

**SOHRAB AND  
RUSTUM: AN  
EPISODE, PP. 1-122**

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Sohrab and Rustum: An Episode, pp. 1-122 by Matthew Arnold & Merwin Marie Snell

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**MATTHEW ARNOLD & MERWIN MARIE SNELL**

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SOHRAB AND RUSTUM  
AN EPISODE

BY  
MATTHEW ARNOLD

WITH  
An Introduction, Illustrative matter from the Shah Nama of  
Firdausi, and Notes

BY  
MERWIN MARIE SNELL



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## INTRODUCTION

Opinions are divided as to the relative merits of the poetical and prose works of Matthew Arnold<sup>1</sup>; but there is a large and growing number who look back with regret upon the hour when he abandoned poetry for criticism, even though that gracious type of culture whose essence is light and sweetness gained thereby its first professed apostle.

Arnold published his first volume of verses in 1849, when he was twenty-five years of age. It bore the title *A Stray Reveller and Other Poems*, and was followed within three years by *Empedocles on Etna and Other Poems*. Both of these volumes were signed "A," and it was not until the year 1853 that the name of Matthew Arnold first made its appearance on the list of England's poets. A portion of the collection published in that year under his own name was reprinted from the earlier volumes, but it also contained several new poems, far superior to anything that had hitherto come from his pen. There were many who, from the first, recognized in these verses the touch of a master hand. Neither these nor the subsequent volumes<sup>2</sup> ever became popular in the wide sense of that word, and Arnold has remained to this day a poet of the schools, worshiped by a chosen few who belong to the inner world of culture, and also, it is true, by that larger circle who mold their tastes according to the accepted oracles of literary criticism, but never winning his way, like Tennyson, to the hearts of the people at large. Never for a moment was Matthew Arnold the poet tossed upon the foamy crest of a literary or emotional fad such as that which in later years caught up for a while his own gospel of culture, or that which has made his

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namesake Sir Edwin Arnold the darling of an hour with the indiscriminating multitude that snaps its fingers at the maledictions of the reviewers.

But amid all the fluctuations of popular and critical taste the appreciation of Arnold's poetical work has steadily increased, and it begins to appear as though he had achieved in this field, at least, one of those lasting reputations that give a true immortality. It is by no means improbable that he may still be admiringly studied when some whom we now consider greater poets have been relegated to that outer Limbo of fame which is the happy hunting ground of the antiquarian and the blue-stocking.

Matthew Arnold is rightly held to have been in his literary creed a classicist, and in his religion a naturalist. But his views underwent a certain change, which is reflected in his poetical as well as his prose works, and in the style as well as the spirit of his poetry. Perhaps it would be truer to say that two currents of thought and taste ran through all his life, one of which predominated in his earlier years and the other in his later.

Reared by the celebrated Dr. Thomas Arnold, and educated under him at Rugby, he revolted against the Christianity even of so good a father and so broad a Churchman. He went through Oxford when the Tractarian movement was at its height, and was broadened and sweetened by it without yielding to its attractions; and he was still less influenced by the wave of scientific agnosticism amid which he found himself after he left the university.

Between 1853 and 1865,<sup>3</sup> however, the spirit of Hebraism, as he called it — meaning the ideals, the world-outlook, as the Germans say, which we inherit from the Hebrew prophets and teachers through the Christian religion — reasserted itself in a measure, and in his best known essays (e.g., *Culture and Anarchy*, *Literature and Dogma*, published in 1869 and 1873,)

his Hellenism — his glorification of the Greek ideals in thought and art and conduct — has ceased to be unreserved and intolerant.

The change in his theory of poetic art is clearly marked. In the preface to the collection published in 1853, with which those to the second edition in the following year and to *Merope*<sup>4</sup> in 1859 were in accord, he urged a return to classical models as the only remedy for the fantastic character and lack of sanity by which modern literature seemed to him to be characterized.

He condemned subjectivism — the habit of dwelling chiefly on mental states and interior conditions — and expressly taught that the highest art is always objective, and that the only legitimate field of poetry is the narrative, the description of actions worthy to be described.

But in his *Essays in Criticism* in 1865 he takes a broader view:

“The grand power of poetry is its interpretative power, and that it develops in two ways — by expressing with magical felicity the physiognomy and movement of the outer world . . . and expressing with inspired conviction the ideas and laws of the inward world of man’s moral and spiritual nature.”<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile his artistic intuitions or his soul’s craving for expression had outrun his colder thought, and one of the most subjective of his longer poems is also one of the earliest — *Empedocles on Etna*,<sup>6</sup> which for this and other sins against the classic standards was excluded by its author from the collection of 1853.

“After 1854,” says the *Edinburgh Review*,<sup>7</sup> “all his poems, with the exception of *Merope*, which he wrote rather as a professor of poetry<sup>4</sup> than as a poet, show that, both artistically and morally, the exclusive domination of the classic spirit was overthrown.”

Taking the poetry of Matthew Arnold as a whole, it is divisible into two groups: the objective poems, which portray