

Sordello

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Robert Browning

Sordello

Shearsman Books

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

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

ISBN 978-1-84861-252-5

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Acknowledgements

Sordello was first published in 1840 by Edward Moxon of London. The text here follows that of the final collected edition of Browning's works, published in 1888–89, but retains the running headers from the 1863 collected edition—presented here as marginal glosses—as a guide for the reader. A few textual errors reported by scholars have been corrected.

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Important dates in the poem

Birth of Ecelin the Monk (Ecelin II)	1150
Birth of Ecelin the Tyrant (Ecelin III), his son	1194
Expulsion of House Romano from Vicenza	1194
Battle of Ponte Alto	1212
Death of Azzo VII and of Richard of San Bonifacio (the Elder)	1212
Death of Adelaide (wife of Ecelin II)	1221
Retirement of Ecelin II to the monastery in Oliero	1221
Sacking of the Palace of Salinguerra at Ferrara	1221
Capture of Richard at Ferrara	1224
Renewal of the Lombard League	1226
Death of Ecelin the Monk	1234
Capture of Salinguerra at Ferrara	1240
Death of Salinguerra at Venice	1245
Death of Ecelin the Tyrant	1258
Death of Alberic and family	1260

Dramatis Personae

Ghibellines

Friedrich II of Hohenstaufen, Holy Roman Emperor, King of Germany, Burgundy, Lombardy, Sicily and Jersualem.

—Agnes Este (deceased), his wife.

Ecelin da Romano (Ecelin II), also known as “the Monk”.

- his first wife, Agnes Este (deceased); mother of Palma, who falls in love with Sordello.
- his second wife, Adelaide; foster-mother of Sordello; mother of Alberic, Ecelin III (a.k.a. “the Younger,” or “the Tyrant”), and Sofia.

Salinguerra Taurello, soldier and politician in the employ of Ecelin.

- his first wife Retrude, a Hohenstaufen, mother of his son, Sordello; died at Vicenza, 1194.
- Sofia da Romano, his second wife, daughter of Ecelin II, sister of Ecelin III, and widow of Henry of Egna.

Count Mainard.

Tito, Imperial Pretor, envoy to Taurello.

Elcorte, an archer, supposedly the father of Sordello.

in *Sordello*

Guelfs

Pope Honorius III, d.1227, succeeded by Gregory IX.

Count Richard Boniface (Riccardo di San Bonifaccio),
Count of Verona.

Azzo VII d'Este, Lord of Este, Marquis of Ferrara.

Montelungo, the Papal Legate.

Sordello — brought up by his foster-mother Adelaide at Goito, north of Mantua, the supposed son of an archer, Elcorte. This Elcorte had saved the life of Adelaide, and of Sordello at Vicenza on the night when the wife and child of Salinguerra were reported to have perished, dying himself in the process.

A Note on the Text

The text used here is that of the final edition of Browning's works (1888–89). Browning was a restless tinkerer with his work, not always to its benefit, but the final text was broadly that of the 1863 edition, which was intended by its author to be a rewrite, but which turned out to be a slightly amended version with some important aids for the reader—specifically the inclusion of speech-marks and the addition of running headers, glossing the action, and presented here as marginalia. I take the view that these aid comprehension of the text and are thus preferable to the approach taken in the first and final editions—the glosses were dropped in the latter. The dedication to J. Milsand—a close French friend of the author—also dates from the 1863 edition, and was preserved by the author in subsequent reprintings.

This is one of several volumes by Browning being published in the Shearsman Classics series in the poet's bicentenary year. While every attempt has been made to ensure textual accuracy, these editions should not be confused with academic critical editions. They are intended for a general reader, and those who need a more robust scholarly edition are directed to the splendid Oxford University Press publication, edited by Ian Jack and Margaret Smith, volume 2 of the exhaustive *Poetical Works of Robert Browning*. Those needing detailed guides to the minutiae of the poem are advised to acquire some of the older guides, which can be downloaded from such sites as Project Gutenberg, or Internet Archive. The most useful guides are listed in the bibliography below. Of the modern studies, Ryals' *Becoming Browning* can be downloaded from the Ohio University Press website, without charge. His analysis of *Sordello* is invigorating, although I feel that he over-estimates the success of the poem's structure.

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Dante & Sordello

from Dante's 'Purgatorio'

“But see yon spirit that, stationed all alone,
All solitary, looketh toward us now:
It shall the speediest way to us make known.”
We came to it. O Lombard spirit, how
Disdainful and majestic thou wast!
In moving of thine eyes how stately and slow!
No word to us approaching it address,
But let us go on, watching only there
In likeness of a lion couched at rest.
Yet Virgil toward it moved and made his prayer
That it should point to us the best ascent;
And that shade for his question had no care,
But of our country and where out life was spent
Inquired of us; and the sweet Guide began
“Mantua”: and the shade, all self-intent,
Leapt toward him from its place, crying “Mantuan!
I am Sordello, of thine own city.”
And each into the other’s arms they ran.
Thou inn of sorrow, ah, trampled Italy!
No Lady of domains, but brothel of shame!
Ship without pilot on a stormy sea!
That gentle spirit was thus quick to to acclaim
His countryman and hail him there for friend
Merely at the sweet sound of his city’s name;
And now their days in thee the living spend
In quarrel, and each one doth the other wound
Of those whom one wall and one moat defend.⁴

⁴ Dante: *The Divine Comedy. Purgatorio*, Canto VI, ll 58–85 (translated by Laurence Binyon; London: Agenda Editions 1968; *The Portable Dante*. New York: Viking Press 1947.)

SORDELLO.

BY ROBERT BROWNING.

LONDON :
EDWARD MOXON, DOVER STREET.

MDCCCL.

To J. Milsand, of Dijon.

Dear Friend,—Let the next poem be introduced by your name, therefore remembered along with one of the deepest of my affections, and so repay all trouble it ever cost me. I wrote it twenty-five years ago for only a few, counting even in these on somewhat more care about its subject than they really had. My own faults of expression were many; but with care for a man or book such would be surmounted, and without it what avails the faultlessness of either? I blame nobody, least of all myself, who did my best then and since; for I lately gave time and pains to turn my work into what the many might,—instead of what the few must.—like: but after all, I imagined another thing at first, and therefore leave as I find it. The historical decoration was purposely of no more importance than a background requires; and my stress lay on the incidents in the development of a soul: little else is worth study. I, at least, always thought so—you, with many known and unknown to me, think so—others may one day think so; and whether my attempt remain for them or not, I trust, though away and past it, to continue ever yours,

R. B.

London: June 9, 1863.

BOOK THE FIRST

Who will, may hear Sordello's story told:
His story? Who believes me shall behold
The man, pursue his fortunes to the end.
Like me: for as the friendless-people's friend
Spied from his hill-top once, despite the din
And dust of multitudes, Pentapolin
Named o' the Naked Arm, I single out
Sordello, compassed murkily about
With ravage of six long sad hundred years.
Only believe me. Ye believe?

*A Quixotic
attempt.*

Appears

10

Verona ... Never,—I should warn you first,—
Of my own choice had this, if not the worst
Yet not the best expedient, served to tell
A story I could body forth so well
By making speak, myself kept out of view,
The very man as he was wont to do.
And leaving you to say the rest for him.
Since, though I might be proud to see the dim
Abysmal past divide its hateful surge.

*Why the poet
himself addresses*

Letting of all men this one man emerge
Because it pleased me, yet, that moment past,
I should delight in watching first to last
His progress as you watch it, not a whit
More in the secret than yourselves who sit
Fresh-chapleted to listen. But it seems
Your setters-forth of unexampled themes,
Makers of quite new men, producing them.
Would best chalk broadly on each vesture's hem
The wearer's quality; or take their stand.

20

Motley on back and pointing-pole in hand,
Beside him. So, for once I face ye, friends,
Summoned together from the world's four ends.
Dropped down from heaven or cast up from hell,
To hear the story I propose to tell.

30

Confess now, poets know the dragnet's trick.
 Catching the dead, if fate denies the quick.
 And shaming her; 't is not for fate to choose
 Silence or song because she can refuse
 Real eyes to glisten more, real hearts to ache
 Less oft, real brows turn smoother for our sake: 40
 I have experienced something of her spite;
 But there's a realm wherein she has no right
 And I have many lovers. Say; but few
 Friends fate accords me? Here they are: now view
 The host I muster! Many a lighted face
 Foul with no vestige of the grave's disgrace;
 What else should tempt them back to taste our air
 Except to see how their successors fare?
 My audience! and they sit, each ghostly man
 Striving to look as living as he can. 50
 Brother by breathing brother; thou art set,
 Clear-witted critic, by ... but I'll not fret
 A wondrous soul of them, nor move death's spleen
 Who loves not to unlock them. Friends! I mean
 The living in good earnest—ye elect
 Chiefly for love—suppose not I reject
 Judicious praise, who contrary shall peep,
 Some fit occasion, forth, for fear ye sleep.
 To glean your bland approvals. Then, appear,
 Verona! stay—thou, spirit, come not near 60
 Now—not this time desert thy cloudy place
 To scare me, thus employed, with that pure face!
 I need not fear this audience, I make free
 With them, but then this is no place for thee!
 The thunder-phrase of the Athenian, grown
 Up out of memories of Marathon,
 Would echo like his own sword's griding screech
 Braying a Persian shield,—the silver speech
 Of Sidney's self, the starry paladin,
 Turn intense as a trumpet sounding in 70
 The knights to tilt,—wert thou to hear! What heart
 Have I to play my puppets, bear my part
 Before these worthies?

*his audience—
 few living,
 many dead.*

Lo, the past is hurled

In twain: up-thrust, out-staggering on the world,
 Subsiding into shape, a darkness rears
 Its outline, kindles at the core, appears
 Verona. 'T is six hundred years and more
 Since an event. The Second Friedrich wore
 The purple, and the Third Honorius filled
 The holy chair. That autumn eve was stilled: 80
 A last remains of sunset dimly burned
 O'er the far forests, like a torch-flame turned
 By the wind back upon its bearer's hand
 In one long flare of crimson; as a brand.
 The woods beneath lay black. A single eye
 From all Verona cared for the soft sky.
 But, gathering in its ancient market-place,
 Talked group with restless group; and not a face
 But wrath made livid, for among them were
 Death's staunch purveyors, such as have in care 90
 To feast him. Fear had long since taken root
 In every breast, and now these crushed its fruit,
 The ripe hate, like a wine: to note the way
 It worked while each grew drunk! Men grave and grey
 Stood, with shut eyelids, rocking to and fro,
 Letting the silent luxury trickle slow
 About the hollows where a heart should be;
 But the young gulped with a delirious glee
 Some foretaste of their first debauch in blood
 At the fierce news: for, be it understood, 100
 Envoys apprised Verona that her prince
 Count Richard of Saint Boniface, joined since
 A year with Azzo, Esters Lord, to thrust
 Taurello Salinguerra, prime in trust
 With Ecelin Romano, from his seat
 Ferrara,—over zealous in the feat
 And stumbling on a peril unaware.
 Was captive, trammelled in his proper snare.
 They phrase it, taken by his own intrigue.
 Immediate succour from the Lombard League 110
 Of fifteen cities that affect the Pope,

*Shelley departing,
 Verona appears.*

90

100

*How her Guelfs
 are discomfited.*

110

For Azzo, therefore, and his fellow-hope
 Of the Guelf cause, a glory overcast!
 Men's faces, late agape, are now aghast.
 'Prone is the purple pavis; Este makes
 'Mirth for the devil when he undertakes
 'To play the Ecelin; as if it cost
 'Merely your pushing-by to gain a post
 'Like his! The patron tells ye, once for all,
 'There be sound reasons that preferment fall
 'On our beloved' ... 120

'Duke o' the Rood, why not?'
 Shouted an Estian, 'grudge ye such a lot?
 'The hill-cat boasts some cunning of her own,
 'Some stealthy trick to better beasts unknown,
 'That quick with prey enough her hunger blunts,
 'And feeds her fat while gaunt the lion hunts.'

'Taurello,' quoth an envoy, as in wane
 'Dwelt at Ferrara. Like an osprey fain
 'To fly but forced the earth his couch to make
 'Far inland, till his friend the tempest wake, 130
 'Waits he the Kaiser's coming; and as yet
 'That fast friend sleeps, and he too sleeps: but let
 'Only the billow freshen, and he snuffs
 'The aroused hurricane ere it enroughs
 'The sea it means to cross because of him.
 'Sinketh the breeze? His hope-sick eye grows dim;
 'Creep closer on the creature! Every day
 'Strengthens the Pontiff; Ecelin, they say,

*Why they
 entreat the
 Lombard
 League,*

'Dozes now at Oliero, with dry lips
 'Telling upon his perished finger-tips 140
 'How many ancestors are to depose
 'Ere he be Satan's Viceroy when the doze
 'Deposits him in hell. So, Guelfs rebuilt
 'Their houses; not a drop of blood was spilt
 'When Cino Bocchimpane chanced to meet
 'Buccio Virtù—God's wafer, and the street
 'Is narrow! Tutti Santi, think, a-swarm
 'With Ghibellins, and yet he took no harm!
 'This could not last. Off Salinguerra went

'To Padua, Podestà, "with pure intent,"
 'Said he, "my presence, judged the single bar
 ' "To permanent tranquillity, may jar
 ' "No longer"—so! his back is fairly turned?
 'The pair of goodly palaces are burned,
 'The gardens ravaged, and our Guelfs laugh, drunk
 'A week with joy. The next, their laughter sunk
 'In sobs of blood, for they found, some strange way,
 'Old Salinguerra back again—I say,
 'Old Salinguerra in the town once more
 'Uprooting, overturning, flame before,
 'Blood fetlock-high beneath him. Azzo fled;
 'Who 'scaped the carnage followed; then the dead
 'Were pushed aside from Salinguerra's throne,
 'He ruled once more Ferrara, all alone,
 'Till Azzo, stunned awhile, revived, would pounce
 'Coupled with Boniface, like lynx and ounce,
 'On the gorged bird. The burghers ground their teeth
 'To see troop after troop encamp beneath
 'T' the standing corn thick o'er the scanty patch
 'It took so many patient months to snatch
 'Out of the marsh; while just within their walls.
 'Men fed on men. At length Taurello calls
 'A parley: "let the Count wind up the war!"
 'Richard, light-hearted as a plunging star,
 'Agrees to enter for the kindest ends
 'Ferrara, flanked with fifty chosen friends,
 'No horse-boy more, for fear your timid sort
 'Should fly Ferrara at the bare report.
 'Quietly through the town they rode, jog-jog;
 ' "Ten, twenty, thirty,—curse the catalogue
 ' "Of burnt Guelf houses! Strange, Taurello shows
 ' "Not the least sign of life"—whereat arose
 'A general growl: "How? With his victors by?
 ' "I and my Veronese? My troops and I?
 ' "Receive us, was your word?" So jogged they on,
 'Nor laughed their host too openly: once gone
 'Into the trap!—'

Six hundred years ago!