

## RATIONALE

The last truly important critical book devoted to Matthew Arnold's poetry was David Riede's *Matthew Arnold and the Betrayal of Language*, published at the centenary of Arnold's death.<sup>1</sup> Some twenty years later, we might well wonder at the relative critical neglect endured by this icon of Victorian literature and culture during these two decades.<sup>2</sup> But various explanations for the phenomenon are ready to hand. New, post-structuralist methodologies dominating criticism in this period have tended to devalue the work of Arnold as effectively as the formalist and New Critical methodologies dominating the previous decades of the twentieth century tended to overvalue it. Similarly, the popularity of feminist and other, new historicist approaches to literary study have shown more interest in recuperating undervalued authors or in analyzing issues of literary power and authority than in revalidating writers already perceived as triumphant in the field of cultural production. Still, in the literary world outside the academy, Arnold retains some prominence, as is remarkably demonstrated in the conclusion to Ian McEwan's 2005 novel, *Saturday*, in which a recitation of "Dover Beach" effectively saves the protagonist and his family from horrifying threats to their lives and property.<sup>3</sup> As this case in point demonstrates, the trajectory of Arnold's career inside and outside the academy since his death suggests the extent to which he has often been reconstructed according to the interests of those who engage his work.<sup>4</sup> That he is susceptible to such manipulation results in part from the deliberate mystifications that inhabit his poetry and prose. But it is also the case that Arnold, as himself a symbolic figure within the field of cultural production, has always been under construction.

The several *entendres* of this book's title will, doubtless, be lost on few readers: the manufacture of Matthew Arnold (as an eminent poet and the preeminent critic of his generation) by various nineteenth- and twentieth-century intellectual fields of force together with the extraordinarily influential textual creations of Matthew Arnold (both his own and those of admirers who canonized him) constitute a remarkable historical spectacle orchestrated by a host of powerful Victorian cultural institutions (including, among others, Oxford University, the publishing industry, the national education bureaucracy, and the civil list pension commissioners). The chapters in this book begin to investigate these constructions by situating Arnold's poetry in various contexts that partially shaped it. Analysis of what for Arnold were culturally privileged pressures on his work provides helpful perspectives on fault lines in both his foundational values and his poetic expression of them, and it thus reveals much about the fractured political, social, amatory, and literary underpinnings of guiding middle-class intellectuals in Victorian England. Such analysis also revises our understanding of the formation of the elite (and elitist) male literary-intellectual subject during the 1840s and 1850s, as he attempts self-definition and strives simultaneously to move toward a position of ideological influence on intellectual institutions that were contested sites of economic, social, and political power in his era. (These institutions would include, for instance, the schools and universities, the Anglican Church, the publishing industry, and the law.)

The particular contexts I attend to here are political (from the dual threats of European revolutions in 1848 to that of Chartism at home); social (from the sometimes-histrionic nostalgia for all things medieval in Arnold's era to the midcentury fascination with gypsies, reflected both positively and negatively in the law and other Victorian cultural texts); literary (from Arnold's poetic responses to precursors such as Wordsworth and Keats to his attacks on contemporaries such as Alexander Smith); and finally, those of gender (from the silencing of the female voice in his poetry to its

implicit assault on the looming figure of the successful “poetess”). I choose these rather than other contexts with which Arnold was visibly engaged (such as midcentury debates about religion, economics, the Irish Question, or the importance of the classics) not only because the contexts I catalogue above seem to me insufficiently discussed to date but also because they provide new perspectives on Arnold’s rise to power as what John Storey some years ago usefully termed a Victorian “organic intellectual.”<sup>5</sup> My frequent procedure with this project is to reopen discussion of selected works by Arnold in order to make visible some of their crucial sociohistorical, intertextual, and political components. Only by doing so, I would argue, can we ultimately view the cultural work of Arnold “steadily and . . . whole” but also in a fashion that eschews this mystifying and literally prejudicial premise of all Arnoldian inquiry, which, by the early twentieth century, had become wholly naturalized in the academy as ideology.

As will be apparent to readers, the methodologies I make use of in these explorations of cultural contexts that inflect (if they do not determine) important ideological aspects of Arnold’s poetry are largely derived from recent historicist, sociological, deconstructive, and feminist criticism. Pierre Bourdieu is an especially important theorist guiding the direction of my analyses. In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu extends his previous work as a sociocultural theorist to demonstrate how a special variety of power relations is inevitably instantiated in the interactions among authors and texts that aspire to cultural dominance. Fundamental to Bourdieu’s theory is the premise that “the literary and artistic field is contained within the field of power, while possessing a relative autonomy with respect to it, especially as regards its economic and political principles of hierarchization.”<sup>6</sup> Bourdieu properly observes that “the more autonomous the field [of cultural production] becomes, the more favourable the symbolic power balance is to the most autonomous producers” (39). Crucial to Arnold’s success in this field is his strategy always to differentiate his positions as synchronically unique (indeed, often

quirky) and thereby to preserve a very high level of autonomy. As Bourdieu contends, “because it is a good measure of the degree of autonomy, and therefore of presumed adherence to the disinterested values which constitute the specific law of the field, the degree of [immediate] public success” (39) is no measure (and indeed may be an inverse measure) of power in the field, in this case a field in which the most advantageous and desirable power is symbolic: that is, cultural capital.

The present book attempts a relatively simple argument, distilled from analyses of the contexts for Arnold’s work discussed above: the most frequent strategies deployed in Arnold’s poetic productions (and in much of his prose)—strategies that eventually yield his own cultural dominance—are (1) self-marginalization, (2) the (fraudulent) suppression of his works’ true origins, and (3) ideological mystification (either through a process of “re-centering” or shifting apparent ideological positions, or through an implicit or sometimes explicit denial of ideological content or aims). Whether eliding the true historical contexts of poems generated from his immersion in English and European politics during the late 1840s; reconceptualizing the culturally pervasive penchant for all things medieval in the long nineteenth century; appropriating and redirecting (as cultural critique) dominant elements in the work of Keats, the so-called Spasmodic poets, or the phenomenally successful women poets of sensibility (while simultaneously eschewing such influences); or implicitly identifying with gypsy figures that emerge as the central trope in many of his major poems, Arnold disingenuously positions himself as an outsider. He presents competing positions or figures, as well as the social or political or aesthetic values they embody, as lamentably dominant in a not-quite-irredeemable culture. And by doing so consistently and repeatedly over the course of his career, Arnold accrued increasing and finally indomitable cultural capital. By 1939, Lionel Trilling could go so far as to describe Arnold’s reputation as a “mythopoeia” (*Matthew Arnold*, 9) and the man himself as one of Bernard Shaw’s ideal

“masters of reality” (13). In the introduction to his monumental edition of Arnold’s letters nearly fifty years later, Cecil Lang could similarly insist that Arnold remains “honored wherever English literature is honored,” largely because of his indelible influence in the academy. Perhaps more relevant to my general argument (as rehearsed above) is Lang’s further insistence that Arnold “has never returned from oblivion because, somehow, he has never been there.” (Lang’s perhaps ironic and mystified “somehow” also figures into my argument, as will be seen subsequently.) Lang explains, “As poet, critic, moraliste, Arnold stood foursquare for what the academy, middle-class and closet poets or deliquescent belletrists to a man, always aspired to be—repository, watchdog, evangelist, keeper of the flame of liberal education, apotheosis of its aspirations, representative of ‘culture’ raised to the highest power of excellence.”<sup>7</sup>

Theories of the cultural production of texts formulated by Bourdieu and other late-twentieth-century social and philosophical thinkers I cite in the chapters that follow liberate the literary historian to see beyond traditional critical wisdom and are especially helpful in coming to terms with a writer such as Arnold whose successful poetic, rhetorical, and ideological strategies enabled his work to attain an astonishing level of influence on Anglo-American cultural values that has only in the past two decades begun to wane. It is the backgrounds to such influence, specifically as these emerge from (sometimes unexpected) historically situated readings of his poetry, that I explore in this book.