

## THE REALISM OF *THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE*: COVENTRY PATMORE'S POEM RECONSIDERED

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“*THE ANGEL IN THE HOUSE* is not a very good poem,” writes Carol Christ, “yet it is culturally significant, not only for its definition of the sexual ideal, but also for the clarity with which it represents the male concerns that motivate fascination with that ideal” (147). Her pronouncement is strongly emblematic of recent approaches to Coventry Patmore’s best-known poem. *The Angel*, it is asserted or implied, almost never receives a full or attentive reading now, and does not reward one; it would long since have sunk into obscurity were it not for the unforeseen appropriation of its title as a repository for the prevailing Victorian conception of womanhood; as a text it belongs more properly to the domain of cultural history or gender studies than literary criticism. A renewed scholarly interest in the technical experimentation of Patmore’s later volume *The Unknown Eros* (1877) has done little to challenge this view, largely defining itself against the dull conventionality of the earlier work.<sup>1</sup>

I want to suggest that to read *The Angel in the House* independently of both the fraught afterlife of its title and its co-option by late-twentieth-century feminist criticism is to find it a much more interesting poem than later pigeonholing of it allows. Nina Auerbach’s throwaway remark that the poem’s “title is so much more resonant than its content” (66) receives confirmation in the proliferation of books and articles whose own titles play on the phrase in ways much more likely to trace their lineage to Virginia Woolf’s murderous encounter with “her” (the Angel in the House both abstracted and personified) than to bear any relation to the original poem – from Elaine Showalter’s “Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers” (1972) to Dorice Elliott’s *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (2002). Scholarship of recent decades that does deal with *The Angel* itself has stemmed mainly from feminist criticism of the period and thus naturally enough, given the assumptions and concerns of these critics, focussed on the poem’s contribution to the nineteenth-century “Woman Question”: the nature of women’s intellect, character, and role within society in relation (inevitably) to that of men. Those who have questioned a reading of Patmore’s poem that places woman and her duties at its heart tend to do so by suggesting that *The Angel in the House* is in fact much more concerned with Victorian *masculinity* and thereby have, if anything, bolstered the work’s reputation for treating women as secondary and firmly subordinate creatures.<sup>2</sup>

I am not going to attempt to show that Patmore's views on feminine virtue, the marriage relationship, or the principle of separate spheres have been radically misunderstood. He wrote plainly and repeatedly, in prose as well as verse, in support of some of his age's most conservative notions of womanhood and of relations between the sexes, and from this perspective the poem's conversion into a rallying point for anti-feminist positions in the final decades of the nineteenth century is a logical development. Yet to simply equate *The Angel in the House* with the oppressive idealisations later encompassed by its title is to fail to engage with the scope of Patmore's project as a whole. Concerns entirely absent from more recent discussion of the poem feature markedly in earlier criticism, from contemporary reviews of the 1850s and 1860s well into the twentieth century. Alice Meynell, for example, who was an intimate friend of Patmore's, wrote after his death to defend the characters and events of *The Angel* against charges rather different from those our own time lays at its door:

These persons and incidents are unwelcome to poetry as we modern men have learnt to hold it – apart from the social world we know. But this is an avowal that we are either content, or very weakly, very ineffectually, ill-content to live in a social world which we recognise as unworthy of poetry. Coventry Patmore, as we may understand his attitude, refused to be content with such a division. . . . He did not believe – at any rate in his youth – in that division of daily life from poetry; where man and woman are, there poetry and dignity are not shut out. (17–18)

Half a century after the publication of *The Angel in the House*, Meynell continues to situate the poem, not within the context of contemporary debates about the capacities, rights, and responsibilities of women, but rather in relation to the question of what constitutes appropriate subject matter for poetry. While she resolutely upholds “daily life” as worthy of poetic representation, the converse case is put by Herbert Read in his essay on Patmore a few decades later; having quoted approvingly Edmund Gosse's dismissal of the successive parts of *The Angel* as “humdrum stories of girls that smell of bread and butter,” he elaborates on this sneer at the poem:

its subject-matter raises a question of importance which has never been squarely faced by Patmore's apologists. If necessary we might go back to Aristotle for reasons, but surely it may be laid down as self-evident that poetry and life are anything but identical. The sphere of poetry is at once rarer and more remote than the sphere of life. . . . Contemporary subjects can only be treated if invested with dignity or obscurity – and Patmore's “girls” have neither. (94)

It was in the middle of the last century that C. Day Lewis could affirm, as a matter of course, that “to-day our English poets are committed to the belief that every idea and every object of sense is potentially material for poetry” (95); a century earlier again, such poetic catholicity was by no means a given. The very obviousness in our own time of this principle that everything, including and perhaps especially the mundane details of daily life, falls under the jurisdiction of the poet may make it more difficult for the modern reader of *The Angel in the House* or poems like it to discern the significance of this issue to the poet, or to find the earnestness of his defence of it compelling. What chiefly attracts the attention of the twenty-first-century reader of the poem (where such a creature exists) is the foreignness of its representation of gender roles; by contrast, within the culture to which these conventions were native, the most jarring element of *The Angel* seems to have been its attempt to cast the

everyday events and details of Victorian middle-class existence in verse. In this Patmore is entering the lists not so much on behalf of the traditionalists in the Woman Question debate, but rather as a champion of the radical position in a quite different debate concerning the nature of the age and the place of poetry within it.

The representative Goliath to Patmore's somewhat unlikely David in this battle could be played by Matthew Arnold, whose repeated denunciations of his age and of a poetry that sought to engage with it sum up the unease bred in many of his contemporaries by half a century of rapid social, economic, and intellectual change. A master of the rhetoric of disillusionment and disgust with the times that constituted the flip side to Victorian triumphalism, Arnold famously wrote to his old friend and fellow-poet Arthur Hugh Clough "how deeply *unpoetical* the age and all one's surroundings are. Not unprofound, not ungrand, not unmoving: – but *unpoetical*" (Lowry 99). It was a common enough reaction. The upheavals of industrialisation and consequent urbanisation, multiple challenges to orthodox faith, and the new ascendancy of the middle class led to complaints of the ugliness, fragmentation, and banality of modern life. The complexity and artificiality of the modern world made heroic action seem an anachronism; railways, umbrellas, factories, and crinolines may betoken a more "civilised" society, but were for many Victorians emblematic of the gap between their comfortable, prosaic lives and the elevated tone and import of poetry. As late as 1909, A. C. Bradley could attribute the modern poet's difficulty in choosing a subject to the uninspiring trappings of an advanced and inevitably bureaucratic society: "The outward life around him . . . appears uniform, ugly, and rationally regulated, a world of trousers, machinery and policemen. Law – the rule, however imperfect, of the general reasonable will – is a vast achievement and priceless possession; but it is not favourable to striking events or individual actions on the grand scale" (191). For poets and critics of poetry in the middle of the nineteenth century, then, discussion of this brave new world centred around the poet's choice of a subject for his song. In the face of this "unpoetical age," is the poet justified in retreating to the more dignified, graceful, intelligible, and/or pleasing phenomena of history or legend, or of the inner life so beloved of the Romantics? Is such a withdrawal mere prudence, or an admission of poetry's increasing irrelevance to modern life and thus of defeat? Or is it the poet's duty to grapple with the unwieldy material of contemporary experience, and to wrest some kind of order and meaning from the apparent chaos and uncertainty of the present age?

Interlocutors in this mid-century debate tend to be strongly prescriptive in their views. Alexander Smith in his *Life-Drama* (1853) insists that "To set this Age to music" is "The great work / Before the Poet now" (Scene VI), and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, similarly, that poets' "sole work is to represent the age, / Their age, not Charlemagne's" (*Aurora Leigh* 5.202–03). In the Preface to his 1853 *Poems*, Arnold's most direct contribution to this question of what poets ought to be writing about, the poet-critic quotes a recent *Spectator* review as typical of criticism at this period: "the Poet who would really fix the public attention must leave the exhausted past, and draw his subjects from matters of present import, and *therefore* both of interest and novelty" (Super 3). Although Arnold himself affects a strict neutrality on the question of modern versus ancient subjects, asserting with some disingenuousness that what true poets "need for the exercise of their art are great actions," and that "so far as the present age can supply such actions they will gladly make use of them," his apparent even-handedness crumbles before his antipathy to the contemporary scene as he concludes that "an age wanting in moral grandeur can with difficulty supply such" (13–14).

While the medievalist poetry and especially the Arthurian Revival of these middle decades of the nineteenth century illustrate the principles and recommendations of one side of the debate, a number of poets took up the challenge issued by the opposing camp, to produce a kind of Poem of the Age – a work that might forge out of “an age so diversified and as yet so unshapely” (in the words of John Sterling’s famous review of Tennyson’s early poetry) “a whole transmuted into crystalline clearness and lustre” (113, 110). That several long narrative poems written at the time spring from this impulse is recognised by the works’ first reviewers; although the variety and intermittency of the efforts militates against any sense of an organised movement advocating modern, everyday life as a legitimate subject for poetry, the shared origins of poems such as Clough’s *The Bothie of Tober-na-vuolich* (1848), Tennyson’s *Maud* (1855), and Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856) were sufficiently plain to contemporary critics to earn them the label of “school.” Aubrey de Vere, for example, in a review of *The Angel in the House* published in the *Edinburgh Review* in 1858, situates Patmore’s poem among a series of works recently composed “on the principle of versifying the manners of the day,” and places this principle firmly at the heart of the poet’s endeavours: “Of these poems which attempt to describe the finer emotions of modern society, the most original and the most artistic which we have seen is Coventry Patmore’s ‘Angel in the House;’ a poem, the existence of which is better than a thousand *à priori* arguments in favour of the school to which it belongs” (122–23).

If read as a ponderous treatise on women’s “angelic reach / Of virtue, chiefly used to sit and darn, / And fatten household sinners” (in the sardonic phrasing of *Aurora Leigh* 1.438–40), “original” and “artistic” seem incongruous descriptors of *The Angel*. As an experiment in treating the most typical, uneventful, and unprepossessing of subjects, however – giving poetic form to the ups and downs of an utterly ordinary Victorian courtship and marriage – de Vere’s praise of the poem is far more comprehensible. Like *Aurora Leigh*, *The Angel in the House* has been disproportionately judged by what it has to say about the role of women in Victorian society (a preoccupation that has had precisely opposite effects on the poems’ respective standings within current scholarship). It is salutary to recall Barrett Browning’s own surprise at seeing her poem appropriated to this purpose. She wrote with amusement to her friend Julia Martin in 1858: “Did you see in the list of Lectures to be delivered by Gerald Massey, (advertised in the Athenaeum) one on ‘Aurora Leigh, and the womans [sic] question?’ . . . I did not fancy that the poem would be so identified as it has been, with that question, which was only a collateral object with my intentions in writing” (Reynolds 347). Those “intentions” are abundantly documented, from her earliest mention of the projected poem in her correspondence to the extensive discussion of the proper subject matter for poetry that runs through the books of *Aurora Leigh* itself. The poet wrote to Robert Browning, more than ten years before the poem’s publication, that she wished to write “a sort of novel-poem,” “completely modern . . . running into the midst of our conventions, and rushing into drawing-rooms and the like . . . and so, meeting face to face and without mask the Humanity of the age” (Reynolds 330). Both *Aurora Leigh* and *The Angel* make significant contributions to our understanding of the state of the “womans question” at mid-century; to ignore the poems’ participation in the campaign for a poetry of modern life, however, is to miss the aesthetic principles which underlie and animate their treatment of the matrimonial and the domestic in its Victorian forms.

Perhaps the last critic to address this aspect of Patmore’s poem directly was Humphry House who, in a 1948 BBC radio talk on the Pre-Raphaelites, cited it as the archetypal

instance of a poet seeking to resolve the tension between contemporary life and the “poetic” that was characteristic of the age:

One of the big problems for the Pre-Raphaelites and for all their generation was to try and see the daily life of Victorian England –complete with all its keeping of dress and furniture and social habits – as having an equivalent spiritual and human significance to that which medieval life had in all its details for medieval poets and painters. . . . The series of poems which best illustrates this dilemma in the poetry of the mid-century is Coventry Patmore’s long work *The Angel in the House* . . . an attempt to invest an ordinary Victorian courtship and marriage in the prosperous educated classes with as deep a spiritual and psychological significance as was felt to attach to the great poetic loves of the past. (128–29)

House does not consider Patmore’s attempt a success. “The trouble,” he writes, “was that people laughed. . . . There seemed to be an irreparable cleavage between the facts of modern society and the depths it was recognised poetry ought to touch” (129). Certainly, many of the reviews were not kind. The story was ridiculed for its paltriness. The *Athenaeum* went so far as to parody the work’s tripping metre, in prose made up of rhymed octosyllabic quatrains: “How his intended gathered flowers, And took her tea and after sung, Is told in style somewhat like ours, For delectation of the young . . . There are no tears for you to shed Unless they may be tears of mirth. – From ball to bed, from field to farm, The tale flows nicely purling on” (“Minor Minstrels” 76). It was the uneventful, unpoetic subject matter of *The Angel* that chiefly attracted the attention (and frequently the derision) of these first readers of the poem.

*The Angel in the House* relates the story of the wooing and winning of Honoria Churchill, eldest daughter of the Dean of Salisbury, by Felix Vaughan, a rather amative young man of leisure and reasonable prospects who has recently come down from Cambridge. It consists of four (out of a projected six) parts: *The Angel in the House*, though widely used as the overall title of the work, initially included only the first two books, “The Betrothal” (1854) and “The Espousals” (1856); *Faithful for Ever* (1860) and *The Victories of Love* (1862), often referred to together by the latter title, explore the matrimonial fortunes of Honoria’s failed suitor, her cousin Frederick Graham (with cameo appearances from the blissfully married Vaughans). In this series of instalments, Patmore sought to depict nothing more than what really did happen, every day, in the course of marrying and giving in marriage among the Victorian upper middle class, and to reveal the inherent grace and meaning – the poetry – in such quotidian goings-on. Meynell underscores the originality of Patmore’s scheme (and the difficulty readers had in assimilating its incongruous results):

The propriety and fastidiousness of polite life had never before been matter for high poetry. It amused many to find the Cathedral Close as gaily sung as the Village had been or the Court. Others, again, very probably thought it a trivial scene, and the persons of the little story trivial. To Patmore man and woman were creatures of dignity, of honour, and of bliss, even in mid-Victorian dress and in the conditions of provincial elegance. (14–15)

*The Angel* is composed in direct opposition to the sentiment expressed by Wilkie Collins in his “Letter of Dedication” to *Basil* (1852) – which could serve as an apology for the sensation novel of which *Basil* is perhaps the earliest exemplar – that “[t]hose extraordinary accidents

and events which happen to few men seemed to me to be as legitimate materials for fiction to work with . . . as the ordinary accidents and events which may, and do, happen to us all” (4). The studied dullness of *The Angel*, by contrast, eschews not only sensational happenings but, as far as possible, anything that could be classified as an “accident” or “event” at all – favouring instead the inward agonies and ecstasies that go largely undetected beneath the unbroken surface of daily social life. This principle is openly stated in the Prologue to the first edition of the poem, in which Felix discusses with Honoria, his wife of eight years, the plan of the poem he intends to write about their courtship and marriage:

’Twas fixed, with much on both sides said,  
The Song should have no incidents,  
They are so dull, and pall, twice read:  
Its scope should be the heart’s events . . . <sup>3</sup>

The result is a deliberate and, as de Vere acknowledges, highly disciplined blandness of plot: “The interest of the poem is studiously rendered independent of vicissitudes. . . . Such a mode of treatment, while it increases the difficulty of the performance, is doubtless necessitated by the author’s desire to illustrate ordinary, not exceptional, modern life” (123–24). A poem about a courtship that opens with a picture of the happily married couple assuredly, as de Vere observes, “[r]enounc[es] the stimulus of curiosity”; Patmore opts instead for the more austere charms of a story that embodies his philosophy of the human and divine significance contained in the apparently commonplace.

Patmore’s emphasis on the everyday life of the age as not only a possible, but the only true, subject for poetry is confirmed by his writings on his fellow-poets’ work during the period of *The Angel*’s composition. In an 1856 *Edinburgh Review* article, for example, his description of the poet’s task (a staple ingredient of mid-Victorian reviews) sheds considerable light on the sedateness, as well as the didacticism, of his own contemporaneous efforts:

all the greatest poets seem to have been equally partial to commonplace themes, as well in incident as in moral; for these reasons, among others, that moral truth is usually important in proportion to its triteness . . . and that a poem, unlike a novel, ought to contain no element of effect calculated to diminish or fail in its operation after repeated perusals. (“New Poets” 339)

The song, in other words, should have no incidents, since they inevitably pall “after repeated perusals”; its scope should be the events of the heart. A further denunciation of the stirring and exceptional in poetry is implied in Patmore’s dismissal of the subject of *Aurora Leigh* – an attempted poem of modern life he clearly does not associate, as de Vere later did, with his own endeavours in the field: “The development of her powers as a poetess is elaborately depicted; but as Mrs. Browning is herself almost the only modern example of such development, the story is uninteresting from its very singularity” (Rev. of *Aurora Leigh* 454). There are presumably few more damning labels, in Patmore’s poetics of the ordinary, than that of “singular.” Perhaps he had the sensationalism – the distinctly novelistic flavour – of *Aurora Leigh* in view a few years later when praising the homeliness of William Barnes’s poetry in *Macmillan’s Magazine*:

It is almost the rarest quality of a poet to be able to know a good subject when he sees it. At least ninety-nine poems out of a hundred – even by good writers – have either too little subject, or, what is far worse, too much. A good poet can make good poetry out of little or no subject; but a preponderance of subject – an incident, or series of incidents of great and obvious interest and significance, independently of their treatment by the poet – is a difficulty which no poet can overcome, but such an one as appears every five hundred years or so . . . (“William Barnes, The Dorsetshire Poet” 155–56)

Certainly it would be difficult to charge *The Angel in the House* with a “preponderance of subject.” Patmore goes on to define poetry as “[s]ensible events and objects . . . manifested in their divine relations by the divine light, and expressed in verse,” contending that “the poet enables us to see common and otherwise ‘commonplace’ objects and events with a sense of uncommon reality and life” (156). It is this aesthetic principle that governs the apparently trite incidents and moralistic reflections of which *The Angel in the House* is comprised.

What, then, is *The Angel* about? In what sense may and should it be classified and read as a “Poem of the Age”? To what extent does Patmore’s “method” merit Alice Meynell’s characterisation of it as “realism” or “reality” (13)? Like many other poems of the period that self-consciously undertake either modern or ancient subjects – among them *Aurora Leigh* and Tennyson’s frame poem to his 1842 “Morte d’Arthur,” “The Epic” – *The Angel* furnishes the reader with an extensive account of its own origins which serves as an apology for its choice of theme and seeks to pre-empt likely objections to the homeliness of the story. The Prologue to the poem’s first book, “The Betrothal,” sees would-be poet Felix Vaughan sharing with his wife the outcome of his deliberations over that question of the day, the proper subject matter for poetry:

I, meditating much and long  
 What I should sing, how win a name,  
 Considering well what theme unsung,  
 What reason worth the cost of rhyme,  
 Remains to loose the Poet’s tongue  
 In these last days, the dregs of time,  
 Learn that to me, though born so late,  
 There does, beyond desert, befall  
 (May my great fortune make me great!)  
 The first of themes, sung last of all.

Echoes of Wordsworth’s own rejection of the Arthurian legend as “some British theme, some old / Romantic tale by Milton left unsung” (*Prelude* I.168–69) are reinforced by his wife’s response:

Then she: “What is it, Dear? The Life  
 Of Arthur, or Jerusalem’s Fall?”  
 “Neither: your gentle self, my Wife,  
 And love, that grows from one to all.”

Felix is delighted to stumble, in “green and undiscover’d ground,” upon “the very well-head” of poetry. To be sure, love has been a perennial theme of the divine songsters whose ranks

he hopes to join; his discovery takes place “near where many others sing.” Yet as one writer for the *Eclectic Review* enthuses, “it was all love before marriage; and few have dared or been fitted to go higher” (Rev. of *The Angel in the House* 548). This reviewer’s affirmation of “wedded love” as “an almost unoccupied domain in the choicest of all the realms of poesy” (547) sides decisively with Patmore against the traditional embargo on prosaic post-wedding life as a subject for verse, expressed most baldly by Byron in that most un-domestic of poems, *Don Juan*:

There’s doubtless something in domestic doings,  
Which forms, in fact, true love’s antithesis;  
Romances paint at full length people’s wooings,  
But only give a bust of marriages;  
For no one cares for matrimonial cooings,  
There’s nothing wrong in a connubial kiss:  
Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch’s wife,  
He would have written sonnets all his life? (III.8)

Love in its most common, durational, socially authorised, and pedestrian form – that is, marriage – is dismissed, like the ugly or mundane aspects of modern life, as simply and ludicrously incompatible with the raptures of poetry. It is this devaluing of love as it manifests itself in the workaday world that Felix/Patmore sets out to combat.

The equation between marriage and everyday life in the modern world – the world of Victorian, middle-class respectability, the novelistic world dominated by the concerns of the marriage market – is an easy one, and Patmore’s defence of the one is indistinguishable from his preoccupation with the other. The very first lines of the poem have Felix disclaiming that “Mine is no horse with wings, to gain / The region of the spheral chime.” His “homely Pegasus,” he confesses, is firmly in harness, performing common service: “The world’s cart-collar hugs his throat, / And he’s too wise to prance or rear.” Renouncing the poetic ascent to Mount Olympus in favour of, say, a Victorian hackney cab, our poet prepares his readers for a placid tour of the immediate neighbourhood, assuming a frankness and self-deprecation which aims at disarming any potential critics. Vaughan’s anxiety that his subject may prove too homely, too familiar, to be acceptable to a novel-reading public finds its inversion in Tennyson’s Arthurian poet, Everard Hall, who burned his twelve-book epic in the belief that “a truth / Looks freshest in the fashion of the day,” damning his own work as “faint Homeric echoes, nothing-worth.”<sup>4</sup> “The Epic” embeds the objections of critics who declare such subjects as the death of Arthur unsuited to modern poetry within its prelude to just such a poem; in the same way, the writer of *The Angel* draws regularly on the “how unpoetical the age” rhetoric freely circulating at mid-century. The sense of belatedness that is a notable feature of this discourse of gloom surfaces in Felix’s description of himself in *The Angel*’s Prologue as “born so late,” and seeking a worthy subject for poetry “In these last days, the dregs of time.” Similar expressions recur throughout the books of the poem: describing his paean of woman as wife and mother as “That hymn for which the whole world longs,” the poet expresses the hope that it will arouse “these song-sleepy times” (Book I, Canto II, Prelude I, “The Paragon”). A letter from Felix to Honoria in *The Victories of Love*, celebrating their many years of marriage, asks, “How read from such a homely page / In the ear of this unhomely age?” (XII). Entering into the sentiments of those who doubt the



receptiveness of the modern age to poetry, Patmore nonetheless affirms the daily domestic life of Victorian men and women as the proper stuff of poetry, and as precisely the song such an age needs.

It is on principle, then, that “The Espousals” does not draw to a happily-ever-after close with the climax of Felix and Honoria’s wedding, but rather follows the honeymooning couple into a store where a shop-girl is fitting the new Mrs Vaughan with sand-shoes:

That was my first expense for this  
Sweet Stranger, now my three days’ Wife.  
How light the touches are that kiss  
The music from the chords of life! (II, XII.1)

The accompaniment of a trivial incident with a commentary upon the significance and beauty of the apparently commonplace is standard practice for *The Angel*, functioning as it does almost as an experiment in how banal and unremarkable – how close to the most unexceptional of real lives – a story can be made without forfeiting the interest of its audience. The balance is a delicate one between, on the one hand, the novelistic appeal of seeing circumstances or events which could plausibly happen to the readers themselves poeticised; and, on the other, the point where such readers balk at the mundaneness of a plot in which little occurs that they may not experience in their own lives. And certainly Patmore sails very close to the wind, frequently risking slips into dullness or bathos. As John Reid notes, though he “tried to give to the most homely details of living a radiant significance,” he “was not always able to transmute the details” (58), and many of the passages received as especially incongruous or risible were quietly excised from later editions. A writer for the *Critic* in 1860 quotes at length a portion of *Faithful for Ever* which strikes him as particularly ludicrous, from a letter written to Frederick Graham (Honoriam’s naval cousin) by his mother as he leaves for the Levant:

I send you, Dear,  
A trifling present; ’twill supply  
Your Salisbury costs. You have to buy  
Almost an outfit for this cruise!  
But many are good enough to use  
Again, among the things you send  
To give away. My Maid shall mend  
And let you have them back.

“This union of love and old clothes is certainly a novelty in poësy, for which Mr. Patmore deserves full credit,” is the reviewer’s sardonic gloss on the lines; yet his gibe that such a passage “will no doubt prove very effective with Mr. Patmore’s warmest admirers” (480) hints at more positive responses to the poet’s deliberate attention to the humblest of domestic transactions.

In fact, the humdrum details that pepper the narrative of *The Angel in the House* rarely give an impression of arbitrary selection, but are instead, as a rule, deployed strategically in relation both to the development of the hero’s love, and to the principles that underpin Patmore’s versification of the commonplace. A section of “The Betrothal,” for example,

which treats at length Felix's interactions with his tenant, comes directly on a visit to his new beloved; returning home from the Deanery, he describes his "load of joy and tender care" and desire to be alone to pray, but continues:

I rode home slowly; whip-in-hand  
And soil'd bank-notes all ready, stood  
The Farmer who farm'd all my land,  
Except the little Park and Wood;  
And with the accustom'd compliment  
Of talk, and beef, and frothing beer,  
I, my own steward, took my rent,  
Three hundred pounds for half the year;  
Our witnesses the Cook and groom,  
We sign'd the lease for seven years more,  
And bade Good-day . . . (IV.3)

The abrupt transition from exalted reflections upon his blossoming love to the banality of a business transaction is intended to mirror Felix's own sense of discordance between his inward concerns and the matter-of-fact expectations of the outer world. The level of detail provided – down to the specified rate of the rent and who witnessed the contract – both describes and mimics, in the apparent superfluity of the description, the rightness of the hero's response to this check on his daydreams. Rather than retreat from the demands of everyday life to his own sweeter thoughts, he shows the farmer appropriate courtesy, engages fully in the details of the lease and, in a broad sense, acts responsibly as "[his] own steward." Frederick Graham learns a similar lesson in *Faithful for Ever* through his disappointed love for Honoria. In a (remarkably candid) letter to his mother, the young seaman speaks of "the bright past" as "but a splendour in his dreams," and laments that, though "Life aches / To be therewith conform'd," the world, "so stolid, dark, and low," prevents such a consummation of dreams and reality. His conclusion, with its distrust of ethereal fancies which leave one unfit for the realities of daily life, could also serve as Patmore's synopsis of the poet's task:

But perilous is the lofty mood  
Which cannot yoke with lowly good.  
Right life, for me, is life that wends  
By lowly ways to lofty ends. (XII)

The poet acknowledges the gap between human longing and the concrete facts of everyday existence, and roundly rejects any means of navigating it that clings to the ideal at the expense of the actual, leaving the dreamer unable to assimilate, work with, and delight in the actualities of the world in which he lives.

Frequently, Patmore's campaign for a recognition of the intrinsic worth of the ordinary and seemingly unimpressive aspects of life takes the form of a kind of moral psychology which affirms that the vicissitudes of human life, from an external point of view, do not always correspond to the ebb and flow of the inner life – that the landmark moments of the soul often pass by with barely a ripple. There is a constant and calculated tension throughout the books of *The Angel in the House* between the apparent inconsequentiality of events and their amplified effect on the fragile and spiritually sensitive inner world of the lovers. It is during

a day on Salisbury Plain, while superficially the party carries on a routine conversation, that a new “sweet familiarity and awe” steals over our hero and heroine amongst the group of picnickers and Felix, for the first time, gains a conviction that his love is returned: “in the eternal light I saw / That she was mine” (I.VIII, 5). A momentous day for his suit – yet on the surface, an outing like any other. These heights are matched by (similarly disproportionate) depths of despair. At a ball, the lover abruptly finds that he has displeased his beloved: his over-eagerness betrays him into a faux pas of some sort – in the first edition, he asks her to waltz, a recently-introduced dance seen by some as indecorous; in later versions, he “press’d her hand,” was immediately aware of “my spirit’s vague offence,” and is devastated to see “the rays / Withdrawn” that she had, up to now, bent upon him. The moment of discord is quickly overcome; but later, filled with “measureless remorse,” Felix confesses himself in prayer, with tears, “Unseasonable, disorderly, / And a deranger of love’s sphere” (I, XI.3) – a blatant overreaction from the extrinsic perspective of the reader, but Patmore wishes to emphasise the delicacy of “love’s sphere” and the reverberations that the most ostensibly paltry actions and events cause within it. The minor episodes that make up a typical courtship take on epic proportions. A week which does not include an invitation from the Churchills is described as an “exile” (I.III, 1), and when Honoria spends some time in London, the sun shines on the Cathedral Close “As on Sahara” (I.IX, 4). One of the preludes to Canto VII of “The Betrothal,” entitled “Love’s Immortality,” encapsulates the principle:

So trifles serve for his relief,  
And trifles make him sick and pale;  
And yet his pleasure and his grief  
Are both on a majestic scale.

The scale of the lover’s reactions to superficially trivial incidents not only seems but, in fact, *is* majestic; Patmore, in casting the couple’s temporary separation as “Sahara” and the time following their engagement in terms of “Beulah” or the promised land, is not falsely magnifying the ordinary experiences of his protagonist, but rather revealing the organic connection between those experiences and the eternal truths they reflect and incarnate.

And indeed, incarnation is an illuminative concept for understanding Patmore’s poetics in *The Angel in the House*. There is frequently a religious logic behind the determination of certain mid-Victorians not to flinch from the mundane and the unattractive in poetry. Aurora Leigh, for example, vows as a poet “To look into the swarthiest face of things, / For God’s sake who has made them” (6.148–49), and the Chartist poet who is the eponymous hero of Charles Kingsley’s novel *Alton Locke* (1850) lauds the “democratic tendency” of Tennyson’s poems – “the revelation of the poetry which lies in common things” – as the direction in which the age as a whole is heading, grounding his defence of this democratic principle in art in “the likeness of Him who causes his rain to fall on the just and on the unjust, and His sun to shine on the evil and the good” (97–98; ch. 9). The vindication of the everyday is a necessary corollary to a faith that subscribes not only to the doctrine of God as creator, but as himself having taken on flesh and all the particulars and humiliations of a specific historical moment. For the Word himself not to scorn the stable or the carpenter’s workshop compels the poet to take an accordingly reverent view of the drawing-room and the railway station, as well as the humdrum routine of married life. Patmore’s oft-voiced conviction of the divine reality that underpins, and lends worth to, even the most ordinary and unromantic

experiences appeals not only to the logic of incarnation, but to the language and principle of the Christian sacraments. Defined by the Anglican Book of Common Prayer as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace” (“A Catechism” 294), the concept of a sacrament offers a perfect metaphor for Patmore’s view of poetry as “[s]ensible events and objects . . . manifested in their divine relations by the divine light, and expressed in verse.” The parallel becomes glaring in one prelude’s explication of the religious nature of the poet’s vocation, entitled “Orpheus”:

Of Heav’n I ask,  
 May I, with heart-persuading might,  
 Pursue the Poet’s sacred task  
 Of superseding faith by sight . . .  
 To prouder folly let me show  
 Earth by divine light made divine;  
 And let the saints, who hear my word,  
 Say, “Lo, the clouds begin to shine  
 About the coming of the Lord!” (III, I, III)

Patmore here formulates his goal as the reification, in some sense, of biblical truths about life, love, and marriage; to present his readers with a picture of modern, daily, married life so real, and so redolent of heaven, that the need for faith in what is unseen will be made as superfluous as the visible return of Christ would render it. Like the sacraments of baptism and communion, the characters and details of *The Angel in the House* serve to make concrete and accessible the abstract ideals and eternal truths they body forth.<sup>5</sup> It is a process reflected in the complex structure of the poem. “The Betrothal” and “The Espousals” consist of twelve cantos each, divided between a set of “Preludes” (“Accompaniments” in the first edition) and a narrative section. The preludes to each canto – a series of abstract meditations with such titles as “Love in Tears” (I.V, II), “The Spirit’s Epochs” (I.VIII, III), and “Joy and Use” (II.VII, I) – represent the content of the “faith” espoused by the poem, wisdom that finds its incarnation in the story of Felix and Honoria, which shouldered the task of “superseding” that faith “by sight.”<sup>6</sup>

The treatment of the homely details of everyday life that is at the heart of what Patmore is attempting in *The Angel in the House* is thus of a very specific kind, deriving its shape from the poet’s belief system and the relations of visible and invisible, time-bound and eternal, humble and heavenly, within it. Patmore’s taste for the realities of the contemporary world is not so catholic as that of, say, Clough or Barrett Browning, whose poems of modern life display such a voracious appetite for facts. There are strict limits to the “realism” of *The Angel in the House*. Although Patmore’s project necessitated a modern setting, for example – “the spirit of Dante was to be expressed in the setting of the Trollope novels” (Evans 135) – the backdrop to *The Angel* is not urbanised, industrial Britain, nor is it a place of intellectual ferment or religious and political controversy. Like many of his contemporaries who wished to signal their allegiance to the representation of the modern and the everyday in their poetry, Patmore manages to include a scene at the train station, in which Felix bids farewell to his future bride as she departs by rail to spend a month in London; William Barnes, reviewing *The Angel* for *Fraser’s Magazine*, applauds the poet as “a true artist, who sees beauty in all good works of man – new as well as old . . . And so [he] does not shrink from a landscape with a steam-engine even in the foreground” (132). London itself, on the other hand, does not

feature outside of the hero's fretfulness over whether "The harmful influence of the place" might lead his beloved to "scorn our simple country life" and his contemplated proposal of marriage (I, IX.4). Arthur Symons's later declaration that "I think that might be the test of poetry which professes to be modern: its capacity for dealing with London, with what one sees or might see there, indoors and out" (46) establishes a standard by which Patmore fails dismally (*Aurora Leigh*, on the other hand, passing with flying colours).

This fastidiousness is in line with the poet's expressed ambivalence about contemporary subjects. In an essay entitled "The Poetry of Negation," he affirms the proper concern of poetry as "the permanent facts of nature and humanity," arguing that, as it is "interested in the events and controversies of its own time only so far as they evolve manifestly abiding fruits," poets have traditionally "either allowed the present to drift unheeded by, or have so handled its phenomena as to make them wholly subsidiary to and illustrative of matters of well-ascertained stability" (*Principle in Art* 40) – matters, presumably, such as the marriage bond. *The Angel in the House* is a decidedly Victorian poem; yet the "temporalities" or "topicalities" interspersed throughout its lines are firmly subordinated to the poet's didactic purpose. It is the placid civility of Salisbury, the social round of upper-middle-class families, the conventions of nineteenth-century courtship and the nineteenth-century household that constitute the "Victorian-ness" of *The Angel*. The ancillary nature of the modern details (which had been so central to the contemporaneity of *Aurora Leigh*, for example) is evident in the excision of many of the first edition's particularities of time and place in the repeated revisions Patmore made to the poem. Innumerable contemporary references – the religious controversy over Strauss, Cambridge japes, the recently-introduced waltz, political talk (including mentions of Henry Philpotts and the Young Englanders) – simply disappear, as do whole scenes which appear especially trivial, such as a tête-à-tête between the affianced lovers largely concerning fashion preferences ("Do you like flounc'd or plain skirts best?" II, VII.2). Those that remain are characteristically subtle. One biographer, commenting upon the seemingly innocuous lines "though he merits not / To kiss the braid upon her skirt" (I.III, I, "The Lover"), insists that Patmore therein "avoids a scriptural cliché like the hem of her garment and calls attention to a detail of Victorian dressmaking"<sup>7</sup> – a touch of ordinary nineteenth-century life so light a modern audience would almost certainly miss it. De Vere hails this disciplined approach to contemporary detail as "the secret of Mr. Patmore's success in the poetical treatment of modern life":

The picture with which he has presented us is not a caricature of the accidents belonging to modern society. Such accidents find their due place, but no more, in his verse . . . if the conventionalities of the day admit of being thus introduced, and laid aside, it is because our interest is riveted, throughout the bulk of the poem, by those moral relations and affections which belong to no age and no place in particular. (130)

Patmore is interested less in the incidental trappings of modern life than in the power and validity of eternal human passions manifesting themselves in the supposedly trivial and stultifying circumstances of Victorian gentility.

Patmore's "realism" is thus far from indiscriminate in its championing of the modern and the everyday in poetry. While his use of surface detail is sparing, *The Angel* can most truly be characterised, in de Vere's words, as an attempt at "versifying the *manners* of the day" (122, italics mine). The "laws" of the harmonious Churchill household are celebrated as "The fair sum of six thousand years' / Traditions of civility" (I, 1.5); superficial social accomplishments

are deemed indispensable as an indicator of commitment to more fundamental realities, as in the following description of the wise wooer:

He dresses, dances well: he knows  
 A small weight turns a heavy scale:  
 Who'd have her care for him, and shows  
 Himself no care, deserves to fail . . . (I.III, I, "The Lover")

Just as the routine incidents of daily life, for Patmore, carry a deeper meaning than meets the casual, irreverent eye, so the formalities of social intercourse are a manifestation of, and a kind of protective shell for, the more profound human relations. One (otherwise not unsympathetic) reviewer complains that the poet's "favourite study is what we may call the *surface* of man's deeper life, – that stratum of human existence where character passes into *manners*" ("Poems by Coventry Patmore" 531–32). "A little more of the primeval rock," the writer ventures later in the review, "on which our life is based, and a little less of the overlaying flowers and sod, would add dignity and interest to Mr Patmore's landscape" (545).

If the gritty reality and elemental passions suggested by "primeval rock" would seem, to say the least, incongruous in the airy, forbiddingly decorous world of *The Angel*, Patmore's own use of flower/sod imagery defends his focus on the apparently superficial, pointing up the unseen but intimate relation between the earthly experience of wedded love and more heavenly joys. A prelude entitled "Love Justified" makes characteristically sweeping claims for the marriage relationship, identifying the "little germ of nuptial love, / Which springs so simply from the sod" as in fact the "root" of "all our love to man and God" (I, VI.II). The following canto returns to this organic metaphor in the prelude "Heaven and Earth":

How long shall men deny the flower  
 Because its roots are in the earth,  
 And crave with tears from God the dower  
 They have, and have despised as dearth . . .  
 But fools shall feel like fools to find  
 (Too late inform'd) that angels' mirth  
 Is one in cause, and mode, and kind  
 With that which they profaned on earth. (I, VII.II)

*The Angel* repeatedly heaps this reproach – that of failing to see the worth and beauty of what one already has, despising it as earthy and undignified ("unpoetic," perhaps) – on those especially who grow dull and indifferent after marriage, once the raptures of courtship are at an end. A series of preludes with titles like "Common Graces" (I, IX.II) and "The Churl" (I, XII.III) (which eponymous character is condemned for valuing the chase over the wife he wins thereby) set about skewering this tendency. "Frost in Harvest" is particularly scathing about the disjunction between the sentiments of wooer and spouse, lamenting that once the "gulf / Of ceremony" natural to courtship is "o'erleapt, the lover wed," it is too often the case that "Respect grows lax, and worship cold."

That marriage is allowed to fall into humdrum routine, that lovers take each other for granted once the chase is over, that familiarity is permitted to breed matrimonial contempt – it is against this tendency that Patmore composes *The Angel in the House*. His solution to this

near-universal experience is to studiously maintain the “gulf of ceremony” which had come so naturally to the lovers before marriage relegated their love to the realm of the quotidian and mundane. The formal courtesies of polite society are not merely the icing on the wedding cake, but a crucial preservative of the marriage vows. *The Angel* deplores the casualness that tends to accompany the most intimate relationships and glorifies “Love Ceremonious”:

Keep your undrest, familiar style  
 For strangers, but respect your friend,  
 Her most, whose matrimonial smile  
 Is and asks honour without end.  
 'Tis found, and needs it must so be,  
 That life from love's allegiance flags,  
 When love forgets his majesty  
 In sloth's unceremonious rags. . . .  
 This makes that pleasures do not cloy,  
 And dignifies our mortal strife  
 With calmness and considerate joy,  
 Befitting our immortal life. (II, III.1)

The cultivated courtliness advocated here serves as a bridging mechanism between the painful inadequacies of daily life and a higher sphere, re-clothing the “mortal” with its “immortal” significance. Treat the everyday as precious and honourable, urges Patmore, and it will disclose to you that it truly is so. This moral philosophy of the everyday is the main burden of *The Angel*: asserting on the one hand the earthly, and therefore always chequered and muddied, nature of human blessing in this life, and on the other its contiguity with heavenly joys, even amidst the most prosaic accoutrements of Victorian society. In *The Angel*, the vindication of the everyday is not a distinct theme from that of married love; rather, the poet proposes the former as the fundamental principle the neglect of which has led to the denigration of (and poetic disregard for) the latter. Just as the husband must paradoxically exercise a restraint which increases his intimacy with and ardour for his spouse, and all treat their daily blessings with a reverence which keeps them from palling, so *The Angel in the House* insists on investing the flimsiest of experiences with a poetic distance and solemnity that enact Patmore's belief in the divine glory manifest in ordinary modern life.

This, I suggest, is the principle encapsulated in the poem's much-abused title. An attentive reading of *The Angel* offers little support for the assumption that the titular angel refers to the supposed “heroine” of the work, Honoria Vaughan (née Churchill),<sup>8</sup> or even to a more general, idealised woman-figure. There are, in fact, surprisingly few angel references in the poem itself. The adjective “angelic” or “angelical” appears occasionally to describe the “countenance” (I.IV, I, “The Rose of the World”) or the “fellowship” (II.IV, II, “Love and Honour”) of an abstract ideal of the virtuous wife; yet the descriptor is also used to convey the lover's “power of bliss,” and the sole direct comparison of Honoria to a celestial being – at church (not even in “the house”) together one day during their courtship, Felix relates how “she seem'd to be / An angel teaching me to pray” (I, X.6) – is rather outweighed by several mentions of actual angels: “angels' mirth” (I.VII, II, “Heaven and Earth”), “the great society / Of nature, angels, and of God” experienced by Adam before Eve was created (II.I, IV, “Nearest the Dearest”), and “the flight / Of angels” (Book IV, Wedding Sermon). Indeed, one

prelude draws an explicit contrast between married lovers and these supernatural creatures: “Angels may be familiar; those / Who err each other must respect” (I.XI, II, “Aurea Dicta”). In effect, Patmore is at once too realistic – too aware of the trials and disappointments of actual daily life – and too orthodox to subscribe to the equation of women to angels so easily made by a more secular literature, which classes the latter with other mythological creatures (such as mermaids and fairies) often associated with the fair sex in Victorian imagery. Despite Auerbach’s contention that, in “popular Victorian angelology,” “angel” and “house” became “virtual synonyms” (66, 69), it is not at all clear even that Patmore’s first readers took the poem’s title as a description of wife and mother, enthroned as domestic goddess over the household sphere. A perusal of the contemporary reviews yields a somewhat fuzzy but discernible impression, in the minds of many of these initial readers, of Patmore’s “angel” as a heavenly power or powers capable of transmuting the difficulties and discords of married life into pleasing harmony. The *Harvard Magazine*, for example, concludes from the poem that “virtue, sincerity, watchfulness of temper, tender regard, attention to the little amenities of living, are the angels that shower happiness before the path of the wedded lovers” (“The Angel in the House: The Espousals” 420). The *Eclectic Review* figures the experience of love as the catalyst turning discontented youths to prosperous family men: “Let love only beckon them out of the dismal byway and the lonely lane, and straightway they arise transfigured, most probably to walk the world rejoicing. . . . It is here that the waters of life – troubled until the angel came – grow calm” (551). And William Barnes casts the poem itself in its title role, suggesting that “wherever it is read with a right view of its high aim, we believe it will be found itself, more or less, of an angel in the house” (133) – providing a pattern of thought, affections, and conduct that will make for a happy home and marriage. To read the poem’s title in light of Patmore’s advocacy of the honour of the daily domestic round, rather than his notions of virtuous womanhood, makes considerably better sense of both its theological and its moral teaching. *The Angel in the House* as a whole seeks to make visible to its readers the spiritual realities – “the angel” – that lie behind, and have the power to transfigure, the everyday life of “the house.”

Patmore therefore sets out, in *The Angel*, to controvert the view that modern life is “unpoetical” via a refutation of Byron’s assumption that poetry does not survive the bourne of marriage – filling a whole poem with “matrimonial cooings” in an effort to prove that Petrarch could indeed have continued to churn out sonnets to Laura, à la Felix Vaughan, throughout their married life. This apparently prim and tedious mid-century verse-novel is written, not as a handbook to Victorian misogyny, but in answer to the call for a poetry capacious and robust enough to handle the varied forms of modern life, and to invest them with order and meaning. The rallying cry is that of Clough, who asked of poetry in a review of 1853, the year before the first instalment of *The Angel*:

Could it not attempt to convert into beauty and thankfulness, or at least into some form and shape, some feeling, at any rate, of content – the actual, palpable things with which our every-day life is concerned; . . . intimate to us relations which, in our unchosen, peremptorily-appointed posts, in our grievously narrow and limited spheres of action, we still, in and through all, retain to some central, celestial fact? . . . Cannot the Divine Song in some way indicate to us our unity, though from a great way off, with those happier things; inform us, and prove to us, that though we are what we are, we may yet, in some way, even in our abasement, even by and through our daily work, be related to the purer existence. (144–45)



This is precisely what Patmore undertakes in *The Angel in the House*: to indicate the relations a particularly narrow and limited sphere of action bears to a higher reality. Admittedly, the bland middle-class civility of the poem's setting holds less appeal to readers today than the grittiness of Clough's poems or the polemical edge to *Aurora Leigh*, but Patmore's experiment is perhaps all the more radical for that. *The Angel* is a poem that we now have to work hard at, not only due to the irksomeness of its picture of gender relations, but because of the inherent difficulty of recapturing its vision of its world. It is a difficulty illustrated by the poem's reception history within the course of just a few decades. In the 1880s, as *The Angel* (or, more accurately, its title) was increasingly coming into play in feminist and anti-feminist debates, the publisher Cassell & Co brought out a new edition as part of a series of affordable classic works, which to everybody's surprise sold extremely well (Anstruther 96–98). Anstruther accounts for this resurgence in the poem's popularity as "largely historical" in nature: "a generation not born when *The Angel* first appeared in print found its picture of Sarum Close and the Dean's simple daughter, Honor, who visited the poor, feared to waltz, and fell in love by Stonehenge, as out of date as the coach and the crinoline, and just as quaint, romantic and charming" (98). For a poem that aimed expressly at the representation of what was widely dismissed as unromantic and thoroughly ordinary in contemporary life, it was a somewhat ironic development.

The reason behind this renewed popularity at the end of the nineteenth century, then, is more or less identical to the reason for its unpopularity in the early twenty-first (and throughout most of the twentieth); and both responses are based on factors incidental to the poem itself. While the energy and directness of *Aurora Leigh* allow readers to overleap the poem's more time-bound features – including the Swedenborgian belief in a heavenly reality precisely parallel to "this world's show" (7.835) which underpins the entire work – *The Angel in the House* is much more dependent for the enjoyment it might afford on a congruity between the reader's worldview and that espoused by the poet. This pattern applies even to the metre of the poem, the effectiveness of which for many Victorian reviewers seems to have been pegged to the success of the poem's defence of the everyday: the strictly regular tetrameters and alternating rhymes of *The Angel* flirt with triteness and triviality in tandem with its perilously ordinary subject matter. The poem itself draws a parallel between the workings of poetic metre and its own embodied philosophy of life and marriage. A prelude titled "The Joyful Wisdom" declares of the truly wise that:

They live by law, not like the fool,  
But like the bard, who freely sings  
In strictest bonds of rhyme and rule,  
And finds in them, not bonds, but wings. (I, X.I)

The wise man, like the husband, like the poet in this stanza (and every other, without variation, in *The Angel*) submits willingly to the fetters of law, marriage, or meter and finds in them a paradoxical freedom. Whether or not readers of Patmore's domestic paean have been able to accept his account of marriage as the central and liberating experience of man is closely connected to their response to his claim that the "heart's events," even under the guise of a modern and uneventful courtship, merit the highest poetic treatment; and both tend to move in concert with the impression either that Patmore's purling verses do, in fact, take wing, or else more closely resemble the plodding motion threatened by Felix's apology,

in the opening lines of the poem, for his “homely Pegasus,” harnessed with “the world’s cart-collar.” This is the opinion of a writer for the *National Review* in 1858, who complains that the poet’s tendency to “take a too ‘fond’ view of human life” lends to much of the poem “a somewhat effeminate tone” that is “aided by the metre, which, though correct and smooth, is monotonous” (“Mr. Coventry Patmore’s Poems” 196): the banality of the poem’s subject mirrors the banality of its metre.

The philosophy, poetics, and prosody of *The Angel* cannot be put asunder. The cosmic order the work projects, with the marriage bond at the centre of human life as well as human-divine relations; the suffusion of the mundane with heavenly meaning and purpose; and the submission to seemingly stifling convention as a means to freedom, peace, and joy run through every aspect of the poem. Once severed from this theological-philosophical schema, the quotidian incidents of the poem become merely trivial, the tripping metre and neat rhymes become trite rather than profound in their simplicity, and Patmore’s vision for wedded love becomes a sickly-sweet piece of sentimentality in place of a rigorous epistemological and ethical system. William Barnes issued this warning early on, predicting that the poet’s “song” would be “received with more or less faith and pleasure, as [his] hearers may hold the high or the low form of manhood to be the natural one,” and contrasts those who accept unfallen man, made in God’s image, as “natural man,” with one who subscribes to “some such theory as Darwin’s” and thus will find in *The Angel* “only the silly fondness of a man who does not know the world, or has not received the light of science” (130).<sup>9</sup> Given the instinctive response to *The Angel* in our own time, the argument is a discomfiting one.

It is in many ways unsurprising that *The Angel in the House* is not widely read, let alone enjoyed, in our time; there are multiple and formidable obstacles to its acceptance by a modern audience. Through the lens of twenty-first-century Victorian literary studies, the upwardly-mobile *Aurora Leigh* seems to capitalise on every possible congruence between the nineteenth century and our own period, while *The Angel* manages only to hit one dissonant chord after another. Yet in consequence, although hard work, the poem does promise to communicate something about its time that is unlikely to come intuitively to us. In its original context, it is neither sweet nor picturesque, and certainly not conventional, but rather a complex, rigorous, and quietly revolutionary contribution to one of the significant problems faced by mid-Victorian poets. As an important link in the chain of nineteenth-century poems grappling with contemporary subject matter, and indeed as probably the most profoundly committed among them to daily life as actually experienced by a majority of his readers, Patmore’s *Angel in the House* both merits and rewards being read anew, and on its own terms.

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## NOTES

1. Representative is Maynard’s dismissal of *The Angel* as “a very false direction of Patmore’s poetic inspiration” and focus instead on the “sometimes great – and barely known – odes” of the later volume (2). Exceptions include Ball’s extensive consideration of *The Angel* in Chapter 5 of *The Heart’s Events* (1976), and Anstruther’s *Coventry Patmore’s Angel* (1992), to my knowledge the only full-length study of the poem.

2. Christ's "Victorian Masculinity and the Angel in the House" is the most pronounced example of this inversion. However, Gilbert and Gubar, as well as Freiwald, mount similar arguments concerning the way that women's desires and their satisfaction are contingent on men's, citing the following lines from *The Angel*: "Man must be pleased; but him to please / Is woman's pleasure" (Book 1, Canto IX, Prelude I, "The Wife's Tragedy").
3. The publication history of *The Angel* is somewhat complicated, the poem having been published in instalments (and in various combinations of the four books) and revised extensively by Patmore in successive editions. All quotations here refer to the Routledge edition of 1906 (with Meynell's introduction), unless a reference to the first edition of either "The Betrothal" or "The Espousals" is specified, in which case the 1998 Haggerston Press facsimile of the originals has been used. The (almost comically) proliferating subdivisions of *The Angel* make line numbers less useful than section references; quotations from the first two books are placed by Book (I or II) and Canto (I through XII), followed by either Prelude (Roman numeral with title) or narrative section (Arabic numerals).
4. Both Tennyson and Patmore clearly wish to forestall the anticipated barbs of their critics. However, while the former seeks to disarm them through the diffidence of his poet-figure, who himself outlines the case against his medievalism, the latter is rather less subtle in his signals to the critical establishment. Fearing the ridicule of the reviewers, Patmore injected into the Epilogue to "The Betrothal" a form of pre-emptive strike against the reviews, presumably in the hope of immunising, to some extent, his "homely page" (II.XII) against attack:

His "Book the First" so finish'd, Vaughan,  
 Elated with his partner's praise,  
 March'd laughing up and down the lawn,  
 With brows that seem'd to feel the bays.  
 She thought the Critics must admire  
 What seem'd to her such lovely rhymes!  
 "Nay," answer'd he, with rising ire,  
 As boding "Blackwood" and "The Times,"  
 "A bard may reckon his degree  
 More high the more their welcome's foul;  
 For music's mystic property  
 Is to make dogs and critics howl."

Neither *Blackwood's Magazine* nor the *Times* printed a review of this first volume of *The Angel*; the Epilogue was absent from subsequent editions.

5. The Catholic belief in marriage as one of the sacraments further complicates this picture in, I think, both helpful and unhelpful ways. However, as Patmore was still (at least technically) Protestant throughout the writing of *The Angel in the House*, and due to space constraints, I bypass this potentially fruitful avenue here.
6. Maynard notes that Patmore's omissions of some explicitly religious material in later editions of some of the books of *The Angel* – such as a meditation by the Dean on Christ and marriage, and a dream of Jane's recounted at length – suggest that the poet "became aware of his own wish to put more speculative thought into these books than their plots would warrant" (362, n.72). His success at "superseding faith by sight" is certainly debatable; the ambition, however, is plain.
7. Weinig explains that Patmore is describing "not the trimming but the braid or cording customarily sewn into the bottom edge where skirt and lining join, to save the long skirt from wearing out too quickly as it brushes the ground" (73).
8. This automatic assumption is made by, among others, Showalter – who refers to "the spectre of Victorian respectability" that Virginia Woolf "named the Angel in the House (after the self-sacrificing heroine of

Coventry Patmore's popular verse novel)" (339–40) – and Gilbert and Gubar, who describe the angel as "the eponymous heroine of what may have been the middle nineteenth century's most popular book of poems" (22).

9. See also de Vere, who accounts for different kinds of love poetry according to whether or not the poet has hit upon "the true philosophy of man" (130–31) and the writer for the *Harvard Magazine*, who argues that the author's purpose – "to dignify simple, every-day attachments" – will be successful only if "his philosophy is true" (420).

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