

POETRY

The Browning–Howard Connection

Selected and introduced by Anthony Hecht

When I was a schoolboy, Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess" was a standard item in the English curriculum. It had many features calculated to excite the minds of the young, foremost among them a ruthless, egotistical tyrant of such power and vanity that he could openly admit to having ordered the execution of his own wife for the "crime" of being too pleasant to others. Critics have not been of one mind about the meaning of the poem, or even the psychology of its ducal speaker. Robert Langbaum, who regards himself as something of an authority on the poem, writes, "It is because *the duke's motive for telling the story is inadequate*, and because the situation is never resolved in that the utterance is not quite directed to the auditor and *does not accomplish anything*, that we look for a resolution in the duke's life outside the poem" [my italics, indicating where I think Langbaum mistaken]. William Harmon declares, "The duke is dignified and cagey but not quite cagey enough. Some inner compulsion, probably an overwhelming sense of guilt, has compelled him to return to the scene and situation of his crime and to confess." This seems to me equally mistaken.

Browning's duke is based on Alfonso d'Este, duke of Ferrara, whose first wife died under mysterious circumstances only three years after her marriage. Like historical novelists of our day, Browning allowed himself some latitude in creating his psychological portrait. But he was a keen student of history, and he would have known all about the moral vagaries of Italian Renaissance princes, a topic Shakespeare himself was acquainted with. Regarding the d'Este family, Jacob Burkhardt writes:

Within the palace frightful deeds were perpetrated; a princess was beheaded (1425) for alleged adultery with a stepson; legitimate and illegitimate children fled from the court, and even abroad their lives were threatened by assassins sent in pursuit of them (1471). Plots from without were incessant; the bastard of a bastard tried to wrest the crown from the lawful heir, Hercules I; this latter is said afterwards (1493) to have poisoned his wife on discovering that she, at the instigation of her brother, Ferrente of Naples, was going to poison him.

Confident, audacious, vain, Browning's duke knows just what he's up to, and has calculated to a nicety the effect his words will have on the envoy who has come to treat with him about a second marriage, and is acting as the agent of the count of Tyrol, whose court is at Innsbruck, Austria. Underneath the duke's connoisseurship, civility, and boastfulness, two stipulations are meant to be made crystal clear to the family of the potential bride: (1) The duke is a man of expensive tastes who will expect a dowry commensurate with the distinction of his noble family, and (2) he will also expect nothing but absolute submission and obedience from anyone he deigns to marry. This is the "motive" for his elaborate discourse. He feels no more *guilt* than Shakespeare's Antonio in *The Tempest*, who plots the murder of his brother, Prospero. The duke's conscience is as untroubled as Machiavelli tells us a prince's ought to

be. Doubtless this is chilling, even monstrous; yet there have been such men. That such brutal considerations should present themselves openly during the negotiations preliminary to a marriage contract should not astonish us when we recall that marriage among the nobility was largely a mercenary and dynastic matter, in which love played little if any role.

Richard Howard, a poet and professor of English at Columbia University, has written a brilliant sequel to the Browning poem, predicated on the dramatic situation as outlined above. His “speaker” is one Nikolaus Mardruz, the envoy to whom Browning’s duke has recently spoken, and who is now reporting (by written message) on that interview along with relevant observations, to his principal, the count of Tyrol. He includes comments omitted in Browning’s version: for example, the duke’s mention of “the relative consolations of semblance,” a curious turn of phrase, suggesting that the duke is (1) so old, or (2) so ill, or (3) so refined that he now prefers portraits to their subjects. This can mean that he has moved beyond sexual appetites, but it can also mean that he places no high value on the lives of others. As a diplomat/intermediary, Mardruz is easily the equal of the duke in cunning, intrigue, and cool, strategic thinking. Howard has introduced matters of age, health, and cash flow into the plottings, and the drama is greatly enlarged thereby. He might well plan to continue the sequence.

A few words need to be said about the formal elements of the two poems. Browning’s is written, not (as William Harmon declares) in heroic couplets (which are also called “closed” couplets, and in which the sense is completed in the second line), but in what might be called defiantly unheroic couplets, full of enjambments, the speaker’s impetuosity of discourse flooding through the form almost without pause to rhyme. The headlong thrust of syntax makes the formality of rhyme a secondary, if not a negligible, factor. Howard’s poem is composed in syllabics, in which syllables are counted without regard to accents. Though he has disposed his lines on the page with great craft and seamless continuity, study will disclose that he has constructed an eight-line stanza, in which the line lengths, by syllable count, run: 9, 11, 5, 5, 11, 9, 5, 5. With the ninth line, this pattern is repeated. By ingeniously placing the first set of five-syllable lines toward the left margin of the poem, and the second set toward the right, Howard has presented a visually serpentine format, suggesting the deviousness and sinuosity of his speaker, and his Mardruz is worthy of Browning.

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: Frà Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.
Will’t please you sit and look at her? I said
“Frà Pandolf” by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by
The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; 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
 Frà 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
 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,
 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
 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
 —E'en then 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
 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!

*Nikolaus Mardruz to his
 Master Ferdinand,
 Count of Tyrol, 1565*

*A tribute to Robert Browning and in
 celebration of the 65th birthday of Harold
 Bloom, who made such tribute only natural.*

My Lord recalls Ferrara? How walls
 rise out of water yet appear to recede
 identically
 into it, as if
 built in both directions: soaring and sinking...
 Such mirroring was my first dismay—
 my next, having crossed
 the moat, was making
 out that, for all its grandeur, the great
 pile, observed close to, is close to a ruin!

Myself I find it
 but a mountebank's
 proficiency—another chicane, like that
 illusive curtain, a waxwork sort
 of nature called forth:
 cold legerdemain!
 Though *extranea* such as the hares
 (copulating!), the doves, and a full-blown rose
 were showily limned,
 I could not discern
 aught to be loved in that countenance itself,
 likely to rival, much less to excel
 the life illumined
 in Cranach's image
 of *our* Countess, which His Grace had set
 beside the dead woman's presentment. . . . And took,
 so evident was
 the supremacy,
 no further pains to assert Fra Pandolf's skill.
 One last hard look, whereupon the Duke
 resumed his discourse
 in an altered tone,
 now some unintelligible rant
 of *stooping*—His Grace chooses “never to stoop”
 when he makes reproof. . . .
 My Lord will take this
 as but a figure: not only is the Duke
 no longer young, his body is so
 queerly misshapen
 that even to *speak*
 of “not stooping” seems absurdity:
 the creature *is* stooped, whether by cruel
 or impartial cause—say
 Time or the Tempter—
 I shall not venture to hypothecate. Cause
 or no cause, it would appear he marked
 some motive for his
 “reproof,” a mortal
 chastisement in fact inflicted on
 his poor Duchess, *put away* (I take it so)
 for smiling—at whom?
 Brother Pandolf? or
 some visitor to court during the sitting?
 —too generally, if I construe
 the Duke's clue rightly,
 to survive the terms
 of his . . . severe protocol. My Lord,
 at the time it was delivered to me thus,
 the admonition
 if indeed it was
 any such thing, seemed no more of a menace
 than the rest of his rodomontade;
 item, he pointed,
 as we toiled downstairs,
 to that bronze *Neptune* by our old Claus
 (there must be at least six of them cluttering
 the Summer Palace
 at Innsbruck), claiming
 it was “cast in bronze for me.” Nonsense, of course.

But upon reflection, I suppose
 we had better take
 the old reprobate
 at his unspeakable word. . . . Why, even
 assuming his boasts should be as plausible
 as his avarice,

no “cause” for dismay:
once ensconced here as the Duchess, your daughter
 need no more apprehend the Duke’s
 murderous temper
 than his matchless taste.

For I have devised a means whereby
the dowry so flagrantly pursued by our
 insolvent Duke (“no
 just pretense of mine
be disallowed” indeed!), instead of being
 paid as he pleads in one globose sum,
 should drip into his
 coffers by degrees—
 say, one fifth each year—then after five
such years, the dowry itself to be doubled,
 always assuming
 that Her Grace enjoys
her usual smiling health. The years are her
 ally in such an arbitrament,
 and with confidence
 My Lord can assure
 the new Duchess (assuming her Duke
abides by these stipulations and his own
 propensity for
 accumulating
“semblances”) the long devotion (so long as
 he lasts) of her last Duke... Or more likely,
 if I guess aright
 your daughter’s intent,
 of that young lordling I might make so
bold as to designate her next Duke, as well...

Ever determined in

My Lordship’s service,
I remain his Envoy
to Ferrara as to the world.

Nikolaus Mardruz.



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