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POETRY AND
THE DRAMA

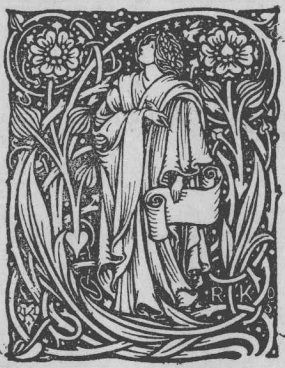
THE RING & THE BOOK

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
CHARLES W. HODELL

THE RING AND THE BOOK

by ROBERT BROWNING

EVERY MAN I WILL GO WITH THEE BE THY GVIDE



IN THY MOST NEED TO GO BY THY SIDE

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INTRODUCTION

THE *Ring and the Book*, the longest and most important of Browning's poems, is the product of several years of creative activity during the period of his fullest maturity. The love romance which had enriched his life for fifteen years had come to an end, and his thought was searching more profoundly than ever before the problems of life and death. For twenty years he had been devoting his art to casual subjects in rich succession; *Men and Women* and *Dramatis Personæ* lay in the immediate past, and the dramatic monologue had become an easy form for voicing his imaginations; yet he must have craved the fuller joy of expressing through some larger subject and at far greater length his conception of human life and of the Divine in and above the world.

The occasion for this expression came in the chance discovery of the *Old Yellow Book* in June 1860 on a market barrow in the Piazza di San Lorenzo, Florence, as told by Browning in the poem. This book is the record of a sensational murder trial at Rome, January-February 1698, and gives many of the facts and motives of an ignoble intrigue for certain properties, culminating in a brutal assassination and in the subsequent execution of the criminals. It was a dark page from the criminal annals of Rome, and time had all but effaced the record when it fell into the hands of the poet. The problem of making these dead fragments live again challenged the imagination of Browning, and by the power of his imagination he saw there in Florence that June night how the crime had stirred Rome a century and a half earlier. So interested did he become in the Franceschini story that he frequently told it to his friends in conversation, and is said to have offered it to one of them as the plot of an historical novel. Eventually the inspiration came to him to tell the story through his art of poetry, and what was more, he saw the opportunity of expressing through the incidents of this base crime his own fuller vision of man. The interpretation of

the *Yellow Book* in his poem involved the whole problem of life as the poet saw it.

How then should he unfold his views? His own age had perfected the novel to present at length the activities and motives of man, and Browning learned much of his art from the novel. Yet he was no novelist, and he left unattempted the possible historical novel in the subject. Long years before he had tried the drama, and had been defeated by a half success, nor could a stage drama trace the minute threads of motive in this case. In the narrative poem as such he had little interest, and seldom practised the fascination of the narrator. Browning's one purpose in the art of poetry was to search the heart deeply for motive. He had by years of practice developed the dramatic monologue to a high point of efficacy in expressing motive. It is accordingly not surprising that he made a "strange art of an art familiar," and by the repetition of the story in many forms in a series of dramatic monologues, he invented a new type of poem which grew directly out of the material before him, and enabled him to tell the Franceschini story more truly than through any of the established forms of art.

This tragic course of events had not developed simply and symmetrically. Life seldom does. It was a confused web of disputed fact, with motive and counter-motive, genuine or sham, conventional or personal, further entangled by the professional casuistry of the lawyers, until the right and wrong of the story seemed hopelessly obscured. Such confusion surrounds every deeper crisis which stirs the heart of man, as is illustrated in the journalistic hubbub around every sensational crime and its trial at the bar of justice. Literary art tends to simplify all this by the intensification of the prevailing motives, and by the eradication of whatever distracts from these. Yet in the successive development of the epic, the drama, and the novel as methods of picturing life, there has been a distinct evolution away from this artistic singleness toward the variety and intricacy of life. The novel offers large opportunities to present this human complexity. Browning carries literary development a step farther by using in a new way the multi-monologue form of narrative, in which he tells the story from a series of personal standpoints, each of which modifies fact and motive with iridescent shadings of significance and with the perplexing

but thrilling uncertainties which we find in real life. He illustrates by his art also the great principle which he found in life—the apparent relativity of truth—"The truth is this to thee and that to me." He sees that the perception of truth is one of the most vital functions of personality, and that the kind and degree of our perception of it are invariably restricted by all limitations of personality. In monologue after monologue in his previous art Browning had tinged a thought or a passion or a story by the prejudice of the speaker. When at last he found the *Old Yellow Book*, it gave him illustration after illustration of such perversion of truth through personal bias. It became inevitable for him, therefore, in his strong sense of the obligation to represent the full truth of the tragedy, that he should tell and retell the story from the various personal standpoints possible until he had turned every phase of it to the reader. His figures of the landscape and the glass ball, book i. ll. 1348-1378, illustrate this.

The Franceschini tragedy and the environing life of Rome thus come to live again before the reader in all that essential intricacy which we find in the world outside of books. In fact, the poem gives the impression not of a book, but of throbbing life, confused almost past finding out. We should read the successive monologues not for a chain of incident, nor for the achievement of a final judgment on the merits of the case, but to study the hearts of actors and spectators alike, as they pulsate with passions, noble or ignoble, which surge around that act of murder on January 2, 1698.

What persons then should be chosen as narrators? What personal standpoints were significant and vital to the complete understanding of the tragedy? First and most important were the three principals — the husband, the wife, and the priest Caponsacchi. Then the legal presentation of facts in the *Yellow Book* suggested the representation of the professional interpreters of law. Was not law the "patent-truth-extracting process" which man had established to ascertain the rights and wrongs of such cases? Hence Browning includes two of the attorneys found in the recorded case, though he cannot suppress his ironic attitude toward them. Above the lawyers stood their ultimate superior, the Pope, through whose final judgment the sentence was executed against the criminals;

in him was exhibited judicial deliberation illuminated by an almost prophetic insight into divine truth. Beyond these six monologues, the poet saw the need of other narratives, which would present the story as it appeared to common, outside Rome. None of the actual personages involved, such as Abate Paolo, Canon Conti, or Violante, could serve this purpose satisfactorily. Hence the poet invented two purely typical, anonymous personages, "Half-Rome" and "Other Half-Rome," who represent the two prejudiced camps of opinion which made up "reasonless, unreasoning Rome." These speakers were doubtless suggested to the poet by the two anonymous Italian narratives of the murder story, which are included in the *Yellow Book*. Then in a sport of irony and caricature he invented "Tertium Quid"—a third Something—the supercilious, contemptuous opinion of the man who takes pride in his unsympathy, and who plays with judgment trivially, smartly, and sneeringly, even in the face of this violent crime — who found nothing in human life worthy of serious consideration save the etiquette and intrigue of his own polite circle. These three typical personages represent the opinion of Rome at large, but they also afford the poet an opportunity to tell and retell the story until all the details of fact have become familiar to the reader. Consequently when he passes on to the heart of the poem in the monologues of Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia, he need no longer tell a story, but can devote himself entirely to such incidents and passions as bring out most fully and subtly the character of the speakers. The reading of books ii., iii., and iv., is a fundamental preparation of the reader for the complete understanding of the monologues of Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia. When the poet had written these thrice three monologues he evidently felt his poem to be incomplete of final effect if he left the reader in any possible uncertainty as to the true nature of Guido. In book v. the poet had presented the Guido of skilled subterfuge and of supercilious reliance on the privileges of a sham social condition. He would now give us the genuine Guido, fierce, brutal, ignoble, depraved, blasphemous, till we shudder at the abyss of darkness in his heart. These are the ten monologues of the *Ring and the Book*, not ten repetitions of the same story, but ten glimpses into the human heart as it reacts upon a

story which ever changes with the personality of the narrator.

To this body of the poem Browning adds his prefatory and concluding books, both of them entirely unconventional in their form, but direct and vitally truthful to the poem as a whole, and to the *Old Yellow Book* before the poet. The first book is an invaluable preparatory miscellany, including the explanation of the title of the poem, an account of the finding of the *Yellow Book*, of its contents, of Browning's immediate interest in it, and of his creative reaction in response to it; then a series of summaries of the monologue situations which follow in the succeeding books of the poem, and finally the invocation and dedication to Mrs. Browning. The concluding book is equally miscellaneous, and its purpose is to complete the story which had been broken by Guido's shriek in his dungeon, and to lead the reader down from the glaring lights of mid-story into the creeping oblivion which overtook this fact as it overtakes all things human. The device of telling about Guido's execution through the letters of eye-witnesses was suggested to the poet by the three letters of the *Yellow Book*, one of which, the letter of Arcangeli, is included in full, lines 239-288. From the additional Italian narrative which had fallen to his hands, Browning then fashions the ghastly spectacle of the throngs of Rome pressing curiously and unfeelingly around Guido's scaffold. Even the final absolution of the memory of Pompilia and the establishment of her innocence takes the form of the court decree included in the *Yellow Book*. At last the inevitable tide of time surges over all, and the Franceschini tragedy and its stir in Rome are swept into final oblivion.

Through the ten voices of the ten monologues, Browning does not merely tell a story; he pictures the life of Rome and Arezzo in the year 1698, with all their play of professional and social motive. The accounts of the motives of Guido and Caponsacchi for entering the church reveal the great worldly ecclesiastical establishment of which they are a part. In domestic life the sacrament of marriage is pictured as mere barter and sale, not unmingled with fraud.

> Marriage making for the earth,
> With gold so much,—birth, power, repute, so much,
> Or beauty, youth so much, in lack of these.

And the law and the law courts, with their countless delays

and perversions of justice are seen in a confusion of lawsuits, civil and criminal, which surrounded Pompilia's life. Rome is portrayed in the poem with an art more subtle and penetrating than is usually found in the art of the historical novel.

Yet here, as at all times, Browning is interested in men rather than institutions; in Abate Paolo, Canon Conti, the Confessors Romano and Celestino rather than in the church as such; in Arcangeli and Bottini rather than in the profession of the law. Hence many who were mere names in the *Yellow Book* become personal and alive in the poem. Violante stands forth in all her meddlesome self-will. Donna Beatrice grows portentously to a true novercal type, amplifying the sketch of the old duchess in the *Flight of the Duchess*. The worldly Bishop of Arezzo again yields to the Franceschini in bland deference the victim they desire. A score and more of persons have started into life from the old record, and are significant to Browning as a searcher of the heart of man.

But it is in the interpretation of the three chief actors that the creative Browning best found expression. Guido, Caponsacchi, and Pompilia become at last the measure of Browning's mastery and insight, and are the high-water mark of his creative imagination.

Browning has represented many evil men in his art, but all his other villains pale into insignificance beside the full, passionate, living portrayal of Guido Franceschini. Yet Guido is not a monster, nor an accidentally unfortunate man; he is the hideous outgrowth of a self-seeking, Christless society, in which nobility is no longer a spiritual attribute, but has become a mere merchantable asset and a shield for crouching littlenesses. The *Yellow Book* makes plain accusation concerning the ruthless greed of Guido, but Browning connects this with the effete nobility and the worldly churchmanship of the day as he saw it. And this theme of greed is made to run through the whole Franceschini family with variations. Guido's final desperation of hate and of misanthropy expresses itself in his terrible ravings in his prison cell on the night before his execution.

Caponsacchi, on the other hand, is Browning's highest conception of heroic manhood, not an unreal, and vainly ideal dream, but a passionate, earnest, and great-hearted

man, with a lovable impetuosity and rashness at times. He is a modern St. George, saving a woman in desperate plight by a reckless display of courage. Called suddenly from the narrow, uneventful life of an idle, fashionable canon, not by a great, shining duty, but by a low cry of pain from the roadside, he threw prudence and self-seeking to the wind that he might worship God in saving this woman. Though he is summoned by pity, he is detained by passion—not a debasing, physical passion, but passion controlled by the consecrating power of reverential love, as of the divine. He worships Pompilia with no merely conventional worship of love-sick poetising, but he bows, is blest by the revelation of Pompilia, who seems to him to be an embodiment of the virtues of the Madonna, whom he as a priest had been taught to revere. Into this portrait of his " soldier-saint " Browning put much that was noblest in his own high type of manhood.

In Pompilia, Browning has achieved his master picture of woman. Probably the character of the real Pompilia as it shone from the affidavit of Fra Celestino in the *Old Yellow Book* fixed the poet's attention on this story. She is represented there as saint and martyr in simple loveliness of character. He further endowed her with the highest spiritual graces which may glorify woman, the passion of maternity, the devoted love for the man who embodies her ideal of manly nobility, and her unquestioning faith in God " held fast despite the plucking fiend." These are greater and more essential to the highest womanhood than the intellectuality of Balaustion, or the social charm and grace of Colombe. Pompilia of the *Yellow Book* has been glorified at last with all that Browning had found most divine in that woman whom he reverenced primarily as a woman of these same spiritual graces, and only secondarily as a woman of genius.

The Pope might be added to the noble portraits of this great poem of humanity. As Caponsacchi may be said to represent the passionate and noble-worldly side of Browning's nature, so the Pope represents his graver, more other-worldly character. Browning has given us an unfading portrait of the great, wise, grave Pope, facing a sad duty, and turning from it to confront the darkest problems which may assail the human heart. But he creates the Pope less as a portrait than as a mouthpiece. Through this wise,

earnest personality he would speak what he himself felt most deeply in the tragedy. No historic Pope could have spoken as Browning makes Pope Innocent speak. It may be pointed out that Browning uses his other great old men of this period in the same way, as mouthpieces of his own vision of truth: for such undoubtedly is his use of Rabbi Ben Ezra, of the Apostle John, and of the Russian village pope in *Ivan Ivanovitch*. Through the Pope, therefore, Browning gives his own mature verdict in the case, and gives it weight by the impressive personality of the Pope as he presents him.

The slow toil of years had at last carried out the plan which came suddenly to the poet as he was thinking of the materials in the *Yellow Book*, yet it was not the " gold " of fact but the " alloy " of personality, the richly endowed nature of Robert Browning that raised the poem to greatness. It is at last the one poem which seems to employ every power of his mastership, and to utter his deepest convictions concerning the life of man.

CHARLES W. HODELL.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND, U.S.A.
January 27, 1911.

THE MONOLOGUE SITUATIONS

A BRIEF statement of the various monologue speakers and their situations will help the reader in his first approach to the poem.

Book II. Half-Rome is speaking on the day following the murder, addressing his story to the cousin of a certain young "jackanapes" who has roused the jealous fears of the speaker for his attractive young wife. He therefore feels it safer to take the husband's side. He has just come from crowded San Lorenzo church where the murdered Comparini lie beneath the stare of the curious mob. Having fought his way free of the crowd, he is loafing along the Corso near by, when a chance meeting with his friend gives him opportunity to tell Guido's story as he sees it. (Read book i. ll. 839-82.)

Book III. Other Half-Rome is a bachelor and a dabbler in art, who has found way to gain admission to the hospital cell where Pompilia lies a-dying, and he is immediately won by a sentimental admiration of her beautiful face. He meets a friend just outside near Bernini's fountain and tells the story in defence of Pompilia. (Read book i. ll. 883-909.)

Book IV. Tertium Quid, a fop and a sycophant, finds audience three days after the murder, for his version of the story, in certain "card-table quitters for observance sake," a cardinal, a nobleman, an ambassador. Here in a grand drawing-room in the midst of Rome's most fashionable circle, he tells the story in "silvery and selectest phrase," with unconcealed contempt for the social ignobility rather than the moral obliquity of the tragedy. He tells all in pure self-display, finding in the story only an opportunity for him to demonstrate his own shrewdness and aptness of phrase before his eminent audience. We are glad when he comes to grief in his purpose at the end. (Read book i. ll. 910-42.)

Book V. Count Guido Franceschini, arrested and brought to trial immediately after the assassination, is represented as speaking in his own defence before the

criminal court of the governor. He is fresh from the torture of the vigil to which the assassins had been subjected, and is ripe for declaring truth. But he realises that his head must save his neck, and with eyes riveted on the judge he makes his plea, at times groaning with the pangs of his torture-wracked limbs and at times flashing out in cutting irony, yet never forgetting the part he is playing. His plea is frankly based on a godless, selfish social code, rather than on pity or righteousness. (Read book i. ll. 942-1015, x. ll. 399-868.)

Book VI. Giuseppe Caponsacchi, the twenty-four year old canon of the church of Sta. Maria della Pieve, who had accompanied Pompilia in her flight from her husband's home the preceding April, and who had been arrested for his complicity in flight, and had been sentenced to three years' relegation to Civita Vecchia in September 1697, is represented as having returned now at the request of the same court which had sentenced him. He retells his story of the previous summer that he may throw light on motive of this terrible assassination of four days earlier. But the passions of love and grief and indignation sweep through his soul, and he speaks no craven apologies, but it is " speech that smites," for he is overwhelmed by the thought that Pompilia is dying. (Read book i. ll. 1016-75, ii. 910-5, iii. 839-82, v. 1357-65, vii. 920-3 and 1843-5, x. 1095-1212. *See* also his affidavit in the *Old Yellow Book*.)

Book VII. Pompilia, though frightfully wounded on the evening of January 2nd, survived till the 6th. The poet imagined her lying in the hospital cell, talking to Fra Celestino, who had confessed her and had ministered to her through those four days. To those gathered at her bedside she tries to tell her story, but after a few vain attempts to bring back the dreadful past, she rests in the great spiritual treasures which have come to her in the babe Gaetano, born on December 18, her faith in God, and her glory in the man who had come to save her. (Read book i. ll. 1076-1104, x. 1004-94, xi. 2089-2138. *See* also Pompilia's affidavit and the affidavit of Fra Celestino in the *Old Yellow Book*.)

Book VIII. Don Giacinto Arcangeli, the Procurator of the Poor, was appointed by the court to defend Guido, and his arguments in the case are found at length in the *Yellow Book*. Browning has humanised this lawyer by making him father of an eight-year-old son and namesake, whose

birthday feast at the end of the day's work stirs both the father's love and his gourmandising delight in high living. This serves as a comic accompaniment to the formal work of the lawyer. Arcangeli is represented as hard at work organising his first plea for the defendants. He is assembling arguments, precedents, phraseology, but all is yet in disorder. Practically every point of law, every citation of authority or precedent, and almost all the law Latin is taken directly from the *Old Yellow Book*, though Browning has used them grotesquely and at times even waggishly. (Read book i. ll. 1105-61.)

Book IX. Bottini, Advocate of the Fisc, who carried on the prosecution against Guido, is represented not in open court, but trying over to himself in his office the effect of his grand effort in the case. He is concerned not with the rights or the wrongs, but with the opportunity for Ciceronian self-display. Browning becomes fiercely, undramatically ironic in his picture of the Fisc, and he exaggerates to the point of almost preposterous parody the type of professional casuistry found in the real Bottini of the *Yellow Book*. (Read book i. ll. 1162-1219.)

Book X. The Pope is speaking on February 21 at the close of the long winter day, during which he has toiled over the papers in the appeal for Guido. When Guido had been condemned by the Criminal Courts on February 18, his attorneys had secured stay of sentence on the alleged clerical privilege of Guido. The Pope overruled this delay, on the 21st. He is represented as sitting quietly in his cell in the Vatican, his mind fully made up that Guido must die, but stopping again to weigh his own act of condemnation, and the characters of those connected with the sordid story. He has in his hand the *History of the Popes*, from which he reads for his own guidance and cheer, and the monologue opens with a reading from this book. It concludes as he summons his attendant to bear Guido's sentence to the prison. (Read book i. ll. 1270-1.)

Book XI. Guido is finally represented as speaking in his prison cell when his death is but a few hours away. Two cardinals were sent to minister to him in his dread hour. Browning imagines them in the dark, filthy den, in the dim light, shrinking in horror at the wild, bestial ravings of Guido, who is now driven to an ecstasy of desperation. He rails with almost demoniac violence against the whole

world he had known, and it is only in the end that as the Brotherhood of Death is heard chanting the *Miserere* he breaks down in wild fear and turns for help to the memory of his sainted wife. (Read book i. ll. 1272-1329.)

CHARLES W. HODELL.

The following is a list of the works of Robert Browning:—

Pauline, 1833; Paracelsus, 1835; Strafford, 1837; Sordello, 1840; Bells and Pomegranates: No. 1, Pippa Passes, 1841; No. 2, King Victor and King Charles, 1842; No. 3, Dramatic Lyrics, 1842; No. 4, The Return of the Druses (a Tragedy), 1843; No. 5, A Blot in the 'Scutcheon (a Tragedy), 1843; No. 6, Colombe's Birthday (a Play), 1844; No. 7, Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, 1845; No. 8, Luria; and A Soul's Tragedy, 1846; Christmas-Eve and Easter-Day, 1850; Cleon, 1855; the Statue and the Bust, 1855; Men and Women, 1855; Gold Hair: A Legend of Pornic, 1864; Dramatis Personæ, 1864; The Ring and the Book, 1868; Balaustion's Adventure, 1871; Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, 1871; Fifine at the Fair, 1872; Red-cotton Night-cap Country, 1873; Aristophanes' Apology, with "a Transcript from Euripides," and "Last Adventure of Balaustion," 1875; The Inn Album, 1875; Pacchiarotto, 1876; The Agamemnon of Aeschylus, 1877; La Saisiaz: The Two Poets of Croisic, 1878; Dramatic Idyls: 1st Series, 1879; 2nd Series, 1880; Jocoseria, 1883; Ferishtah's Fancies, 1884; Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day, 1887; Essay on Shelley (Introductory Essay to Volume of Shelley's letters (suppressed) 1852), 1888; Asolando, 1890 (1889).

In the Browning Society's Papers are published poems which appeared in various Magazines, and were not reprinted in any of the above-named works.

The Old Yellow Book, source of Browning's Ring and the Book, first published by Carnegie Institution, edited by C. W. Hodell, is now reprinted as a companion volume in Everyman's Library.

First Collected Ed. 1849; 2nd, 1863; 3rd, 1868; Complete Edition, 1888-1894.

Letters, Ed. T. J. Wise, 1895.

LIFE: W. Hall Griffin, 1910. Bibliography (see Literary Anecdotes of the Nineteenth Century, Vol. I. 1895).

CONTENTS

THE RING AND THE BOOK

I

THE RING AND THE BOOK

Do you see this Ring?
'Tis Rome-work, made to match
(By Castellani's imitative craft)
Etrurian circlets found, some happy morn,
After a dropping April; found alive
Spark-like 'mid unearthed slope-side figtree-roots
That roof old tombs at Chiusi: soft, you see,
Yet crisp as jewel-cutting. There's one trick,
(Craftsmen instruct me) one approved device
And but one, fits such slivers of pure gold
As this was,—such mere oozings from the mine,
Virgin as oval tawny pendent tear
At beehive-edge when ripened combs o'erflow,—
To bear the file's tooth and the hammer's tap:
Since hammer needs must widen out the round,
And file emboss it fine with lily-flowers,
Ere the stuff grow a ring-thing right to wear.
That trick is, the artificer melts up wax
With honey, so to speak; he mingles gold
With gold's alloy, and, duly tempering both,
Effects a manageable mass, then works.
But his work ended, once the thing a ring,
Oh, there's repristination! Just a spirt
O' the proper fiery acid o'er its face,
And forth the alloy unfastened flies in fume;
While, self-sufficient now, the shape remains,
The rondure brave, the lilied loveliness,
Gold as it was, is, shall be evermore:
Prime nature with an added artistry—
No carat lost, and you have gained a ring.