Catherine Gallagher’s influential analysis of Thomas Malthus’s (1766–1834) *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798; 1803) cogently exposes the way in which that work overturned the eighteenth-century assumption that a society’s health improves in direct proportion to the increase of its population. Gallagher investigates the sociocultural implications of Malthus’s remarkably simple yet famously dramatic suggestion that, while populations reproduce geometrically, food resources expand only arithmetically. This theory, she suggests, flew in the face of the traditional definitions and markers of societal health articulated earlier by David Hume (1711–76) and Adam Smith (1723–90), severing the “homological relationship” traditionally linking the individual human organism and the social body by “tracing social problems to human vitality itself.” Indeed, according to Malthus, a rapidly growing population serves as the indicator of a society not just out of order but actually in grave danger of imminent collapse. Gallagher explains: “Malthus simultaneously sees the unleashed power of population, the reproducing body, as that which will eventually destroy the very prosperity that made it fecund, replacing health and innocence with misery and vice.”

Thus, for the nineteenth century, Malthus’s *Essay* revolutionized the perception of population growth. The ostensibly healthy, biologically reproducing individual body came
to be associated with both the exponential growth of the social body to which it belongs and, more important, the empirical measure of that social body’s ills. “The healthy, and consequently reproducing, body,” Gallagher explains, “is the harbinger of the disordered society full of starving bodies.” Moreover, she adds, the reproducing body became a specifically gendered body — a female body — because Malthus conceptualized reproduction simply in terms of delivery from the maternal source.  

In the wake of Gallagher’s influential project, a host of literary critics have turned to Victorian fiction in order to theorize the novel in light of Malthusian social and sexual economies. Such critical approaches have attempted to decode the plots and themes of Victorian domestic fiction in relation to the cultural anxieties surrounding the period’s population growth and its resultant social discontents. For example, Linda Schlossberg unpacks the “Malthusian economies” of Charlotte Brontë’s (1816–55) Jane Eyre (1848), and Eric Berlatsky employs a similar model in his reading of Charles Dickens’s (1812–70) David Copperfield (1850).  

Situating myself in this essay within this critical and historical project, I interrogate Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s (1806–61) verse novel Aurora Leigh (1856). Like Jane Eyre and David Copperfield, Aurora Leigh, I believe, registers and represents the Victorian social and cultural anxieties surrounding biological reproduction and the material requirements (i.e., production) necessary to sustain such reproduction. In order to substantiate this claim, I investigate not only how Barrett Browning’s verse novel signifies Victorian tocophobia, or the mid-nineteenth-century fear of childbirth and procreation, but also how in its formal conclusion it manages to imagine several specific social and sexual solutions for this characteristically Victorian anxiety. My purpose, however, is not simply to apply an emerging critical model to yet another Victorian text. What I find most intriguing about Aurora Leigh is that Malthusian theory not only deeply affects its underlying structural thematics but also alters the narrative’s very developmental unfolding. In what follows, I suggest that the formal structure of Aurora Leigh — its narratological teleology — represents a direct response to the forceful ontological reconceptions of the individual and social body that resulted in reaction to Malthus’s revolutionary scientific theory. Biological considerations of the individual human body and that body’s relationship to its social whole allow, I show, for a reimagining and, consequently, a reworking of traditional models of narrative form and development in nineteenth-century fiction.  

ANXIOUS (RE)PRODUCTION: THE MALTHUSIAN RESPONSES OF AURORA LEIGH  

Silvana Colella has recently examined an array of early-nineteenth-century twopenny illustrated magazines for how their short fictions, novelettes, and sketches encode responses to Malthus’s theory. Unlike Schlossberg and Berlatsky, however, Colella is not interested simply in thematic concerns. Instead, she makes the intriguing suggestion that the vast majority of short stories from the Olio (1828–32), the Freebooter (1823–24), the Portfolio (1824–29), and the Mirror (1823–32) display direct responses to Malthusian considerations of sociality and sexuality in their narrative conclusions. That is, instead of being “end-determined” in the fashion of eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century fiction, in which “the wedding bells always have the last word,” these tales avoid resolving their narratives with marriages.  

Colella suggests that this type of narrative resolution is the defining feature of what she calls the “Malthusian love plot,” which she defines in relation to its other, the “non-Malthusian love plot”:  

only twenty percent of the “love stories” end happily. Of these very few actually culminate in a wedding ceremony; in most cases the possibility of a matrimonial union between the protagonists is only hinted at. These are the “non-Malthusian”
love plots: fictions in which love is actually rewarded in the end, a new family is about to be formed, procreation becomes a textual possibility, reproduction is not ruled out. Among the "Malthusian" love plots (eighty percent) a further distinction can be drawn between plots that encode overtly Malthusian issues (the value of celibacy, the "fear of a family," the avoidance of marriage at all costs); and tragic love stories in which the indictment of marriage is most sentimentally plotted and a general Malthusian warning is elicited through the death closure.

Colella is mainly interested in deconstructing the formal closures of these fictions, but she does gesture toward the consideration that these fictions very likely also served to prime nineteenth-century audiences for some fresh alternatives in the conclusions of later popular narrative fictions. That is, she notes that Malthusianism "lack[ed] an audience among the working-class" and that "the cheap, octavo magazines of the 1820s [did] not so much address such an audience as help create the cultural conditions for its emergence." They did this "by orienting the taste for fiction in the direction of tragedy; by offering a steady supply of Malthusian tragic plots; and by bringing together, in story after story, the gloss of respectability and the thrills of sensationalism."5

Nevertheless, like the end-determined fiction of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century novelists, much mid-nineteenth-century fiction continued to adhere to the non-Malthusian love plot, ending with all the vows of marriage and the potential for procreative sexual relations between protagonists found in such earlier novels as those of Jane Austen (1775-1817). For example, the final pages of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre bring us not only Rochester’s unforgettable marriage proposal and Jane’s emphatic acceptance but also Jane’s reminder (at the start of the final chapter), "Reader, I married him." Moreover, as Jane reveals in the final paragraphs of the novel, her marriage to Rochester has, indeed, been a procreative one – biologically speaking? Likewise, in the final pages of George Eliot’s (1819-80) Daniel Deronda (1876), Daniel and Mirah are married in a ceremony in which "the velvet canopy never covered a more godly bride and bridegroom, to whom their people might more wisely wish offspring."6

The conclusion of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s Aurora Leigh, however, poses distinct challenges to such notions of end-determined fiction and, while complex, resembles Colella’s Malthusian model in several striking ways. For one thing, although Aurora and Romney are united in the end, the actual wedding is not depicted but only alluded to. Moreover, there are no references to sexual reproduction anywhere in the ending. Departing in its final book from the narrative pattern of other midcentury fictions, Aurora Leigh uniquely follows a series of circuitous moves in which a marriage union fails to occur between Romney and Marian and is only alluded to as occurring between Romney and Aurora – even though the latter pair have been matched since youth. These perpetually deferred marriage-plot movements expose larger motifs structuring the entire narrative development, which, as we shall see, unfolds in response to acute Malthusian phobias and anxieties. In order to arrive at a more comprehensive investigation of this narratological development, however, a turn to the localized ways in which the final book responds to and encodes Malthusian stimuli is first necessary.

In the final pages of Aurora Leigh, Romney Leigh has arrived in Florence in his quest to reunite with both his cousin Aurora and Marian Erle. Aurora was his first love, but she had (in bk. 2) rejected his offer of marriage, intent on a literary career. Marian, whom he met during the course of his charity work, was a later "project." She had agreed to marry him but had (in bk. 4) deserted him at the altar. After she and Aurora meet by chance years later in Paris (in bk. 6), they abscond to Italy (in bk. 8) to begin a quasi-domestic partnership in which they plan to raise Marian’s illegitimate son, a child born as the result of Marian’s rape by an anonymous man in a French brothel. Having found Aurora and Marian, Romney professes his continued devotion to Marian. Pleading that Aurora help him reclaim his bride-to-be, he asks:

“I’m married. Is not Marian Erle my wife? As God sees things, I have a wife and child; And I, as I’m a man who honours God, Am here to claim them as my child and wife.”11

Marian is, of course, not Romney’s wife. Although she is in love with Romney, she has
broken her ceremonial union with him because, thanks to Lady Waldemar’s meddling influence, she believes that her working-class status can do nothing but harm him, that

clinging round his neck, she pulls him down
And drowns him, – and that, lavishing her soul.
She hales perdition on him.

(p. 207 [bk. 6, lines 951–53])

Marian cannot conceive of her identity without its being marked by her working-class status. In effect, their marriage becomes for her a synecdoche of class collapse, representing, as one of the more patrician wedding guests puts it, the “dismembering of society” (p. 127 [bk. 4, line 677]). The self-loathing Marian again, in the final pages of Aurora Leigh, denies Romney, having been brought to believe that she and her illegitimate son, “though . . . innocent, . . . are not harmless,” that

“both our harms
Will stick to his good smooth noble life like burrs,
Never to drop off.”

(p. 293 [bk. 9, lines 229–32])

This moment is symptomatic of the text’s preoccupation with avoiding unions that hold the promise of biologically procreative relationships. Marian’s union with Romney would be especially problematic, however, because – as Marian herself senses – it would metonymically serve as the admixture resulting from a gentry or upper-middle-class attempt to answer the “modern question of the poor” (p. 126 [bk. 4, line 663]) through alliance with the licentious and profligate working class itself. It would signify the literal mixing of bloodlines between the aristocracy and the wretched, multiplying poor who, in the scene of the failed marriage ceremony, “clogged the streets,” “oozed into the church / In a dark slow stream, like blood,” and caused the nobility to “st[and] up in their pews, / Some pale for fear, a few as red for hate” (p. 124 [lines 553–56]). Similarly depicting such a grotesque crowd in the Essay on the Principle of Population, Malthus equates the teeming body of the lower-class “mob” to a monstrous organism that, when left unchecked, breeds out of control as “the growth of a redundant population, goaded by resentment for real sufferings, but totally ignorant of the quarter from which they originate. . . . of all monsters the most fatal to freedom. It fosters a prevailing tyranny, and engenders one where it was not: and though, in its dreadful fits of resentment, it appears occasionally to devour its unsightly offspring; yet no sooner is the horrid deed committed, than, however unwilling it may be to propagate such a breed, it immediately groans with the pangs of a new birth.”

In his theory of population, Malthus thus imagines the crowd as a radically untamed and uncontrollable cannibalistic body devouring itself in the processes of its own revolting self-(re)production. Moreover, he proposes that, although all orders of humanity are subject to the “principle of population,” there is no group more affected than the lower classes. As he suggests: “The positive check to population, by which I mean the check that represses an increase which is already begun, is confined chiefly, though not perhaps solely, to the lowest orders of society.” According to Malthus, the lower classes are more prone to starvation and other effects of the principle of population because they cannot properly control their desires. The urban poor in particular are kept in check by their own vices: “The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves. . . . Urged by the passion of love, men have been driven into acts highly prejudicial to the general interests of society.” This depiction of the vices of the lower orders is not much different from Aurora’s own representation of England’s poor. Narrating the text’s central wedding scene, Aurora collapses her description of the individual faces in the working-class crowd surrounding her into a metaphor of vice and its miserable repercussions, a metaphor corresponding to Malthus’s:

Faces? . . . phew.
We’ll call them vices, festering to despair.
Or sorrows, petrifying to vices: not
A finger-touch of God left whole on them.
All ruined, lost – the countenance worn out[.]  

Those, faces? ’twas as if you had stirred up hell
To heave its lowest dreg-fiends uppermost
In fiery swirls of slime.
(p. 124 [bk. 4, lines 579–83, 587–89])

Similarly to Malthus picturing the mob as a cannibalistic "monstrous organism" horrendously producing and consuming itself, Aurora envisions the lower-class crowd enveloping her as hell's living dead rising to the surface of the earth.

Margaret Reynolds points out that this "unflattering picture of the mass of the poor has attracted a great deal of criticism from modern liberal critics," who accuse both Barrett Browning and her heroine-narrator of a lack of pity and compassion. However, as Rebecca Stott remarks, this ostensibly unsympathetic "nightmare vision" must be understood in the context of the immediate impact on Barrett Browning of the revolutions of 1848 and, more generally, of the rhetoric of Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). As Stott argues, Barrett Browning's conceptualization and representation of the urban poor were modeled on Carlyle's apocalyptic and scatological representations in The History of the French Revolution (1837) and the Latter-Day Pamphlets (1850). Equally influential, as I have suggested, was Malthus's theory of population, which, not just in the crowd scene but throughout Aurora Leigh, significantly shaped Barrett Browning's understanding and depiction of both the English-working-class social body and the individual bodies constituting it. In much the same way as later-nineteenth-century novelists reacted to Charles Darwin's (1809–82) narratives, Barrett Browning responded to the scientific Malthusian zeitgeist of her age by weaving its epistemologies into the texture of Aurora Leigh's language and thematics.

Marian, like Aurora, is made to recognize the social and cultural anxieties emerging in response to biological reproduction. She understands that it is partially because of these fears that an unsympathetic society has created a system of mores forbidding her marriage to Romney. As she explains to Aurora:

"[S]ince the nest is surely spoilt
And Marian what you know her, – though a wife,
The world would hardly understand her case
Of being just hurt and honest."
(p. 294 [bk. 9, lines 237–40])

As Michel Foucault has shown, in Victorian England the sexual urges and procreative capacities of the lower classes were imagined by the upper as radically out of control – unconscious and, at the very least, unpredictable. Such illicit sexualities were never to mix with the "controlled" sexual behavior of the upper classes. Denied not just marriage but any recognized form of social or civil union with the British upper class, Marian can only choose her own death – albeit a figurative demise. "Marian's dead," she tells both Aurora and herself, pleading: "What can you do with people when they are dead, / But, if you are pious, sing a hymn and go" (p. 204 [bk. 6, lines 813–15]). From this point on, she refers to herself as a figuratively dead body, a move resembling the symbolic death scene that, as Colella suggests, signifies the closure of the Malthusian love plot. In her final denial of Romney, Marian ironically interweaves descriptions of wedding scenes with her own supposed death:

"I told your cousin, sir, that I was dead:
And now, she thinks I'll get up from my grave,
And wear my chin-cloth for a wedding-veil,
And glide along the churchyard like a bride
While all the dead keep whispering through
the withes [willows]."
(p. 297 [bk. 9, lines 391–95])

This morbidity has long confused critics. Angela Leighton, for example, has noted: "There is no narrative logic to this sudden and persistent association of Marian with 'the Dead.' It is entirely a product of Barrett Browning's own experiences and imaginative needs." However, as I am suggesting, given Malthusian checks on the working-class body, the only way in which Marian can conceive of herself as married to Romney is in some hazy, quasi-purgatorial state between life and death – a zombie-like ontological condition in which biological functions and propensities are extremely complicated, if not utterly void. Her speech ironically underscores the absurdity of Aurora's urging her to "[a]ccept the gift" of Romney's repeated final proposal (p. 294 [bk. 9, line 255]). While Aurora may be so well versed in Malthusian representations of lower-class populations that she can em-
ploy Malthusian epithets in her own speech, she apparently has little consciousness of the historical imperatives structuring class interactions or the mores invoked by the epithets and metaphors themselves. Marian, on the other hand, recognizes and understands these class imperatives all too clearly. “‘I’ve room for no more children in my arms,’” she tells Romney, “‘Here’s a hand shall keep / For ever clean without a marriage-ring.’” “[W]ed a noble wife,” she finally commands him (p. 298 [lines 428, 431–32, 440]).

The text does not fully honor Marian’s request that Romney wed a noble wife, in part because he has come to recognize his limitations in controlling the peasant mobs of England and, consequently, accedes to the pall cast over marriage by persistent Malthusian conditions. He is, of course, blind in these final pages; he has been emasculated or “mulcted” by yet another of the text’s teeming mobs (p. 302 [bk. 9, line 564]). The peasants at his social commune in England burn their community to the ground, and he is blinded in the conflagration. As a result, he gives up his hopes of taming and controlling the crowd and confesses his mistakes to Aurora, telling her that English social thinkers need:

“Fewer programmes, we who have no prescience.
Fewer systems, we who are held and do not hold.
Less mapping out of masses to be saved,
By nations or by sexes.”

(p. 309 [lines 865–68])

Having given up on this social project, Romney finally admits to Aurora that he will now be “[c]ontent henceforth” to live out the remainder of his life with her, promising her merely to act as the shelter for the woman he has always loved. To this profession, Aurora answers with an echo of her father’s final words of advice, imparted on his deathbed when he left her an orphan in childhood: “I love, — / I love you, Romney’” (p. 303 [lines 597, 607–8]; see also p. 11 [bk. 1, lines 21–12]).

Yet, despite these pledges, the text concludes without specifying whether Romney and Aurora will be officially married.

Furthermore, Barrett Browning makes absolutely no allusions to a sexual relationship between them. Aurora Leigh concludes with a pair of cousin-lovers who can imagine and articulate their civil union only through a language of fabula in which Aurora is fantastically referred to as Romney’s “fairy bride” and his “bride of dreams” (p. 307 [bk. 9, lines 766, 797]). Instead of closing the verse novel with a marriage ceremony, Barrett Browning leaves it much more open-ended. If Romney and Aurora come to be “wedded” at all, it is only in their mutual labors in love and work. Having abandoned his early mantra that the role of the female is merely to provide mankind with “doating mothers, and perfect wives” (p. 45 [bk. 2, line 222]), Romney explains a new joint project in which Aurora will necessarily possess agencies unassociated with the traditional capacities of simply mother and wife:

“Beloved, let us love so well,
Our work shall still be better for our love,
And still our love be sweeter for our work.
And both commended, for the sake of each,
By all true workers and true lovers born.”

(p. 311 [bk. 9, lines 924–28])

At the conclusion of Aurora Leigh, the protagonists are left leading only by example. Chiasmatically interweaving work and love, Romney promises that these labors together are the only way in which “all class-walls” can be blown “level as Jericho’s / Past Jordan” (pp. 311–12 [bk. 9, lines 932–33]). No longer is regimented praxis presented as the key to social reform, and, although “the old world” still “waits the time to be renewed,” this utopian renewal will occur only when — as Aurora has suggested all along — massive social bodies are reconstituted and reenvisioned for the individual organisms constituting them. Then, and only then, will

“new hearts in individual growth
... increase to multitude
In new dynasties of the race of men.”

(p. 312 [lines 942, 943–45; emphasis added])

In these final lines, Barrett Browning draws on an emerging discourse of evolutionary narrative in order to make the final suggestion that old and outdated models of social, sexual, and ontological economies
and epistemologies – like Malthusian doctrine – can (and will) be reworked as science refocuses or invents anew the paradigms structuring its vision and, consequentially, its knowledge.

Similarly to the way in which George Eliot leaves Daniel and Mirah as the quasi forebears of what is promised as a new, Eastern community, Barrett Browning leaves her readers with the vision of a couple facing “toward the east” and imagining the utopian possibilities of a New Jerusalem (p. 312 [bk. 9, line 951]). But, despite Romney and Aurora’s protestations of love, this is not the happy ending typical of the non-Malthusian love plot. The protagonists are unconcerned with establishing new populations or communities of men and women like themselves. Instead, the emphasis is on economic production, not biological reproduction – the Malthusian love plot with a twist. The conclusion of the text reveals Barrett Browning’s continuing commitment to Malthusian doctrines and imperatives in that the ending presents a vision of Aurora and Romney sharing a common project that is not a reproductive one. The type of social and cultural work that they will do in the future, Barrett Browning suggests, has nothing to do with raising a large family. They have seen the horrors of a land overburdened, its productive capacity nearly outstripped by the starving, teeming crowds, an overpopulated nation that Romney describes as

“one great famishing carnivorous mouth. –
A huge, deserted, callow, blind bird Thing,
With piteous open beak.”

(p. 265 [bk. 8, lines 396–98])

From this monstrous nation Romney and Aurora have fled to the haven of Italy, a utopia of “misty olive-woods” and “orange groves,” a land of verdant gardens “green / From maize and vine” (pp. 229–30 [bk. 7, lines 475, 483, 531–32]). Their new homeland is one where their British cultural phobias concerning reproduction, overpopulation, and starvation can be finally set aside.

**AURORA LEIGH’S MARRIAGE PLOT AND GOOD AND BAD (RE)PRODUCTION**

The phobia of the twin customs of marriage and procreative sex drives the development not only of the themes and unfolding moves of the final, open-ended book of *Aurora Leigh* but also of the progress of the entire verse novel. *Aurora Leigh* proceeds, as Leighton notes, as a long series of “novelistic detours,” a series of substitutions and role reversals in which the major actresses among the dramatic personae play musical chairs around Romney’s ceremonial wedding table, each being given at some point at least the semblance of partnering with Romney: Aurora in books 2 and 9, Lady Waldemar in book 7, and Marian in books 4 and 9. In effect, marriage works like a metonymic trope that provides Romney with not one but three wives. Ironically, this chain of substitutions concludes in book 9 without bestowing on him an *official* bride. By means of this open-ended conclusion so long in the (un)making, Barrett Browning cashes in on the cultural currency of both the Malthusian and the non-Malthusian finale.

Almost all the “exchanged” women in the text desperately avoid a marriage proposal because they, like Marian, conceive of marriage as going hand-in-hand with death. In part, and especially in Marian’s case, this demise is akin to the metaphorical social death alluded to by John Stuart Mill (1806–73), who, in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), explains that all Victorian wives had been “brought up” to believe that they naturally occupied resigned, powerless positions of “submission . . . yielding to the control of others” – especially to their controlling husbands. It is partially because of this concern that Aurora rejects Romney’s proposal in book 2 – the rejection that sets off the chain of bridal substitutions marking the overall narrative development. Denying Romney her hand in marriage, she explains:

“What you love,
Is not a woman, Romney, but a cause:
You want a helpmate, not a mistress, sir,
A wife to help your ends, – in her no end!”

(p. 50 [bk. 2, lines 400–403])

As an unmarried upper-class woman, Aurora retains the agency to reject a marriage that, as she understands it, would rob her of agency itself, and, in so doing, she avoids becoming another of the text’s figurative corpses like Marian.
In the case of Aurora’s mother, marriage is linked to literal demise, not just figurative, revealing how *Aurora Leigh* registers and represents its own narrative development. Aurora’s mother dies (when Aurora is only four) because, the narrator tells us, “[s]he could not bear the joy of giving life, / The mother’s rapture slew her” (p. 6 [bk. 1, lines 34–35]).23 This passage suggests that the verse novel’s diegesis moves from marriage to procreative sex to simultaneous life and death, and the fact that Aurora links her own life to her mother’s death gives some psychological explanation for Aurora’s marriage phobia.

By book 7, Aurora and Marian have found sympathetic identification in their mutual avoidance of Romney as well as in their anxieties about marriage generally, and, at this point, a new relationship develops between them and in the overall narrative development. In their quasi-domestic partnership in Florence, Aurora and Marian establish a homosocial relationship, raising Marian’s fatherless child together. As Simon Avery suggests, their relationship in Italy is “freed from previously imposed identities,” and, as a result, they are “able to achieve new emotional attachments.”24 “[Y]e are my own / From henceforth,” Aurora tells Marian, and she describes the liberating possibilities of their new partnership with both affect and logic:

“I am lonely in the world,  
And thou art lonely, and the child is half  
An orphan. Come, – and henceforth thou and I  
Being still together will not miss a friend,  
Nor he a father, since two mothers shall  
Make that up to him.”

(p. 219 [bk. 7, lines 119–20, 120–25])

In this new partnership, Aurora locates the alternative both to the rigid structures and confines of marriage and to all the Malthusian nightmares of procreative heterosexuality as she imagines a new domestic space in which Marian’s starving, half-orphaned child can be raised by “two mothers.”

As the first domestic partnership established outside the text’s sequence of heteronormative kinship relations, the coupling between Aurora and Marian breaks the metonymic chain of substitute wives linking Romney to the female protagonists – a chain that, until this juncture, has organized the text’s formal movement, from repeated marriage proposal to repeated marriage deferral. For the brief period of time before Romney arrives in Florence, the narrative temporarily eddies into the largest of its formal developmental deferrals as female homosociality disrupts and then reworks traditional models of narrative development by removing anxieties associated with biological reproduction.

Interestingly, Aurora resumes writing her books during this new relationship, thereby substituting the task of cultural production for her capacities of biological reproduction. Dorothy Mermin has written extensively about how Barrett Browning understood the dichotomization of work into the biological and the cultural, noting: “Barrett Browning had been afraid that being a mother and writing poetry were mutually exclusive alternatives – the one requiring self-sacrifice, the other self-assertion – and before her return to Italy Aurora has the same fear.”25 Apparently conscious of substituting cultural work for biological reproduction, Aurora recognizes that “[b]ooks succeed, / And lives fail” (p. 235 [bk. 7, lines 704–5]), and, through writing her book, she becomes – in the end – the “better self” to which she alluded in the opening stanza (p. 5 [bk. 1, line 4]).

In effect, the cultural valence of the trope of literary work becomes, as David points out, central to *Aurora Leigh’s* concluding passages.26 Just before moving to Italy, Aurora gave her publisher a manuscript that has now become, as both Romney and Vincent Carrington explain, a remarkable success with its British readers. Vincent tells Aurora in a letter:

“We think here you have written a good book,  
And you, a woman! It was in you – yes,  
I felt ‘twas in you.”

(p. 231 [bk. 7, lines 563–65])

In particular, the book is championed by a growing body of female readers who embrace it for its enabling protofeminist praxis.27 Vincent complains that even his fiancée has Aurora’s “books by heart more than my words” and that she quotes from them in her arguments with him (p. 232 [bk. 7, lines 603 (quote), 604–5]). Apparently unable to understand the fascination with the books,
Vincent nevertheless admits to Aurora that she has become something of a mythic figure among her female readers in England:

"There’ll be women who believe of you (Besides my Kate) that if you walked on sand You would not leave a foot-print."

(p. 233 [lines 620–22])

With the production of this successful, socially transformative text, Aurora has effectively exchanged "bad" biological reproduction for "good" cultural (re)production. This dichotomy, as Anita Levy suggests, arose precisely from the work of Thomas Malthus: "With the intellectual labor of cultural reproduction categorized as a different order of activity from the maternal labor of social and biological reproduction, Malthus splits the reproductive domain in two." Moreover, Malthus’s treatise caused another, perceptual division within the idea of reproduction itself as either positive or pejorative: "Concealed unobtrusively within the binary dividing production from reproduction is a third division … tucked neatly into reproduction, … the difference between forms of 'good' and 'bad' reproduction." In connection with this split, Levy, following Gallagher, reminds us that Malthus’s sensationalized, stigmatized, and gendered Victorian social body was, characteristically, a classed body. For Malthus, that social body was created by the poor who "with their untoward marriage practices and bad sexual habits … simply [did] 'it' too much because they [could] not control their reproductive urges." Suddenly, their illicit sexual practices become perceived as out of control: "Malthus radically reconfigures the notion of reproduction, transforming it from the controlled, determinable process imagined earlier in the century to a biological force that overpowers efforts to contain it."

The Victorians did, however, seriously attempt to control these "reproductive urges." Drawing on Foucault’s analysis of the discourse of sexuality, Levy reminds us that "the apparent existence of this reproductive urge … called forth strategies for its detection, regulation, and containment." As both Foucault and Levy argue, one of the major ways in which this illicit sexuality of the lower classes was subjected to observation, maintenance, and subsequent control was through a "sexualized" literature. Levy proposes that, during the course of the nineteenth century, "the literature of sociology, anthropology, and psychology, as well as sensational fiction came into being in response to accounts of various sexualized populations who were in need, at risk, threatening, or threatened. … What such representations share, among other features, is the idea that there exist populations whose sexuality is entirely out of control, in need of regulation, or properly managed." Literature provided part of the solution, Levy suggesting that there existed a direct relation between the effects of the discourse of sexuality and the Victorian print capacities available to inject that literature into circulation. The novel, she argues, was an invaluable resource for such a project of social praxis since, "more than any other medium, and because it could accomplish the particular mimetic sleight of hand denounced by its critics, [it] proved capable of allowing readers to feel part of a community that was conceived of as a horizontal kinship independent of rank or status."

In the context of Levy’s work on Malthus and sexualized literature, the success of Aurora’s book in England takes on unexpected valences. Not only does Aurora personally substitute the altruistic act of cultural (re)production for the socially angst-ridden deed of biological procreation; she creates – in the very process of producing her book for her English readers – a text encoding an espousal of this selfsame lifestyle choice. Aurora Leigh – like Barrett Browning herself – produces a work of sexualized literature urging its (largely female) audience to defer marriage and, consequentially, procreative sex. Vincent censures Aurora for this very reason, and he despises the fact that her book has masculinized its female readers in England. He cannot understand, he tells her.

"How women can love women of your sort, And tie their hearts with love-knots to your feet, Grow insolent about you against men And put us down by putting up the lip."

(p. 233 [bk. 7, lines 613–17])

With this comment, Vincent makes it clear that Aurora’s book affects the social and sexual mores and practices of its British
readers. Her sexualized literature is changing the ways in which English women conceive not just of sexuality itself but, more important, of their own active roles in the processes of sexual politics. And it affects her male readers as well. A significant example is how, after reading it, Romney is transformed so radically that, as we have seen, he leaves England for Italy and makes his final promise to Aurora to adopt her vision of sociality and kinship.

*Aurora Leigh* thus operates as what Foucault and Levy label a sexualized discourse on two distinct yet interdependent levels. First and foremost, the fiction functions as literature of social praxis in terms of its wholesale plot, circulating among an actual British readership, and disseminating Barrett Browning's advocacy of deferred marriage and, thus, procreative sex. Second, the primary social functioning of the text's plot is further reinforced and dramatized through the play-within-the-play operation of Aurora's imaginary text—the made-up metatext that is likewise, we are told, reproduced and widely read in England and is shown, consequently, to alter British social and sexual mores. As noted by a number of critics, the functioning of Aurora's book within *Aurora Leigh*'s diegesis becomes the allegory for the nature and performance of Barrett Browning's own verse novel. Leighton points out that, within the text, "there is the underlying story of Aurora the poet, who is a scarcely disguised representative of Barrett Browning herself. This is an autobiography of literary development."35 Through this espousal of deferred marriage and procreative sex, promoted doubly by the book within the book, Barrett Browning underscores and fortifies how the narrative unfolding of *Aurora Leigh* reacts to post-Malthusian anxieties through its encoded reworking of the conventional marriage plot. The issue of bad biological reproduction versus good cultural reproduction becomes an integral part of the text's overall response to Malthusian anxieties. Thus, the ostensibly happy ending can be seen as a confirmation of Aurora's and Romney's (and Barrett Browning's) commitment to a nonreproductive vision of marriage: a union between equals who devote their energies to utopian social and cultural work. Couched in the romantic language of love, this vision is all the more effective as a response to mid-Victorian phobias concerning biological reproduction and overpopulation precisely because it is (re)presented as a happy closure.

Throughout this essay I have argued that a number of new and interesting discourses open up when we historicize the nontraditional generic developments of Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* by placing it alongside and considering it as a response to nineteenth-century Malthusian conversations of population and reproduction—considerations that were undoubtedly shaping the author and her text. In doing so, I have attempted both to give formal definition to and to stress the significance of Victorian tocophobia not only as a specific fear haunting the mid-nineteenth century but also as a critical paradigm emerging within contemporary nineteenth-century studies. Barrett Browning's verse novel, we have seen, not only signifies this Victorian tocophobia, but also, and perhaps more important, imagines with its complex closure several specific social and sexual solutions to this mid-nineteenth-century anxiety. Moreover, by better understanding a very specific set of Victorian social and cultural concerns centering around issues of biological and material reproduction (and specifically around post-Malthusian phobias of marriage, procreation, and childbirth), we can, I believe, more clearly understand why questions of sexuality and narrative development endlessly invoke one another in our critical and theoretical discussions of some of the most popular fictions of the mid-nineteenth century. Sustained investigation of this nexus of post-Malthusian considerations opens many novel avenues to examining this set of challenging and rewarding questions concerned with the interrelations of sexuality, historicity, kinship, and narrative development in nineteenth-century fiction.

NOTES


6. Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, ed. Beth Newman (New York: St. Martin’s, 1996), 437 (chap. 38). In the penultimate chapter, Jane famously accepts the now-blind Rochester’s marriage proposal and explains: “Mr. Rochester, if ever I did a good deed in my life - if ever I thought a good thought - if ever I prayed a sincere and blameless prayer - if ever I wished a righteous wish, - I am rewarded now. To be your wife is, for me, to be as happy as I can be on earth” (ibid., 434 [chap. 37]).

7. We know that Jane and Rochester have at least one child: “When his first-born was put into his arms, he could see that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were - large, brilliant, and black” (ibid., 440 [chap. 38]).


9. A number of critics have drawn attention to the complex and anomalous nature of Aurora Leigh’s apparently happy ending. Dorothy Mermin, e.g., notes: “Perhaps the oddest thing about Aurora Leigh, after all, is the triumphantly happy ending - happy for the heroine at any rate, if not for her disempowered and humiliated lover. She [Aurora] gets much more than the nineteenth-century marriage plot usually allows its heroines: love and work and fame and independence and power” (Elizabeth Barrett Browning: The Origins of a New Poetry [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], 215).

10. In fact, as Deirdre David notes, all “eroticised imagery” or “references to female sexuality” in Aurora Leigh must always be understood as being “expressed through symbolic language” (Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy: Harriet Martineau, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, George Eliot [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987], 152).


13. Thomas Robert Malthus, An Essay on the Principle of Population, ed. Philip Appleman (New York: Norton, 2004), 35 (chap. 5), 54 (chap. 7), 75 (chap. 11). Malthus argues that, although the outlook for the poor is bleak, they may at some point in the future be able to curb their own destruction by learning to control their vices: “The lower classes of people in Europe may at some future period be much better instructed than they are at present; they may be taught to employ the little spare time they have in many better ways than at the ale-house; they may live under better and more equal laws than they have ever hitherto done, perhaps, in any country; and I even conceive it possible, though not probable, that they may have more leisure: but it is not in the nature of things … [to] allow them all to marry early, in the full confidence that they shall be able to provide with ease for a numerous family” (ibid., 92 [chap. 14]).


15. Rebecca Stott, “Where Angels Fear to Tread: Aurora Leigh,” in Elizabeth Barrett Browning, by Simon Avery and Rebecca Stott (London: Pearson Education, 2003), 181–209. Stott suggests: “Carlyle’s grotesque and simultaneously visionary language [in the Latter-Day Pamphlets] influenced many descriptions of the urban poor in the fiction and rhetoric of the 1830s: the language of the Condition of England is so often the metaphor of the rotten tide, of people who have been polluted like the water of the Thames by urbanisation and industrialisation. Both Carlyle and Barrett Browning use this grotesque imagery to embody the moral pollution they see as choking the heart of the nation. The dominant words used to describe the urban
Leigh are drawn from the world of the grotesque: they petrify, they are dissolve, they are physically repulsive, the creatures of nightmare. . . . Carlyle's influence on the imagery, ideas and philosophy of Aurora Leigh is widespread" (ibid., 193). Stott (pp. 193–94) also points out the influence of the History of the French Revolution (1837).


19. It may be of significance here that, over the course of the nineteenth century, the growth rate of select European populations began to accelerate dramatically while that of others remained relatively constant. For example, while the rate of increase of the Italian population was around 48 percent, that of the English population was nearly 100 percent. As the demographer Massimo Livi-Bacci has shown, England was, in fact, "the [European] country that experienced the greatest demographic growth in the period [1750–1850]" (A Concise History of World Population, 4th ed. [Maiden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2007], 67). Livi-Bacci's table 1.3, "Continental Populations (400 BC to AD 2000)" (p. 26), is useful; see also table 2.6, "Growth of Selected European Populations (1600–1850)" (p. 66). For a detailed examination of English population growth, see E. A. Wrigley and R. S. Schofield, The Population History of England, 1541–1871 (1981; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

20. The vast majority of recent critical interpretations of Barrett Browning's use of the trope of Italy have been generally aligned with Sandra Gilbert's classic reading in "From Patria to Matria: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento," PMLA 99, no. 2 (March 1984): 194–211. Gilbert analyzes her adherence to and reworking of English literary traditions for troping the country of Italy as a means to (re)imagine, among other things, English patriarchal kinship structures. She argues: "Elizabeth Barrett Browning revises[s] and revitalize[s] the dead metaphor of gender that is [her] literary and linguistic inheritance, using it to transform Italy from a political state to a female state of mind, from a problematic country in Europe to the problem condition of feminality." Gilbert articulates the ways in which Barrett Browning employs the trope of Italy as both an imagined and a real territory in which (English) patriarchy is seamlessly reimagined and reorganized into a "motherland" in which man is resurrected from patria. She suggests that Barrett Browning performs this resurrection of "the dead land of Italy and the dead metaphor of her feminality" through "five increasingly complex but always interrelated definitions of this . . . woman-country": Italy as "nurturing mother," "impassioned sister," "home of art," "magic paradise," and, finally, "dead, denied, and denying woman—a land that has been rejected or is rejecting" (p. 196).


23. Aurora's mother's death is a strange and unexplained result of some surplus of "motherly" experience. For additional analysis of the causes and circumstances, see Leighton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 120–21.

24. Avery, "'Twixt Church and Palace of a Florence Street': Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Italy," in Avery and Stott, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 156–86, 158.

25. Mermin, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, p. 207. Contrast Mermin's suggestion that Barrett Browning ultimately resolves the opposition between love and work in the poem's conclusion because Aurora comes to accept motherhood as part of her life's work: "The conflict between love and work fades away when Aurora's work is redefined as including (rather than, as he had originally proposed, being included by) Romney's" (p. 213). "Since it is taken for granted throughout the poem that children are the inevitable consequence of marriage," writes Mermin, "we can assume that when Aurora finally accepts Romney she is accepting motherhood too" (p. 207). As I argue throughout this essay, Barrett Browning's concluding vision of the union between Romney and Aurora is far too complicated to support such a reductive conclusion.

26. "Work is a 'key' word at the end of Aurora Leigh." David explains, "the literal key enabling the poet to unlock the symbolic wards that restrain man from seeing connections between 'sensuous' and 'insensuous' world . . . . Barrett Browning's enduring insistence on the cultural function of the poet intellectual in the world originates in this imperative to work: the poet clears a symbolic path, unlocks a symbolic door, dissolves the encrustations of debasing materialism covering man's soul" (David, Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy, 155–56).

27. Leighton has commented on the (proto)feminist nature of Aurora Leigh, noting that "the heroine of the work is a poet herself, who writes the story of her life and literary success as one example of the general cause of women's emancipation and independence," with the ultimate
result that Barrett Browning "derives a theory of women's writing as contemporary, combative and self-sufficient" (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 115).


29. In her reading of the classed nature of this social body, Levy pays tribute to Gallagher's understanding of Malthus's gendered interpretation of the Victorian social body. She explains that "Malthus measures illicit human reproduction in terms of the issue from the mother's body," with the result that "the female becomes" the "source" of illicit reproduction (p. 18).

30. Ibid., 18, 46.

31. Ibid., 30, 31.

32. "It can be argued," Levy proposes, "that the discourse of sexuality had its most widespread effect and lasting impact through writing that, like fiction, could be massively reproduced and distributed" (ibid., 31).

33. Ibid., 31. Levy here draws from Benedict Anderson's notion that the rise of the novel produced a number of "imagined communities" of readers who came together as specific social groups because of their shared readership of certain fictions. Shared readership allowed these communities to engage with the cultural anxieties erupting as a result of Malthus's treatise and, in so doing, to identify their community's place within an emerging social structure and at the same time to be molded and regulated by other, more powerful communities also constituting that social structure. See Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (1983), rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991).

34. Much like her fictional Aurora, Barrett Browning deferred her own marriage as long as possible. As Stott notes: "Even when Robert [Browning] insisted that she consider marriage as the only way they could live together abroad, she procrastinated and deferred committing herself to a final decision . . . ; the love letters written in the six months before they married show Barrett wrangling and tormented about marriage and its relation to power and money" ("How Do I Love Thee? Love and Marriage," in Avery and Stott, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 134-55, 151). Stott points out that, in light not only of Barrett Browning's desire for the deferral of her own marriage but also of her outspoken criticism of the institution more generally, it is ironic that her poetry is so often read during contemporary wedding ceremonies and that the relationship between Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning is critically and culturally "memorialised as one of the nineteenth century's greatest love stories" (ibid., 134 [see also 150-53]).

35. Leighton, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 117. Leighton's view is seconded by David ("Aurora Leigh is pervaded by metaphors of writing," and "[Aurora] is a political poet whose ideas echo the conservative thought of Barrett Browning" [Intellectual Women and Victorian Patriarchy, 128-29]) and by Mermin "[Aurora's] poem mirrors the one in which she appears" [Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 183].