

**CRITICAL ESSAYS.
IN THE REPUBLIC OF
LETTERS, PP. 1-219**

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Critical Essays. In the Republic of Letters, pp. 1-219 by W. Macneile Dixon

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W. MACNEILE DIXON

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IN THE 80788
REPUBLIC OF LETTERS

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their Reviews

THE POETRY OF MATTHEW ARNOLD

THE king is dead: the great peers of the realm poetic had passed away before him, and there is no head found worthy of the consecrating oil.¹ The critical search-parties that went forth throughout all the land have returned, and report that they have failed to meet with a Saul who stands head and shoulders above his brethren. Meanwhile disaffected persons murmur, and hint at the abolition of the monarchy. Kingship is out of date, and we must set up a poetic republic as we have set up a republic of polite letters. To which it is replied by others, that Nature, to whom we have still to look for our supply of poets, goes about her work in a way that renders futile a revolution with such an end in view. It is said that she produces a poet in the most unlikely spot, in the midst of what appear to be hopelessly uncongenial and blighting circumstances, and at periods incalculable even by the acute physical scientist, who knows all about her movements and designs. And when she has

¹ Written in 1893.

THE POETRY OF MATTHEW ARNOLD

produced him she straightway crowns him; and despite any efforts of the critics to discrown him or crown another in his place, she never fails in retaining the robe and sceptre for the man of her own choice. And the moral is, that it is desirable to discover, as early as may be in each case, these favourites of Nature, and to set the laurel upon their temples; for it is best to be on the side of Nature, seeing that here as elsewhere she is invincible.

However these things be, some of the explorers of these recent search-parties are angry because there is no giant in Israel, and the poets of ordinary stature have been mocked, and otherwise severely handled. It is undoubtedly a grievous thing that they are so many, and yet so diminutive and unimpressive withal; and the fact would in the eyes of the desponding be significant of the degeneracy of the age, if that degeneracy were not, alas! firmly established. The minor poet has indeed always been as much the butt of ridicule as the major poet has been the god—when once his divinity is discovered—in whose honour temples are built and incense-fires kept continually burning. To attempt poetry, and to attain minor poetry, is the unpardonable sin:—

‘*Mediocribus esse poetas*
Non di, non homines, non concessere columnæ,’