

Arnold the Humorist? Romantic Irony in Friendship's Garland

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*M*ax Beerbohm's (1872-1956) famous caricature in *The Poet's Corner* (1904) provides a concentrated introduction to some of the problems inherent in thinking about Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) as a humorist. As Beerbohm explained in a lecture delivered three years earlier, "the most perfect caricature is that which, [...] with the simplest means, most accurately exaggerates, to the highest point, the peculiarities of a human being, at his most characteristic moment" (Beerbohm, *The Spirit* 357). Beerbohm's Arnold leans back on the wall, one elbow resting on the mantelpiece, his face, body, and arm stretched out of proportion, elongated into a languid posture bespeaking disinterested *ennui*. He looks down towards a neatly dressed little girl standing at his feet, his niece "Miss Mary Augusta," who looks up in return and enquires, "Why, Uncle Matthew, oh why, will not you be always wholly serious?" In reply, Arnold's extravagant sideburns pull to the side, his cheeks expanding beyond measure to accommodate an extraordinary smile. Perhaps coming as something of a surprise today, we see that for Beerbohm, humor figures Arnold at his most "characteristic."

The caricature works on a number of levels, poking fun at both Arnold and his niece. Beerbohm satirizes Mary Augusta Ward's (1851-1920) earnestness, while also playing up Arnold's sense of humor. This was a facet of his personality that was legendary in his day, but which had somewhat receded from view by 1904, and which has been only further obscured in the century or so since. While those working on Arnold will be familiar with his reputation as a humorist, even scholars of the Victorian period more broadly may struggle to recognize this aspect of his thought.

Humor does not spring to mind when thinking of the existential meditations of the poet on the shore of “Dover Beach” (c. 1851), a point played upon bathetically in “Margate Sands,” one of William Ernest Henley’s (1849-1903) pastiches printed in *Punch* (25 November 1903). As Patrick Downey puts it, “Arnold’s tragic ‘melancholy, long, withdrawing roar’” is hardly funny (279). Likewise, it may be hard today to think of humor when envisaging the campaigning social reformer of *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), so concerned with the one thing needful to right contemporary ills. The latter opinion is ironic, given that *Culture and Anarchy* is itself a work brimming with satire, but the impression of Arnold’s “seriousness” has tended to obfuscate this fact for those who are neither specialists in the man himself nor in the humor of the period. Even more crucially, Arnold’s sense of humor is not easily accessible for many of today’s readers without lengthy exposition and contextualization. As a general rule, annotation rather serves to blunt the impact of punchlines: nothing is quite as funny if you have to explain the joke—unless of course, as in the case of Arnold’s *Friendship’s Garland* (1871), the notes are part of the joke. Nevertheless, in the context of Arnold’s diminished reputation as a humorist, the two hundredth anniversary of his birth offers us the opportunity for reevaluating this aspect of his life and work.

What is curious, however, and foregrounded by Beerbohm’s caricature is that Arnold the writer of prose was not necessarily considered “serious” during the Victorian period. Far from it, for Arnold’s critics often complained of the ways in which, in their opinion, his penchant for a joke got in the way of the argument he was trying to make. Occasioned by Arnold’s tour of America, Henry James (1843-1916) famously reflected on this quandary in an 1884 article: “[Arnold’s] incorrigible fondness for his joke doubtless has had something to do with the reproach sometimes made to him that he is not serious, that he does not really care for the causes for which he pleads, that he is a talker, an artist even, a charming humorist, but not a philosopher” (James, “Matthew Arnold” 245). As James had admitted in a letter the year beforehand, he held Arnold, with whom he socialized occasionally during the 1880s, in high

regard (*Letters* 14), and unsurprisingly in this context, his phrasing in this essay published only a few months later is precise and measured. James is not making a claim about Arnold per se so much as a claim about how he was received: as a kind of dilettante, whose dilettantism is testified to by his jokes. Moreover, James makes a subtle but significant distinction between Arnold's humor and his being a "humorist," defined by the *OED* as one "skilled in the literary or artistic expression of humour" (*humorist*, *n.*). A "humorist" is "facetious," someone who is funny, but whose sense of humor is stylistic, superficial or lightweight, perhaps not fully "serious" about either their jokes or the points they are trying to make. Such, James suggests, has been the charge levelled at Arnold. But regardless, James's characterization of Arnold's reputation toward the end of the nineteenth century does not comport with the ways in which he has come to be principally remembered during the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. If Arnold's reputation as a "humorist" negatively impacted his early reception at the expense of his seriousness, in the years that followed, the emphasis changed: rather than his humor undermining his serious credentials, Arnold became first and foremost associated with this seriousness. At the time, his critics wanted him to be more sober, but today his sense of humor has been relegated to the status of a supporting act.

The stakes of the "serious" Arnold are familiar, and not only to those who have a particular interest in his work. It relates to the ways in which the Victorians in general have had a bit of a bad rap in the past century or so. While the Romantics are sublime and exciting, bad, mad, and dangerous to know; while the decadents are world-weary, subversive, and electrifying; and while the modernists are edgy and innovative, the Victorians, quite unfairly it may be added, conjure to many minds images of a grey, turgidly monochrome period of British history. The image is of repressed spinsters and uptight gentlemen, of starched collars and an earnest desire to "improve" themselves and others—of what Oscar Wilde's (1854-1900) Lord Henry Wotton calls the Lord Goodbodies (179): self-styled philanthropists, windbags expostulating upon the "serious" questions of the day. Such a construction is, of course, precisely

that, and Michel Foucault's important work on debunking some of the misconceptions of the so-called "repressive hypothesis" (15) are significant here, if admittedly dealing with a different kind of "seriousness,"¹ but in general, this construction has had the effect of giving the sense that the Victorians themselves, and the period as a whole, were primarily "serious."

Reflecting on the genealogies that link neo-Victorian humor to the humor of the nineteenth century, Margaret Stetz usefully quotes Anca Parvulescu on the ways humor might potentially challenge the ideological burden of "seriousness": "Historically, seriousness, in its official tone and respectable dress has intimidated, demanded, prohibited, oppressed," "establish[ing] value and rules of appropriate behavior" (2). Arnold's own family were keen to promote this image of the man; as early as 1895, G.W.E. Russell reflected on the severe editing Arnold's letters had received at the hands of his relatives, which had effected "a curious obscuration of some of Arnold's most characteristic traits," including "his love of what our fathers called Raillery" (viii; qtd Alarauhio, "Dialogical Approach" 133). Such an obscuration, calculated on the part of those carefully curating an image for posterity, has nevertheless come to define what we today think of as Arnold's "characteristic" qualities. Moreover, it has arguably served to obfuscate the humor of his works themselves, so that, inattentive to the efforts at canonization at work in the background, a modern reader might skip over any "raillery," all in their haste to get to the "thing itself."

For other critics, however, the problem is less that Arnold's humor has been forgotten than that it was weak. In perhaps the most penetrating analysis of Arnold's humor hitherto published, Richard D. Altick patiently details the various kinds of "comic effects" deployed in *Culture and Anarchy* (120), but while he admits Arnold can occasionally be funny, he also finds fault in the humor. Arnold is too "heavy-handed" (141), the target too easy, like the inherently risible Deceased Wife's Sister's Bill, which would have allowed a man to marry the non-relation, a topic that Arnold comes back to time and again as a source for merriment. More

problematically, however, Arnold is inconsistent: he often relies on exploiting the ironic potential of certain turns of phrase, while at other points in *Culture and Anarchy* he intends his readers to take the same phrase straight. Thus he can attack a *bête noire* such as John Bright (1811-1889) as a "man of genius," while calling Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881) the same (Arnold, *Prose Works* V:130, 124; Altick 130). How are we to know when we should laugh?

"Of the high-mindedness of his aims as a social critic there can be no question," Altick opines, "but the methods [Arnold] uses are doubtful." For Altick, Arnold's "self-mockery fails to conceal self-righteousness," his "seriousness" marred by his sense of "superiority" (142). The problem, however, is that, like Arnold's contemporary critics, Altick maintains an uneasy division between humor and seriousness, and judges Arnold negatively against this standard. So while Altick's analysis may be more detailed and sophisticated than those of Arnold's contemporaries, the outcome is much the same. Compare, for instance, the reviewer of *Friendship's Garland* for the *Saturday Review*, 11 March 1871. Having alluded to the fact that some of their own criticisms had prompted the satire,² this critic accuses Arnold of "complacency," of being himself a kind of caricaturist who makes "our ugly features [...] yet more hideous than they are in nature," before posing a series of crucial questions: "Is Mr. Arnold's fun really funny? When we fail to smile at his jokes, is it that the humour is too refined for our coarse perceptions, or is it that the humour is in reality poor?" (Anon., "*Friendship's Garland*" 314). The rhetorical question is not answered outright, but the reviewer's opinion is clear: Arnold "had better give up a vein of humour which he is not adapted by nature to work, or from which at any rate he has hitherto extracted very poor results" (315), a tellingly Darwinian turn of phrase given the date.³ Likewise for Altick, Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy* may reveal himself to be "a wit," "but the elegant Jeremiah was not a first-rate comedian" (142).

If scholarship on Arnold's humor has fallen somewhat uncritically into the trap of repeating the binary opposition of humor and seriousness,

it is this supposed opposition which needs to be given renewed scrutiny. If Arnold said of his principal “weapon” in *Culture and Anarchy* that irony means “the saying rather less than one means” (*Letters* III:196), then his specific mode of irony during the period 1866-1871, which finds its crowning achievement in *Friendship’s Garland*, may benefit from being more specifically categorized. To be sure, the irony of *Friendship’s Garland* is not for everyone. Some of Arnold’s contemporaries were quick to see in it something of the smile of Beerbohm’s caricature, an almost savage, wicked sense of superiority. And superiority, of course, has long been thought to lie somewhere underneath humor, with philosophers from Plato to Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) suggesting that laughter’s power is essentially a malicious one, the wit laughing at some unfortunate soul. There is certainly an element of laughing *at* in *Friendship’s Garland*. The context was by definition an adversarial one: first published in the *Pall Mall Gazette* as a series of letters purportedly written by a German correspondent Arminius von Thunder-ten-Tronckh, *Friendship’s Garland* principally replies to critics of Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy*. Both works were published in installments, allowing Arnold to engage with his critics in a manner approximating to a Victorian version of real-time response, so that *Friendship’s Garland* can be characterized as a critique of those who had criticized Arnold’s earlier critique. It is perhaps Arnold at his most “dialogic,”⁴ as well as at his most ironic (not least since irony always implies a certain degree of dialogicism, a reply to the other), but the less charitable of his critics may also consider it by the same measure to represent Arnold at his most distanced, his most “superior,” obnoxious, and haughty.

We know now that Arnold was less aloof than the reviewer of *Friendship’s Garland* for the *Saturday Review* suggests. He was quite fond of some of the humor that was had at his expense, famously writing in a letter of Frederic Harrison’s (1831-1923) attack on *Culture and Anarchy*: “It is scarcely the least vicious, and in parts so amusing that I laughed till I cried” (*Letters* III:181). But at the time, not everyone who read Arnold’s work realized (or cared) that he was in on the joke. Another caricature by

James Tissot (1836-1902), published in *Vanity Fair*, 11 November 1871, sees Arnold resting on a walking stick, his left arm behind his back, looking into the distance with a smile that, if not as savage as in Beerbohm, speaks of an avuncular, self-satisfied, patronizing attitude. The caption reads "I say, the critic must keep out of the region of immediate practice," alluding to a famous comment—a criticism of the "furious" Carlyle and "pugnacious" John Ruskin (1819-1900)—in "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (1864).⁵ Read in the context of the recent publication of *Friendship's Garland*, which appeared half a year before, the illustrator figures Arnold as arrogantly aloof from the real world import of his writing and from those who would seek to engage him alike. Supposedly, this "superiority" gives us Arnold at his most "characteristic."

A few years earlier, at the time when the Arminius letters were first being published, the satirical weekly *Fun* seems to have already seen the same sort of writing on the wall. On 13 May 1867 it published a short biography of Arnold "By A Philistine." The formula is tried and tested, but has its moments, particularly the chiasmus that Arnold "wrote a good deal of very remarkable poetry, which did not receive so much attention as it deserved. Has since revenged himself by writing a series of letters to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, which did not deserve so much attention as they received." The squib concludes: "Is fond of talking about a certain 'Arminius'. 'Arminius' is understood to be simply the cousin-german of MRS. GAMP'S MRS. HARRIS" (Anon., "Our Biographical Dictionary" 101). The allusion is to Charles Dickens' (1812-1870) *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-44), and that "phantom of Mrs Gamp's brain" Mrs. Harris, with whom Sarah Gamp appears to be in near-constant communication. Given that in Dickens' novel these conversations "invariably" conclude "with a compliment to the excellence of her nature" (386), the writer for *Fun* suggests that Arminius exists at least in part as a kind of narcissistic projection serving to inflate Arnold's own ego. His humor is simply an expression of his superiority, be it conscious or not.

Without wishing to further psychoanalyze a long-dead patient, it is worth focusing on the character of Arminius. Certainly, he serves as

something of a mouthpiece for Arnold's views, but the reflection is not identical. A clue as to how best to approach the character Arminius, *Friendship's Garland* as a whole, and Arnold as a "serious" humorist, may be gleaned, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, from the same critical 1871 review of the book published in the *Saturday Review*. There, the reviewer makes a passing but significant comparison between *Friendship's Garland* and Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34):

Arminius may be an unrecognised great man, just as his cousin Teufelsdröckh, who made many similar remarks in *Sartor Resartus*, failed to make his way at first with the British public. Yet, if we compare the two, and, for example, put the satire on Lord Lumpington beside the celebrated epitaph on Count Zaehdarm, we cannot help thinking that the author of the Clothes-philosophy had a little more power than the apostle of "Geist." (Anon., "*Friendship's Garland*" 315)

The allusion intentionally lessens Arnold's achievements, but is suggestive, because in many respects, it is precisely his German cousin, Carlyle's Teufelsdröckh, rather than Dickens' Mrs. Harris, who is Arminius's real cousin-german. Perhaps not unimportantly, the *Fun* entry on Arnold ends with another on Carlyle, his biography supposedly written by Teufelsdröckh (Anon., "Our Biographical Dictionary" 101). Yet somewhat curiously, particularly given this early recognition in the *Saturday Review*, the comparison has only been fitfully pursued in the years that have passed. David DeLaura notes that "*Friendship's Garland* is the work of Arnold which is probably most Carlylean in method and tone," and his "reading in *Sartor Resartus* must (even if unconsciously) have influenced Arnold's technique" (110 & n.). DeLaura's observation builds on earlier work by John P. Kirby (1:80-83); Stefan Collini later makes a similar point (95), but they do not pursue the links in detail and nor have Arnold's other critics.

Partly, the cause for this lack of comparison may lie in the fractious personal relationship between the two men: Arnold and Carlyle did not

always see eye to eye. But Carlyle, and *Sartor Resartus* in particular, were impossible to ignore for anyone of Arnold's generation. As George Eliot (1819-1880) famously put it, "there is hardly a superior or active mind of this generation that has not been modified by Carlyle's writings," the character of whose "influence is best seen in the fact that many of the men who have the least agreement with his opinions are those to whom the reading of *Sartor Resartus* was an epoch in the history of their minds" (213-14). Unsurprisingly, in the context of this well-nigh Bloomian spectre, the influence of Carlyle on Arnold has been often discussed.⁶ Arnold himself reflected on the forceful presence of his forebear on his younger Oxford self in his essay on "Emerson." He may have become "so sorely strained, over-used, and misused since," but in the early 1840s, Arnold recalls Carlyle's voice as being "fresh, comparatively sound, and reaching our hearts with true, pathetic eloquence" (*Prose Works* X:166). There, he singles out Carlyle's significance as a translator of Goethe and mediator of all things German as a particular point of inspiration. A key antecedent of Arnold's campaign against the philistines in that and earlier works such as the essay on "Heinrich Heine" (1864), can be seen not only in his reading of Heine (1797-1856) (*Prose Works* III:435-36), but also in his reading of Carlyle on German literature and to *Sartor Resartus* in particular (DeLaura 107). Arnold certainly liked *Sartor Resartus*: some years later, he took a copy with him on his American tour of 1883 (*Note-Books* 608, 609).⁷ Moreover, Carlyle himself appears to have appreciated the essay on "My Countrymen" (1866), which would later become the first chapter of *Friendship's Garland*. On 23 February, Arnold wrote to his mother that "Carlyle almost wholly approves" of the essay (*Letters* III:14), and went to visit him, although in point of fact, as DeLaura argues, "Carlyle very likely misread" the article's position on the aristocracy (109).⁸

Still, such differences notwithstanding, the attentive reader of *Friendship's Garland* will see clearly that Arnold intends his readers to note the similarities between it and *Sartor Resartus*. Carlyle's novel follows an unnamed Scottish Editor's attempts to introduce the work of a hitherto

unknown German transcendental philosopher to the British public. Certainly, Arnold's Victorian readers would have immediately picked up on links between Teufelsdröckh and Arminius. To be sure, Arminius is not a "transcendental" thinker in the mold of a Teufelsdröckh, although Arnold in persona does complain on one occasion of Teufelsdröckh's tendency toward "rubbishy transcendentalism" (*Prose Works* V:48). But both are preachers of a doctrine of "*Geist*," even if that of Arminius is somewhat different to that of Teufelsdröckh, reflecting a different time, one where, as Arminius puts it, "'Ungeist' is rampant" (41).⁹ Moreover, both are German thinkers whose ideas are being introduced to the British public. Both texts are further ironized by the addition of their editors' supposedly commenting upon the text, Arnold's persona ironically voicing the concern that he might end up becoming, like Carlyle's Editor, "the depositary of his ideas for transmission to the English public" (*Prose Works* V:48). It was a conceit that Arnold's letters to his own editor, George Smith (1824-1901), show was an essential part of the joke, knowingly "self-important and *bête*" (*Letters* IV:9). Nevertheless, in spite of such points of comparison and the limited number of comparisons that have been made, what is crucial in the current context is the fact that none of those who have so far drawn attention to the links between Carlyle's novel and *Friendship's Garland* have explicitly considered precisely what *Sartor Resartus* actually is, and, consequently, the comparison with Arnold has been left ungrounded within the wider context of Victorian traditions of humor.

Put simply, *Sartor Resartus* is a work of romantic irony.¹⁰ But putting it simply does not always help, since romantic irony is an idea that has proven somewhat difficult to define. As Joseph Dane asks, is "romantic irony" to be understood as "the irony used by romantics? or an irony envisaged by the romantics and romanticists?" (73) The *OED* gives a definition as "an attitude of detached skepticism adopted by an author towards his or her work, typically manifesting in literary self-consciousness and self-reflection" ("romantic irony," *n.*), but such a definition is somewhat retroactive and arguably emphasizes the perspective of Romanticists over the Romantics; moreover, passing over

this quality in silence, it has served to obfuscate the humor of romantic irony.¹¹ Today associated primarily with the Jena School figures Novalis (Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg) (1772-1801), Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829), Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), and Karl Wilhelm Ferdinand Solger (1770-1819), romantic irony was influentially criticized by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831)—a criticism that was levelled precisely, it should be noted, on the grounds of the ways in which Schlegel's irony supposedly masked his own arrogant "superiority"—before being later rejuvenated for a new audience by Paul de Man (1919-1983). Carlyle, as a keen reader of the Jena School, was in a privileged position to attempt to translate the ideas of romantic irony into English, with *Sartor Resartus* perhaps the greatest work of romantic irony published in English during the period. It operates on many levels, ironizing Teufelsdröckh's philosophy of clothes as a kind of farcical excess of German idealist speculation, and ironizing the skeptical Scottish Editor for his earnest desire to find deep meaning in Teufelsdröckh's philosophy. But also, and at the same time, it ironizes Carlyle himself who is at once identifying with Teufelsdröckh and with his Editor, having himself played a similar role in trying to popularize the Jena School and German idealist philosophy in Britain in influential essays on topics including "The State of German Literature" (1827).¹² In this way, *Sartor Resartus* is not simply a metacommentary about romantic irony, but is itself a work of romantic irony, a literary expression of a certain quality of self-consciousness on the part of Carlyle and a self-reflection precisely on the limits of Romantic speculation.

Initially, comparison with *Friendship's Garland* seems unlikely, particularly since it was the "transcendental" aspects of Carlyle's writing about German literature that Arnold found distasteful. For instance, in his essay on "Heine," Arnold, repeating his estimation of Carlyle as a "man of genius" and ranking him as "the living writer who has done most to make England acquainted with German authors" (*Prose Works* III:107), argues that his predecessor's fault lay in his attaching "far too much importance to the romantic school of Germany,—Tieck, Novalis, Jean

Paul Richter,—and giv[ing] to these writers [...] an undue prominence” (III:108). By comparison, Arnold ranks Heine as “the most important German successor and continuator of Goethe” (III:108), whose misfortune it is that Carlyle could not recognize his merits.¹³ But this is not to say that Arnold is inured to the power of romantic irony, or at least, to the irony of the Romantics. And even if Heine is no romantic ironist in the sense of a Schlegel,¹⁴ the significance of his essay on the poet for understanding Arnold’s intentions in *Friendship’s Garland* should not be underestimated: as Kirby argues, Arminius seems to be modelled in part on Heine. Crucially, then, we can see that Arnold does note something approximating to an idea of Heine’s romantic irony when commenting on “Spanische Atriden” (1851), remarking: “Observe how the irony of the whole of that, finishing with the grim innuendo of the last stanza but one, is at once truly masterly and truly modern” (*Prose Works* III:117). Heine’s irony is “modern,” something fundamentally new, and by extension, an expression of the modernity of the (Romantic) period. Likewise, in his poem “Heine’s Grave” (1867), Arnold sees in the German writer “The spirit of the world,” a portentously Hegelian phrase (translating but also partly ironizing the idea of *Weltgeist*), “Beholding the absurdity of men— / Their vaunts, their feats” (ll. 206-8). Heine takes up a position of ironic distance to the world which he comments upon, letting “a sardonic smile / For one short moment wander o’er his lips” (ll. 208-9).

As a “sardonic” smile, romantic irony certainly appears to be superior, and the *OED* gives Hobbes, that key proponent of superiority theory, and his translation of Homer (1675) as an early instance of the word in English (“sardonic, *adj.*”), connoting a sense of bitterness and scorn. But if Arnold here sees himself somewhere in Heine, and considers the role of the poet—commenting on the social while also, as a late Romantic, “waiting for the spark from heaven” (“The Scholar Gypsy,” l.120)—as to some degree marked by a romantic irony,¹⁵ then he is also aware that this form of irony acknowledges the power and potential of human ambitions as much as their necessary failures. After all, the subject of romantic irony is precisely the “Romantic” subject, the irony setting up

a distance between this same subject, who is at once striving toward a kind of sublime transcendence, and at the same time reflecting ironically upon the necessary failure of these aspirations. As such, Romanticism's pretensions to transcendence are simultaneously indicative of a kind of "transcendental buffoonery," as Schlegel puts it (Wheeler 41). *Friendship's Garland* finds Arnold experimenting with a similar kind of "buffoonery." Even if he minimizes the insights of the Jena School and Carlyle's estimation of them, then he has arrived at the same destination by another path. In Arnold's hands, as in Carlyle's, romantic irony is not simply "superiority," but the active implication of the very same subject who is ironizing the world in a moment of bathetic self-irony. It is not simply the mark of critics smiling down at the foundering ship of fools, as though they know better, but an acknowledgement that they are, as it were, also a part of its crew.

To be sure, irony can always be read as a kind of humor expressing superiority, whether that irony be broadly conservative, laughing at the radicals and their new-fangled ideas, or, as it were, subversive or driven from "below," as the kind of knowing laughter of the oppressed at the follies of those above them, in a moment of Nietzschean *ressentiment*. But romantic irony destabilizes precisely the ground for the comparison, since it implicates the ironizing subject in a kind of *mise en abyme* of laughter, where they are at once subject and object of their own ridicule. It is in this context that we can reappraise Arnold's achievements in *Friendship's Garland*, while also beginning to reply to those of his critics, both then and now, that find fault in his supposedly "superior" tone. In what remains of this essay, I will consider one particular moment of romantic irony, focusing on a passage from the final letter of *Friendship's Garland*, which has attracted hitherto little critical commentary.

In this final letter, first published 29 November 1870, Arminius has been mortally wounded and "had evidently but a few minutes to live." On his deathbed, he seeks to settle a few old scores, though with generosity:

First, our Amphytryon, Mr. Bottles. "Say to Bottles from me," said Arminius coldly, "that I hope he will be

comfortable with his dead wife's sister." Next, Mr. Frederic Harrison. "Tell him," says Arminius, "to do more in literature, he has a talent for it; and to avoid Carlylese as he would the devil." Then I mentioned a personage to whom Arminius had taken a great fancy last spring, and of whose witty writings some people had, absurdly enough, given Mr. Matthew Arnold the credit, Azamat-Batuk. Both writers are simple; but Azamat's is the simplicity of shrewdness, the other's of helplessness. At hearing the clever Turk's name, "Tell him only," whispers Arminius, "when he writes about the sex, not to show such a turn for sailing so very near the wind!" Lastly, I mentioned Mr. Matthew Arnold. I hope I rate this poor soul's feeble and rambling performances at their proper value; but I am bound to say that at the mention of his name Arminius showed signs of tenderness. "Poor fellow!" sighed he; "he had a soft head, but I valued his heart. Tell him I leave him my ideas, the easier ones; and advise him from me," he added, with a faint smile, "to let his Dissenters go to the devil their own way!" (*Prose Works* V:347)

The passage requires comment, but read contextually through the allusion to Carlyle, shows Arnold's operation to be both clearly marked by romantic irony, and essentially undecidable in terms of where the humor resides or who is meant to be the butt of the jokes. It begins with Mr. Bottles, standing for the self-made middle classes, likened to Amphytrion, the Greek mythological figure who married his niece Alcene, allowing a dig at the Deceased Wife's Sister's Bill. This might "comfort" the middle classes, punning on the language of the marriage vows in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer ("Wilt thou love her, comfort her, honour, and keep her, in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"), but also implies a sexual joke, as in *Julius Caesar*, where Portia, annoyed at her treatment by Brutus, refers to

her role "comforting" his bed (2.1.284). Then Harrison is attacked for his style, a point to which we will shortly return, before the two discuss Azamat-Batuk. This was the pseudonym of Nicolas Leon Thieblin (1834-1888), a British-Italian journalist who styled himself as a "Turk," viewing British society from the outside and passing comment on it. Thieblin published a series of letters to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, beginning June 1869 (hence the reference to Arminius fancying his work "last spring"). Later revised and published as *A Little Book about Great Britain* (1870), these letters included the then infamous attack on the flirt "Miss. Lucy" (a misogynistic portrait of young London women), explaining why Arminius "whispers" his advice, and advises Azamat-Batuk not to sail "near the wind." Arnold corresponded with Thieblin in appreciation of the conceit (*Letters* III:424), but while contemporaries apparently noted the similarities between these letters and those of Arnold (Anon., "Notes. Literary" 139), the comparison lies precisely between Azamat-Batuk and Arminius, rather than between the "Turk" and Arnold himself. Both are fictitious foreign correspondents, writing in the same periodical, and both are situated at a supposed remove, a precisely ironic distance, from the society they criticize, while in reality their authors Thieblin and Arnold write from within. The comparison between Azamat-Batuk and Arnold made in the text of *Friendship's Garland* signals metacommentary, for to give Arnold the "credit" for Azamat-Batuk's publications would mean acknowledging his authorship lying behind the figure of Arminius. Drawing attention to this possibility while also foreclosing it is suggestive in its psychic power as well as its ironic awareness, knowingly winking at the liminal, constructed, and contingent position of both the author and the subject, in a moment which could serve precisely as a dictionary definition of "romantic irony." The irony is only augmented in the ways in which the comparison, once introduced as a possibility, is dismissed: Arnold, in Arminius's view, is too "simple" a writer to pull off such a conceit, his simplicity differing from that of Azamat-Batuk in its "helplessness." The ironic creation Arminius ironically judges his creator Arnold as being unable to reach his own standards.

This arch construction of the subject in this passage as the subject of irony is itself Carlylean. And that Arnold knows as much and intends his reader to get the joke is made clear in Arminius's advice to Harrison "to avoid Carlylese as he would the devil." The allusion to the "devil" here is an intertextual one: throughout the pages of *Sartor Resartus*, the idea of the devil is a constant companion, most prominent in the central chapters of the second book dealing with Teufelsdröckh's spiritual revelation (passages which themselves "translate" Carlyle's own experience of spiritual epiphany, experienced some years earlier in 1821). Indeed, the word "devil" or its cognates appears some 42 times in the text of *Sartor Resartus*. But Arminius's phrase also ironizes the figure of Carlyle's German philosopher in a deeper way. It puns on his name, with Diogenes Teufelsdröckh translating as "Born-of-God Devil's-excrement." Names are important, of course: Arnold's Arminius von Thunder-ten-Tronckh picks up on the name of the Baron of Voltaire's satire *Candide* (1759) which, in a typical move, is read ironically as being "straight" history, a point which Arnold's dedicatory letter picks up on (*Prose Works* V:352). But in this passage of *Friendship's Garland*, the pun really pushes the text to its limits: "to avoid Carlylese" as "the devil" would mean to at once equate Carlyle and Teufelsdröckh, his style with Teufelsdröckh's style, and both with literary "dröckh." And given this stylist conceit lies somewhere behind Arnold's own style in *Friendship's Garland*, a point which this allusion clearly acknowledges, then it dismisses the whole of Arnold's conceit as also "dröckh."

What can we glean from this joke and how "seriously" should we take it? Firstly, the attack on Harrison is not "superior" but self-effacing, precisely and paradoxically through the act of silently acknowledging or alluding to the presence of the author hidden behind his creation. Thus, when Arminius goes on to note "tenderly" the possibility that Arnold might be the pale imitation of Arminius himself (which is to say, the author the imitation of his creation), then, facing his imminent death, Arminius, as it were, bequeaths his intellectual legacy to Arnold (though appropriately limited to "the easier ones" according to Arnold's

supposedly limited capacities), before the key punned term returns in Arminius's advice that Arnold "let his Dissenters go to the devil their own way!" (*Prose Works* V:347). Read back into the previous allusion to the devil and Carlyle, and the ways in which it also implicates Arnold stylistically, then this second allusion to the devil in the paragraph also drags Arnold into sharing a kind of fate with the philistines he so rails against. As such, *Friendship's Garland* is read back into *Culture and Anarchy*, where Arnold explicitly figures himself as one of the philistines. But moreover, here in *Friendship's Garland*, letting the philistines go to the devil in their own way juxtaposes with the central conceit of this whole series of fictional letters, which is an exercise in going to the devil Carlyle's way. And what becomes clear in these ironic reversals is that what is at stake here is hardly the simple form of irony that Altick identifies as being at work in Arnold's prose, which he considers undermined by both its obviousness and tendency toward self-aggrandizement. There is little obvious about these passages, which are characterized by a more nuanced form of irony than many of Arnold's critics would grant him capable of. Indeed, it may not be too much of a leap to suggest that Arnold, perhaps unconsciously, echoes the Editor of *Sartor Resartus*. In a crucial passage expressing his skeptical Scottish frustrations at Teufelsdröckh's more outlandish utterances and the style in which they come clothed, which is to say, reflecting upon his "Carlylese," Carlyle's Editor remarks that "much" of what Teufelsdröckh has written "should be thrown to the Devil" (*Sartor Resartus* 179). There, as in *Friendship's Garland*, what is at stake is the concern not simply that Teufelsdröckh, like Arminius, is not quite to be taken seriously, but rather that these "empty" stylistic "Masks" (179) are precisely that: vacant "symbols" which serve to stand in for a subject well aware of the dangers imminent in their own precarious footing. Again, it is precisely a moment of romantic irony.

This is, of course, but one example, but it serves to unpack Arnold's wider operation in the text of *Friendship's Garland* as a whole. The allusion to "Carlylese," ostensibly an attack on Harrison but as much poking fun at himself, is not only an allusion to Carlyle's style, but also,

through the pun on the “devil” that many of Arnold’s Victorian readers would have immediately associated with *Sartor Resartus*, to his romantic irony. Read thus, Arminius cannot simply be dismissed as a Mrs. Harris, or an arrogant attempt to bat off his critics. Moreover, while an interest in Schlegel and romantic irony has been resurgent since de Man, the idea did not really end up translating well into English soil, and canonical English literature can count few actual works of romantic irony among its number upon which its critics can agree, barring of course, *Sartor Resartus*. Re-evaluating Arnold’s achievements in *Friendship’s Garland* serves to add his name to this all-too-short list.

For Altick, “Arnold’s flippantly intrusive self distracts from his seriousness” (141), at once assuming the impossibility of serious humor and that any humor Arnold might have had at the expense of his “self” would ultimately mask his righteous sense of superiority. But this seems wide of the mark if we examine *Friendship’s Garland*. When James reflected on Arnold’s most singular achievements, he ranked this work highly. Those who “care for literature [...] think the wit and humour of *Friendship’s Garland* the most delicate possible,” James claims. In its imagined absence, “the whole tone of discussion would have seemed more stupid, more literal. Without his irony to play over its surface, to clip it here and there of its occasional fustiness, the life of our Anglo-Saxon race would present a much greater appearance of insensibility” (“Matthew Arnold” 246). Rather than an image of the dry, serious thinker, the stately man of letters opining with gravitas and authority on his contemporary moment, James’s Arnold offers a mirror to the Victorian age: the rage of Caliban is at seeing his own face in the glass.

Nevertheless, James’s attempts to separate Arnold’s humor from his reputation as a humorist have continued to be ignored: Altick’s comment that Arnold was “capable of comedy but not of true humour” (141), marks him precisely as a humorist, simultaneously disbarring him both stylistically and intellectually from attaining the status of what James calls a “philosopher.” But that rather depends on what one asks from one’s philosophers. True, Arminius is not quite a “transcendental” thinker in the

mold of a Teufelsdröckh, and nor is Arnold, who rejects the accusations levelled by the *Saturday Review* that he had "assume[d] the truth of the transcendental system of philosophy" (*Prose Works* V:3-4). But one of the lessons of *Sartor Resartus* is that the figure of a "philosopher" is itself inherently unstable and very much dependent on what position one adopts: after all, the Socrates of a Plato, essentially a "serious" figure (if occasionally prone to the odd joke), is one and the same as the Socrates of an Aristophanes, satirized as a quintessential buffoon. The same is surely true of Arminius, who ultimately leaves to Arnold and the British public only his "ideas" (*Prose Works* V:347). In this sense, attempts to divide once and for all the "serious" from the humorous are untenable. But a serious philosopher who is in on the joke? Such might mark the stakes of re-evaluating Arnold the humorist and recognizing his experiments in romantic irony.

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Notes

¹ For an initial discussion of the significance of Foucault's comment for Victorian humor studies, see Lee 3.

² Nor was this the first occasion that *Saturday Review* had had to attack Arnold's Arminius in particular: in an article published 4 May 1867, they carried a piece in which the letters that would become *Friendship's Garland* are referred to in passing—"Arminius plumes himself on a name which is two thousand years old"—in considering the "superior" attitude certain English commentators carried toward the country whose best interests they supposedly had at heart (Anon., "John Bull" 553).

³ It is worth noting that immediately beneath this review of *Friendship's Garland*, the *Saturday Review* published their second notice of "Darwin's Descent of Man."

⁴ On Arnold's "dialogicism," see Alarauhio, *Matthew Arnold's Epics*.

⁵ "I say, the critic must keep out of the region of immediate practice in the political, social, humanitarian sphere, if he wants to make a beginning for that more free speculative treatment of things, which may

perhaps one day make its benefits felt even in this sphere, but in a natural and thence irresistible manner” (*Prose Works* 3:275).

⁶ See Tillotson, DeLaura, Starzyk, Wilkinson, Dale, and Farrell 254-55.

⁷ An allusion to this same work has been traced in a key passage of “Empedocles on Etna” (1852) (Tucker 105), and Gilstrap has also suggestively commented on similarities between Teufelsdröckh’s philosophy of clothes and the Yale Manuscript (166-67). Charles Algernon Swinburne admitted to using a similar conceit when inventing an anonymous French critic in his review of “Mr. Arnold’s *New Poems*” (1867). After Arnold had enquired as to the critic’s identity, Swinburne replied: “the French critic quoted by me resides in a department of France abutting on the province of Germany where MM. Teufelsdröckh & Sauerteig are Professors” (Arnold, *Letters* 3:177).

⁸ Some years later in a May 1877 letter to his wife, Arnold recounts taking their daughter Eleanor to meet Carlyle: “We sat with Carlyle more than an hour; he was very easy to get on with, and very kind to Nelly[.]” Still, if personally warm, Arnold had his professional reservations, continuing: “His [Carlyle’s] letter to the *Times* [‘On the Eastern Question’] is very mad, however; I mean, he has not really the *knowledge* he says he has; it turned out today that he had not really anything but someone’s assurance that Dizzy wanted to do *something* in the East” (*Letters* 4:365).

⁹ See also the Editor’s footnote (*Prose Works* 5:41 n.). Arnold takes the phrase “ungeist” from James Grant Duff (1789-1858) (see Super’s note in *Prose Works* 5:381 n.), a reference to the militarization of the German state leading up to Bismarck, well before the time of Carlyle’s Teufelsdröckh, though the tendency to politicize “*Geist*” obviously predates this movement and, as active state policy, can be traced back certainly to the ascent of King Frederick IV in 1841.

¹⁰ On Carlyle and romantic irony, see Haney, and Mellor 109-34.

¹¹ I have discussed this in more detail elsewhere: see Whiteley.

¹² On the significance of this period for Carlyle, see Ashton.

¹³ On Arnold and Heine, see Butler, Wright, and McMahon 69-124. With respect to Carlyle’s misfortune, Arnold writes: “I do not forget that

when Mr. Carlyle was dealing with German literature, Heine, though he was clearly risen above the horizon, had not shone forth with all his strength; I do not forget, too, that after ten or twenty years many things may come out plain before the critic which before were hard to be discerned by him; and assuredly no one would dream of imputing it as a fault to Mr. Carlyle that twenty years ago he mistook the central current in German literature, overlooked the rising Heine, and attached undue importance to that romantic school which Heine was to destroy" (*Prose Works* 3:108).

¹⁴ On Heine and romantic irony, see Kolb.

¹⁵ For a reading of romantic irony in Arnold's poetry, see Ryals; to the best of my knowledge, no one has given extended attention to romantic irony in his prose.

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