The Ring and the Book
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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, a 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 huge work which almost no-one today reads, at least not voluntarily.

This edition of *The Ring and the Book* seeks to persuade the 21st century reading public to tackle this complex but rewarding work, in theory a poem made from more than 21,000 lines of blank verse, but in fact a verse novel. Perhaps the only reason why it has not usually been granted this unusual classification is that its form is deceptive, and it is far less obviously novel-like than, say, Pushkin’s *Yevgeny Onegin*. Browning’s work is structured in twelve books, all of which take the form of blank-verse dramatic monologues—the form most associated with Browning—and we are given the views of all parties to the trial that lies at the heart of the story, as well as the views of the general public, for and against the accused. The reader thus circles the action, while also pursuing a more linear path through the trial process. The use of multiple viewpoints, and the fact that the author appears to step back from the action and allow it to speak for itself—thanks to his remarkable source material—is perhaps the book a remarkably modern air, notwithstanding the somewhat fustian-tinted diction and the plethora of information on late 18th century Rome. The text of the poem here is that of the first edition of 1868–9.

§
The Story

Browning’s source material for this work was a set of bound documents, which he happened upon in a Florentine market—quarto-sized, and partly printed, partly manuscript. It was titled *Romana Homicidiorum*—“Roman murder-case”, as the author styled it—and it had an enormous impact on him. He thought it an ideal subject for a novel and offered it to a number of other Victorian writers, including, oddly, Tennyson, but none took the bait. Some years later, once again resident in London following the death of his wife, Browning took up the story himself. The source material (available in *The Old Yellow Book*—see Further Reading on p.12—runs as follows.

Count Guido Franceschini is a nobleman of good lineage, native to Arezzo, in Tuscany. He appears not to have been too successful in life, although he had served in the retinue of a Cardinal at some point, and had also seen some military service. His brother, Abate Paolo, seems to have had greater success in life. Given Guido’s lack of obvious prospects, the family decide that he should be married to a woman of means. An introduction is made to a middle-class Roman woman, Violante Comparini, who is mother to a thirteen-year-old daughter, Pompilia. The Comparini family is well-off, and Violante is much taken with the idea of her daughter marrying into the nobility. Her husband is less enamoured of the proposition, but Violante arranges the marriage in secret, leaving her husband no choice in the matter, and a substantial dowry is paid to Guido. All leave Rome for Arezzo, where they are to live in the Franceschini house.

Inevitably, all parties are disappointed. The Comparini discover that their new relative is poor, and the parents apparently do not behave in a manner befitting their lower station in life. After a number of quarrels they leave Arezzo for Rome. Pompilia is a less-than-enthusiastic wife, but is in no position to do anything about her situation. The disillusioned Violante has her revenge by confessing that Pompilia was in fact an adopted child, her birth mother having been a Roman prostitute. Pompilia’s newly-revealed status means that she is not actually the heir to the Comparini, and thus has no legal right to the dowry, as originally contracted.

Guido feels himself dishonoured by these revelations and is worried that he will be cast back into poverty by the loss of the dowry. He contests Violante’s statement and at home he beats his wife and threatens to kill
her. He also tries to entrap her as an adulteress by leaving her to receive the attentions of a number of young men of Arezzo, among them one Giuseppe Caponsacchi, a young priest—actually, a subdeacon, the lowest order of priest, but still bound by the laws of celibacy. Pompilia eventually decides to flee back to Rome and persuades Caponsacchi to assist her in reaching her parents.

Having reached Castelnuovo, on the outskirts of Rome, the pair are surprised by Guido, who delivers them to the legal authorities in the city. Pompilia is taken to a nunnery, and Caponsacchi is sent off to Civita Vecchia for three years—a demotion. When it is realised that Pompilia is carrying a child, she is released to the care of her parents, but still has the status of a prisoner. She bears a son, Gaetano, but two weeks after the birth, Guido and four henchmen break in, kill Pompilia’s parents, and mortally wound Pompilia herself. The perpetrators are caught almost immediately, and are tried and sentenced to death. Guido is beheaded, as befits his noble status, while his helpers are hanged. Pompilia lives on for a further four days and protests her innocence in a final statement.

As may be apparent, the characters involved are venal in one way or another or, in the case of Pompilia, trapped. The Roman trial was a lurid cause célèbre in 1698, with the whole city debating the truth or otherwise of the accusations. Pompilia is easily portrayed as a wronged innocent, but it is an awkward fact that the inconsistencies of her evidence suggest that she was not entirely innocent. Subsequently, further evidence has been found to cast doubt upon other parts of her testimony. Guido hoped to frame her for adultery because, at the time, it was widely considered acceptable to kill one’s wife in such a matter of honour and he was indeed able to win a suit against her in Arezzo shortly before the fatal assault. By contrast, if she were innocent, as she protested, he would be guilty of a capital crime. The Roman court, however, found for Pompilia, and Guido paid the ultimate price, proving himself to be as poor a plotter as he had been in other aspects of his life.

Browning’s version of these events paints Pompilia in a much better light, as might be expected, and lends credence to Caponsacchi’s motives. Pompilia’s monologue in Book VII is a masterpiece, as is that of her doomed husband, awaiting his execution, in Book XI. The power of the book however lies in the multiplicity of its voices, the way in which the same events are seen from various standpoints, and the subversion of truth that is entailed in this structure.

§
The Sequence of Events

1680 16 July. Pompilia is born, and adopted by the Comparini.  
1694 March. Pompilia’s parents return to Rome; Violante declares Pompilia illegitimate and sues for the return of the dowry.  
1697 23 April. Pompilia leaves Arezzo with Giuseppe Caponsacchi.  
1698 2 Jan. Guido and four others kill the Comparini, and leave Pompilia mortally wounded.  
3-6 Jan. [Books II-VII].  
Late Jan. Murder trial begins [Books VIII-IX].  
18 Feb. Guido and his accomplices are found guilty.  
20 Feb. The Pope rejects Guido’s appeal [Book X]; Guido informed [Book XI].  
22 Feb. Guido and his accomplices are executed [Book XII].

The Legal Processes

1694 (1) Suit by the Comparini to declare Pompilia illegitimate.  
1695 (2) Countersuit by Guido and Pompilia to prevent annulment of the dowry. The court finds in favour of Guido, but Pompilia’s father appeals all the decisions. No final judgement was reached before the assassination of the Comparini and their daughter.  
1697 (3) Guido brings a suit against Pompilia and Caponsacchi for flight and adultery. The court ordered that Caponsacchi be
“relegated” (demoted) to Civita Vecchia for three years, and that Pompilia be confined to a Nunnery. N.B. no judgement was in fact made on Pompilia’s guilt or otherwise. Caponsacchi’s sentence is more akin to a slap on the wrist for an indiscretion, than a punishment.

(4) Pompilia sues for a legal separation from Guido. Process not completed before the deaths of both parties.

(5) Suit in Arezzo against Pompilia for flight and adultery. Caponsacchi is not sued. Judgement handed down in favour of Guido in December, which, by Tuscan law, gave Guido clearance to murder his wife.

1698 (6) Trial of Guido and his accomplices for murder.

(7) Suit by the Nunnery of the Convertites to acquire the estate of Pompilia after her death, the grounds being her sinful state. (By Roman law at the time, this institution had the right to inherit the estate of women of loose morals, or “fallen women”.) Browning was wrong about this order caring for Pompilia before he death; in fact she was lodged with the Conservatorio di Santa Croce della Penitenza, but this makes little difference to the story, and Browning’s version is tighter from a dramatic point of view.

(8) Counter-suit by the Franceschini family claiming her estate. The court rules that Pompilia’s estate should be turned over to her executor, and thus to her son, Gaetano, upon reaching his majority. In September 1698 the court formally cleared Pompilia’s name.

Notes

A basic glossary is provided at the back of this volume, but, even a cursory glance at the text would show the reader that it would be possible to fill another book, the size of the current volume, with commentary. The glossary covers basic things that the reader might wish to know, explaining names of people and places, and also some of the Latin phrases scattered throughout the book. The Latin used extensively throughout Books VIII and IX, that is the monologues by the lawyers for the defence and for the prosecution, is glossed within the text by Browning himself; one can
therefore skip the Latin entirely and just read the English, although the
verse will obviously not scan if one does so. For those who wish to follow
up more detailed explanatory matter, there is a free downloadable PDF at
archive.org of A.K. Cook's A Commentary Upon Browning's 'The Ring and
the Book' (Oxford University Press, 1920), which runs to some 340 pages
of dense type. The text analysed by Cook is the present one, i.e. that of
the first edition. The URL for this PDF is:

http://ia700208.us.archive.org/2/items/
commentaryuponbr00cookuoft/commentaryuponbr00cookuoft.pdf

(Enter the entire two lines above, without the forced break introduced here, into a
browser window. The file runs to some 20MB and may take some time to download.)

Further reading

as Altick.] Excellent reading edition that uses the first-edition text; now
out of print, alas. If it were in print, this Shearsman edition would not be
necessary.

Robert Browning: The Poetical Works, Vols VII, VIII, IX, ed. Stefan Hawlin and

A.K. Cook A Commentary Upon Robert Browning's 'The Ring and the Book'
[Referred to in this volume as Cook.]

Charles W. Hodell (ed.) The Old Yellow Book: Source of Robert Browning's 'The
org/8/items/oldyellowbooksou00hodeuoft/oldyellowbooksou00hodeuoft.pdf

Project Gutenberg has the 2nd edition as a viewable file here: http://www.
gutenberg.org/files/38238/38238-h/38238-h.htm


Tony Frazer
August 2012
Book 1

The Ring and the Book
Do you see this Ring?

’T is 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.
What of it? ’T is a figure, a symbol, say;
A thing’s sign: now for the thing signified.

Do you see this square old yellow Book, I toss
I’ the air, and catch again, and twirl about
By the crumpled vellum covers,—pure crude fact
Secreted from man’s life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since?
Examine it yourselves! I found this book,
Gave a lira for it, eightpence English just,
(Mark the predestination!) when a Hand,
Always above my shoulder, pushed me once,
One day still fierce ’mid many a day struck calm,
Across a Square in Florence, crammed with booths,
Buzzing and blaze, noontide and market-time;
Toward Baccio’s marble,—ay, the basement-ledge
O’ the pedestal where sits and menaces
John of the Black Bands with the upright spear,
’Twixt palace and church,—Riccardi where they lived,
His race, and San Lorenzo where they lie.
This book,—precisely on that palace-step
Which, meant for lounging knaves o’ the Medici,
Now serves re-venders to display their ware,—
’Mongst odds and ends of ravage, picture-frames
White through the worn gilt, mirror-sconces chipped,
Bronze angel-heads once knobs attached to chests,
(Handled when ancient dames chose forth brocade)
Modern chalk drawings, studies from the nude,
Samples of stone, jet, breccia, porphyry
Polished and rough, sundry amazing busts
In baked earth, (broken, Providence be praised!)  
A wreck of tapestry, proudly-purposed web
When reds and blues were indeed red and blue,
Now offered as a mat to save bare feet
(Since carpets constitute a cruel cost)
Treading the chill scagliola bedward: then
A pile of brown-etched prints, two crazie each,
Stopped by a conch a-top from fluttering forth
—Sowing the Square with works of one and the same
Master, the imaginative Sienese
Great in the scenic backgrounds—(name and fame
None of you know, nor does he fare the worse:)
From these … Oh, with a Lionard going cheap
If it should prove, as promised, that Joconde
Whereof a copy contents the Louvre!—these
I picked this book from. Five compeers in flank
Stood left and right of it as tempting more—
A dog’s-eared Spicilegium, the fond tale
O’ the Frail One of the Flower, by young Dumas,
Vulgarized Horace for the use of schools,
The Life, Death, Miracles of Saint Somebody,
Saint Somebody Else, his Miracles, Death and Life,—
With this, one glance at the lettered back of which,
And ‘Stall!’ cried I: a lira made it mine.

Here it is, this I toss and take again;
Small-quarto size, part print part manuscript:
A book in shape but, really, pure crude fact
Secreted from man’s life when hearts beat hard,
And brains, high-blooded, ticked two centuries since.
Give it me back! The thing’s restorative
I’ the touch and sight.

That memorable day,
(June was the month, Lorenzo named the Square)
I leaned a little and overlooked my prize
By the low railing round the fountain-source
Close to the statue, where a step descends:
While clinked the cans of copper, as stooped and rose
Thick-ankled girls who brimmed them, and made place
For marketmen glad to pitch basket down,
Dip a broad melon-leaf that holds the wet,
And whisk their faded fresh. And on I read

Presently, though my path grew perilous
Between the outspread straw-work, piles of plait
Soon to be flapping, each o’er two black eyes
And swathe of Tuscan hair, on festas fine:
Through fire-irons, tribes of tongs, shovels in sheaves,
Skeleton bedsteads, wardrobe-drawers agape,
Rows of tall slim brass lamps with dangling gear,—
And worse, cast clothes a-sweetening in the sun:
None of them took my eye from off my prize.

Still read I on, from written title-page
To written index, on, through street and street,
At the Strozzi, at the Pillar, at the Bridge;
Till, by the time I stood at home again
In Casa Guidi by Felice Church,
Under the doorway where the black begins
With the first stone-slab of the staircase cold,
I had mastered the contents, knew the whole truth
Gathered together, bound up in this book,
Print three-fifths, written supplement the rest.

‘Romana Homicidiorum’—nay,
Better translate—‘A Roman murder-case:
‘Position of the entire criminal cause
‘Of Guido Franceschini, nobleman,
‘With certain Four the cutthroats in his pay,
‘Tried, all five, and found guilty and put to death
‘By heading or hanging as befitted ranks,
‘At Rome on February Twenty Two,
‘Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight:
‘Wherein it is disputed if, and when,
‘Husbands may kill adulterous wives, yet ’scape
‘The customary forfeit.’

Word for word,
So ran the title-page: murder, or else
Legitimate punishment of the other crime,
Accounted murder by mistake,—just that
And no more, in a Latin cramp enough
When the law had her eloquence to launch,
But interfilleted with Italian streaks
When testimony stooped to mother-tongue,—
That, was this old square yellow book about.

Now, as the ingot, ere the ring was forged,
Lay gold, (beseech you, hold that figure fast!)
So, in this book lay absolutely truth,
Fanciless fact, the documents indeed,
Primary lawyer-pleadings for, against,
The aforesaid Five; real summed-up circumstance
Adduced in proof of these on either side,
Put forth and printed, as the practice was,
At Rome, in the Apostolic Chamber’s type,
And so submitted to the eye o’ the Court
Presided over by His Reverence
Rome’s Governor and Criminal Judge,—the trial
Itself, to all intents, being then as now
Here in the book and nowise out of it;
Seeing, there properly was no judgment-bar,
No bringing of accuser and accused,
And whoso judged both parties, face to face
Before some court, as we conceive of courts.
There was a Hall of Justice; that came last:
For justice had a chamber by the hall
Where she took evidence first, summed up the same,
Then sent accuser and accused alike,
In person of the advocate of each,
To weigh that evidence’ worth, arrange, array
The battle. 'T was the so-styled Fisc began,
Pleased (and since he only spoke in print
The printed voice of him lives now as then)
The public Prosecutor—'Murder’s proved;
'With five … what we call qualities of bad,
'Worse, worst, and yet worse still, and still worse yet;
'Crest over crest crowning the cockatrice,
'That beggar hell’s regalia to enrich
'Count Guido Franceschini: punish him!'
Thus was the paper put before the court
In the next stage, (no noisy work at all),
To study at ease. In due time like reply
Came from the so-styled Patron of the Poor,
Official mouthpiece of the five accused
Too poor to fee a better,—Guido’s luck
Or else his fellows’, which, I hardly know,—
An outbreak as of wonder at the world,
A fury-fit of outraged innocence,
A passion of betrayed simplicity:
‘Punish Count Guido? For what crime, what hint
‘O’ the colour of a crime, inform us first!
‘Reward him rather! Recognize, we say,
‘In the deed done, a righteous judgment dealt!
‘All conscience and all courage,—there’s our Count
‘Charactered in a word; and, what’s more strange,
‘He had companionship in privilege,
'Found four courageous conscientious friends:
'Absolve, applaud all five, as props of law,
'Sustainers of society!—perchance
'A trifle over-hasty with the hand
'To hold her tottering ark, had tumbled else;
'But that's a splendid fault whereat we wink,
'Wishing your cold correctness sparkled so!'
Thus paper second followed paper first,
Thus did the two join issue—nay, the four,
Each pleader having an adjunct. 'True, he killed
'—So to speak—in a certain sort—his wife,
'But laudably, since thus it happened!' quoth one:
Whereat, more witness and the case postponed.
'Thus it happened not, since thus he did the deed,
'And proved himself thereby portentousest
'Of cutthroats and a prodigy of crime,
'As the woman that he slaughtered was a saint,
'Martyr and miracle!' quoth the other to match:
Again, more witness, and the case postponed.
'A miracle, ay—of lust and impudence;
'Hear my new reasons!' interposed the first:
'—Coupled with more of mine!' pursued his peer.
'Beside, the precedents, the authorities!
From both at once a cry with an echo, that!
That was a firebrand at each fox's tail
Unleashed in a cornfield: soon spread flare enough,
As hurtled thither and there heaped themselves
From earth's four corners, all authority
And precedent for putting wives to death,
Or letting wives live, sinful as they seem.
How legislated, now, in this respect,
Solon and his Athenians? Quote the code
Of Romulus and Rome! Justinian speak!
Nor modern Baldo, Bartolo be dumb!
The Roman voice was potent, plentiful;
Cornelia de Sicariis hurried to help
Pompeia de Parricidiis; Julia de
Something-or-other jostled Lex this-and-that,
King Solomon confirmed Apostle Paul:
That nice decision of Dolabella, eh?
That pregnant instance of Theodoric, oh!
Down to that choice example Ælian gives
(An instance I find much insisted on)
Of the elephant who, brute-beast though he were,
Yet understood and punished on the spot
His master’s naughty spouse and faithless friend;
A true tale which has edified each child,
Much more shall flourish favoured by our court!
Pages of proof this way, and that way proof,
And always—once again the case postponed.

Thus wrangled, brangled, jangled they a month,
—Only on paper, pleadings all in print,
Nor ever was, except i’ the brains of men,
More noise by word of mouth than you hear now—
Till the court cut all short with ‘Judged, your cause.
‘Receive our sentence! Praise God! We pronounce
‘Count Guido devilish and damnable:
‘His wife Pompilia in thought, word and deed,
‘Was perfect pure, he murdered her for that:
‘As for the Four who helped the One, all Five—
‘Why, let employer and hirelings share alike
‘In guilt and guilt’s reward, the death their due!’

So was the trial at end, do you suppose?
‘Guilty you find him, death you doom him to?
‘Ay, were not Guido, more than needs, a priest,
‘Priest and to spare!’—this was a shot reserved;
I learn this from epistles which begin
Here where the print ends,—see the pen and ink
Of the advocate, the ready at a pinch!—
‘My client boasts the clerkly privilege,
‘Has taken minor orders many enough,
‘Shows still sufficient chrism upon his pate
‘To neutralize a blood-stain: presbyter,
‘Primae tonsurae, subdiaconus,
‘Sacerdos, so he slips from underneath
‘Your power, the temporal, slides inside the robe
‘Of mother Church: to her we make appeal
‘By the Pope, the Church’s head!’

A parlous plea,

Put in with noticeable effect, it seems;
‘Since straight,’—resumes the zealous orator,
Making a friend acquainted with the facts,—
‘Once the word “clericality” let fall,
‘Procedure stopped and freer breath was drawn
‘By all considerate and responsible Rome.’
Quality took the decent part, of course;
Held by the husband, who was noble too:
Or, for the matter of that, a churl would side
With too-refined susceptibility,
And honour which, tender in the extreme,
Stung to the quick, must roughly right itself
At all risks, not sit still and whine for law
As a Jew would, if you squeezed him to the wall,
Brisk-trotting through the Ghetto. Nay, it seems,
Even the Emperor’s Envoy had his say
To say on the subject; might not see, unmoved,
 Civility menaced throughout Christendom
By too harsh measure dealt her champion here.
Lastly, what made all safe, the Pope was kind,
From his youth up, reluctant to take life,
If mercy might be just and yet show grace;
Much more unlikely then, in extreme age,
To take a life the general sense bade spare.
’T was plain that Guido would go scatheless yet.

But human promise, oh, how short of shine!
How topple down the piles of hope we rear!
Now history proves … nay, read Herodotus!
Suddenly starting from a nap, as it were,
A dog-sleep with one shut, one open orb,
Cried the Pope’s great self.—Innocent by name
And nature too, and eighty-six years old,
Antonio Pignatelli of Naples, Pope
Who had trod many lands, known many deeds,
Probed many hearts, beginning with his own,
And now was far in readiness for God,—
’T was he who first bade leave those souls in peace,
Those Jansenists, re-nicknamed Molinists,
(’Gainst whom the cry went, like a frowsy tune,
Tickling men’s ears—the sect for a quarter of an hour
I’ the teeth of the world which, clown-like, loves to chew
Be it but a straw ’twixt work and whistling-while,
Taste some vituperation, bite away,
Whether at marjoram-sprig or garlic-clove,
Aught it may sport with, spoil, and then spit forth)
‘Leave them alone,’ bade he, ‘those Molinists!
‘Who may have other light than we perceive,
‘Or why is it the whole world hates them thus?’
Also he peeled off that last scandal-rag
Of Nepotism; and so observed the poor
That men would merrily say, ‘Halt, deaf and blind,
‘Who feed on fat things, leave the master’s self
‘To gather up the fragments of his feast,
‘These be the nephews of Pope Innocent!—
‘His own meal costs but five carlines a day,
‘Poor-priest’s allowance, for he claims no more.’
—He cried of a sudden, this great good old Pope,
When they appealed in last resort to him,
‘I have mastered the whole matter: I nothing doubt.
‘Though Guido stood forth priest from head to heel,
‘Instead of, as alleged, a piece of one,—
‘And further, were he, from the tonsured scalp
‘To the sandaled sole of him, my son and Christ’s,
‘Instead of touching us by finger-tip
‘As you assert, and pressing up so close
‘Only to set a blood-smutch on our robe,—
‘I and Christ would renounce all right in him.
‘Am I not Pope, and presently to die,
‘And busied how to render my account,
‘And shall I wait a day ere I decide
‘On doing or not doing justice here?
‘Cut off his head to-morrow by this time,
‘Hang up his four mates, two on either hand,
‘And end one business more!’
So said, so done—
Rather so writ, for the old Pope bade this,
I find, with his particular chirograph,
His own no such infirm hand, Friday night;
And next day, February Twenty Two,
Since our salvation Sixteen Ninety Eight,
—Not at the proper head-and-hanging-place
On bridge-foot close by Castle Angelo,
Where custom somewhat staled the spectacle,
(‘T was not so well i’ the way of Rome, beside,
The noble Rome, the Rome of Guido’s rank)
But at the city’s newer gayer end,—
The cavalcading promenading place
Beside the gate and opposite the church
Under the Pincian gardens green with Spring,
‘Neath the obelisk ‘twixt the fountains in the Square,
Did Guido and his fellows find their fate,
All Rome for witness, and—my writer adds—
Remonstrant in its universal grief,
Since Guido had the suffrage of all Rome.

This is the bookful; thus far take the truth,
The untempered gold, the fact untampered with,
The mere ring-metal ere the ring be made!
And what has hitherto come of it? Who preserves
The memory of this Guido, and his wife
Pompilia, more than Ademollo’s name,
The etcher of those prints, two crazie each,
Saved by a stone from snowing broad the Square
With scenic backgrounds? Was this truth of force?
Able to take its own part as truth should,
Sufficient, self-sustaining? Why, if so—
Yonder’s a fire, into it goes my book,
As who shall say me nay, and what the loss?
You know the tale already: I may ask,
Rather than think to tell you, more thereof,—
Ask you not merely who were he or she,
Husband and wife, what manner of mankind,
But how you hold concerning this and that
Other yet-unnamed actor in the piece.
The young frank handsome courtly Canon, now,
The priest, declared the lover of the wife,
He who, no question, did elope with her,
For certain bring the tragedy about,
Giuseppe Caponsacchi;—his strange course
I’ the matter, was it right or wrong or both?
Then the old couple, slaughtered with the wife
By the husband as accomplices in crime,
Those Comparini, Pietro and his spouse,—
What say you to the right or wrong of that,
When, at a known name whispered through the door
Of a lone villa on a Christmas night,
It opened that the joyous hearts inside
Might welcome as it were an angel-guest
Come in Christ’s name to knock and enter, sup
And satisfy the loving ones he saved;
And so did welcome devils and their death?
I have been silent on that circumstance
Although the couple passed for close of kin
To wife and husband, were by some accounts
Pompilia’s very parents: you know best.
Also that infant the great joy was for,
That Gaetano, the wife’s two-weeks’ babe,
The husband’s first-born child, his son and heir,
Whose birth and being turned his night to day—
Why must the father kill the mother thus
Because she bore his son and saved himself?

Well, British Public, ye who like me not,
(God love you!) and will have your proper laugh
At the dark question, laugh it! I laugh first.
Truth must prevail, the proverb vows; and truth
—Here is it all i’ the book at last, as first
There it was all i’ the heads and hearts of Rome
Gentle and simple, never to fall nor fade
Nor be forgotten. Yet, a little while,
The passage of a century or so,
Decads thrice five, and here’s time paid his tax,
Oblivion gone home with her harvesting,
And all left smooth again as scythe could shave.
Far from beginning with you London folk,
The flesh and the devil, does it tell for once.

I took my book to Rome first, tried truth's power
On likely people. 'Have you met such names?
'Is a tradition extant of such facts?
'Your law-courts stand, your records frown a-row:
'What if I rove and rummage?' —Why, you'll waste
'Your pains and end as wise as you began!'
'Everyone snickered: 'names and facts thus old
'Are newer much than Europe news we find
'Down in to-day's Diario. Records, quotha?
'Why, the French burned them, what else do the French?
'The rap-and-rending nation! And it tells
'Against the Church, no doubt,—another gird
'At the Temporality, your Trial, of course?'
'Quite otherwise this time,' submitted I;
'Clean for the Church and dead against the world,
'The flesh and the devil, does it tell for once.'
'The rarer and the happier! All the same,
'Content you with your treasure of a book,
'And waive what's wanting! Take a friend's advice!
'It's not the custom of the country. Mend
'Your ways indeed and we may stretch a point:
'Go get you manned by Manning and new-manned
'By Newman and, mayhap, wise-manned to boot
'By Wiseman, and we'll see or else we won't!
'Thanks meantime for the story, long and strong,
'A pretty piece of narrative enough,
'Which scarce ought so to drop out, one would think,
'From the more curious annals of our kind.
'Do you tell the story, now, in oft-hand style,
'Straight from the book? Or simply here and there,
'(The while you vault it through the loose and large)
'Hang to a hint? Or is there book at all,
'And don't you deal in poetry, make-believe,
'And the white lies it sounds like?'

Yes and no!

From the book, yes; thence bit by bit I dug
The lingot truth, that memorable day,
Assayed and knew my piecemeal gain was gold,—
Yes; but from something else surpassing that,
Something of mine which mixed up with the mass,
Made it bear hammer and be firm to file.
Fancy with fact is just one fault the more;
To-wit, that fancy has informed, transpierced,
Thridded and so thrown fast the facts else free,
As right through ring and ring runs the driereed
And binds the loose, one bar without a break.
I fused my live soul and that inert stuff,
Before attempting smithcraft, on the night
After the day when,—truth thus grasped and gained,—
The book was shut and done with and laid by
On the cream-coloured massive agate, broad
’Neath the twin cherubs in the tarnished frame
O’ the mirror, tall thence to the ceiling-top.
And from the reading, and that slab I leant
My elbow on, the while I read and read,
I turned, to free myself and find the world,
And stepped out on the narrow terrace, built
Over the street and opposite the church,
And paced its lozenge-brickwork sprinkled cool;
Because Felice-church-side stretched, a-glow
Through each square window fringed for festival,
Whence came the clear voice of the cloistered ones
Chanting a chant made for midsummer nights—
I know not what particular praise of God,
It always came and went with June. Beneath
I’ the street, quick shown by openings of the sky
When flame fell silently from cloud to cloud,
Richer than that gold snow Jove rained on Rhodes,
The townsmen walked by twos and threes, and talked,
Drinking the blackness in default of air—
A busy human sense beneath my feet:
While in and out the terrace-plants, and round
One branch of tall datura, waxed and waned
The lamp-fly lured there, wanting the white flower.
Over the roof o’ the lighted church I looked
A bowshot to the street’s end, north away
Out of the Roman gate to the Roman road
By the river, till I felt the Apennine.
And there would lie Arezzo, the man's town,
The woman's trap and cage and torture-place,
Also the stage where the priest played his part,
A spectacle for angels,—ay, indeed,
There lay Arezzo! Farther then I fared,
Feeling my way on through the hot and dense,
Romeward, until I found the wayside inn
By Castelnuovo's few mean hut-like homes
Huddled together on the hill-foot bleak,
Bare, broken only by that tree or two
Against the sudden bloody splendour poured
Cursewise in his departure by the day
On the low house-roof of that squalid inn
Where they three, for the first time and the last,
Husband and wife and priest, met face to face.
Whence I went on again, the end was near,
Step by step, missing none and marking all,
Till Rome itself, the ghastly goal, I reached.
Why, all the while,—how could it otherwise?—
The life in me abolished the death of things,
Deep calling unto deep: as then and there
Acted itself over again once more
The tragic piece. I saw with my own eyes
In Florence as I trod the terrace, breathed
The beauty and the fearfulness of night,
How it had run, this round from Rome to Rome—
Because, you are to know, they lived at Rome,
Pompilia's parents, as they thought themselves,
Two poor ignoble hearts who did their best
Part God's way, part the other way than God's,
To somehow make a shift and scramble through
The world's mud, careless if it splashed and spoiled,
Provided they might so hold high, keep clean
Their child's soul, one soul white enough for three,
And lift it to whatever star should stoop,
What possible sphere of purer life than theirs
Should come in aid of whiteness hard to save.
I saw the star stoop, that they strained to touch
And did touch and depose their treasure on,
As Guido Franceschini took away
Pompilia to be his for evermore,
While they sang ‘Now let us depart in peace,
‘Having beheld thy glory, Guido’s wife!’
I saw the star supposed, but fog o’ the fen,
Gilded star-fashion by a glint from hell;
Having been heaved up, haled on its gross way,
By hands unguessed before, invisible help
From a dark brotherhood, and specially
Two obscure goblin creatures, fox-faced this,
Cat-clawed the other, called his next of kin
By Guido the main monster,—cloaked and caped,
Making as they were priests, to mock God more,—
Abate Paul, Canon Girolamo.
These who had rolled the starlike pest to Rome
And stationed it to suck up and absorb
The sweetness of Pompilia, rolled again
That bloated bubble, with her soul inside,
Back to Arezzo and a palace there—
Or say, a fissure in the honest earth
Whence long ago had curled the vapour first,
Blown big by nether fires to appal day:
It touched home, broke, and blasted far and wide.
I saw the cheated couple find the cheat
And guess what foul rite they were captured for,—
Too fain to follow over hill and dale
That child of theirs caught up thus in the cloud
And carried by the Prince o’ the Power of the Air
Whither he would, to wilderness or sea.
I saw them, in the potency of fear,
Break somehow through the satyr-family
(For a grey mother with a monkey-mien,
Mopping and mowing, was apparent too,
As, confident of capture, all took hands
And danced about the captives in a ring)
—Saw them break through, breathe safe, at Rome again,
Saved by the selfish instinct, losing so
Their loved one left with haters. These I saw,
In recrudescency of baffled hate,
Prepare to wring the uttermost revenge
From body and soul thus left them: all was sure,
Fire laid and cauldron set, the obscene ring traced,
The victim stripped and prostrate: what of God?
The cleaving of a cloud, a cry, a crash,
Quenched lay their cauldron, cowered i’ the dust the crew,
As, in a glory of armour like Saint George,
Out again sprang the young good beauteous priest
Bearing away the lady in his arms,
Saved for a splendid minute and no more.
For, whom i’ the path did that priest come upon,
He and the poor lost lady borne so brave,
—Checking the song of praise in me, had else
Swelled to the full for God’s will done on earth—
Whom but a dusk misfeatured messenger,
No other than the angel of this life,
Whose care is lest men see too much at once.
He made the sign, such God-glimpse must suffice,
Nor prejudice the Prince o’ the Power of the Air,
Whose ministration piles us overhead
What we call, first, earth’s roof and, last, heaven’s floor,
Now grate o’ the trap, then outlet of the cage:
So took the lady, left the priest alone,
And once more canopied the world with black.
But through the blackness I saw Rome again,
And where a solitary villa stood
In a lone garden-quarter: it was eve,
The second of the year, and oh so cold!
Ever and anon there flittered through the air
A snow-flake, and a scanty couch of snow
Crusted the grass-walk and the garden-mould.
All was grave, silent, sinister,—when, ha?
Glimmeringly did a pack of were-wolves pad
The snow, those flames were Guido’s eyes in front,
And all five found and footed it, the track,
To where a threshold-streak of warmth and light
Betrayed the villa-door with life inside,
While an inch outside were those blood-bright eyes,
And black lips wrinkling o’er the flash of teeth,
And tongues that lolled—Oh God that madest man!
They parleyed in their language. Then one whined—
That was the policy and master-stroke—
Deep in his throat whispered what seemed a name—
‘Open to Caponsacchi!’ Guido cried:
‘Gabriel!’ cried Lucifer at Eden-gate.
Wide as a heart, opened the door at once,
Showing the joyous couple, and their child
The two-weeks’ mother, to the wolves, the wolves
To them. Close eyes! And when the corpses lay
Stark-stretched, and those the wolves, their wolf-work done,
Were safe-embosomed by the night again,
I knew a necessary change in things;
As when the worst watch of the night gives way,
And there comes duly, to take cognizance,
The scrutinizing eye-point of some star—
And who despairs of a new daybreak now?
Lo, the first ray protruded on those five!
It reached them, and each felon writhed transfixed.
Awhile they palpitated on the spear
Motionless over Tophet: stand or fall?
‘I say, the spear should fall—should stand, I say!’
Cried the world come to judgment, granting grace
Or dealing doom according to world’s wont,
Those world’s-bystanders grouped on Rome’s crossroad
At prick and summons of the primal curse
Which bids man love as well as make a lie.
There prattled they, discoursed the right and wrong,
Turned wrong to right, proved wolves sheep and sheep wolves,
So that you scarce distinguished fell from fleece;
Till out spoke a great guardian of the fold,
Stood up, put forth his hand that held the crook,
And motioned that the arrested point decline:
Horribly off, the wriggling dead-weight reeled,
Rushed to the bottom and lay ruined there.
Though still at the pit’s mouth, despite the smoke
O’ the burning, tarriers turned again to talk
And trim the balance, and detect at least
A touch of wolf in what showed whitest sheep,
A cross of sheep redeeming the whole wolf,—
Vex truth a little longer:—less and less,
Because years came and went, and more and more
Brought new lies with them to be loved in turn.

Till all at once the memory of the thing,—
The fact that, wolves or sheep, such creatures were,—
Which hitherto, however men supposed,
Had somehow plain and pillar-like prevailed
I’ the midst of them, indisputably fact,
Granite, time’s tooth should grate against, not graze,—
Why, this proved sandstone, friable, fast to fly
And give its grain away at wish o’ the wind.

Ever and ever more diminutive,
Base gone, shaft lost, only entablature,
Dwindled into no bigger than a book,
Lay of the column; and that little, left
By the roadside ’mid the ordure, shards and weeds.

Until I haply, wandering that way,
Kicked it up, turned it over, and recognized,
For all the crumblement, this abacus,
This square old yellow book,—could calculate
By this the lost proportions of the style.

This was it from, my fancy with those facts,
I used to tell the tale, turned gay to grave,
But lacked a listener seldom; such alloy,
Such substance of me interfused the gold
Which, wrought into a shapely ring therewith,
Hammered and filed, fingered and favoured, last
Lay ready for the renovating wash
O’ the water. ‘How much of the tale was true?’
I disappeared; the book grew all in all;
The lawyers’ pleadings swelled back to their size,—
Doubled in two, the crease upon them yet,
For more commodity of carriage, see!—

And these are letters, veritable sheets
That brought posthaste the news of Florence, writ
At Rome the day Count Guido died, we find,
To stay the craving of a client there,
Who bound the same and so produced my book.
Lovers of dead truth, did ye fare the worse?
Lovers of live truth, found ye false my tale?

Well, now; there’s nothing in nor out o’ the world
Good except truth: yet this, the something else,
What’s this then, which proves good yet seems untrue?
This that I mixed with truth, motions of mine
That quickened, made the inertness malleolable
O’ the gold was not mine,—what’s your name for this?
Are means to the end, themselves in part the end?
Is fiction which makes fact alive, fact too?
The somehow may be thishow.
I find first
Writ down for very A B C of fact,
‘In the beginning God made heaven and earth;’
From which, no matter with what lisp, I spell
And speak you out a consequence—that man,
Man,—as befits the made, the inferior thing,—
Purposed, since made, to grow, not make in turn,
Yet forced to try and make, else fail to grow,—
Formed to rise, reach at, if not grasp and gain
The good beyond him,—which attempt is growth,—
Repeats God’s process in man’s due degree,
Attaining man’s proportionate result,—
Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps.
Inalienable, the arch-prerogative
Which turns thought, act—conceives, expresses too!
No less, man, bounded, yearning to be free,
May so project his surplusage of soul
In search of body, so add self to self
By owning what lay ownerless before,—
So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms—
That, although nothing which had never life
Shall get life from him, be, not having been,
Yet, something dead may get to live again,
Something with too much life or not enough,
Which, either way imperfect, ended once:
An end whereat man’s impulse intervenes,
Makes new beginning, starts the dead alive,
Completes the incomplete and saves the thing.
Man’s breath were vain to light a virgin wick,—
Half-burned-out, all but quite-quenched wicks o’ the lamp
Stationed for temple-service on this earth,
These indeed let him breathe on and relume!
For such man’s feat is, in the due degree,
—Mimic creation, galvanism for life,
But still a glory portioned in the scale.
Why did the mage say,—feeling as we are wont
For truth, and stopping midway short of truth,
And resting on a lie,—‘I raise a ghost’?
‘Because,’ he taught adepts, ‘man makes not man.
‘Yet by a special gift, an art of arts,
‘More insight and more outsight and much more
‘Will to use both of these than boast my mates,
‘I can detach from me, commission forth
‘Half of my soul; which in its pilgrimage
‘O’er old unwandered waste ways of the world,
‘May chance upon some fragment of a whole,
‘Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse,
‘Smoking flax that fed fire once: prompt therein
‘I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play,
‘Push lines out to the limit, lead forth last
‘(By a moonrise through a ruin of a crypt)
‘What shall be mistily seen, murmuringly heard,
‘Mistakenly felt: then write my name with Faust’s!’
Oh, Faust, why Faust? Was not Elisha once?—
Who bade them lay his staff on a corpse-face.
There was no voice, no hearing: he went in
Therefore, and shut the door upon them twain,
And prayed unto the Lord: and he went up
And lay upon the corpse, dead on the couch,
And put his mouth upon its mouth, his eyes
Upon its eyes, his hands upon its hands,
And stretched him on the flesh; the flesh waxed warm:
And he returned, walked to and fro the house,
And went up, stretched him on the flesh again,
And the eyes opened. 'T is a credible feat
With the right man and way.

Enough of me!
The Book! I turn its medicinable leaves
In London now till, as in Florence erst,
A spirit laughs and leaps through every limb,
And lights my eye, and lifts me by the hair,
Letting me have my will again with these
—How title I the dead alive once more?

Count Guido Franceschini the Aretine,
Descended of an ancient house, though poor,
A beak-nosed bushy-bearded black-haired lord,
Lean, pallid, low of stature yet robust,
Fifty years old,—having four years ago
Married Pompilia Comparini, young,
Good, beautiful, at Rome, where she was born,
And brought her to Arezzo, where they lived
Unhappy lives, whatever curse the cause,—
This husband, taking four accomplices,
Followed this wife to Rome, where she was fled
From their Arezzo to find peace again,
In convoy, eight months earlier, of a priest,
Aretine also, of still nobler birth,
Giuseppe Caponsacchi,—and caught her there
Quiet in a villa on a Christmas night,
With only Pietro and Violante by,
Both her putative parents; killed the three,
Aged, they, seventy each, and she, seventeen,
And, two weeks since, the mother of his babe
First-born and heir to what the style was worth
O' the Guido who determined, dared and did
This deed just as he purposed point by point.
Then, bent upon escape, but hotly pressed,
And captured with his co-mates that same night,
He, brought to trial, stood on this defence—
Injury to his honour caused the act;
That since his wife was false, (as manifest
By flight from home in such companionship,)
Death, punishment deserved of the false wife
And faithless parents who abetted her
I’ the flight aforesaid, wronged nor God nor man.
‘Nor false she, nor yet faithless they,’ replied
The accuser; ‘cloaked and masked this murder glooms;
‘True was Pompilia, loyal too the pair;
‘Out of the man’s own heart this monster curled,
‘This crime coiled with connivancy at crime,
‘His victim’s breast, he tells you, hatched and reared;
‘Uncoil we and stretch stark the worm of hell!’
A month the trial swayed this way and that
Ere judgment settled down on Guido’s guilt;
Then was the Pope, that good Twelfth Innocent,
Appealed to: who well weighed what went before,
Affirmed the guilt and gave the guilty doom.

Let this old woe step on the stage again!
Act itself o’er anew for men to judge,
Not by the very sense and sight indeed—
(Which take at best imperfect cognizance,
Since, how heart moves brain, and how both move hand,
What mortal ever in entirety saw?)
—No dose of purer truth than man digests,
But truth with falsehood, milk that feeds him now,
Not strong meat he may get to bear some day—
To-wit, by voices we call evidence,
Uproar in the echo, live fact deadened down,
Talked over, bruited abroad, whispered away,
Yet helping us to all we seem to hear:
For how else know we save by worth of word?

Here are the voices presently shall sound
In due succession. First, the world’s outcry
Around the rush and ripple of any fact
Fallen stonewise, plumb on the smooth face of things;
The world’s guess, as it crowds the bank o’ the pool,
At what were figure and substance, by their splash:
Then, by vibrations in the general mind,
At depth of deed already out of reach.
This threefold murder of the day before,—
Say, Half-Rome’s feel after the vanished truth;
Honest enough, as the way is: all the same,
Harbouring in the centre of its sense
A hidden germ of failure, shy but sure,
Should neutralize that honesty and leave
That feel for truth at fault, as the way is too.
Some prepossessions such as starts amiss,
By but a hair’s-breadth at the shoulder-blade,
The arm o’ the feeler, dip he ne’er so brave;
And so leads waveringly, lets fall wide
O’ the mark his finger meant to find, and fix
Truth at the bottom, that deceptive speck.
With this Half-Rome,—the source of swerving, call
Over-belief in Guido’s right and wrong
Rather than in Pompilia’s wrong and right:
Who shall say how, who shall say why? ’T is there—
The instinctive theorizing whence a fact
Looks to the eye as the eye likes the look.
Gossip in a public place, a sample-speech.
Some worthy, with his previous hint to find
A husband’s side the safer, and no whit
Aware he is not Æacus the while,—
How such an one supposes and states fact
To whosoever of a multitude
Will listen, and perhaps prolong thereby
The not-unpleasant flutter at the breast,
Born of a certain spectacle shut in
By the church Lorenzo opposite. So, they lounge
Midway the mouth o’ the street, on Corso side,
’Twixt palace Fiano and palace Ruspoli,
Linger and listen; keeping clear o’ the crowd,
Yet wishful one could lend that crowd one’s eyes,
(So universal is its plague of squint)
And make hearts beat our time that flutter false:
—All for the truth’s sake, mere truth, nothing else!
How Half-Rome found for Guido much excuse.
Next, from Rome’s other half, the opposite feel
For truth with a like swerve, like unsuccess,—
Or if success, by no more skill but luck:
This time, through rather siding with the wife,
However the fancy-fit inclined that way,
Than with the husband. One wears drab, one, pink;
Who wears pink, ask him ‘Which shall win the race,
‘Of coupled runners like as egg and egg?’
‘—Why, if I must choose, he with the pink scarf.’
Doubtless for some such reason choice fell here.
A piece of public talk to correspond
At the next stage of the story; just a day
Let pass and new day bring the proper change.
Another sample-speech i’ the market-place
O’ the Barberini by the Capucins;
Where the old Triton, at his fountain-sport,
Bernini’s creature plated to the paps,
Puffs up steel sleet which breaks to diamond dust,
A spray of sparkles snorted from his conch,
High over the caritellas, out o’ the way
O’ the motley merchandizing multitude.
Our murder has been done three days ago,
The frost is over and gone, the south wind laughs,
And, to the very tiles of each red roof
A-smoke i’ the sunshine, Rome lies gold and glad:
So, listen how, to the other half of Rome,
Pompilia seemed a saint and martyr both!

Then, yet another day let come and go,
With pause prelusive still of novelty,
Hear a fresh speaker!—neither this nor that
Half-Rome aforesaid; something bred of both:
One and one breed the inevitable three.
Such is the personage harangues you next;
The elaborated product, tertium quid:
Rome’s first commotion in subsidence gives
The curd o’ the cream, flower o’ the wheat, as it were,
And finer sense o’ the city. Is this plain?
You get a reasoned statement of the case,
Eventual verdict of the curious few
Who care to sift a business to the bran
Nor coarsely bolt it like the simpler sort.
Here, after ignorance, instruction speaks;
Here, clarity of candour, history’s soul,
The critical mind, in short: no gossip-guess.
What the superior social section thinks,
In person of some man of quality
Who,—breathing musk from lace-work and brocade,
His solitaire amid the flow of frill,
Powdered peruke on nose, and bag at back,
And cane dependent from the ruffled wrist,—
Harangues in silvery and selectest phrase
’Neath waxlight in a glorified saloon
Where mirrors multiply the girandole:
Courting the approbation of no mob,
But Eminence This and All-Illustrious That
Who take snuff softly, range in well-bred ring,
Card-table-quitters for observance’ sake,
Around the argument, the rational word—
Still, spite its weight and worth, a sample-speech.
How quality dissertated on the case.

So much for Rome and rumour; smoke comes first:
Once the smoke risen untroubled, we descry
Clearlier what tongues of flame may spire and spit
To eye and ear, each with appropriate tinge
According to its food, pure or impure.
The actors, no mere rumours of the act,
Intervene. First you hear Count Guido’s voice,
In a small chamber that adjoins the court,
Where Governor and Judges, summoned thence,
Tommati, Venturini and the rest,
Find the accused ripe for declaring truth.
Soft-cushioned sits he; yet shifts seat, shirks touch,
As, with a twitchy brow and wincing lip
And cheek that changes to all kinds of white,
He proffers his defence, in tones subdued
Near to mock-mildness now, so mournful seems
The obtuser sense truth fails to satisfy;
Now, moved, from pathos at the wrong endured,
To passion; for the natural man is roused
At fools who first do wrong, then pour the blame
Of their wrong-doing, Satan-like, on Job.
Also his tongue at times is hard to curb;
Incisive, nigh satiric bites the phrase,
Rough-raw, yet somehow claiming privilege
—It is so hard for shrewdness to admit
Folly means no harm when she calls black white!
—Eruption momentary at the most,
Modified forthwith by a fall o’ the fire,
Sage acquiescence; for the world’s the world,
And, what it errs in, Judges rectify:
He feels he has a fist, then folds his arms
Crosswise and makes his mind up to be meek.
And never once does he detach his eye
From those ranged there to slay him or to save,
But does his best man’s-service for himself,
Despite,—what twitches brow and makes lip wince,—
His limbs’ late taste of what was called the Cord,
Or Vigil-torture more facetiously.
Even so; they were wont to tease the truth
Out of loath witness (toying, trifling time)
By torture: ’t was a trick, a vice of the age,
Here, there and everywhere, what would you have?
Religion used to tell Humanity
She gave him warrant or denied him course.
And since the course was much to his own mind,
Of pinching flesh and pulling bone from bone
To unhusk truth a-hiding in its hulls,
Nor whisper of a warning stopped the way,
He, in their joint behalf, the burly slave,
Bestirred him, mauled and maimed all recusants,
While, prim in place, Religion overlooked;
And so had done till doomsday, never a sign
Nor sound of interference from her mouth,
But that at last the burly slave wiped brow,
Let eye give notice as if soul were there,
Muttered ‘’T is a vile trick, foolish more than vile,
‘Should have been counted sin; I make it so:
‘At any rate no more of it for me—
‘Nay, for I break the torture-engine thus!’
Then did Religion start up, stare amain,
Look round for help and see none, smile and say
‘What, broken is the rack? Well done of thee!
‘Did I forget to abrogate its use?
‘Be the mistake in common with us both!
‘—One more fault our blind age shall answer for,
‘Down in my book denounced though it must be
‘Somewhere. Henceforth find truth by milder means!’
Ah but, Religion, did we wait for thee
To ope the book, that serves to sit upon,
And pick such place out, we should wait indeed!
That is all history: and what is not now,
Was then, defendants found it to their cost.
How Guido, after being tortured, spoke.

Also hear Caponsacchi who comes next,
Man and priest—could you comprehend the coil!—
In days when that was rife which now is rare.
How, mingling each its multifarious wires,
Now heaven, now earth, now heaven and earth at once,
Had plucked at and perplexed their puppet here,
Played off the young frank personable priest;
Sworn fast and tonsured plain heaven’s celibate,
And yet earth’s clear-accepted servitor,
A courtly spiritual Cupid, squire of dames
By law of love and mandate of the mode.
The Church’s own, or why parade her seal,
Wherefore that chrism and consecrative work?
Yet verily the world’s, or why go badged
A prince of sonneteers and lutanists,
Show colour of each vanity in vogue
Borne with decorum due on blameless breast?
All that is changed now, as he tells the court
How he had played the part excepted at;
Tells it, moreover, now the second time:
Since, for his cause of scandal, his own share
I’ the flight from home and husband of the wife,
He has been censured, punished in a sort
By relegation,—exile, we should say,
To a short distance for a little time,—
Whence he is summoned on a sudden now,
Informed that she, he thought to save, is lost,
And, in a breath, bidden re-tell his tale,
Since the first telling somehow missed effect,
And then advise in the matter. There stands he,
While the same grim black-panelled chamber blinks
As though rubbed shiny with the sins of Rome
Told the same oak for ages—wave-washed wall
Where to has set a sea of wickedness.
There, where you yesterday heard Guido speak,
Speaks Caponsacchi; and there face him too
Tommati, Venturini and the rest
Who, eight months earlier, scarce repressed the smile,
Forewent the wink; waived recognition so
Of peccadillos incident to youth,
Especially youth high-born; for youth means love,
Vows can’t change nature, priests are only men,
And love needs stratagem and subterfuge:
Which age, that once was youth, should recognize,
May blame, but needs not press too hard against.
Here sit the old Judges then, but with no grace
Of reverend carriage, magisterial port.
For why? The accused of eight months since,—the same
Who cut the conscious figure of a fool,
Changed countenance, dropped bashful gaze to ground,
While hesitating for an answer then,—
Now is grown judge himself, terrifies now
This, now the other culprit called a judge,
Whose turn it is to stammer and look strange,
As he speaks rapidly, angrily, speech that smites:
And they keep silence, bear blow after blow,
Because the seeming-solitary man,
Speaking for God, may have an audience too,
Invisible, no discreet judge provokes.
How the priest Caponsacchi said his say.
Then a soul sighs its lowest and its last
After the loud ones,—so much breath remains
Unused by the four-days’-dying; for she lived
Thus long, miraculously long, ’t was thought,
Just that Pompilia might defend herself.

How, while the hireling and the alien stoop,
Comfort, yet question,—since the time is brief,
And folk, allowably inquisitive,
Encircle the low pallet where she lies
In the good house that helps the poor to die,—
Pompilia tells the story of her life.
For friend and lover,—leech and man of law
Do service; busy helpful ministrants
As varied in their calling as their mind,
Temper and age: and yet from all of these,
About the white bed under the arched roof,
Is somehow, as it were, evolved a one,—
Small separate sympathies combined and large,
Nothings that were, grown something very much:
As if the bystanders gave each his straw,
All he had, though a trifle in itself,
Which, plaited all together, made a Cross
Fit to die looking on and praying with,
Just as well as if ivory or gold.
So, to the common kindliness she speaks,
There being scarce more privacy at the last
For mind than body: but she is used to bear,
And only unused to the brotherly look.
How she endeavoured to explain her life.

Then, since a Trial ensued, a touch o’ the same
To sober us, flustered with frothy talk,
And teach our common sense its helplessness.
For why deal simply with divining-rod,
Scrape where we fancy secret sources flow,
And ignore law, the recognized machine,
Elaborate display of pipe and wheel
Framed to unchoke, pump up and pour apace
Truth in a flowery foam shall wash the world?
The patent truth-extracting process,—ha?
Let us make all that mystery turn one wheel,
Give you a single grind of law at least!
One orator, of two on either side,
Shall teach us the puissance of the tongue
—That is, o’ the pen which simulated tongue
On paper and saved all except the sound
Which never was. Law’s speech beside law’s thought?
That were too stunning, too immense an odds:
That point of vantage, law let nobly pass.
One lawyer shall admit us to behold
The manner of the making out a case,
First fashion of a speech; the chick in egg,
And masterpiece law’s bosom incubates.
How Don Giacinto of the Arcangeli,
Called Procurator of the Poor at Rome,
Now advocate for Guido and his mates,—
The jolly learned man of middle age,
Cheek and jowl all in laps with fat and law,
Mirthful as mighty, yet, as great hearts use,
Despite the name and fame that tempt our flesh,
Constant to that devotion of the hearth,
Still captive in those dear domestic ties!—
How he,—having a cause to triumph with,
All kind of interests to keep intact,
More than one efficacious personage
To tranquillize, conciliate and secure,
And above all, public anxiety
To quiet, show its Guido in good hands,—
Also, as if such burdens were too light,
A certain family-feast to claim his care,
The birthday-banquet for the only son—
Paternity at smiling strife with law—
How he brings both to buckle in one bond;
And, thick at throat, with waterish under-eye,
Turns to his task and settles in his seat
And puts his utmost means to practice now:
Wheezes out law and whiffles Latin forth,
And, just as though roast lamb would never be,
Makes logic levigate the big crime small:
Rubs palm on palm, rakes foot with itchy foot,
Conceives and inchoates the argument,
Sprinkling each flower appropriate to the time,
—Ovidian quip or Ciceronian crank,
A-bubble in the larynx while he laughs,
As he had fritters deep down frying there.
How he turns, twists, and tries the oily thing
Shall be—first speech for Guido ’gainst the Fisc.

Then with a skip as it were from heel to head,
Leaving yourselves fill up the middle bulk
O’ the Trial, reconstruct its shape august,
From such exordium clap we to the close;
Give you, if we dare wing to such a height,
The absolute glory in some full-grown speech
On the other side, some finished butterfly,
Some breathing diamond-flake with leaf-gold fans,
That takes the air, no trace of worm it was,
Or cabbage-bed it had production from.
Giovambattista o’ the Bottini, Fisc,
Pompilia’s patron by the chance of the hour,
To-morrow her persecutor,—composite, he,
As becomes who must meet such various calls—
Odds of age joined in him with ends of youth.
A man of ready smile and facile tear,
Improvised hopes, despairs at nod and beck,
And language—ah, the gift of eloquence!
Language that goes as easy as a glove
O’er good and evil, smoothens both to one.
Rashness helps caution with him, fires the straw,
In free enthusiastic careless fit,
On the first proper pinnacle of rock
Which happens, as reward for all that zeal,
To lure some bark to founder and bring gain:
While calm sits Caution, rapt with heavenward eye,
A true confessor’s gaze amid the glare,
Beaconing to the breaker, death and hell.
‘Well done, thou good and faithful!’ she approves:
'Hadst thou let slip a faggot to the beach,
'The crew had surely spied thy precipice
'And saved their boat; the simple and the slow,
'Who should have prompt forestalled the wrecker's fee:
'Let the next crew be wise and hail in time!'
Just so compounded is the outside man,
Blue juvenile pure eye and pippin cheek,
And brow all prematurely soiled and seamed
With sudden age, bright devastated hair.
Ah, but you miss the very tones o' the voice,
The scrannel pipe that screams in heights of head,
As, in his modest studio, all alone,
The tall wight Stands a-tiptoe, strives and strains,
Both eyes shut, like the cockerel that would crow,
Tries to his own self amorously o'er
What never will be uttered else than so—
To the four walls, for Forum and Mars' Hill,
Speaks out the poesy which, penned, turns prose.
Clavecinist debarred his instrument,
He yet thrums—shirking neither turn nor trill,
With desperate finger on dumb table-edge—
The sovereign rondo, shall conclude his Suite,
Charm an imaginary audience there,
From old Corelli to young Haendel, both
I' the flesh at Rome, ere he perforce go print
The cold black score, mere music for the mind—
The last speech against Guido and his gang,
With special end to prove Pompilia pure.
How the Fisc vindicates Pompilia's fame.

Then comes the all but end, the ultimate
Judgment save yours. Pope Innocent the Twelfth,
Simple, sagacious, mild yet resolute,
With prudence, probity and—what beside
From the other world he feels impress at times,
Having attained to fourscore years and six,—
How, when the court found Guido and the rest
Guilty, but law supplied a subterfuge
And passed the final sentence to the Pope,
He, bringing his intelligence to bear
This last time on what ball behoves him drop
In the urn, or white or black, does drop a black,
Send five souls more to just precede his own,
Stand him in stead and witness, if need were,
How he is wont to do God’s work on earth.
The manner of his sitting out the dim
Droop of a sombre February day
In the plain closet where he does such work,
With, from all Peter’s treasury, one stool,
One table and one lathen crucifix.
There sits the Pope, his thoughts for company;
Grave but not sad,—nay, something like cheer
Leaves the lips free to be benevolent,
Which, all day long, did duty firm and fast.
A cherishing there is of foot and knee,
A chafing loose-skinned large-veined hand with hand,—
What steward but knows when stewardship earns its wage,
May levy praise, anticipate the lord?
He reads, notes, lays the papers down at last,
Muses, then takes a turn about the room;
Unclasps a huge tome in an antique guise,
Primitive print and tongue half obsolete,
That stands him in diurnal stead; opes page,
Finds place where falls the passage to be conned
According to an order long in use:
And, as he comes upon the evening’s chance,
Starts somewhat, solemnizes straight his smile,
Then reads aloud that portion first to last,
And at the end lets flow his own thoughts forth
Likewise aloud, for respite and relief,
Till by the dreary relics of the west
Wan through the half-moon window, all his light,
He bows the head while the lips move in prayer,
Writes some three brief lines, signs and seals the same,
Tinkles a hand-bell, bids the obsequious Sir
Who puts foot presently o’ the closet-sill
He watched outside of, bear as superscribed
That mandate to the Governor forthwith:
Then heaves abroad his cares in one good sigh,
Traverses corridor with no arm’s help,
And so to sup as a clear conscience should.
The manner of the judgment of the Pope. 1270

Then must speak Guido yet a second time,
Satan’s old saw being apt here—skin for skin,
All a man hath that will he give for life.
While life was graspable and gainable, free
To bird-like buzz her wings round Guido’s brow,
Not much truth stiffened out the web of words
He wove to catch her: when away she flew
And death came, death’s breath rivelled up the lies,
Left bare the metal thread, the fibre fine
Of truth, i’ the spinning: the true words come last. 1280

How Guido, to another purpose quite,
Speaks and despairs, the last night of his life,
In that New Prison by Castle Angelo
At the bridge-foot: the same man, another voice.
On a Stone bench in a close fetid cell,
Where the hot vapour of an agony,
Struck into drops on the cold wall, runs down
Horrible worms made out of sweat and tears—
There crouch, well nigh to the knees in dungeon-straw,
Lit by the sole lamp suffered for their sake,
Two awe-struck figures, this a Cardinal,
That an Abate, both of old styled friends
Of the part-man part-monster in the midst,
So changed is Franceschini’s gentle blood.
The tiger-cat screams now, that whined before,
That pried and tried and trod so gingerly,
Till in its silkiness the trap-teeth join;
Then you know how the bristling fury foams.
They listen, this wrapped in his folds of red,
While his feet fumble for the filth below;
The other, as beseems a stouter heart,
Working his best with beads and cross to ban
The enemy that comes in like a flood
Spite of the standard set up, verily
And in no trope at all, against him there:
For at the prison-gate, just a few steps
Outside, already, in the doubtful dawn,
Thither, from this side and from that, slow sweep
And settle down in silence solidly,
Crow-wise, the frightful Brotherhood of Death.
Black-hatted and black-hooded huddle they,
Black rosaries a-dangling from each waist;
So take they their grim station at the door,
Torches alight and cross-bones-banner spread,
And that gigantic Christ with open arms,
Grounded. Nor lacks there aught but that the group
Break forth, intone the lamentable psalm,
‘Out of the deeps, Lord, have I cried to thee’—
When inside, from the true profound, a sign
Shall bear intelligence that the foe is foiled,
Count Guido Franceschini has confessed,
And is absolved and reconciled with God.
Then they, intoning, may begin their march,
Make by the longest way for the People’s Square,
Carry the criminal to his crime’s award:
A mob to cleave, a scaffolding to reach,
Two gallows and Mannaia crowning all.
How Guido made defence a second time.

Finally, even as thus by step and step
I led you from the level of to-day
Up to the summit of so long ago,
Here, whence I point you the wide prospect round—
Let me, by like steps, slope you back to smooth,
Land you on mother-earth, no whit the worse,
To feed o’ the fat o’ the furrow: free to dwell,
Taste our time’s better things profusely spread
For all who love the level, corn and wine,
Much cattle and the many-folded fleece.
Shall not my friends go feast again on sward,
Though cognizant of country in the clouds
Higher than wistful eagle’s horny eye
Ever unclosed for, Mid ancestral crags,
When morning broke and Spring was back once more,
And he died, heaven, save by his heart, unreached?
Yet heaven my fancy lifts to, ladder-like,—
As Jack reached, holpen of his beanstalk-rungs!

A novel country: I might make it mine
By choosing which one aspect of the year
Suited mood best, and putting solely that
On panel somewhere in the House of Fame,
Landscaping what I saved, not what I saw:
—Might fix you, whether frost in goblin-time
Startled the moon with his abrupt bright laugh,
Or, August’s hair afloat in filmy fire,
She fell, arms wide, face foremost on the world,
Swooned there and so singed out the strength of things.
Thus were abolished Spring and Autumn both,
The land dwarfed to one likeness of the land,
Life cramped corpse-fashion. Rather learn and love
Each facet-flash of the revolving year!—
Red, green and blue that whirl into a white,
The variance now, the eventual unity,
Which make the miracle. See it for yourselves,
This man’s act, changeable because alive!
Action now shrouds, now shows the informing thought;
Man, like a glass ball with a spark a-top,
Out of the magic fire that lurks inside,
Shows one tint at a time to take the eye:
Which, let a finger touch the silent sleep,
Shifted a hair’s-breadth shoots you dark for bright,
Suffuses bright with dark, and baffles so
Your sentence absolute for shine or shade.
Once set such orbs,—white styled, black stigmatized,—
A-rolling, see them once on the other side
Your good men and your bad men every one,
From Guido Franceschini to Guy Faux,
Oft would you rub your eyes and change your names.

Such, British Public, ye who like me not,
(God love you!)—whom I yet have laboured for
Perchance more careful whoso runs may read
Than erst when all, it seemed, could read who ran,—
Perchance more careless whoso reads may praise
Than late when he who praised and read and wrote
Was apt to find himself the self-same me,—
Such labour had such issue, so I wrought
This arc, by furtherance of such alloy,
And so, by one spirt, take away its trace
Till, justifiably golden, rounds my ring.

A ring without a posy, and that ring mine?

O lyric Love, half-angel and half-bird
And all a wonder and a wild desire,—
Boldest of hearts that ever braved the sun,
Took sanctuary within the holier blue,
And sang a kindred soul out to his face,—
Yet human at the red-ripe of the heart—
When the first summons from the darkling earth
Reached thee amid thy chambers, blanched their blue,
And bared them of the glory—to drop down,
To toil for man, to suffer or to die,—
This is the same voice: can thy soul know change?
Hail then, and hearken from the realms of help!
Never may I commence my song, my due
To God who best taught song by gift of thee,
Except with bent head and beseeching hand—
That still, despite the distance and the dark,
What was, again may be; some interchange
Of grace, some splendour once thy very thought,
Some benediction anciently thy smile:
—Never conclude, but raising hand and head
Thither where eyes, that cannot reach, yet yearn
For all hope, all sustainment, all reward,
Their utmost up and on,—so blessing back
In those thy realms of help, that heaven thy home,
Some whiteness which, I judge, thy face makes proud,
Some wanmess where, I think, thy foot may fall!