’s “caged bird” life.69 Aurora is inducted into the gendered hierarchy of English society with books that only teach women their “right of comprehending husband’s talk/ When not too deep” and to “never say ‘no’ when the world says ‘aye.’”70 It is for her aunt, who “liked a woman to be womanly,” that Aurora “broke the copious curls upon (her) head… because (her aunt) liked

66 *Aurora Leigh*, 1.155-163.
67 Ibid., 1.383-384.
69 *Aurora Leigh*, 1.305.
70 Ibid., 1.431-432, 1.437.
smooth ordered hair.’”71 This is foreshadowed in the second stanza of Book One, where Aurora yearns for her “father’s hand/ (to) Stroke heavily, heavily (her) poor hair down” because she is “too young to sit alone.”72 Angela Leighton argues that this line proves its contradictory meaning, showing that at this stage in the writer’s life her father has to die “because the daughter is no longer a child, because she desires a rival lover and, finally, because she seeks the power of speech.”73 Wordsworth’s experimental poetry that sought to break with custom and triviality paved the way for EBB to attack the customs that would restrict women to a life of superficiality by imbuing her heroine with the power of poetic speech.

For Wordsworth in *The Immortality Ode*, the memory of “the mighty waters rolling evermore”74 brings images of childhood to the mature poet’s mind, becoming an inner light by which he can see himself. The crucial role that light, the ocean and memory play in the author’s self-fashioning forms a strong undercurrent to the poem, one that also runs through *Aurora Leigh*. Aurora is “a poor spark snatched up from a failing lamp,” the failing lamp being her mother who “could not bear the joy of giving life.”75 Here Aurora embodies a spark of light, childhood memories of her mother shaping the poet she becomes in later life. In Wordsworth’s *Ode*, the child has “light upon him from his father’s eyes,”76 and this childhood memory illuminates the mind of the older poet. EBB repositions this theme to highlight gender inequality – the ‘poor spark’ that Aurora gains from her mother’s ‘failing lamp’ shows that she inherits her mother’s unequal social status along with her femininity. Later in the

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71 Ibid., 1.443; 1.386-387.
73 Leighton, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 52.
75 *Aurora Leigh*, 1.31-34.
narrative Aurora empowers herself by selling her father’s books to pay for her journey back to Italy. Reminding the reader of the ocean of pre-existence, Aurora journeys along the Mediterranean, “The scimitar of ever-shining sea” to her mother’s land of Tuscany in Book Seven.\textsuperscript{77} Helen Cooper describes this as a “psychic journey, uniting poet and woman.”\textsuperscript{78} For Wordsworth the light of childhood and the memory of the infinite ocean construct the poet’s mind. Although her father’s classics might help her understand the ignorance of men, Aurora’s ability to speak in her own voice is ultimately aligned with her mother when she begins her story with: “I write. My mother was a Florentine.”\textsuperscript{79}

By undertaking the defiant journey back to her mother’s land of Italy, Aurora refuses to be like those “who waste their souls in working out/ Life’s problems on these sands betwixt two tides,/ Concluding – ‘Give us the oyster’s part, in death.’”\textsuperscript{80} She refuses to despair, instead appealing to God to “sustain me while I walk these waves/ Resisting!”\textsuperscript{81} EBB weaves Wordsworth’s oceanic metaphor through her story to situate Aurora’s youth, memory and her claim on the light of poetic maturity, refashioning the importance of these ecosystems so that their presence empowers her claim on artistic creativity and truth, as well as femininity.

**Light, Water and Movement in Wordsworth’s Poetry**

*The Immortality Ode* is not the only place where memory, light and the sound of water are combined in Wordsworth’s poetry. As mentioned earlier in this section,

\textsuperscript{77} *Aurora Leigh*, 7.451.
\textsuperscript{78} Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 171.
\textsuperscript{79} *Aurora Leigh*, 1.29.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 7.1024-1026.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 7.1034-1035.
the “sweet inland murmur” of the river Wye is the sound to which the speaker returns after “five summers” in *Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey.*

Here the memory of the “sylvan Wye” is cherished by the author, reviving him when he finds himself “In darkness, and amid the many shapes/ Of joyless daylight.”

The interplay of light and dark here illuminates another aspect of the river that is of value to the poet: its constant rippling motion that oscillates between sparks of light and shadowy darkness. In the city, the harsh daylight removes all joy from the author and its heat seems to cause “the fever of the world” which he then seeks to escape.

Rather than this harsh light, the poet instead searches for the gentler “gleams of half-extinguished thought” that come with the sound and motion of the river.

Here he finds “a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused,/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,/ And the round ocean.”

The murmur of the river becomes the “sweet sounds and harmonies” that the speaker imparts to his sister.

The river is the place where his memory shall live on in her after his death, thereby becoming a place of poetic immortality.

The image of light shining off the face of water can also be found in the first book of Wordsworth’s final work, *The Prelude,* where it is connected to poetic creativity and the conception of poetic immortality. The Derwent River occupies an important place in Book One with the speaker asking: “Was it for this/ That one, the fairest of all rivers, loved/ To blend his murmurs with my nurse’s song.”

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82 Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey,* 4, 1.
83 Ibid., 57, 52-53.
84 Ibid., 54.
85 Ibid., 59.
86 Ibid., 96-99.
87 Ibid., 143.
murmur of water harmonises the poet’s memories, gently composing his mind. Just as the sound of running water composes the author’s mind, the sight of the ocean also offers food for poetic creativity. In Book One Wordsworth positions himself literally above the ocean, remembering how “mine eye hath moved over many a league/ Of shining water.” At first glance this seems to be a perfect example of what Jacqueline M Labbe would call the ‘prospect view.’ In Romantic Visualities Labbe argues that, standing at a great height is an inherently masculine viewpoint that causes “the sublimation of the fixed into the fluid, of the solidly particular into the vastly general.” Labbe reasons that this movement from particular to general erases feminine aspects of the scene, including work traditionally done by women and even the women spectators themselves.

Although this can be a useful way to question Wordsworth’s poetry, the limitations of this argument begin to emerge when comparing it with Wollstonecraft’s depiction of the ocean, and further when this kind of ‘prospect view’ is taken up by EBB. Wollstonecraft describes the “ineffable pleasure” with which she gazed out to the ocean “losing my breath through my eyes – my very soul diffused itself in the scene.” Wollstonecraft’s famous scene finds intriguing echoes in Wordsworth’s imaginary eye moving over shining water. Wordsworth continues to describe how his eye seemed to gather, “Through every hair breadth in that field of light/ New pleasure like a bee among flowers.” Although they are not feminine, the smallness of hairbreadths and the particularity of one bee among flowers shows that, although he is

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89 Ibid., 577.
90 Labbe, Romantic Visualities.
91 Ibid., 36.
92 Wollstonecraft, Letters, 97.
looking out at a vast ocean, the speaker gleans insights from nature on a much smaller scale, though one which is no less important because of this. When Marian, Aurora’s “woodland sister,” finds herself literally or metaphorically above an ocean she too oscillates between the scales of very small and very large, allowing the reader to learn about the plight of lower class women in England through the particularities of Marian’s story. Fields, light and a devastating ocean all frame the character of Marian Erle, an excellent example of EBB’s attack on poetic convention. EBB places her work in the tradition of *Lyrical Ballads* by attacking “that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision” when she creates a character who is lower class, often homeless, who associates with prostitutes and who even has a child out of wedlock. For Marian the ocean is the overwhelming force of conservative society that would seek to annihilate her. When Marian tells Aurora the tragic story of her rape she points out the hypocrisy of social condemnation that has been heaped upon her as a single mother by arguing that the very word harlot “has dealt with me/ As when the hard sea bites and chews a stone.” In this simile Marian becomes a pebble “ground and tortured by the incessant sea,” a process which gives rise to a second life with Aurora. Both she and Aurora imagine themselves above an ocean not to command a prospect view, but to empower themselves with the ability to tell their own stories. An extension of the feminist politics that Wollstonecraft

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94 For further discussion on the importance of scale to Romantic poets see Heidi Scott’s *Chaos and Cosmos: Literary Roots of Modern Ecology in the British Nineteenth Century* (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). Scott draws the intriguing parallel between Wordsworth’s depictions of lakes as small ecosystems and the scientific methodology of looking at microcosms to understand macrocosms.

95 *Aurora Leigh*, 5.1096.


97 Christopher Connoroy traces the “ocean annihilating vision” of Western literature in his article “There was no more sea: the suppression of the ocean from the Bible to Cyberspace” *Journal of Historical Geography* 32, no. 3 (2006).


99 Ibid., 6.811.
imagined in *Letters Written During a Short Residence*, EBB also incorporates Wordsworth’s poetic technique of employing a telescopic view of the ocean to give weight and power to poetic creations. Aurora and Marian resemble Wordsworth looking across the ocean in search of poetic meaning when they walk together across devouring waters, towards the truth in Marian’s story.

**Marian Erle**

Just as Wordsworth uses the word ‘light’ in reference to the Enlightenment only to then move away from scientific rationalism and toward the natural world of bees and flowers, EBB alludes to Wordsworth’s poetry only to move it into a very different context. I began this section by emphasising the importance of Book Five in the overall plot of *Aurora Leigh*. This is where EBB places her manifesto on poetry and art, where she rushes into drawing rooms and where Aurora makes her decision to return finally to Italy. Book Six follows closely in its wake, with the most important point being Aurora’s rediscovery of Marian. This is the major event of Book Six, signalling a significant shift in the plot’s trajectory. Angela Leighton describes this event as a “delayed ‘sistering’… (that) points to an alternative love story, full of pastoral images of flowers and animals by comparison with which Romney’s marital cravings seem obsessively money-minded.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed Aurora and Marian’s union represents a rebellion against the dictates of an increasingly money-minded industrial revolution and the class separation exacerbated by capitalism. Helen Cooper also argues that this is an extremely important turning point in the plot, particularly because here Marian is empowered to tell her own story, rather than have Aurora tell it for her as in Book Three. According to Cooper, Marian’s “narrative disrupts

¹⁰⁰ Leighton, *Victorian Women Poets*, 103.
Aurora’s patriarchal discourse and transforms woman from scorned object to angry subject. Aurora is thereby empowered to identify herself as female.” Here EBB is participating in the tradition Wordsworth helped to create, a tradition that experiments with “the real language of men” in order to paint “human passions, human characters and human incidents.” In a recent article Eve Kobayashi argues that Marian Erle represents a reworking of Wordsworth’s blind beggar. While this article helpfully demonstrates the close relationship between Wordsworth’s interest in beggars and vagrants and the characterization of Marian, I will discuss here how Wordsworth is alluded to and then displaced at the important moment of Marian’s discovery in Book Six.

Book Six of *Aurora Leigh* opens with Aurora wandering through the streets of Paris, musing on the failed revolution, art and the place of poetry and philanthropy in society. She is now a successful poet, confidently writing that “we thunder down/ We prophets, poets – Virtue’s in the word.” This biblical assertion signals that Aurora positions herself on the side of Wordsworth’s “naked savage, in the thunder shower” and even alongside “Homer the great Thunderer.” She is another in the line of male poets, claiming this tradition and pitting herself against the overly materialistic philanthropists. However, her philosophical musings are interrupted when, mid-sentence, she exclaims “God! what face is that?” Marian’s face crashes into Aurora’s thoughts, interrupting both sides of the argument, complicating and thereby

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101 Cooper, *Elizabeth Barrett Browning*, 176.
104 Kobayashi, “Feeling Intellect in *Aurora Leigh* and *The Prelude*”
fusing the distinction between the poet’s and the philanthropist’s philosophy. Marian functions in this way at several points in the text: she rebukes Aurora’s conservative condemnation of unmarried mothers and defiantly tells her own story, one which disrupts the gender and class hierarchies of industrial society. Angela Leighton outlines the important way that Marian’s story acts as social critique in the plot, particularly because she tells her own story, not blaming herself (as Aurora initially does) but the men and social structures that assault and disempower her. Leighton argues that in Marian’s story “rape is part of a system of law that has little to do with wedding rings, but which does have something to do with class, power and specifically with “men”. Marian’s rape thus gathers a cluster of violence, masculinity and money, which sends small shocks in many directions through the poem.” One of these shocks functions to dissolve the clear boundary between poet and philanthropist that Aurora is constructing before she finds Marian. Her re-entry into the text unites the poetic tradition (the ‘we’ with which Aurora positioned herself, the masculine thunder of a male dominated literary canon) and the philanthropist’s concern with materiality. In short, she proves that both are necessary for human existence. The plot as a whole illustrates this point, in so far as Marian demonstrates that disenfranchised women do not merely want to be rescued by wealthy men or listen to poets proselytize at them. Rather, Marian and the class of women she represents desire both economic and spiritual independence.

The way that Marian complicates Aurora’s distinction between poet and philanthropist is played out in miniature in the reference to Wordsworth used by EBB to describe Aurora’s shock at rediscovering Marian:

108 Leighton, Victorian Women Poets, 106.
It was as if a meditative man
Were out dreaming on a summer afternoon
And watching gnats a-prick upon a pond,
When something floats up suddenly, out there,
Turns over… a dead face, once known alive …
So old, so new! it would be dreadful now
To lose sight and keep the doubt of this:
He plunges – ha! He has lost it in the splash

This intriguing scene shifts from the small-scale particularity of gnats on a summer’s
day to the grand themes of life, death and finally loss, the illusive pond being the
place where dangerous dreams unearth hidden, even repressed fears that the man
might secretly long for – “it would be dreadful now/ To lose sight”. Although many
men are meditative, this meditative man must be Wordsworth. In the final book of
*The Prelude* Wordsworth describes himself as “A meditative, oft suffering man”
whose voice and accents “shall blend/ Their modulation with these vocal streams,”
thereby combining meditation, poetic voice and the sound of rushing water. This
intersection of poetry, meditation and mysterious bodies of water is crystallised in
Book Five of *The Prelude*. Here we find a scene of drowning that is very similar to
the one EBB paints in the above quotation. In the midst of Book Five Wordsworth
remembers a moment in his childhood when “roving up and down alone,/ Seeking I
knew not what” he sees a pile of clothes next to Esthwaite’s Lake, belonging to a
drowned man.

In Book Five of *The Prelude* Wordsworth recalls sitting alone on the shore of
a lake, watching a motionless pile of clothes as “the calm lake/ Grew dark with all the
shadows on its breast.” This solitary meditation suspends both the reader and the

111 Ibid., 5.431-432.
112 Ibid., 5.439-440.
boy in a moment before the realisation of death. When the next day the “anxious

crowd” gathers to search for the drowned man,\textsuperscript{113} the boy stands apart from the group,

observing them yet remaining a detached, solitary figure. The almost gothic contrast

between the “beauteous scene” and the drowned man’s “ghastly face” might horrify

the reader, however the boy feels no “soul debasing fear.”\textsuperscript{114} Instead this spectacle

reminds him of sights his “inner eye had seen… among the shining streams/ Of faery

land, the forests of romance.”\textsuperscript{115} The boy filters this scene through his childhood

reading, his early romance reading combining with the striking scene to form his adult

mind and poetic taste. Not only does his reading render this scene less terrifying – an

emotion linked with debasement and vulgarity (the word ‘vulgar’ used in the 1805

edition) – but the spirit of these tales also endows the “sad spectacle/ With decoration

of ideal grace.”\textsuperscript{116} Instead of plunging after the dead man or fearing his spectral form,

Wordsworth transfigures the scene into one of “Grecian art, and purest poesy.”\textsuperscript{117}

Imaginatively, as well as spatially, the boy stands apart from the vulgar grappling
crowd. The boy is even separated temporally, the space of the night removing his
discovery from that of the crowd. Standing alone, Wordsworth takes this scene of
human mortality and describes it in verse to convey the immortality of ‘purest poesy.’

Later, in the fifth book of \textit{The Prelude}, he describes this striving for poetic
immortality as “that wish for something loftier, more adorned./ Than this common
aspect, daily garb,/ Of human life.”\textsuperscript{118} The hierarchy that aligns common clothing
with daily trivialities and below poetic truth is continued in \textit{Essays Upon Epitaphs}. In
the third of these essays Wordsworth warns that “if words be not… an incarnation of

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 5.444.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 5.448, 5.450, 5.451.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 5.454-455.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 5.457-458.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 5.459.
\item \textit{Ibid.}, 5.575-577.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the thought, but only a clothing for it, then surely they will prove an ill gift.”\textsuperscript{119} By leaving his clothes on the shore, the drowned man takes on the immortal aspects of truth and art that are as old and noble as ancient Greece and pure poetry.

The moment before she finds Marian, Aurora sees herself as a poet in the manner of Wordsworth. At the moment of collision, however, her actions contrast with Wordsworth’s in several important ways. The old, submerged truth of a woman forgotten and cast out by polite society rises up out of the market place to interrupt a tranquil summer’s day. Here we can find Wordsworth’s theory of poetry deployed in an unexpected way, particularly his argument that the meter of poetry offers pleasure because the reader finds “similitude in dissimilitude.”\textsuperscript{120} Here the similitude of a Wordsworthian scene is refashioned into dissimilitude by using it to describe something new and different: the previous poetic scene of a solitary boy witnessing the surfacing of a drowned man becomes an epic simile to describe the discovery of a lower class, single mother in the marketplace of Paris.

The solitary boy of \textit{The Prelude} understands drowning through earlier forms of writing and art. These assist him to immortalise the horror he has seen. As a writer committed to writing about “this live throbbing age,”\textsuperscript{121} EBB may well have thought that Wordsworth’s approach in this episode meant that the author does “lose the sight and keep the doubt” of the event.\textsuperscript{122} Where Wordsworth evidences the immortality of poetry by sublimating an experience of death into high literature, EBB references the poet laureate’s scene to signal to the reader that she is taking this high literature and

\textsuperscript{119} Wordsworth, \textit{Essays Upon Epitaphs}, 129.
\textsuperscript{120} Wordsworth, \textit{The Preface to Lyrical Ballads}, 34.
\textsuperscript{121} Aurora Leigh, 5.203.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 5.241.
moving it into a place it has never been before. Wordsworth finds literary inspiration by standing alone and witnessing death in nature. EBB shows her readers that this same kind of poetic immortality can, and indeed must be found, in the plight of lower class women in the midst of society. In a rush of action Aurora immediately renounces her solitary thoughts, plunging into the hub of the Parisian marketplace. Bumping into an array of different characters on her frenzied search, Aurora takes the reader diving through “Such a stream of folk,” each individual character “all with cares and business of their own.”

In doing so EBB shows that a woman’s difficulty in finding a place in this overwhelming flood of people, generated by the capitalist marketplace, is just as important, indeed even more so, than the contemplations of art by a solitary male poet.

Scenes of drowning metaphorically shape the mind and the inner world of understanding for both poets. However, with the character Marian Erle, EBB shows how the mind is formed through social interactions just as much as through philosophy and art. Marian is driven to consider drowning herself because, as an unmarried pregnant woman, she is fired and forced out of her home. Unable to gain employment she is again cast into poverty. Thus social interactions and structures, whether they occur in a drawing room or between an employer and an employee, dictate where a woman can go and indeed who she can be. Wordsworth witnesses drowning, and even imagines himself to drown, in order to plumb the philosophical depths of poetic understanding. Building on this, EBB uses these same images and scenes to expose the hypocrisy of social stigma that threatens to drown single mothers like Marian Erle. However, Marian Erle is not the only character that considers

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123 Ibid., 5.252, 5.253.
drowning. Indeed Aurora and Lady Waldemar are also characterised in terms of dissolving. This occurs for Aurora when she reaches the pinnacle of her poetic achievement in Florence. She imagines Florence as a drowned city and sits with an open book on her lap, dissolving into the environment around her and heralding a new dawn in the concluding two books of the epic.

**Prophet-Poets**

A lone figure stands at the shore, gazing at the ocean as though searching for something in the unending blue horizon, an image of eternity into which the individual loses herself as she dissolves equally into the landscape and into meditative contemplation. Both W.H. Auden and later Christopher Connorry note the importance of such scenes in the history of Western literature. From this position the poet contemplates the limits of existence, moving beyond mortality and blurring the boundaries between life and death. The question that this boundary suggests is of great concern to Wordsworth, especially in his *Essays Upon Epitaphs* where he describes looking out over a quiet country graveyard. Surrounded by epitaphs that proffer the virtues of the departed and carrying messages of love, the poet finds a sanctuary “where the traces of evil inclinations are unknown; where contentment prevails” in this quiet place.\(^{124}\) He states: “I have been affected by sensations akin to those which have risen in my mind while I have been standing by the side of a smooth sea, on a Summer’s day.”\(^{125}\) Although a graveyard is usually a place for sadness and mourning, Wordsworth instead discovers a site for honest contemplation, the many genuine epitaphs proving “the consciousness of a principle of immortality.”\(^{126}\) The

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\(^{125}\) Ibid.  
\(^{126}\) Ibid., 80.
disjunct between the epitaph and the reality of the flawed human life that it purports to describe becomes another point of interest for Wordsworth as he remembers strolling amongst the graves. Telescopically travelling from the grand view of the whole ocean to consider the small-scale vices of the deceased individuals, he begins to contemplate “the anxieties, the perturbations… by which the hearts of those who lie under so smooth a surface and so fair an outside have been agitated.”¹²⁷ Now that these darker elements of life come into view, so different from the epitaph yet a truth known to any reader, Wordsworth writes:

The image of an unruffled sea has still remained; but my fancy has penetrated into the depths of that sea; with accompanying thoughts of shipwreck, of the destruction of the mariner’s hopes, the bones of drowned men heaped together, monsters of the deep, and all the hideous and confused sights which Clarence saw in his dream.¹²⁸

Just as Shakespeare’s Clarence dreams of drowning and predicts his own demise (Richard III), so too does Wordsworth imaginatively plunge into the depths of the lives of those whose stories he is reading in epitaph. The ocean, especially at its murky depths, becomes a metaphoric place where the linearity of time dissolves and melts away so that the poet can strive for poetic truth. Indeed, Wordsworth’s aim here is to attain nothing less than “those thoughts which have the infinitude of truth,”¹²⁹ the art and philosophy that deserves immortality.

For both Wordsworth and EBB the ocean is a space between life and death, between mortality and immortality, in which the infinitude of poetic truth can be discerned. In her typically valiant, ambitious determination EBB lays claim to poetic immortality as vehemently as Wordsworth. At several points in Aurora Leigh the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 99.
¹²⁸ Ibid.
¹²⁹ Ibid., 129.
hero’s descent into the underworld follows the same trajectory as that taken by Wordsworth. Book Five of *The Prelude* offers another version of Clarence’s dream. Here Wordsworth imagines the apocalypse in which a great fire would “dry up Old Ocean, in his bed left singed and bare.” He laments the passing of time and mortality, asking why the human mind “gifted with such powers to send abroad / Her spirit, must it lodge in shrines so frail?” After these apocalyptic images and haunting complaints of mortality, the poet relates an equally apocalyptic dream in which an Arab rider carrying two books in the forms of a stone and a shell rides through a “boundless plain/ Of sandy wilderness” to escape “Destruction to the children of the earth/ By deluge, now at hand.” This dream culminates with the speaker being consumed by “the fleet waters of a drowning world” and awakening to a view of the ocean. Now awake, Wordsworth wishes that he “should share/ That maniac’s fond anxiety,” especially when he holds a book of great poetry, seeing it as a “Poor earthly casket of immortal verse.” Considerations of mortality, whether they be the mortality of those he sees in the graveyard or of the whole human race in the dream, take Wordsworth into the drowning world of the ocean, and paradoxically toward poetic immortality.

In an analysis of how *Aurora Leigh* fits within the epic genre, Herbert Tucker notes the importance of the shift towards the apocalyptic mode at the end of the narrative. Christine Chaney describes the usefulness of Tucker’s assessment of

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130 Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, 5.33-34
131 Ibid., 5.48-49
132 Ibid., 5.71, 5.97-98
133 Ibid., 5.137
134 Ibid., 5.159-160
135 Ibid., 5.164
136 Tucker, *Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse*
Aurora Leigh, stating that he “has interestingly argued that the overwhelming linguistic use of liquid, water, and dissolution in Aurora Leigh involves a rejection of selfhood binaries.”\textsuperscript{137} I would add that this dissolution of selfhood binaries is exemplified in the final marriage, and therefore is an essential aspect of EBB’s argument for the social utility of poetry – the self dissolves into the social, as well as into poetic immortality. Tucker argues for the importance of the apocalyptic mode in the closing scene of Aurora Leigh when he argues that Aurora decides to get married “at an alter of her own devising, in the bridal guise of New Jerusalem.”\textsuperscript{138} Essential to the end of the narrative, this apocalyptic mode begins as early as the end of Book Seven and is steeped in the liquid language of dissolution and oceanic flows.

In the final scene of Book Seven Aurora sits at the front of her house watching the evening turn to night until the moon “Lay out there like a sickle for His hand/Who cometh down at last to reap the earth.”\textsuperscript{139} Fearing that her poems are trivial “before the four-faced silent cherubim” she asks “With God so near me, could I sing of God?”\textsuperscript{140} The end of time and night falling over the whole earth is told in terms of poetry, and yet what type of poetry can possibly do justice to something so vast as the immortal presence of God? Experiencing this spiritual state of transcendence, Aurora does not read or write, but merely sits and witnesses the passing of time. In the final simile of Book Seven, Aurora compares herself to a “passive broken lump of salt” that dissolves in a bowl of water.\textsuperscript{141} Tucker argues that this “simile of dissolution (is)… a paradoxically passive act of expansive attenuation and diffusive

\textsuperscript{137} Chaney, “The Prophet Poet’s Book, 797.
\textsuperscript{138} Tucker, Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 384.
\textsuperscript{139} Aurora Leigh, 7.1300-1301.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 7.1304-1305.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 7.1309.
It not only recalls the way Aurora described her youthful vitality as “sea salt,” it also reminds us of the pearl Lady Waldemar wore that seemed to dissolve in her beautiful skin.

More importantly, the simile sets the scene for the opening of Book Eight. Just as Wordsworth falls asleep with a book of Cervantes open on his lap and dreams of a deluge that will consume the earth, so does Aurora sit looking out to Florence with Boccaccio’s tales open on her lap. Although she does not fall asleep, her effervescent imagination takes over and the encroaching night is described in terms of its “purple and transparent shadows” that had “flooded all the city… As some drowned city in some enchanted sea.” In his dream Wordsworth describes an intense desire to cleave unto the Arab rider and join him in his quest to rescue the books, in a similar way to which both Aurora and the reader are drawn “With passionate desire, to leap and plunge/ And find a sea-king with a voice of waves.” At this point the sensuously attractive king is completely imaginary; the reader is yet to be shocked with the discovery that he is indeed Romney. Instead Aurora takes both the reader and the city of Florence down to the depths of the ocean, with the duomo bell striking ten “as if it struck ten fathoms down.” By imagining herself submerged, Aurora gains poetic clarity and revelation when she writes: “Methinks I have plunged, I see it all so clear.” An indentation in the line prompts the reader to pause for breath, the pace of the poem, after accelerating up to this point, slowing to give steady solemnity to the next line. Aurora’s revelation now comes through the sense of hearing. Having seen

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142 Tucker, Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 79.
143 Aurora Leigh, 1.384.
144 Tucker, Epic: Britain’s Heroic Muse, 35, 37-38.
145 Aurora Leigh, 8.39-40.
146 Ibid., 8.45.
147 Ibid., 8.59.
everything so clearly after plunging into the flood, Aurora shifts senses and writes “In my ears/ The sound of waters. There he stood, my king.”\textsuperscript{148} This aural shock not only recalls the shaping murmur of streams and rivers that are so important to Wordsworth’s poetic ear, but also the “voice from heaven, as the voice of many waters” heard by St John in \textit{Revelations}.\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Revelations} is equally present in Wordsworth’s treatment of the sound of water, especially in Book Five of \textit{The Prelude}. Geoffrey Hartman argues that, for Wordsworth, “the music metaphor, associated with wind and water sounds, occurs in (a) context close to apocalyptic feeling,” this being the dream of Book Five that is “given an explicitly apocalyptic frame.”\textsuperscript{150} The sound of waters takes on biblical proportions for both Wordsworth and EBB. The immortal sea of pre-existence that began \textit{Aurora Leigh} now returns in the guise of the apocalypse.

For Wordsworth the experience of the apocalypse is a solitary one. The Arab/Cervantes rides alone through a desert wasteland devoid of other living things, his overwhelming mission being the preservation of books. Saving immortal verse from the fate of mortal humans is a dream that stays with Wordsworth long after he awakens. EBB uses similar apocalyptic tropes to assert her equal claim to solitude and poetic immortality, but she grounds this claim in social justice. The final marriage of \textit{Aurora Leigh} shows that, for EBB, immortal poetry is not only found in the “endless solitudes” of Wordsworth’s rider.\textsuperscript{151} Rather, for poetry to be truly great, it must bring about radical social change. The potential for post-apocalyptic social renewal is therefore the real subject of the final dawn of \textit{Aurora Leigh}. The final marriage

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 8.60-61.
\textsuperscript{149} \textit{Revelations}, 14:2.
\textsuperscript{150} Hartman, \textit{The Unremarkable Wordsworth}, 169.
\textsuperscript{151} Wordsworth, \textit{The Prelude}, 5.147.
between Romney and Aurora plays out the dynamic interaction between poetic truth and social good that form the two poles of the poem. This apparent opposition sets the narrative spinning with the rhythm begun by The Prelude, but in a quite different direction. Finally, the distinction between these two oppositions is dissolved. A reformed philanthropist, the now blind Romney not only concedes to Aurora that “art’s a service,” but indeed implores her to “breathe thy fine keen breath along the brass,/ And blow all class-walls level as Jericho’s.”¹⁵² This reimagining of Wollstonecraft’s egalitarian politics is told in terms of Wordsworth’s poetry. The sea king that has risen from the depths of the ocean now uses biblical language to champion Aurora’s skills and the social utility of her poetry. Here the apocalypse is not a destructive force, but an event that has the potential for rebuilding society anew.

Carefully explaining EBB’s philosophy of poetry in this final scene, Romney continues to describe the work that Aurora’s poetry does, claiming that her song “crying from the top of souls/ To souls, that, here assembled on earth’s flats,/ They get them to some purer eminence/ Than any hitherto beheld for clouds!”¹⁵³ Jonathan Bate points out how “the particles of water which form clouds – and we need no reminding of how important clouds were to Wordsworth, as they were to Ruskin – cannot be possessed or sold.”¹⁵⁴ Here the clouds that were so important to Wordsworth are not only un-owned, but form the collective height of all those who read and understand poetry. This immortal position is an egalitarian one, a space where class no longer matters and where all souls are equal.

¹⁵² Aurora Leigh, 9.915, 9.932.
¹⁵³ Ibid., 9.933-936.
¹⁵⁴ Bate, “A Language That is Ever Green,” 384.
In this final rendition of the apocalypse we find another example of EBB adopting an important theme of Wordsworth’s in order to alter it considerably, imbuing it with the social concerns that are at the heart of *Aurora Leigh*. As an admirer of Wordsworth’s poetic creativity, EBB could not have failed to notice the way that his treatment of liquids and water take on such importance in his work, particularly to advance his claim to poetic immortality. In *Aurora Leigh*, EBB takes these tropes and radically extends and builds upon them. By referencing Wordsworth’s treatment of drowning and floods, EBB shows her readers that she is not only capable of an achievement comparable to *The Prelude*, but that her claim to poetic immortality also acts as a political and social statement. Wordsworth wrote in his *Prospectus to The Recluse* that the long poem to follow was not going to seek the worlds of chaos or paradise “like those of old/ Sought in the Atlantic Main” for better worlds.\(^{155}\) Rather, his aim was to “speak of nothing more than what we are” in order to look “into the Mind of Man.”\(^{156}\) EBB took up a similar mission, to write a poem that dealt explicitly with her own age, the people and problems that made her time what it was. EBB extends Wordsworth’s poetic revolution in many ways, not the least being her mission to look into the mind and times of Woman, as well as Man.


\(^{156}\) Ibid., 59, 40.
Conclusion

New, Blue Horizons

I began this thesis with a brief window into the lives of three writers. Peering in, almost voyeuristically, to see moments of extreme hardship and emotional turmoil, I uncovered the power of the ocean and the intense fear of drowning that troubled all three authors. Looking to their literary works rather than their biographies, this thesis has explored the complexities inherent to literary representations of water and terraqueous environments, especially the ocean. Although intimately connected with limitation, death and mortality, this seascape also offers intimations of immortality, and imaginative space to go beyond the limits of subjectivity. The revolutionary politics so important to each of these authors come alive when faced with the vastness of the ocean, the mysterious depths of dark lakes, or the torrential speed of a cataract. For each writer, water presents some kind of paradox. Whether it is the promise of escape alongside the threat of isolation, or the threat of death dissolving into immortality, oppositions intermingle and limitations blur when faced with watery landscapes.

Few scholars, other than Herbert Tucker, have noted that *Aurora Leigh* is a watery poem. From beginning to end, characters, landscapes, ideas and philosophies are described as dissolving, drowning, or washing into one another. By reading this poem alongside scenes in previous works, this thesis has shaped an understanding of the way in which EBB directs the currents of previous writing into her own work to create something new. Steeped in literary history, *Aurora Leigh* overflows with influences and allusions as EBB turns to many different sources for inspiration. The
poem invites comparison with previous epics, its feminist politics also gesturing towards political works by women. By charting the movement of watery imagery through time in each of these three works, this thesis has peered through the lens of *Aurora Leigh* and into the past in order to understand how EBB imagined the future.

At the margins of this poem, and at the margins of Aurora’s life, the ocean swirls and crashes. Her revolutionary demand to work as a woman for the good of society, and her ambition to write poetry are situated alongside powerful depictions of drowning, dissolving, the apocalyptic ocean, and even the act of walking on water. In order to understand why this occurs I looked to the influence of Romantic authors, Wollstonecraft and Wordsworth. Choosing to read a small number of authors closely, rather than give a shallower reading of the many influences in this poem, meant that there was not space to look at every possible influence on water imagery in *Aurora Leigh*, textual or otherwise. Instead, I chose to analyse two Romantic writers in my quest to understand the way in which the revolutions of Romanticism continue in *Aurora Leigh*.

Feminist criticism has always been an important tool for reading EBB’s work. Contemporary readers usually approach her poetry with the knowledge that this author was attempting to do something astonishing in the service of women. This political framework has led to many intriguing and varied readings of EBB. However, whether admiring her achievements or exposing her shortcomings, critics are yet to create an in-depth understanding of the way EBB’s feminist politics formed her relationship with place, and vice versa. Indeed, it is the vice versa that becomes particularly interesting, with places and landscapes inspiring different modes of
critique and revolutionary philosophies. Inspired myself by Wollstonecraft’s political philosophy that intensifies with her experiences of bodies of water, this particular point of comparison has proven fruitful in exploring subjectivity in these texts. The subjectivity that Wollstonecraft develops throughout *Letters* is inextricable from her feminist politics: her powerful, yet melancholy experience of solitude working with the landscape around her to expand the limits of consciousness. It is no coincidence that Wollstonecraft’s work galvanised the teenage EBB, the older woman’s politics energizing EBB’s ambition and determination. This transference of political thought accompanied a continued fascination with the landscape, the horror and pleasure of experiencing a natural sublime empowering both writers. Indeed, it is the power to claim an authorial voice that really unites EBB’s poetry with Wollstonecraft’s depictions of wild coastlines. Both authors make it their mission to write a new kind of female subjectivity, one that is expansive and powerful. Images of water reach into the minds of the narrators in both *Letters Written During a Short Residence* and *Aurora Leigh*. Terraqueous environments like oceans, lakes, and cataracts work with these narrators to inspire new ways of thinking that question old power structures. In defiance of social forces that would oppress them, these authors look to the ocean and other bodies of water to refashion subjectivity in their texts.

To understand how EBB’s feminist politics shaped her depiction of water and drowning in *Aurora Leigh*, I not only needed to look to an author that prefigured her politically, but also to a poet whose work she was inspired by, yet sought to refashion. EBB had been energised by Wordsworth’s poetry all her life. His complicated depictions of lakes and oceans were not only familiar to her, but pervade her own work. A famous lover of nature, Wordsworth’s enigmatic portrayal of oceans, rivers
and lakes accompanies the poet’s subtle grappling with his own mortality. Reaching for her own goal of poetic immortality, EBB invokes Wordsworth only to refashion the meaning of his images. Experiences of death and the desire for immortal life are transformed in EBB’s poem into the experience and philosophies of disenfranchised women. By refashioning Wordsworth’s depictions of lakes and oceans, EBB is also recreating the definition of poetic immortality, locating this within the mind of a woman poet, a move that has extensive political implications for the position of women in wider society. The importance that these terraqueous landscapes have for Wordsworth continues into *Aurora Leigh*. These are the places where Aurora claims her apocalypse and her imaginative revolution. By refashioning these landscapes, EBB is transforming epic and poetic subjectivity, valiantly claiming these powerful forces for women.

By mapping the similarities and differences in these different representations of water, my thesis has begun to create a history of the way in which literary and feminist ideals change how certain places are imagined, and vice versa. Important concepts such as solitude, subjectivity and mortality make themselves immediately apparent, and these ideas are heightened when played out in relation to watery ecosystems. Indeed, these places reach into each author’s mind, causing thoughts and philosophies to coalesce and crystallise. This thesis is just the beginning of more research on the poetics of feminist landscapes. The current exploration of EBB’s most mature poem *Aurora Leigh* marks the beginning for future scholarship venturing out into these uncharted waters.
Bibliography


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