

Dramatic Romances

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Robert Browning

*Dramatic
Romances*

Shearsman Books

This edition published in the United Kingdom in 2012 by
Shearsman Books
50 Westons Hill Drive
Emersons Green
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BS16 7DF

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30–31 St. James Place, Mangotsfield, Bristol BS16 9JB
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www.shearsman.com

ISBN 978-1-84861-251-8

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Introduction

This is one of a series of volumes published in a somewhat tardy celebration of the bicentenary of the author's birth—he was born in May 1812, and this volume sees the light of day in September 2012. At the date of writing, celebrations have been decidedly muted, and Edward Lear, Browning's exact contemporary, has received a good deal more attention. Why the neglect? The easy response would be that certain Victorian authors have simply gone out of fashion, that Browning wrote far too much, and at too great a length, for an age where attention spans have grown ever shorter, and that we now simply prefer his wife's poetry. In the case of Elizabeth Barrett, an extraordinarily fine poet, this marks a return to the situation that Robert Browning himself would have recognised during her lifetime, for, while his wife still lived, her fame completely eclipsed his. His own fame was to rise after her death, following his return to London from Florence, and the publication of the *magnum opus* that was to seal his reputation, *The Ring and the Book*, a vast poem which is in fact a verse-novel, and which almost no-one today reads, at least not voluntarily. *The Ring and the Book* is a companion volume to the present one, part of this small attempt at persuading the 21st century public to take Browning seriously, and simply *read* him.

The poems in this volume first appeared in three separate collections: *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842), *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845) and *Men and Women* (1855), the last-named being one of the first of Browning's publications to make its way beyond a restricted group of *cognoscenti*. The first two however, despite being filled with poems that were later to become acknowledged classics, were almost ignored. All of these volumes contained poems in the form of the *Dramatic Monologue*, a form that Browning was to share with Tennyson, but which, in his case, was a much more subversive affair. Not for nothing was Henry James to describe Browning as the most "modern" of British poets—the term of course dates badly: one era's moderns are the next era's stuffy representatives of tradition, needing to be dethroned by the thrusting new generation. In later life, Browning came to be lionised, although he made his readership work hard. The anti-Victorian backlash in the 20th century ensured his temporary eclipse, but his reputation did recover by the mid-century. For some reason, however, although admired today in academic departments that have a speciality in Victorian literature, his star seems to have been

thoroughly eclipsed for the wider public, a problematic situation he seems to share with Tennyson, a poet who I suspect is read less than he is quoted. It may simply be that both are seen as representatives of high-Victorian imperialism at a time when we are uncomfortable with that particular aspect of our history. It may, however, be nothing more than fashion, and in my humble opinion, literary fashions are to be despised. Indeed, if such a fashion does take root, this should be a powerful incentive to go 180° the other way, and read that which is deemed *unfashionable*.

The *Dramatic Romances* offered in this volume represent one strand of Browning's work, and the collection brings together all the poems that the author gathered under this heading in the two-volume *Poetical Works* published in 1863, with the exception of 'Johannes Agricola in Meditation', which, in 1868 and in subsequent editions, the author moved to the *Men and Women* poems. Browning had previously termed these poems *Dramatic Lyrics and Romances*, and it was only in 1863 that he distinguished between the *Lyrics* and the *Romances*. When seeking to publish new editions of Browning's shorter poems, it seemed to me to make sense to follow these classifications, and we may issue volumes devoted to the *Lyrics* and *Men and Women* in due course. The texts themselves are those of the author's final thoughts, as published in the seventeen-volume *Poetical Works* of 1888-89. While Browning's continual tinkering with his poems may not necessarily have improved them, I have nonetheless opted for the final texts, rather than for those of the first editions. A scholarly audience would no doubt prefer a synoptic edition and this would probably best be served by an online, hyperlinked set of texts, which would allow the reader to track the various changes through the lives of these poems.

The selection made by Browning does give the reader a large number of acknowledged masterpieces, and "greatest hits", which are of course not necessarily the same thing. 'My Last Duchess', for one, must stand as one of the most significant Victorian poems; 'The Pied Piper of Hamelin', by contrast, is one I recall reading as a child in an illustrated edition, and is none the worse for its status as a children's poem. What the majority of the poems here do display, however, is Browning's mastery of the dramatic monologue. Where Browning was revolutionary was in giving such monologues a deeply unstable environment. The speaker in these poems is often a slippery character, and rarely has much of the author in him. The listener is also not necessarily the reader: in some cases, the reader is eavesdropping on the monologue, not always sure who the

“listener” *within* the poem actually is. This instability lends more drama to the text. Today, in the 21st century, readers are used to the fact that a narrator speaking in the first person may well not be the author, may indeed be nothing like the author, may even be the most reprehensible of individuals. We are also used to the fact that such narrators can be as unstable and as untrustworthy as any other narrator: not for nothing is autobiography renowned for being more fictional than many a novel, and memory proven to be more wishful thinking than historical “truth”. In the Victorian era, however, Browning’s adoption of an *unreliable* narrator in many of his poems was an innovation, and a puzzle for readers who expected “I” to be the author, even if at times an aggrandised projection. The extent of the potential instability discussed here might best be indicated by considering the drama of ‘Porphyria’s Lover’ (first journal publication, 1836), where the reader is “listening” to the eponymous lover, who appears to have murdered innocent Porphyria—a natural assumption, but one fascinatingly contradicted by J.T. Best, who argues the case for *euthanasia*, rather than a *crime passionel*.¹ Here the instability would arise from the reader’s projections and has a little in common with the red herrings of whodunnits. Thus it is that *truth* is a significant casualty of the dramatic monologue, and thus it is that Browning begins to seem decidedly modern, notwithstanding his often fustian language, for “truth” is today a very slippery concept in the world of human interaction, something which literature has taken very much on board.

For those wishing to read more of Browning, the situation as of 2012 is not too helpful, unless you are willing to read e-books, the most recent of which are from the University of Adelaide—these show a number of incorrect stanza-breaks, but otherwise do the job as intended. Scanned reproductions of the first editions and of the *Collected Works* of 1889-90 are available in (multiple) PDF form from Project Gutenberg and from Google Books, as well as in unreadable OCR’d .txt files, but, if paper copies are required, one is confined to a good *Selected* from Penguin, edited by Daniel Karlin, and a slightly less satisfactory one (but which has good additional essays and notes), *Robert Browning’s Poetry*, edited by James F. Loucks and Andrew M. Stauffer, from Norton. Scholarly readers, who need something more robust and thorough, are directed to the excellent Oxford Standard Authors edition of Browning’s works, in

¹ J.T. Best “*Porphyria’s Lover*”: — *Vastly Misunderstood Poetry*. <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/rb/porphyria/best1.html> Accessed 2 August 2012.

seventeen volumes. The poems in this book may be found in Volume 4 of that edition. This is an expensive pleasure, however, as that edition is designed for library, rather than personal, budgets. Affordable second-hand editions that can be recommended are the *Poetical Works 1833-1864*, ed. Ian Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1970) and Volume 1 of *The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew (London: Penguin Books 1981). The former is light on commentary, but the latter has good notes.

Tony Frazer

Incident of the French Camp

I

You know, we French stormed Ratisbon:
A mile or so away,
On a little mound, Napoleon
Stood on our storming-day;
With neck out-thrust, you fancy how,
Legs wide, arms locked behind,
As if to balance the prone brow
Oppressive with its mind.

II

Just as perhaps he mused, 'My plans
That soar, to earth may fall,
'Let once my army-leader Lannes
Waver at yonder wall.'
Out 'twixt the battery-smokes there flew
A rider, bound on bound
Full-galloping; nor bridle drew
Until he reached the mound.

10

III

Then off there flung in smiling joy,
And held himself erect
By just his horse's mane, a boy:
You hardly could suspect
(So tight he kept his lips compressed
Scarce any blood came through)
You looked twice ere you saw his breast
Was all but shot in two.

20

IV

‘Well,’ cried he, ‘Emperor, by God’s grace
 ‘We’ve got you Ratisbon!
‘The Marshal’s in the market-place,
 ‘And you’ll be there anon
‘To see your flag-bird flap his vans
 ‘Where I, to heart’s desire,
‘Perched him—’ The chief’s eye flashed; his plans
 Soared up again like fire. 30

V

The chief’s eye flashed, but presently
 Softened itself, as sheathes
A film the mother-eagle’s-eye
 When her bruised eaglet breathes,
‘You’re wounded!’ ‘Nay,’ the soldier’s pride
 Touched to the quick, he said:
‘I’m killed, Sire!’ And his chief beside,
 Smiling the boy fell dead. 40

The Patriot

AN OLD STORY

I

It was roses, roses, all the way,
 With myrtle mixed in my path like mad:
The house-roofs seemed to heave and sway,
 The church-spires flamed, such flags they had,
A year ago on this very day.

II

The air broke into a mist with bells,
 The old walls rocked with the crowd and cries.
Had I said, 'Good folk, mere noise repels—
 'But give me your sun from yonder skies!'
They had answered, 'And afterward, what else?' 10

III

Alack, it was I who leaped at the sun
 To give it my loving friends to keep!
Nought man could do, have I left undone:
 And you see my harvest, what I reap
This very day, now a year is run.

IV

There's nobody on the house-tops now—
 Just a palsied few at the windows set;
For the best of the sight is, all allow,
 At the Shambles' Gate—or, better yet,
By the very scaffold's foot, I trow. 20

V

I go in the rain, and, more than needs,
 A rope cuts both my wrists behind;
And I think, by the feel, my forehead bleeds,
 For they fling, whoever has a mind,
Stones at me for my year's misdeeds.

VI

Thus I entered, and thus I go!
 In triumphs, people have dropped down dead.
'Paid by the world, what dost thou owe
 'Me?'—God might question; now instead,
'Tis God shall repay: I am safer so.

30

My Last Duchess

FERRARA

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Fra Pandolf's hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will't please you sit and look at her? I said
'Fra 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) 10
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not
Her husband's presence only, called that spot
Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps
Fra Pandolf chanced to say 'Her mantle laps
'Over my lady's wrist too much,' or 'Paint
'Must never hope to reproduce the faint
'Half-flush that dies along her throat'; such stuff 20
Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart—how shall I say—too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.
Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech, 30
Or blush, at least. She thanked men—good! but thanked
Somehow—I know not how—as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame
This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

In speech (which I have not) to make your will
 Quite clear to such an one, and say, 'Just this
 'Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
 'Or there exceed the mark'—and if she let
 Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set 40
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
 E'en that would be some stooping; and I choose
 Never to stoop. Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
 Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
 As if alive. Will't please you rise? We'll meet
 The company below, then. I repeat,
 The Count your master's known munificence
 Is ample warrant that no just pretence 50
 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
 Together down, sir. Notice Neptune, though,
 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
 Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me!

Count Gismond

AIX EN PROVENCE

I

Christ God who savest man, save most
 Of men Count Gismond who saved me!
Count Gauthier, when he chose his post,
 Chose time and place and company
To suit it; when he struck at length
My honour, 'twas with all his strength.

II

And doubtlessly ere he could draw
 All points to one, he must have schemed!
That miserable morning saw
 Few half so happy as I seemed,
While being dressed in queen's array
To give our tourney prize away.

10

III

I thought they loved me, did me grace
 To please themselves; 'twas all their deed;
God makes, or fair or foul, our face;
 If showing mine so caused to bleed
My cousins' hearts, they should have dropped
A word, and straight the play had stopped.

IV

They, too, so beauteous! Each a queen
 By virtue of her brow and breast;
Not needing to be crowned, I mean,
 As I do. E'en when I was dressed,
Had either of them spoke, instead
Of glancing sideways with still head!

20

V

But no: they let me laugh, and sing
 My birthday song quite through, adjust
The last rose in my garland, fling
 A last look on the mirror, trust
My arms to each an arm of theirs,
And so descend the castle-stairs—

30

VI

And come out on the morning-troop
 Of merry friends who kissed my cheek,
And called me queen, and made me stoop
 Under the canopy—a streak
That pierced it, of the outside sun,
Powdered with gold its gloom's soft dun—

VII

And they could let me take my state
 And foolish throne amid applause
Of all come there to celebrate
 My queen's-day—Oh I think the cause
Of much was, they forgot no crowd
Makes up for parents in their shroud!

40

VIII

However that be, all eyes were bent
 Upon me, when my cousins cast
Theirs down; 'twas time I should present
 The victor's crown, but ... there, 'twill last
No long time ... the old mist again
Blinds me as then it did. How vain!

IX

See! Gismond's at the gate, in talk
 With his two boys: I can proceed. 50
Well, at that moment, who should stalk
 Forth boldly—to my face, indeed—
But Gauthier, and he thundered 'Stay!'
And all stayed. 'Bring no crowns, I say!'

X

'Bring torches! Wind the penance-sheet
'About her! Let her shun the chaste,
'Or lay herself before their feet!
 'Shall she whose body I embraced
'A night long, queen it in the day?
'For honour's sake no crowns, I say!' 60

XI

I? What I answered? As I live,
 I never fancied such a thing
As answer possible to give.
 What says the body when they spring
Some monstrous torture-engine's whole
Strength on it? No more says the soul.

XII

Till out strode Gismond; then I knew
 That I was saved. I never met
His face before, but, at first view,
 I felt quite sure that God had set 70
Himself to Satan; who would spend
A minute's mistrust on the end?

XIII

He strode to Gauthier, in his throat
Gave him the lie, then struck his mouth
With one back-handed blow that wrote
In blood men's verdict there. North, South,
East, West, I looked. The lie was dead,
And damned, and truth stood up instead.

XIV

This glads me most, that I enjoyed
The heart of the joy, with my content 80
In watching Gismond unalloyed
By any doubt of the event:
God took that on him—I was bid
Watch Gismond for my part: I did.

XV

Did I not watch him while he let
His armourer just brace his greaves,
Rivet his hauberk, on the fret
The while! His foot ... my memory leaves
No least stamp out, nor how anon
He pulled his ringing gauntlets on. 90

XVI

And e'en before the trumpet's sound
Was finished, prone lay the false knight,
Prone as his lie, upon the ground:
Gismond flew at him, used no sleight
O' the sword, but open-breasted drove,
Cleaving till out the truth he clove.

XVII

Which done, he dragged him to my feet
And said 'Here die, but end thy breath
'In full confession, lest thou fleet
 'From my first, to God's second death! 100
'Say, hast thou lied?' And, 'I have lied
'To God and her,' he said, and died.

XVIII

Then Gismond, kneeling to me, asked
 What safe my heart holds, though no word
Could I repeat now, if I tasked
 My powers for ever, to a third
Dear even as you are. Pass the rest
Until I sank upon his breast.

XIX

Over my head his arm he flung
 Against the world; and scarce I felt 110
His sword (that dripped by me and swung)
 A little shifted in its belt:
For he began to say the while
How South our home lay many a mile.

XX

So 'mid the shouting multitude
 We two walked forth to never more
Return. My cousins have pursued
 Their life, untroubled as before
I vexed them. Gauthier's dwelling-place
God lighten! May his soul find grace! 120

XXI

Our elder boy has got the clear
Great brow; tho' when his brother's black
Full eye shows scorn, it ... Gismond here?
And have you brought my tercel back?
I just was telling Adela
How many birds it struck since May.