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The portrayal of historical character in Browning's poetry

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The Portrayal of Historical Character in Browning's Poetry

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate School
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Preface

Robert Browning is one of the most popular of the English poets, in his day and ours. There are Browning Societies and Browning lovers all over the world, from England and America to Africa and South America. He is also popular with scholars. There are at least twelve biographies, three handbooks to interpret his poetry, and six or more collections of his letters to his wife and friends. What accounts for Browning's popularity? He was not a lyric poet like Shelley, nor was he a nature lover like Wordsworth. Much of his poetry is difficult and requires careful reading. Some of it is mediocre and some bad. "Irks care the crop-ful bird?" is certainly not good poetry. Why then is he so popular? Primarily it is because his poetry deals with people. We have come to know Browning as the master psychologist, an artist capable of portraying people in all situations. In a stanza or two, Browning can succinctly reveal more of a person's character and personality
than many biographers in a whole page of prose.

Browning's interests were varied and, consequently, he dealt with all types of people. In his poetry one finds painters, poets, rabbis, criminals, and kings. One of the most interesting things about his poetry is that it so often portrays historical people.

We can date Browning's interest in history from his childhood. His father was an amateur scholar and fervent book lover. He loved all books, but old books were his special delight. He knew all the bookstalls in London and could often tell where a copy of a certain work could be bought. The elder Browning was especially interested in


history and had over 2,000 volumes in his library in English, Greek, Hebrew, Latin, French, Italian, and Spanish. There were also such biographical dictionaries as the Biographie universelle, which his son was later to use extensively in his poetry. Since almost all of Robert's education, both


early and late, was received at his home through tutors and reading, it is natural to assume that he acquired his father's taste for history and out-of-the-way historical characters. This interest quite naturally carried over into
his poetry, and as a result, we have today his many poems on historical persons.

With a poet such as Browning, a summary of his use of historical people is a necessity. Many times when reading his poems, it would be most helpful, and in some cases very necessary to the understanding of the poem, to be able to refer to something which would give all the essential facts concerning the person involved. This is one of the aims of this study. I have tried to gather all of Browning's poems which deal with historical people and to give the essential details about them. When it was possible, I have used Browning's original sources. This was rarely possible however, because many of the books which Browning used have gone out of print. One notable exception is the Biographie universelle.

A question which arises in connection with a poet who deals with historical personalities is whether the poet was historically accurate or whether he rearranged the events of the person's life to suit his purposes. Browning was always very careful to defend his characterizations. In letters to readers, scholars, and friends he tried to clear up points of misunderstanding and justify his historical point of view. His letter to the unidentified reader in which he defends his
historical correctness in "The Statue and the Bust," or the letter to Professor Edward Dowden in which he repudiates the allegation that he made a slip in the poem "Fra Lippo Lippi" are examples. On the other hand, we have C. N. Wonger's implication that Browning did not remain faithful to history, and Kenneth Knickerbocker's implication that he often rearranged the facts of a person's life to suit his purposes.

Thurman L. Hood, editor, *Letters of Robert Browning*, collected by Thomas J. Wise (New Haven, 1933), pp. 260 and 104. See also pages 164 and 176 for additional examples of Browning's interest in the historical accuracy of his poetry.

This study then should aid in answering the question of whether Browning was faithful to history and if he was not, why not, and whether he realized that he was contradicting history.

In order to determine what type of people Browning was interested in, why he was interested in them, and whether he remained faithful to history in his conception of them, I have arranged this thesis in four chapters, each one dealing with a major interest of his life. The first chapter is devoted to artists, musicians, and scholars. "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and other poems about painters are examples of Browning's deep appreciation of painting. "The Bishop Orders His Tomb" is the culmination of his
knowledge of the Renaissance, and the poem has been justly praised for its truthful portrait of a Renaissance churchman. "Abt Vogler" and "A Toccata of Galuppi" reveal Browning's interest in musicians, while "A Grammarian's Funeral" reveals his respect for scholarship.

Chapter II is concerned with Browning's religious poetry. In these poems, one can trace his interest in religion from Hebrew to Christian. His poems "Rabbi Ben Ezra" and "Solomon and Balkis" show his extensive knowledge of rabbinical and Hebrew lore. Such a poem as "An Epistle of Karshish, the Arab Physician" reveals Browning's ability to depict foreign attitudes toward Christianity, while his two poems on popes, coupled with "The Heretic's Tragedy," reflect the Church of the Middle Ages. His "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" and "A Death in the Desert" are his comment on current religious controversies by using historical persons.

Chapter III contains those poems which cannot be classified under art or religion. This chapter reveals a variety of interests. "Donald" and "Muckle-Mouth Meg" reveal Browning's interest in Scottish history, while "Epps" and "Clive" show his interest in people of English history. "Herve Riel," "The Two Poets of Croisic," and "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli" are concerned with French history, while "Cenciaja," "Cristina and Monaldeschi," and "My Last Duchess" reveal a deep interest in old Italian murder stories.

Chapter IV contains a study of four longer poems of Browning: Paracelsus, Sordello, Strafford, and King Victor.
and King Charles. This chapter presents the best opportunity to study Browning's use of historical persons, since the longer poems consider a large segment of a person's life, and this gives us a better opportunity to compare it with history. The four long poems reveal a variety of interests. Browning writes of a doctor and magician, a troubadour, a politician, and two kings.

I have omitted a consideration of historical persons in The Ring and the Book because this has already been done in a Master's thesis on file at the University of Richmond. Browning's Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in their Day has been omitted because William Clyde DeVane, in his Browning's Parleyings, The Autobiography of a Mind, has done a splendid job of collecting this material.

I must acknowledge my indebtedness to three references which I have used considerably. A Browning Handbook by William Clyde DeVane, Edward Berdoe's Browning Cyclopaedia and Griffin and Minchin's Life of Robert Browning are indispensable to any Browning student. DeVane gives the essential background of each poem, Berdoe ordinarily gives a good exegesis, and Griffin and Minchin give the details of the poet's life.
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Chapter I
Artists

Throughout his life, Browning was avidly interested in people who had something to do with the arts. His interest included musicians, scholars, poets, and painters. Wide travels and varied reading gave him adequate background for his poems on these persons. In Italy, for instance, he had a chance to study firsthand the work of such artists as Andrea del Sarto and Fra Lippo Lippi and to hear the music of Vogler and Galuppi.

One group in which Browning was particularly interested was the Florentine painters of the Renaissance. This interest was generated by firsthand acquaintance with their works and by his familiarity with such books as Vasari's Lives of the Painters and Gerard de Lairesse's The History of Painting in All Its Branches. Three poems which immediately come to mind when Browning and the Florentines are mentioned are "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Pictor Ignotus." A good place to begin a study of Browning's use of history would be with these three poems since they are all concerned with a particular group of painters.

When Browning was in Florence in 1853, John Kenyon asked him to procure a copy of the portrait of Andrea del Sarto and his wife, painted by the artist himself. There was no copy to be had; so Browning wrote the poem "Andrea del Sarto" and sent it to his friend.
As the poem opens, Andrea is talking with his wife, Lucrezia. They have just had a quarrel and Andrea has finally agreed to work for her "friend's friend," and to treat "his own subject after his own way." As they sit together overlooking the Fiesole, a suburb of Florence, Andrea mentions that his art is all "placid and perfect," and that his youth, hope, and art have all been toned down.

He thinks that if Lucrezia had only given him inspiration and urged him to "God and glory" instead of to gain, he might have been another Rafael or 'Angelo. Perhaps though, incentives come from "the soul's self," and maybe his failure is his own fault. Andrea then recalls his trip to France to work for King Francis I, and how he left with some of the King's funds, which he promptly used to build a cottage for himself and his wife.

At the end of the poem, Lucrezia is preparing to leave for the evening with her "cousin," and Andrea promises to paint the pictures for her friend and thus earn the money to pay her "cousin's" gambling debts. Tonight, even if he could change some of his past, he does not believe that he would. It seems enough that she has loved him. Perhaps in
Heaven there will be a new chance for him.

In "Andrea del Sarto," Browning makes use of the artist's life to bring out his ideas that "a man's reach should exceed his grasp," and also that each person will be judged in Heaven by his accomplishments in relation to his abilities.

The poem is based on the opinion, held by Browning and most other art critics, that Andrea's pictures are perfect in their technique and execution but lack the elevation or inspiration which would have placed them with the pictures of Raphael or Michelangelo. Browning recalls certain events in Andrea's life to answer the question of why the artist's work lacked this soul-like quality.

Before studying the poem in relation to the historical events in the man's life, it would be well to examine this idea that Andrea was a painter without a soul. Was Browning correct in his idea? The poet's experience with the art of Andrea began as far back as his boyhood. The Brownings lived but two miles from Dulwich, where the Dulwich Picture Gallery was opened in 1814. In the gallery was a Madonna by Andrea, and both the poet and his father spent much time there.

Later, in Italy, Browning certainly spent time in the Pitti Palace, where hangs the portrait of Andrea and his wife. It is also significant that the scene of the poem "The Statue
and the Bust" is in the Square of the Annunciation, where Andrea's frescoes The Birth of the Virgin and the Madonna del Sacco are located.


Browning's opinion was certainly the result of long acquaintance with the artist's pictures and is an opinion held by most art critics. John Addington Symonds says that although Andrea met high technical requirements, he lacked inspiration, depth of emotion, and energy of thought. Miss


Alice Van Vechten Brown says that there was no real reason behind Andrea's scenes. They were often the "intelligent performance of an empty drama, a triumph of the eclectic spirit," while Bernard Berenson says that Andrea lacked


a profound sense of the significant, and that he sacrificed "spiritual and material significance to pose and draperies."


I am substantially in agreement with Browning and the critics in thinking that Andrea lacked the quality of inspiration needed to make him a great painter. The artist
had almost a perfect sense of proportion and balance, and he made good use of color, but he lacked the ability to bring significance to a picture. The faces of his Madonnas are often stylized, and often their positions are unnatural.

The *Madonna delle Arpie*, in her statuesque pose holding the Christ in one hand and a book in the other, is a good example of Andrea's lack of ability to paint a dramatic picture. Andrea seemed to be more interested in proportion, color, and position than he was in personality.

The background which Browning used for the poem is straight out of Vasari's *Lives of the Painters*. Andrea's marriage to Lucrezia, his abuse of his parents, and his deception of the King of France are history. Vasari tells of the beautiful widow of a capemaker, who was called Lucrezia di Baccio del Fede. Andrea married this woman, and his friends lost their respect for him because the woman had a bad reputation. He began to neglect his art and his parents.

But he destroyed his own peace as well as estranged his friends by this act, seeing that he soon became jealous and found that he had besides fallen into the hands of an artful woman, who made him do as she pleased in all things. He abandoned his poor father and mother, for example, and adopted the father and sisters of his wife in their stead; insomuch that all who knew the facts mourned over him and he soon began to be as much avoided as he had been previously sought after. His disciples still remained with him, it is true, in the hope of learning something useful, yet there was not one of them, great or small that was not maltreated by his wife, both by evil words and despicable actions; none could escape her blows, but although Andrea
lived in the midst of all that torment, he
yet accounted it a high pleasure. 9

Helen Archibald Clarke, *Browning's Italy* (New York,
1907), pp. 263-265.

Vasari also tells of Andrea's deception of King Francis.
About 1515, Francis sent for him and he spent some time in
the French court working for the King. One day he received
a letter from Lucrezia begging him to return home. When he
left, Francis gave him a large sum of French money, probably
to buy some paintings in Florence for the royal collection.
However, Andrea never returned, but took all the money and
built a house for his wife. 10

Ernest Rhys, editor, *Vasari's Lives of the Painters*
(London and Toronto, 1927), vol. 2, pp. 518-519. (All sub-
sequent references will be to *Vasari.*

As we have seen, Browning followed the history of Andrea's
life quite accurately. He probably had many reasons for his
interest in Andrea. Of course, the substitution of the poem
for the picture which the poet was supposed to send John
Kenyon was the immediate occasion of the poem. It also gave
Browning the opportunity to bring out his idea that the artist
should aim high, because here was an example of what happened
to an artist who did not. The very fact that Andrea was
relatively obscure probably appealed to the poet. In "Old
Pictures in Florence," Browning stresses the point that only
persons of little wit will restrict their praise to the very
great painters. The real critic will give each artist his
due, since each contributed to the development of the art.
Moreover, the fact that Andrea was a failure, in a manner of speaking, probably appealed to the poet. Here was a perfect psychological study.

Another poem that is very similar to "Andrea del Sarto" is "Fra Lippo Lippi," since it too studies the personality of a painter. In 1853, when Browning was in Florence, he visited both the Pitti and Uffizi Galleries, where hang many of Lippi's paintings. Browning's poem foreshadows Lippi's

DeVane, p. 216.

Coronation of the Virgin, which he probably saw in the Academia delle Arti in Florence. As a result of his acquaintance with Lippi's work, he became interested in the painter himself. He went to Vasari for the story of the artist's life, and then supplemented Vasari with Filippo Baldinucci's Delle Notizie dei Professori del Disegno da Cimabue. Later we shall see how each of these works influenced the poet.

In the poem Browning tells of the time when Lippi was engaged to paint for the Medici family. While painting in a room of the Medici palace, Lippi had seen three young women pass his window. He made a ladder out of curtains and counterpanes, let himself down out of the window, and made for the red-light district of Florence. There he was caught by the police, who wondered what a Carmelite monk was doing.
in that particular place. The poem is Lippi's explanation of his presence in the neighborhood and his efforts to get out of trouble. He tells the police how he was orphaned at birth and how an old aunt took him to the Carmelite Cloister. The monks took him in, gave him food, and resolved to make a monk of him. They tried to teach him numbers and letters, but all he could do was draw.

Lippi tells how the monks finally despaired of teaching him anything but painting and how they commissioned him to paint the Carmelite chapel. He decorated it with realistic pictures of old peasant women, fat and lean monks, and even a murderer. The head of the monastery complained to the painter that the pictures were all wrong, since they lacked soul. When Lippi asked the Friar to define the soul for him, the answer was rather pathetic.

It's vapor done up like a new-born babe
(In that shape when you die it leaves your mouth
It's ... well, what matters talking, it's the soul!)

Lippi then begins to defend his naturalistic methods by saying that if you try to "paint life and beauty," you will find the soul. He admits that he finally acquiesced to the Friar and rubbed the pictures out. Now he only paints what the Friar wishes. But some nights, he says, he escapes his bondage by coming to the red-light district.

Browning's poem is built around an incident in the life of Fra Filippo de Tommaso Lippi, who was born in Florence
about 1406. In his book Vasari says that Lippi was so amorous that when he saw a woman who pleased him he would give all his possessions to have her. If he could not, he quieted the flame of his love by painting her portrait. While the humor lasted, he paid little or no attention to his work.

Thus, on one occasion when Cosimo de' Medici was employing him, he shut him up in the house so that he might not go out and waste time. He remained so for two days, but overcome by his amorous and bestial desires, he cut up his sheet with a pair of scissors, and, letting himself down out of the window, devoted many days to his pleasures. When Cosimo could not find him he caused a search to be made for him, until at length Filippo returned to his labours. 14


Throughout the poem, Browning stresses Lippi's naturalistic earthy style of painting. Lippi disagreed with the old pietistic theories of art and held that the best way to paint the spirit of God was to paint his works. Lippi's naturalism is barely hinted at in Vasari, but Browning also used Baldinucci's Delle Notizie de' Professori del Disegno da Cinabro. Baldinucci emphasizes much more "strongly than does Vasari the notion that Lippi was one of the first painters to break with the formal traditions of ecclesiastical painting which Fra Angelico and Lorenzo Monaco followed." 15

DeVane, pp. 217-218.
Browning's portrait of the naturalistic Lippi is upheld by most art critics. Miss Brown says that Lippi was one of the representatives of early Renaissance naturalism and that there is little pathos or poignancy in his pictures, while Symonds feels that Lippi was too apt to make angels out of street urchins and to use peasant loves for Virgins. His earthy qualities caused a falseness in his religious themes.

The faces of the women in such a picture as the Coronation of the Virgin do not have a very spiritual air about them. The picture lacks the same quality which Andrea's paintings lacked, namely that ethereal quality which one normally associates with religious pictures. Of course a critical judgment naturally depends on what is desired in a painting, and Lippi certainly sticks to his method of presenting religious themes in earthy terms.

Browning probably chose Lippi as a poetic subject for many of the same reasons that he was interested in Andrea. The man was a failure, at least in the sense that he never was a Raphael or a Michelangelo. He was relatively obscure, and this fits in with Browning's desire to bring some of the lesser-known artists to the public attention. The incident which the poet chose allows for psychological expansion, and this certainly appealed to him. Finally, Lippi is
another example of an artist who was a fine technician, but who never aspired to or attained greatness.

"Pictor Ignotus," a poem about an unknown painter, was probably written sometime in 1844 when Browning was traveling through Italy. The monologue is spoken by the painter, Griffin and Minchin, p. 130.

and the main idea is that the pictures of this young man could have been as famous as others of his day if he had not been too sensitive to have his art become associated with the public. Although his pictures are unknown, says the painter, at least no merchant will profit from his soul's labors. Works, pp. 445-446.

There is disagreement among the commentators as to the interpretation of this poem. In The Browning Cyclopaedia, Berdoe says that this spirit of self-retirement is the same true art spirit which animated the men who built the cathedrals of the Middle Ages and early Renaissance. While DeVane agrees in substance with Berdoe, Paul F. Jamison thinks that the poem is a gesture of personal timidity. "Pictor shrinks from original creation, but is piqued by the fame of a contemporary. He is deceiving himself, and is motivated
by envy. His sensitivity is only half-true."

Helen Archibald Clarke feels that the poem does reveal the feelings of a sensitive spirit, but it also reveals a failure. The painter excuses himself for not wanting to display his art because of his sensitivity and his fear of blundering criticism. "The truth is that the feeling itself is a sign of the self-consciousness which leads to imitation rather than to real creative force."

The identity of the unknown painter is complicated by these different interpretations of the poem. To agree with DeVane and Bordoe is to hold that the unknown painter is probably a belated traditionalist left stranded by the change into realism and naturalism, the movement Browning suggests in "Fra Lippo Lippi." The poem in this case becomes a defense of the old tradition in the face of change.

Agreement with Clarke, however, will produce another idea as to the unknown artist's identity. Clarke holds that Pictor is a painter who stands for a mood "which means the outflow of the tide (realism and secularism), the decay of the creative impulse through the development of too
great self-consciousness."

Clarke, p. 244.

My own idea is that Browning did not have any one painter in mind when he wrote the poem and probably not even a historical type. He almost always mentions the name if he is speaking of an actual person. In his travels through Italy in 1843 and 1844, he had many opportunities to see pictures by unknowns. His acquaintance with these pictures, coupled with his liking for relatively minor or unknown painters, probably gave him the idea for the poem. We are already familiar with the poet's fondness for unknowns and failures in "Andrea del Sarto" and "Fra Lippo Lippi."

I certainly do not agree with Jamison's idea that Pictor is envious and self-deceiving and that his sensitivity is only half-truth. Browning's tone in the poem is too sympathetic to fit this theory, and familiarity with the poet's other works will show that this is not a self-revealing poem such as "My Last Duchess." When Browning is revealing an unpleasant character he makes him appear in such a ludicrous light that the reader always knows exactly where the poet stands.

Browning's "Old Pictures in Florence" also deals with the Florentine group of painters. In this poem, he brings out two of his favorite ideas about art. At the beginning of the poem, he is on a height overlooking Florence, admiring the Campanile which Giotto planned but never lived to see
completed. The poet thinks how people tend to forget the
Giotto and the Cimabues in their reverence for the Raphael
and Michelangelo. People do not realize that the road to
perfection is laid by many artists, each one providing
something for his successors. The great masters, says Brow-
ing, are as much the product of the more obscure artists
as they are of their own talent.

In addition, Browning is drawn to Renaissance artists
because they strived after spiritual perfection. The poet
tells of the time that a Papal envoy was sent for a sample
of Giotto’s work so that the Pope might judge its quality
and see if the artist was talented enough to be employed by
the Vatican. Giotto drew the envoy a circle on a piece of
paper. Browning makes the point that Renaissance artists
did much more than paint perfect circles. They aspired to
put the soul into their art. Unlike the Greeks, who
achieved more physical perfection, the Italians often fell
short in their efforts to paint spiritual beauty. At least
they tried, says Browning, and it is better to aim high and
fall short than to achieve only a narrow success.

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Works, pp. 234-236.

Many artists are mentioned in the poem, but Giotto is
the central figure. Browning concentrates on two incidents
in the life of Giotto. The artist’s popularity had finally
brought him to the attention of the Pope. An envoy was sent
to him to negotiate for his services, and he was instructed
to bring back samples of the artist's work. The only sample which Giotto would give him was a circle painted in red on a sheet of vellum. The messenger carried the sample to the Pope, and Giotto was engaged to paint at the Vatican.

Thomas Craven, Men of Art (New York, 1951), pp. 48-49.

The other incident in the poem is Giotto's planning of the Campanile. Giotto "designed the tower, ornamenting the base with some of the noblest sculptures ever carved, but lived to complete only the first story of the Campanile." Browning uses this to point up the fact that Giotto's real virtue was not that he was able to finish such petty undertakings as the perfect circle, but that he could plan and aspire to build such a work of art as the Campanile. What does it matter that the tower was not completed in Giotto's lifetime. The important thing is that he aspired to greatness. Browning probably chose Giotto because the two incidents from the artist's life gave him a perfect opportunity to illustrate his ideas on the continuity and spiritual quality of all great art.

Browning's interest in painting was not restricted to the Florentine school. His poems "Beatrice Signorini" and "Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Dintemper" bear witness to this. Browning tells of a painter of Viterbo,
Francesco Romanelli, who was married to a noble Roman lady, Beatrice Signorini. While in Rome, Romanelli had met Artemisia Gentileschi, a noted female painter, who was a much more appealing creature than his passive wife. Soon the two fell in love, and they spent much time together. Finally, Artemisia told Romanelli that he must return home to his wife. Before he went, she presented him with a canvas bordered with flowers, which had an unfilled space in the center. Here, said Artemisia, Romanelli must paint the woman of his choice, either her or his wife. Romanelli painted Artemisia in the space and took the picture home with him.

One day, he and Beatrice were looking at his works. In a moment of spite, Romanelli drew back the veil and showed her the picture of Artemisia. Beatrice, in a fit of jealous anger, slashed it to ribbons. Her husband realized that his wife was no placid creature with milk in her veins, but a woman who could feel passions just as strong as any that Artemisia had experienced. From then on, he loved no other woman.

Works, pp. 1304-1308.

Francesco Romanelli was a painter of the Roman school, born at Viterbo in 1610. He was a weak though pleasing painter who specialized in frescos and decorative painting. He traveled widely, doing frescos both in the Vatican and at
the Louvre. Artemisia Gentileschi was born in Rome.


She traveled to England, where she was well received. She even painted the royal family, and her portrait hangs at Hampton Court.


Browning drew the essential facts of his poem from Filippo Baldinucci's Notizie de Professori del Disegno da Cimabue in Qua, which tells of the friendship between Artemisia and Romanelli, of the picture of Artemisia painted by Romanelli, and of what Romanelli's wife, Beatrice, did to it. The two accounts differ on one point, however. The prudish Baldinucci speaks of an innocent friendship between Romanelli and Artemisia, while Browning treats the relationship as a love affair. The Browning version seems to be much more accurate, since Artemisia was "as famous for her amours as her painting." Browning probably wrote the poem because of his interest in painters and because of the interesting situation with which it provided him.

DeVane, p. 544.
"Of Pacchiarotto, and How He Worked in Distemper" is Browning's attempt to castigate his critics who, as he saw it, had long abused, misunderstood, and belabored him for his manner of writing. In particular, the poem is directed at Alfred Austin, the five-foot poet and critic who in time succeeded Tennyson in the Laureateship and who was one of Browning's severest critics. Browning compares Austin, who was also somewhat of a reformer and politician, with Pacchiarotto. He tells the story of Pacchiarotto, the Italian painter who decided to reform the human race. He needed practice first and consequently built a workshop. Over the walls he painted frescos of men in every condition, from beggar to king, from tramp to pope. Then he began to lecture the people whom he had painted. He put arguments into their mouths: defenses for the condition of beggars and for the corruption of kings and popes. Afterwards he proceeded to refute them.

Since he had such an easy time with the paint-bred men, he decided to go out into the streets of Siena and reform real people. It happened that just at that time there was a famine in Siena, and Pacchiarotto went to the Bardotti, a group of which he was a member. The Bardotti were men who wanted to reform the town by making the poor rich and the rich poor and replacing rulers with their subjects. They were called Bardotti (spare horses) because they never did
anything but were ready in case of an emergency. Pacchiarotto spoke to them of the evils of the city and told them that he was the right man to lead them. With that they flew at him and would have torn him to pieces if he had not fled. Finding no other place to hide, he had to go into an open vault with a newly buried corpse. Two days later he came out, crawling with vermin and starved into sanity. Now says Browning, the wings of fancy will begin to wave.

Pacchiarotto went to a monastery and told the abbot that he had resolved never to meddle in the affairs of men again. The abbot reminded him that sometimes we must be satisfied with people the way they are, because we cannot always reform them. Pacchiarotto relates that the corpse told him that life on earth is but a rehearsal for heaven, and we must realize that rehearsals do not always run smoothly.

Now Browning addresses his critics. They are like Pacchiarotto and the Bardotti; they try to remove the soot from his flue and suggest that he burn the extra coal in his kitchen. But says Browning, my housekeeper suspects you of bringing in more dirt than you take out. So dance away boys, before my housemaid serves you as Xantippe served Socrates once; she will take the first thing that comes to her hand.

Works, pp. 1060-1066.

The central incident of the poem, that of Pacchiarotto
fleeing from the populace and hiding in a vault is true, but his monologue with the paint-bred men and his talk with the abbot are not. Giacomo Pacchiarotto was born at Siena in 1474. He was of a turbulent and excitable disposition, and he had a fondness for mixing in the political strifes and revolutions of the period. His idleness and braggadocio led to trouble more than once. During the famine of 1533, the Society of Bardotti, of which Pacchiarotto was a member, raised a tumult. The authorities quelled the disturbances, and the artist took refuge in the vault of a cemetery, passing two days at close quarters with a newly buried corpse. He escaped punishment for a while, but finally was exiled in 1539 for the good of the state. His exile was eventually repealed and he was allowed to return home, where he soon died.


In the poem, it should be noted that the Bardotti themselves turned on Pacchiarotto. Historically speaking, the authorities were the ones who chased him. Browning may have changed the facts in this fashion in order to satirize critics who often turn upon themselves, even as the Bardotti did. Of course, the reason why he chose Pacchiarotto is obvious. Here was a situation which, with a few changes, was a perfect opportunity to satirize his critics.
Two other poems which deal with painters who were actual persons are "Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli" and "Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial." The subject of "Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli" is the unrequited love which Mary bore for the painter Fuseli. In the short poem, Mary comments on the various things which she would have attempted if she had only had Fuseli's love. She makes it clear that she pursued him openly, but the painter would have none of it. When she went to his house, Fuseli's wife repulsed her. Mary is best remembered for her book A

*Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and by the fact that she was Mary Shelley's mother. She finally became discouraged in her efforts with Fuseli, and after living with Gilbert Imlay, married William Godwin.

In 1883, Browning's friend Lord Lytton (Owen Meredith) published *The Life, Letters and Literary Remains of Edward Bulwer, Lord Lytton, by his Son*, which contained anecdotes about Fuseli. This might have reminded Browning of a book which he had in his library, John Knowles' *Life and Writings of Fuseli*, where he could have read of Mary Wollstonecraft's infatuation for the painter.

Heinrich (Henry) Fuseli was a painter who lived from 1741 to 1825. He took Holy Orders in Germany but left
because of a dispute with the Church. Finally he came to London, where his picture The Nightmare attracted much attention. He was a fantastic and prolific designer, but not a very good painter.


In his *Life*, Knowles tells of the incident between Mary Wollstonecraft and Fuseli's wife. Mary felt that although Mrs. Fuseli had a right to the person of her husband, she hoped to unite herself to his mind.

At length Mrs. Wollstonecraft appears to have grown desperate, for she had the temerity to go to Mrs. Fuseli, and to tell her that she wished to become a part of the family; and she added, "as I am above deceit, it is right to say that this proposal arises from the sincere affection that I have for your husband, for I feel that I cannot live without the satisfaction of seeing and conversing with him daily." This frank avowal immediately opened the eyes of Mrs. Fuseli, who not only refused her solicitation, but she instantly forbade her the house.

Most biographers have repudiated the story and have reduced Mary's love for Fuseli to a warm friendship. Godwin, however, in his *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, readily admits that she was interested in Fuseli, and although their relationship was never anything but Platonic, Mary would have been willing to continue the relationship on a more intimate
basis if Fuseli had been willing.


Apparently Browning was attracted to the situation because of the unfulfilled desires of Mary and because the incident is not well known. One of Browning's favorite devices was to take a little-known incident and transform it into a character-revealing situation.

For entirely different reasons, Browning wrote "Filippo Baldinucci on the Privilege of Burial." It is a satire on Christian prejudice toward Jews, and he always liked the Jews. In the poem the speaker, Filippo Baldinucci, reminisces on something which happened long ago. In Florence, the burial ground of the Jews was next to the field of a Christian farmer. The farmer erected a shrine in his field, facing the burial ground, containing a picture of the Virgin, painted by Lodovici Buti. The Jews were offended by the picture and agreed to pay him a sum of money to remove it. The farmer did as he had agreed, but placed a cross in its place. As he and the painter were laughing at their joke, a young, stout Jew approached. The men began to fear that he would harm them. Instead he bought the picture of the Virgin, and when the farmer asked why a Jew would want a Christian painting, the young man replied that if Cardinals
could hang pictures of naked gods and goddesses in their apartments, certainly a Jew could keep a picture of the Virgin. He will take the picture home, and hang it with his other paintings, to be judged on its merits, more likely on its faults.

    Your picture? -- shall possess ungrudged
    A place among my rank and file
    Of Ladas and what not -- be judged
    Just as a picture! and (because
    I fear no man I scarce have bought
    A Titian) Master Buti's flaws
    Found there, will have the laugh flaws ought.

    Works, pp. 1086-1091.

Browning frequently used Baldimucci's Notizie de Professori del Disegno da Cimabue in Gua when he was interested in a painter. Many times Baldimucci had more information than Vasari, but the poet "despised the man for his narrow and bigoted nature, and he neglected no opportunity to satirize the Tuscan." He drew heavily on Baldimucci's account of

    DeVane, p. 412.

the life of the Florentine painter, Lodovico Buti, who flourished about the year 1600. He has Baldimucci recount the story of the joke on the Jews, a story which the writer told in his life of Buti, but then Browning adds an ending of his own. In the thirty-sixth stanza of the poem, Baldimucci says

    plague of me
    If I record it in my Book!
From then on, the story of the joke which the young Jew played on the painter and the farmer is Browning's own superb invention, for he "always wrote admirably when he wrote of Jews."

Browning's interest in Italian art and culture was not restricted to painting. His poems concerning sculpture and music bear this out. "The Statue and the Bust" deals with a legend which has built up around a statue of Duke Ferdinand I, which stands in the Square of the Annunciation in Florence. The poet uses the legend to bring out his point that even though a person may act in accordance with the conventions of society, he can still be guilty of great sin. The head of the Riccardi family has just been married. While gazing from her window the young bride sees Ferdinand de Medici, the Duke of Florence, riding by. He looks up at her and as their eyes meet, they fall in love. That night at the wedding feast, the Duke kisses the bride as convention demands, and after the feast, apparently since he has caught a hint of the affair, the husband locks his bride in her room "'til she be dead." The girl resolves to go away with Ferdinand, but she reflects that she must wait a day so that her family may see her in her married state.
The Duke, on the other hand, feels that he will go to any lengths to possess her. He even invites the bridegroom and his bride to his palace at Petraia for a holiday, but Riccardi refuses on the grounds that the cold winds will be bad for his wife's health. Then the Duke resolves to wait another day before he takes the girl, so that he may use Riccardi in his dealings with the Envoy of France, who is expected to arrive that night. Days, weeks, and even years pass, and there is always something that keeps the lovers from eloping. Finally realizing that they will never be together, the girl hires Della Robbia to make a bust of her looking out of the window so that her love for the Duke may at least be preserved in stone if not in action. Duke Ferdinand, in turn, hires Giovanni of Bologna to erect a statue of himself on horseback facing the window of the lady. These two failed in their love, says Browning, because they were not willing to struggle for what they desired.

The poem has confused many readers because the palace which Browning calls the Riccardi Palace has since changed hands and become the Medici Palace. In reply to a letter written by an American reader, asking among other things whether the statue and the bust were still in their original positions, Browning said that although the shrine was empty,
47

The statue was still in its place.


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The background for the poem is almost certainly pure legend, since the statue of the Duke on horseback was erected not by the Duke, but by his son, Ferdinand II. Ferdinand II ordered the statue erected in 1608 as a tribute to his father and to commemorate the victory of the Knights of St. Stephen over the Turks. Ferdinand I had been the leader of the Knights, and a cannon from the battle was used to make the statue. The inscription on the base of the statue reads, "Con la fusione dei motolli's rapiti al fiore Tracce."

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The legend probably arose because Duke Ferdinand's head is turned toward the west, almost directly toward an empty shrine under a window in the old Riccardi Palace. Since the rest of the wall of the Palace was decorated with Della Robbias, artistic balance would demand some sort of bust in the shrine. But the last of the great Della Robbias who might have been commissioned to make the bust died in 1566, some years before the events of the story took place.

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DeVane, p. 234. (See also the attached diagram of the Square of the Annunciata.)
Browning simply used the legend in his own way to bring out his idea that the conventional way is not always the right way.

A poem which sums up Browning's conception of Italian art and culture in the Renaissance is "The Bishop Orders his Tomb at St. Praxed's Church." The poet seems to catch the whole spirit of the Renaissance in his juxtaposition of the worldly and materialistic Churchman with religious art. The Bishop is dying and has called his "nephews" in for their last instructions. He proceeds to tell them how to build his tomb. They must make it out of the finest marble, place within it the blue stone which he stole from his own Church and inscribe it with proper words from Tully. He wants his sepulchre to be so fine that his dead rival, 50 Candolf, will envy it from his onion-stone tomb.

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As in other poems where Browning has not used the name of the central character, there has been considerable controversy as to the Bishop's identity. John D. Rea, in his article on "My Last Duchess," feels that he was suggested by Affo's *Vita di Vespasiano Gonzaga*. In the book Duke Gonzaga mentions a well-appointed tomb, and there is even mention of a Churchman named Candolf. Affo portrays the Duke as dying in state and giving orders to build a marble tomb in the church, to place a statue on it and to beautify the
church which contains it.


DeVane feels that the model for the Bishop may have been Cardinal Ippolito d'Este the Younger, brother of Ercole II, Duke of Ferrara. He mentions that Lionel Stevenson, in the University of Toronto Quarterly, also holds this view. The Cardinal was notoriously stingy and worldly, fond of splendor and show and had some of the qualities of Browning's Bishop.

DeVane, p. 167.

In her account of the poem, Mrs. Sutherland Orr says that the story and the tomb are entirely fictitious, although something which is supposed to stand for the Bishop's tomb is now shown to "credulous sightseers in Saint Praxed's Church."


My own idea is that Browning's Bishop is an aggregate of several people. Both Rea's and DeVane's suggestions sound plausible, and probably there is some truth in both. However, we must remember that when Browning is speaking of a particular character, he almost always mentions his name. The Bishop seems to be a character type, rather than an actual person. He embodies qualities which Browning felt
existed in many Churchmen of the Renaissance, typifying one prevailing aspect, the combination of corruption and beauty.

Browning's interest in artists also included musicians. Two poems which illustrate this are "Abt Vogler" and "A Toccata of Galuppi's." In "Abt Vogler" Browning brings out his notion of the permanence of perfection. The situation itself is imaginary, but something which could have easily occurred in the life of Vogler. While extemporizing on the organ, Vogler begins to wish that his music could be as permanent as a beautiful palace. But it is only temporary, lost as soon as it is played. Then he begins to realize that perfection is not for this earth, but for heaven. Our brief glimpses of perfection on earth are only evidences that perfection exists in Heaven. Music is an example of the transience of earthly perfection.

On earth the broken arcs: in the heaven, a perfect round. 54

54 Works, pp. 499-500.

Georg Joseph Vogler lived from 1749 to 1814. He was a German composer, theorist, and teacher, and he had studied law and was an ordained priest. From an early age Vogler showed a religious cast of mind as well as an aptitude for music. He made the most stir as an organist and theorist.

"His extempore playing never failed to create an impression, and in the elevated fugal style he easily out-distanced all his rivals." Thus, Browning's choice of Vogler as the central figure of the poem was suitable. He was a religious person, one who would be inclined to think in a religious vein, and he was well known for his extempore playing.

"A Toccata of Galuppi's" is another poem which shows Browning's interest in music and musicians and his ability to use them to bring out an idea. There have been various interpretations of this poem. Berdoe thinks that the poem is a comparison between two types of people, the pleasure-seeking Venetians and the scientists and their various 'ologies. One class dissipates its energies in pleasure and the other in science, and both miss the true end of life. DeVane feels that Browning intends the speaker in the poem to be the sort of person who looks to Venice to be the very symbol of romance, gaiety, and love. Instead, Galuppi's music disconcerts him, and its coldness almost persuades him that he, with all his learning, will die just as surely as the light-hearted people of the Venetian past have died.

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57 DeVane, p. 544.

58 DeVane, p. 221.
I do not agree with either DeVane or Berdoo, but feel that the poem should be interpreted as follows: The speaker hears a toccata played by Galuppi, and its light runs and figurations remind him of the people of Venice: gay and light-hearted. But interwoven in the music is a certain seriousness which makes the people think about death and an end to their pleasure. Then the music reminds the speaker that he is not in the same position as the Venetians. Souls rise in their degree, and although the Butterfly-Venetians have to dread extinction because of their soulless existence, the speaker's soul will not die. The speaker lacks the sternness to scold the dead people, and the music which reminds him of their death only makes him feel chilly and grown old.

Works, pp. 233-234.

Baldassare Galuppi, who was born in 1706 and died in 1785, contributed copiously to the delight of his fellow Venetians. He was the type of musician who tried always to keep in touch with his listeners and to keep pace with the times. Galuppi composed masses, oratorios, more than seventy comic and serious operas, and twelve harpsichord sonatas. "His melody is attractive rather than original, but his workmanship in harmony and orchestration is generally
superior to that of his contemporaries,"


Just as the identity of Galuppi is connected with the meaning of the poem, so is a definition of the toccata. A toccata is literally a piece "to be touched" and is one of the oldest names for keyboard music. Originally it was merely an improvisational introduction or prelude, but it was expanded until it became one of the ancestors of the fugue. It is a composition intended to exhibit the touch and execution of the performer. Its characteristics are flowing movement in notes of equal length, lack of theme, and an air of showy improvisation.


Browning chose this particular form of music because its characteristic improvisational runs and figurations, underlaid by a solemn tone, suggested both the pleasure-loving Venetians and the sadness of their soulless existence. Galuppi was chosen as the performer because Browning had played a toccata by Galuppi while in Italy, and because

Devane, p. 219.

Galuppi was a Venetian. Both the choice of the music and
the man are proper for the poem. Browning's selection of both Vogler and Galuppi was probably influenced by his liking for relatively obscure people.

Browning was also interested in scholars and their contribution to mankind. This is illustrated by his poem "A Grammarian's Funeral." The poet tells of a man who strived to make all knowledge his province. The scholar is dead, and the poem concentrates on the conversation of his pallbearers. They are carrying him to the summit of a high mount, an appropriate burying place for their elevated master. As they bear him upward, they talk about his life. They remember how he was born with a beautiful body, but wasted it in study. He studied until calculus, a stone formed in his bladder, and tussis (a cough) attacked him. Even as he was dying, this man settled questions of grammar.

Works, pp. 366-368.

There has been much debate about the identity of Browning's scholar, Jacobus Milichius, whose career is considered in Nathaniel Wenyley's Wonders of the Little World, has been suggested. Gertrude Reese suggests that Isaac Casaubon may be the model for the poem. She says that Casaubon had a thirst for knowledge and lived a life of prolonged devotion. He suffered from both calculus and a cough, and is known to have considered new work while dying. Browning would have known about Casaubon through his edition of Aristotle.
which was in his library, and also through the Biographica universella, which he read extensively. Miss Reese also suggests Scaliger, Cyriac of Ancona, and Filelfo as other possibilities.


Another article which appears in *Notes and Queries*, signed only with the initials B. R., suggests that the unknown scholar may be Linacre. The author offers the proof that Erasmus joked with Linacre about his devotion to acid grammar. Erasmus mentioned a scholar (Linacre) who tortured himself in his studies and only hoped that he might live long enough to distinguish rightly the eight parts of speech.

"Browning's 'A Grammarian's Funeral,'" *Notes and Queries*, June, 1949, p. 224.

DeVane thinks it possible that the career of Rabbi Ben Ezra may have been on Browning’s mind when he wrote the poem. The Jewish Rabbi wrote treatises on the Talmud and Hebrew grammar, and a commentary on Isaiah. However, the dates do not agree, and the scholar of the poem is Greek.

DeVane, p. 271.

In this chapter we have seen Browning’s interest in artists of all types. He was familiar enough with their lives to be
able to choose incidents from them which would reveal character and fit the ideas of his poems. Browning was interested in lesser known artists, and he seemed to be greatly concerned with failure. "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Pictor Ignotus," and "The Statue and the Bust" are all poems about artists and people who failed, in one sense or another. This chapter illustrates Browning's varied and extensive knowledge of artists and their works.
Chapter II

Religious Personalities

One of Browning's most absorbing interests was religion. Although he never professed to be an orthodox Christian, and even denied that he was on one occasion, his interest in Christianity and Judaism was extensive. In his poetry, one can read of Hebrew and Greek scholars, Greek attitudes toward Christ, religious practices and attitudes during the Middle Ages, and contemporary religious controversies.

Browning's interest in Hebrew and rabbinical lore is apparent in at least five poems. "Rabbi Ben Ezra" contains two of his favorite ideas. First Ben Ezra reflects on youth and age. He points out that youth is the time for venture and age a time for reflection and evaluation. Then, as in "A Grammarian's Funeral" and "Old Pictures in Florence," Browning brings out the idea that the "reach should exceed the grasp." He says that achievement and accomplishment should not be judged by the standards of the world, but by God's standards. What the world may regard as failure may be success in the sight of God.

For several reasons, Browning made an appropriate choice in Rabbi Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra of Toledo, born about
1088. He was a philosopher, astronomer, scholar, and physician, the type of person who would be expected to think along the lines of the poem. Ben Ezra's personality contained many conflicting elements. He was a critic of the law but a slave to it. He was deeply religious but an astrologer, and he was a rationalist but a mystic. The fact that he was a poet could have appealed to Browning, although most scholars now think that his poetry was very poor. He traveled a great deal, visiting England and Italy, and he is remembered in Rome for having been the first scholar to teach the Roman Jews the importance of Hebrew grammar. Browning would certainly have been attracted to him because of his own interest in Italy and the Jews.

The main reason that Browning picked Ben Ezra for a poem of this type was that the man was never very happy. It is quite true that Ben Ezra was a good expositor of the Scriptures; in fact, it was said of him that he was a born exegete. But he was never satisfied with his success in any field. Once he said, "I strive to become wealthy, but the

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5. Graetz, p. 375. (The fact that Ben Ezra traveled to England and Italy is supported by DeVane, p. 260.)
stars are opposed to me. If I were to engage in shroud-making, men would cease dying; or if I made candles, the sun would never set unto the hour of my death." Certainly

he was an appropriate person to reflect on the idea that apparent failure on earth may be success in the eyes of God.

"Ben Karshook's Wisdom" is another poem which exemplifies Browning's interest in rabbinical lore. Browning never collected the poem, and in a letter to Doctor Furnivall he said that "Karshook (Heb; a Thistle) just belongs to the snarling verses I remember to have written but forget for whom." In the poem, Ben Karshook says that if a man wants

to escape damnation, he must turn to God the day before he dies. When the poet protests that one never knows the day of his death, the Rabbi advises that he should turn to God today. Then one of the students, a young Sadducee, asks if it is certain that we all have souls. The Rabbi replies that there is really no answer to a question such as this. Certain it is that I have a soul, he sneers, but "we" may have none.

Letters, Hood, p. 196.

Works, pp. 1332-1333.
Browning's Rabbi Ben Karshook is really Rabbi Eliezer Ben Hyrcanus, a Jewish scholar and teacher of the first and second centuries, A. D. Ben Eliezer was a conservative Jew who followed tradition closely. He was especially noted for his knowledge of Jewish law and for the fact that he persecuted the Christians in Jerusalem. The poem concentrates on some advice which Ben Eliezer once gave to his students. He told them to "repent one day before thy death." When someone asked him how to determine the day of death, he said, "So much the more must one repent daily, lest he die tomorrow, and it follows that he must spend all his days in piety." From his letter to Doctor Furnivall and S. Mendelsohn, "Eliezer, Ben Hyrcanus," The Jewish Encyclopedia, 1901 edition, vol. 5, pp. 113-115.

because he never collected the poem, we may deduce that it probably became distasteful to Browning. He was never in favor of the sneering, self-assured type of person that this poem portrays.

Browning's third rabbinical poem, "Jochanan Hakkadosh," portrays a Jewish rabbi, a renowned scholar, lying on his deathbed surrounded by his students. Just as he was about to die, one of his students suggested that each of them contribute a part of their life to him, so that he might live a little longer and benefit mankind still further by his
knowledge. Five persons donated: a lover, a warrior, a poet, a statesman, and an unnamed child. However, when the aspirations of these five are combined with the Rabbi's experience, the aspirations are chilled. In "Rabbi Ben Ezra" Browning had said that youth was for action and age for reflection. Here the two are mixed, and aspiration suffers. We are better off, says Browning, not knowing what will happen to us. For if we know how our actions will turn out, we might never attempt anything.

11 Works, pp. 1202-1214.

At the end of the poem, Browning appended a note in which he said that the authority for the poem was an old Hebrew treatise. When translated, his Hebrew title reads "A pack of many lies." In a letter to Doctor Furnivall

12 DeVane, p. 472.

In 1883, Browning wrote that "the whole story is a fiction of my own, with just this foundation, that the old Rabbis fancied that earnest wishing might add to a valued life."


Though the story is Browning's, some of the characters are historical. Rabbi Jochanan Hakkadosh is a composite of Rabbis, but principally Jochanan ben Zakki, a Jewish.

14 Robert Browning and Hebraism, in DeVane, p. 471.
teacher who labored always to maintain the life of the Jewish nation. He lived to a very old age, finally dying in the arms of his students, while still talking of scholarly matters. Rabbi Perida is also mentioned in the poem

15 Gaetz, pp. 322-333.

as the example of a patient teacher. In a letter to Julia Wedgewood, Browning told how he had read of Rabbi Perida in the Travels of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela. Rabbi Perida made it a general rule to read and explain the same thing four hundred times over, said Browning, and on one occasion, when one of his students still did not understand, he repeated the lecture four hundred times more. Browning's three


poems on Jewish Rabbis show that he was very much interested in rabbinical lore and read widely in the field. Of course, "Jochanan Hakkadosh" is another example of Browning's practice of building an imaginary situation on a historical person.

A poem which shows Browning's interest in Hebrew lore is "Solomon and Balkis." It tells of the visit of Balkis, the Queen of Sheba, to Solomon, King of the Jews. The Biblical basis for the story is I Kings 10:2 and II Chronicles 9:1. However, Browning's special use of the characters suggests that he knew much more about the relationship
than is told in either Kings or Chronicles. In the poem, Sheba admits that she came, not to experience Solomon's great wisdom, but because she was physically attracted to him. Solomon, on the other hand, admits that he is interested in knowledge, not for its own sake, but because he enjoys being admired for his wisdom.


The particular meaning which Browning put on the visit may have a basis in Talmudic legend. Many stories have arisen around the visit, but most of them have the following elements: Solomon knew the language of animals. One day, a hoopoe bird told him that far away there was a great land, ruled by a beautiful woman. He sent the bird to ask the queen to visit him. Since she was frightened of Solomon's great power, Sheba sent 6,000 boys and girls to him as a present. After loading her ships with all the wealth she could spare, she set out to visit him. When she arrived, she put many riddles to him, which he solved easily.


Most of the stories tell that Solomon was impressed by Sheba's great beauty. Some even hint of a love affair between Solomon and Sheba and say that they had a son.
Browning's title must refer to one of these stories, since the name Balkis in Hebrew means something like "concubine" in English.

Browning's "Saul" exhibits his talent as a lyric poet. The poem is concerned with David's efforts to free Saul from his attack of melancholia. It develops from a commentary on the richness of life to the richness of the soul through a series of songs: the reaping song, wine song, marriage song, funeral chant and religious chorus. The conclusion is that God is responsible for the richness of life, and just as He is now working through David to relieve Saul, so will He later work through Christ to relieve the world.

Browning's primary source for the poem is 1 Samuel 16:14-23. This passage deals with David's visit to Saul and his success in healing his melancholia. In particular, verses 22 and 23 are the basis of the poem:

And Saul sent to Jesse, saying, Let David, I pray thee, stand before me; for he hath found favour in my sight.

And it came to pass, when the evil spirit from God was upon Saul, that David took a harp, and played with his hand: so Saul was refreshed, and was well, and the evil spirit departed from him.
Of course, Browning expands the situation much more than
the Bible does. Although this thesis is not concerned
primarily with sources, it will be interesting to note some
of the suggestions which have been advanced as to Browning's
basis for the lengthy treatment of the situation. Christ-
opher Smart's "Song to David" has been suggested as a
possible source. Griffin and Minchin, and DeVane feel
that the lyric qualities of Browning's "Saul" were at least
in part suggested by the "Song."

Griffin and Minchin, p. 129, and DeVane, p. 255.

Many articles have been written about possible sources
for the poem, and H. W. Yocum summarizes them all. A. W.
Crawford has suggested Smart's "Song to David," and
Longus' "Daphnis and Chloe." W. T. Young has suggested
Alfieri's drama Saul and David, and G. S. Wykoff has sugges-
ted Charles Mackay's "Saul and David."

H. W. Yocum, "Some Additional Sources of Browning's
'Saul,'" Notes and Queries, July, 1941, pp. 44-46.

Yocum feels that the account of Saul and David in Flavius
Josephus' The Antiquities of the Jews may be a source for
the poem. He also suggests the musical drama Faustus by
George Scane, and A History of the Jews published by Henry
H. Milman in 1830, which contains a lengthy account of Saul
and David. Browning's friend, William Macready, read it and
recorded it in his diary on November 24th. Three nights
later, according to the diary, Browning came to dinner. Yocum feels that they may have discussed the book which Macready had been reading.

Although Browning may have gotten hints for his long lyrical passages from Smart's "Song to David" and the various musical dramas on the subject, it is not likely that anything greatly affected his conception of the situation. The Bible gives the essential background for the poem, namely the meeting of Saul and David, and David's successful attempt to break Saul's fit of melancholia.

In "An Epistle Containing the Strange Medical Experience of Karshish, the Arab Physician," Browning depicts a foreign attitude toward early Christianity. The writer and central figure in the poem is imaginary. Actually, the word Karshish in Arabic means "the picker-up of learning's crumbs."

The poem centers around Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead. The Gospel of Saint John, 11:1-44 tells of the incident. "And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with graveclothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go." In The Bible in Browning, Minnie Machen says that Browning not only has a remarkable appreciation of narration
and character portrayal in the Bible, but that he also shows an understanding of its deeper spiritual meanings. "God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear."

Browning's understanding of deeper spiritual meanings is clearly brought out in this poem. Just as Christ used the raising of Lazarus to show His divinity, so Browning uses the situation in the same way. Karshish is wandering about Judea studying the medical practices of the people, when he meets Lazarus, who tells the story which so impresses him. The poem shows how Christianity would have appeared to a scientist of the times.

Browning wrote three poems about the Church in the Middle Ages. The first of these, "The Heretic's Tragedy," tells of the execution of Jacques du Bourg-Molay. Its grotesqueness is reminiscent of its companion piece, "Holy-Cross Day," and of "Childe Roland." The poem is adequately summarized in a note of Browning's which precedes it.

It would seem to be a glimpse from the burning of Jacques du Bourg-Molay, at Paris, A.D. 1314, as distorted by the refraction from Flemish brain to brain, during the course of centuries.

Jacques de Molay was born in 1243 and died in 1314.


28 Works, pp. 368-369.
He was the last Grand Master of the Knights Templars, being elected to the post in 1295. After the Templars had been driven out of Palestine by the Saracens, de Molay took refuge with the remnant of his followers in Cyprus. Both Pope Clement V and King Philip IV of France were envious of the great wealth of the Templars. In 1307, the Order was repressed by order of Philip, and all the Templars were arrested.

De Molay was arrested with his followers, and after torture, confessed to the sin of simony. Later he retracted his confession, but after years of imprisonment and torture he was finally burned at the stake as a heretic on March 10, 1314.


Browning wrote two poems dealing with popes, probably both about the year 1888. "The Bean Feast" tells of the pope who goes about Rome disguised as a poor priest in order to see how his people live. During the course of his travels, he comes upon a poor hovel and enters. After revealing that he is the pope, to the amazement of the inhabitants, he sits down and eats a plate of beans with them.

30 DeVane, p. 464.

31 Works, pp. 1299-1300.
The Pope referred to in the poem is probably Sixtus V, named Felice Peretti, who was Pope from April 24, 1585, until 1590. Gregorio Leti, in his Life of Pope Sixtus


the Fifth tells of the time when Sixtus visited a porter who cared for the convent. The Pope entered while the porter was eating, and "as the meanness of the repast put him in mind of his former condition, he took a wooden spoon, and sitting down close to the porter, ate two plates full of beans with him."

33 DeVane, p. 484.

"The Pope and the Net" tells of a pope who was the son of a fisherman. While he was still a cardinal, he hung a net in his palace as a sign of his father's humble profession. Since his fellows thought that he was also humble, they elected him pope. After he was elected, as each cardinal filed past to kiss his foot, they noticed that the net was gone. When they asked him why, he said, "Son, it hath caught the fish."

34 Works, p. 1299.

Although there was no pope after Peter who was a fisherman or the son of a fisherman, there have been many stories
about Pope Sixtus V which resemble the situation described in Browning's poem. Since the two poems, "The Pope and Devil", p. 483.

The Net" and "The Bean Feast" were probably written at the same time, it is logical to assume that Browning had Sixtus V in mind when he wrote both poems. There is one legend that Sixtus entered the conclave on crutches, feigning the infirmities of age, and that upon his election he thrust aside his crutches and appeared full of life and vigor.


Browning would have been familiar with this story and others of the same nature in his readings for "The Bean Feast."

Two of Browning's poems show his interest in current religious problems. "Johannes Agricola in Meditation" is his satire on the Calvinistic doctrines of reprobation and election. He is certain that God ordained him and every circumstance of his life "ere he fashioned star or sun."

He has God's word that even if he blended all the hideous sins of the world, his salvation would still be secure. He thinks about the priests, monks, hermits, and nuns who have tried to do good on earth, but have gone to hell simply because they were not predestined to salvation by God.

Johannes praises God the more because he cannot understand his ways.
Johannes Agricola was born in 1494 and studied at Wittenberg with Luther. For a time he was Luther's secretary, but when Agricola became a leader in the Antinomian heresy, Luther split with him. The Oxford Dictionary


of the Christian Church defines "Antinomianism" as a "general name for the view that Christians are by grace set free from need of observing any moral law." In its widest sense


the term is used to designate the doctrines of extreme fanatics who "deny subjection to any law other than the subject caprices of the empirical individual, though this individual is generally credited as a witness and interpreter of the Holy Spirit." In a note to the poem,


Browning says:

Antinomians, so denominated for rejecting the Law as a thing of no use under the Gospel dispensation, they say, that good works do not further, nor evil works hinder salvation; that the child of God cannot sin, that God never
chastiseth him, that murder, drunkenness, etc. are sins in the wicked but not in him, that the child of grace being once assured of salvation, afterwards never doubteth... that God doth not love any man for his holiness, that sanctification is no evidence of justification, etc. Potamus, in his Catalogue of Heresies, says John Agricola was the author of this sect, A.D. 1535. Dictionary of All Religions, 1704.

A natural question to ask in connection with this poem is, why did Browning use a figure who was connected with Antinomianism when he was satirizing Calvinism? The idea that the poet was satirizing Calvinism is supported by the meaning of the poem and by the fact that the poem was first published in 1836 in the Monthly Repository, a magazine edited by W. J. Fox, the Unitarian minister who was at war with the Calvinists. Later, the poem appeared in Dramatic Lyrics under the general title of Madhouse Cells.

Tracy thinks that Browning used Johannes Agricola in this poem because the poet's satirical method was often to refer covertly to a contemporary subject by an ancient prototype, thereby concealing the point of his weapon. Another probable reason is that Antinomianism is closely connected with Calvinism; in fact, certain English Calvinists espoused
the doctrine, though others fought it earnestly. I feel

DeVane, p. 124.

that Browning wanted to show the unreasonableness of strict Calvinism by demonstrating what would happen if it were followed to its logical conclusion. Just as in "Caliban upon Setebos," Browning is satirizing man's attempts to read his desires into the mind of God.

"A Death in the Desert" is another poem concerned with a religious controversy current in Browning's day. Ever since people have read the Gospel of John and Revelations, they have been arguing about their authorship. Browning had probably read the two latest works on the controversy, La Vie de Jesus by Renan and A New Life of Jesus by Strauss, which were published respectively in June, 1863, and January, 1864. His poem was published in June, 1864, in Dramatis Personae. Both Renan and Strauss had held that the Apostle John had not written the Fourth Gospel or Revelations, and the poem was Browning's attempt to answer their allegations, not on the ground of scholarship, but on the poet's familiar ground of art. Some scholars have thought that putting the defense in the mouth of the dying Apostle was a rather cheap trick, which in no way refuted the scholarship of Renan and Strauss.

DeVane, pp. 261-264.
Browning tells a fictional story of the death of the Apostle John in a cave in a desert. He is surrounded and protected by his five disciples. John is the speaker throughout most of the poem, and he repeats many of the ideas so familiar to readers of his Gospel. He prophesies that certain critics will hold that he did not write the Fourth Gospel or Revelations. He also mentions both Ebion and Cerinthus, who were his enemies and critics.

The major objections to the theory of Johannian authorship, which Browning was trying to refute, are that the Apostle John was not educated enough to write of the doctrine of the Logos, and that there are too many inconsistencies in the actions of Christ between the Fourth Gospel and the other three. Critics say that the writer of the Fourth Gospel could not have been an eye-witness since he presents an entirely different picture of Jesus. They also say that the actions of John the Apostle do not harmonize with the ideas of the Gospel.

Ezion and Cerinthus, critics and enemies of John, are mentioned in the poem. Both were opposed to John and his teachings, and Cerinthus has even been credited with the
There is a story, now believed to be false, that John once met Cerinthus in the public baths and refused to go in until Cerinthus had left.

Browning's extensive knowledge of religious figures, especially those people who have to do with Judaism is apparent in this chapter. Of course, his interest in the Jews stemmed from his liking of them. Although Browning never professed to be a Christian, such poems as "An Epistle of Karshish" and "The Death in the Desert" show an understanding of the deeper meanings of the Bible.
Chapter III

Miscellaneous Personalities

The subject of this chapter is historical personality in some of the shorter poems which were not considered in either of the first two chapters. Almost any type of historical incident fascinated Browning, from a duel or a battle to a murder story. This chapter contains a study of twelve poems denoting some of his other interests. The first six poems are concerned with certain minor moments in history, ranging from tales of the Scottish highlands to a very tense moment in the life of Robert Clive, the hero of Plassey.

The first two poems, "Donald" and "Muckle-Mouth Meg," are based on stories of the Scottish highlands. "Donald" is Browning's poetic commentary on the virtues of honor and mercy. He tells of a Scottish mountaineer who is on his way to see a lass. In order to take a short cut, he has to travel a very narrow and dangerous path, really little more than a ledge, bounded by a high cliff and a steep drop. While inching his way along the narrowest part of the ledge, Donald meets a large red stag. Neither can turn, the deer because the ledge is too narrow and Donald because of his pride. Donald stands very still, knowing that his only salvation lies in not arousing the beast.

After they have faced each other for some time, Donald decides to lie down, hoping that the deer will step over him. The deer, seeming to realize that he must trust the man in
order to get out of his predicament, begins to step over him. Suddenly, Donald's "sportsman" instincts are aroused, and he draws his knife and stabs the creature. However as the deer falls, Donald is pulled over the ledge with him. Luckily, he lands on top of the stag and escapes with only broken bones. For many years, relates the poet, Donald travelled about telling the story, saying that he thanked God that he landed on top of and not under the deer.

Works, pp. 1194-1196.

Browning contrasts the beast, who trusted the man enough to walk over him, and the man, who was dishonorable enough to break the trust. This leads to his second idea, the unnecessary cruelty that so many hunters show to animals. After all, the man did not kill the deer for food and certainly had no way of getting it down the mountain. Donald killed the deer simply because of his cruel "sportsman" impulse. In this respect, the poem is very similar to "Tray" and "Arcades Ambo." These two poems deal directly with vivisection, but the general idea of showing mercy to animals is present in all three poems. Writing to Isa Blagden from Scotland in 1871, Browning had expressed his disgust at the sport of hunting, even though his own son was engaged in it.

Dearest Isa, McAleer, p. 363.

The story Browning used for the background of his poem is true, although the poem differs from the original story in certain details. Mrs. Orr says that it was told to Browning
by one who had heard it from Donald himself. Actually,


the story was told by Sir Walter Scott and whether Browning
heard it from someone who knew the hero or read it in Scott,
and later forgot it, is something no one knows.

Scott's story appeared in The Keepsake, an annual for
1832. Although his hero is named Duncan, the story he tells
is very similar to Browning's, with certain exceptions.
Duncan, a shepherder, was badly crippled, and the story of
his accident, says Scott, is a rather singular one. One day,
realizing that one of his sheep was lost, he went to look
for it. He was forced to ascend a high mountain by way of
a very narrow path bounded by a high wall of rock on the
right and a sheer precipice on the left. As he was inching
his way along, he met a red deer, a species noted for its
swift and fierce attacks. The path was too narrow for the
deer to turn and if Duncan turned his back, he knew that he
would be attacked. At length, the deer began to lower his
antlers; so Duncan lay down and tried to remain very still
in order to provide as small a target as possible. For
three or four hours the two remained in these positions. At
last, as the deer began to approach him, Duncan's fears were
overcome, whether for the devil or the untameable love of
sport. He totally forgot the dangers and the implicit com-
 pact which must have existed in such a situation, and he
seized the deer's horns with one hand and stabbed him with
the other. The deer bounded over the precipice, taking Duncan with him. Fortunately, the deer landed first and thus broke Duncan's fall. At the end of his tale, Scott comes to the same conclusion as Browning does in his poem; that is, that he could never approve of Duncan's conduct toward the deer.


It is interesting to note the differences between Browning and Scott. Scott seems to show more sympathy for the man than Browning does. For instance, Scott's man does not turn his back on the deer because he realizes that the deer will attack him if he does, while Browning's man refuses to turn because of pride. According to Scott, the deer was about to charge when Duncan grabbed his horns, but in Browning, the deer was not trying to charge at all. Obviously Browning changed some of the details of his poem in order to give it greater moral point.

One further point should be brought out. The difference in names does not belie the idea that the two stories are the same, for both authors are equivocal on this point. Browning's line reads, "But Donald — (that name, I hope, will do) —," while Scott reads, "Duncan, (for so I shall call him)." It is obvious that both stories are the same, excepting certain points. "Donald" is another indication that Browning was not above changing the facts of a tale slightly in order to stress his particular point.
The second poem concerned with Scottish history is "Muckle-Mouth Meg." Here the poet tells the story of a young English gallant who had been caught red-handed trespassing and trying to steal sheep. The Scottish lord who caught him is ready to swing the intruder from the gallows tree when his wife suggests that her husband let the young man go free if he will marry their daughter, Muckle-mouth Meg. The youth says that he prefers hanging; so the wife suggests that her husband put him in a cellar for a week to tame his temper and change his mind. Each morning a girl appears with some food for him and asks him if he will marry Muckle-mouth Meg. Each day the answer is the same:

Did Meg's muckle-mouth boast within some  
Such music as yours, mine should match it or burst;  
No frog-jaws! So tell folk, my Winsome!

At the end of the week the man is let out of the cellar, and the girl asks him if he still prefers the gallows tree to Muckle-mouth Meg. The youth still refuses, until he finds that the young girl and Meg are the same person. Thereupon he agrees to marry her and widen her "to Muckle-mouth Meg in good earnest!"

Works, pp. 1300-1301.

Browning told his friends that his version of the story came from Benjamin Jowett, who had heard it from Lady Stewart, and that he thought it was merely a legend and
not fact. However, it appears in Sir Walter Scott's Tales of a Grandfather and it is highly probable that Browning read it in Scott. Since I have been unable to locate the 6

DeVane, pp. 538-539.

series of Tales of a Grandfather which contains the story of Muckle-mouth Meg, I have gone to Lauder's Scottish Rivers for the same story. Lauder tells that there was once a feud between the Murrays and the Scotts. William Scott, one of Sir Walter's ancestors, made a foray against Sir Gideon Murray of Elibank in order to drive off some of his cattle for spite. The Lord of Elibank engaged the invaders and caught Sir William red-handed. Sir Gideon then offered William the choice of hanging or marrying his daughter, Muckle-mouthed Meg. At first Scott seemed to prefer hanging, but finally yielded and agreed to marry the girl. Meg proved to be a good wife and her large mouth was said to have appeared in many generations of Scotts. A sketch of the affair hangs at Abbotsford. 7

Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, Scottish Rivers (Edinburgh, 1874), pp. 71-72.

These two poems illustrate Browning's interest in Scottish history, especially in those stories told by Sir 8

Walter Scott. The poet had traveled to Scotland in 1871

and his library contained many of Scott's works, including twenty-five Waverly novels.

See Sotheby Catalogue, Appendix I, items 1059 and 1060.

Browning's interest in English history is illustrated by two poems, "Epps" and "Clive." In "Epps," Browning tells of the Kentish hero who was killed at the siege of Ostend. During the battle he lost his sight, and since he could no longer see to fight, he begged to carry the colors of Saint George. Almost immediately the enemy attacked him in an effort to capture the colors. Escaping the first charge, Epps took the flag off the wooden staff and wrapped it around his own body. He went at the foe and received two bullet and two sword wounds. He staggered back into the arms of his friends, still wrapped in the flag, and finally died.

In the poem itself, Browning reveals his sources, "Donne and Dekker, brave poets and rare." In his Satire VI, Donne said "like Epps it often wars/And still is hurt." Grosart, the editor of the The Complete Poems of John Donne, drew his note upon Epps from a longer explanation in Dekker's Knight's Conjuring. Dekker tells the story of Epps, who lost his eyes and begged to carry the colors. The enemy twice shot and twice ran him through, but still he would not surrender the flag. Instead, he stripped it off the
staff, wrapped it about his body, and threw himself into the thick of the fight. Finally, he reeled back to die in the arms of his comrades.

DeVane, p. 569.

In Browning's poem, Epps wraps the flag around his body before he is wounded, not after as in the original version. But such a minute departure from the original is not to be condemned, especially since Browning never considered the poem a very important specimen of his poetic art. According to Sir Edmund Gosse, Browning announced in 1884 to Mrs. Gosse and Lady Alma-Tadema, whose maiden name was Epps, that he was going to write a poem about their Kentish ancestor, Epps. They said that they were not aware of any relationship with the hero, but Browning laughingly insisted that they must throw no doubt on the fact, because he proposed to endow them with this ancestor. "Shortly afterwards, says Gosse, he showed them the MS., of the verses, which he did not treat as a serious specimen of his poetic art."

Works, p. 1338.

"Clive" is another poem which illustrates Browning's interest in English history. It concentrates on a particular incident in the life of Robert Clive, hero of Plassey. An old man is telling the story to a boy. He had long been a
friend of Clive, and one night he dined with the then old and broken man, who was addicted to dope. In order to take his mind off the dope, the friend asked Clive to relate the situation in which he had shown the most bravery. Instead, Clive wanted to tell his friend of the time when he felt the most fear in his life.

Clive was engaged in his youth by the East India Company as a clerk, and in their service he traveled to Madras, where he was stationed at an army post, Camp Saint David. One day he engaged in a game of cards with some officers and lost some money to one of the players, a young officer whom he accused of cheating. The officer challenged him to a duel, and when they met, Clive fired the first shot, which went wide of its mark. The officer then walked up to Clive, put his pistol to his head, and asked, "Did I cheat?" Clive answered:

Cheat you did, and knew you cheated, and, this moment, know as well.
As for me, my homely breeding bids you ---
fire and go to Hell!

The officer put the pistol to Clive’s head, but wavered and finally walked away, admitting that he had cheated and saying that the lad was too brave to be shot.

Then Clive passed each of the spectators, warning them that since none would come to his defense, none could ever mention the incident again. This had happened twenty-five years before, and never did the officer have a single word of the affair breathed against him. Then Clive told his
friend that if the man had spared his life by forgiving him instead of admitting his guilt, he would have been forced to take it himself. This was his real fear, not of the officer's bullet, but that he would be dishonored.

Works, pp. 1173-1178.

Browning said that he had heard the story of Clive's duel from Mrs. Jameson, who had it from Lord Lansdowne, to whom it had been told by Macaulay. The idea that Clive would have killed himself if the man had condescendingly forgiven him and walked off without confessing his guilt was completely my invention, said Browning. "But what else," said he, "could such a man as Clive have done?"

Griffin and Winch, p. 238.

Macaulay made brief mention of the story in the Edinburgh Review for 1810, in a review of Sir John Malcolm's Life of Robert Lord Clive. Macaulay said that Clive's personal courage was proved "by a desperate duel with a military bully who was the terror of Fort Saint David."

His bearing during the duel speedily made him conspicuous even among hundreds of brave men.

The story told in the poem is accurate, up to a point.

While Clive was a clerk in the employ of the East India Company, stationed at Camp Saint David, he lost money at cards and was challenged to a duel for his accusations of the cheater. Clive missed his shot and the officer walked up to him, put his pistol to his head, and demanded that Clive recant his accusations concerning unfair play. "Fire and be damned!" said Clive. "I said you cheated; I say so still, and I will never pay you." The officer threw his pistol away and called Clive mad. Clive never told the story or allowed it to be told, for he said that although he was resolved never to pay money which was unfairly won, the man had given him his life.

Browning probably wrote the poem because of his interest in English history and also because the situation gave him the opportunity to use his subtle psychology. The man did not fear his opponent, only loss of his honor. Of course, this part of the story; i.e., the confession of the officer and the idea that Clive would have killed himself if the officer had not confessed, was invented by Browning. It is interesting to note that when the poet writes of a situation of which he has heard, he has no hesitation in changing the facts to fit the particular idea which he wishes to stress. We have seen this illustrated in both "Donald" and "Clive."
Another poem by Browning which deserves brief mention, because it may have certain historical background is "Rosny." In this short poem, the young woman, Clara, thinks of Rosny, her lover, who has gone off to war. She imagines him in battle and wonders whether he will acquit himself with honor. She finally decides that, for honor's sake, it would be better if Rosny were killed, since this would be a fitting end to their affair.

DeVane feels that Browning, because of his strong predilection for history, may have had in mind Maximilian de Bethune, Duke of Sully, who was born at the chateau of Rosny, and who bore the name all his life. I have not been able to find any historical basis for the poem; although it may have been suggested by Rosny's known bravery and gallantry and by the fact that he was wounded in 1590.

Of course, there is the possibility that the poem was based on some other story which Browning had heard or read, but that is unlikely. It is more likely that it is Browning's own situation, built around Rosny, a character of whom he had read.
In 1866 and again in 1867, the Brownings chose the little town of Croisic, which lies northward of the mouth of the Loire in Brittany, as their summer retreat. From Griffin and Minchin, p. 237.

Browning's interest in the stories and historical personages of the town, two poems were created, "Hervé Riel" and "The Two Poets of Croisic."

"Hervé Riel" tells of the time the French fleet engaged the English at the Battle of the Hogue. The French lost the battle and were being pursued by the English. When they came upon the shallows of the river Rance, the French admiral called the pilots on board and was told that it was impossible to get his ships through the shallows. Just as the admiral was ready to scuttle his ships rather than let them fall into English hands, a Breton sailor named Hervé Riel stepped forward and said that he had sailed the waters many times as a boy. He offered to pilot the ships through on pain of his life if he failed. He succeeded, and as a consequence, the admiral offered to grant him anything he wished. He requested only that he be allowed a day's leave to visit his wife since they were anchored close to his home at Croisic. Of course, his request was granted.

21 Works, pp. 1076-1078.
The story Browning used for the background of his poem came from a guidebook, *Notes sur le Croisic*. In this book, the author relates the events of May 31, 1602, when the French fleet was being pursued by the English. As they came upon the shallows of the Rance, the admiral called the pilots on board, but they said that the waters were too shallow for the ships to pass. The admiral had decided to beach his ships so that they would not fall into English hands when Hervé Riel, a simple but sturdy Breton sailor, declared to him that the pilots were wrong. He knew the waters well and promised to lead the ships through. Coolly, he piloted all the French ships through the shallows, and as his reward demanded a complete discharge from the navy so that he might rejoin his wife. This, of course, was granted him.

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One point should be made in connection with this poem. Browning had Hervé ask for a whole day's holiday, but in the *Notes*, he asked for a complete discharge. In a letter to Doctor F. J. Furnivall, Browning admitted his mistake in translating the phrase "un conge absolu" and said that "an absolute discharge seems to approach in importance a substantial reward." It is interesting to observe that

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23 *Letters*, Hood, p. 207.
Browning had on hand notes on Hervé Riel from another source which has never been determined.

24

See Sotheby Catalogue, Appendix I, item 198.

The guidebook which Browning used for "Hervé Riel" also gave him the background for another longer poem, "The Two Poets of Croisic," although the poem itself was not published until more than ten years after his journey to Croisic. As the title indicates, Browning tells the story of two poets of Croisic, each of whom enjoyed fame for a brief time. The poet pictures the different types of inhabitants who live in or near Croisic. From the north come the Bretons, from the east the peat-diggers, and from the west the salt makers. The poet is seated with a group of men around an open fire in winter. As the flames flicker, they remind him of the flicker of fame which blazes up and then subsides quickly. Two poets of Croisic each had a brief moment of fame. First, there was René Gentilhomme, who was page of the Prince of Conde, whom men called the Duke. The Duke's cousin, the King, had no heir, and men began to expect that the Duke would be the next king. Then one day René was sitting rhyming when a storm came up and a bolt of lightning struck quite near him. After he had regained his composure, he saw that a ducal crown, the emblem of kingship, had been smashed. This was a sign,
thought Renoir, that his patron would not be the next king of France; so he wrote some forty lines to this effect and presented them to the Duke. His prophecy came true, for within a year a son was born to Louis and Anne. Louis heard of the poet who prophesied his son's birth and awarded him the title of "Royal Poet."

The other poet of Croisic who was famous for a brief time was Paul Desforges Maillard. Paul was an unknown poet when the Royal Academy announced that they would present a prize for the writer who could write the best piece describing the art of navigation. He submitted an entry which he felt would surely win, but it was rejected and someone else won. Then he determined to send his poem to a friend, the Chevalier La Roque, editor of the Paris Mercury. La Roque refused with the excuse that he did not want to offend the Forty. The poet then sent him an abusive letter, whereupon La Roque told him that the reason he refused his piece was because it was execrable, but he had not wished to say so.

Paul had his sister copy some of his poetry and submit it under the name of Malcras as the efforts of a young girl. The Mercury published so many of these verses that she became famous. In fact, La Roque fell in love with her and even Voltaire was deceived enough to praise highly this young lady and her verses. Paul at last became dissatisfied with his lack of fame; so he went to Paris and confronted La Roque with his identity. La Roque laughed, but said that he was nobody compared to Voltaire. Paul had fooled "the
golden eagle." La Roque, who held a grudge against Voltaire, took Paul to see him in order to enjoy the fun. They arrived and announced that Demoiselle Malcrais wished to see Monsieur Voltaire. Voltaire came, realized the joke, turned, and stalked out. Paul went home and once more began to submit verse to various publishers in Paris, but this time under his own name. However, he never again became popular and his brief period of fame was over.

Browning's portraits of these two poets was quite accurate historically. Both stories are told just as he told them in his poem. René Gentilhomme was born at Croisic in 1610 and as the page of Gastin, Duke of Orleans, he prophesied the birth of the Dauphin and thus became Court Poet. The other poet, Paul Desforges Maillard, was born at Croisic on April 24, 1699. His poetry was rejected by the Royal Academy and the Paris Mercury; so, using his sister's name, he duped both the editor of the Mercury and Voltaire.

Browning's interest in these three stories of Croisic, i.e., the story of Herve Riel and the two poets, was generated by his two summer visits to the town. The obscurity of the stories probably further attracted his attention,
as we have seen that stories of obscure personalities always attracted him. This is especially true of the "Two Poets," since one of the ideas in the poem is that fame flickers and dies like a flame.

The troubadour poem, "Rudel to the Lady of Tripoli," further illustrates Browning's interest in poets of history. He tells of the love of a troubadour for his lady by elaborate use of symbols. Rudel, the sunflower, turns toward the sun which represents love, but the Mount, the lady, remains cold and aloof. Rudel has woven a device, a sunflower, which he begs a passing pilgrim to take to his lady. He cares not for the applause of men, only for his lady. This poem again depicts Browning's interest in aspiration, for it is concerned not with the actual journey of Rudel to his lady, but with his love for the unattainable.

The basis for the poem is a story which has built up around the Provençal troubadour, Geoffrey de Rudel. Principally, the legend is concerned with his poem "On Distant Love," which is quoted below.

Angry and sad shall be my way
If I behold not her afar,
And yet I know not when that
Shall rise, for still she dwells afar.
God, who hast formed this fair array
Of worlds, and placed my love afar,
Strengthen my heart with hope, I pray
Of seeing her I love afar.
Oh, Lord! believe my faithful lay
For well I love her though afar
Though not one blessing may repay
The thousand griefs I feel afar.
No other love shall shed its ray
On me, if not this love afar.
A brighter one, where'er I stray
I shall not see, or near, or far. 29

J. C. L. Simonde de Sismondi, Historical View of the
Literature of the South of Europe (New York, 1827), vol. I,
p. 55.

Sismondi says that the circumstance which occasioned
this poem was a remarkable one and illustrative of the
wildness of the imagination and manners of the troubadours.
The knights returning from the Holy Land spoke of a beauti-
ful and gracious Countess of Tripoli. Geoffrey Rudel,
hearing this account, fell deeply in love with her. In
1162 he embarked for the Holy Land. While on the voyage,
he was stricken with a serious illness and had lost the
power of speech when he arrived at the port of Tripoli.
The countess was informed that a poet was dying of love
for her, and she went on board the ship and comforted him
in the last minutes of his life. Later, she erected a
monument to his memory. 30

Sismondi, pp. 57-58.

Justin H. Smith probes even deeper into the life and
aspirations of Rudel than does Sismondi. He says that Rudel
was rejected by the ladies to whom he paid suit. He then
began to feel that he needed a more spiritual love, a
combination of the physical and the ideal. Hearing of the beautiful Countess of Tripole from returning pilgrims, he set out upon a journey to see her, but was taken ill on arrival. He was taken to an inn, where the Countess stayed with him until he died. She then became a nun in sorrow over his death.


The important difference between the two stories, at least for the purpose of this paper, is that Smith stresses Rudel's aspirations toward ideal love much more than does Sismondi. And after all, this is the theme of Browning's poem, for in it Rudel never travels to visit his lady; he only aspires to her love. The poem most likely arose out of Browning's studies in troubadour literature for Sordello, and it was probably written in 1838 or 1839, just when

DeVane, p. 130.

Browning was finishing Sordello. Browning's interest in Rudel was apparently provoked by his relative obscurity and by the fact that he saw in the poem "On Distant Love," and the legend which accompanied it, an excellent opportunity to write a poem about aspiration, which always fascinated him.

Browning's "Pietro of Abano" illustrates an entirely
different type of interest from the people we have been studying. The story of Pietro had long been known to Browning, for in 1846 he wrote of him to Elizabeth Barrett. Browning told her how Pietro had helped to build Padua Cathedral and had written a treatise on magic, but that he was persecuted by the people of his day because they thought that he was a conjuror. To this day, said Browning, mothers tell their children that he was evil and that his pact with the evil one obliged him to drink no milk.

DeVane, p. 453.

In his poem Browning tells of the time when a young Greek came to see Pietro with the request that he make him rich so that he might have leisure to devote his time to serving mankind. Pietro cast a spell, and soon the Greek found himself a rich man. About a year later Pietro came to see him, requesting a place to lodge. The Greek put him off with excuses and requested that Pietro make him the master of men, so that he might better serve them. Soon the Greek found himself a great politician and ruler. Ten years later Pietro came to see him again, this time requesting protection from the mob. Again the Greek put him off with excuses and asked Pietro to make him pope, the master of the souls of men. Once again Pietro worked his spell, and soon the Greek became pope. And again Pietro came to see
him, to tell him that he was going to be burnt at the stake as a heretic. However, Pietro did not wish to save himself, only his book. He asked the pope to preserve his book for future generations. This time the Greek made no pretense, but told Pietro that he and his book could go to the fire. Pietro said some magic words, and suddenly the Greek found himself in his original condition, as a poor young man. He then realized that it had all been a vision, and that the magician had revealed to him all the ingratitude and rottenness of his soul.

34

Works, pp. 1180-1187.

Peter of Abano was born near Padua about 1250. He traveled widely, visiting Spain, England, and Scotland. He spent a number of years at the University of Paris, where he was regarded as a second Aristotle. It is interesting to note that while he was at Paris he translated into Latin the astrological writings of Abraham Aben Ezra, the same Rabbi Ben Ezra of Browning's earlier poem. Later he taught medicine at Padua and labored at his many writings.

Peter was an authority on medicine, astronomy, and astrology. He wrote treatises on physiognomy, poisons, and astrology. His best-known work, called the Conciliator, is in the form of questions and answers on problems which he had investigated. In Browning's poem, this is the work
which Pietro asks the Greek to preserve for him. Peter had a wide reputation for magic and there is evidence that he was brought before the Inquisition for heresy.


The story of the young Greek does not occur in the accounts of Pietro, and Browning apparently got this from another source. There is a similar incident told in *El Conde Lucanor* by Don Juan Manuel, which was repeated by Connop Thirlwall in a letter to a friend in 1866. Browning knew Thirlwall and might have heard the story from him. The story tells of a young Spaniard who comes to see a magician in hopes of learning magic to improve his position in life. The magician gradually unfolds visions of the career of the Spaniard, as he is aided by the magic. At each stage the magician appeals for some small favor, but it is refused. Finally the Spaniard, as pope, sentences the magician to death for heresy. With that, the magician wakes the Spaniard from his sleep and sends him on his way.

36 "DeVanc, p. 454.

There is one thing that should be noted about "Pietro of Abano." It is the way that Browning grafted a legend, taken from an entirely different source, onto the life of
Peter. Later, we shall see that he uses exactly the same method in *Sordello*, when he grafts the political conflicts of Italy onto the life of Sordello. He chose his incidents and characters wisely, because in both cases the incidents fit into the lives of the men.

One of Browning's major interests was stories of murder and intrigue. The principal example of this is *The Ring and the Book*. But there are three shorter poems which are also concerned with the same subject. These are "Cenciaja," "Cristina and Monaldeschi," and "My Last Duchess." In *The Old Yellow Book*, the primary reference for *The Ring and The Book*, Browning must have encountered the lawyer's citation of the Cenci case. "Cenciaja"


is his footnote to Shelley's play *The Cenci*. In a letter to Buston Forman, Browning explained that the Italian word cenciaja meant a bundle of rags, a trifle. "The proverb (to which it refers) means that every poor creature will be for pressing into the company of his betters, and I used it to depreciate the notion that I intended anything of the kind."

In Shelley's *Cenci*, when the Pope finally sentences
Beatrice to death, he says that Paolo Santa Croce had murdered his mother and implies that he must sentence Beatrice to death to provide an example to parricides.

39


Browning's poem is the story of the Croce case. The poet tells how Paolo Croce, the youngest son of Marchesine Costanza, wished to take the place of the eldest son in the family inheritance. But the mother refused and Paolo decided to kill her. In order to hide his iniquity, he wrote to his brother Onofrio Santa Croce, telling him that their mother had become an evil and impure person and requesting advice on the proper course of action. Onofrio advised Paolo to "act as honor prompts a cavalier." Paolo then killed his mother and fled. Later he died at the hands of an assassin.

Though the killer was dead, the Pope was still not satisfied. He ordered Cardinal Aldobrandini to search the house and belongings of Paolo to find out if he had an accomplice. The Cardinal's men found the letter from Onofrio to his brother, and they arrested him as an accomplice in the murder. The Cardinal instructed the judge to torture his prisoner until he admitted his guilt. Some months later, Onofrio was finally beaten into what might be called an ad-
mission of his guilt. He was then sentenced and executed, an innocent man implicated by a scrap of advice in a murder. At the end of the poem, Browning gives the reason why the Cardinal was so anxious to have Onofrio executed. The Cardinal was in love with the same girl whom Onofrio loved, and he was insulted when he saw Onofrio wearing a favor he had given her. From that moment, he could not rest until Onofrio had been executed.

In another letter to Buxton Forman, Browning said that he got "the facts from a contemporaneous account" which he found in a manuscript lent him by Sir John Simeon. This led most commentators to think that his source for the "Cenciaja" was a pamphlet by Sir John Simeon on the Cenci case, which contains a brief notice of the Santa Croce case. However, in the Philological Quarterly, Kenneth Knickerbocker has shown that Browning got most of his facts from an Italian manuscript in the British Museum. In parallel columns, Knickerbocker compares the Italian manuscript with the poem and concludes:

There can be no doubt as to the faithfulness amounting in part to translation with which Browning followed his source material. Contrary to his usual practice when taking a story from a source, Browning here places an almost air-tight restraint on his imagination.
"Cristana and Monaldeschi" takes place after Queen Cristina of Sweden has abdicated her throne. She has fallen in love with the head of her household, Monaldeschi. While visiting Paris, she finds that he has betrayed her. She arranges a meeting with him in the Galerie des Cerfs at the Palace of Fontainebleau. They meet under pictures of Francis I and Diane de Poictiers, the woman rumored to have been the mistress of Francis. Pointing to their pictures, Cristina reminds Monaldeschi that they had vowed to love each other just as Francis and Diane had done. As they walk down the hall, she begins to accuse him of unfaithfulness and treachery, and she watches as he appears more and more guilty. Finally, convinced of his guilt, she calls in her priest and three soldiers. The priest confesses Monaldeschi, and the three soldiers stab him as she looks on.

Browning may have heard the story of Christina and Monaldeschi on any one of his numerous trips through Paris, and he may even have seen an account of the trial at which Christina was acquitted of her act, since she had retained sovereign control over her servants.

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42 Kenneth L. Knickerbocker, "Browning's 'Cencioja,'" Philological Quarterly, October, 1934, p. 400.

43 Works, pp. 1198-1199.

44 DeVane, p. 466.
In a paper read to the Browning Society on February 27, 1891, Mrs. Alexander Ireland gave the essential circumstances of the poem. Christina was the daughter of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden. She became queen in 1632 on the death of her father. She was highly accomplished and educated and thus had many royal suitors, but rather than marry, she abdicated her throne in 1654. At this time she renounced Protestantism and embraced Catholicism.

Among the exclusively Italian members of her household was her servant, Marquis Monaldeschi. Christina fell in love with him, only to find that he was a traitor and a scoundrel. He soon tired of her and became interested in another woman. At Fontainebleau, the queen came into possession of a packet containing her letters to Monaldeschi and also letters which he had written to his new love. His letters made a mockery of her love for him. She arranged a meeting with him at the Galerie des Cerfs and after accusing him, she had her priest confess him and her soldiers kill him.  


In his article, "Clio's Rights in Poetry: Browning's 'Cristina and Monaldeschi,'" C. N. Wenger raises the question of just how far poetic license permits a poet to depart from
his authentic sources. He criticizes Browning's treatment of the Christina-Monaldeschi incident as well as the various people who have commented on it. In particular, he criticizes Mrs. Ireland for her inaccurate article on Browning's source. Contrary to Mrs. Ireland's account, Christina succeeded to the throne of Sweden in 1633. The servants in her household were not exclusively Italian. Christina had Monaldeschi executed not so much because of passion as because of politics, since Monaldeschi had betrayed her politically. There were no other women to whom Monaldeschi had written the letters which Christina intercepted, and she did not lead her victim down Diana's gallery.

Although most of these criticisms apply to Browning as well as to Mrs. Ireland, Wenger goes on to criticize the poet especially for his relation of the actual execution. He says that Browning followed only rumor when he made the crime wholly one of passion. Since Monaldeschi was wearing a coat of mail, the soldiers could not stab him, and they had to decapitate him. Christina was not present at the execution. After instructing her priest and soldiers, she left them to carry out her orders.

46


In order to see whose account of the incident is correct, Mrs. Ireland's or Wenger's, it is necessary to consult
another account. There is an excellent one in Arckenholtz's
Mémoires concernant Christine, Reine de Suède. Queen
Christina was suspicious that her Italian servant, Marquis
Monaldeschi, was betraying her interests. She intercepted
his letters which contained incriminating evidence and
gave them to her priest to be presented to the Marquis when
the situation demanded. Soon the Marquis realized that his
letters were being intercepted, and becoming suspicious,
he prepared for flight. In order to prevent this, Christina
arranged a meeting with him on November 10, 1657, in the
Galerie des Cerfs at Fontainebleau. The Marquis was late
but finally arrived, trembling and pale. In fact, his bear-
ing was so changed that several members of the Court remarked
on it. At first Christina chatted aimlessly with him. Then
she sent for her priest and guards. The priest entered by
one door and the captain of her guard, with two soldiers,
by another. It was then that her manner toward Monaldeschi
changed. She took the letters from the priest, Father le
Bel, and showed them to the Marquis, reproaching him for his
enormous felony and treason. Then she searched his pockets
and found some more letters plotting a new treason. The
Marquis, confused and afraid, threw himself at her feet and
begged for mercy, but she pronounced the sentence of death
on him. Telling her priest to confess him and her soldiers
to kill him, she left the room. The Marquis besought the
queen's private confessor to intercede for him, but it was
to no avail, and finally, realizing that he must die, he made his confession, admitting repentance for the wrong which he had done to Christina. Since he had on a coat of mail, the soldiers had some trouble in killing him, but they finally did so.

47

Johan Arkenholtz, Mémoires concernant Christine, Reine de Swede (Amsterdam et Leipzig, 1751), Tome Second, pp. 3-4.

From this account, we can see that Wenger was substantially correct in holding that both Browning and Mrs. Ireland departed considerably from history in their treatment of this incident. Of course, he is on much safer ground when he criticizes Mrs. Ireland. Certainly when a commentator undertakes the job of tracing sources, as Mrs. Ireland had done, it should be done correctly. Wenger is also correct when he criticizes Browning for depicting Christina and Monaldeschi walking down the Galerie des Cerfs together and for having Christina witness the execution. As we have seen from the Mémoires, both these statements are incorrect. However, when he criticizes the poet for motivating the murder with passion instead of politics, he is not necessarily on sound ground. Even Arkenholtz does not give the reason why Christina killed Monaldeschi, although he hints that the motive may have been one of state. In her Christina of Sweden, Ada Harrison states that no one knows just why Christina had Monaldeschi killed. There was a rumor at the
time that she and Monaldeschi were having an affair. Although Miss Harrison conjectures that the murder may not have been one of passion, she admits that the point cannot be proved. So Browning was as justified in following rumor as any of the historians or commentators have been in conjecturing that there may have been political matters involved.


At the end of his article, Wenger raises the question of whether authentic sources are obligatory in the case of historically based poems and also the question of just how far the limits of poetic license extend. Of course, this question is something that each reader must decide for himself, but in my opinion, the changes which Browning made from the original situation do not mar the poem. The walk which Christina and Monaldeschi take down the Galerie and the witnessing of the execution by Christina lend more tension to the poem. And we have seen that Browning had just as much right to base the crime on passion as on politics.

"My Last Duchess" is another Browning poem on the subject of murder and mysterious death. Browning's Duke of Ferrara is negotiating with an emissary for the hand of the
daughter of a Count. The Duke is showing the agent a portrait of his last wife. He describes the young woman as the type of person who found joy in everything from his smiles to a bough of cherries cut by some officious fool in the orchard. As he speaks of his wife, the Duke reveals himself as a cold and possessive creature, who is much happier with the artistic representation than he was with the vibrant model. Finally he admits that he gave commands for all her smiles to stop. As he and the emissary descend the stairs, the Duke shows him a statue of Neptune taming a sea-horse, just the sort of thing he attempted with his wife.

50

*Works*, p. 334.

Since Browning mentioned no specific Duke in the poem, it is only recently that scholars have begun to search for the model. In fact, Berdoo mentions no historical model for the Duke in his commentary. In 1932, Professor John D. Rea suggested that the model for the poem was Duke Vespasiano Gonzaga, Duke of Sabbioneta, a small town about fifty miles from Ferrara. To support his conclusions, Rea stated that Gonzaga had three wives and that his first wife, Diane di Cardona, was a very lively and personable woman. Once the Duke had said that he feared disgrace to his family more than anything and that even the suspicion of his wife's
unfaithfulness would be too much for him to bear. Shortly thereafter, he heard rumors of his wife's wrong-doing. When these were confirmed, she suddenly disappeared. The rumor was that he had murdered her.

52


In 1936, Louis Friedland discredited Rea's theory because it could not be shown that Browning ever knew Gonzaga's career and because Rea's Duke lived in Sabbioneta. It must be remembered, said Friedland, that the full title of the poem is "My Last Duchess, Ferrara." This would place the Duke in Ferrara, not in Sabbioneta. Friedland also reminded his readers that Browning's poem hinges on the conversation between the Duke and the emissary who had come to negotiate for a second marriage. There is no such incident anywhere in the life of Gonzaga.

After disproving Rea's theory, Friedland went on to advance Duke Alfonso Este the Second as the model for the poem. Alfonso, Duke of Ferrara, fits the description in the poem. He married Lucrezia de Medici in 1558 when she was only fourteen, fitting Browning's description of the young wife in the poem. Just after the marriage Alfonso left home and did not return for almost three years. Soon after his return his wife died and rumor had it that she had been poisoned, although modern scholars feel that she died from
a lung disease.

Duke Alfonso was arrogant and conceited, egotistical and possessive, just as was the Duke in the poem. He prided himself on his bravery, intelligence, and ancient descent, and was always vengeful and ready for a feud. He patronized all the arts and had galleries in his palace. The incident which sways the case in favor of Duke Alfonso instead of Duke Gonzaga is the fact that Alfonso did negotiate for his second marriage. The girl was the daughter of Ferdinand I of Spain, and niece of the Count of Tyrol, whose capitol was at Innsbruck. The envoy was Nikolaus Madruz, a native of Innsbruck who took his instructions from the Count of Tyrol. This would account for the Duke in the poem speaking of the Count as the envoy's master, and for Browning's reference to Claus of Innsbruck. Claus is a diminutive of Nikolaus, but of course this was a slip on Browning's part since he referred to the sculptor of the statue of Neptune as Claus of Innsbruck.

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Friedland has so well substantiated his arguments that it is difficult to doubt that Duke Alfonso Este the Second is not the Duke of Browning's poem. The incident of the emissary and the reference to Innsbruck is certainly a better argument than Rea's. The fact that part of the title of the poem is "Ferrara" also lends weight to Friedland's
argument. This is one of the few times when Browning has not mentioned the name of the central character in his poem that scholars have been able to identify the person. Browning did not name the Duke in the poem probably because he had was not sure enough of the facts of his life. His accident in referring to the sculptor instead of the emissary as Claus of Innsbruck would indicate this.

While Chapters I and II depicted Browning's intensive interest in artists and religious figures, this chapter indicates his broad interest in many different kinds of people, English and French history, stories of magicians, and stories of murder and violence stimulated him.
Chapter IV
Personalities in Plays and Long Poems

The best way to study Browning's use of historical personality is to study his long poems. This is true for several reasons. First — and we have found that this is not always true of the shorter poems — we know the sources which the poet used for his characterizations. Griffin and Minchin, DeVane, and others, have fairly well established his sources for the longer poems. Second, since we know the dates of publication of all the longer poems, and since we often know when Browning began work on them, we can trace the development of his interest in and use of historical personality. Third, Browning himself usually gave the background for his work in either a note or preface to the poem, and this is an aid in comparing his researches and his use of the character with history. Fourth, and probably most important, the longer poems usually consider the person's whole life or a large segment of it. For this reason, we get a fuller idea of Browning's treatment of character.

Paracelsus was published in 1835. The poem was dedicated to Comte A. De Ripert-Montelair and came about at his suggestion.  

Mrs. Sutherland Orr, The Life and Letters of Robert Browning (Boston, 1903), p. 67.

Browning, however, knew of Paracelsus long before his friendship with the Count. His father was quite familiar with the German physician, and his own Pauline was prefaced by a
quotation from the *Occult Philosophy* of Cornelius Agrippa, a work dedicated to the Abbot Tritheim, who appears in the poem of 1835 as the teacher of Paracelsus.  

2 Griffin and Minchin, p. 65.

*Paracelsus* is a dramatic poem in five scenes. It contains many ideas which Browning was to develop more fully later. The poet is concerned with the high and unattainable aspirations of *Paracelsus*, with the fact that he was an apparent failure, and with the reasons for his failure. In the first scene, *Paracelsus* desires to obtain true knowledge of God and man, found not in books but in the world of men. Over their objections that he may be treading on forbidden ground, he leaves his friends, Festus and Michal. The second scene, set in 1521, finds him in Constantinople, where he takes stock of his accomplishments and finds that he has failed to achieve his goal. Just as he is beginning to think about trying occult magic, the spirit of the departed poet Aprile appears to him. Aprile tells him that he has failed because he has left out love and beauty in his quest for knowledge. As Aprile leaves, *Paracelsus* feels that he has found the answer to his problem. He must combine his quest for knowledge with an appreciation of beauty.

In 1526, *Paracelsus* meets his friend Festus in the town of Basle. He tells Festus that although he has attained a professorship at the University, he still feels that he has failed. He has lost all his aspirations and ambition.
They part, but in 1528, from the town of Colmar, Paracelsus sends for Festus. He tells his friend that he was run out of Basle because of a squabble with a Church dignitary over a medical fee and because the rest of the faculty thought that he was a quack. Once more he has begun to travel in search of knowledge, but this time he has taken into account physical pleasures as well as aesthetic aspirations. He even admits that he has turned to pleasures of the baser sort. Festus pleads with him to give up his search with its evil associations, but Paracelsus refuses.

The last scene of the poem takes place in 1541, in a hospital at Salzburg where Paracelsus lies dying. Festus, who has been called to his bedside, is praying for his friend. Paracelsus wakes from his sleep and begins to speak. He says that he has failed in his quest because he has overlooked the real truth of life, the fact that it is made up of more subtle truths than he had realized and that, in reality, mankind and nature are a combination of good and evil. He has not failed completely, says Paracelsus, because he was only a part of the great evolution of mankind toward God. Love is the key which he missed and when man comes to a fuller realization of the meaning of the word, he will begin to commune with God.  

3 Works, pp. 15-60.

Browning consulted three references for his poem. They were the Biographie universelle, Melchoir Adam's Vitae
Germanorum Medicorum, and the Preface to Frederick Bitiskius' edition of the works of Paracelsus, published at Genova in 1658. He got the principal facts of the life of Paracelsus from the Biographie universelle and supplemented and corrected this account with Adam and Bitiskius. 4

4 DeVane, p. 53.

One of the things which makes the study of Paracelsus so profitable in connection with Browning's use of historical personality is that in a note at the end of the poem, he gives a summary of the life of Paracelsus, principally from the Biographie and his corrections to that account. In order to test the accuracy of Browning's treatment of Paracelsus, it will be profitable to give a brief resume from the Biographie universelle and then compare this account with some more modern ones.

Paracelsus was born near Zurich, Switzerland. His early education was negligible, and he spent most of his young life in wandering about the country and studying under such teachers of magic and alchemy as the Abbot Tritheim. He traveled in Sweden; in the East, where he probably learned occult magic; in Spain and Prussia; and there is a possibility that he even traveled to Turkey and Constantinople. When he returned to Germany, his marvelous cures gave him such renown that he was offered a professorship at the University of Basle. Soon after his arrival at the Uni-
versity, he began to provoke the other professors, and they finally accused him of being a quack. After an argument with a magistrate, he fled Basle in fear of being punished for cheating the man. From about 1527 to 1539, he led the life of a nomadic physician, spending much time with the poor and the peasants in their ale houses. Finally, he died in the hospital at Salsburg in 1541.


In his copious notes to the account given by the Biographie, Browning stressed certain points and corrected others. One thing that is noticeable is that Browning corrected the Biographie on the reason why Paracelsus had to leave Basle. The Biographie implies that Paracelsus was at fault in the affair with the magistrate, while Browning says that Paracelsus saved the magistrate's life and that the argument arose when the magistrate would not pay Paracelsus the agreed fee.

6 Works, p. 69.

Since the account in the Biographie is scanty and seems sometimes to be rather slanted, perhaps it would be well to supplement it with facts about the life of Paracelsus obtained elsewhere. Franz Hartmann in The Life of Philippus Theophrastus Bombast of Hohenheim says that Paracelsus received rudimentary instruction in alchemy and medicine
from his father and then continued his studies under the
tuition of the monks of the convent of Saint Androw, near
the valley of Savon. According to Hartmann, he did study
at Basle and Johann Trithemius developed and cultivated his
talents for occultism. He traveled in Germany, Italy, the
Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, and Russia; and some stories
even say that he went to Constantinople as a prisoner of
the Tartars. Quite probably he received instruction in the
secret doctrine of the Eastern teachers, since his works
do resemble the doctrine of the Eastern adepts. He returned
to Europe and served in Italy as an army surgeon. "He
collected useful information from the high and low, from
the learned and from the vulgar, and it was nothing to see
him in the company of teamsters and vagabonds."

7

Franz Hartmann, The Life of Philippus Theophrastus

In 1527 Paracelsus became a teacher at the University
of Baslo. However, he was disliked because he taught his
beliefs instead of traditional doctrines. He also held the
office of city physician and warred against the corrupt
apothecaries of the city. He wrote a severe publication
against a decision by the City Council which was rendered
in favor of Cornelius of Lichtenfels, whom he had saved from
death and who had refused to pay his fee.

Because of the difficulties which arose over the
publication and because of his teaching methods, Paracelsus had to flee Basel. He resumed his strolling life, followed by numerous disciples. He was denounced by regular physicians, but he cured many people who had been supposed incurable.

In 1541, he died in a small room of an inn called the White Horse. There remains a mystery in regard to his death, but most recent investigations confirm the statement of his contemporaries that he was attacked by hirelings of certain physicians who were his enemies and that in consequence of a fall upon a rock, his skull was fractured.

Ibid.

This account differs in some places from the account given in the Biographie. It supports Browning's feeling that Paracelsus was the injured party in the dispute which took place at the University and also seems more sympathetic than the Biographie. Of course, both Browning and the Biographie place Paracelsus' death in the hospital at Salzburg, while Hartmann says that he died at an inn.

One thing more should be noted about Paracelsus, which has been mentioned by neither the Biographie nor Hartmann. That is the fact that he was interested in religion as well as science. He was against luxury and preached his gospel of poverty and nonviolence in taverns and by the roadside. He believed in God, but felt that he could only be known through science. Such a knowledge, felt Paracelsus, would
perfect man's communion with God. He preached against
religious practices of the day, and characterized Luther and
the Pope as "two whores discussing chastity."

Henry M. Pachter, _Paracelsus, Magic into Science_ (New

Although Browning said, in a note to the poem, that "the
liberties I have taken with my subject are very trifling; and
the reader may slip the foregoing scenes between the leaves
of any memoir of Paracelsus he pleases, by way of comment-
ary," Griffin and Minchin and DeVane feel that he took
more than mere trifling liberties with the life of Paracelsus.
For instance, they both mention that nowhere except in Brown-
ing does one find Michal, Festus, or Aprilo. Also, the death-
bed scene is pure Browning. Griffin and Minchin also say
that Browning's erudition in the notes to the poem is more
apparent than real. In reality, he got most of his material
from the works which have already been mentioned, especially
the preface by Bitiskius to the works of Paracelsus. After
all, say Griffin and Minchin, he spent only six months on
the poem.

Griffin and Minchin, pp. 70-72.
However, even though Browning’s researches may not have been as vast as they would seem on first appearance, it should be noted that they were certainly adequate for the work. As for the insertion of Festus, Michal, and the death scene, it must be remembered that Browning was interested in the development of a soul, rather than the mere retelling of a man’s life. The liberties which the poet took may not have been trifling, but they were certainly necessary for his purpose.

Browning probably had many reasons for choosing Paracelsus. Comte A. De Ripert-Montclair had suggested that he write a poem about Paracelsus. Paracelsus was interested in the common man, and this probably appealed to the poet. Certainly his unorthodox ideas about religion appealed to the equally unorthodox Browning. Probably the greatest reason why the life of Paracelsus appealed to Browning was that it fitted his purposes. Paracelsus was the sequel to Pauline and the forerunner of Sordello, and all three are concerned with the development of a soul. The fact that Paracelsus was unorthodox, that he taught doctrines which were in advance of his times, and that the minute details of his life were not well enough known to cause people to question the poet’s treatment of his life, were probably the principal reasons why Browning chose him.

Although Strafford was published before Sordello, I will treat Sordello after Paracelsus since both poems are directly
concerned with the development of a soul. Browning probably put more time and effort into Sordello than any poem he ever wrote, with the exception of The Ring and the Book. It was published in 1840 after at least six years of composition.

13 Griffin and Minchin, p. 89.

Although it opens with a scene which takes place much later in the life of Sordello, the real story of the poet-soldier begins about the middle of Book I. Here Browning described Sordello's childhood spent near Mantua at the castle of Gioto. He is a very sensitive child, and as he wanders about the woods, he is aware of the flowers and trees and even invests them with a life like his own. These fancies quickly disappear, however, and he begins to dream of becoming famous. He sets Apollo as his ideal and lives Apollo's life in fancy, choosing as his Daphne, Palma, the daughter of Ecelin and Adelaide, whom he has seen at Gioto.

One day, as Sordello is approaching manhood, while he is strolling through the woods, he comes upon a court of love. Here he finds various troubadours competing with their lays for the favor of Adelaide and Palma, the queens of the court. When Sordello arrives, Eglamour is singing. As he finishes, Sordello steps forward and sings a version of the Daphne and Apollo theme. Sordello wins the competition easily, and since Eglamour has been bested at the one thing for which he lived, he dies as Sordello accepts
the post as Palma's minstrel.

Soon after this, Sordello learns the story of his mysterious origin. He finds that he is the son of a poor archer who died saving a child of the Ezzelins from a fire. Adelaide had accordingly taken him under her protection and raised him at Gioto. When Sordello learns this, he realizes that he does not have the physical or social equipment to become an Apollo; so he alters his ideal slightly. He decides that he will be potentially all the things which Apollo was. He will aspire to be a poet, a fighter, and a philosopher, but will never hope to attain these goals because of his limitations. The best way to develop these potentialities is to become a troubadour, since troubadours are the ones most concerned with warriors, lovers, and philosophers. He decides to go to Mantua and live the life of a poet. When he arrives, he finds that his fame has preceded him, and for some time he lives the life of a favored troubadour. But he is constantly torn between his actual life and his high aspirations.

Meanwhile, Adelaide, the strong-minded wife of Ezzelin, has died, and because he repents their evil deeds, her husband decides to become a peacemaker. His family belongs to a political faction called the Ghibellines, who have been warring for many years with the Guelphs for the domination of the Italian states. Consequently, Ezzelin weds his
two sons to relatives of the Guelph leaders and proposes to wed Palma, his daughter, to Richard, Count of Saint Boniface, one of the principal Guelph leaders. Taurello, his lieutenant, tries to dissuade him from his desires, but Ezzelin persists.

At the end of a year, Sordello is still living at Mantua practicing his art of poetry and music. Then Palma sends for him and confesses that she has wanted to marry him since that day at the court of love, but has been prevented by her betrothal to Richard and by the fact that Sordello was of lowly birth. Now however, things are different. On her deathbed, Adelaide had made important revelations about Sordello's parentage which put matters in a new light. Then, too, Taurello has not followed his master's peaceable ideas, but has continued fighting Richard and has finally managed to capture him and his town of Verona. Palma takes Sordello with her to Ferrara, Taurello's city, where he becomes interested in improving the condition of the people. As he wanders over the city, he sees their sufferings and speaks to Taurello about this, but gets no results.

The Emperor has authorized Taurello to choose a new leader of the Ghibellines to replace Ezzelin, who has ro-
tired, but Taurello is in doubt as to whom he should choose. Sordello, still possessed with the people's cause, comes again to Taurello and Palma and tries to persuade them to join the Guelph faction, which he feels is more sympathetic with the desires of the people. Taurello pays no attention to his opinions, but is impressed by his leadership and eloquence and finally confers upon him the leadership of the Ghibellines. Palma feels that the time has come to reveal that on her deathbed, Adelaide had confessed that Sordello is in reality Taurello's son, whom he had thought killed when the Guelphs burned his castle. Adelaide had kept this fact from Taurello because she felt that if he knew he had a son, he might become ambitious and overthrow her husband's leadership.

Taurello and Palma leave Sordello alone to think about his new position. His mind becomes a turmoil. On one side is the fact that he has sworn to champion the rights of the masses against the unjust rule of a few. On the other side is the promise of fulfillment of love and ambition. By blood he is a Ghibelline, but he feels that the Guelph cause is that of the people. As the conflict between the poet and the man of action intensifies, Sordello succumbs and dies, a victim of his own emotions. But when Palma and Taurello enter, they see that he has trampled the badge of leadership and thus chosen the side of the people.

Works, pp. 103-173.
Browning's principal authority for the character of Sordello was the *Biographie universelle*, a work which he had already used for *Paracelsus*. The *Biographie* gives a 

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DeVane, p. 75.

lengthy summary of the accounts supplied by various historians of Sordello's life. Since they differ greatly as to details, the best way to approach them is to give a fair sample. Benvenuto d'Imola tells that Sordello, a citizen of Mantua, was born in the time of Ezzelin of Romano. He was an illustrious and clever warrior and a courtier.

Ezzelin's sister Cunizza fell in love with him, but Ezzelin, disguised as a servant, caught the two one night and forced Sordello to promise that he would never return. Imola adds that the fault for the affair lay principally with Cunizza. Other legends tell that Sordello was born in Mantua of a poor family. At an early age, he composed songs and was finally favored with a position at the court of Richard of Saint Boniface. Later he became the lover of Boniface's wife. Finally he made an honorable marriage.

In his *History of Mantua*, Platina tells us that Sordello was distinguished for bravery at the early age of twenty. He had a noble and graceful manner and proved his courage by winning several duels. He was pursued by Beatrice, sister of Ezzelin, whom he finally married. He was honored in France and received a great welcome when he returned to Mantua. When Ezzelin besieged the city of Mantua, Sordello aided the
Mantuans in defending the city and defeating him. Only Platina names the sister of Ezzelin Beatrice; all the rest call her Cunizza. Nostradamus says that Sordello was a Mantuan and that when he was fifteen he entered the service of Berlenger, Count of Provence. He wrote his best songs on philosophy, not love. Giambattista d’Arco says that he was born at Giotto, a suburb of Mantua. He abducted the wife of his protector, Count Richard of Saint Boniface. He was a well-known author and man of war who died a noble death.


To summarize the character of Sordello as given by the various historians in the Biographie, we will repeat the points on which most of them agree. Sordello was born at or near Mantua. He was a well-known poet, a warrior of no mean abilities, a member of the Court, and possibly even somewhat of a philosopher. At an early age he entered the service of Count Richard of Saint Boniface. He was in love with, and possibly abducted Cunizza (Browning’s Palma), the sister of Ezzelin and probably the wife of his protector, Count Richard.

Two other accounts of Sordello can be used to supplement the Biographie. Justin H. Smith feels that Sordello was not the type of person to haunt the woods, deep in the reveries of a philosophic poet, as Browning would have us believe. On one occasion, says Smith, he even appears as a brawler.
in the taverns of Florence. In a struggle with other troubadours, Sordello got a wine flask broken on his crown and bore a "sufficient share in the odium of the fray."

About six years after this, he became the friend of Richard, Count of Saint Boniface, who was married to the sister of Ezzelin of Romano. Richard and Ezzelin quarreled, and to dishonor his brother-in-law, Ezzelin commissioned Sordello to steal his wife, Cunizza, from him. Afterward Sordello ran off with another lady of the Strasso house and married her. He was well liked both in France and Portugal. He loved many women, it is said at least one hundred. In France Charles d'Anjou became his patron and gave him five castles.

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In a brief account Sismondi says that Sordello was attached for awhile to the household of the Count of Saint Boniface, the chief of the Guelph party. Many stories arose about him, and he became a legendary hero of the people and was said to have been their champion in every revolution.

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It is probable that a part of Browning's conception of
Sordello came from the Divine Comedy of Dante. When Browning was sixteen, he studied Italian and certainly read the Italian poet. However, in the Comedy itself, the only indication there is as to Sordello's character is the fact that he is placed in that circle of Purgatory which contains those who delayed repentance until they died violent deaths and the fact that Dante describes him as having the aspect of a lion. As for Cunizza, Dante places her in Paradise. In a note, Kuhns says that she was married three times, that among her lovers was Sordello, and "it is not easy to understand Dante's motives for putting her in heaven."

After comparing Browning's Sordello with the account given by the Biographie, by Smith, Sismondi, and Dante, it is obvious that his final poem did not remain very faithful to the historical conception of the troubadour. The only similarities between Browning's conception of Sordello and history's conception of the troubadour are that he was born and grew up in Gioto near Mantua, that he was a well known
poet, maybe somewhat of a philosophical thinker (although as we have seen, Smith certainly does not hold this view), and that he was in love with Cunizza. Although some would not agree, most of the historians who considered Sordello would agree on these points. There however, the resemblance between Browning's Sordello and the original ends. The appearance of Sordello at the court of love, the fact that he was the son of Faurello, and the final scene when he is offered the leadership of the Ghibelline party and dies from emotional conflict are Browning.

Of course, the question which naturally arises in this connection is why Browning strayed so far from history's conception of Sordello. The main reason for this is that the poem went through a long period of development, and for certain reasons which will be considered, each stage was a little further from the historical conception of Sordello. During the five- or six-year period of composition, there were at least three different versions of Sordello.

See DeVane, pp. 72-85, Griffin and Minchin, pp. 89-103, and William Clyde DeVane, "Sordello's Story Retold," Studies in Philology, January, 1930, pp. 1-24. My discussion of this is a summary of all of these with some additions of my own.

Browning's original idea was probably to treat Sordello much as he did Paracelsus, concentrating on the development of the soul. In this version, he would have remained fairly faithful to the historical conception of Sordello, tracing
development of soul by inserting subjective passages between events of the troubadour's life. This was probably the state of the poem in April 1835 when, in writing to Fox on the publication of Paracelsus, Browning remarked, "I have another affair on hand rather of a more popular nature, I conceive; but no so decisive and explicit on a point or two, so I decide on trying the question with this." This

Griffin and Minchin, p. 89.

version of the poem is probably the one to which Browning refers in the Dedication to the 1863 edition of Sordello, where he says that he has tried to revise and simplify it but cannot. "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." But

Works, p. 103.

then, while Browning was still working on Sordello, he wrote and published Paracelsus, and this poem on the development of a soul usurped many of the ideas which his Sordello contained. So the second version came about in order to make the treatment of Sordello different from that of Paracelsus. In this second version, the poet probably concentrated much more on the later life of Sordello, on his warlike
aspirations and romantic passions. This inclusion of the warlike and romantic Sordello would have made the poem different from the more subjective Paracelsus. It was at this time that it probably took the form of six cantos or books and rhymed couplets which Scott had made famous in his treatment of stories of this type. It was probably at this time that it probably took the form of six cantos or books and rhymed couplets which Scott had made famous in his treatment of stories of this type. It was probably at this time that the poet's father projected his romantic plan for Sordello, as it was occasionally his habit to try his hand at the same subject on which his son was working.

During this period Browning's conception of Sordello probably came closer to the historical conception than at any other time. We have already seen that many historians spoke of Sordello's courage in battle, his many loves, and his courtly manner. The Sordello of this period very likely resembled closely the adventurous but amorous Sordello of Platina, Giambattista d'Arco, and Justin Smith. This was approximately the form of the poem in May 1837, when in the advertisement of the published Strafford there appeared, "Nearly ready. Sordello, in Six Books."

But on July 15, 1837, a singular incident took place.
Mrs. W. Busk of England published a collection of poems headed by a long poem titled *Sordello*. She was a disciple of Scott, and her poem was in the traditional troubadour fashion. It consisted of some 2,000 lines and was divided into six cantos. She pictured Sordello as the poet-lover, and in her poem he falls in love with Cunizza (Palma in Browning). Sordello declares his love for her, but Ezzelin, who wants to marry his sister to Count Richard of Saint Boniface, sends him off to war. Then Ezzelin becomes jealous of Richard and seeks Sordello's aid in withdrawing Cunizza from the court of his brother-in-law. Sordello visits the court and Cunizza flees with him. Thereupon, the Count is slain and Sordello and Cunizza are married. It can be seen at a glance that Mrs. Busk followed the traditional stories of Sordello, given in the *Biographie universelle* and Smith.

Since Browning's poem probably resembled Mrs. Busk's poem greatly, he could not publish it. He had two choices: he could either abandon the poem, or he could modify it to differ from the style and tradition in which Mrs. Busk had written. He decided on the latter course. And here is probably the main reason why his final poem contained the picture of Sordello that differs so greatly from history.
For now Browning decided to concentrate on the historical background of the poem. This is when the struggles between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines began to assume major importance and also when the part which Taurello and Ezzelin played in these struggles assumed importance. Almost three years of research and travel followed. Browning read many of the works referred to in the *Biographie universelle* such as Ludovico Antonio Muratori's *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores* and the *Chronica Parva Ferrarensis* for background for the Italian political struggles and the part which Ezzelin, Richard, and Taurello played in them. In the spring of 1838 he traveled to Italy, where he must have picked up much local color for his tale.

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DeVane, pp. 72-85.

When the final version of the poem was published in 1840, it was not a tale of the life of Sordello, but a combination of Sordello's story with the story of the political unrest in Italy during the time of Sordello. Browning departed from the historical conception of Sordello's life in the summer of 1837 because of the publication of Mrs. Busk's poem. The final version was his attempt to treat the development of Sordello in a different light from the traditional one. In doing this, he departed considerably from history.

It only remains to consider briefly why Browning chose
Sordello as the subject for a poem. Probably his intense interest in Italian culture and history had something to do with it. He read of Sordello in Dante and later in the Biographie universelle. Here was a man who had been poet, warrior, lover, and perhaps even a philosopher — just the type Browning needed for the tale of the development of a soul. Then too, just as in Paracelsus, here was a man whose life was not very well known. The poet could take poetic license with the details of his life without creating a sense of disbelief in his readers. When Mrs. Busk published her poems, Browning was too deep into Sordello to waste the effort; so he simply changed his point of view from a concentration on the traditional Sordello to one which concentrated on the imagined part which Sordello played in the political struggles of Italy.

The other two long poems which contain persons drawn from history are both plays, Strafford and King Victor and King Charles. On May 26, 1856, at a dinner at 56 Russell Square, the actor William Macready turned to his new friend Robert Browning and with an affectionate gesture said, "Will you not write me a tragedy, and save me from going to America?" The result was the play Strafford, published just as in Paracelsus, here was a man whose life was not very well known. The poet could take poetic license with the details of his life without creating a sense of disbelief in his readers. When Mrs. Busk published her poems, Browning was too deep into Sordello to waste the effort; so he simply changed his point of view from a concentration on the traditional Sordello to one which concentrated on the imagined part which Sordello played in the political struggles of Italy.

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high treason against England. Wentworth was King Charles' Lord Deputy to Ireland. While there he had been very severe with the people, operating under the theory that since the King's will was law, it must be enforced no matter what the means. The Scottish rebellion forced Charles to call him home to help put down the uprising. When he arrived in England, the King made him chief counsellor and gave him an Earldom. At this point Browning's play opens.

Soon after Strafford arrives in England and before he can see the King, he meets Lady Carlisle, who is in love with him. She warns him against the danger of siding with Charles against the group of Parliamentarians headed by Pym and Hampden, which is becoming more and more powerful. Then he meets Pym, his old friend, who tries to win him over to the Constitutional cause, but Strafford will have none of it. He is the King's man and must act in accordance with his sovereign's wishes.

When he and the King meet, Strafford advises him to call a Parliament to prove Scotland's treasons. Then Pym and his followers will have to go along with him, and they can raise both monetary and popular support for the war with Scotland. Strafford returns to Ireland, calls a Parliament and is granted money and popular support. But in England,
the King's representative, Vane, takes a stand before the Parliament and demands all twelve subsidies or none for the war. Parliament, already engaged by ship-money subsidies, is further angered by Vane's arrogant demeanor and refuses any subsidy. Charles is then forced to dissolve it.

By this time, Scotland has invaded England and Charles' army is doing badly. He is forced to send Strafford to the north to load it. Strafford finally finds the defeated and scattered army, pulls it together, and is beginning to win a few battles when he hears that Charles has concluded a truce with the Scots and has ordered him back to London. Returning to London with proof that the patriots led by Pym had plotted with the Scots to invade England, he enters Parliament determined to impeach Pym and his comrades. Before he can gain the floor, however, Pym makes a speech and impeaches Strafford for treasonable acts against England. Strafford is so carried away by Pym's words that he begins to believe the man does represent the will of the people, and so he declines to produce his proof and speak out against him.

At the impeachment trial, Strafford is once more his old self. He makes an eloquent defense but is finally defeated by notes which Vane had made at a council on the Scottish war. These notes, given by Vane's son to Pym, stated that Strafford had offered the King his Irish troops to force England into obedience, if necessary. At once, both Houses of Parliament become convinced of his guilt.
and Pym is able to pass a bill of attainder against him. Even the House of Lords approves it, knowing that the final decision rests with the King, who must sign it. With a little prodding from Pym, Charles signs the bill and condemns Strafford to death. Although Lady Carlisle offers him a means of escape, Strafford refuses and as the play closes, he is executed at the block.

34 Works, pp. 70-102.

In the original preface, later discarded, Browning said that he felt that the portraits of the characters in the play were faithful, except for Carlisle, whom he drew from Voiture and Waller. As proof of this he referred to the Life of Strafford in John Forster's Eminent British Statesmen.

35 DeVane, p. 62.

Forster's Life may be summarized briefly as follows. Thomas Wentworth was born of an aristocratic family of Yorkshire in 1593. In 1614, he represented Yorkshire in Parliament. In his early political career, he seemed to lean toward parliamentary rights and was against James I's denial of free speech to Parliament. He also refused to contribute to a forced loan to Charles I. For this, he lost office and was imprisoned for a time. He had made friends among the champions of Parliamentary rights, but he always tried to make it clear that he blamed the King's ministers for the faults of the administration and not the King himself.
Strafford finally became so powerful that the King gave him audience and even rewarded him with public office. Of course, the Parliamentary forces looked upon him as an apostate.

He was finally appointed Lord Deputy to Ireland and served the King well in this capacity. In fact, he was known for being very severe at times in his efforts to enforce the King's will. Then the trouble arose with Scotland and Charles called Strafford home as his chief counsellor. Strafford called Parliaments both in Ireland and England, and while the Irish gave money and support to the cause, the English did not. Finally, Strafford took over the leadership of the English forces that had been routed by the Scots. Just as he was beginning to achieve some minor successes, the King called another Parliament, and he had to return to London...

He was immediately impeached by Pym and his associates and confined to the tower. Pym accused him of trying to introduce tyrannical rule into England and of suggesting that his Irish troops be used, if necessary, to quell the English. Pym had secured some notes which were made by Vane at the council which had debated the Scottish affair. At this point in the history, Forster admits that he is unsure just how the notes came into Pym's possession. He quotes Clarendon as saying that Vane gave them to Pym, whereas Whitlock states that Vane's son took the notes from his father's cabinet and gave them to Pym. Whatever the case, the notes were damning evidence and the principal instrument in convicting Strafford. The House of Commons drew up a bill of attainder against him.
Then Charles made a very unwise appeal to the House of Lords to save him even though he might be guilty, and the next Sunday, the Presbyterian ministers used this admission of Strafford's guilt to arouse the people. The King was forced to sign the bill. Pym discovered and put down a conspiracy of the Court to free Strafford, and he was beheaded on May 12, 1641.

Forster, pp. 55-117.

As is apparent, Forster's *Life of Strafford* and Browning's play are almost identical. However this is not necessarily because of the historical accuracy of both but because of the fact that Browning helped Forster write the *Life*. Doctor F. J. Furnivall said that the poet told him of his part in writing the *Life of Strafford* which was later published by John Forster. This fact is also borne out by two of Browning's letters. In a letter to Forster himself, Browning speaks of the time when "we turned over books together in the Strafford crisis." And in a letter to Miss Emily Hickey:


who published an edition of *Strafford*, Browning had this to say of his part in the writing of the *Life*: "I had no notion of scribbling anything but as a rough piece of work which F.
might fill up, file away, and make his own: he had no time to do as much in that way as both he and I expected."

Although most of the commentators do not think that Browning helped Forster as much as Furnivall contends he did, they all agree that he had something to do with Forster's Life. Of course, this is the reason that he followed it so closely in his play.

However, there are two places in the play where Browning departs considerably from the Life. He particularly stresses the fact that when Strafford returned from the war with Scotland, he came with proof that the popular leaders in England, Pym and the others, had been secretly in communication with the Scots. Browning probably went to one of the other histories, such as Clarendon's History of the Rebellion for this, since Forster hardly mentions the point. In the Life, the writer feels that Strafford finally realized that Pym represented the will of the people against tyranny and acquiesced in the situation, even feeling that his death was justified.

There is none of this in Browning. Except for a brief moment when he wavers in Parliament, Browning's Strafford never departs from the side of the King.
Except for these differences, there is much similarity between the play and the Life. Professor Samuel R. Gardiner, who feels that Forster was extremely careless, wrote an introduction to Miss Hickey's edition of Strafford. He holds that Browning's play departed greatly from history. He notes especially that Strafford and Pym were never friends and that the idea of Pym or his friends entering into colloquies with Strafford or bursting in unannounced to Charles is completely inaccurate. Gardiner goes on to say, however, that he feels that Browning, irrespective of his historical inaccuracies, has seized the character of the real Strafford, the man who strove for the good of his nation without sympathy for the generation in which he lived.

It would seem that Browning's portrait of Strafford is generally supported by Gardiner. He supports the poet in the belief that Strafford returned to England with the proof necessary to impeach Pym and the others, but never used it.

Browning's picture of the Strafford who worked so hard for government by will of the King alone and who felt that he was working in the best interest of the people is certainly the
one which Gardiner gives.

The other characters in the play seem to follow the conception given by history. The only imaginary one is Carlisle, whom Browning found in Waller and Voiture. In Voiture, the poet would have found a beautiful and enchanting woman, but one who knew how to use her beauties to further her political interests. Waller speaks of Carlisle at least five times in his poetry. He concentrates on her beauty and her ability as a lady of the court. For the most part, however, Browning followed his own impulse in creating Carlisle, since in the play she represents loyalty to Strafford just as Strafford represents loyalty to the King.

We have already seen that the immediate occasion of Strafford was Macready's suggestion that Browning write him a play. The poet probably chose the subject of Strafford because he had been working on it with Forster. Although there are certain inaccuracies in the play, in the main Browning's conception of Strafford as the misguided statesman who sup-
ported divine right government over the constitutional type seems to agree with history.

Browning's *King Victor* and *King Charles* was published in the Spring of 1842, as part two of *Bells and Pomegranates.* It was a drama modeled on the simple lines of Alfieri, whose works he had been studying very closely. As the title

suggests, the play deals with two personalities, King Victor Amadeus II, King of Sardinia, and his son, Charles Emanuel. In order to understand the play, it will be necessary to consider a few details of the background.

Victor Amadeus was born in 1665 of Charles Emanuel II and Jean Marie de Nemours. When he was sixteen, he married Princess Anne, daughter of Philip of Orleans and Henriette of England. His military and political abilities helped make the little nation of Savoy so powerful that he was respected among all the nations of Europe. Later he became King of Sicily and finally even King of Sardinia. In 1715, his beloved son Victor died and soon after, his daughter and wife died. At this point Browning's play opens.

The first part of the play is concerned with the abdication of King Victor. He has decided to abdicate his throne because
his policies have finally gotten him into trouble from which he must extricate himself. He has increased the taxes on his nobles, and they are about to rebel. The Spanish have made claims on his territory which can be put off no longer. It seems that half of Europe has turned against him and his kingdom, and he feels that the only way to escape is to abdicate his kingship. D'Ormea, Victor's chief minister, who has been just as deeply involved in the plots and machinations which have involved the kingdom in the trouble as his master, begs the old King not to abdicate. He feels that when Charles, Victor's son, gains the throne, he will hold him up to the people as being the one responsible for the kingdom's troubles.

Then too, for many years, D'Ormea has tried to undermine Charles' relationship with his father. He feels that now he will have to pay for the animosity which he has created between himself and Charles.

Browning portrays Charles as a son who has never received any attention from his father. The father had loved his first son, Victor, and had hoped that he would succeed to the throne, but young Victor died. Because of his idealism, his occasionally vacillating will, and D'Ormea's machinations, Charles has become the object of the contempt of the court. Then his father calls him in and tells him that he has decided to abdicate. He tells Charles that he is old and weary of the affairs of state. He has married Anna Canali and wishes to retire to some secluded place with her, where he can hunt, hawk, and grow old with ease. Charles is too dumbfounded to realize
his father's real purpose and accepts the kingship. Just before Victor leaves, he begs his son to retain D'Ormea as his minister, for reasons of state. Charles agrees.

In the second part of the play, King Charles has just concluded a treaty with Austria and Spain and settled the domestic troubles which had plagued Victor. D'Ormea warns him that for some time Victor has been planning to take back the throne, and since he knows of the treaty, he will soon be back to reclaim it. Charles does not believe him, however. Then Victor comes to the Court and makes it clear that he does want the throne back. Charles accuses his father of thrusting his son between himself and danger, and then, when the danger has subsided, of wishing to take back the throne. In order to keep the rest of the Court from knowing of Victor's perfidy, Charles gives him Moncaglier, a castle much closer to the Court, and tells everyone that the reason Victor came back was to request a place closer to his son.

Soon after, D'Ormea warns Charles again that Victor is still plotting to regain the throne. Victor has visited all the nobles and even plans to go to France to request aid from the French King. D'Ormea advises Charles to arrest the nobles with whom Victor has been plotting. Instead, Charles demands that D'Ormea arrest Victor himself, still in hopes that Victor will be able to prove that he has not been plotting to regain the throne and that D'Ormea has been lying. While D'Ormea has gone to arrest Victor, Charles begins to
contemplate giving him back the crown. Polyxena, his wife, finally makes him realize that his duty is to the kingdom, and that in its best interests, he should not give up the crown. When D'Ormea returns with Victor, he openly admits that he has been plotting for the throne. Charles, seeming to realize that his father is near dying, gives him the crown again. Victor then dies, just as he had lived, King of Sardinia.

50 Works, pp. 196-218.

King Victor and King Charles appears to be one of Browning's most scrupulous attempts to reproduce a historical situation. In a Note at the beginning of the play, he says that his presentation of the situation will be more accurate than any with which he has met. During his research, says Browning, he has consulted the Abbé Roman's Recit, Lord Orrery's Letters from Italy, and parts of Voltaire and Condorcet for the character of the fiery, but selfish and scheming Victor, and the idealistic, but at times vacillating Charles.

51 Works, p. 196.

However, DeVane feels that Browning's research for the play was not as formidable as the reader might think. He went, as was his custom during those years, to the Biographie universelle in his father's library, and from the accounts of Victor, Charles Emanuel, and Ormea constructed his plot.

52 DeVane, p. 99.
The Biographie referred him to Voltaire's brief account, where he also read Condorcet's long note to Voltaire.

In the Biographie, Browning read of the youth and early rule of King Victor Amadeus II. However, a great portion of the account in the Biographie is given over to the time when Victor abdicated his throne in favor of his son, Charles Emanuel. Victor had secretly married the Contessa di San Sebastiano, his son's wife's lady-in-waiting. Soon after this, he told Charles that he wanted to abdicate the throne, wishing to live the few remaining years of his life in peace. Charles, who was surprised, tried to convince him of the foolishness of his action, but Victor would have none of it. He wanted to give his son absolute power. At the time he said, "My son, the supreme authority permits no leaving. I would be able to disapprove of what you would do, and that would be bad."

Victor and his wife went to Chambéry in Savoy, where young King Charles visited them twice. However, after a short stay at Chambéry, Victor's wife began to try to induce him to regain the throne. He finally came to see his son, telling him that he wished to be nearer the Court. Charles gave him the chateau of Montcalier. Soon Victor began to feel out Charles' ministers as to their willingness to support his attempt to regain the throne. Even though he had particularly told his son at the time of the abdication that he wished to be completely separate from the kingdom, he now
wished to have the throne. The ministers remained faithful to Charles, however, telling him of Victor's intentions, and finally Charles was forced to sign the order to arrest his father. Victor was confined in the castle at Rivoli and later at Montcalier, where he died in 1732.


The accounts of Charles and Ormea in the Biographie also aided Browning in constructing his characters and plot. The Biographie states that Charles, although he had been weak and vacillating in his youth, soon formed the intent of keeping the crown. In fact, he took a firm hand in the affairs of state and did not scruple to use force to put down his opposition if necessary. As king, his policies were much different from those of his father. He was much more liberal, reducing many of the taxes which had been imposed on the nobles by his father. When Victor returned to reclaim his throne, Charles would not give it up. Either he was seduced by power or he thought the public interest would best be served by keeping it. Finally Charles had his father imprisoned at Rivoli and Montcalier, where he died.


As for Ormea, the Biographie states that he was well liked by Victor Amadeus, who was impressed by his lively
spirit, stylish manner, and penetrating mind. When the time came to choose sides, however, Ormea sided with Charles and even had a hand in influencing him to arrest and imprison his father.


In its account of Ormea, the Biographie refers to the brief account given by Voltaire and the long note which his editor, Condorcet, had appended to the account. In Voltaire, Browning read how Victor "capriciously" abdicated his crown in 1730 and how he finally became dissatisfied and tried to regain power. His ministers refused to side with him, however, and he was arrested and imprisoned, and neither his abdication, his attempt to retake the throne, his imprisonment nor his death "caused the least motion among the neighboring nations. It was a terrible event without consequences."

56 Condorcet, editor, Oeuvres Completes de Voltaire (Paris, 1785), Tome Vingt, pp. 36-43.

Condorcet states that the attempts of Victor to regain the throne are fables and that the whole was a plot of Ormea to accuse his earlier master falsely. Ormea had ambitions to the throne, and for this reason he wished to cause trouble between the King and his father. Ormea was instrumental in having Victor arrested and imprisoned.

57 Ibid., pp. 39-43.
This chapter is evenly divided between plays which are accurate historically and those which are not. Browning reworked the lives of both Paracelsus and Sordello to suit his purposes. Of course, he was also forced to rework Sordello by the publication of Mrs. Busk's poems. Strafford and King Victor and King Charles are Browning's attempts to present accurately a historical situation. Though there are minor objections to his treatment of the two principal characters, by and large, he was successful.
Conclusion

This thesis has been an examination of Robert Browning's treatment of historical personalities. The first chapter concentrated on his treatment of artists. Several tendencies became apparent in this chapter: Browning was interested in Italian artists, especially the lesser known ones, and he had a fondness for failures. Chapter II dwelt with religious figures. Here we saw that Browning was particularly drawn to Rabbis. His poems about religious figures present almost a complete picture from the Hebrew to the modern Christian. In Chapter III, we saw that Browning had many other interests besides artists and religious figures. Almost any situation which revealed character attracted him. Chapter IV dwelt with the longer poems, and it afforded us the best opportunity to study Browning's treatment of history. Here we saw that Browning picked two little-known men from history, a magician and a troubadour, to illustrate his theories of the development of the soul. The last two poems considered in Chapter IV illustrated Browning's ability to accurately depict a historical person when he desired to do so.

It only remains to answer the question of whether Browning was accurate in his treatment of historical personalities. With some exceptions, he was generally accurate. We have seen that he tried to be careful in treating a character and he was interested in correcting any mistakes which he had made. The
accuracy of Browning's treatment of a character depended on the way the character was used. When Browning desired to depict a historical situation, he could do so. However, when he desired to have a character fulfill a definite purpose, he could also do this, even though it might mean changing the facts of the man's life somewhat. It must be remembered that Browning was a poet first, not a scholar, and he wrote of people because he was interested in them and because they could serve his poetical purpose. With this in mind, the question of whether Browning was accurate in his treatment of historical personalities becomes less important. The important thing is to know enough about the person in the poem to be able to see how Browning used him. Then his departures from history will acquire purpose and help to explain his ideas.
Appendix I


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<td>198</td>
<td>Copy of a passage from Notes sur le Croisic. A page on the same subject from another source. Other notes by Miss Browning apparently relating to &quot;Two Poets of Croisic.&quot;</td>
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Appendix II

"Sordello, nephew of Ezzelin the Tyrant, is invited by his uncle to his court at Vicenza; but on account of a feud between the two branches of the family, he is advised not to go. He therefore flees to France, where he becomes a Troubadour. Returning to Italy, he seeks the court of his uncle, to whom he is personally unknown -- for Sordello had been carried away as an infant and educated at Pisa -- and he enters the household as tutor to Alfonzo and Bertha, two prisoners, children of Count Julian of Visconti whom Ezzelin had murdered. Discovering that Ezzelin desires to wed Bertha, Sordello, who loves her, proposes flight, whereupon Ezzelin at once orders the arrest of the poet. The lovers, however, escape to Genoa and embark for Alexandria; but off the coast of Sicily they are captured by pirates, taken to Algiers, purchased by the wealthy Mustapha and carried to his estate. Ezzelin, in pursuit, reaches Genoa; here, his life being in danger, he vows to visit the Holy Land. On his recovery he sets out, but off Crete he also is captured by the corsairs, borne to Algiers, and purchased by Mustapha. Finding that Sordello, who had risen in favor, is about to wed Bertha, Ezzelin makes himself known and claims his bride; Mustapha decides that she shall be given to the one who shall turn Mohammedan. This Sordello indignantly refuses, but Ezzelin accepts; and the marriage is arranged for the following day.
"Meanwhile, Alfonzo having escaped from Vicenza by means of a pirate with whom he was acquainted, accidentally lands at Tunis, and hearing of the proposed marriage of his sister seeks the aid of his pirate friend in rescuing her. By the help of a slave he gains access to the garden of Mustapha, slays Ezzelin and retires. Mustapha, on discovering the deed, accuses Sordello and has him strangled with a bow-string; whereupon the slave, falling at his master's feet, declares how the murder had been committed. In order to make all possible amends Mustapha offers Bertha his hand! This she reluctantly accepts, and the poem concludes with a description of the magnificent wedding."

1 Griffin and Minchin, p. 99.
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Vita

Claudius Griffin was born in Brooklyn, New York, on March 24, 1935. He now resides in Richmond, Virginia. He received his primary and secondary education in the public and parochial schools of Richmond. He entered the University of Richmond in 1952, but withdrew in 1954. In 1955, he resumed his education, receiving his B.S. in 1958. He is married and has two children. He wishes to teach in college and intends to acquire a Ph.D.