“The *bourgeois* nature in *difficulties*”: The Crisis of Liberalism in Robert Browning’s *Aristophanes’ Apology*

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NATHAN K. Hensley’s recent study, *Forms of Empire* (2016), posits that liberalism, as the nineteenth century progressed, came up against the “wayward meanings” generated by its own contradictions, particularly the “curious intimacy between legality and harm” that characterized a doctrine of individual freedom inextricably rooted in violent imperial expansion.[1] For Hensley, “the dogged persistence of killing in an age of liberty disrupted the conceptual assumptions of progressive idealism”; while “the very inseparability of law and violence, never more painfully evident than in episodes of colonial war and legal emergency, collapsed the logical principles of non-contradiction and identity that remain our common sense.”[2]

Such a “curious intimacy” is gleaned in Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1869). His proposal, “to make all live in an atmosphere of sweetness and light, and use ideas [. . .] freely, – to be nourished and not bound by them,” hinges on notions of freedom, explicitly opposed to what is “bound.”[3] Yet, in the book’s conclusion, he admits that certain behaviors, insofar as they impinge on this “atmosphere of sweetness and light,” are not to be tolerated: “monster processions in the streets and forcible irruptions into the parks, even in professed support of this good design, ought to be unflinchingly forbidden and suppressed” (*Culture,* 149). For people to be free, certain activities must be—and the force of the phrase is almost directly the opposite of “sweetness and light”—“unflinchingly forbidden and suppressed.”

In many ways, the 1870s themselves were characterized by the “curious intimacy” Hensley describes. Napoleon III’s supposedly liberal Second Empire declared war on Prussia in 1870, which led Robert Browning to complete and publish *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* a year later and also declare, in a letter to Isa Blagden dated 19 July 1870,

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that "in the interest of humanity, [Napoleon III] wants a sound beating."[4] Furthermore, the 1871 budget saw the Liberal Party propose a match tax that, according to Eugenio Biagini, "looked like a treason against the sacred canons of Cobdenite and Gladstonian taxation committed by a notoriously anti-democratic Chancellor in order to," among other things, "provide Princess Louise with a dowry."[5] This led to precisely the sort of "monster procession" that Arnold feared just a few years before: in late April, three or four thousand matchmakers "protested energetically against the new tax" in Parliament Square.[6] Later, in 1874, the Liberal Party itself failed to retain office, after Disraeli's Conservatives won 350 seats to the Liberal party's 242.

It was, therefore, at a moment in which both the practice and theory of liberalism were in difficulties that Browning published *Aristophanes' Apology* (1875).[7] Indeed, Browning, for his contemporary critic Walter Bagehot, too often focused on the presentation of "the *bourgeois* nature in *difficulties*."[8] This article contends that *Aristophanes' Apology* is fruitfully read in terms of these very difficulties. The poem grapples with the various contradictions that mark the inward working of culture prescribed by Matthew Arnold in 1869, especially in thinking through an artist's responsibility to society.

Such a grappling might prove essential to a full understanding of the political engagement of Browning's work, which remains a problem for Browning studies in general. In 2012 the journal *Victorian Poetry* published "Future Directions for Robert Browning Studies: A Virtual Roundtable," edited by Mary Ellis Gibson and Britta Martens. Intended as a "lively discussion of various questions" regarding the "future of Browning studies," the article features the contributions of Isobel Armstrong, Sandra Donaldson, Warwick Slinn, Herbert Tucker, and John Woolford.[9] In the article, Woolford suggests the extent of "the job still to be done on the exactitudes and indeterminacies of Browning's politics."[10] This claim was seconded by Tucker, who suggested that "the Victorianist reassessors of Liberalism seem devoted to keeping not just Browning but poets tout court out of the discussion."[11]

Consequently, this article has three main objectives. First, to supplement Hensley's analysis of the ways in which literature registered the "curious intimacy between legality and harm" that characterizes the liberalism of the period by exploring the ways in which liberal attitudes toward culture are portrayed "*in difficulties*" in Browning's critically neglected *Aristophanes' Apology*. This essay will, therefore, begin the work prescribed by Woolford and Tucker by foregrounding Browning's specifically poetic

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engagement with his contemporary political situation. Second, to show that the poem's foregrounding of translation represents an important and hitherto neglected aspect of this political engagement. Third, to show how both the form and the style of *Aristophanes' Apology* not only register the difficulties the poem attempts to negotiate but how these difficulties are themselves thought through formally and stylistically.

This essay draws on a way of reading pioneered in Isobel Armstrong's *Victorian Poetry* (1993) yet attempts to extend its reach in several important ways. For Armstrong,

> The dramatic form decentres both speaker and reader, questioning the authority of both. It dramatizes but does not concede to the power relations of communication and interpretation, showing them in operation and enabling a democratic access to their complexities. It embodies the *structural problems* of power in its form and comprehends the reader within these problems.[12]

This claim, that Browning's form lays bare the "*structural problems* of power," is suggestive of Walter Bagehot's association of Browning with what he terms the "grotesque" style. For Bagehot,

> ornate art, as much as pure art, catches its subject in the best light it can, takes the most developed aspect of it which it can find, and throws upon it the most congruous colours it can use. But grotesque art does just the contrary. It takes the type, so to say, *in difficulties*. It gives a representation of it in its minimum development, amid the circumstances least favourable to it, just while it is struggling with obstacles, just where it is encumbered with incongruities.[13]

Formally as well as thematically, then (as the combination of Bagehot's and Armstrong's claims suggests), Browning's verse accentuates the "difficulties" and "structural problems" that beset the power relations and theories he describes. Rather than taking "its subject in the best light it can," his verse frequently tests theories at their limits or in conflict with their opposites.

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Aristophanes' Apology, Including a Transcript from Euripides, Being the Last Adventure of Balaustion was published in 1875 by Smith, Elder & Co. in London. Contemporary criticism tended to dismiss the poem as arcane classicism: the result of Browning's friendship with Benjamin Jowett, the scholar of Ancient Greek, then master of Balliol College, Oxford,

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where Browning was, in later life, an honorary fellow. In a letter dated 11 February 1876, Browning himself recounts his critics' supposition that the poem was "probably written after one of Mr Browning's Oxford Symposia with Jowett"—one critic "reported the poem to be 'the transcript of the talk of the Master of Balliol.'"[14] Yet such an assumption of concurrence is not supported by Jowett's own opinions of Browning's work, opinions that show little deviation from those that characterize much contemporary criticism:

> He is also very extravagant, perverse, topsy-turvy, obscure; he has art without beauty and a grim humour hardly intelligible. Nowhere is he really effected by the great themes of poets – love, or ambition, or enthusiasm. Isolated in the world, μυριόνους ἀνήρ ["myriad-minded man"], neither epic not dramatic, but semi-dramatic.[15]

The charges here reflect a tendency to read Browning's poetry as grotesque—as "perverse" and "grim" work that refuses to conform to conventional expectations or to deal with the "great themes of poets," despite the fact that Browning's poetry regularly and famously engages with themes of "love" and "ambition." Jowett's criticisms here bear the influence of Bagehot's critique of Browning. Yet the poem's avoidance of "great themes" is a result of its engagement, not with the prescribed subjects of "culture," but rather with a questioning of that very prescription.

In the poem, Balaustion and her husband, Euthukles, are forced to flee an Athens recently sacked by the Spartan army. She decides to narrate, with her husband transcribing her words, an event that she believes foreshadowed the loss of Athens, first to what she thinks of as that city's late degeneracy, and second to the Spartans themselves: she decides to narrate the moment that she heard of the death of Euripides, a playwright she esteems, and the ensuing confrontation she had with Aristophanes.

The confrontation hinges on a profound disagreement between Aristophanes and Balaustion as to the proper purpose of drama. For Balaustion, it is the "high soul" (l. 498) of Euripides that characterizes good art,[16] a "high soul" that Aristophanes attacks for disregarding the majority of the populace:

> Which brings me to the prime fault, poison-speck
> Whence all the plague springs – that first feud of all
> 'Twixt me and you and your Euripides.
> "Unworld the world" frowns he, my opposite.

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I cry "Life!" "Death," he groans, "our better Life!"
Despise what is – the good and graspable,
Prefer the out of sight and in at mind,
To village-joy, the well-side violet-patch

(*Poems,* II, 236; ll. 1949–56)

What is "graspable," tangible, and has a material existence is opposed to the "out of sight and in at mind" of Euripides: an intellectualism that favors contemplation of a purely conceptual "ideal" rather than the "village-joy" of ordinary life. Such an opposition between the two playwrights was emphasized in the classical scholarship of the 1870s. William Bodham Donne's *Euripides,* published in 1872 as part of the Ancient Classics for English Readers series (to which Browning made available some of his own translations), characterizes the dramatist as "the poet of the few and not of the Athenians in general."[17] Preferring, as Bodham Donne claims, "solitude and his library to the hubbub of the market-place, or the crowding and noise of popular assemblies," and preferring also a drama that focuses less on ordinary life and more on the ideals that lie beyond it, Euripides, as he was characterized in the 1870s, bears striking similarity to the custodians of culture depicted by Arnold: those whose duty is to study perfection, or "the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time," rather than the strikingly imperfect conditions that pervade ordinary lives (*Culture,* 53).

Indeed, Bodham Donne's emphasis on Euripides' individualism, and his avoidance of the public sphere, contrasts distinctly with W. Lucas Collins's characterization of Aristophanes, also published in 1872 as part of the same series:

> Almost always more or less political, and sometimes intensely personal, and always with some purpose more or less important underlying its wildest vagaries and coarsest buffooneries, [Aristophanes' comedy] supplied the place of the political journal, the literary review, the popular caricature, and the party pamphlet, of our own times.[18]

Despite, however, this contemporary association of Aristophanes with political engagement (albeit an engagement marked by a mixture of styles and registers) and Euripides with an intellectualism "of the few," Daniel Karlin, in one of the few extensive critical readings of the poem, posits that, for Browning, "Aristophanes represents a conservative social ethos, Euripides a progressive one."[19] He seeks to establish this as the central opposition of the poem, arguing that "Aristophanes is an aristocratic reactionary, suspicious of anything which smacks of modernity,

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'progress,' or the 'rationalist' challenge to the old order in morals, politics, and religion."[20] This suspicion, Karlin suggests, echoes the conservative rejection of Victorian progress, such as the development of evolutionary theory. However, while Euripides is undoubtedly associated with liberal theory and progress in the poem—he "Exhibit[s] women, slaves and men as peers" (*Poems,* II, 242; l. 2179)—Karlin misrepresents the importance of Aristophanes. Rather than simply serving as a representative of illiberal or conservative ideas, the character's importance derives from his posing challenges to the liberal orthodoxy of Euripides: challenges that push liberalism into difficulties and that demonstrate the limitations that are concealed by its unending rhetorical dedication to the concept of liberation.

Clyde de L. Ryals, in one of the other few extensive treatments of the poem, comes closer to a developed understanding of the importance of Aristophanes' challenges to liberal logic. He suggests that any reading which stresses the importance of a simple opposition fails to recognize the greater importance of dialectical resolution. For Ryals, "it is most fruitful to read *Aristophanes' Apology* formally as a further attempt by Browning to experiment with and overcome the limitations of the dramatic monologue and thematically as an expression of his philosophy that human beings must accept the antinomies of existence without strict adherence to one pole of the dialectic."[21] Neither Balaustion, Euripides, nor Aristophanes, then, is to be read as representative of a "correct" political or poetic practice, because "men fail when they do not admit the dual thrusts of their natures and recognize only one pole of the dialectic tension."[22] Ryals does not, however, extend this insight far enough. By focusing too much on "resolution"—exemplified, both thematically and stylistically, he argues, by the transcript of *Herakles*—Ryals fails to account for the ways in which difficulties, rather than resolutions, characterize the poem's treatment of ideology.

Such critical variety, however, is perhaps testament to the complexity of Browning's poetry. Yet this variety often has the unfortunate effect of obfuscating the poem's engagement with ideology, and specifically Browning's contemporary political environment, and the assumptions about culture popularized by Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Indeed, it is Arnold's work that provides the terms needed to fully explicate the poem and to reveal the genuine difficulties it foregrounds.

While Jane A. McCusker has demonstrated the importance of Browning's objection to Arnold's notions of the function of both poetry and criticism to the poem (a poem that, she argues, is "deeply concerned

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with the world of Victorian Britain, particularly with the contemporary poetic situation, and is, to be even more specific, a debate with Matthew Arnold about what constitutes the best poetry for the age"), she reads the poem, similarly to Karlin, as a simple opposition between two views: one that Browning himself thinks correct, and a mistaken Arnoldian view he wishes to condemn.[23] Although the opposition between Aristophanes and Euripides is indeed integral to a full understanding of the poem, McCusker, in attributing Browning's support solely to Euripides, fails to account for the ways in which the poem, dialogically, lays bare what Armstrong calls "the *structural problems*" of the interpretation advanced by Balaustion.

Neither Balaustion, Euripides, nor Aristophanes is here the sole representative of what is right, but rather they all combine in dialogue with one another, and in combination enable Browning to comprehend fully the difficulties with which an advancing liberalism contends. Aristophanes' challenges to Balaustion, instead of having the effect of highlighting the "truth" of Balaustion's opinions, push these opinions into crisis: exposing the inconsistencies and contradictions that prevent their development.

In a sense, Browning's interest in portraying the "*bourgeois* nature in *difficulties*" is similar to what Arnold, in his essay "The Future of Liberalism," published in *Irish Essays* (1882), called the "master-thought by which my politics are governed": in particular, "the thought of the bad civilisation of the English middle class."[24] However, for Arnold, it is less an exploration of the "difficulties" that besets "Philistine" logic which interests him, and more an explication of the solution: a "culture" that would guarantee "civilisation pervasive and general."[25] In *Culture and Anarchy,* Arnold posits that this "culture, or the study of perfection, leads us to conceive of no perfection as being real which is not a *general* perfection, embracing all our fellow-men"; and that this "individual perfection is impossible so long as the rest of mankind are not perfected along with us" (*Culture,* 141; emphasis original). Yet here, the announcement of a liberating "perfection" makes use of surprisingly limiting vocabulary. The "rest of mankind" are "perfected"—as objects of the act, not subjects—but Arnold's perfection "embracing all our fellow-men" does not seem to depend on whether these people want to be embraced:

> [C]ulture indefatigably tries, not to make what each raw person may like, the rule by which he fashions himself; but to draw ever nearer to a sense of what is indeed beautiful, graceful, and becoming, and to get the raw person to like that. (*Culture,* 38)

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Trying "to get the raw person" to like and behave in accordance with an idea of perfection, Arnold here echoes Browning's *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*'s desire to "[t]o do the little minds the good they need, / Despite themselves, by just abolishing / Their right to play the part and fill the place / I' the scheme of things" (*Poems,* I, 976; ll. 1296–99). As Raymond Williams posits, "The complex of senses [of the word "culture"] indicates a complex argument about the relations between general human development and a particular way of life."[26] For Arnold, the argument must be for a limitation of particular ways of life, in order to achieve a liberation of "general human development." Culture, then, as a liberating force is for Arnold dependent on exclusion and limitation. If, as Hensley suggests, "the conceptual assumptions of progressive idealism" were being disrupted throughout the second half of the nineteenth century by an awareness of the proximity between liberation and limitation, then Arnold here typifies this proximity, and, in *Aristophanes' Apology,* Browning exemplifies this awareness.

Describing the "sphere of life," a sphere full of apertures through which different perspectives of life may be achieved, Aristophanes suggests that Euripides' standards of truth and perfection are themselves limiting:

> Inside this sphere of life, – all objects, sense
> And soul perceive, – Euripides hangs fixed,
> Gets knowledge through the single aperture
> Of High and Right: with visage fronting these
> He waits the wine thence ere he operate,
> Work in the world and write a tragedy.
>
> (*Poems,* II, 315; ll. 5102–21)

The explicit rhyme between "Euripides" and "fronting these" fixes the relation between the dramatist and the aperture, emphasizing the immobility with which he "hangs fixed." As Stefan Collini suggests, "Arnold's prose [. . .] has been characterized as a monologue masquerading as a dialogue," and here Aristophanes criticizes Euripides for precisely this: for claiming to represent "truth" despite rejecting dialogue with the manifold apertures of the "sphere of life," in favor of a single perspective.[27]

Opposed to this, Aristophanes claims mobility and a dynamic art form that can represent all life:

> *I* am movable, –
> To slightest shift of orb make prompt response,
> Face Low and Wrong and Weak and all the rest,

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> And still drink knowledge, wine-drenched every turn, –
> Equally favoured by their opposites.
> Little and Bad exist, are natural:
> Then let me know them, and be twice as great
> As he who only knows one phase of life!
>
> (*Poems,* II, 315; ll. 5127–35)

Here the aural effects the lines produce reflect the shifting movements of Aristophanes' art: the repeated vowel sounds of "movable [. . .] orb [. . .] prompt response [. . .] Low and Wrong" combine with a pattern of shifting consonantal resonances ("drink [. . .] drenched," "Wrong [. . .] rest," etc.) to produce alliterative sequences that seem themselves "movable." Woolford and Karlin argue that it is part of Browning's distinct poetic style that "rhyme and metre [. . .] are felt as pressure, as atmosphere, rather than as constitutive of expression."[28] Here, however, aberrations in "rhyme and metre" are constitutive of a dynamic and shifting energy, which itself represents the content of Aristophanes' claims. From one line to the next, the dominant meter is submerged only to then emerge again: "Little and Bad exist, are natural / Then let me know them, and be twice as great"—an irregular line that begins and ends with dactyls is followed by a regular iambic pentameter. These shifting patterns, both metrically and aurally, are themselves suggestive of the "competing energies and evolving life-forms" that Nicola Bown argues characterizes Browning's "grotesque."[29]

However, two approaches to poetry are more explicitly "competing" here, which, in many ways, recalls the distinction between "objective" and "subjective" poets developed by Browning in his "Essay on Shelley" (1852). Browning writes that, "in our approach to the poetry [of a subjective poet], we necessarily approach the personality of the poet; in apprehending it we apprehend him" (*Poems,* I, 1002). Conversely, an objective poet endeavors "to reproduce things external [. . .] with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men" (*Poems,* I, 1001). Euripides, then, in his refusal to consider the "common eye" and "his fellow men" worthy of the interest of a "High and Right" art form, consistently combines his personality with his poetry by appearing to value subjectivity over objectivity. Relying on an Arnoldian "sweetness and light" distinct and deliberately separated from ordinary "vulgar" life, Euripides here partakes of the same confusion of limiting and liberating logic. As Morse Peckham posits, "Browning, like Hegel, saw culture as a structure and a force that contains within itself inherent

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contradictions and confusions"; and here these "contradictions and confusions" are the conspicuous subjects of the poem's central opposition.[30]

However, in demonstrating a dynamic and "movable" art stylistically, Aristophanes here draws attention to the ways in which a poetry capable of facing "Low and Wrong and Weak and all the rest" can do so both thematically and linguistically. Indeed, language itself frequently enacts aspects of the cultural critique it mediates. For example, once more attacking pedantry and sophistry, Aristophanes exclaims:

> Away pretence to some exclusive sphere
> Cloud-nourishing a sole selected few
> Fume-fed with self-superiority!
> I stand up for the common coarse-as-clay
> Existence, – stamp and ramp with heel and hoof
> On solid vulgar life, you fools disown.
> Make haste from your unreal eminence,
> And measure lengths with me upon that ground
> Whence this mud-pellet sings and summons you!
>
> (*Poems,* II, 254; ll. 2680–88)

Here, compound words ("mud-pellet," "coarse-as-clay," "fume-fed") serve to emphasize a linguistic energy that binds words organically together: a power of accumulation characteristic of Aristophanes' language. The compound words also distance Aristophanes' speech from the very formal register, the "pretence," he condemns. Aristophanes' preference for the "common coarse-as-clay / Existence" is suggestive of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls "grotesque realism"—a form in which "the bodily element is deeply positive [. . .] something universal, representing all the people."[31] He continues to suggest that the "essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the earth and body in their indissoluble unity."[32] As Woolford suggests, "For Browning as for Bakhtin, such a preference is not only defensible, but also associated with all that commits art to the experienced life of the common people, as opposed to the glosses, or lies, of official art. Browning's liking for Rabelais and for the comedy of Aristophanes exemplifies his own ability at least to perceive the attractiveness of this position."[33]

Browning himself stated that "I have a huge love for Rabelais" in a letter to Walter Herries Pollock dated 28 June 1879.[34] He also mentions Rabelais in three of his poems: *Red Cotton Night-Cap Country* (1873) as well as "A Likeness" and "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis," from *Dramatis Personae* (1864) and *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845), respectively.

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Of these three, "Sibrandus Schafnaburgensis" is the most relevant to Aristophanes' purpose here. In the poem, the speaker, bored by the pedantry of what he sarcastically calls a "delectable treatise," proceeds to his "revenge" by throwing it into a "crevice" under a plum-tree, before fetching "a loaf / Half a cheese, and a bottle of Chablis" and relaxing on the grass "Over a jolly chapter of Rabelais" (*Poems,* I, 418). It is "pretence" and demagoguery that represent, for Browning, an indefensible rejection of ordinary life and "the bodily element."

Browning's penchant for Rabelais goes some way to explicate Aristophanes' linguistic choices. Once more railing against pedantry, the comic poet exclaims:

> Despising most of all the demagogue,
> (Noisome air-bubble, buoyed up, borne along
> By kindred breath of knave and fool below,
> Whose hearts swell proudly as each puffing face
> Grows big, reflected in that glassy ball,
> Vacuity, just bellied out to break
> And righteously bespatter friends the first)
>
> (*Poems,* II, 230; ll. 1695–1701)

The parentheses here seem to take on the appearance of the ever-expanding "air-bubble" Aristophanes describes. This Rabelaisian attack on the pretensions of the "demagogue" echoes Pantagruel's visit to the Island of Ruach, where the ostentatious inhabitants "live on nothing but wind."[35] One particularly unfortunate inhabitant is described as "a little diminutive swoln bubble."[36] However, grotesque realism here serves a broader purpose—that of cultural critique.

The passage, like much of Aristophanes' speech, is characterized by compound words and a deliberately colloquial register, comprised mostly of words with either Old English, Norse, or Germanic etymological roots, such as "bubble," "knave," "swell," "puffing," and "bespatter," rather than words with a Latin or Greek root. This preference for Germanic and Old English words itself appears strange considering the poem's location and theme, and, indeed, contemporary criticism emphasized the work's Greekness (particularly by rumoring the influence of Benjamin Jowett). But what the linguistic hybridity does is foreground the ways in which the poem's cultural critique becomes a linguistic as well as a thematic concern.

Implicit in Euripides' and Arnold's prescriptions and prioritizations regarding culture is the rejection of the "bodily element" and

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nonstandard registers as, to use Jowett's phrase, too far from "the great themes of poets." What is advocated is something akin to Bagehot's "pure" poetry: a poetry that describes the "type in its simplicity [. . .] with the exact amount of accessory circumstance which is necessary to bring it before the mind in finished perfection, and no more than that amount."[37] This Hellenism—Bagehot describes "pure" poetry as "classical,"[38] and Arnold's use of the term "Hellenism" is strikingly similar to Bagehot's: "to see things as they are, and by seeing them as they are to see them in their beauty, is the simple and attractive ideal" (*Culture,* 99)—is precisely what Browning complicates, and portrays in difficulties, in his "Greek" poem. Arnold himself, in a letter to Arthur Hugh Clough in 1848, complained that Browning could not "understand that [he] must begin with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world's multitudinousness": almost perfectly mirroring the stance characterized by Euripides in the poem.[39]

The difficulties of the liberal approach to culture (the confusion of liberating and limiting prescriptions), as embodied in Arnold, Jowett, and Bagehot are explored most importantly in the poem through the difficulties of translation it continually accentuates. Translation pervades the poem: not only is the central action a translation from one culture to another, but the work also features one of Browning's own translations, the transcript of *Herakles*. As Annmarie Drury's recent study of his "incorporative aesthetic" shows, Browning regularly employs translation and forms of linguistic hybridity "explicitly for the sake of [the language's] enhancement and development," and also to unsettle the reader's confidence in English, particularly as it tends to support, and come to represent, tenuous and uncritical cultural ideologies.[40]

According to Padma Rangarajan's study *Imperial Babel* (2014), translation itself suggests a "curious intimacy" between contradictory concepts similar to that described by Hensley: "As much as translation may garner the free exchange of ideas, it is also easily made into a tool for both local and global oppression."[41] It is striking that Rangarajan uses the phrase "free exchange of ideas," a phrase perhaps more often associated with liberalism than translation. Indeed, an exploration of the ways in which the process of translation itself can foreground the "curious intimacy" between its own enabling and the disabling propensities is one of Browning's central preoccupations in *Aristophanes' Apology*.

Browning's contemporary John Stuart Blackie, in his preface to *The Lyrical Dramas of Aeschylus* (1850), suggests that the "proper problem of an English translator is not *how to say a thing as the author would have*

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said it, had he been an Englishman; but *how, through the medium of the English language, to make the English reader feel both what he said and how he said it, being a Greek*."[42] This second type of translation, however, frequently brings about both what Matthew Reynolds terms "distinguishable vocabularies," and "translationese."[43] For Reynolds, "translationese [. . .] registers the difficulty of carrying meanings from one language to another." Its words are "poised on the borders of our linguistic competence"; they can "just about be made sense of according to the conventions of English writing, but at the same time they bear the marks of the foreign language which lies behind" ("Browning," 99). He continues:

> What is special about translationese is, first, the way its strangeness points to a particular foreign tongue, and, secondly, its knack of conjuring up a sense of linguistic belonging in the act of challenging it. We drag words of translationese home into the language they have made us newly aware that we know, while also having to realize that in doing this we are creating for them an English identity which is perhaps spurious. In prompting this oscillation between recognition and abolition of foreignness, translationese is obviously apt to Browning's untiring interest in the processes by which others, especially people in foreign cultures, are understood. ("Browning," 99–100)

The "oscillation between recognition and abolition of foreignness" that Reynolds identifies in Browning's language is essential to a complete understanding of the ways in which Browning explores the "*structural problems*" of power, as it foregrounds his verse's engagement with linguistic power structures—both the expression of ideology through language and linguistic hegemony itself. Rangarajan's suggestion that translation can enable a liberal "free exchange of ideas," just as readily as it can serve as a tool for the opposite, foregrounds the ways translation is used in the poem as a means of testing the ideologies it analyzes.

Browning was himself aware of the violent linguistic implications of the colonial expansion that characterized the liberalism of the mid- to late Victorian era. In his poem "Clive," published in *Dramatic Idylls: Second Series* (1880), the speaker renders the conquering of India with a brutal honesty: "Conquered and annexed and Englished!" (*Poems,* II, 618). Language is, as a verb, inseparably part of the act of colonizing. Indeed, this awareness suggests that Browning was sensitive to language as well as to translation's inseparability from identity and its importance as a marker of cultural difference. *Aristophanes' Apology* itself can be read as reflective of Rita Kothari's recent claim that "[a]ll questions of identity are questions of translation" and that "the constitutive role of translation

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in the shaping, morphing and refashioning of identities cannot be sufficiently underscored."[44]

What is most important to the poem's glottopolitical emphases, however, is the way in which cultural difference and cultural security are unsettled at the moments when various translations cohabit individual speech acts. For example, Aristophanes at one point laments the loss of

> the blessed time
> When [. . .] our communality
> Firm in primeval virtue, antique faith,
> Ere earwig-sophist plagued or pismire-sage,
> Cockered no noddle up with A, b, g,
> Book-learning, logic-chopping, and the moon,
> But just employed their brains on "*Ruppapai,*
> Row, boys, munch barley-bread, and take your ease –
> Mindful, however, of the tier beneath!"
>
> (*Poems,* II, 214; ll. 1060–68)

Not only does this passage feature colloquial English slang (both "cockered," meaning obscured, and "noddle," meaning head, feature in dictionaries of colloquial English such as Farmer and Henley's 1890 *Slang and Its Analogues*), and a Standard English characterized by polysyllabic and, despite the Greek setting, specifically Latinate words like "communality" (from Latin *communalis*) and "primeval" (from Latin *primaevus*), but it also features a loose translation of Aeschylus's scorning of Euripides for encouraging boatmen to forget their social duties in Aristophanes' *The Frogs* (in particular lines 1073–75) and, of course, the Greek sailor's chant "*Ruppapai.*" It quickly becomes clear that the "common coarse-as-clay / Existence" that drives Aristophanes' drama itself depends on a direct challenge to the notion of purity of language: a notion that denies nonstandard or even non-English dialects both value and importance. It self-consciously mixes registers and blends languages to create a grotesque hotchpotch irreducible to a strict hierarchy of linguistic value. If English itself is the primary medium, then its primacy serves only to accentuate its inability to represent accurately the cultural specificity it purports to mediate. For example, the line "Cockered no noddle up with A, b, g" at once signals its Englishness ("noddle" was, for example, a word frequently used by Shakespeare) and its uncanny foreignness —"A, b, g" jokingly upsets the habitually rehearsed English progression, in favor of the Greek.

This "oscillation between recognition and abolition of foreignness," to borrow Reynolds's phrase, poses a dynamic challenge to the dominant

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notion of English's hegemony during the expansion of the British Empire ("Browning," 99–100). Yet it also in part responds to criticism of Browning's poetry as not English enough. Bagehot, for example, in his review of *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69) in the January 1869 issue of *Tinsley's Magazine,* suggested that it was Browning's failure to be truly English that guaranteed his unfavorable reception: "The colouring of his mind and the colouring of his work are alike Italian. [. . .] If Mr. Browning had studied England and English character as faithfully and successfully as he has studied Italy and Italian character, his position as an English poet would have been other than it now is."[45] By undermining English's status as a linguistic power, Browning advances a stylistic cosmopolitanism capable of representing all sides of the "sphere" of life, challenging the tendency of linguistic nationalism to fall foul of the same limiting perspective of which Aristophanes accuses Euripides.

However, that, for Bagehot, foreignness and cultural difference can have an effect on the "colouring" of a poem is suggestive of the ways in which such difference is registered stylistically in the poem. Balaustion frequently references her own foreignness (she had arrived in Athens from Rhodes, her birthplace) in her responses to Aristophanes:

> Finally, am I not a foreigner?
> No born and bred Athenian, – isled about,
> I scarce can drink, like you, at every breath,
> Just some particular doctrine which may best
> Explain the strange thing I revolt against –
> How – by involvement, who may extricate? –
> Religion perks up through impiety,
> Law leers with license, folly wise-like frowns,
> The seemly lurks inside the abominable.
>
> (*Poems,* II, 257; ll. 2769–77)

In a poem featuring extensive direct translation from Aristophanes, Euripides, Sophocles, and other writers, it appears strange that, when discussing her foreignness, Balaustion should opt for a register unmarked by explicit borrowings from other languages. The hybridity that constitutes the poem's norm is rejected in favor of a flat register indistinguishable from formal Standard English. Her cultural difference, frequently commented upon in the poem, is registered linguistically as a difference from the "town's vernacular" (*Poems,* II, 232; l. 1774), which Aristophanes commits himself to. This difference Aristophanes refers to as her "privilege" (*Poems,* II, 232; l. 1761): a privilege that permits her to pass judgment on Athens without having been immersed in it—and a

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perspective divorced from the realities of "A population which, mere flesh and blood, / Eats, drinks and kisses, falls to fisticuffs, / Then hugs as hugely" (*Poems,* II, 232; ll. 1770–72). Although Balaustion's identification of the "seemly" that "lurks inside the abominable" comes close to a recognition of Hensley's "curious intimacy," her language itself frequently expresses her inability to relate to ordinary life, thereby demonstrating her failure to recognize a more immediate difficulty: her cultural prescriptivism announced from an "exclusive sphere" yet purporting to reflect the needs of all.

Even further from the "town's vernacular" than Balaustion's language, however, is the "perfect piece" (*Poems,* II, 275; l. 3534), the *Herakles.* The translation, in its allegiance to the original Greek syntax, represents a striking departure from the style prevalent throughout the rest of the poem. Herakles, for example, having been coerced into murdering his children and wife, calls upon the Theban people to join him in mourning:

> Theban people all,
> Shear off your locks, lament one wide lament,
> Go to my children's grave and, in one strain,
> Lament the whole of us – my dead and me –
> Since all together are fordone and lost,
> Smitten by Heré's single stroke of fate!
>
> (*Poems,* II, 313; ll. 5039–44)

Herakles' earlier suggestion (in response to Theseus's advice) that "these words are foreign to my woes!" (*Poems,* II, 311; l. 4976) is perhaps more appropriately reflective of the effect of Browning's strict translation here. The translationese (here most evident in the repetition and the peculiar syntax, as the sentence winds across six lines, reaffirming its main verb—"lament"—three times) misrepresents the grief Herakles claims to feel by foregrounding strangeness at the expense of the emotions described. Despite the English and Germanic origins of many of the words used ("Shear," "fordone," "lost," "smitten"), what Reynolds terms the "word-for-wordism" of Browning's translation seems merely to emphasize the unwieldiness between English and the original Greek.[46] In this sense, it echoes Annmarie Drury's identification of parodies of "Tennyson and Arnold" among others, in *Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day* (1887), which "take as their object translators who understand Greek poetry as a font of guidance for poetic craft and a source of solutions for contemporary poetic problems."[47]

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In his lecture series "On Translating Homer," published in 1861, Arnold prescribes a translation similar to the one Blackie had advocated eleven years earlier: a translation that reproduces, "as nearly as possible, the general effect" of the author translated.[48] If the translation in any way surprises the reader with its inappropriateness, then it fails. Arnold continues to denounce F. W. Newman's 1856 translation of the *Iliad* on the grounds that "he is grotesque; that is, he expresses himself in a manner which produces on us a very strong sense of its incongruity, and which violently surprises us."[49]

The *Herakles* makes clear that two distinct types of translation coexist in the poem: first, the dynamic interspersing of translations from Aristophanes' plays as part of a hybrid and varied register; and second, the formal and strict "word-for-wordism" of *Herakles*. For Reynolds, the difference between these two types is reflective of genre allegiances: "The contrasting modes of response harmonize with the genres and locations to which they are attached: the free spirit of comedy meets the marmoreal significance of tragedy; the cacophonic energy of a street festival comes up against the quiet concentration of a domestic interior."[50] Yet, according to Arnold's prescriptions, the first of these is superior insofar as it conveys powerfully the "general effect" of Aristophanes' style, and the *Herakles*' translationese is "grotesque" insofar as it "produces on us a very strong sense of its incongruity" and foreignness. However, this is not to say that the first type of translation does not have its own grotesque elements. It produces another effect of surprise and incongruity—its "cacophonic energy" and combination of different languages and registers act to underline the importance of a diverse and inclusive linguistic medium to the representation of all people, regardless of social circumstance. Browning, then, advocates grotesque translation, insofar as the "sense of [. . .] incongruity" it produces depends on a linguistic cosmopolitanism, rather than a sense of strangeness dependent on strict transliteration. Aristophanes argues for an art representative of all experience, and he sees clearly that such an art cannot avoid speaking in "the town's vernacular."

Yet for Ryals, the translation itself embodies the poem's linguistic ideal and represents the poem's moment of resolution. He suggests that the dialogue between Balaustion and Aristophanes "ends up as two monologues, an expostulation and a reply. What is needed is some way to join the two in more nearly perfect counterpoint. And this is precisely the purpose of the *Herakles*."[51] The strangeness of the translation—a translation that Reynolds calls "translationese in the full sense: poised so as to unsettle English readers' confidence in their own tongue"—is

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less important to Ryals than a recognition of its purity ("Browning," 108). He continues:

> It is not that Browning was incapable of making beautiful translations, but that with the *Herakles* he wished to be as neutral and objective in style as possible. Within the design of the poem the *Herakles* would be the "pure" statement, distinct from the biased utterances of Aristophanes and Balaustion.[52]

However, Ryals's attempt to identify a "'pure' statement" in the poem fails to notice that the very notion of linguistic purity is itself a point of contention throughout the work.

It is perhaps significant that the poem was written and published during the organization and compilation of the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1888). For James Murray, the dictionary was to bear witness to a "widely-diffused and highly-cultivated living language."[53] However, his use of the word "cultivated" suggests an uncomfortable proximity between his project and the sort of cultural nationalism characteristic of imperial liberalism. As Lynda Mugglestone suggests, the dictionary featured a "pervasive set of images of patriotism and cultural prescriptivism": precisely the cultural arguments portrayed in difficulties in *Aristophanes' Apology*.[54] It is, therefore, unsurprising that Murray would at one point complain that Browning "constantly used words without regard to their proper meaning" and consequently "added greatly to the difficulties of the Dictionary."[55]

The poem's objections to any prescription of a "proper meaning"—reminding the reader that such prescriptions inevitably fail to represent the interests of ordinary people seen to be below "high culture"—are inextricably related to the poem's uses of translation. The *Herakles* acts as a sort of dead language, as a demonstration of high culture's inability to reflect the hybridity that constitutes "ordinary" linguistic life. In *Metrolingualism* (2015), Alastair Pennycook and Emi Otsuji posit that "multilingualism is not merely a plurality of languages but rather a creative space of language making, where rules and boundaries are crossed and changed."[56] *Aristophanes' Apology* pits the creativity of such a multilingual "space" against the spurious claims of Arnoldian liberalism: it is, in fact, possible to think of the poem itself as such a "creative space of language making" but more accurate, perhaps, to see its use of linguistic hybridity as *testing* meaning, rather than simply creating it. In confronting the "self-laudation" of cultural prescriptivism and "high" art, Aristophanes accentuates one of the main crises affecting liberal policy—that their liberation necessitates forms of limitation (*Poems,* II, 215; l. 1100).

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In 1978 the philosopher Roger Scruton's essay "The Politics of Culture" was included in a volume entitled *Conservative Essays,* edited by Maurice Cowling. The essay attempts to show that "there might be what may be called a 'high culture' which is actually continuous with the 'common culture' from which it springs."[57] Following Arnold, and quoting frequently from *Culture and Anarchy,* Scruton suggests that if the "traditional claims for high culture could be upheld, then it would be possible to look upon high culture as an articulation of the true ends of social conduct."[58] His argument, that "what we naively dismiss as a mere 'matter of taste' is something which affects the whole quality of life," hinges on the very assumptions that Browning, over a century earlier, portrayed in difficulties.[59] It is a testament, therefore, to Browning's continuing relevance that the arguments *Aristophanes' Apology* presents to its reader—the unsettling of dominant liberal assumptions regarding culture—are still applicable to late twentieth- and twenty-first-century advocacy of Arnoldian liberalism.

Scruton's defense of a "high culture" that "reveals" the "true ends" of social action assumes the same attitude to ordinary people and life as in both *Balaustion* and *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau.*[60] Incapable of engaging with "little minds" (*Poems,* I, 976; l. 1297), Scruton advocates cultural prescriptivism (Arnold's Hellenism) with the hope that "high culture" will eventually prove its ability to negotiate class differences. The similarity with Arnold is striking. For Collini, Arnold "treats culture not just as something that we can acquire or possess, but as something that is an active force in its own right. One indication of this is the frequency with which he uses the word with an active verb."[61] *Aristophanes' Apology* reminds its readers that, for Arnold, "culture," as a verb, frequently acts less to liberate ordinary people and more to coerce them into accepting forms of "high" culture irredeemably dissimilar to their predominant forms of expression. Furthermore, in foregrounding a linguistic hybridity in his poem and by mobilizing variant types of translation, Browning demonstrates the ways in which language itself can embody social attitudes and reveal radical engagement.

Coda: Some Provocations

Briefly placing this article in relation to two recent texts, Joseph North's important institutional history *Literary Criticism* (2017) and an article by James Kirchick, published in the *Los Angeles Times,* entitled "The British

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Election Is a Reminder of the Perils of Too Much Democracy" (9 June 2017), enables it to intervene in several important contemporary discussions. To do so is also to suggest the extent to which a revival of interest in the social function of literary criticism could benefit from an awareness of Browning's own problematization of liberalism and its attitudes to culture in *Aristophanes' Apology*. In fact, North's intervention serves at once to illustrate the continued importance of Browning's poem and also to assuage the concerns with which Mary Ellis Gibson and Britta Martens initiated their 2012 roundtable discussion regarding "Future Directions for Robert Browning Studies." The fourth of their "provocations" ("How is Browning teachable in the twenty-first century?") becomes directly answerable once the relevance of Browning to North's proposals is understood.[62]

In his book, North bewails the institutional tendencies introduced, during the late 1970s and early 1980s, by what he terms the "scholarly turn": a turn

> by which "scholarly" approaches, which have tended to treat literary texts chiefly as opportunities for cultural and historical analysis, have replaced "critical" approaches, which, in their day, had tended to treat literary texts as means of cultivating readers' aesthetic sensibilities [. . .] with the goal of more general cultural and political change.[63]

This turn toward a purely "scholarly" approach, for North, has led to a depoliticization of writing about literature, insofar as scholarship implies rigorously historicizing texts to the extent that it "directs our attention to the context of production" at the expense of "the context of reception."[64] He continues to prescribe that

> We will of course continue to need trenchant historicist/contextualist analyses of culture through a radical lens, such as are now provided by those on the left of the discipline, as well as by those situated outside the discipline to its left. But to make advances in this new period, we will also need to mobilize those analyses, setting them to work as the diagnostic element in a broader project of systematic cultural intervention.[65]

In an important sense, North's discontent with "the absence of the project of criticism in our period—the absence of any programmatic commitment, not just to analysing and describing the culture, but to taking action to change it," reflects the discontent with some of the tendencies within Arnoldian cultural criticism foregrounded in *Aristophanes' Apology*.[66] Browning's poem continually accentuates the need to understand how language carries ideology and can betray political allegiances.

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If the poem reminds its readers that the language of liberalism and "high culture" ("high" betraying an evaluative criticism that North associates with the conservative and Arnoldian writings of F. R. Leavis) betrays a contradictory "limiting" tendency in that ideology, insofar as it remains, in some "exclusive sphere," "cloud-nourishing a sole selected few," then it echoes North's objection to the continuing preference for an approach to literary study equally removed from the "sphere of Life" that Aristophanes celebrates.

That Browning's poetry can be both analyzed and mobilized in an attempt to change a twenty-first-century cultural environment is perhaps best demonstrated with a brief example. On 9 June 2017 an opinion piece by James Kirchick appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. The article bitterly attacks the "plebiscitary obsession" in modern politics—an obsession blamed for the results of the Brexit referendum and the 2017 general election.[67] For Kirchick, "our duly elected representatives should depend more upon their own judgement and worry less about the uninformed opinion of the masses." In an argument eerily familiar to readers of Browning's *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau* and *Aristophanes' Apology,* democracy itself is thought of as a problem, because "leaving little minds their liberty" frequently, for Kirchick, means leaving them to make "bad" political decisions (*Poems,* I, 976; l. 1297). By returning to Browning, himself a staunch defender of democratic values, opponents of Kirchick's antidemocratic polemic could find not only their arguments but also an extensive vocabulary of opposition.

If this article were to posit its analysis regarding Browning's engagement with the "difficulties" of liberal attitudes toward culture without recognizing the ways in which they could serve to challenge similar, if not almost identical, contemporary cultural arguments, it would merely serve to isolate Browning within the confines of his immediate context: in this case, the 1870s. Following North, it suggests, instead, that it is important to recognize that the contexts of production can be as significant as the contexts of reception. Teachers of Browning today, to return to Gibson and Marten's "provocation," should certainly be aware of this possibility.

Notes

1. Hensley, *Forms of Empire,* 5. This argument appears in a similar form in Adams, *Liberal Epic,* 3–4, and is anticipated by Raymond Williams's note on the word "Liberal" in *Keywords,* 181.

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2. Hensley, *Forms of Empire,* 243.
3. Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy,* 52. All subsequent references to this edition are noted as *Culture* parenthetically in the text.
4. Hood, *Letters of Robert Browning,* 138.
5. Biagini, "Popular Liberals," 145.
6. Biagini, "Popular Liberals," 145.
7. Liberalism is defined here, with Raymond Williams, as "a doctrine based on individualist theories of man and society [. . .] of certain necessary kinds of freedom but also, and essentially, a doctrine of possessive individualism." See Williams, *Keywords,* 181.
8. Bagehot, *Selected Essays,* 465 (emphasis original).
9. Gibson and Martens, "Future Directions," 431.
10. Gibson and Martens, "Future Directions," 438.
11. Gibson and Martens, "Future Directions," 441.
12. Armstrong, *Victorian Poetry,* 288–89 (emphasis original).
13. Bagehot, *Selected Essays,* 456 (emphasis original).
14. Hood, *Letters of Robert Browning,* 171.
15. Abbot and Campbell, *Life and Letters,* II, 355.
16. Browning, *Poems,* II, 199. All subsequent references to this edition (both volumes) are noted parenthetically in the text.
17. Donne, *Euripides,* 40.
18. Collins, *Aristophanes,* 2–3.
19. Karlin, *Browning's Hatreds,* 151.
20. Karlin, *Browning's Hatreds,* 156.
21. Ryals, *Browning's Later Poetry,* 112.
22. Ryals, *Browning's Later Poetry,* 103.
23. McCusker, "Browning's 'Aristophanes' Apology' and Matthew Arnold," 783.
24. Arnold, *Irish Essays,* 135.
25. Arnold, *Irish Essays,* 163.
26. Williams, *Keywords,* 91.
27. Collini, *Matthew Arnold,* 77.
28. Woolford and Karlin, *Robert Browning,* 56.
29. Bown, "Entangled Banks," 126.
30. Peckham, *Victorian Revolutionaries,* 128.
31. Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader,* 205.
32. Morris, *The Bakhtin Reader,* 205.
33. Woolford, *Robert Browning,* 42.
34. Armstrong Browning Library MS 79114-00, from "The Browning Letters", folio 1.

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35. Urquhart, *The Works of Rabelais,* 485.
36. Urquhart, *The Works of Rabelais,* 486.
37. Bagehot, *Selected Essays,* 432.
38. Bagehot, *Selected Essays,* 432.
39. Lowry, *Letters of Matthew Arnold,* 97.
40. Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* 105.
41. Rangarajan, *Imperial Babel,* 174.
42. Blackie, *Lyrical Dramas,* viii (emphasis original).
43. Reynolds, "Browning and Translationese," 97. All subsequent references to this essay are noted as "Browning" parenthetically in the text.
44. Kothari, "Translation, Language, Anthropology," 44.
45. Bagehot, "Mr. Browning's New Poem," 666.
46. Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation,* 239.
47. Drury, *Translation as Transformation,* 100–101.
48. Arnold, *On Translating Homer,* 31.
49. Arnold, *On Translating Homer,* 38–39.
50. Reynolds, *The Poetry of Translation,* 212.
51. Ryals, *Browning's Later Poetry,* 103.
52. Ryals, *Browning's Later Poetry,* 104–5.
53. J. A. H. Murray, *A New English Dictionary,* xvii.
54. Mugglestone, "Patriotism, Empire and Cultural Prescriptivism," 186.
55. K. M. E. Murray, *Caught in the Web,* 235.
56. Pennycook and Otsuji, *Metrolingualism,* 16.
57. Scruton, *Politics of Culture,* 230.
58. Scruton, *Politics of Culture,* 240.
59. Scruton, *Politics of Culture,* 242.
60. Scruton, *Politics of Culture,* 240.
61. Collini, *Matthew Arnold,* 84.
62. Gibson and Martens, "Future Directions," 431–32.
63. North, *Literary Criticism,* 2–3.
64. North, *Literary Criticism,* 33.
65. North, *Literary Criticism,* 211.
66. North, *Literary Criticism,* 18.
67. Kirchick, "The British Election."

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