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## **Interpreter of Hinduism to the West? Sir Edwin Arnold's (Re)Presentation of Hindu Texts and their Reception<sup>1</sup>**

Brooks Wright's 1957 biography of Sir Edwin Arnold (1832-1904) is entitled *Interpreter of Buddhism to the West* so, at first glance, it may seem beside the point to examine Arnold's importance in terms of conveying Hinduism to the West. Writer, poet and translator among other things, Arnold is certainly most readily and frequently associated with Buddhism. As discussed in a previous article that embarked upon the reassessment of his life and work (Robinson 2009), this is principally because his best-known publication is *The Light of Asia*, first published in 1879, in which his avowed aim was to portray the life and thought of the Buddha (Arnold 1903: vii). The success of *The Light of Asia* was, by any standards, extraordinary whether measured in terms of sales, editions, status or influence. Its sales have been estimated as falling in the range of half a million to a million copies in America alone (Wright 1957: 75) with one, admittedly questionable, figure of 60 English and 80 American editions (Phelan 2004-2011). A once standard item found on the domestic bookcase (Wright 1957: 79), it was both a famous and a controversial text (Clausen 1976: 174). Accordingly, it brought Arnold great celebrity, leading to his appearance in early lifestyle magazines (e.g. *The Woman at Home* undated) and his receiving numerous honours among them membership of the Siamese Order of the White Elephant (Hatton 1998: 119-22).

If it was through *The Light of Asia* that Arnold 'won instant fame' (*The Times* 1904), there were other reasons for his association with Buddhism. These were his obvious admiration for and sympathy with the religion which is evident, for example, in campaigning journalism championing the cause of Bodhgaya's restoration as a Buddhist sacred site (e.g. Arnold 1896: 305-22). Here his pro-Buddhist advocacy and activism were all the more prominent, though not necessarily effective, due to his personal prestige. Consequently, his role in disseminating Buddhist ideas (or, perhaps better, ideas about Buddhism) has led commentators to consider his legacy first and foremost in relation to Buddhism and rarely, if at all, in relation to Hinduism, despite the still striking success enjoyed by *The Song Celestial* and the wealth of his other writings relevant to an understanding of Hinduism.<sup>i</sup>

However, it is worth noting that Wright's biography acknowledged non-Buddhist aspects of Arnold's life and work, including his publications on Hindu subjects. In addition, Wright's description of Arnold's lasting contribution is that he 'popularize[d] a knowledge of Oriental religion with a wide audience and ... serve[d] his generation as a bridge between the East and the West' (Wright 1957: 179). Possibly, therefore, while his greatest triumph may have been *The Light of Asia* and his own preference may have been for Buddhism, an argument can be advanced for Arnold playing a similar part in respect of Hinduism that he is often hailed for playing in respect of Buddhism.

This article advances such an argument, that Arnold was in fact influential in making Hinduism more widely known in the West, by referring to his translations of Hindu texts, particularly the prefaces to his translations where he articulated his own ambition and agenda. It begins with a brief sketch of Victorian print culture, specifically publishers catering for the general reader given Arnold's popularizing approach with its corollary, a 'domesticating' treatment of Hindu texts. Next there is an examination of the process of translation, concentrating upon an analysis of the type, readership, meaning and purpose of Arnold's translations in respect of 'the cultural turn'. It ends with an assessment of Arnold's impact as an interpreter of Hinduism, especially through his translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and some reflection on his importance in historical perspective.

### **Arnold's Popularization of Hindu Texts**

A reviewer in *The Times* whose words were excerpted in the publisher's blurb to titles in *Trübner's Oriental Series* (e.g. Dowson 1888), after remarking that a general reader was now expected to be informed about Eastern topics, lamented that recent discoveries tended to be found in expensive or erudite volumes. It was on this basis that the reviewer commended the publisher as 'hav[ing] determined to supply the constantly-increasing want, and to give in a popular ... form, all this mass of knowledge to the world.' Certainly, Trübner was well known for its portfolio of Eastern titles, among them many aimed at the wider public including Arnold's books (Howsam 1998: 141-42; Stark 2010: 162). In so doing, it was exploiting the easily exportable nature of literature in an age before technological advances made rapid and reliable communication and travel possible and was part of a publishing boom in which a burgeoning print media sought to satisfy the demand of a growing market for affordable and accessible books, newspapers and magazines (Eliot 2011a; 2011b).

It was the non-specialist readership, expanded by new opportunities, goods and services, that was crucial to Arnold's publishing career, and to his reputation as a translator, which rested on his ability to make Eastern texts interesting as well as informative for ordinary Western readers. Possibly a review in *The Leeds Mercury* was correct in its prediction that 'his translations ... will do more for the English reader than any amount of metaphysical or historical disquisition to open a way into the mysterious labyrinth of Eastern speculation' (*The Leeds Mercury* 1885). Throughout, Arnold was making decisions about what was appropriate to readers of his books. Such decisions by a translator must take into account the readers' [lack of] knowledge about a text, the language and the environment in which it was composed, and the purpose a translation of it would serve for them (Hardwick 2000: 20; Lefevere 1990: 17). Arnold himself commented on these decisions, mainly in the form of prefaces, demarcating his own distinctive task and vocation as a translator alongside the character, scope and significance of his translations. In the absence of a translator's preface, he often gave some impression of his thinking on such topics in other discussions of the texts he

translated.

The analysis of Arnold's work as a translator that follows is based mainly upon the prefaces, or their nearest equivalent, to translations of texts that, notwithstanding his tendency to merge the 'Indian' and the 'Hindu' (consistent with the older meaning of Hindu as ethnic and cultural), are Hindu in more narrowly defined religious terms. These are translations (where translation is interpreted extremely liberally) of the *Gītagovinda* (*The Indian Song of Songs*, 1875), episodes from the *Mahābhārata* (*Indian Idylls*, 1883), the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (*The Song Celestial*, 1885) and examples of upaniṣadic literature, especially the *Kaṭha* and *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣads* ('The Secret of Death' in a collection of the same name, 1885, and 'In an Indian Temple' in *Lotus and Jewel*, 1887). In translating these texts, Arnold adopted a popularizing approach aimed at the general reader.

Arnold represented himself as a popularizer both directly and indirectly: directly by referring to his work as producing popular translations of Hindu texts (Arnold 1875: xii; 1885b: 10); and indirectly by contrasting these translations with previous scholarly ones (Arnold 1883: xii; 1885b: 9). It should not be supposed, however, that he was disparaging about the scholarly enterprise. Far from it, he frequently acknowledged his indebtedness to scholars (Arnold 1875: xiii; 1885b: 9) and, if he gave some critical comment concerning their translations (Arnold 1885b: 9), it was primarily to make the point that his approach had value precisely because other translations were more suited to the specialist scholar than to the general reader (Arnold 1883: xi). Indeed, in many ways, he was distilling academic debate for the general reader. He thus became an authority in his own right, within the limits of his popularizing project, his authority being vested in the provision of concise and comprehensible guidance alongside the production of a readable translation.

### **Arnold's Domestication of Hindu Texts**

In turn, Arnold's intention to provide popular translations of Hindu texts led him to prefer what can be characterized as a 'domesticating' over a 'foreignizing' strategy (Johnson 2005: 66). This entailed an emphasis on the familiar at the expense of the distinctive or even unique, instead of demonstrating difference and divergence from Western standards by stressing the strange (Dodson 2005: 809-10). Accordingly, his strategy, in Schleiermacher's terms, was to move author towards reader rather than moving reader towards author (Schleiermacher 1992: 42). However, this strategy could only succeed if it did not jeopardize the appeal of the texts in so doing. This required Arnold to retain the allure of the exotic at the same time as presenting the exotic in a suitably sanitized and stereotypical form that avoided giving offence to his readers while meeting their expectations of the splendour and mystery of the East.

In 'domesticating' Hindu texts, Arnold made allusion to biblical and classical

literature, drawing more substantive parallels with Christian and Hellenic thought as well as setting Hindu texts in a new narrative frame with a cast of characters whose conversation made Hindu ideas easier to understand though still exotically alluring. He made allusion to biblical literature when he called his *Gītāgovinda* translation *The Indian Song of Songs* (Arnold 1875), inviting comparison with *The Song of Songs* of King Solomon and his beloved, which similarly had erotic content and tended to be interpreted in an allegorical manner. Likewise, he made allusion to classical literature in entitling an essay on the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa* 'The Iliad and Odyssey of India' (Arnold 1883: vii), in this instance inviting comparison with epic poems attributed to Homer which similarly contained tales of the exploits of great heroes. Although any such comparisons were, at best, simplistic and superficial and, at worst, entirely erroneous, they suggested similarities between what the general reader already knew and what they were now reading.

When introducing the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, Arnold drew a parallel with Christian thought, speculating that the correspondences identified between the *Bhagavad-Gītā* and the New Testament could be due to Christian influence upon the text (Arnold 1885b: 8-9). If this idea had been raised by other commentators, especially by Franz Lorinser who argued that the admirable qualities of the text were attributable to its author's dependence upon Christian sources, it was not widely welcomed, and Arnold's enthusiasm for the possibility was atypical (Sharpe 1985: 49-50). His exposition of the Upaniṣads was perhaps more conventional, explaining their role as secret or occult doctrines in developing philosophical awareness while drawing cross-cultural parallels including with Hellenic thought, specifically the philosophy of Socrates, on the subject of metempsychosis (Arnold 1896: 155, 159-62). In this way, Arnold presented a Hindu teaching as plausible by aligning it with the classics as culturally approved sources of truth and knowledge in a society where Greek philosophy featured prominently in elite education (Stray 1998). By making these connections, he was enabling the general reader to come to an appreciation of Hindu texts from a Western starting point.

Arnold gave the philosophical themes of the Upaniṣads a more radical treatment in 'The Secret of Death' and 'In an Indian Temple' by extending the dialogical model of the Upaniṣads to encompass different settings and additional interlocuters. He set the dialogue on the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* in a temple where a Hindu priest and an English gentleman were reading a Sanskrit manuscript of the text (Arnold 1885a: 7). The *Kaṭha Upaniṣad's* teaching on the nature of the self offered Arnold an opportunity to examine the relationship between the self and ultimate reality, by making the Hindu priest integrate material from other Upaniṣads and use practical illustrations derived from them in enlightening his English pupil (pp. 14-15, 24-25, 29, 34, 37, 39). The dialogue on the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* was also set in a temple where a Hindu priest, an English gentleman and a *devadāsī* (alternatively described as a *nautch* or dancing girl) conversed on religious and ethical questions (Arnold 1899: 3, 5-6, 27). Here too an Upaniṣad

provided Arnold with the springboard for discussion, with the English gentleman reminding the priest of his promise that they would read together the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* on the mystic syllable *aum̐* (p. 8). In this case, the conversation not only ranged across the upaniṣadic corpus, but went beyond it to include a debate on the conflict of *dharma*, with musical intervals provided by the *devadāsī* Gunga's singing and playing (pp. 9-11, 14, 17, 22-25, 28-45, 49-50). Notwithstanding these differences, in both dialogues the Saheb acted to ask questions and raise queries on behalf of the general reader, thereby rendering upaniṣadic wisdom more attractive and engaging. In such diverse ways, Arnold's popular translations 'domesticated' Hindu texts, identifying commonalities with Western ideas wherever possible and easing the experience of the general reader wherever necessary.

### **Arnold's Choice of Hindu Texts**

Due to the 'domesticating' strategy he adopted, Arnold's translations thus often involved a degree of licence. Such licence affected how much of the original text was translated and how freely it was rendered, to the point that, in some instances, recontextualized and reimagined, the original text became something new. Yet underlining the element of interpretation involved in translation was the choice of texts to be interpreted in the first place (Long 2005a: 9).

Where Arnold offered a rationale for his choice of texts, this generally took the form of reference to their importance in India and for Hindus. This was the case in respect of both the *Gītagovinda* and *Bhagavad-Gītā*, where their fame and influence were noted, the texts being described as 'popular' and/or as holding 'authority' (Arnold 1875: xiii; 1885b: 7). Much the same would seem to apply to his estimation of the *Mahābhārata* given his statement that the status of the *Rāmāyāṇā* and *Mahābhārata* far exceeded that of literature in and for the West since 'they are personified, worshipped, and cited as being something divine' (Arnold 1883: ix). In the case of the Upaniṣads, he similarly stressed the general veneration felt for them, and included the *Kaṭha* and *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣads* in a list of Upaniṣads with the highest reputations as 'especially renowned and canonical' (Arnold 1896: 156). There were some differences in approach, however. He located *The Indian Song of Songs* and *The Song Celestial* in the context of other translations of the *Gītagovinda* and *Bhagavad-Gītā* respectively by citing the names of earlier translators and commenting upon their work (Arnold 1875: vi; 1885b: 9). In contrast, he stressed that there were no extant English translations of some of the stories he selected from the *Mahābhārata* (Arnold 1883: x-xi). Or again, in explaining the Upaniṣads, where numerous English translations were in existence, he used his own to illustrate his analysis (Arnold 1896: 157-58, 167).

Even if account is taken of all the translations of Hindu texts in Arnold's writings (e.g. Arnold 1899: 217-63), there seems to have been a preference for older non-sectarian texts, the obvious exception being the *Gītagovinda*. Part of the

explanation for Arnold translating the *Gītāgovinda* must surely lie in the fact that it had earlier been translated by the pioneering Orientalist, Sir William Jones, thereby according the text a certain cachet and establishing the basis for a popular translation. Perhaps, though, an interest in the erotic, similarly evident in Arnold's translation of the love poem *Caurapañcaśikā*, was also a factor and it might have contributed to the potential popularity of his translation too. In any case, insofar as Arnold was working mainly within the confines of a restricted canon, he was representative of a general bias towards classical Sanskrit texts that circumscribed Orientalist understanding of Hindu belief and practice and continues to shape views of Hinduism to this day (Nemec 2009: 763-65).

### **Translation as Process**

Arnold's work as a translator can be better understood in the light of debates about the nature and implications of translation as an activity, especially 'the cultural turn' that considers translations as cultural products. Translation has 'multiple aspects and meanings' (Burger and Pozza 2010: 10). At its simplest and most straightforward, it can be thought of as rendering something in one language into another (e.g. *Oxford English Dictionary* 2010: II.2.a). Yet it can be argued that translation is inherent in all communication so that translation from one language into another is a specific example of what is involved in any oral or written communication (Steiner 1998: xii).

Conventional analyses of translation have concentrated chiefly on technical issues of method on the assumption that the problems of translation are within the realm of language. However, 'the cultural turn' in translation recognizes the relativity of norms and values rather than the absolute standards conventionally cited, stressing that translation extends beyond the text to its culture, and itself occurs in a cultural context that determines its nature (Burger 2010: 26; Lefevere and Bassnett 1990: 3-5).

Consequently, translation is located in a specific setting, challenging simplistic notions of the relationship between text and translation founded on abstract ideas of faithfulness to the original and replacing them with a nuanced sense of the appropriateness of particular approaches. This shift has been marked by a move away from formal equivalence, seeking to pair components of the source language of the original with corresponding components of the target language of the translation, towards functional equivalence, seeking to produce a translation that achieves an effect in the target culture comparable to that achieved by the original in the source culture, even if that necessitates considerable revision of the text (Lefevere and Bassnett 1990: 8; Passi 1996: 88 n.5).

However, 'the cultural turn' has not only informed current translation practice but also encouraged critical scrutiny of earlier translations. For instance, from a post-colonial perspective, translation is deemed to be complicit in the imperial project to the extent that different types of translation are linked with colonial and post-

colonial discourses (Niranjana 1992: 1-3; Robinson 1996: xi). Such developments in translation theory suggest that Arnold's translations should be considered in terms of his own social milieu and associated personal beliefs as a Victorian writer on India at the heyday of empire. Following this line of interpretation, there emerge strong cultural resonances to his stylistic choices while his support for Britain's imperial mission also shaped his translations, irrespective of whether he would have acknowledged this himself.

### **Arnold as a Stylist**

Most discussions of translation have tended to centre on style: for instance, controversies concerning the connection between the language of the text and the language of the translation, whether the translation should reproduce the form of the original or simply adopt a suitable form (Larson 1981: 519). These discussions go beyond the obvious, if important, observation that it is not possible to translate directly between languages as a word's associations are unique to one language and not capable of being recreated in another (Swanson and Helsing 2005: 116-17). Certainly, there are differences between languages – Sanskrit, for example, being highly inflected, and having many synonyms (Figueira 1991: 22; Johnson 2005: 69) – but these discussions also consider how far to strive to replicate the actual style of the text and how far to seek a felicitous style for the translation. In so doing they address issues such as assumptions about poetry needing to rhyme, archaizing tendencies in translating ancient texts and the omission of material deemed sexual or scatological (Hardwick 2000: 13, 15; Lefevere and Bassnett 1990: 5). Certainly, Arnold employed rhyme where possible, favoured archaic language and avoided the sexually explicit in his translations.

Comments on Arnold's stylistic choices can be found in his 'Preface' to *The Song Celestial* where he evaluated extant translations of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* into various languages and different forms (Arnold 1885b: 9). For instance, he was very complimentary about Davies's English prose version of the text but his own preference was for poetry (p. 9). Explaining that the Sanskrit metre could not be rendered appropriately for a Western audience, he chose to present the text in what he called 'our flexible blank verse, changing into lyrical measures where the text similarly breaks' (p. 10). Here he referred respectively to his treatment of verses in the *anuṣṭubh* metre for which he used blank verse, and his treatment of the minority of verses in the *triṣṭubh* metre for which he used various types of rhymed verse. Hence, at the beginning of the tenth chapter, he drew attention to variation in the text that he had tried to indicate in the translation, commenting that '[t]he Sanskrit poem here rises to an elevation of style and manner which I have endeavored to mark by change of metre' (n.1, p. 95), namely the transition from blank to rhymed verse.

Blank verse is common in English literature in diverse genres, and Arnold's opting for this for the *Bhagavad-Gītā* showed his preparedness to ignore the

structural dissimilarity of the *śloka* and blank verse in favour of the cultural suitability of the latter for epic literature, linked as it was with English narrative and didactic poetry. Indicating the special status of blank verse, Easthope asserts that pentameter (its characteristic metre) has a national significance and a normative position as 'a sign which includes and excludes, sanctions and denigrates' (Easthope 1983: 65). This special status, as Graham observes in relation to Easthope's argument, means that Arnold's recourse to blank verse involved 'a sign of cultural hegemony' (Graham 1998: 163). According to Graham, blank verse was selected to enhance the readability of Arnold's translation for an English readership and to facilitate the inclusion of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* into the English literary canon yet it simultaneously subverted the superiority of the imperial power through the use of the paradigmatic style of English verse for Indian poetry (pp. 164-65).

Discussing the style of the *Mahābhārata* in his 'Preface' to *Indian Idylls*, Arnold made links between the epic's style and its date (Arnold 1883: xi-xii). He noted the existence of 'defects, excrescences, differences, and breaks of artistic style and structure' in a text which he regarded as composite in nature since it had been expanded and emended over time (p. xi). In respect of 'the simpler and nobler sections', that he likened to Homeric Greek, he argued for an extremely early date (pp. xi-xii). It was perhaps the stress on the age of his source material that led Arnold to avail himself of an archaizing approach in which his phrasing and vocabulary harked back to times past, specifically a medievalism that chimed in with Victorian sentiment and sensibilities. Typically, alongside Sanskrit expressions and Sanskritized English, in *Indian Idylls*, he employed older forms of address such as 'thee' and 'thou' for the second person singular and older forms of verbs such as 'spake' for the past tense of speak and 'hath' for the present tense of have, combined with other obscure terminology such as 'maid' and 'damsel' for a young woman, 'steed' for horse and 'foeman' for enemy (e.g. pp. 6, 30, 46, 70, 79, 144, 159, 201).

Victorian medievalism was a protean phenomenon in which the imaginative evocation of the medieval featured in a variety of fields, the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in art, the Gothic Revival in architecture, the Oxford Movement in Christianity and Young England in politics, as well as in literature in which Arnold's hero, Alfred Lord Tennyson, was a leading light. Explaining the importance of the Middle Ages for the Victorians as arising out of a sense of loss and dislocation, Houghton remarks that 'from their perspective it was the medieval tradition from which they had irrevocably broken' (Houghton 1957: 1-2). The empire, while often seen as one of the threats to Britain's integrity and cohesion that led to the Victorians' nostalgia for the Middle Ages, also provided the British with a compensating medieval world to rule as Waghorne shows in relation to India (Waghorne 1994: 33-34). Waghorne states that '[a]s long as there was an Indian empire, a stage existed on which to play out a feudal dream' of princes, courts and knights (p. 33), and this medieval vision of India may have influenced Arnold's choice of archaic language for his translations.

Arnold's 'Preface' to *The Indian Song of Songs* included the claim that by and large his translation closely followed the original but he admitted that he had resorted to both adaptation and exclusion in translating the *Gītagovinda* (Arnold 1875: xiii). He interpreted the text in terms of Kṛṣṇa, as a form of Viṣṇu, representing the human soul, who was led away from sensual pleasure towards a higher union with Rādhā, conveying this message through 'the parable of human passion' (pp. v-vi). This element of the erotic proved problematic for Arnold, as the relationship of the lovers was 'too glowingly depicted by the Indian poet for exact transcription' (p. vi). Accordingly, the sexual content of the text led him to omit sections from his translation as well as modify others in order not to offend his readers' notion of decency and decorum. For example, in the tenth sarga, Rādhā's charms are described in seemly rather than sexual terms consistent with the note that '[m]uch here ... is necessarily paraphrased' and, in the eleventh sarga, Rādhā is urged to join Kṛṣṇa as his bride rather than his lover when exhorted to 'yield up open-hearted / His desire, his prize, his bride', while the twelfth sarga, in which the original conveys the couple's consummation of their union, was left out (pp. 91, 97, 101).

In taking account of his contemporaries' attitudes to sexuality, Arnold was adopting common practice among translators. In de-emphasizing the erotic, he was also following in the footsteps of Sir William Jones who, as Figueira notes, had understood the *Gītagovinda* 'as an allegory of the human soul's love for God' (Figueira 1991: 23). Commenting that '[s]ometimes translators have regarded parts of their text as in some way inappropriate for the eyes of their audience', Crosby discusses the strategies employed in dealing with ostensibly obscene material (Crosby 2005: 47-48). As Crosby points out, one strategy was simply not to translate certain sections (p. 48), a strategy Arnold employed so as not to scandalize his readers or to provoke a censorious response.

### **Arnold as an Imperialist**

As is already evident, Arnold's reflections on style cannot neatly be confined to style as narrowly defined since they have a significant cultural component, be it the valorization of blank verse, the fascination for the Middle Ages or the antipathy towards including sexual subjects. Given that the translator's motives for translating a text are instrumental in fashioning the translation, another cultural factor was imperialism (Hardwick 2000: 10; Long 2005a:1). This is not only because Arnold was himself an unapologetic imperialist but also because of the centrality of translation in the history of British India. Arguably, in the case of India, '[a] major translator called "colonialism" has been at work' (Soni 2010: 67). Certainly, British rule of the subcontinent was associated with many translations (and the tools for translation, grammars, dictionaries, etc., too) (Cohn 1985: 282). Some of these translations had an immediate practical purpose, at least in intention, but even where there was no such purpose, an imperial rationale could still be offered as it was by Warren Hastings whose letter commending Charles

Wilkins' translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* stated that all knowledge served the cause of power (Hastings 1785: 13). Yet this does not mean that imperialism was a monolithic phenomenon or that imperial considerations excluded all others.

Arnold's statements about his own motivations as a translator similarly suggest that it would be reductive to regard him simply as an imperialist, certainly of an unsympathetic stamp. *The Book of Good Counsels*, his translation of the *Hitopadeśa*, a book of Indian fables, linked his time in India with commitment to her people, relating that '[a] residence in India, and close intercourse with the Hindoos, has given the author a lively desire to subserve their advancement' (Arnold 1861: xi). This is a reference to his having taken up the post of principal of the government college at Poona in 1857, subsequently making the most of the opportunity to study Sanskrit (Wright 1957: 27-35). On his return to Britain after a comparatively short tenure in the subcontinent, his career developed in the direction of journalism rather than education. He rose to become editor of the *Daily Telegraph*, which under Arnold's leadership supported the cause of Disraeli against Gladstone (pp. 48-50). This alliance probably played some part in Arnold's failure to become poet laureate though he was compensated for this disappointment by being created Companion of the Star of India when Queen Victoria was declared Empress of India in 1877 (pp. 51-52). Indeed, Arnold called attention to the Queen's new title when discussing the inextricable connection between the epics and the Indian people whom he described in terms of familiar imperial tropes as 'that unchanging and teeming population which Her Majesty rules as Empress of Hindostan' (Arnold 1883: viii).<sup>ii</sup>

Clearly, Arnold was an imperialist and, while not ruling out genuine interest, respect and concern on his part, however hedged about with assumptions of superiority typical of imperialism, his political convictions were evident in many pronouncements and imparted a flavour to others. There was, for example, his confident assessment on returning to the subcontinent years after leaving for home that 'India at large knows that she has never received from Heaven a richer blessing than the Pax Britannica' (Arnold 1891: 294). Or again, there was his desire that his translation of the *Gītāgovinda* would promote greater familiarity between Britain and India described as 'an object always dear to the present writer' (Arnold 1875: xiii). His imperial sympathies may also be detected in his translations, perhaps most clearly where he was making more editorial decisions about the selection of material as in *Indian Idylls* or engaging in a freer style of translation that integrated imaginative elements as in 'In an Indian Temple'.

Discussing *Indian Idylls*, Graham contends that Arnold created the image of India as an ordered society with fixed roles and responsibilities, illustrating his argument from 'Sāvitrī; or Love and Death' and 'Nala and Damayantī' where this order was subverted but then reestablished (Graham, 1998: 153). The story of Sāvitrī in which she won back her husband's soul from Yama, god of death, had her request and receive boons, among them the return of her father-in-law's kingdom for him to rule over in virtue and the birth of sons to her own father to

secure the succession to the throne (Arnold, 1883: 25-26). Similarly, Yama's ultimate revival of Satyavan as a reward for Sāvitrī's devotion was a reassertion of Satyavan's royal destiny and of the couple's future as king and queen:

He shall live and reign  
Side by side with thee, - saved by thee, - in peace,  
And fame, and wealth, and health, many long years;  
For pious sacrifices, world-renowned.  
(p. 31)

The story of Nala and Damayantī, charting the course of their relationship from first meeting to marriage to estrangement and final reunion, turned on Kali's curse that led Nala to lose his kingdom in a game of dice so that it was only when released from that curse that he was able to win it back in another game of dice (pp. 71, 179). Accordingly, Nala's people greeted his restoration with elation as bringing with it joy, harmony and prosperity:

“Happy now our days  
will be,”  
Said the townsfolk, said the elders, said the villagers;  
“O king!”  
Standing all with palms unfolded: “peace and fortune  
thou wilt bring  
To thy city, to thy country; boundless welcome do we  
give,  
As the gods in heaven to Indra when with them He  
comes to live.”  
(pp. 181-82)

The selection of these stories, evoking as they did an ordered world where balance and harmony, though temporarily overthrown, were always restored, reflected an imperial vision of India as a traditional society that valued the immutable norms of time immemorial.<sup>iii</sup>

More explicitly, Arnold used the English gentleman in ‘In an Indian Temple’ to voice common imperial views of the superiority of Christian faith and morality over Hindu belief and practice, ‘your Indian systems lack / Two points we Westerns boast’, in asserting the absence in Hinduism of love of one's fellows for love of God and of the motivation to do good for its own sake (Arnold, 1899: 28). Further, the priest's decision to instruct his English friend in the *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad*, despite the latter not being a member of a twice-born class entitled to hear the Veda, was justified by the Englishman's attitudes towards India and wisdom, ‘thou lovest our Land, and lov'st to tread / All paths of knowledge’ (p. 8). Such sentiments recall not only a rationale of imperialism as inspired by an altruistic sense of duty and service but also Arnold's hope to be remembered as a lover of India (Arnold, 1903: xi) which was consistent with his advocacy of the

benefits and benevolence of the Raj.

Bearing in mind Arnold's role in conveying Eastern thought to the West, imperial ideology must have been mediated along with the texts he translated. Further, since translation can encompass broader processes by which Eastern traditions were explained in Western terms and integrated into the Western consciousness, how far does this apply to Hinduism albeit viewed through an imperial lens? That is, was Arnold translating not just Hindu texts but Hinduism by interpreting it for the West?

### **Arnold as Interpreter of Hinduism to the West**

Both a sense of empire and a concept of Hinduism can be detected in *The Song Celestial*, as Javed Majeed demonstrates in his analysis of Arnold's 'Preface' to his translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Majeed comments upon Arnold's assertion that 'English literature would certainly be incomplete without possessing in popular form a poetical and philosophical work so dear to India' (Arnold 1885b: 9-10). Majeed's contention is that this involved effacing the Sanskrit of the original in order to achieve its admission to the English literary canon (Majeed 2006: 325). It also stressed the notion of 'ownership, of "possessing" a work which is "dear" to India' (p. 325), the literary counterpart and corollary of the Raj in which, just as India was a British possession, so the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was to become British property.

Moreover, according to Majeed, 'the challenging potential of the *Gita* is contained by reading it as an unproblematic reflection of a given Hinduism ... [that was] doubly essentialised, both in temporal and in cultural terms' (Majeed 2006: 324). This statement is substantiated by citing Arnold's declaration that the *Bhagavad-Gītā* revealed 'a philosophic system which remains to this day the prevailing Brahmanic belief' a system which Arnold described as a synthesis of 'the doctrines of Kapila, Patanjali, and the Vedas' in a declaration that combined a claim about the text's eclecticism with a claim about the fundamentally unchanging character of Hindu thought (Arnold 1885b: 7). Majeed observes that, in Arnold's judgment, complicated philosophical issues raised by the *Bhagavad-Gītā* were thereby rendered simple and straightforward, and regarded as representing a static set of principles (Majeed 2006: 324-25). The brevity of Arnold's 'Preface' and the limited footnoting of the translation to which Majeed draws attention are evidence for this since the lack of commentary meant that the text was regarded as intelligible with only the most minimal introduction and exposition (p. 324). Such was Arnold's claim when, towards the close of his 'Preface', he wrote that '[t]here is little else to say which the "Song Celestial" does not explain for itself' (Arnold, 1885b: 10) and in like fashion his footnotes conveyed no idea of historical development beyond literary critical issues of textual integrity (e.g. pp. 84, 136, 154; *Bhagavad-Gītā* 8.23-27, 13.4, 15.15).

This notion of changelessness, dissolving the distinction between past and

present and with it the possibility of real alteration or advance, was typical of imperial attitudes where it was grounds for the British sense of superiority over India but paradoxically also the basis of envy for a lost way of life. This tendency to see any change as merely superficial and to stress the substantial nature of continuity characterized Arnold's treatment of India in general. Thus, in *India Revisited*, he reported that behind the façade of modern Bombay lay 'ancient, placid, conservative India with her immutable customs and deeply-rooted popular habits derived unbroken from immemorial days' (Arnold 1891: 57-58). This tendency also ran through his discussion of other Hindu texts, and was clearly evident in his exposition of the Upaniṣads and the epics.

Referring to the Upaniṣads, Arnold identified their 'leading ideas' described as being 'plain enough', defining them as 'three vast conceptions which have governed Hindu life': the illusory nature of phenomenal reality, *māyā*; the transmigration of the self, *ātman*, through multiple incarnations; and the prospect of freedom from continued transmigration through union with ultimate reality, *mokṣa* (Arnold 1896: 156-57, 159, 162). Here, however old the origins of the Upaniṣads, Arnold deemed them to be as relevant to modern as to ancient India. He maintained that the Upaniṣads constituted 'a guide to her [India's] inmost feelings and beliefs' and 'the keys to her [India's] real mind and heart' without making any allowance for change over millennia (p. 156).

Similarly, Arnold stressed the current importance of the epics, notwithstanding the great age that he attributed to them, remarking that they 'contain almost all the history of ancient India' along with 'inexhaustible details of its political, social, and religious life' (Arnold 1883: vii-viii). What is significant about this, for Arnold, is that the epics not only reflected the norms and values of ancient India but also exerted an enduring influence over many centuries to the present day. In his account, the epics acted as 'the library, the newspaper, and the Bible, generation after generation, for all the succeeding and countless millions of Hindoo people' (pp. viii-ix).<sup>iv</sup> On this evidence, the changelessness of India and Hinduism were closely related in Arnold's understanding of Hindu texts and it was this perspective on Hinduism that he communicated to his readers.

In any event, it was probably in his translation of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* that Arnold made his major contribution towards awareness and appreciation of Hinduism in the West. First published in 1885, *The Song Celestial* reached its tenth edition in 1906, remaining in print through subsequent decades (Kapoor 1983: 20, 28, 29, 31, 36, 38, 39, 45, 50, 63, 64, 68, 71, 82, 96, 98); it is estimated to have reached around 40 editions by the late twentieth century in addition to being translated into other European languages (Callewaert and Hemraj 1982: 269). If its sales did not match the prodigious performance of *The Light of Asia* to which it can be compared unfavourably, these sales were by no means modest and would surely have been the envy of many writers. Its impact is harder to judge though here too it is likely to have been greater than indicated by mere numbers because, apart from the fact that a number of individuals could read the same copy, *The Song*

*Celestial* was published at a time when the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was rising to ever greater prominence (Sharpe 1985: 169).

Two additional factors have made for the longevity of *The Song Celestial*: the endorsement by nationalist and reformer, M.K. Gandhi (1869-1948); and that by Indologist and Sanskritist, Franklin Edgerton (1885-1963). In his autobiography, Gandhi recalled first encountering the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, later to become vital to his spiritual and ethical outlook, while a student in Britain when he met two Theosophists who were reading *The Song Celestial* (Gandhi 1982: 76). Commenting on *The Song Celestial*, he deemed it to be superior to other translations of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* into English, explaining that Arnold 'has been faithful to the text, and yet it does not read like a translation' (p. 76). Edgerton was equally appreciative, choosing to include *The Song Celestial* alongside his own work on the *Bhagavad-Gītā* in the Harvard Oriental Series (Edgerton 1944: 2.95-172). He described *The Song Celestial* as 'a beautiful English rendering' that offered 'a good idea of the living spirit of the poem', praising Arnold's talent as a poet that suited him to translate the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, conceived by Edgerton as a religious poem (Edgerton 1925: 6; 1944: 2.4-5). Such endorsements, in both general and specialist literature, can only have served to raise awareness of *The Song Celestial* and perhaps prompt further investigation.

Interestingly, not only does Sharpe describe *The Song Celestial* as 'perhaps the most celebrated, and in some ways the most influential of Gita translations' (p. 60), but Wright, notwithstanding the stress upon Buddhism in his biography of Arnold, indicates that 'it is the only one of Arnold's poems that is still regularly read and the one on which his future reputation must rest' (Wright 1957: 127). Indeed, in Sinha's opinion, '*The Song Celestial* reinvented and, in some contexts, replaced' the *Bhagavad-Gītā* (Sinha 2010: 307). Referring to contemporary reviews and responses, he concludes that by the close of the nineteenth century it was as *The Song Celestial* that the *Bhagavad-Gītā* had attained the status of 'a naturalized Victorian text' (p. 308). However, *The Song Celestial*'s legacy went beyond making Hinduism known to the West through bringing the *Bhagavad-Gītā* to Arnold's readers. Sinha points out that Arnold's treatment of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was lauded in both artistic and religious terms, reaching a much wider readership than earlier translations (pp. 308-9). Sinha observes that, through *The Song Celestial*, the *Bhagavad-Gītā* 'became capable of slippage', breaking the bounds of its original setting and significance to function as literature facilitating a more open and flexible interpretation of its literary style and religious content (p. 309). Rather than simply being a Hindu text, he shows that the *Bhagavad-Gītā* was then capable of 'be[ing] received as poetry and a kind of non-denominational religious philosophy', giving rise to new possibilities (p. 309). The subsequent history of the *Bhagavad-Gītā* in the West supports Sinha's argument in witnessing to the text's growing importance for Westerners whether as an object for literary appreciation or as a resource for spiritual exploration, a process in which *The Song Celestial* surely played a pivotal part as the first translation to make a real impression on the general reader.

### **'[A] revealer to his generation'**

In one review of *The Song Celestial*, Arnold was lauded as 'a revealer to his generation', referring to his role in bringing Eastern texts to Western readers (*Birmingham Daily Post* 1885). This praise for Arnold was predicated upon the general public's previous ignorance of the wealth of wisdom to be found in Eastern texts, an ignorance that the reviewer associated with negative opinions of Eastern people and consequent support for their proselytization. Against this background, there was approval for Arnold's talent as a poet – 'gifted with rare poetic faculty' – and his selection of texts – 'works of utmost popularity and authority' – that together had shown these texts to be of the highest quality. Strikingly, in discussing how Arnold's publications had presented a positive picture of Eastern religions, this review mentioned that in one of his previous translations 'the teachings of Brahmanism were unfolded' while also recommending *The Song Celestial* to spiritual seeker and literary aesthete alike.

Notwithstanding a certain tendency towards hyperbole, the point is well made in the sense that Arnold made a major contribution to the West's knowledge of the East, even if (alternatively, it could be argued, because) this was compromised by a partial approach and coloured by a patronizing attitude. One way in which Arnold made this contribution was through his translation of Hindu texts and thus his translation of Hinduism into a Western medium that could be accepted by the Western public analogous to his role in respect of Buddhism (cf. Franklin 2005: 967-68). However, insofar as his importance is ever acknowledged, Hindu texts and Hinduism rarely feature, certainly not in comparison to their Buddhist counterparts.

Often relegated to a passing mention, it is only to be expected that even those with an abiding interest in the texts he translated and the traditions with which these texts are associated are unaware or unappreciative of the part Arnold played in making these texts and traditions better known. Moreover, where a serious attempt is made to assess Arnold's life and work, this has usually concentrated on his legacy for Buddhism based on the publication of *The Light of Asia*. Yet he translated a number of Hindu texts and, especially in *The Song Celestial*, did much to bring Hinduism to the general reader with long-term consequences that should not be minimized or marginalized. Favourably received by his contemporaries, and in *The Song Celestial* benefiting from the testimonials of leading figures, Arnold's translations brought Hinduism to far greater prominence, crucially presenting it in a generally positive light. This, in turn, cannot but have contributed towards a wider recognition of and higher regard for Hinduism that over the years was to develop further on the foundations he helped to lay. If, as has been suggested, he was an agent of cross-cultural inter-religious understanding, Arnold's legacy was no less as an interpreter of Hinduism, than Buddhism, to the West.

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<sup>i</sup> Despite a previous article ranging more widely in considering Arnold's efforts to bring Indian religions to the Western public thereby also influencing events in the East, the present article develops some of the ideas and supplements some of the information already discussed while redressing the balance of coverage in favour of Hinduism. In so doing, it acknowledges the importance of Colin Graham's examination of epic that investigates Arnold, imperialism and Indian epic in which Graham suggests that Arnold's Orientalism nevertheless constructed India as a nation (Graham 1998: 123-170). However, some aspects of the analysis, though congruent with Graham's argument, were arrived at independently arising out of a reading of the primary sources.

<sup>ii</sup> Graham goes further in stressing that reference to Queen Victoria as Empress of India recalled his readers to a recognition of the significance of India in the light of Britain's imperial destiny (Graham 1998: 149).

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<sup>iii</sup> Here too, Graham goes further in emphasizing that this sense of order also challenged the logic of imperialism since it undermined the legitimacy of British rule as disruptive of a timeless polity (Graham, 1998: 154-55).

<sup>iv</sup> Graham makes much the same point in commenting that, for Arnold, the epics were a way of comprehending contemporary India because he denied that change had occurred since their creation, also acknowledging the underlying stereotype of India as traditional rather than progressive (Graham 1998: 149).