This starting, feverish heart': Matthew Arnold and the Problem of Manliness

This article explores the ambiguous role of gender in Matthew Arnold’s poetry and early criticism, an aspect of his work hitherto almost entirely neglected by Victorian scholars. In the first part, a link is posited between effeminate caricatures of Arnold and his early work and those of John Henry Newman and the Oxford Movement, whose notions about the peculiar spiritual value of poetry and of contemplative seclusion exercised a pervasive influence upon Arnold as an Oxford undergraduate in the early 1840s and indeed throughout his life. The article goes on to suggest that while Newman felt confident enough to propose an alternative ideal of manliness based upon the traditionally feminine, yet irrefutably Christian, virtues of self-denial, self-inspection and obedience, Arnold lacked the certainty which Newman’s faith gave him, and, in addition, felt that he had failed to live up to the contrasting ideal of self-assertive, active manliness propounded by his father, Newman’s arch-rival and critic, Thomas Arnold.