



CRITICISM

VOLUME

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Preface

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
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- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

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Contents

Preface vii

Acknowledgments ix

Literary Criticism Series Advisory Board xi

Robert Browning 1812-18891

English poet

Entry devoted to "My Last Duchess" 1842

George Crabbe 1754-1832 67

English poet

James Macpherson 1736-1796 169

Scottish poet and prose writer, political writer, journalist, and translator

Literary Criticism Series Cumulative Author Index 359

PC Cumulative Nationality Index 473

PC-97 Title Index 477

“My Last Duchess”

Robert Browning

The following entry presents criticism of Browning’s poem “My Last Duchess” (1842). For information on Browning’s complete career, see *PC*, Volumes 2 and 61.

INTRODUCTION

“My Last Duchess” is a dramatic monologue consisting of twenty-eight rhymed couplets, written in iambic pentameter employing an AABB rhyme scheme. It first appeared in Browning’s 1842 collection, *Dramatic Lyrics*. It has been reprinted in numerous anthologies and is still taught in many college and university literature courses.

PLOT AND MAJOR CHARACTERS

The poem itself is preceded by the word “Ferrara,” suggesting that the speaker is an historical figure from the Italian Renaissance, Alfonso II, fifth Duke of Ferrara. The Duke is receiving an emissary from another member of the nobility, a Count; the envoy has arrived to negotiate a marriage between the Count’s daughter and the Duke, who has, presumably, been recently widowed. The Duke, a connoisseur of fine art, takes the envoy on a tour of his palace, and draws the curtain on a portrait of his last wife. He describes the sessions of the Duchess sitting for her portrait and the comments of the artist, Fra Pandolf. The Duke then describes his wife’s shortcomings—that she was too generous with her smiles, that she was “too easily impressed,” and that she failed to appreciate the Duke’s nine-hundred-year old name. It is unclear if the wife’s behavior was actually flirtatious or even scandalous, or if it was completely innocent and was misconstrued by a jealous, egotistical, domineering husband. In any case, the Duke reports that he “gave commands” after which the Duchess’s smiles stopped. Again, her actual fate is not clear, although the implication is certainly that the Duke ordered her murder. As the Count’s emissary and his host walk away from the portrait, the Duke points out another work of art, the subject of which is Neptune taming a seahorse.

MAJOR THEMES

Most critics consider the central theme of “My Last Duchess” to be an attack on the arrogance and abuse of

power on the part of the aristocracy. The Duke is represented as a completely controlling, domineering man who insists on commanding his wife’s full attention. She is, in fact, expected to find no enjoyment or happiness that is not derived from her relationship with him. He acknowledges that he might have corrected her behavior, but insists that such a move would have involved some “stooping,” which he was far too proud to do. The Duke’s monologue is usually considered a thinly-veiled warning regarding the behavior expected of his next young bride; presumably the envoy will deliver the message to the Count and his daughter.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

James A. W. Heffernan (see *Further Reading*) finds “My Last Duchess” to be a poem that is “truly remarkable in the history of ekphrasis” since the poem’s speaker is the owner of the painting rather than the artist or the subject of the portrait or even the poet gazing upon it. Earl G. Ingersoll considers the poem—as well as other dramatic monologues by Browning—to be a perversion of artistic sensibility in that the collector uses art “to freeze beauty in a material form for ruthless possession.” Thus, regardless of whether or not the Duke arranged for the murder of his wife, “he has metaphorically murdered her by confining her beauty to an arrangement of pigments which only he may view.”

Most critics view the poem as a cautionary tale directed at the Duke’s next wife. Not all critics agree with this interpretation, however. B. R. Jerman believes that there is “little in the poem to support the notion that the Duke is consciously warning, demanding, taking precautions to inform, insinuating, hinting, implying, or intimating . . . that he expects or wants the envoy to tell the Count’s daughter how she must behave once she is his wife.” He considers the poem “a clever character study of a Renaissance nobleman who does not appear to be as clever after all as some critics would have him.” His interpretation is challenged by Laurence Perrine who makes a case for the Duke’s shrewdness based on “his skill in speech” and in “his whole deportment toward the emissary, which is subtly designed to flatter.” R. J. Berman points out that Browning was attempting to present a “cross-section of a Renaissance aristocrat,” and quotes fellow critic G. H. Palmer as

saying that because Browning's aim was "the dispassionate study of individual character, good and evil qualities are allowed to intertwine in the same perplexing fashion as in actual life." Elizabeth V. Gemmette finds that the poem offers an example of "probable unintentional self-revelation," and that the central concern for critics is the extent of the Duke's self-revelation and whether it is indeed intentional.

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

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Asolando: Fancies and Facts 1889
The Complete Poetical Works of Robert Browning 1915

Other Major Works

- Strafford* (play) 1837
A Blot in the 'Scutcheon (play) 1843
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King Victor and King Charles (play) 1843
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Luria, A Soul's Tragedy (play) 1846

- An Essay on Percy Bysshe Shelley* (essay) 1888
The Works of Robert Browning. 10 vols. (poetry, drama, and translations) 1912
The Complete Works of Robert Browning. 11 vols. to date (poetry, plays, and translations) 1969-
The Brownings' Correspondence. 15 vols. to date (letters) 1984-

CRITICISM

B. R. Jerman (essay date June 1957)

SOURCE: Jerman, B. R. "Browning's Witless Duke." In *The Browning Critics*, edited by Boyd Litzinger and K. L. Knickerbocker, pp. 329-35. Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1965.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1957, Jerman refutes the common critical notion that the Duke's conversation with the Count's emissary in Browning's "My Last Duchess" amounts to a warning to his next wife.]

A number of critics who have written on Browning believe that the Duke's little chat with the emissary of the Count in "My Last Duchess" constitutes a clever man's instructions as to the sort of behavior he expects of his next wife. Mrs. Sutherland Orr, for example, says that the Duke's "comments on the countenance of his last Duchess plainly state what he will expect of her successor."² Others, like Edward Berdoo, S. S. Curry, Ethel C. Mayne, William Lyon Phelps, and Ina B. Sessions,³ not to mention numerous editors and anthologists,⁴ find a similar purpose in the Duke's monologue. Although Berdoo's reading of the poem (p. 282) is perhaps not typical, it summarizes what the other critics have in mind: "When the Duke said 'Fra Pandolf' by design, he desired to impress on the envoy, and his master the Count, the sort of behavior he expected from the woman he was about to marry. He intimated that he would tolerate no rivals for his next wife's smiles. When he begs his guest to 'Notice Neptune—taming a sea horse,' he further intimated how he had tamed and killed his last duchess. All this was to convey to the envoy, and through him to the lady, that he demanded in his new wife the concentration of her whole being on himself, and the utmost devotion to his will." Browning himself is often quoted in support of at least the first part of this argument. Asked what the Duke meant by the words "by design," the poet answered briefly but equivocally, "To have some occasion for telling the story, and illustrating part of it."⁵

There is good reason to doubt, however, that the Duke is intentionally warning his intended bride, as these critics believe. In the first place, we know that Browning was uncomfortable with factual-minded people who persisted in asking him what he had meant by this or that line or poem.⁶ We also know that he, like most good poets, felt that it was necessary to make ambiguous statements about his poetry.⁷ Again like most good poets, Browning wanted his readers to do their own interpreting, once even going so far as to tell an acquaintance that poetry was not "a substitute for a cigar, or a game of dominoes, to an idle man."⁸ In the second place, if we must use Browning's statement about his poem (which he made, incidentally, nearly fifty years after the poem was first published), we need not necessarily conclude from it that the Duke is moralizing—as I hope to show. In the third place, although we, the audience (and certainly the emissary), might very well be aware of what His Grace expects of his wives, I see little in the poem to support the notion that the Duke is consciously warning, demanding, taking precautions to inform, insinuating, hinting, implying, or intimating—or whatever other terms these critics employ—that he expects or wants the envoy to tell the Count's daughter how she must behave once she is his wife. Finally, if he is not issuing a warning to his intended bride, it follows that the Duke, in pointing out the statue of Neptune taming the sea horse, is not suggesting "That's the way I break them in!" (Phelps, p. 175) or "just so do I tame my wives" (Rogers, p. 519). A closer analysis of "My Last Duchess" should show that the Duke does not have this purpose in mind.

The Duke of Ferrara is an art collector, not a moralist.⁹ He is, further, a splendid dilettante who prides himself on his possessions.¹⁰ As the poem opens, he is in his sublime role of collector, pointing out his various acquisitions to his visitor. I hardly think that he went to all the trouble to lead the emissary upstairs so he could, by telling the tale of the Duchess' demise, warn the Count's daughter, even by indirection. More probably the Duke has been taking the emissary on the rounds of his art gallery, a common courtesy in great houses, after chatting briefly about his bride-to-be ("as I avowed / At starting"). When they come to one particular picture, the Duke flings back the curtain which covers it, and, after determining his guest's reaction to the portrait, goes into his act. He is pleased, even inspired, to talk about this work of art.

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

His first mention of the artist is, as it were, bait. The envoy may have exclaimed, "What a beautiful portrait! Who on earth did it?" "Picasso, of course!" the Duke

replies. The bait is out, and the Duke knows, from having stalked other prey, what questions such a man as the envoy would ask. He is suave and confident in this matter:

I said
"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; . . .

Although the Duke might ask him to "sit and look at her," we can be certain that the envoy's eyes are soon turned to the speaker, for the Duke quickly draws attention to himself. The focus is, as Browning intended it to be, on the Duke, who is less concerned with this man's knowing how the artist managed to paint the Duchess than he is in pointing up his own stature as an art collector. The name of the famous artist, then, is designed to give the Duke a gambit, or as Browning called it, an "occasion for telling the story" of what he had to go through to get this so-called "wonder."

The Duchess was no doubt a very attractive but not necessarily beautiful woman, whose great asset, and paradoxically, liability, was her warm personality. Although the Duke disparages her personality (and well he might),¹¹ he praises her portrait as being a "wonder," and his explanation of how this artist managed to paint her "earnest glance" is all in a day's work to him as an elegant connoisseur. He describes the portrait's virtues, which were his Duchess' faults, in such phrases as the "depth and passion of its earnest glance," "such a glance," "spot of joy," "blush," and "smile," suggesting, to be sure, that the portrait is a revelation of the woman's "soul," possibly a masterpiece. However, in deflating the real-life Duchess, surely to inflate himself before this nameless messenger, the Duke reveals that all the artist had to do was to paint what was on the surface, for she was shallow, indiscriminating, common. She smiled at everyone and everything ("Sir, 't was all one!"). Even the artist could call up that "spot of joy" by using commonplace flattery, he says. Moreover, Frà Pandolf painted the portrait in "a day," surely a supreme achievement even for a master doing a perfunctory job, let alone painting a "wonder." What appears at first glance to be a masterpiece, then, is (on the basis of the Duke's own description of its history, it must be remembered) a mechanically reproduced, realistic picture of a photogenic woman, a dilettante's trophy. Frà Pandolf would be quick to agree that his patron's knowledge of art is more apparent than real.

The Duke, of course, plays down the annoyance the real-life Duchess caused him, saying:

Sir, 't was not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek:

and, later:

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile?

In other words, the Duke explains "how such a glance came there" not, I think, because he feels compelled to make an accounting of his motives for getting rid of his last Duchess, thereby drawing a moral, but to state the "price" he had to pay for the portrait. A man as proud as His Grace would not condescend to explain why he had her put away.

The most obvious point against the notion that the Duke is warning his bride-to-be is in this very matter of pride, which can best be seen in his attitude towards instructing her. "I choose / Never to stoop," he declares coldly. Petty wrangling, even polite suggestion that she might not spread her personality so thin, would have been beneath his dignity, he insists—and we believe him. After all, she was a duchess—His Duchess—and she should have known better than to have degraded him and his "nine-hundred-years-old name" by being "too easily impressed." It seems unlikely, therefore, that he would consciously unbend to tell "strangers" like the emissary, directly or even subtly, what he expects of this new woman.

As I see it the Duke's "design" is to exhibit his possessions, to pose as a patron of the arts, and to explain how he suffered to get the Duchess on canvas—all for the single purpose of directing attention to himself. In person she was a nuisance because he could not possess her. Framed, the object of inquiries which appeal to his vanity and, therefore, the subject of what he believes is a great portrait, she was kept in his art gallery along with other presumed "rarities" like the statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse, which another apparently well-known artist cast in bronze for "me!" Now, he has no more feeling for the one than for the other. He could as easily be talking about the statue. He moves, not callously but unwittingly, from one to the other, never guessing that because of the proximity of the two *objets d'art* to each other, his audience might see him as Neptune. He keeps the portrait of his last Duchess covered because he, like a jealous and insecure child, wants to show complete possession of her "smile." He can now turn that smile on or off at will, simply by pulling a rope.

The Duke would, in all likelihood, adopt similar measures against a new, smiling Duchess who refused to be possessed, but he does not draw a parallel between the two women, possibly because he sees no parallel.

He says he wants to marry the Count's daughter because she is "fair" (that is, beautiful), certainly a tactful statement, not because she has a personality equal to or better than that of his last Duchess. In spite of his insistence that he is interested in the daughter's "self" and not her dowry, money is probably important to him, but he is too proud to bargain for it. If it is money that he wants, it would seem that he and the Count are indulging in out-and-out horse trading: he is offering a position of dignity and an old name in exchange for the Count's money. The Duke remembers to mention the Count's "known munificence." Only a man who has money can afford to have the reputation for being generous.

"My Last Duchess," then, is a clever character study of a Renaissance nobleman who does not appear to be as clever after all as some critics would have him. This monologue is done with the same extraordinary irony exhibited in "*Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister*," its usual companion piece, where the petty and lecherous monk, too, unmasks himself unwittingly. Where jealousy blinds the monk, vanity and pride blind the Duke. His Grace is so pleased with himself that he does not realize that he has given himself away. Nor would it ever occur to so vain and possessive a dilettante that this conducted tour of his art gallery had revealed his "soul," as Browning would term it, just as it would never occur to him to utilize the tale of his sinister treatment of his last Duchess and the statue of Neptune taming the sea-horse as warnings to the Count's daughter about her behavior. The excellence of the poem lies in the dramatic irony of the Duke's witlessness, for we can be certain that the envoy, unless he sees and feels less than we do, will advise the Count against a marriage which might have put money in the Duke's pocket. As one discerning critic observes, some of Browning's "best effects are produced by a kind of dramatic irony, by which the speaker reveals himself as infinitely better or (more often) worse than he supposes himself to be."²

Notes

1. See William C. DeVane, *A Browning Handbook* (2nd ed.; New York, 1955), pp. 102-103, 107-109, for details of publication. First entitled "Italy," the poem is said to catch the temper of the Italian Renaissance. Edward Dowden, *The Life of Robert Browning* (London, 1915), p. 79, observes that "the Duke is Italian of Renaissance days; insensible in his egoistic pride to the beautiful humanity before him." Pearl Hogrefe, *Browning and Italian Art and Artists* (Lawrence, Kans., 1914), p. 19, says that the poem sums up "the entire decadent Renaissance attitude toward art so fully that no historical names could improve it."
2. *A Handbook to the Works of Robert Browning* (London, 1939), p. 251.

3. *The Browning Cyclopaedia* (London, 1892), p. 282; *Browning and the Dramatic Monologue* (Boston, 1908), p. 98; *Browning's Heroines* (London, 1913), pp. 173-74; *Robert Browning* (Indianapolis, 1932), p. 175; "The Dramatic Monologue," *PMLA*, LXII (1947), 510. It should be clear that I have not made a collection here of the variant interpretations of "My Last Duchess." I cite only a handful to illustrate what seems to be the prevailing interpretation of the poem, however.
4. A representative few are Charlotte Porter and Helen A. Clarke, ed., *The Complete Works of Robert Browning* (New York, 1901), IV, 384; William H. Rogers, ed., *The Best of Browning* (New York, 1942), pp. 518-19; James Stephens, Edwin L. Beck, and Royall H. Snow, ed., *Victorian and Later English Poets* (New York, 1937), p. 1198; R. R. Kirk and R. P. McCutcheon, ed., *An Introduction to the Study of Poetry* (New York, 1934), p. 20; Cleanth Brooks, John P. Purser, and Robert Penn Warren, ed., *An Approach to Literature* (New York, 1952), p. 293.
5. See A. Allen Brockington, "Robert Browning's Answers to Questions Concerning Some of his Poems," *Cornhill Magazine*, XXXVI (1914), 316-18. On 22 Feb. 1889 Browning answered in writing the queries put to him by a member of The Day's End Club of Exeter, a literary group studying contemporary writers. The queries dealt with not only "My Last Duchess," but also "In a Gondola," "Earth's Immortalities," and "Parting at Morning." Brockington reprints this information in his *Browning and the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 1932), pp. 117-18.
6. On his reticence, see Richard D. Altick, "The Private Life of Robert Browning," *Yale Review*, XLI (1951), 247-62. [In this volume [*The Browning Critics*], pp. 247-64.]
7. Such statements abound in Browning scholarship, perhaps reinforcing the often repeated idea that what a poet has to say about his work is frequently not the most revealing word on the subject. One of Browning's comments on "My Last Duchess" should illustrate the poet's point, however. An American professor once asked him if the Duke's commands were that the Duchess be killed. Browning "made no reply, for a moment, and then said, meditatively, 'Yes, I meant that the commands were that she should be put to death.' And then, after a pause, he added, with a characteristic dash of expression, and as if the thought had just started in his mind, 'Or he might have had her shut up in a convent.'" This interviewer wisely points out that when Browning wrote the poem he most likely had not thought out exactly what the commands were. His art purpose was satisfied, nevertheless, in having the smiles stopped, whatever the method. See Hiram Corson, *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry* (Boston, 1886), pp. vii-viii.
8. Letter to W. G. Kingsland, dated 27 Nov. 1868 in *Letters of Robert Browning*, ed. Thurman L. Hood (New Haven, 1933), pp. 128-29.
9. Louis S. Friedland, "Ferrara and 'My Last Duchess,'" *SP* [*Studies in Philology*], XXXIII (1936), 656-84, convincingly establishes the Duke as Alfonso II, 5th Duke of Ferrara (1553-98); the Duchess as the daughter of Cosimo I de Medici, the Duke of Florence; the Count as the Count of Tyrol; the envoy as possibly one Nikolaus Madruz of Innsbruck, etc. It is useless to suppose that Browning had all of these people in mind as the actual personages in the poem. Nevertheless, since he located the poem in Ferrara, there is every reason to believe that he meant the speaker to be the Duke of Ferrara and not some other Italian grandee, as John D. Rea suggests in "'My Last Duchess,'" *SP*, XXIX (1932), 120-22. If the envoy is not patterned after Madruz, Browning surely intended him to be an intelligent and respected commoner, say, a scholarly diplomatist, and not an ordinary servant, as some readers might believe him to be.
10. Elizabeth Nitchie, "Browning's 'Duchess,'" *Essays in Criticism*, III (1953), 475-76, once again calls attention to "my" in the title and the first line of the poem as being significantly in keeping with the Duke's pride of possession. We may add that a reading of the poem aloud with increased emphasis on the personal pronouns should reveal this important aspect of the Duke's character.
11. One can hardly resist the temptation to agree that "It was the deadly monotony [of her smile] that got on the man's nerves." See Margaret H. Bates, *Browning Critiques* (Chicago, 1921), p. 84, for this spirited note. Browning told The Day's End Club (q. v.) that the Duke used her shallowness "As an excuse—mainly to himself—for taking revenge on one who had unwittingly wounded his absurdly pretentious vanity, by failing to recognize his superiority in even the most trifling matters."
12. H. V. Routh, *Towards the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1937), p. 107.

Lionel Stevenson (essay date June 1959)

SOURCE: Stevenson, Lionel. "'My Last Duchess' and *Parisina*." *Modern Language Notes* 74, no. 6 (June 1959): 489-92.

[In the following essay, Stevenson considers Byron's poem *Parisina* as a possible source for "My Last Duchess."]

Discussion of possible sources for "My Last Duchess" has centered upon the actual behavior of certain Renaissance Italian rulers. Louis S. Friedland's article¹ has shown that the closest parallels are with the actions of a real Duke of Ferrara, Alfonso II. As I have pointed out elsewhere,² there is also a certain resemblance to an episode in the life of this Duke Alfonso's parents, Ercole II and Renée de France. John D. Rea's nomination of a Duke of Sabbioneta³ is also worthy of consideration. Since Browning was creating a fictitious character rather than reporting a real occurrence, it is probable that recollections of all three instances mingled in his mind, and justified the feeling that he was portraying a typical duke behaving in a typical manner.

It seems never to have been observed, however, that a famous English poem, Byron's *Parisina*, had already told a very similar story about yet another Duke of Ferrara, and that in particular this poem sheds light upon a much debated crux of the Browning monologue.

Unquestionably the most effective words of the poem, in producing the impression of the Duke's loathsome egoism and harshness, are the remark,

This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive.

Nowhere else in Browning's work is there a better instance of his ability to stimulate the reader's imagination with a few cryptic phrases. What actually happened to the Duchess is conveyed in the space between the words "together" and "There." Any explicit statement about her doom would have been far less horrifying than this chilly hint.

When Browning was questioned about the implication of these lines, half a century after he wrote them, Hiram Corson reports,

He made no reply, for a moment, and then said, meditatively, "Yes, I meant that the commands were that she should be put to death." And then, after a pause, he added, with a characteristic dash of expression, and as if the thought had just started in his mind, "Or he might have had her shut up in a convent." This was to me very significant. When he wrote the expression, "I gave commands," etc., he may not have thought definitely what the commands were. . . . This was all his art purpose required, and his mind did not go beyond it.⁴

Though Corson's opinion is cited approvingly by the latest commentator on the poem,⁵ it does not give any clue as to how Browning might have thought of this peculiarly ingenious device for heightening the sinister effect.

Byron's poem was based on the life of Duke Nicholas III of Ferrara (1384-1441), as narrated in Gibbon's *Antiquities of the House of Brunswick*. Byron explained

that he changed the duke's name to Azo "as more metrical." (It is perhaps worth noting that an earlier Azzo d'Este figured in *Sordello*.) The one conspicuous difference from Browning's poem is that in *Parisina* the wife is actually unfaithful. Duke Azo in his youth fathered an illegitimate son, Hugo, who grew up and expected to marry a beautiful girl, Parisina. His father, however, fell in love with the girl and broke off the match on the ground that Hugo, as a bastard, was unworthy of her. Azo then married Parisina himself, and later discovered that she was carrying on a secret love affair with Hugo. In his injured pride and honor, Azo condemned his son to be immediately beheaded.

At this point Byron departed from his source, which had stated that both the guilty lovers were executed together. Byron instead left the wife's fate as an unsolved mystery. It will be noted that he included both the alternatives that Browning mentioned to Corson:

Hugo is fallen; and, from that hour,
No more in palace, hall, or bower,
Was Parisina heard or seen: . . .
Parisina's fate lies hid
Like dust beneath the coffin lid:
Whether in convent she abode,
And won to heaven her dreary road
By blighted and remorseful years
Of scourge, and fast, and sleepless tears;
Or if she fell by bowl or steel,
For that dark love she dared to feel;
Or if, upon the moment smote,
She died by tortures less remote, . . .
None knew—and none can ever know.

The final section of the poem informs us that

Azo found another bride
And goodly sons grew by his side;

though in typically Byronic fashion he remained gloomy and taciturn, consumed by unacknowledged remorse.

Browning's boyhood enthusiasm for Byron is well known. His first biographer said:

Byron was his chief master in those early poetic days. He never ceased to honour him as the one poet who combined a constructive imagination with the more technical qualities of his art; and the result of this period of aesthetic training was a volume of short poems produced, we are told, when he was only twelve, in which the Byronic influence was predominant.⁶

Browning's mature poetic methods were so utterly unlike Byron's that no critic has paid much attention to the possibility that Byronic traces may be latent in any of his work. But we can be sure that the poems he admired so much in childhood sank deeply into his imagination, so that when in his later reading of Italian history he came across the episodes that merged into

"My Last Duchess," they recalled something of the first poem he had read about a beautiful Duchess of Ferrara and her doom.

Notes

The basic resemblance between the two poems is obvious. In both a proud, ruthless Duke of Ferrara thinks he has reason to be dissatisfied with the conduct of his wife, and removes her in some unspecified fashion, leaving himself free to marry again. Browning characteristically altered the situation by making the Duke's suspicion and revenge the result of psychopathic egoism, without justification in fact. Even more characteristic of the difference between the two poets is the fact that Browning conveyed the Duchess's equivocal fate more grimly in two lines than Byron did in twenty. But his respect for Byron's mastery of "the more technical qualities of his art" is shown by his borrowing of the unusual device for intensifying the sense of despotic cruelty.

1. "Ferrara and 'My Last Duchess,'" *SP [Studies in Philology]*, xxxiii (1936), 656-684.
2. "The Pertinacious Victorian Poets," *UTQ [University of Toronto Quarterly]*, xxi (1952), 241.
3. "My Last Duchess," *SP*, xxix (1932), 120-122.
4. Hiram Corson, *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry* (Boston, 1895), p. viii.
5. B. R. Jerman, "Browning's Witless Duke," *PMLA*, lxxii (1957), 489.
6. Mrs. Sutherland Orr, *Life and Letters of Robert Browning* (London, 1891), p. 33.

Laurence Perrine (essay date 1959)

SOURCE: Perrine, Laurence. "Browning's Shrewd Duke." In *The Browning Critics*, edited by Boyd Lit-zinger and K. L. Knickerbocker, pp. 336-42. Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1965.

[In the following essay, originally published in 1959, Perrine responds to B. R. Jerman's alternative interpretation of "My Last Duchess," contending that Browning employed a doubled element of dramatic irony in the poem.]

B. R. Jerman's challenge to the traditional view of Browning's Duke of Ferrara ("Browning's Witless Duke," *PMLA*, LXXII, June 1957, 488-93)¹ should not pass without a rebuttal. According to Jerman, the Duke is not at all the clever man he has usually been thought, who utilizes a casual conversation on his last Duchess to insinuate what he expects of his next one; rather, he

is a "witless" man who, blinded by vanity and pride, "does not realize that he has given himself away" to the Count's emissary, with whom he is speaking. "The excellence of the poem lies in the dramatic irony of the Duke's witlessness, for we can be certain that the envoy, unless he sees and feels less than we do, will advise the Count against a marriage which might have put money in the Duke's pocket."

I shall contend, quite otherwise, that the Duke, vain and proud as he assuredly is, is also a shrewd bargainer and master diplomat who, while exposing himself fully to the reader, not improbably obtains high commendation from the emissary in his report to the Count. Inordinate egotism and intellect frequently cohabit, as may be seen in characters from history (e.g., Benvenuto Cellini) or from Browning's other poems (e.g., Cleon); and vanity, though it puffs a man up, by no means necessarily blinds him in matters of self-interest.

If it seems paradoxical that the Duke should expose himself to the reader without giving himself away to the Count's envoy, we must remember that the envoy (1) does not have the privilege of viewing him through the lens of literature, as we have, and (2) has not been subjected, as we have been for over two hundred years, to such sentiments as "a man's a man for a' that" and "Kind hearts are more than coronets, / And simple faith than Norman blood." The reader is fully prepared to dismiss the Duke's position and family name as hollow trumperies, and to be scornful of their possessor; but the envoy, living in a day when the prerogatives of birth were still unquestioned, standing in the very presence of the Duke, and surrounded by all the appurtenances of his power, may well have been impressed and even dazzled.

We cannot know, however, how the envoy responded; we can only know how the Duke handled him.² And first, why has the Duke summoned him to an upper room? I agree with Mr. Jerman that he hardly "went to all the trouble to lead the emissary upstairs so he could, by telling the tale of the Duchess' demise, warn the Count's daughter," without joining him in the speculation that he "has been taking the emissary on the rounds of his art gallery." The purpose of their interview seems clearly indicated in the poem:

I repeat,
The Count your master's known munificence
Is ample warrant that no just pretense
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;

The Duke and the Count's envoy have been closeted for a business conference: they have been discussing terms for the Duke's alliance with the Count's daughter. The Duke is indeed "indulging in out-and-out horse-trading": it is his position and nine-hundred-years-old

name for her money. Such arrangements were probably common enough in those days of marriages of convenience; nevertheless, the Duke is too polished and subtle to avow openly that the dowry is his principal interest, so he adds,

Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object.

The words "I repeat" and "as I avowed / At starting" are important. The Duke has mentioned both of these matters before, in reverse order; he is now driving them home in order of their real importance, making sure he is clearly understood. Notice also that the Duke's claiming of the Count's "fair daughter's self" as his object in marriage, is not at all equivalent, as Jerman says it is, to saying that he wants to marry the Count's daughter "because she is 'fair'."

The prime argument for the Duke's shrewdness is his skill in speech. His disclaimer of such skill is part of the evidence for it, and should remind the reader of a similar disclaimer by Shakespeare's Mark Antony in his oration on Caesar, for it serves a similar purpose. It is a rhetorical trick, to throw the listener off his guard. The Duke's momentary groping for words a few lines above ("She had / A heart—how shall I say?—too soon made glad") by no means supports his disclaimer, for actually the words he finds when he finds them are just the right words and, moreover, the break in the sentence serves very subtly to throw emphasis on the words which follow the break, which otherwise might have followed too smoothly, as if rehearsed. But the real proof of the Duke's skill in speech is the beautifully modulated passage, above quoted, in which he couches his demand for dowry. These lines are a masterpiece of diplomatic circumlocution. The nature of the demand is made amply clear, yet it is gloved in a sentence softened by a double negative and by a skillfully tactful and euphemistic choice of diction: not "riches" but "munificence"; not "proves" but "is ample warrant"; not "my demand" but "no just pretense of mine"; not "refused" but "disallowed." The hard bargaining is thus enveloped in an atmosphere of perfect courtesy and good breeding.

The Duke's skill in diplomacy is to be seen not only in his speech, however, but also in his whole deportment toward the emissary, which is subtly designed to flatter. Having risen from their business conference, they pass in the hall the portrait of the Duke's last Duchess. We need not assume that the Duke has planned it this way: he is simply quick to take advantage of the opportunity. To show the emissary a specimen of his art collection is indeed, as Jerman says, a courtesy, but it hardly has the manner of a "common" courtesy when the Duke tells him, "none puts by / The curtain I have drawn for you, but I"; it is rather a special courtesy. The envoy may well feel honored that the Duke should thus draw aside

the curtain for him and chat in a friendly manner about personal affairs. This friendly courtesy, from the man who is accustomed to give commands and who objected to too much courtesy in his Duchess, is apparent throughout the interview: "Will't please you sit and look at her? . . . Will't please you rise?" And when the envoy, having risen, waits respectfully for the Duke to precede him downstairs, as befits his eminence, the Duke, perhaps taking him by the elbow, tells him, "Nay, we'll go / Together down, sir." And so the envoy walks side by side down the stairway with the possessor of a nine-hundred-years-old name who has just said, "I choose / Never to stoop." Why shouldn't the envoy be flattered?

Mr. Jerman's interpretation would seem to assume that *because* the Duke is glorying in showing off his possessions, he is *not* using the occasion also to intimate his prescriptions for his next wife. But the poem does not present us with any such *either-or* proposition. The Duke is a complex, not a simple individual, and Browning's is a complex characterization. The Duke is compounded of egotism and astuteness, cruelty and politeness, pride of possession and love of art, all at once. In his interview with the emissary his motives are at least three. He wishes (1) to stipulate politely but clearly exactly what he expects for his share in this bargain, both as to dowry and as to daughter, (2) to impress the envoy with his position, his power, and his importance, and (3) to flatter the envoy so as to ensure a favorable report on the envoy's return to his master. He accomplishes all three purposes. When he has been so subtle in presenting his demands for dowry, we need not balk at imputing to him subtlety also in presenting stipulations for his next bride. Mr. Jerman may find the irony he requires in the fact that when the Duke says,

Even had you skill
In speech—which I have not—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one,

he is at that very moment by indirection making his will most clear to the envoy as to what he expects of his next wife. The Duke is vain, but he is no fool.

To support his interpretation Mr. Jerman advances the "obvious" point that the Duke who chooses "never to stoop" to correct his first wife, would find it beneath his dignity to stipulate, even indirectly, what he expects of his next wife. But surely there is a difference between making clear what is wanted in a purchase and wrangling over the goods after they are provided. The man who is very particular in ordering a custom-built piece of furniture may simply cancel the order, rather than haggle over details, if it doesn't meet specifications on delivery. Moreover, if the Duke can "stoop" to state plainly what he expects in dowry, why should he not state subtly what he expects of a wife?

Another point that Mr. Jerman advances for the Duke's "witlessness" is his regarding as a "wonder" a portrait that had been painted in a day. There are various ways of meeting this objection. One is to question whether a masterpiece may not be painted in a day. Whistler, when cross-examined about one of his paintings, said he asked two hundred guineas for it, not for the labor of two days but "for the knowledge of a lifetime." Another is to question how literally the phrase "a day" is to be interpreted: perhaps only the sitting lasted a day. But suppose we grant that the painting may not have been the masterpiece the Duke thought it? We may grant a shallowness in his art appreciation without impairing our claim for cleverness in matters that touch him more personally. The Duke is proud of being a collector and art patron at a time when such patronage was fashionable. Millionaire collectors today often have very faulty artistic taste without being any less shrewd in their personal transactions with people.

One other suggestion made by Mr. Jerman requires contention. He apparently regards the Duchess as superficial and insipid, and quotes approvingly the opinion of Margaret H. Bates that it was "the deadly monotony" of the Duchess' smile that got on the Duke's nerves. The poem does not support this view of the Duchess. Our reactions to the Duchess are controlled by the warmth of her response to compliments, by her graciousness to inferiors, and especially by the things she takes delight in: the beauty of a sunset, the gift of a bough of cherries, a ride round the terrace on a white mule. Her response to these things indicates a genuine and sensitive nature, which takes joy in simple, natural things rather than in gauds and baubles or the pomp of position and power which attract the Duke. To the Duke, who seldom smiles, the Duchess may seem to smile excessively. The Duke thinks his Duchess should be proud and unbending, like himself; she should give commands to her inferiors, not stoop to thank them for small favors. The Duke's response to her, therefore, is to do away with her. But the response of others in the poem is to bring her a bough of cherries or to remark on "the faint / Half-flush that dies along her throat."

Mr. Jerman ends his article by quoting H. V. Routh's comment that some of Browning's "best effects are produced by a kind of dramatic irony, by which the speaker reveals himself as infinitely better or (more often) worse than he supposes himself to be." The excellence of "My Last Duchess" does indeed lie in this kind of dramatic irony, in fact, in a double use of it, for the Duke while revealing himself as infinitely worse than he supposes himself to be (in human worth, not wit), is at the same time revealing his last Duchess as infinitely better than he supposed her to be. The Duke is trying to build himself up and run his Duchess down.

He is given all the words, and he uses them skillfully. But for the reader (not necessarily for the envoy), he accomplishes just the reverse.

Notes

1. Reprinted in this volume [*The Browning Critics*], pp. 329-35.
2. However, if historical evidence counts for anything, the marriage did take place. In 1565 Alfonso II, Duke of Ferrara, took for his second duchess the daughter of Ferdinand I, Count of Tyrol. That these historical figures were the prototypes of Browning's characters is convincingly established by Louis S. Friedland in "Ferrara and *My Last Duchess*," *SP [Studies in Philology]*, XXXIII (1936), 656-84.

R. J. Berman (essay date 1972)

SOURCE: Berman, R. J. "Browning's Duke." In *Browning's Duke*, pp. 1-94. New York: Richards Rosen Press, 1972.

[In the following excerpt, Berman contends that most scholarship on "My Last Duchess" fails to consider the relationship between the poem's form and its intent.]

I

What so many commentators on Robert Browning's *My Last Duchess* seem not to account for is the form of the poem as a complement to, and a vital adjunct of, its intent. The work is not a narrative in limbo, one offered from the point of view of an omniscient poet with a particular pronouncement or moral lesson to aver and justify, but a statement of one hypothetical persona to another, a dramatic monologue—that "consists of three constituent parts: the occasion, the speaker, and the hearer."¹ *My Last Duchess* differs from, for example, *Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister* or *Porphyria's Lover* insofar as in it one speaks directly to an identifiable other, both have demonstrable personalities, and the two are in a specific and detailed setting, the essential features of which seem completely comprehensible by the words of the one to the other. The 'monologue' aspect of the poem differentiates it from a soliloquy since, although the words of the poem emanate entirely from one of the personae, all are heard—and intended to be heard—by his immediate auditor. The poem, rather than being a narrative, is 'dramatic' because the whole of it appears to have been excerpted from the body of a play, of many characters and scenes and a conceivable plot; all of these dramatic features comprise the remainder, what precedes and what follows, which defines a drama of the reader's imagination, evocative but unwritten.