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BROWNING'S DRAMATIC ART

BY

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Introduction

An average person interested in literature naturally reads any book of Browning's complete works with perhaps little intention of reading his dramas, mainly because Browning is not generally known as a dramatist. His fame grew from his poetic genius. This paper will present to one interested in Browning as a dramatist the entire list of his plays, arranged chronologically, showing their individual theatrical and literary values, their influences and sources, and lastly, an estimate of the author's position as a playwright.

From a dramatic viewpoint a critical discussion of Browning and his plays is necessarily a broad one, and because of this we shall only consider the plays from a standpoint of their theatrical and literary merit or demerit. The problem of the actability of each play is answered as well as possible and the question of their literary importance is also considered. In presenting a critical analysis of the individual plays the mechanics of stage production have been constantly kept uppermost in mind, and therefore the dramas discussed are only those that might conceivably be acted. Because of these considerations much in the following chapters may often appear harsh and severe, but this severity is not meant to disparage the great poet. Browning's poetry, lofty thought, and keen dramatic appreciation stand securely as an answer to any odious or malicious attack on the author himself.

Since only the conceivably actable dramas are reviewed in
this paper, Pippa Passes and Paracelsus have not been includ-
ed. However, there are other reasons why these two pieces
have not been considered, and an explanation seems appropriate.
In the first place Browning himself did not consider them as
dramas. He wrote them as poems, using the dramatic method of
discourse, monologue and dialogue, with the machinery of the
drama to bring forth his creations. And he carried out his
plan marvelously well for the English reading public in Pippa
Passes and Paracelsus. In the preface to the latter Browning
says, "I have endeavored to write a poem, not a drama; the
canons of drama are well known, and I cannot but think that,
inasmuch as they have immediate regard to stage representation,
the peculiar advantages they hold out are really such only so
long as the purpose for which they were at first instituted is
kept in view." (1) The extremely long monologues of Paracelsus,
one of which is approximately three hundred lines, were obviously
not written to hold the attention of an audience.

Pippa Passes offers more of a problem. However, no one
will deny that the piece, as Browning wrote it, could not be
presented on the modern stage. The modern cinema could, perhaps,
with little revision give us a good drama. The moving and often
changing scenery, the transition of action, and the speed of the
movement in the poem could very easily be controlled under the
cinema's more or less machinelike art. But to consider its

(1) Browning's Complete Poems, p. 12.
feasibility as a stage production is somewhat fatuous.

Browning does not say definitely, as in the case of Paracelsus, that Pippa Passes is not a drama but a poem. And there are several literary critics, because of this and the dramatic features of the piece, who class it under the heading of drama. Browning, however, has indicated, though somewhat vaguely, in the advertisement of Pippa Passes, that he meant the work as a drama, but only as such for the same small group that so enthusiastically supported the theatrical presentation of Strafford. (1) The implication that even though Browning considered Pippa Passes as a drama, he thought so only as a poetic closet drama and meant it for his small reading public of that time. There is little doubt that it is nothing other than a closet-drama.

Most dramatic critics do not consider Pippa Passes or Paracelsus as stage plays. At least no classification dealing with them as such has been found. This does not mean that the dramatic qualities which they contain have been ignored. On the contrary, both pieces are among the most often cited from Browning. One cannot forget the vivid tragic scene of Ottima and Sebald, nor the pathetic unceasing intellectual searching of Paracelsus.

Before passing to the main body of this paper, it will be well to explain the group division of Browning's plays.

(1) Browning's Complete Poems, p. 128.
There are four English plays and four Italian. The first group contains the true stage plays, and these, in treatment and subject matter, are closely aligned to the English dramatic tradition, especially the Elizabethan. The plays of the second group show the type of drama that Browning made peculiarly his own; these are strictly soul-studies, with the Italian background, and totally unsuited for acting, but are capable of production. Furthermore, the division given preserves the chronological order of the plays, and allows the interested student to note the evolution of Browning's "soul-dramas".
Browning's first dramatic effort resulted in the historical tragedy, Strafford. The author dedicated this play to the actor, William C. Macready. In fact, it was largely through the suggestion of Macready, who was a warm friend and ardent admirer of Browning, that the drama was written. Browning met Macready at a supper given by the former, and as the guests were leaving, Macready is quoted as saying, "Write a play, Browning, and keep me from going to America". Browning replied, "Shall it be historical and English? What do you say to a drama on Strafford?" And thus the poet found his subject. (1). Since, he was at the time, assisting his friend, John Forster, with the life of Strafford contained in Lives of Eminent British Statesmen, his choice is readily explained. The following is Browning's preface to the first edition in 1837:

"I had for some time been engaged in a Poem of a very different nature, when induced to make the present attempt; and am not without apprehension that my eagerness to freshen a jaded mind by diverting it to the healthy natures of a grand epoch, may have operated unfavorably on the represented play, which is one of the Action in Character, rather than Character in Action. To remedy this, in some degree, considerable curtailment will be necessary, and, in a few instances, the supplying details not required, I suppose, by the mere reader. While a trifling success would much gratify, failure will not wholly discourage me from another effort: experience is to come; and earnest endeavor may yet remove many disadvantages.

"The portraits are, I think, faithful; and I am exceedingly fortunate in being able, in proof of this, to refer to the subtle and eloquent exposition of the characters of Eliot and Strafford, in Lives of Eminent British Statesmen, now in the course of publication in Lardner's Cyclopaedia, by a writer (John Forster) whom I am proud to call my friend; and whose biographies of Hampden, Pym, and Vane, will, I am sure, fitly

(1). Dowden, Edward, Robert Browning, pp. 44-45.
illustrate the present year—the Second Centenary of the Trial concerning Ship-Money. My Carlisle, however, is purely imaginary: I at first sketched her singular likeness roughly in, as suggested by Matthews and the memoir-writers—but it was too artificial, and the substituted outline is exclusively from Voiture and Waller.

"The Italian boat—song in the last scene is from Redi's 'Bacco', long since naturalized in the joyous and delicate version of Leigh Hunt". (1).

The play was produced in 1837 with Macready in the role of Strafford, and it was successfully performed before the London audiences. However, after the first few nights the play was discontinued, because of the unfortunate desertion of one of the leading actors. It cannot be said that Strafford was a gigantic theatrical success; in fact, its prosperity was only mild. And it is safe to say that had its production been continued, the popularity it held would have died, because it does not contain true dramatic theatrical qualities. A modern showing of Strafford would certainly be a failure. It is not an "impossible" play and can be acted out to some degree, but after its first showing it was never reproduced, and except for Browning students and students of English drama, it holds little interest.

The production of Strafford brought to Browning a certain literary position. It won him many admirers and brought him recognition as one of England's men of letters. It is rather a striking contrast to note that Browning's introduction to the literary world was not through the poetic route that made him immortal, but through drama in which he was unsuccessful.

(1). *Browning's Complete Poems*, p. 49.
In **Strafford** the theme is simple: shall Wentworth decide in favor of the king or of his country? The play opens by showing England dissatisfied with the crown. England is without a Parliament. Charles, who is determined to subdue the Scots by force, calls Wentworth to help him. Wentworth (Strafford) accepts the Scottish war against his own judgment and is beaten. On returning home he finds himself under impeachment, and that the king has secretly deserted him. Pym attempts to induce Wentworth to go over to the Popular party, and Lady Carlisle warns him of the king's treachery, but Wentworth remains loyal to the king. He is brought to trial and impeached. Charles, who could have saved him by a word, signs his death warrant. Strafford is unshaken in his love and loyalty for the king and refuses to accept Lady Carlisle's offer of escape, but before his death, he vainly implores Pym to save the king from an inevitable execution.

It is the poorest of Browning's plays as literary merit goes, and shows that the author at twenty-five was too immature for such an undertaking, and that he lacked the ability and capacity to construct the dramas of the greater writers. In short, he lacked the constructive genius that set Marlowe in the front rank as a dramatist while still a boy in the university. The characters are extremely weak and affected by the extreme sentimentalism of manner, which at that time completely dominated the English drama. **Strafford** reflects much of Browning's Puritan and Liberal backgrounds. It is a political play, but not of the admirable type represented in Shakespeare's in *Julius Caesar*. Browning tries not to allow
politics to dominate the drama and attempts a strong substitution in Strafford's love for Charles, with the inclusion of the mutual affection between Pym and Strafford. There is too much intrigue and too much history attempted, making it impossible for an audience to follow.

With the exception of the charming and delightful love song, the setting of music, moonlight, and children singing, along with the remainder of the fifth act, there is very little good poetry in the entire drama. All that precedes the fifth act is jerky and prosaic, ruining the blank verse. When it changes to the poetic charm, grace and clearness in Strafford's talk with his children we lose its effect in the confusion of the whole fifth act by the speeches of Hollis, Charles, Pym, and Lady Carlisle. Its worst fault is the mangled conversations with too many interruptions, interjections, and broken off phrases. Both reader and audience lose the threads of meaning in the conversations, because of this excessively involved speech effect.

The influence of the Sentimental school is partly responsible for the failure of Browning to represent true drama in Strafford. As before mentioned it spoils the characterizations. The character of the Queen is weak and unimportant in the play. Her one good speech is her first one:

"Is it over then? Why, he looks yellower than ever! Well, At least we shall not hear eternally Of service—services: he's paid at least". (1).

(1). Strafford Act II, Sc. 1.
The friendship of Pym and Strafford is over-sentimentalized and hard to understand. The character of Pym begins strong and sympathetic, but ends in disgust and hatefulness. Likewise King Charles is over-sentimentalized by his uxoriousness, cowardliness and weakness. We wonder why Strafford does not penetrate his duplicity. Lady Carlisle's love is too obscure for Strafford as well as for the audience to comprehend; and the argument for its obscurity, not to offend Strafford by disclosing Charles' perfidy, is weak. A woman, in loving a man, will not be the artificial type that Browning has created in Lady Carlisle. Finally Strafford's love for King Charles, his great loyalty, and his defense for him is so artificial that it does not gain the reader's sympathy, because such a love and loyalty would be impossible to one knowing the truth about Charles, as Strafford could scarcely have avoided.

As tragedy, the effectiveness in Strafford is impaired by sentimentality, poor dramatic construction, (Browning failed to lift the final act to importance), and bad handling of poetry. Although it is not strictly closet-drama, it will unquestionably be confined to that field of literature, because obviously any effort to revive this play would not be met with success.

Browning's second attempt to produce tragedy in drama was expressed in his *King Victor and King Charles*. This piece was No. II of *Bells and Pomegranates*, which appeared in 1842. It is rather a peculiar actionless drama, but the play could be acted out, and its possibilities are undeniable.
As in Strafford, Browning ignores dramatic construction in *King Victor* and *King Charles*, and to a certain degree the mechanics of stage production are lost in the latter. The author uses a somewhat original device for acts and scenes. He divides the play into two main parts called, "The First Year, 1730" and "The Second Year, 1731". Each main division is divided into two sections: "Part I-King Victor" and "Part II-King Victor" for "The First Year, 1730"; and "Part I-King Charles" and "Part II-King Charles" for "The Second Year, 1731". All this can be reduced to four parts rather evenly divided. In short the play could be called a four act tragedy.

It can hardly be called a drama, because there is so very little action, and because it lacks the essentials of true drama. This drama resembles that type which has been called by many of Browning's commentators a soul study. As drama it is not exceptionally good, and there is amazingly little poetry in the entire play. It can hardly be called a tragedy, because we are entirely out of sympathy with the feeble King Victor. The last scene, in spite of its pathetic ending in depicting his death, does not inspire sympathy or even sadness. Furthermore, King Charles seems to be the main character of the play and, as far as our interest in his actions dominates the play, we must consider the play as having a happy ending and being in this respect a melodrama. The name tragedy hardly fits the story.

The introduction to *King Victor* and *King Charles*, written
by Browning when it was first published, gives us some interesting facts:

"So far as I know, this tragedy is the first artistic consequence of what Voltaire termed 'A terrible event without consequences'; and although it professes to be historical, I have taken more pains to arrive at the history than most readers would thank me for particularizing: since acquainted, as I will hope them to be, with the chief circumstances of Victor's remarkable European career—nor quite ignorant of the sad and surprising facts I am about to reproduce (a tolerable account of which is to be found, for instance, in Abbe Roman's Recit, or even the fifth of Lord Arrery's Letters from Italy)—I cannot expect them to be versed, nor desirous of becoming so, in all the detail of the memoirs, correspondence, and relations of the time. From these only may be obtained a knowledge of the fiery and audacious temper, unscrupulous selfishness, profound dissimulation, and singular fertility in resources, of Victor—the extreme and painful sensibility, prolonged immaturity of powers, earnest good purpose and vacillating will of Charles—the noble and right woman's manliness of his wife—and the ill-considered rascality and subsequent better-advised rectitude of D'Orme. When I say, therefore, that I cannot but believe my statement (combining as it does what appears correct in Voltaire and plausible in Condorcet) more true to person and thing than any it has hitherto been my fortune to meet with, no doubt my word will be taken, and my evidence spared as readily. R. B."

London, 1842. (1).

Aside from the reference to Voltaire and Condorcet, one learns a good deal from this short preface. If we accept the highly flattering characterizations of Browning's own portraits, we find that it is based on historical facts from certain Italian sources, and that the author allowed his own originality freedom in interpreting them. It is given to the readers as a semi-historical political play, in the study of despotic instinct, profound statescraft and human nature, finely interwoven and finely evolved. In these respects the

(1). Browning's Complete Poem, p. 145.
drama is closely modeled on the Elisabethan pattern in theme and treatment. Its main fault is that Browning's dramatic instinct errs when he pictures King Victor, who was once so noble, as fallen to the low level of cringing senility and fear.

The plot is simple and of some interest: King Victor, having brought the kingdom to the verge of ruin, abdicates and gives the crown to his son, believing him to be weak-minded. This fault will bring him, Victor, back to the throne, after, of course, his son Charles receives the blame for ruining the country. Charles turns out just the opposite; he is strong, sets matters aright, and repairs Victor's misdeeds. Then Victor, envious and longing for power, plots to get back his throne, but is taken as a prisoner. Then the broken-down Victor pleads his cause to Charles, who, as a dutiful son, touched by his father's misery, restores the throne against his better judgment. Victor, however, conveniently dies at this climactic point, and all is well.

King Victor is foolish in the last scene, and this, of course, is unhistorical. The good and wise King Charles is too inconsistently sentimental in the last scene wherein he shows his dutifulness to his father. Polyxena is not an Italian type. Browning gives us a fine picture of her womanly gravity, resoluteness, sagacity and authority, but her wifely affection towards Charles is sometimes too material. She strikes the reader as a wise and patient guardian angel. D'Ormea, the minister, serves both kings faithfully to re-
tain his own position and is the real politician.

The characterization and style are much better than that in Strafford. The two kings are fairly well drawn, and Lady Carlisle is far behind the fine character of Polyxena. D'Ormea's part lacks impressiveness. The style is plain and unpoetic; it is unfigured, uncolored, and more or less suits the characters.

The Return of the Druses was first published as No. IV of Bells and Pomegranates in 1843. Browning at first named this tragedy Mansoor the Hierophant. It is a real tragedy of five acts and contains some beautiful and powerful poetry. The theme of which is truth versus fancy, or an ideal scheme. Browning herein shows much originality and power. Since the play was composed in five days, an act a day, it is cited as an example of Browning's great capacity for work and artistry.

A tribe of Druses (people found chiefly in the southern part of the mountains in Lebanon, very mysterious and uncommunicative respecting their religion, believing in one God, who at several times has reincarnated himself among them) are discovered as a colony on a small island of the Sporades in the fifteenth century. Djabal, the main character, is a Druse and son of the last Emir. His family was massacred on the island, but he escaped and fled to Europe. The Knights Hospitallers of Rhodes govern the islands through a Prefect, who is an extremely cruel and oppressive governor. Djabal returns to the island to free his people and is welcomed as the reincarnated Messiah, their "Hakim". He allows the de-
ception and is worshipped as a god. Whether he should go on as a man or as a god is the struggle in Djabal's mind and in his decision for the latter, the delusion causes his own ruin. The complications arise from his love for Anael, a noble Druse girl, who has vowed to marry the man that would bring succor and relief to her people. She worships Djabal as a god, but would rather have him a mortal, and even thinks of him as such. Thinking thus she is lead to doubt his divinity and says:

"Tis the man's hand,
Eye, voice! Oh, do you veil these to our people,
Or but to me? To them, I think, to them!
And brightness is their veil, shadow, my truth!" (1).

Anael then takes upon herself Djabal's plan to murder the Prefect. Djabal discovers her after the deed and is so overcome that he breaks down and confesses his fraud. She scorns him and demands an open confession before the Druses. When he refuses, Anael, in contempt of his cowardice, betrays him. He accepts his fate and in a long, moving speech to the Druses, before whom he has been arrayed, his eloquence is so powerful that Anael swoons crying, "Hakim" in recognition of his divinity. She thereby manifests her faith and recovers the faith of the people for him. She immediately dies, and Djabal follows by killing himself with a dagger.

Mr. Brooke says, "It is amusing to follow the prestidigitation of Browning's intellect creating this confused battle in

(1). The Return of the Druses, Act II. p. 204.
souls as long as one reads the play at home, though even then we wonder why he cannot, at least in drama, make a simple situation." (1). The complications of love and soul battles is far too intricate for clarity, and strains the use of poetry. However, the Return of the Druses is most subtle, with its perplexing motives. Commentators on Browning say that it is an account of humanity as represented by one individual, Djabal. (2). But this is far too broad, because it is only an account of an extremely high minded impostor, who was nevertheless, an honest man.

The Return of the Druses shows Browning's love of historical legends, his interest in the religions of the East, his love of color and verbal luxury, of gold, green, and purple, quite Oriental itself. The style fits the characters being rich and ornamental. Djabal's character is unconvincing and Anael is impressionless. The other characters are so weak that no mention of them is necessary, although, perhaps, the best scene is the interview of Loys and the Prefect in Act III, because of its fine characterization, but this is not consistent throughout the play. The drama is conceivable for stage production, but the confusing motivations, contrary and bewildering as there are, might present a difficult problem.

The Blot in the Scutcheon was produced with the Druse tragedy, and likewise done in a relatively short period of

(2). Brooke, Stoppford A., op. cit., Ch. VII, and also Dowden, Edward, Browning, Ch. III
four or five days. It was, however, presented on the stage with great applause and was reproduced both in England and in America. Browning wrote it especially for Macready. After its temporary stage success, (1) it was printed as No. V. of Bells and Pomegranates.

The play suffers little from rapid composition and is perhaps, Browning's best; at least, it is the best considered as a stage play. The theme is love versus family honor, and the plot is quite simple: Mildred Tresham and Henry Mertoun have loved and sinned; their attempt at a late reparation is foiled by their own folly and awkwardness, leading to the death of both. Mertoun is killed by her brother, and Mildred sinks under the weight of calamity and sorrow too heavy for her to endure.

The framework of the motivating elements is extremely poor and produces in certain passages undramatic situations. For example, the character of Mildred is altogether too innocent and childlike to sustain real drama. Her speech,

"I was so young-
I had no mother, and I loved him so!"

in Act II, Sc. 1., is a very poor excuse and is too sentimentally false. And again, we find no explanation for the sudden change in Mildred's character in the last scene when she appears as a remarkably sophisticated woman. Each of the char-

(1) Browning and Macready quarreled after the initial success of the play and the company broke up.
acters calls down upon his own head the suffering which at first could have been avoided. The tragic end was not inevitable; had it been so, the play might have ranked with the greater dramas of the Jacobean.

The first act is awkward in using servants with explanatory remarks to show what has preceded. Mildred's refusal to disclose her lover's name is the most unnatural and the weakest part of the play. All the tragedy would have been avoided had she confessed her dishonor, and at the same time, accepted Mertoun as her husband by her brother's hand, for the latter has a splendid, open, generous, loving nature as the tragedy reveals. Tresham was stupid not to guess the identity of Mildred's lover, because surely she would not have given one up to go to another in such a short space of time. At the most Browning's picture of the innocent Mildred could not warrant this. And furthermore, why should Guendolen perceive the secret and Tresham not? It is illogical and ridiculous. For true drama this dullness and blindness is unforgivable.

Rashness of anger and sinful pride begin the third act; Mertoun is slain by Tresham as he climbs to Mildred's window. Why Mertoun should go on risking Mildred's honor when their marriage is assured is incomprehensible. Browning again shows lack of forethought and poor dramatic technique. How much cleaner and more dramatic would the situation have been if Tresham could have discovered Mildred's lover in another way? As it is the situation implies a lascivious lustfulness in Mertoun and the innocent Mildred. Sorrow succeeds the
wrathful and passionate introduction, and death and forgiveness are beautifully woven together in sharp contrast to the almost vicious passions of the opening scene. This is the best act. A sacred love is touched upon in this last scene, which forgives the worst existing between man and woman. It is this, with its extreme pathos, that makes the drama so appealing.

The pathos of the catastrophe in *The Blot in the 'Scotchman* is, perhaps, the greatest in all of Browning's tragedies. The close leaves us in sorrow, but not at ends with human nature. It has a sort of combination of cruelty in fate and bitterness balanced by the tenderness of forgiveness in the hour of tragedy. Mildred, Mertoun and Tresham sin from error, and die gladly from pain, each forgiving the others. We gather the impression that death reunites them in righteousness and love.

In spite of its numerous faults, this is Browning's best acting drama. As a literary piece, it is not highly meritable. The main characters are all clear enough, and the simplicity of the play as a whole is commendable. Dramatic interaction of passion and intense feeling is really very good. The deeper readings in human nature and its unity of effect mark the main differences with the author's other dramas. It was Browning's one play that almost brought him success as a dramatist.
CHAPTER II

BROWNING'S ITALIAN PLAYS

The success of the initial presentation of the Blot in the 'Scutcheon encouraged Browning to write another drama for the theatre. The result was the play Colombe's Birthday, which was printed in 1844 as No. VI of Bells and Pomegranates, and for some unknown reason was not produced on the stage for ten or more years. Mr. Gosse in his Peronalia says:

"The stage directions are numerous and minute, showing the science which the dramatist had gained since he first essayed to put his creations on the boards. Some of the suggestions are characteristic enough. For instance: 'Unless a very good Valence is found, this extremely fine speech, (in Act IV, where Valence describes Berthold to Colombe), perhaps the jewel of the play, is to be left out.' In the present editions the verses run otherwise." (1).

The play was rearranged for three acts and brought again to the stage in 1895, but because of its weak subject could not hold the public and was withdrawn. It marks the second step in the evolution of Browning's dramatic soul studies. We have noted the tendency towards the substitution of mental struggles for dramatic action in King Victor and King Charles and The Return of the Druses. Beginning with Colombe's Birthday Browning abandons action completely.

The theme is the conflict in Colombe to choose between having a commoner as her husband, or retain the Duchy. It is a political play, as well as a semi-romantic melodrama, with a happy ending and no humor, no real gaiety of temper, no comedy as one would expect. Seriousness and gravity are its

(1). Browning's Complete Poems, pp. 230-231.
dominant features. The body of the play is made up of serious pleadings with serious hopes and fears.

Colombe, by the support of Valence, a commoner, proposes to fight the claims of Berthold to her Duchy. Valence secretly loves the unsuspecting Colombe, who thinks he is a very loyal servant. Berthold is the true heir, but in order to avoid trouble proposes marriage to Colombe. She discovers Valence's affection and returns it by renouncing her claims and going with Valence as his wife in common, private life.

This weak plot is dragged through five acts with the aid of Browning's long-winded discourses on love and friendship. The courtiers make a feeble pretense at intrigue, but the result is wholly incongruent with the theme of the play. Colombe's Birthday gives a fair picture showing two people of different ranks finding themselves in love with each other and overcoming all obstacles to their marriage. The antithesis of this rests in the character of Berthold, which gives us a striking contrast, for he is ambitious at any figure and despises love in comparison to power. Except for the one speech already mentioned before in the quotation from Mr. Gosse, there is little in the character of Valence. However, Valence, Berthold, and Colombe are of the best in Browning's dramas. The portrait of Colombe is one of Browning's most artful pictures in feminine characterization. She is an understanding human being, happy in love, and happy in losing her Duchy for the Ladyship of Ravestein.
Browning's relentless desire for complexity renders the action entirely in the minds of the actors, and is, perhaps, with the weak plot, the most serious fault of play. Though it is far less dramatic than the Blot in the 'Scutcheon, it is nearer the type of true drama and is far more realistic.

Luria, the last of Browning's true dramas and considered by him his best, was published in 1846 and dedicated to Walter Savage Landor. It is a five act tragedy divided into parts of one day, Morning, Noon, Afternoon, Evening and Night. The scene is Luria's camp between Florence and Pisa.

The theme is the conflict in the mind of Luria whether to remain loyal to a traitorous Florence, or to avenge himself. Luria is a Moorish mercenary general of the Florentine army. In staging a successful war against Pisa, Luria discovers he is suspected and accused of treachery to Florence by the rulers of the city. They are envious and jealous of him and fear his power. Because he loves Florence, its wonderful civilization, its grandeur, art and beauty, and has made it his adopted city, serving it with zeal and faithfulness, he poisons himself when he learns that he is fraudulently charged with treason. All are convinced of the hero's fidelity as they stand around him at the moment of his death; they learn of his devotion and unselfishness, his nobility; but, it is too late to rectify the mistakes of envy and suspicion. In death, as he has been in his noble life, Luria is the conqueror.
The other characters of the play are only instrumental in setting off the lone greatness of Luria. One forgets them all together; and some of them are not essential to the play, as Domizia, the scheming Florentine lady. Tiburzio, the conquered Pison general, is a very noble character, and we are in sympathy with his cause, and wish that Luria would join forces with him to annihilate the city of Florence.

The finest pieces are the poetic and impressive pictures of Florence, its men, its streets, its life; the contrasting Eastern and Latin natures; the friendship of Tiburzio for Luria; the battle at the ford; Luria's destruction of the defamatory letter from the conspirators; and the fine historic painting of the fifteenth century Italy. Luria contains the best of the author's poetry in drama, and in this much it is superior to the others.

The tragedy of Luria lacks the singleness of effect that marks the Blot in the 'Scutcheon. Furthermore, Luria has not its finer degree of dramatic technique. They are both stage plays, but Luria was never produced. The intense poetry, gravity, and dignity do not overcome the staging defects. It is not a good stage play. There is too much long, involved speech-making, too many dry monologues drenched in obscurity, the action is slow and painfully scanty.

The many values of the play are very obvious, but the historical picture of Italy at the time of the Renaissance is the best. Luria shows us the boundless perfidy, insolence, love of gain, mistrust, envy, and hatred, that marked the
petty and cruel wars constantly aflame in the Italy of that era.

A Soul's Tragedy, produced with Luria in 1846, as the concluding number of Bells and Pomegranates, is one of Browning's most peculiar pieces. It is divided into two acts, (something novel, and, although not original with Browning, it marks a new departure) the first of which is called "The Poetry of Chiappino's Life", and the second act, its prose. There are only three characters. The scene is laid in a small sixteenth century Italian village. The first act takes place in Luitafolo's home, while the second act is laid in the market street of Faenza. The peculiar differences of structure and method in A Soul's Tragedy indicate that Browning was beginning to realize his powerlessness in the field of drama. This two-act sketch is extremely interesting, very readable, and, of course, actable in a certain sense. It is properly a soul study of Chiappino with little incident and only a slight attempt at characterization.

The plot is interesting. Chiappino, who is always making trouble and hates the Provost of the town, is fined and exiled, losing all his goods by confiscation. Luitafalo, his friend, comes to his aid and pays the fine, but in doing so delays his marriage with Eulalia, his betrothed. The envious Chiappino, shows his gratefulness by abusing Luitafalo before Eulalia, while the former has gone to plead his case with the Provost. This results in a quarrel, and Luitafalo runs away, thinking he has killed the Provost with
his dagger. Since the governor was a tyrant, and in the absence of Luitafalo, wily Chiappino accepts the glory and praise of the natives in assuming his friend's deed. Ogniben, the papal legate, learns of Chiappino's perfidy and cowardice. He frightens him into quitting Faenza, and thereby ruins Chiappino's ambition to become governor on the stolen merits of Luitafalo.

The first act is slow and a bit dull in action, but the second act is gay and clever, and leads us to think Browning should have attempted drama in prose, since he was so relentlessly persistent in writing drama. The prose is excellent in style and very clear. The second part is packed with quiet humor, (the first indication of humor in all of Browning's plays), and pointed satire, which, after considering some of his poetry, is characteristic of Browning's mind.(1).

The characterization is realistic. Chiappino is a compound of envy, self-conceit, superficial cleverness, and extreme foolishness. He is a typical small-town demagogue. Ogniben is the really clever person. He is skilled in affairs, half-mocking and half-tolerant of foolish people, especially of revolutionists like Chiappino. Luitafalo and Eulalia are only stock figures of a small town with very little characterization.

It is difficult to understand why this play is called, A Soul's Tragedy. The protagonist, Chiappino, does not lose

his soul, it is already lost. The opening scene shows his base character in his hypocritical dialogue with Eulalia. We seem him here as a liar, envious of Luitafalo. This is certainly an indication that his soul is lost before the drama begins. The tragedy, if there is one rests in the simple townspeople's discovery that their hero, Chiappino, is a fraud. And that is not as tragic as it is a startling, disappointing surprise. A Soul's Tragedy is the one intended tragedy of Browning's that is comic. Ogniben is a biting, satirical cynicist, and at the same time a humorous, worldly, kindly sort of person. It is hard to think that the poet meant this as a tragedy, because it has no tragic effect and is unimpressive. Browning's humor and satire make the play redeemable.

When Browning finished Luria and resolved to give up trying to write drama, he must have done so half reluctantly. Realizing his limitations in this field of literature, as he must have, it is curious that he did not discontinue drama altogether. But In A Balcony, a fragmentary drama of three acts, shows his persistence in drama. We can except A Soul's Tragedy, because it was produced along with Luria. Evidently the poet disliked giving up. At any rate about eight years later, while in Italy, Browning wrote In A Balcony. Part of it was written at Bogni di Lucca and part of it at Rome, but, for some unknown reason it was never completed. Evidently Browning was satisfied with it as it is. When presented to the reading public a few years later, it was divided into
three parts, appearing first in Browning's original series of *Men and Women*.

According to Mrs. Orr, "In a Balcony" is a dramatic fragment, equivalent to the third or fourth act, of what might prove a tragedy or a drama, as the author designed. (1). This is hardly the case. Browning may have begun this piece with that in mind, but as it is now, it is a highly poetic and tragic soul drama. The mechanics of the sketch and its construction are irrelevant to the contents. As it is highly imaginative, the dramatic situation could take place anywhere. The situation is striking and is done with marvelous suggestiveness. Its appeal is dramatic and poetic. The lines are very clear and easily read. The impression is forcible and very intense from the beginning to its forbidding and gloomy end. The action is totally set aside for characterization, as the study of a soul in conflict.

There are only three characters in this piece. The Queen, past the age of youth and beauty, loves Norbert, who loves Constance, a poor relation of the Queen's. Norbert entered the Queen's service to be near Constance, and she promises to marry him, but all this is kept secret from the Queen. Norbert, being successful in the diplomatic service, is the court favorite. He decides to tell the Queen of his love for Constance and to ask for approval of their marriage. But Constance, dreading the wrath of the Queen, bids him wait. In the mean-

(1). Orr, Mrs. Sutherland, *Handbook to Browning's Works*, p. 73.
time, the Queen, who is longing for the love of Norbert, suspects Constance' love, and in questioning her, bears out her suspicions. However, she decides to allow the marriage. In a very curious manner misunderstanding arises, and the Queen believing Norbert loves her vows to divorce her husband and marry him; but the honest Norbert tells her the truth, and the sketch closes showing the Queen's wrath, and the lovers awaiting their doom. Constance had previously intended to sacrifice her love for Norbert by giving him up to the Queen and thereby saving him from death, but Norbert took the issue out of her hands by defiantly telling the Queen the truth. The tragedy does not take place but is suggested by the terrible countenance and awful silence of the Queen.

The Queen is the foremost character, a tragic figure of an old woman left alone in the world, unloved. Constance and Norbert are mere stock types from the Jacobean period used to bring out the situation as the poet created it. The tragedy is twofold: first, we see the Queen with a womanly hunger for love, coming eagerly to grasp the life it seems to offer, and then realizing with a dreadful awfulness that she has been deceived, that nothing remains for her; second, we see stark pain driven to a furious rage of vengeance in the Queen towards the lovers, Norbert and Constance, who tragically await their doom.
CHAPTER III

LITERARY INFLUENCES IN BROWNING'S DRAMAS

To make a comprehensive study of the influence directed upon Browning in his dramatic productions would undoubtedly be interesting and of much value to the Browning student. It would be an impossible enterprise without a consideration of the genius' poetry, because his poetic art developed alongside of, and over-reached his dramatic art. Poetry and drama arose almost simultaneously with Browning. The influences and forces that directed and aided Browning in his work are far too numerous and varied for discussion herein, since the limitations of time and space prohibit such a thorough study. Furthermore, those that affected his earlier poetic pieces and even his later works are closely aligned to the same influences noted in his dramas. Because of the wide scope, we shall limit ourselves to the study of certain general literary influences noted in Browning's dramas.

To begin with, there is no question that Browning was well trained in the Greek classics. One merely turns to his translation of The Agamemnon of Aeschylus, Balaustion's Adventure, Aristophanes' Apology, and to the numerous classical references in both his dramas and his poems. In the dedication, to the Countess Cowper, of Balaustion's Adventure, a poetic narrative retelling Euripides' Alcestis story, Browning writes that this work was intended, if possible, to approach "those Greek qualities of goodness and beauty," (1).

(1). Browning's Complete Poems, pl 602.
that he held in such high regard. We note these qualities are admirably expressed in Luria and Colombe's Birthday. Browning also adopted the so-called Aristotelian theory of the dramatic unities. In practically all his plays, with the exception of King Victor and King Charles, he closely adheres to the unities of time, place and action. Moreover, like the ancient Greek tragedians, Browning preferred few characters. In each of his plays there is only one strong character, the others being built around him.

Peculiarly, Browning began Strafford, in the Elizabethan fashion, with a host of actors; though, in reality, there were only four main characters. He finished writing drama with In A Balcony and A Soul's Tragedy and these plays follow the Greek tradition, with only three actors. In the intervening plays the number of characters varies from eleven in Luria to four in King Victor and King Charles.

Browning, furthermore, seems to have adopted the long monologues from the Greeks, which though lacking in the Grecian simplicity of style, are closely analogous. For the next important influence on Browning's dramatic art, let us turn to the Elizabethan period.

Browning studied Shakespeare zealously. In fact he modeled Luria after the master-piece, Othello. Luria and Othello are almost identical in character and position. They are both Moors and very dark complexioned, perhaps black. Both are famous and successful mercenary generals for the Italians in the cities of Venice, in the case of Othello, and
in Florence, in the case of Luria. They are honest and faithful to their respective causes. Each is noble and each believes mankind to be loving, generous, and honest. Both are deceived, and this deception causes their tragic twin. They are men, strong, courageous and intensely passionate. The list of comparisons could go on and on. Shakespeare's Othello must have deeply impressed Browning, although the two plays are very different as to construction and plot. Luria shows the influence of Shakespeare extremely well for study.

Browning, like Shakespeare, interspersed sonnets and lyrics throughout his plays. Pippa Passes, Strafford, and A Blot in the 'Scutcheon contain some very beautiful songs. And like Shakespeare's famous songs, they lend a very pleasing atmosphere to the scenes wherein they are found. Browning places his songs in strikingly pathetic or moving situations, conforming in general to Shakespeare's use of sonnets and lyrics.

The influence of the Jacobean dramatists evinces itself in Browning's In A Balcony and A Blot in the 'Scutcheon. These are like the romantic tragedies of the late Elizabethans. Lady Carlisle, in Strafford, is strictly a Beaumont-Fletcher type, and as such, she is very effective in her role as the unrequited worshipper of Strafford. Furthermore, Browning's narrative ability and his sense of dramatic situations seem to have been born directly from the dramatists of the Jacobean period. At the least, without doubt, he must have
studied them closely.

Following the Elizabethans, the next important literary school of drama that influenced Browning is the Sentimental school of his own time. It is one of the strongest influences that we have noted in Browning. Perhaps, he could hardly have escaped its ill effects. However, he certainly is to blame for the bad results that sentimentalism wrought in his dramas. Browning was not excessively sentimental, nor did sentimentalism dominate his plays; but the fact that this school influenced him at all is bad enough, without mentioning the extremely poor scenes of *Strafford*, *Blot in the Scutcheon*, and one or two of his other plays. The Shakespearean play, *Strafford*, is curiously affected with the stain of the Sentimental School. One notes this in the artificial modes of address between the Puritans. Strafford's asinine love and loyalty for the hypocritical Charles is incomprehensible. The affection between Strafford and Pym is foolishly sentimental, in view of the tremendous conflict between them. In both cases the strong emotion has no real basis, but it is forced with an unbearable, sickening heaviness.

Along with the influence of the Sentimental School in Browning, we note that its co-partner the Melodramatic School of Reade, brought its influence to bear in the poet's *King Victor and King Charles*, (which is not as tragic as the author intended) and *Colombe's Birthday*. Both have the happy ending of melodrama. In reading these plays, one wonders why the
great Browning succumbed to these bad influences. The answer rests mainly in the fact that he could not help himself, just as he could not help producing bad dramas.

The final great influence noted in Browning's works is that of the Italian culture from the Renaissance to his own time. His poetry abounds in Italianisms, that is, the great attachment and sympathy Browning held for the Italian spirit and ideas. Likewise, in his dramas, King Victor and King Charles, A Soul's Tragedy, Colombe's Birthday, and above all Luria, we note the tremendous influence of Italian culture in which Browning was so interested. These dramas not only have their plots, themes, characters, settings, and sources from Italian history and literature, but also, the very spirit of the Latins dominates these plays.
CHAPTER IV
BROWNING AS A DRAMATIST

Browning's career as a dramatist is included between the years 1837 and 1845. His eight dramas followed each other in rapid succession, with the exception of *In A Balcony*. Of the eight, there are only two that could be produced with any degree of success on the stage, *A Blot in the Scutcheon* and *Colombe's Birthday*. These came from the middle and riper period of Browning's dramatic work.

As a successful playwright, Browning was unquestionably a failure, and it took him some time to realize his deficiencies. With whatever impulsiveness Browning began to write drama, he abandoned the true form, because, for some reason, he could not produce it, no matter how hard he tried. For the true form he substituted a type of drama which is strictly closet-drama; it is adequately called the soul-drama—a drama without action depicting in high dramatic style the turmoil and struggles of a soul in conflict with its environment. From his first play to the last, we can note a peculiarly half-resigned evolution of this type of drama. Their greatest value is their poetic quality. *Luria* and *A Soul's Tragedy* show us this peculiar Browning type at its very best. Since they are poetic and at the same time highly dramatic, it is obvious that Browning's dramas were only steps in the evolution of the splendid and beautiful selections of dramatic poetry contained in the famous *Dramatic Romances, Men and Women*, and *Dramatic Personae*.

If Browning had never written a single drama during his literary career, his fame as a great poet would not be
appreciably diminished. It is particularly regrettable that he wrote some of the extremely bad dramas that he did. However, they are of interest to one who is studying the poet himself.

It has been said that the complications incident to the stage presentation of the plays, the disagreements between the poet and producers, and the consequent half-success of Browning's plays, were the chief causes for his abandonment of the drama. Of course, all these may have had their share in the result; but if anyone reads these plays in their chronological order, he can not help feeling that the author gave up drama, because he was, frankly, incapable of writing true drama. He did not have the ability. Furthermore, it could be added that Browning struck a new vein, so to speak, and wished to perfect it, because it was so natural to his expression, which any Browning student knows is very awkward, to say the least, for use in a play. His works grew less and less dramatic and approached more and more the type, which he made peculiarly his own, the dramatic monologue, featuring the intense and complicated study of a soul in conflict. This type lacks characterization in action, therefore, Browning's plays have no developing action to explain their plots. There is instead a single soul put into one supreme situation. Browning favored this type and, perhaps, that is why he considered Luria his best effort. Browning carried this out marvelously well in his poetry, of which "The Statue and the Bust", "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came", 
"The Confessional", "Ivan Ivanovitch", and many others, are typical illustrations.

However, Browning's earliest dramas, Strafford and King Victor and King Charles, have certain good qualities. A comparison with Shakespeare's dramas scarcely seems appropriate. Browning's men and women are too distant from Shakespeare's. The poets are diametrically opposites. We feel that Browning is too distant and remote, but Shakespeare, with the exception of The Tempest, and several other dramas, is very near and close to us because he deals with human nature. The Browning enthusiast is continually associating Shakespeare with Browning. This is purely over-sealousness, when one considers Browning's dramas apart from his best poetry. Browning was strictly not a true dramatist, and Shakespeare, on the other hand, was one of the world's greatest. Browning's failure in attempting to recreate Shakesperian drama, whether consciously or unconsciously, in Strafford, is certainly a significant fact. But Browning enthusiasts will persist in their extravagant praises. One, a Mr. Barrett, states:

"I had heard 'My Last Duchess' and 'In a Gondola' read most eloquently by Mr. Bokker, and I turned to the Poet's works to find for myself the greatest of dramas in A Blot in the 'Scutcheon. While I was at once arrested by the majesty of the verse, my mind was more attracted by the dramatic quality of the story, which stamped the author at once as a master of theatric form of narration—the oldest and greatest of all forms." (1).

Mr. Barrett obviously has allowed his enthusiasm to run away with his judgment, a typical fault of the fervid Browning

(1). As quoted by Wm. J. Rolfe in A Blot in the 'Scutcheon and other Dramas, p. 13.
students.

If a comparison of Browning and Shakespeare's dramatic instinct seems ridiculous, let us pass over to the former's great contemporary, Tennyson. Tennyson and Browning have this much in common: neither could write good drama, they both imitated Shakespeare unsuccessfully, and nobody, except literary students, reads their dramas today.

Neither Browning nor Tennyson had dramatic genius, the power to conceive, build, organize, and finish a play, and both lacked the knowledge of stage technique. But, in spite of these mutual defects, Tennyson's three important dramas are much better than Browning's. Tennyson's *Harold*, *Becket*, and *Queen Mary*, are well wrought, so well, in fact, that they are painfully overdone. They suffer, further, from a poor knowledge of the historical backgrounds they represent. Still the characters are interesting. We remember the pathetic pictures of Queen Mary and the stately Becket. Nevertheless Tennyson like Browning was incapable of handling the action, minor characters, the climax, and the catastrophe. Melody is the keynote of Tennyson's expression contrasting sharply with Browning's jerky, obscure, and often harsh verse.

Both poets suffered from poor composition in drama. Tennyson overworked his plays, and the result was long, bulky and unwieldy drama. Browning's disregard for the rules of style resulted in a somewhat interesting and original effect. Neither could depict human life, but Browning was ahead of
Tennyson in characterization. Tennyson's long dramas are better than Browning's, but Browning's shorter ones surpass Tennyson's. The latter poet's Falcon is extremely dull, and his Robin Hood, as drama, is unimaginable. Browning's In A Balcony, and A Soul's Tragedy, have very fine qualities, fulfilling the author's aim. The love scene of the first play in the balcony is beautiful; the love scene, by way of contrast, in Becket, between Rosamund and King Henry, is awkward.

In conclusion, let us turn to the relative theatrical and dramatic estimation of the poet's drama. The stage will never accept Browning's plays because, characteristically, the parts in them are too Browningesque and there is too much thinking aloud, which makes all of them unsuited for the stage. The plays are interesting stories, especially A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, Colombe's Birthday, A Soul's Tragedy, and Luria, mainly because of Browning's originality and invention. They contain some fine speeches and beautiful songs, but the action, if there is any, is clogged with static thought and involved monologues, often in extremely difficult idiom. Charity and love is the basic philosophy, and Browning very often moralizes. He seldom fails to extol in long beautiful passages the universal law of love. His tragedies have no villains, (the world is his villain); he uses queer poetic meters; there is no dramatic lucidity; and the women in most of his dramas lack strength. In developing dramatic style,
Browning lost sight of the stage and its requirements; his stage became one of the mind. His lack of humor is also a serious fault.

As a dramatist Browning is an extremely poor one. His dramas are so poor that at present we regard them solely as closet-dramas. Their literary value and the blinded zeal of the host of Browning fans have saved them from neglect and obscurity. However, Browning did not lack the dramatic sense which most of us have. In fact it was his strongest faculty, and he knew how to express it; nevertheless, he could not apply this expression as a playwright; he necessarily turned to poetry.

Commentators disagree on the relative value of Browning's dramas, as drama, but all agree on their most valuable feature; that is, the lofty poetic qualities which they contain. Particularly is this true of the Italian group. It is well to remember before closing, that Browning employed poetry to illustrate mental states of emotion, a soul in conflict with its environment. His imaginative power was tremendous, and for intricate dramatic interaction, analyzing the human mind in entangling, knotty situations, he was a genius. The type of drama that the poet has perfected will remain as a permanent and valuable contribution to English literature.
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