

Tadej Braček

Gradec Primary School, Slovenia

Fact, Myth and Legend in Matthew Arnold's *Westminster Abbey*

Summary

The paper deals with the multilayered elegy "Westminster Abbey," which was not given a lot of attention by Matthew Arnold's critics. The poem is dedicated to Arnold's life-long friend Dean Stanley, who was, like Arnold himself, "a child of light." The term refers to their common fight against Philistinism in the English society of the time. As the poem is about a real person, it contains real data, such as excerpts from Stanley's life, described in the form of praise. However, the poem also introduces the old Saxon legend of consecration of the Abbey, namely the consecration by the light, performed by the First Apostle (St Peter) himself. In addition to the legend, Arnold also used some classical Greek allusions to depict the late Dean's character. In one of the allusions, Stanley is associated with Demophon, whose immortality was never achieved due to the fault of another human, and in the second he is transformed into an everlasting oracle of the Abbey using the Trophonius, a builder of Delphi, metaphor. All elements of the poem form a homogenous eulogy, making it worthwhile reading for English scholars and students, and possibly a candidate for the English poetic canon.

Key words: Matthew Arnold, Arthur Stanley, elegy, eulogy, Victorian poetry, Philistinism, poetic metaphor

Dejstva, miti in legende v elegiji Matthewa Arnolda *Westminstrska opatija*

Povzetek

Članek obravnava večplastno elegijo »Westminstrska opatija«, ki ji kritiki Matthewa Arnolda niso posvečali kaj dosti pozornosti. Posvečena je Arnoldovemu dolgoletnemu prijatelju dekanu Stanleyju, ki je bil, kot Arnold sam, »otrok luči«. Ta termin se nanaša na njun skupni boj proti filistrstvu, ki je bilo prisotno v takratni angleški družbi. Ker pesem govori o resnični osebi, vsebuje tudi resnične podatke, kot so na primer dejstva iz Stanleyjevega življenja, ki so predstavljena v obliki hvalnice. Poleg tega pa pesem bralcu predstavi staro saksonsko legendo o posvetitvi Westminstrske opatije, ki bi jo naj posvetil sam Prvi apostol (Sv. Peter). Poleg te legende Arnold v pesmi uporabi tudi klasične oz. grške aluzije, ki služijo opisovanju dekanove osebnosti. V eni izmed njih je Stanley poistoveten z Demofonom, spet v drugi pa se spremeni v večni orakelj Westminstrske opatije, pri čemer Arnold uporabi metaforo grškega arhitekta Trofonija. Vsi ti elementi tvorijo homogeni slavospev pokojnemu, ki je literarno delo, vredno branja tako za študente kot proučevalce angleške literature. Potrebno bi bilo razmisliti o uvrstitvi pesnitve v angleški poetični kanon.

Ključne besede: Matthew Arnold, Arthur Stanley, elegija, slavospev, viktorijanska poezija, filistrstvo, poetična metafora

Fact, Myth and Legend in Matthew Arnold's *Westminster Abbey*

1. Introduction

This elegy, or, better, eulogy, was written on the occasion of Arthur Penrhyn Stanley's burial in the Abbey itself on July 25, 1881. Stanley was the 27th Dean of Westminster Abbey and a close friend of Arnold's. The affiliation began in their pre-Oxfordian days, at Rugby School, where they were both educated by Dr Thomas Arnold, Matthew Arnold's father. Stanley was a liberal thinker, even more liberal than the sharp-quilled Arnold, who in spite of the theological differences between them, supported Arnold in his literary career, and due to his scholastic and moral influence, opened many doors to his recognition. Stanley was also a biographer of Arnold's father and the editor of his works (Williamson 1971, 749–61). Because of all the help Stanley provided to the younger Arnold, it is not surprising that in this poem, Stanley is called “a child of light” (Arnold 1895, 181). Although the poem is “an interesting reflection of a significant relationship in Matthew Arnold's biography and ... a means of studying the transmutation that occurs when biography becomes poetry” (Williamson 1971, 761), it also stands for a unique blend of historical facts – such as the events from Stanley's life, Greek myths, used as allusions to his life, and legends, such as that around the consecration of the Abbey. However, the critics of Mathew Arnold's poetry have not considered the poem one of the most prominent pieces of Victorian poetry, nor have anthology editors included it in contemporary canon. I call this an injustice. The situation is similar to that of metaphysical poets of 17th century England. Their poetry clearly offended Johnson, as he, the man of Romanticism, was unable to accept the fact that the rational can be mingled with the emotional; “to shew their learning was their how endeavour,” he wrote (Hammond 1974, 50). Arnold's poem “Westminster Abbey” is by its title perhaps unattractive, due to the mass tourism associated with to the building itself; however, the poem is rich in sophisticated conceits and hyperboles, which appeal to the modern palate. In addition to this, the poem draws readers' attention to the less known historical/mythical data about the Abbey, which increases their awareness of English culture as well. My paper will disclose those elements of the poem which make it a genuine piece of literature, and call for artistic re-evaluation and inclusion in the English poetry canon.

2. The Christian legend and Stanley

The poem opens with three rhetorical questions concerning the life and death of the Dean:
... now is pass'd into the night?

Couldst thou no better keep, O Abbey old ...
The presence of that gracious inmate, light?–

What, is the happy glow so soon expired? (Arnold 1895, 181)

The visual imagery of lightness with its contrast “night” may refer to Arnold’s idea about Philistinism expressed in his essay on Heinrich Heine, where he states that “Philistine must have originally meant, in the mind of those who invented the nickname, a strong, dogged, unenlightened opponent of the chosen people, of the children of the light” (Arnold 1914, 121); but the images would prove not so effective were they not associated with the legend presented in the four stanzas to follow. The official website of Westminster Abbey states that on a plot of land called Thorney Island, “a small Benedictine monastery [was] founded under the patronage of King Edgar and St Dunstan around 960 AD” and that the consecration of the church occurred on December 28, 1065 under King Edward the Confessor, who also built it in honour of St. Peter the Apostle (Westminster Abbey 2008). However, Arnold in his poem goes considerably further back in history and names Sebert, king of the East Saxons, as a true builder of the church. Sebert is, historically speaking, truly one of the possible establishers (in the year 604) according to both Edgar’s charter, and also according to the writers Ailred of Rievaulx, Sulcurdus, and Gervase of Canterbury. Richard Sporley, who was a monk at the abbey in 1450

carries the period of its erection as far back as the year 184, when king Lucius is supposed to have embraced Christianity. [At the time the place] was not only dedicated to religion, but [was also] a place of royal sepulture, as well as the repository of regalia. In the persecution under Dioclesian, he adds, it was converted into a Temple of Apollo. (Dugdale 1817, 265–6)

The story of the consecration of the church, as used in this poem, is given by Sulcurdus, who lived at the time of William the Conqueror, who was also the first British monarch to be crowned there.

The legend has it that the night before the consecration of the church, a Saxon fisherman met a stranger, who asked to be taken to the other shore, where the Abbey stood. The man went toward the minster, and then the whole exterior building began to shine. The interior was illuminated as well, and there was a divine smell present in the air, and happy carols were heard. The stranger then returned and the church stopped shining. He revealed himself as “the fisher from the Lake of Galilee” (Arnold 1895, 183), which meant that the visitor to the Abbey was the First Apostle. He instructed the fisher to tell King Sebart in the morning “how his St. Peter’s Church in Thorney Isle/Peter, his friend, with light did consecrate” (ibid., 183).

As the abbey itself foretold, in the poem many times mentioned, “boon” from God, with which we become acquainted at the beginning of the poem (ibid., 183), it was only a matter of time then before this boon materialized. Nevertheless, the people had to wait for more than twelve hundred years for the gift from heaven. In the meanwhile

Arts came, and arms, and law,
And majesty, and sacred form and fear;
Only that primal guest the fisher saw,
Light, only light was slow to reappear. (Arnold 1895, 184)

We can see from this stanza that the Abbey survived turbulent times in English history. Especially interesting is the mentioning of the “sacred form and fear.” These words might allude to the

English Reformation led by Henry VIII, and reversed for a while by his daughter Mary I. In 1535 Cromwell was appointed Vicar-general, and after estimating the possessions of the Church, the Parliament, after the introduction of his bill, in 1536 passed a law which aimed to dissolve all monasteries with an income of 200 pounds or less. Large monasteries were excluded from the 1536 Act, but from 1537 on the government started to convince them to dissolve themselves and give their land to the Crown. By 1540 the process was over and the monastic life ended (Newcombe 1995, 59, 61). The process was, ironically, not so much sacred as it was profane; it dealt primarily with the property of the Church rather than religion. Light could hardly appear in such material circumstances.

Then, in the time of Arnold “The promise of the prime/seem’d to come true at last” (Arnold 1895, 184). Arthur Penrhyn Stanley was the chosen one, the spring after winter’s darkness, the man predestined by the Apostle many centuries ago. It is an extremely bold remark on Arnold’s part to claim that the Abbey itself and even St. Peter announced the coming of Dean Stanley. The announcement comes close to that heralding Christ’s birth. By associating his friend with miracles, we can see the deep respect and admiration that Arnold felt towards Stanley. The Dean is described as being in possession of:

Bright wits, and instincts sure,
And goodness warm, and truth without alloy,
And temper sweet, and love of all things pure,
And joy in light, and power to spread the joy. (Ibid., 184–5)

The anaphora as well as the six-fold repetition of “and” reinforce the qualities that Stanley had. The common dominator of all the features is purity of spirit. Here we may remember that although Arnold and Stanley were sometimes in dispute over issues such as Arnold’s attacks on certain clergymen or Stanley’s overly optimistic solutions to ecclesiastical issues, the purpose of elegy/eulogy is to pay tribute to the deceased one, and not to show them in a bad light – hence all the seemingly exaggerated bursts of thanks (hyperboles) and elaborate metaphors (conceits).

3. Classical allusions as biographical metaphors

In speaking about metaphors, allow me to mention the most obvious and extensive one using a classical allusion. Not only Stanley was the light, he was also given “light” by some, presumably divine, source. “And on that countenance bright/Shone oft so high a light,” Arnold states in “Westminster Abbey” (185), before delivering an allegorical image of Demophon (Sylva Rhetoricae), son of the king and queen of Eleusis, who was bathed in fire (light) every night. As a child, Demophon was child nursed by Demeter, the Greek Earth Goddess (Encyclopedia Mythica). Arnold explains how one night his mother, Queen Metanira, found him lying in the fire and screamed. The ritual of burning Demophon’s mortality, performed every night, was thus broken and he had to live the life of a mortal (Columbia Encyclopedia). “In some chance battle on Cithaeron-side/The nursling of the Mighty Mother died” (Arnold 1895, 186). The utterance of the Earth Goddess can be

understood as a critique of those who undermined Stanley's work, aimed to bring good, a "boon" to people. The Goddess said: "O ignorant race of man!//Achieve your good who can/If your own hands the good begun undo?" (ibid., 186). It is again a rhetorical question, a frequent figure of speech in this poem, which means that all the good work is done in vain if the person for whom some beneficial deed is performed begins to undermine it. This refers to Stanley opponents, mentioned later in the paper.

Most noticeable is the blend of Christian and Ancient Greek belief systems, which is reflected in the visual light/fire imagery. As already mentioned, St Peter was supposed to consecrate the Abbey by light, but then the blessing "in desert ice of subtleties was spent/or drown'd in mists of childish wonderment" (ibid., 184). The second example of extinguishing of holy fire can be derived from the second myth of Demophon – not Homeric as the previous one was –but the one provided by Apollodorus. Our mythographer states in it that the surprise of finding Demophon in fire resulted in his death in the flames. Shortly after that the Goddess Demeter left the kingdom of Eleusis (Encyclopaedia Britannica Online 2008). The third part of the same light image consist of Arnold's descriptions of Stanley, namely that he had a "countenance bright" (Arnold 1895, 185), that he was a "bringer of heavenly light" (ibid., 186) and "light's fair nursling" (ibid., 187). Now let us link all the elements to illuminate the blending of the belief systems: St Peter, the Goddess Demeter and also Stanley himself are the same person. They all wanted to do good for the Abbey. However, St Peter's work was destroyed by the strivings of reason, which are, according to the poem, opposite to the Christian faith, or temporarily invisible as the result of people's immature responses to Stanley's liberal thinking. Demeter wanted to make Demophon immortal, but she failed due to improper responses as well. The same happened to Stanley, who had to endure "deadly airs" by his enemies.

In the poem Arnold applies the first-mentioned Greek myth to his friend's life more specifically:

On thee too, in thy day
Of childhood, Arthur! did some check have power,
That, radiant though thou wert, though couldst but stay,
Bringer of heavenly light, a human hour? (Ibid., 186)

Of course, the logical answer to the question is 'no.' No one, as in the case of Demophon, interrupted the spell which aimed to make Stanley immortal. Nevertheless, Arnold continues the next stanza as if the answer were 'yes.' "Therefore our happy guest/Knew care, and knew unrest" (ibid., 187) as all the descendants of Adam and Eve do. While enumerating the calamities to which Stanley was exposed, Arnold scolds his opponents in line 125: "And men ignoble harass'd him with strife." The occasions on which Stanley could have been harassed might have been when "Stanley defended [Bishop] Colenso in Convocation against charges of heresy [and when he fought] "against the forces of bibliolatry and Philistinism" (Williamson 1971, 758). Arnold was his ally in the battle against the latter two negative human characteristics, and wanted "to illuminate and improve mankind ... by affirming the value of literature" (Shumaker 1962, 387).

Ultimately, as "... deadly airs his strength did undermine" (Arnold 1895, 187) Stanley had to die. His death is gloriously described since the Dean's life was glorious: "And light's fair nursling stupor first invades/And next the crowning impotence of death" (ibid., 187). Here we can see the poet's craftsmanship, as he first intensifies the state of dying – stupor preceding death, and, secondly, creates an ingenious oxymoron in the last verse of the stanza – "crowning impotence." The force of death in the end inevitably wins over everyone, no matter how "bright" one is.

The mood of the subsequent, fourteenth, stanza remains the same, and they are both critical "of men with mind [still] ... darken'd and astray" (ibid., 184). Death remains the topic of the stanza; however, this stage of Stanley's life is once more generalized by putting forward the Greek myth of Trophonius and Agamedes, the builders of the temple of Apollo at Delphi (The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia). When they finished building the temple, they "a meed required" (line 136). The god said to them to them to "live happy [for seven days], then expect your perfect meed!" (Arnold 1895, 187). After seven days they both died in their sleep. Although this occurrence seems ironic to the modern reader – i.e. that the makers of a masterpiece received death as payment for their work, Arnold sees their respective peaceful deaths as the ultimate prize: "Death, death was judged the boon supreme indeed" (ibid., 187). The agent of the cited verse is missing; however, we can conclude that it should end in 'by God,' as the previous lines in the stanza refer to Him. The same prize was given to Stanley who "served men nobly, and acceptance found" (ibid., 188).

What draws attention to the analogy between the two ancient architects and Arnold is that according to another legend, Trophonius "was swallowed up by earth and transformed into an Oracular Daimon (Spirit)" (Theoi Project). This was an appropriate destiny for a man, whose father was Apollo and whose name means 'nourisher of the mind' (Theoi Project). All pieces of the metaphorical puzzle now logically come together. Stanley's spiritual father was Thomas Arnold who acted as Apollo for both young men – Stanley and Arnold. He was an oracle, a producer of truth. Stanley, his 'son,' alias Trophonius, is buried beneath the Abbey and is made an oracle, as the poem's final stanza will prove.

Stanley's death was for his own self just the natural end of the life path after the great work he had done for people. Arnold asks the readers then: "What could he better wish than then to die/And wait the issue, sleeping underground?" 'Nothing more,' we are apt to answer since we know the late Stanley's qualities, 'let him wait in peace for the last judgement.' After he had seeded the goodness in people, his work "underground" now becomes to wait for the results, the fruits of his labour. At the end of the fourth, and especially in the third to the last stanza, Arnold is unsure whether the influence of Stanley will remain with the people of England or whether they will lose themselves in "folly revived, re-furbish'd sophistries/And pullulating rites externe and vain." Narrow-mindedness was something both Arnold and Stanley fought against together. He is also afraid that "a church once large [would be] ... grown strait in soul." There is a pun on "large" here which could signify the Anglican *Broad Church* party, of which Stanley was the leader (Williamson 1971, 749). Landow (n.d.) writes that

this loosely associated group of intellectuals in the Church of England in many ways represent what has become liberal twentieth-century Protestantism. ... Broad Churchmen emphasized that the Bible, though in some sense divinely inspired, was not ... literally true in every detail, and that therefore the scriptures should be read metaphorically or even mythologically.

The *Party* therefore refused to believe that the Bible should be read literally, and now when their leader was dead, Arnold predicted that the Church would try to get “strait” again, and read the Bible literally, without understanding the underlying metaphorical language.

The penultimate stanza is the most personal one. In it Arnold compares his life-long companion Stanley to his father, Stanley’s mentor at Rugby and later in his professional career:

Even as my father, thou—
 Even as that loved, that well-recorded friend—
 Hast thy commission done, ye both may now
 Wait for the leaven to work, the let to end. (Arnold 1895, 189)

Dr Thomas Arnold was “well-recorded,” owing to Stanley’s publication of the *Life and Correspondence of Thomas Arnold* in 1844 (Williamson 1971, 754). The image of leaven, as used in bread, creates a picture of their life work and influence growing; it is also just a matter of time when the obstacles will fall and “the boon of life [will be able to] struggle through” (Arnold 1895, 184); this refers to the gift of life which both men nourished and conveyed to the others during their careers.

4. Conclusion

The eighteenth and final stanza recapitulates, as Shakespeare does in the final couplet of his sonnets, what was spoken of till now; it turns again to the legend of the Abbey’s consecration, as well as reminding us that we are reading a eulogy. Arnold starts the stanza by addressing the Abbey and comforting it with the words that it should “fear not but that thy light once more shall burn” (Arnold 1895, 189). The poet explains how this will happen. The “transfigured walls [will] be touch’d with flame” (line 178), when “from lip to lip will pass his name” (line 180) – the line with which the poem ends. The whole idea of this stanza had been captured before in Shakespeare’s “Sonnet XVIII,” if we take the “eternal lines” from the verses “Nor shall Death brag thou wander’st in his shade/When in eternal lines to time thou growest” (Shakespeare 1990, 1194) in a broad sense. According to Arnold, Stanley will be immortalized by other people pronouncing his name, as some sort of a chant, and by this means he will stay in the memory of the British nation. However, as the poet “believed that ‘knowledge’ comes primarily through literature – and most specifically through poetry – he argued that religion, which had traditionally informed humans about themselves and their existences, would soon be overtaken and then replaced by poetry” (Davis 2006, 369), we can understand the last stanza in the same sense in which the above-cited Shakespeare’s “lines” are usually interpreted, i.e. that by Arnold’s piece of writing and by readers’ reading and responding to it, the late Dean will be forever written in the annals of history (this in spite of the fact that Stanley, as a clergyman, would probably not

have agreed with poetry's victory over religion). What is more, Arnold even contradicts himself in predicting the victory, as he in this eulogy picks up an undoubtedly religious story for its frame and assigns his friend the crown of the "Saviour's happy light" (Arnold 1895, 184).

Although the classical allusions are larger in number, the main frame metaphor of "Westminster Abbey" remains the legend of its consecration. It appears that Arnold introduced the two classical conceits to this poem due to his desire to educate and enlighten people via literature, especially poetry. In this sense, we could justly call Arnold a child of light as well.

I believe that I have shown the elements of the poem which make it a worthwhile reading for academic as well as casual readers. The genius of Arnold can especially be seen in his ability to produce several kinds of meaning of facts, myths or legends he incorporates in his poetry. In this sense he comes close to the metaphysical poets: like them, Arnold was not understood by the readers and critics of Romanticism. Due to the value "Westminster Abbey" presents in the sense of quality of expressed thought, and better understanding of English culture in general, it should be considered as a serious candidate for the canon of English poetry.

Bibliography

Arnold, M. 1914. *Essays by Matthew Arnold*. London: Oxford University Press.

– – –. 1895. *Poems*. London: Macmillan and Co.

Davis, W.V. 2006. The Tide's Pendulum Truth: A Reading of the Poetry of Theological Crisis From Matthew Arnold to R.S. Thomas. *Christianity and Literature* 55 (3): 369–91.

Dugdale, W. 1917. *Monasticon Anglicanum: a History of the Abbies and other Monasteries, Hospitals, Frieries, and Cathedral and Collegiate Churches, with their Dependencies, in England and Wales*. London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown.

Encyclopaedia Britannica Online, s.v. "Demophon," <http://search.eb.com.libproxy.txstate.edu/eb/article-9029908> (accessed 10 February 2008)

Encyclopedia Mythica, s.v. "Demophon," <http://www.pantheon.org/articles/d/demophon.html> (accessed 15 August 2007)

Hammond, G., ed. 1974. *The Metaphysical Poets: A casebook*. London: Macmillan.

Landow, G.P. n.d. *The Broad Church Party in the Church of England*, <http://www.victorianweb.org/religion/brdchrch.html> (accessed 15 August 2007)

Newcombe, D.G. 2001. *Henry VIII and the English Reformation*. New York: Routledge.

Shakespeare, W. 1990. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. New York: Gramercy Books.

Shumaker, W. 1962. Matthew Arnold's Humanism: Literature as a Criticism of Life. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900, Nineteenth Century* 2 (4): 385–402.

Williamson, E.L. Words from Westminster Abbey: Matthew Arnold and Arthur Stansley. *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900, Nineteenth Century* 11 (4): 749–61.

The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia, s.v. "Trophonius," www.cc.columbia.edu/cu/cup/ (accessed 15 August 2007)

The Theoi Project: Guide to Greek Mythology, s.v. "Trophonius," <http://www.theoi.com/Khthonios/Trophonios.html> (accessed 15 August 2007)

Westminster Abbey, s.v. "History," <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/history-research/history/> (accessed 9 February 2008)