

# Matthew Arnold (1822 - 1888)

## Philomela,

Original Text:

Matthew Arnold, *Poems by Matthew Arnold: A New Edition* (1853).

1 Hark! ah, the nightingale--

The tawny-throated!

Hark, from that moonlit cedar what a burst!

What triumph! hark!--what pain!

O wanderer from a Grecian shore,

Still, after many years, in distant lands,

Still nourishing in thy bewilder'd brain

That wild, unquench'd, deep-sunken, old-world pain--

Say, will it never heal?

And can this fragrant lawn

With its cool trees, and night,

And the sweet, tranquil Thames,

And moonshine, and the dew,

To thy rack'd heart and brain

Afford no balm?

Dost thou to-night behold,

Here, through the moonlight on this English grass,

The unfriendly palace in the Thracian wild?

Dost thou again peruse

With hot cheeks and sear'd eyes

21 The too clear web, and thy dumb sister's shame?

Dost thou once more assay

Thy flight, and feel come over thee,

Poor fugitive, the feathery change

Once more, and once more seem to make resound

With love and hate, triumph and agony,

Lone Daulis, and the high Cephissian vale?

Listen, Eugenia--

How thick the bursts come crowding through the leaves!

Again--thou hearest?

Eternal passion!

Eternal pain!

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> The poem is based on the Greek myth about Tereus, king of Daulis, his wife, Procne, and her sister, Philomela, daughters of Pandion, king of Attica. There are variants of the story (which is told by Ovid, Pausanias, Conon, Achilles Tatius, Apollodorus, and Hyginus) but the one Arnold used tells that, after a few years, Tereus grew enamoured of his wife's sister, and, to be free to marry her, cut out Procne's tongue and hid her away in the countryside, and then let it be known that she was dead. Procne made her plight public by weaving the story into a piece of tapestry. Philomela freed her sister, and together they devised a scheme to avenge her. They killed young Itylus, the son of Procne and Tereus, and served him up to Tereus as a stew during the festival of Bacchus. When Tereus asked for his son, they informed him whom he was eating. With Tereus in pursuit, they fled, and, calling on the gods for aid, they were metamorphosed into birds, Procne into a swallow and her sister into a nightingale. Arnold's version of the myth appears in Gayley's *Myths* and Murray's *Manual of Mythology*.

Publication Start Year:

1853

RPO poem Editors: (University Of Toronto Libraries)

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