Gender Relations
in
Robert Browning’s Dramatic Monologues

FREYA MAENHOUT
DISSERTATION SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF LICENCE IN GERMANIC PHILOLOGY

Promotor: Prof. Dr. Marysa Demoor

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APPENDIX

BIBLIOGRAPHY
1. Introduction

This dissertation will discuss some of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues. The following poems will be treated: “Porphyria’s Lover” (1836), “My Last Duchess” (1842), “Andrea del Sarto” (1855), “Count Gismond” (1842), “The Laboratory” (1844) and “Evelyn Hope” (1855). “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” will definitely be taken up since they are the most illustrious of Browning’s poems; I added the other four poems because they appealed to me as well. Some of them are easily comparable, and others are just gripping in their situation and development. Browning’s subjects, the way he treated his characters and the fact that his poetry influenced some of the most significant poets in the twentieth century intrigues me. Also his relationship with Elizabeth Barrett was something that engaged my interest and this encouraged me to investigate her work too.

My first chapter will be an introduction to Browning himself: I will give an overview of Browning’s life and focus on different aspects. I will not only look at Browning, the poet, but also at Browning, the husband of a famous female poet. Elizabeth Barrett Browning will be taken up in this dissertation with regard to her relationship and her influence on Browning\(^1\), and naturally she will be an important element in my comparison between Browning’s poetry and her novel-poem *Aurora Leigh*.

Robert Browning was one of the best-known poets that lived during the Victorian era, but Elizabeth Barrett Browning was the more famous poet of the two when she was alive. Of course one cannot really compare both poets and their work, since female writers were in a different position: women were not expected to experiment with forms. Critics started to appreciate Robert more after her death and his fame especially grew in the twentieth century. Now his poetry is praised for its high literary quality because of its depth and innovative literary form.

Before analysing the poems the concept of the “dramatic monologue” will be explained, because it is not one of the best-known literary forms. This dissertation will not offer an exact definition, because there is not really a fitting one; instead some specific characteristics that

\(^1\) See below, pp. 6-7.
are part of the dramatic monologue will be listed.\textsuperscript{2} This will hopefully clarify the form of the poems more and give the reader a better insight into Browning’s literary aims.

My initial idea was to explore Browning’s influence by comparing Browning’s dramatic monologues to some of the great modernist dramatic monologues written in the twentieth century. Instead I chose to analyse the poems and compare them with each other in terms of protagonists, subjects, views on gender etc. Since there is usually a specific situation and tension between a man and a woman in each of Browning’s poems, this has to be the main theme of my dissertation. In light of that I will apply gender-based theories.

Finally, it seemed worthwhile to compare the works of Browning with those of his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, especially with regard to the representation of gender in their poetry. From her works I chose \textit{Aurora Leigh}, a long novel-poem, as she herself called it, consisting of nine books. \textit{Aurora Leigh} is one of Barrett Browning’s best-known writings apart from her love poetry. It will be interesting to relate gender problems to the ideology behind the novel-poem and the encounters of the protagonist with the other characters in the story. This comparison will take up the entire fourth and final chapter.

\footnotesize
\textsuperscript{2} I will especially draw on information from the following books:
Daniël Drappier, Robert Browning – The dramatic monologue. A status quaestionis, 1945-1965 (Louvain: Catholic University, 1972)
2. Robert Browning and the Dramatic Monologue

A. His Life and Work

The Literary puzzle of the nineteenth century
– Thomas Hardy

None of the odd ones have been so great
and none of the great ones have been so odd
– Henry James

Robert Browning was born in 1812 as the son of Robert Browning Sr., a bank clerk, and Sarah Anne Wiedemann, his devoted and religious wife. He went to school from 1820 onwards, but left in 1826; from that moment on, tutors helped him develop his mental and physical abilities. His father owned a bulky library in which young Browning spent a lot of time reading, especially Homer and the Greek dramatists, who were among his favourite authors.

When the fourteen-year-old left school, his cousin supplied him with a book that would change his life. It contained poetry written by the romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. Browning became fascinated and deeply influenced by Shelley’s writings and philosophies, and expressed this idolatry for instance by declaring himself an atheist and a vegetarian.

Two years later, Browning attended classes in Latin, Greek and German at London University, but he abandoned those studies already in 1829.
In 1832 Browning wrote a long poem called “Pauline”, which he published anonymously one year later. “Pauline” was some kind of autobiography in a fictional frame. One could consider the poem to be a romantic one, because confession, or writing about oneself, was one of the favourite subjects of the romantic writers. This shows again the influence of Shelley on the then twenty-year-old poet. But the criticism uttered by John Stuart Mill made Browning swear never to reveal himself in a poem again. Instead he would write dramatic poetry, viz. poetry about characters other than himself. But apart from the critic mentioned above, almost no one had reviewed it and the poem disappeared from the literary scene. Several years later Browning published it again, only this time he included a disclaimer: he called it a “boyish work, lacking good draughtsmanship and right handling”.

In the following years Browning worked on one of the most difficult and obscure poems that has ever been written: “Sordello”. “Sordello” was his last Shelleyan work – Shelleyan in the sense that it is a long poem about a soul-tortured protagonist. Browning started to criticise and even reject his childhood idol Shelley and his ideas by alluding to the romantic poet. During the five years that he needed to complete “Sordello”, Browning published a poem, “Paracelsus”, and two plays, “Strafford” and “King Victor and King Charles”.

His first visit to Italy in 1838 had an enormous impact on his life and work; some of his poems were set in Italy for instance. In “De Gustibus”, part of his collection “Men and Women”, he describes his feelings for Italy beautifully:

Open my heart and you will see
Grav’d inside of it, “Italy.” (lines 43-44)

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13 Penguin i.3.
15 Robert Browning, “De Gustibus” (1855)
In 1840, when “Sordello” appeared, Browning published his work in a cheap paper version that he would call “Bells and Pomegranates”.\textsuperscript{16}

Browning published one play in 1842, and also one work of critical prose, viz. “Essay on Shelley”. But the most significant event that year was the publication of “Dramatic Lyrics”, which contains his best-known poems, among which “My Last Duchess”. Two years later he published one more play, but afterwards he never wrote for the stage again.\textsuperscript{17} Dramatic works that were meant to be performed on stage were ultimately not his cup of tea. He had a special talent for writing so-called dramatic monologues or – as Browning himself called them – dramatic lyrics\textsuperscript{18} which the Victorian poet would limit himself to.

Of course the general public knew and still knows Robert Browning better as a husband than as a poet. While Browning was more or less unknown to and unappreciated by the contemporary public, a female poet by the name of Elizabeth Barrett had already established herself as a great author of her time. In the beginning of the year 1845, she – six years older than him, sickly\textsuperscript{19}, and overprotected by her father\textsuperscript{20} – received a letter from Browning, in which he declared his love for her poetry and for herself, too. This letter was the start of a famous love story. Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett – who was almost forty years old by then – carried on an intense correspondence for over a year. In 1846 the poets secretly married and eloped to Italy. Three years later their only son, Robert Wiedemann Browning (whom they simply called “Pen”), was born.\textsuperscript{21}

In 1850 Browning finally started writing a new piece of poetry, “Christmas Eve and Easter Day”. It was the first poem he wrote after his marriage. Before that he had been publishing and revising his other work, especially under the influence of his wife’s ideas.\textsuperscript{22} Elizabeth read many of his poems before publication\textsuperscript{23} and he definitely wanted his wife to influence his poetry. Browning took her advice to heart and learnt much from her criticism\textsuperscript{24}; she urged him

\textsuperscript{17} John Woolford & Daniel Karlin, \textit{Robert Browning}, pp. 289-292.
\textsuperscript{18} See below p. 8.
\textsuperscript{22} John Woolford & Daniel Karlin, \textit{Robert Browning}, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{23} F.E. Halliday, \textit{Robert Browning – his life and work}, p. 73.
\textsuperscript{24} F.E. Halliday, \textit{Robert Browning – his life and work}, p. 45.
to work on the meaning, syntax and metre of his poems and he accepted all her suggestions. She also encouraged him to write dramatic poetry that was not meant to be performed on stage, because she was not very fond of the theatre in general.

Two years later he issued a publication with a collection of letters that were supposedly written by Shelley, together with an introductory essay which Browning himself had written.

After Elizabeth’s death in 1861 Browning left Florence never to return again: he decided to go back to London via France. One year later he collected and published “Last Poems”.

The following year Browning met Julia Wedgewood; the two met again a year later and started corresponding until 1865, when she broke off their friendship. Even though Browning never proposed to Wedgewood during their correspondence, it was the closest that he would ever get to a relationship after the death of his wife.

In the following years he published “Dramatis Personae” (1864), “The Ring and the Book” (1868) and “Fifine at the fair” (1872). The last volume was a failure and also caused the estrangement between him and his good friend and admirer Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

The following publication was “Dramatic Idyls” in 1879. Two years later, the Browning Society, founded by Furnivall and Hickey, had its first meeting in October. In ’82 and ’84 the poet received honorary degrees by the universities of Oxford and Edinburgh respectively.

Browning published his last volume, “Asolando”, in 1889, the year of his death.

As stated above, Browning was not the most popular poet in his age, especially not in his younger years. His fame grew after his wife’s death. In the twentieth century people started to appreciate Browning’s poetry again: the poet got admirers and influential supporters such as Ezra Pound.
B. The Dramatic Monologue

1. The Term “Dramatic Monologue”

Robert Browning became famous for developing a literary form that was rather new to English literature: the so-called dramatic monologue – although it was not the term that was originally used by Browning. Instead the Victorian poet used “dramatic lyrics” to denote his work. The adjective “dramatic” expressed the dramatic quality of the genre and emphasised the fact that the speaker is not the same person as the poet34; “lyrics” referred to the fact that it was still, above all, a poem. Browning himself described his poems to be “though for the most part lyric in expression, always dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine”.35

The term “dramatic monologue” was used for the first time by G.W. Thornbury in a collection of poems, which was published in 1857. The first person to apply the term to Browning’s poetry was William Stigand. Browning himself made a distinction between “dramatic lyrics” and “dramatic romance”: a dramatic lyric refers to an emotional or psychological state whereas a dramatic romance tells a story of action.36

2. Development

As stated above, Browning first wrote poetry, but from the late 1830s onwards he also wrote plays, which were unfortunately not successful. But his talent for writing was not lost. Instead he mixed up the two genres of drama and poetry and used all this knowledge and experience about plays in his poems, which resulted in the dramatic monologue. The use of pauses, dramatic irony, dramatic gesture and poise for instance – which are definitely dramatic qualities – were surely of some importance in his poetry.37

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Quoted in: Daniël Drappier, Robert Browning – The dramatic monologue, p. 3.
36 Culler, 366.
Quoted in: John Woolford & Daniel Karlin, Robert Browning, p. 38.
Some critics perceive the dramatic monologue as a reaction by the Victorians (especially Browning and Tennyson) against the romantic style of confessional poetry.\(^{38}\)

The romantic lyric can be seen as both subjective and objective: the poet talks about himself and about an object, and the two are closely related. The poet talks about himself by talking about an object; and he talks about an object by talking about himself.\(^{39}\) One could consider Browning to be a romantic, because he liked to write about the sensational, the macabre, and about madness. However, he was not an introvert at all. He did not write about his own life and mind, but explored the minds and motives of others. He was too much interested in drama and motif to write romantic poetry.\(^{40}\) His interest in his characters’ motives was more important to him than action, and that is why he did not become or was not considered to be a successful dramatist.\(^{41}\)

3. Characteristics

If one looks at dramatic monologues as first person narratives only, then the range of works might be overly extensive. One can also be too restrictive in one’s definition and only consider Browning’s and Tennyson’s poetry to be dramatic monologues. “My Last Duchess” would be the ideal and perfect example of such a dramatic monologue; every other poem could never even come close. This viewpoint also suggests a decline in quality since Browning’s age.\(^{42}\)

I will not try to give an exact definition of the poetic genre, but rather sum up its characteristics. I will especially refer to Langbaum’s work about the dramatic monologue.

Ezra Pound, a notable successor of Browning, said the following about his own poetry:

To me the *short* so-called dramatic lyric – at any rate the sort of thing I do – is the poetic part of a drama the rest of which (to me the prose part) is left to the reader’s imagination or implied or set in a short note. I catch the character I happen to be interested in at the moment he interests me, usually a moment

\(^{38}\) Robert Langbaum, *The Poetry of Experience*, p. 73.


of song, *self-analysis*, or sudden understanding or *revelation*. And the rest of the play would bore me and presumably the reader. (my italics)

What I emphasised in this quotation are some of the special characteristics of the dramatic monologue. First of all, the poem tends to be short, especially in comparison with dramatic works. Another feature is that the poem, like a play, begins *in medias res*.

According to the dissertation by Drappier the perfect dramatic monologue (e.g. “My Last Duchess”) has seven characteristics: there is a speaker, an audience, an occasion, interplay between speaker and audience, revelation of character, dramatic action, and the action is taking place in the present. Not all dramatic monologues have all these characteristics, but that does not mean one can consider them to be “bad” dramatic monologues just because not all of the requirements are fulfilled. A poem like “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister” is an imperfect dramatic monologue because it lacks one specific characteristic: the audience is not aware of what is being said. Nevertheless, it is considered to be a dramatic monologue.

The same dissertation makes an allusion to Fuson’s work, in which he says that the most important features of a dramatic monologue are objectivity and revelation. Objectivity refers to the fact that the speaker is a created character, who is in no way connected to the poet. That means there is no moral link between the speaker and the poet. Revelation is entirely in the hands of the speaker, who reveals the situation and scenery by means of his own words. This is done deliberately to ensure that the speaker would not be identified with the poet.

In what follows, some of the characteristics will be looked at more closely.

a. Topic and Characters

The monologue can be about any possible topic, for instance philosophy, religion, art, love, jealousy, adultery, life, death, etc. “Andrea del Sarto”, “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, “My Last Duchess” and “The Bishop Orders His Tomb at Saint Praxed’s Church” are all examples of the wide range of topics that Browning uses in his poetry. Browning expects his

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readers to be acquainted with every subject he writes about.\textsuperscript{48} The topics of Browning’s poetry often refer to problems that his contemporaries had to deal with: faith and doubt, good and evil, and the problematic function of the artist in modern life. His own view on these subjects is not very clear because he uses speakers who are not supposed to reflect his own ideas, and because those speakers are often placed in the past. Yet, there are of course specific ideas that occur in his poetry and that we can attribute to Browning himself.\textsuperscript{49}

Browning was especially interested in the development of the soul and what was going on inside his protagonists’ heads.\textsuperscript{50} The speakers in Browning’s work appear to be historical figures, who put their ruling passion before their sense of morality or humanity. Browning’s characters are often extremely possessive and obsessed lovers, who are dissatisfied with the whole situation that they are in.\textsuperscript{51} They take their stance and perform their actions – however immoral they may seem – out of their own free will.\textsuperscript{52} Browning focuses on evil in particular: many of his protagonists are villains (murderers, sadistic husbands, mean and petty manipulators etc.). Evil was one of his major interests; few writers have explored evil minds like he has. Or as Browning himself put it: “my stress lay on incidents in the development of a human soul, little else is worth study.”\textsuperscript{53} Browning was, like Dickens for instance, fascinated by egotism and the grotesque. Naturally, he insisted that his protagonists were invented characters, and that they had nothing to do with him as a person.\textsuperscript{54}

b. Speaker and listener

The dramatic monologue consists of a speaker and an audience. Through the words of the speaker the reader receives information about the protagonist, about the audience and about the scene. The reader adopts the point of view of the speaker from the beginning of the poem. He or she gets all the information from the speaker and he or she sees what the speaker sees, which makes it easier for the reader to identify him- or herself with the speaker, to explore his

\textsuperscript{48} Daniël Drappier, \textit{Robert Browning – The dramatic monologue}, p. 45.
\textsuperscript{50} John Woolford & Daniel Karlin (eds.), \textit{The Poems of Browning}, p. 361.
\textsuperscript{52} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{54} Michael Alexander, \textit{A History of English Literature}, pp. 265-266.
or her position in the poem and to try to understand him or her. This makes it possible to hide or limit the real moral truth.\textsuperscript{55} This identification is especially what happens in first-person narratives. The reader can view the speaker as unreliable, and hence the reader is able to put into perspective what the speaker is saying, or he or she can see the narrator as a reliable character, and thus accept and adopt his point of view. The last option is the more common one.\textsuperscript{56}

An important characteristic of the dramatic monologue is that the speaker never changes his mind. Even if it seems as if he will give in or change his position, this ultimately never happens. Or as Langbaum says, “it is only a bluff followed by a more daring assertion than ever of their original position.”\textsuperscript{57} Browning also lets the speaker negate his own argument or deny what he has said in the end.\textsuperscript{58}

The listener can have a passive or an active role in the poem. In “My Last Duchess” the duke clarifies that he is talking and that the listener should only listen to what is being said. In “The Laboratory” the auditor plays a small role in the utterances of the speaker. He makes suggestions and answers to the questions, but no more is allowed. Furthermore, the exact words of the auditor are not included in the actual text, but they are repeated by the speaker: the auditor does not get an actual voice. The listener does not necessarily have to be present in the monologue: he or she can be unaware of what the speaker is saying, like in “Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister”, or he or she can be dead, like in “Evelyn Hope”.

The fact that the reader can interpret the poem as autobiographical is more or less as important as the plot itself. The plot is about the self-development of an individual, so that the reader can identify him- or herself with that person. Because of this identification with the protagonist, the reader is involved in a similar kind of self-development; this is also true for the writer of the poem. They both project themselves into the poem: the writer does it in order

\textsuperscript{55} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, pp. 132-133.
\textsuperscript{57} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 147.
to communicate, the reader does the same in order to understand the events in the poem as an experience.  

c. Point of view: sympathy and judgement

The poet uses the past to achieve an extraordinary point of view. The dramatic monologue is the perfect instrument to present a historical viewpoint, because the reader understands the past in a similar way as he or she understands the speaker of the poem. Understanding the past means having sympathy for it, and a willingness to acknowledge that it is different from the present. It also implies that the reader looks at his or her own modernity with critical eyes. The reader tries to understand the speaker by sympathising with him, and by keeping his or her awareness of the moral judgement he or she has put aside to try and understand the speaker.

Because the dramatic monologue implies a combination of sympathy and judgement, the monologue makes it possible for the author to use all kinds of viewpoints, whether they seem to be immoral or not.

Langbaum defines sympathy as a way of knowing, which he calls “romantic projectiveness”, what the Germans call “Einfühlung”, or what psychologists call “empathy”. The dramatic monologue differs from other dramatic literature in the fact that the readers can only focus on the speaker, and hence they give the protagonist all their sympathy. But, as Langbaum states, “the difference is that we split off our sympathy from our moral judgment.”

Sympathy allows the reader to experience a wide range of emotions and to relate to the speakers’ point of view, but the reader can still keep some distance from the events. This is a typical feature of the dramatic monologue. The pursuit of experience is part of the distinct characteristics of this literary genre, or in Langbaum’s words, the genius of the form. Empiricism is basically the art of experiencing, reaching conclusions through experiences. This empiricism is characterised by its “desequilibrium” or imbalance between sympathy and judgement; it points out that the poem shows somebody’s experience of life or a particular perspective towards it.

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In Browning’s dramatic monologues there is a tension between sympathy and moral judgement. He enjoyed making a case for what seemed to be an immoral stance, and of course the ideal means to do that is the dramatic monologue. In order to read the poem, the reader needs to have sympathy for the speaker, who often has dubious motives.\footnote{Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 80.}

d. Language

Browning’s language is more colloquial and disharmonious than the language his contemporaries used. It can be related to John Donne’s poetry or Shakespeare’s soliloquies.\footnote{M.H. Abrams & Stephen Greenblatt (eds.), \textit{The Norton Anthology of English Literature}, p. 2024.} At first sight it is especially characterised by the amount of question marks, exclamation marks, inverted commas, hyphens, brackets and semicolons. A clear example can be found in “My Last Duchess”:

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Even had you skill
In speech – (which I have not) – to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark” – and if she let
Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse
- E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
never to stoop. (35-43)
```

4. Difference with other forms

Initially one could confuse Browning’s dramatic monologue with the soliloquy, but actually these two forms are very different. The difference between the two is the way in which the speaker reveals himself, and the fact that the speaker directs his attention outward. The soliloquist only talks about himself and has to take an objective position to see himself from a general perspective. He needs to describe himself like an outsider would, because he is trying to understand himself rationally. The soliloquist tries to relate his thoughts and feelings to general truths. Thus we get self-analysis and internal debate in the soliloquy. This does not
happen in the dramatic monologue: the narrator starts off with a fixed point of view and strategy; he will not try to be objective, but he will try to impress his audience by what he does and says. The meaning of the dramatic monologue is different from what the speaker reveals and understands.\textsuperscript{65}

The dramatic monologue and the dialogue in general have a similar style of address: each speaker is dealing with his or her own world and ideas and uses his or her own strategy. The resemblance lies in the indirect contact with the audience. They never address it directly and they never care to describe themselves truthfully, because that would benefit the audience. The characters are only concerned about the scene around them.\textsuperscript{66}

The dramatic monologue has only got one voice of a dialogue, and that is the reason why Langbaum calls the structure of the dramatic monologue incomplete. It does not have the completeness that one finds in a dialogue or a soliloquy: the poem never includes a second voice which conflicts with the main voice, and thus it never has a conclusion-like ending to it, or something that would close the argument. There is no logical completion to the poem, because that is impossible if there is only one voice present. Furthermore, the poem has no a real beginning or end. To clarify this statement I would like to refer to what I have said before, viz. that the poem begins \textit{in medias res}, which means that there is no introduction to the events or characters. The reader is thrown into the situation and has to learn all the information from the narrator. The purpose of this is that the reader gets a better insight into the life and experience of the speaker.\textsuperscript{67} There is also not a real ending to the poem: it has an “open” ending. There are many possible developments that could come about after the last line, which makes some incidents in the poem open to interpretation.

What is underground in real dramatic texts surfaces in the dramatic monologue. The fact that the reader has to deal with sympathy, which does not fit in drama, is the whole idea behind the dramatic monologue.\textsuperscript{68}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{65} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 141.  \\
\textsuperscript{66} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 151.  \\
\textsuperscript{67} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, pp. 152-153.  \\
\textsuperscript{68} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 176.
\end{flushleft}
5. Conclusion

Langbaum says that the dramatic monologue has an unfinished or incomplete structure, which is a sign that the poem contains a partial and problematic point of view. By allowing the literary work to establish its own moral judgements, one can read the dramatic monologue in the right way.69

The whole purpose of a dramatic monologue, according to Langbaum, is to present in their original concreteness or to evoke a person, an idea or a historical period. This is achieved by the particular perspective that is used in the poem, which causes the disequilibrium between sympathy and judgement.70 The perspective is the one of the speaker, through whose eyes the reader sees everything. The reader is encouraged to identify with the speaker and thus put aside his or her sense of justice.

The dramatic monologue suited Browning’s style and interests best; the speaker brings to life his own character, the characters around him or her, and the audience. “My Last Duchess” is one of the best poems he ever wrote; it is also the most famous and most perfect example of his dramatic monologues. It was definitely something new in English poetry, too. But Browning’s poems were not acknowledged or appreciated as they should have been, particularly in his earlier life.71

In this chapter I have given information about Browning’s life and works, and also about the literary form he became famous for: the dramatic monologue. This served as an introduction to the following chapters, in which the representation of gender in Browning’s work will be looked at.

71 F.E. Halliday, Robert Browning – his life and work, p. 57.
3. Gender in Browning’s Monologues

In the following chapter I will set out the actual topic of my dissertation, viz. the representation of gender in Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues. First of all I will explore the possible meanings of the term “gender”; then I will discuss its importance in the dramatic monologues I have chosen to analyse.

A. What is Gender?

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines “gender” in the following way:

1. the act of being male or female: issues of class, race and gender; gender differences / relations / roles
2. (grammar) (in some languages) each of the classes (MASCULINE, FEMININE and sometimes NEUTER) into which nouns, pronouns and adjectives are divided. Different genders may have different endings, etc.
3. (grammar) (in some languages) the division of nouns, pronouns and adjectives into different genders: In French the adjective must agree with the noun in number and gender.

Additional notes:
Ways of talking about men and women

The rest of this work will start from the first definition listed. Another current use of the term “gender” is the following:

Traditionally, gender has been used primarily to refer to the grammatical categories of “masculine”, “feminine” and “neuter”, but in recent years the word has become well established in its use to refer to sex-based categories, as in phrases such as gender gap and the politics of gender. This usage is supported by the practice of many anthropologists, who reserve sex for reference to biological categories, while using gender to refer to social or cultural categories. According to this rule, one would say The effectiveness of the medication appears to depend on the sex (not gender) of the patient, but In peasant societies, gender (not sex) roles are likely to be more clearly defined. This distinction is useful

in principle, but it is by no means widely observed, and considerable variation in usage occurs at all
levels.\textsuperscript{73}

Gilbert and Gubar also write about the meaning of “femininity” in relation to “femaleness”. “Feminine” and “masculine” represent social constructs, which are “patterns of sexuality and behaviour imposed by cultural and social norms”. “Male” and “female” are reserved for the “purely biological aspects of sexual difference”. Toril Moi explains:

thus ‘feminine’ represents nurture and ‘female’ nature in this usage. ‘Femininity’ is a cultural construct: one isn’t born a woman, one becomes one, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it. Seen in this perspective, patriarchal oppression consists of imposing certain social standards of femininity on all biological women, in order precisely to make us believe that the chosen standards for ‘femininity’ are natural.\textsuperscript{74}

In this dissertation in particular “gender” refers to the cultural implications of male and female characteristics, and the specific (and often problematic) relationship between men and women. In most poetry and stories there is a certain interaction between the two sexes, but obviously the importance of gender varies according to the text and the goals of the author.

Literary critics have always been fascinated by the gender relations and the development of the views on gender. The role of women in society, especially as a wife or lover, is of great importance in the so-called feminist readings. They look particularly at how the female character is portrayed and what kind of attitude the man has towards her. Male and female feminist critics look at the poem or story from the woman’s perspective, and in particular at the way in which she is portrayed and possibly degraded. When the woman is discredited, the critics sometimes accuse the author of being a misogynist, although this is not always the case. In her book about sexual and textual politics Toril Moi declares that the feminist critic is a radical one and that “the feminist critic can be seen as the product of a struggle mainly concerned with social and political change; her specific role within it becomes an attempt to extend such general political action to the cultural domain.”\textsuperscript{75}

Moi also refers to Elaine Showalter, who wrote about feminist criticism at the end of the seventies. In the introduction of her book she states that “Showalter examines the oppression of women’s potential by the relentless sexism of patriarchal society.” Showalter distinguished

\textsuperscript{74} Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics – Feminist Literary Theory (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 65.
\textsuperscript{75} Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, p. 23.
two types of feminist criticism, viz. “feminist critique” and “gynocritics”. “Feminist critique” deals with works by male authors, and Showalter states that this form of criticism is a ‘historically grounded inquiry which probes the ideological assumptions of literary phenomena’.”76

Subsequently, Showalter avers the following:

One of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be. […] ‘Gynocritics’ (the study of women’s writings) frees itself from pandering to male values and seeks to ‘focus… on the newly visible world of female culture’. 77

In most of Browning’s work gender takes up a central position. The title of one of Browning’s books, “Men and Women”, specifically refers to the representation of gender relations in his poetry. But the title is somewhat misleading, because the majority of Browning’s poems have a male speaker and a male point of view. Women appear only in the speech of the male protagonist or as a silent listener. The title suggests equality of the sexes by using the coordinating conjunction “and”, but the distinction between “men” and “women” is made when “men” is mentioned first. The way it actually should be written is “Men – and Women.” This means that men are more in the picture than women: their point of view is stressed as the most important one. Women do not get a voice, although the title hints at a certain equality between both sexes. Women do not have the same prestige as men and that is why the title is more or less deceiving: men and women are not considered as equals.78 This can serve as a signal for the reader that women will not be given an equal position. This signal is not only in the title of this collection, but it occurs in Browning’s poetry in general.

The subordinate position of women was an important issue in the Victorian age and it was also represented in poetry and literature in general. Furthermore, the monologues – and not only those in “Men and Women” – cleverly combine two features which seem to be incompatible: sophistication and intellect; and lust and (the desire for) power.79 These features are associated with men and masculine characteristics.

**B. Browning’s monologues**

Our interest’s on the dangerous edge of things.

The honest thief, the tender murderer,

The superstitious atheist[^80]  

As stated in the first chapter, Browning’s most famous characters are villains, especially in the form of erratic and passionate husbands. The best-known pieces of poetry that Browning wrote are about problems in the love life of the ill-natured protagonist; the themes addressed are adultery, the ultimate possession of the lover, jealousy, etc.

Browning enjoyed writing about these kinds of characters and he loved to explore their evil minds and reasoning. As far as we know, that was the only reason why he wrote about this. His own life and especially his love life had been very harmonious and intense. Browning and Elizabeth Barrett seemed very happy during the years of their correspondence, their marriage and elopement to Italy and the years they spent there together. In all the texts and biographies written about the Brownings I have never encountered as much as a hint that pointed to possible marital misfortune or problems. Also the relation with his parents and family was very good: Sarah Wiedemann took care of her children very well and the family was very close. Browning’s parents were very supportive and gave their children every possibility for a good education.[^81]

I chose the quotation, which was uttered by Browning himself, because it can refer to Browning’s protagonists. The interest is “on the dangerous edge of things”, which means that he will explore unusual, shocking subjects and actions, like murder. “The honest thief” reminds me of Andrea del Sarto and “the tender murderer” refers to Porphyria’s lover, but this will explain itself later in the analyses.

In the following parts in this chapter I will focus on “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” in particular, because those are Browning’s most famous poems. The other dramatic

[^80]: Robert Browning, “Bishop Blougram’s Apology” (1855), lines 395-397.  
[^81]: Monica Fuller, “Robert Browning”. (17/12/2001)  
monologues that I will have a look at are “Andrea Del Sarto”, “Count Gismond”, “The Laboratory” and “Evelyn Hope”.

C. “Porphyria’s Lover”

For him [Edgar Allan Poe],
the “most poetical topic in the world”
was the death of a beautiful woman.  

“Porphyria’s Lover” was originally part of a collection of two poems together with “Johannes Agricola in Meditation” which was called “Madhouse Cells”. It is likely that Browning took that name with a purpose, viz. to signal to the reader what state the protagonist is in. Later he dropped the title.

The story itself is quite disturbing for a reader who expects to read an ordinary love story. The poem contains more than just that; it also refers to class differences and the dilemma of whether or not to give that up. The man is clearly in a lesser position than the woman, because he is sitting in a simple cottage, waiting for her to return from a party. He does not expect her to come back, but she does return to him. Porphyria does not tell him she will give up her privileges (“vainer ties” (line 24): Porphyria is attached to her class) for him, or that she will turn her back on her class. She is faced with a dilemma and prefers not to choose between the two (“struggling passion” (line 23): she keeps on struggling with the choice between her class and her lover). To divert his attention from this dilemma and to soften his heart, she shows her affection for him by putting his arm around her waist and resting his head on her bare shoulder.

According to Slinn, there is plenty of evidence in Victorian writing to suggest that class difference was a source of erotic fantasising for men, presumably because it supported their

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82 Robert Browning, “Porphyria’s Lover” (1836)
illusion of superior power. Because Porphyria has a better position than him, his pride may be hurt. The lover does not seem too happy when she comes in: he refuses to answer her, to embrace her or to kiss her. His ego may be hurt because she went to an upper-class party, where he would not be welcome.

Another possible interpretation of “vainer ties” (line 24) is that the man is not Porphyria’s only lover; in other words: Porphyria is unfaithful to him. This could also be the reason of the lover being hurt. If one sticks to the reasoning that Porphyria has different lovers, then she could be seen as the sexual property of somebody else, even though she wants something different: a true relationship with her true lover. The speaker uses the words “give herself to me forever” (line 25).

Furthermore, the fact that she does not give him enough attention to his liking plays a role, and this will be a theme in “My Last Duchess”, too. The desire of the man to possess his lover probably has to do with the fact that he is more depending on her than she on him, although she shows that she loves him. She seems to understand those feelings and tries to show her affection. By doing this she signs her own death-warrant. The change in his mind occurs when she looks up to him and he realises that she worships him. He wants to preserve the moment and her love for him by strangling her with her own hair.

The lover is the speaker in the poem: he describes the stormy situation outside, then Porphyria when she enters the cottage, and his actions. There is not an audience in the poem itself: he does not address the only person who is present, viz. Porphyria. He speaks in her name and gives an account of the situation; there is no audience like in “My Last Duchess” or “Andrea del Sarto”. He explains his thoughts and reasoning to the reader, which are clearly not those of a sane person. Of course the reader realises that he or she is dealing with an unreliable and a mad speaker; the reference to his madness could already be found in the title of the collection, “Madhouse Cells”.

Porphyria’s lover is a famous example of a Browning character that is mad. He turns his lady into an object that he wants to control, that he uses for his own good, without caring for her

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Quoted from: Mort 83; McClintock 132-80.

feelings or life. The woman lays her life into his hands, trusting him. The speaker does not mention any struggle or resistance when he puts her hair around her neck and tightens it. Of course the speaker is an unreliable one; she may have resisted him, but she was in a vulnerable position and she was unable to go against the force of her lover. The speaker insists on the indifference and unfaithfulness of his lover, but the reader can immediately put this into perspective because he or she notices how Porphyria behaves in the poem. She acts like a very loyal and considerate person, and hence the accusations and suspicions of her lover seem unfair and unfounded.

No person in his right mind would have wanted to keep everything the way it is by killing the woman that he loves. That way her beauty will not fade and her love for him will not change.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: (lines 36-37)

The speaker has found “a solution” for his problem: keeping their love untouched and untroubled by other people or the difference in class. The only way to solve the problem of the speaker – how does he have to deal with this situation? – is to kill his beloved Porphyria. The speaker is too selfish to consider other solutions that might harm himself, for instance by killing himself instead of her (even though this would be a very drastic solution as well). It is highly improbable that Porphyria wanted to die. The man only thinks of what he wants and not what she wants – although he states that it was her own will to be killed this way and that he merely granted her wish.

The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,
And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria’s love: she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard. (lines 52-57)

88 G.P. Landow, “Porphyria’s Lover”.
He shows lack of empathy, the inability to feel compassion for another or to place himself in another person’s perspective: “No pain felt she” (line 41). Then he nuances his words a little bit, because after all he cannot feel what she felt: “I am quite sure she felt no pain.” (line 42) Also, the man does not seem to understand the implications of his actions. The strangled woman seems to be still alive to him: he opens her eyes to look at them and lays her head on his shoulder. He feels glad to know that everything is perfect now. The imagery he uses to describe the dead body is striking:

As a shut bud that holds a bee,  
I warily oped her lids: again  
Laughed the blue eyes without a stain. (lines 43-45)

The “shut bud” is a metaphor for her eyelids, and her eyes are compared to a bee, a living creature. This implies that he still thinks she is alive. In the next line there is a personification of the eyes: eyes are not able to laugh, and furthermore, they are not alive any longer. He also makes it seem as if she were alive:

And thus we sit together now,  
And all night long we have not stirred, (lines 58-59)

He seems to be in denial about putting an end to a life: his words make it seem as if she is blushing because he kisses her, but in fact it is because of the strangling:

[…] Her cheek once more  
blushed bright beneath my burning kiss: (lines 47-48)

At the beginning of my analysis of “Porphyria’s Lover” I included a quote by Edgar Allan Poe, which will come back later in this dissertation. He calls the death of a beautiful woman the most poetic topic in the world. In “Porphyria’s Lover” the death of Porphyria is indeed described as something beautiful. The lover does not mention any negative aspects of death and thinks of his actions as something good and even beautiful. It seems as if Porphyria is more beautiful than ever when she has been killed. Dead bodies are a common motif in Victorian literature – think of the Lady of Shalott in Tennyson’s homonymic masterpiece for one. The body of the lady is described, floating on the river towards Camelot. The dead woman is almost glorified:
With a glassy countenance
Did she look to Camelot.

[...]  
Lying, robed in snowy white  
That loosely flew to left and right –  
The leaves upon her falling light –  
Through the noises of the night  
She floated down to Camelot.

[...]  
A gleaming shape she floated by,  
Dead-pale between the houses high,  
Silent into Camelot. (lines 130-158)\(^{90}\)

The same happens in “Porphyria’s Lover”: the speaker describes her as much more content (“the smiling rosy little head”, “laughed the blue eyes”) and beautiful.

Maybe he also feels better because he has power over her; now that she is dead she can no longer choose for her class. He can also guide her head to rest on his shoulder, whereas she laid his arm around her when she was alive. It gives him a feeling of control and possession:

\[
\begin{align*}
I\ \text{propped her head up as before,} \\
\text{Only, this time my shoulder bore} \\
\text{Her head, which droops upon it still:} \\
The\ \text{smiling rosy little head,} \\
\text{So glad it has its utmost will, (lines 49-53)}
\end{align*}
\]

Although the woman is in a socially stronger position than the man, the man is physically stronger. She is not able to make a choice between him and her social position, so he makes this choice for her. He calls her weak, because she does not have the strength to choose between him and her class:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{She} \\
\text{Too weak, for all her heart’s endeavour,} \\
\text{To set its struggling passion free (lines 21-23)}
\end{align*}
\]

It seems as if he is emotionally stronger than she is, but his actions show him to be emotionally very unstable. He turns from indifference and insecurity to a confident and wilful personality in a matter of minutes and sentences. The change happens when he realises that Porphyria is his possession, because that is what the words imply:

Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me: surprise
Made my heart swell […]
That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good (lines 31-47)

These last two lines explain his desire to possess Porphyria completely and the way she is at that moment in time: a beautiful, young virgin. The observation of that desire leads to his wish of killing her: he wants to preserve her body and her love for him.91 To him, the loss of her virginity seems a lot worse than the loss of her life. If she keeps on living, she will eventually lose her beauty, purity and virginity. He sees no other way than to kill her and he does this by strangling her with her own hair: he does not want to damage her skin or shed her blood. The strangling of his lover also adds to a certain erotic tension. In her article about “Porphyria’s Lover” Catherine Ross even suggests the possibility of erotic asphyxiation.92 This dangerous sexual game could also have been described in the poem. Moreover, he calls her “mine”: it is as if he is “possessing” her like a man could possess a woman when they are making love. Therefore, Porphyria’s virginity is a matter of interpretation.

The protagonist feels important and he wants the woman to obey him in whatever he wants her to do. Like the lady of Shalott, Porphyria is a victim of a male dominated world.93 The actions of her lover are a symbol for the oppression of women in a sexual and social way. Porphyria is clearly a woman who has sexual and affectional needs: she takes the initiative by calling his name. When he does not answer or embrace her, it is she who puts his arm around her waist.94

91 Catherine Ross, Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”, Explicator, winter 2002, 60 (2), 68 – 72.
92 “What if Browning wanted to titillate his readers with the possibility that instead of murdering Porphyria, the narrator has made love to her using erotic asphyxiation, a well-documented but dangerous sex game in which participants use some type of mechanism to impede the flow of oxygen to the brain in order to heighten sexual pleasure?” Catherine Ross, Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”, 2002.
94 Catherine Ross, Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”, 2002.
Objectively seen, “Porphyria’s Lover” is a poem which can be understood without great difficulty: it is an intelligible story with a lively account of the power relations and madness. Important about this is that in this poem there is a construction of events, which affects the lives of the characters. The ones that have committed the crime (or thought about committing the crime) are portrayed as innocent, while the real innocent victims are represented as “guilty”.95 The protagonist always has some way of justifying his actions: the lover kills Porphyria because she wanted him to, and because she and her beauty would eventually wither. This argumentation is nevertheless flawed: her body will decay much faster now, and her love is gone forever. Only an empty body remains, and the thought that he possessed her once.

“Porphyria’s Lover” seems to be a narrative in which all events take place in a perfectly chronological order, but at the end there is a hint that it might not be that: “And thus we sit together now” (line 58). It is almost as if nothing has really happened, which makes the poem open to interpretation. The events could be real and the murder could actually have taken place. But it could also be seen as a fantasy or a delusion that cropped up in the mind of the speaker. In this way the character could be seen as schizophrenic. People who are schizophrenic often suffer terrifying symptoms such as hearing internal voices not heard by others, or believing that other people are reading their minds, controlling their thoughts, or plotting to harm them. These symptoms may leave them fearful and withdrawn. Their speech and behaviour can be so disorganised that they may be incomprehensible or frightening to others. […] “Psychosis,” a common condition in schizophrenia, is a state of mental impairment marked by hallucinations, which are disturbances of sensory perception, and/or delusions, which are false yet strongly held personal beliefs that result from an inability to separate real from unreal experiences. Less obvious symptoms, such as social isolation or withdrawal, or unusual speech, thinking, or behavior, may precede, be seen along with, or follow the psychotic symptoms.96 (my italics)

What I have quoted here can be applied to the character of the lover, because the murder could very well be a hallucination.

95 Isobel Armstrong, Victorian Poetry, p. 149.
96 M.K. Spearing, Overview of Schizophrenia (National Institute of Mental Health (NIH), Publication No. 02-3517, 1999)
Armstrong says that Browning’s protagonists “invent an illusory temporality which is quite dependent of historical time.” She also states that God cannot have intervened in the action that was taking place because it was just a product of the speaker’s mind. According to Armstrong, the characters read themselves obsessively. If the poems can be seen as merely products of the mind of the speakers, then they suppress the fact that they are being read or “heard” by anyone.

The theme of “Porphyria’s Lover” can also be found in another of Robert Browning’s dramatic monologues, viz. “My Last Duchess”.

**D. “My Last Duchess”**

Such ever was love's way; to rise, it stoops. …and I choose never to stoop.

In “My Last Duchess” the murder of the woman does not happen in the poem and has not even been told explicitly: it has already happened. In this dramatic monologue the listener is not the main female character (because she is dead), but a male servant. Hence there is no real interaction between a man and a woman.

The events described in the dramatic monologue are the following: the duke of Ferrara receives an envoy of a powerful man, who has a marriageable daughter. In his private quarters the duke reveals a painting of his late wife, his “last duchess”. Uncovering that painting is something that only the duke can do: the painting is hidden behind a curtain and he is the only

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97 Isobel Armstrong, Victorian Poetry, p. 141.
98 Isobel Armstrong, Victorian Poetry, p. 141.
99 Catherine Ross, Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”, 2002.
100 Robert Browning, “My Last Duchess” (1842)
101 Robert Browning, “A Death in the Desert” (1864) line 134.
one who can decide about who is allowed to see the painting and who is not. He explains to his guest what happened to her: she smiled and blushed too much at other men, as if she did not appreciate his kindness to her enough.

My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace — all and each
Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men, — good! but thanked
Somehow — I know not how — as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody's gift. (lines 26-34)

Because of this “disrespectful” behaviour measures had been taken, and the duke is now searching for a new wife.

Again, the man has ended his wife’s life, because she did not act the way he wanted her to act. In this case the duchess was too kind to other men and smiled at them, and hence he felt he did not possess her completely. This situation was intolerable for the duke, and the only honourable way out was to let his wife be eliminated.

Oh sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene'er I passed her; but who passed without
Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. (lines 43-46)

The situation seems ludicrous to the reader, because smiling at people does not seem a good enough reason to be killed. This is a clear indication to the reader that the narrator is mad, and thus unreliable.¹⁰³

The portrayal of the duchess in the duke’s words is also an important part of the poem, but the main goal of “My Last Duchess” is the exploration of the mind of the speaker. The description of the duchess makes clear that the duke is obviously not in his right mind.

does not gain any self-knowledge by the end of the poem: he blames others for their mistakes to disguise his own. The duke avoids self-examination and refuses to look at his faults, or even admit that he has faults. The painting of the duchess portrays her as a sweet and innocent young woman, which contrasts with the personality of her husband. The duke likes to exhibit his power to the envoy, who of course will have to tell his master what kind of person his future son-in-law is. The duke also tells the story because he expects the emissary to inform the woman – who is the desired objective – and her father about the expected behaviour she will have to display as his wife. What is expected of her is total deference towards him; he also mentions the things that hurt his pride. The bride-to-be should avoid hurting his pride at all costs if she does not want to suffer the same fate as the late duchess. He reveals his own personality by talking and consequently “the image of an over-zealous, over-possessive collector emerges.”

The only emotion the duke shows is anger because of his late wife’s behaviour, and this does not lead to self-reflection or gained self-knowledge. His taste in art emphasises his evil persona, because the “suggestion of high culture derives a theatrical quality from the insane murder of his wife.” His sophisticated nature contrasts sharply with his madness.

At the end there is a striking image of Neptune, the Roman god of the sea, taming a sea-horse, which is a symbol for the woman who is being objectified and controlled. Neptune of course stands for the duke. This image serves as a warning for the next duchess: the duke shows the envoy that his next wife has to obey him and that he will not tolerate “loose” behaviour. The desire of the man to possess or objectify the woman is clearly present here, just like in “Porphyria’s Lover.”

The painting of his late wife is actually more suitable for him than a real wife, because it cannot make him feel degraded in any way. It turns the duchess into an object; she becomes something which he can dominate completely and which will not embarrass or upset him. His life is care-free with only the painting in his life, but still he needs a wife. The duke seeks happiness in the ideal marriage, but it does not go as planned.

What Browning is doing in “My Last Duchess” is making a case for an immoral position. The dramatic monologue is the perfect instrument for this, because of the tension between

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104 Guozhi Chen, Male Identity in Browning’s Poetry.
105 Guozhi Chen, Male Identity in Browning’s Poetry.
106 Guozhi Chen, Male Identity in Browning’s Poetry.
107 Guozhi Chen, Male Identity in Browning’s Poetry.
sympathy and moral judgement.\textsuperscript{108} Those immoral positions are an act of free will of the characters.\textsuperscript{109} The fact that there is a split between moral judgement and sympathy allows the reader to read the poem from the point of view of the speaker, and even sympathise with him or her, but the reader does not have to adopt that point of view or to agree with it.\textsuperscript{110}

What is special about the character of the duke is that he is attractive to the reader. Langbaum explains this:

> What interests us more than the duke’s wickedness is his immense attractiveness. His conviction of matchless superiority, his intelligence and bland immorality, his poise, his taste for art, his manners – high-handed aristocratic manners that break the ordinary rules and assert the duke’s superiority when he is being most solicitous of the envoy, waiving their difference of rank […] The reader is no less overwhelmed. We suspend moral judgment because we prefer to participate in the duke’s power and freedom, in this hard core of character fiercely loyal to itself. Moral judgment is in fact important as the thing to be suspended, as a measure of the price we pay for the privilege of appreciating to the full this extraordinary man.\textsuperscript{111}

So one could conclude that the duke is a character the reader prefers to identify him- or herself with, because he is such a refined, powerful man, even though he is not that refined morally.

The fact that the duke is actually speaking to the envoy is emphasised by the parts in the speech where he interrupts himself, when he is looking for the right expression.\textsuperscript{112} This makes it clear that he is in a conversation – even though it is one-sided – and that it does not take place in his mind. He does not let the listener intrude in his speech: he reminds the envoy constantly that he controls everything and that he is the one who is in authority.

“My Last Duchess” is considered to be “the” perfect dramatic monologue. It comprises all seven characteristics that were listed in Drappier’s dissertation: the speaker is the notorious duke; the audience consists of one man, the envoy of the father of the possible next duchess; there is an occasion; there is a certain interaction between speaker and audience, although it is extremely one-sided; the main character reveals himself and his personality by his peculiar

\textsuperscript{108} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 80.
\textsuperscript{109} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 81.
\textsuperscript{110} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, p. 100.
\textsuperscript{111} Robert Langbaum, \textit{The Poetry of Experience}, pp. 76-77.
\textsuperscript{112} Guozhi Chen, \textit{Male Identity in Browning’s Poetry}. See also p. 15.
recital; there is dramatic action; and finally, the action is taking place in the present. Like “Porphyria’s Lover”, it is a very interesting poem to analyse. Especially the use of the mad protagonists makes them remarkable, if not unique poems. These two dramatic monologues are definitely a must for everyone who wants to read Robert Browning.

E. “Andrea Del Sarto”

Inscribe all human effort with one word,  
Artistry’s haunting curse, the Incomplete!

“Andrea del Sarto” is a dramatic monologue about a painter of the Renaissance period. This is not a subject that he only took up once: Browning wrote many more poems about artists, e.g. “Fra Lippo Lippi”, “Pictor Ignotus”, “Beatrice Signorini” and “Parleying with Francis Furini”. Andrea del Sarto is not a fictitious character, but an actual person who was a painter during that art movement. His paintings often depicted religious scenes, especially the Virgin Mary. The Italian came to serve the king of France as court painter, but after some time he left France never to return again. He had kept the money which he was supposed to buy paintings with, and spent all of it on a house and on his wife, Lucrezia.

The poem is a long monologue addressed to Lucrezia, who does not pay attention to what he is trying to tell her. Instead, she waits for her lover to show up. Del Sarto probably knows about her affair, although he calls the man her “cousin”; he even urges her to go to him. In his monologue he particularly talks about his past achievements and his painting skills: he states that he is the better painter when compared to Michelangelo – whom he calls “Michel Agnolo” in the poem – and Rafael. But in contrast to the Italian masters, he cannot put anything special in his paintings. Browning insists that being a master in painting not only

113 Daniël Drappier, Robert Browning – The dramatic monologue, p. 13.
114 Robert Browning, “Andrea del Sarto” (1855)
Ian Lancashire, Andrea del Sarto (Toronto: University of Toronto, Department of English, 2005)
requires the technical skills, but also the ability to put something more into it. Del Sarto lacks the spiritual power that Rafael and Michelangelo had.\(^{116}\)

There burns a truer light of God in them,
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate'er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman's hand of mine. (lines 74-77)

In a way it is Lucrezia who limits his painting and his inspiration. She acts as his model:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{you must serve} \\
\text{For each of the five pictures we require:} \\
\text{It saves a model. (lines 23-25)}
\end{align*}
\]

When he paints the Virgin Mary for instance, he always gives her Lucrezia’s face. Because of her he is not able to improve his paintings or invest “soul” into them. Instead, she takes away his creativity because he only looks at her for inspiration. She takes up all his attention so that he cannot turn to something else and thus he is not able to put more variation in his paintings. The protagonist is troubled by Lucrezia’s superficial thoughts, and cannot relate her physical beauty to her narrow mind. He thinks that if she would care more for him and his work, he would be able to make masterpieces. He wants her to make him complete as a person and as an artist, but she has failed in doing that. Byecroft states that del Sarto directly accuses her of robbing him of his artistic potential and success.\(^{117}\)

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,} \\
\text{We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!} \\
\text{Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think —} \\
\text{More than I merit, yes, many times.} \\
\text{But had you — oh with the same perfect brow,} \\
\text{And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,} \\
\text{And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird} \\
\text{The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare —} \\
\text{Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind! (lines 116-126)}
\end{align*}
\]


Lucrezia is to blame for leaving France, where her husband had a good position at the court, and for stealing the king’s money. Because of her action he feels like a criminal, but still he emphasises it is part of the past: he is trying to forgive her.

A good time, was it not, my kingly days?
And had you not grown restless... but I know--
’Tis done and past (lines 160-162)

He cannot devote himself to his profession completely, because he has his wife to look after. Lucrezia is a very spoilt woman; del Sarto gives her everything she desires. He even pays for her debts:

I’ll work then for your friend’s friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?
Oh, I’ll content him.--but to-morrow, Love! (lines 5-10)

Andrea del Sarto is absorbed by his own perspective, and seems both “heroic and pathetic when he makes that final gesture of surrender: ‘the Cousin’s whistle! Go, my Love’.”¹¹⁸ Langbaum calls this “attractive” yet again, and he explains:

but intent as he is on his strategy of self-justification, and without introducing any other perspective – indeed, because he is so absorbed in his own perspective – he yet reveals himself as more contemptible and yet, as in a way more attractive too (his absorption is attractive, it is a pole for sympathy) than he is aware.¹¹⁹

I believe it is rather compassion that the reader will feel for Andrea del Sarto, which is some kind of sympathy on the part of the reader.
The protagonist here is a failed hero and artist, who shows a great deal of self-pity. He tried to develop his painting in a superior way, but he lost his inspiration in the process. His paintings only serve to pay for his wife’s excessive expenses, her craving for luxury. He tries to vindicate his actions and the fact that he degraded his art for his wife. He does not live for his

work anymore, but for his wife. Andrea del Sarto is indecisive and vulnerable, which makes us empathise with him, and feel intimate with him. He pretends to suffer only because of his wife and the relationship that they have. In reality, del Sarto is unable to accept his own failures. Because he has not consciously embraced the things he has done in the past, he cannot deceive his audience: in order to be able to lie, one has to know what the truth is. In his speech he deceives himself and he tries to hide the fact that he still feels guilty for stealing the money that king Francis of France had given to him. He tries to justify his actions by saying that he did everything for Lucrezia. He is not deceiving his audience, but he is hiding the truth from himself. Shaw says the following about this situation: “though a lie posits the duality of deceiver and deceived, bad faith implies the unity of a single consciousness. [...] Andrea del Sarto lies to himself. In bad faith the deceiver and the dupe are one and the same person.”

Shaw also refers to Jean-Paul Sartre’s definition of being in bad faith: I “must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me in my capacity as the one deceived… Better yet I must know the truth very exactly in order to conceal it more carefully.” Del Sarto is in other words a man who unconsciously deceives himself; he lies to himself in a cynical way and that is the reason why he fails to deceive his audience. The only victim he makes by doing this is himself.

Throughout the poem the Italian painter talks about his wife and his need to have her. Lucrezia shows no interest in his artistic achievements and worries at all. She prefers to profit from his money and to love another man at the same time; her husband does not seem to have any objections to this. At the beginning of “Andrea del Sarto” he suggests they should sit together hand in hand, which would make him feel younger and give him inspiration. This does happen throughout the entire poem, and yet she makes him lose confidence in himself by not paying attention to her husband’s words. He says that she does not understand him:

You don't understand
Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak: (lines 54-56)

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120 P.V. Allingham, Robert Browning’s “Andrea del Sarto”.
Quoted in: W.D. Shaw, Masks of the Unconscious, pp.439-460.
123 W.D. Shaw, Masks of the Unconscious, pp. 439-460.
Throughout the whole poem Andrea keeps on talking to Lucrezia, but she refuses to pay him any attention. It appears as though he is talking to himself to find an excuse for his theft. He says he did it all for her and she does not appreciate it or respect him for it.\textsuperscript{124}

At the end of the poem he tells her that she should show some interest in what he does, because these activities make her better financially. Lucrezia only considers him as her husband and not as a successful artist or something else that might be dear to her. To Andrea the domestic life is as important as his art, but Lucrezia has respect for neither of those. She is unfaithful to him and thus makes clear that she is not happy with her life as his wife; and even if she serves as his muse, as the model for her husband’s paintings, she does not appreciate it. Neither of the things that Andrea thinks are important mean anything to her, even though she is part of both their marriage and his paintings. He tries to convince her to reconsider her feelings, and give him another chance. But in the end he tells her to go to her lover, who is waiting for her outside.\textsuperscript{125}

Unlike the poems discussed before, “Andrea del Sarto” does not objectify the female presence – although he makes objects of her: he puts her as an image in his paintings – nor does the protagonist possess the woman. He wants her female passive character to have respect for what he has done for her: he stole money from the French king for her (or he claims at least he did it for her; he could be looking for an excuse). He paints to please Lucrezia and to be able to offer her a comfortable life.

The guilt he suffers from appears at the end of the poem in the form of a hallucination: Lucrezia’s golden hair turns into the golden bricks which he has stolen from King Francis.

King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights
When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
The walls become illumined, brick from brick
Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,
That gold of his I did cement them with! (lines 214-218)

He tried to justify his actions by more or less blaming his wife for it so he would feel less guilty. Instead, Lucrezia becomes his superego and conscience. She knows about his shame


\textsuperscript{125} Abigail Newman, \textit{Inspiration and Unrequited Love in Browning’s “Andrea del Sarto”}. 

39
and humiliation but it seems as if she does not care. He tries to impose his will on her at the end, by telling her to go to her lover, but there is no need for that: she wanted to go anyway. He has got no control over her and making her the scapegoat makes his guilt even worse. After all, he has done so much for her and she means so much to him, and yet she does not care. Andrea del Sarto loses the traditional patriarchal power: he has no authority over his wife. The male figure also fails in the domestic sphere; he cannot even keep his wife to himself. On the contrary, he even tells her to go to the man he calls her “cousin”, even though he knows it is her lover.

This poem stands in contrast to the previous two dramatic monologues I have discussed. Porphyria’s lover and the duke do have power over their wives or lovers and show that power by killing them at the end. Andrea del Sarto has no power. Even though he is a skilful artist, he is not able to produce paintings at the level of other Italian masters. Unlike Browning’s other protagonists, del Sarto does not appear to be mad; yet he suffers from an enormous feeling of guilt, which the duke and the lover do not know or have not experienced, even if they committed crimes that were worse than del Sarto’s theft. The women that are portrayed in the poems are also very different. While Porphyria and the duchess seem like two very kind, loving women, Lucrezia comes across as selfish, greedy, superficial, and not capable of loving. The protagonists in the first two poems suspect their lovers to be unfaithful, and react in an extremely jealous way; del Sarto on the other hand knows that Lucrezia is unfaithful, but acts as if he is undisturbed by it.

F. “Count Gismond”

This poem is not as well-known as the other three I have discussed already, and it is also placed in a different setting. “My Last Duchess” and “Andrea del Sarto” are poems that most

126 W.D. Shaw, Masks of the Unconscious, pp. 439-460.
128 Robert Browning, “Count Gismond” (1842)
Ian Lancashire, Count Gismond – Aix in Provence (Toronto: University of Toronto, Department of English, 2005)
likely were set in Italy. “Count Gismond” takes place in the Middle Ages, in Aix in Provence, France.

I will first give some background information about the situation of girls and young women in the aristocracy or upper classes in the Middle Ages.

The main goal in a young woman’s life was marriage: it gave a woman status and responsibilities. She was expected to get married at an early age and to give her husband heirs. It believed that girls had a weaker intellect than boys, which was why they would fall into sin easier. Therefore, the girls were watched closely because their virginity needed to be preserved; a girl needed to be chaste. That is why everyone is so shocked when Gauthier claims to have slept with the queen, who is not yet married. Before a girl was married she was referred to as “virgo” or “puella”, Latin for “virgin” and “girl”. Once the girl was officially married – and especially after the consummation of the marriage – the girl would be called a woman. Girls, who were engaged in a sexual relationship before they were married, could also have a change of “title”, but this did not always happen. In courtly romances for instance, girls might have sexual relations with knights, and yet they would still be considered a “pucelle” or “girl”. Still, it was very undesirable for a girl to have a reputation of being deflowered, and this might ruin her further life. After all she was destined to marry somebody and be a wife.

The age on which girls were officially marriageable was very young. This was especially the case in royal circles: the minimum age was considered to be eleven years old. Men on the hand were usually a lot older when they got married, which resulted in a huge age gap. So it is possible that the female speaker of this poem is approximately twelve years old. Of course we cannot derive it from the text, but it is likely to be this way. What we do know about her is that it is her birthday, that her parents are dead, and that she is probably a wealthy heiress.

Because most girls got married before puberty had started, which occurred roughly at the age of ten to thirteen, there was some kind of “developmental phase”, in which the girls were prepared for marriage. It was normal that the actual consummation would only come when a few years had passed, when the “woman” was ready to have intercourse. In the meantime they would get special supervision and education. The young spouse had to be prepared for her


new life and everything that was expected of her (social obligations, the sexual side of her marriage, freedom from supervision, control over the household and also participation in government over the property). How long this period lasted depended on the woman and also on the status of the husband.\textsuperscript{131}

“Count Gismond” is like “Andrea del Sarto” in this respect that the person the title refers to is a man. But in contrast to the previous poems, the speaker is not a man. This is one of the few instances where a woman is the narrator, but unlike the male characters, she does not get a name. She remains nameless while her saviour’s name is in the title, and also the name of her assailant is mentioned a few times. The reason for this could be that the woman, even though she is a queen, does not have a voice or any power over people and hence does not have a real identity. When Count Gismond has saved her and married her, she has become a part of his existence and is not her own master anymore.

The woman in this case is a girl from the upper classes; she is the queen of a medieval tournament. The tournament takes place on her birthday and everyone is being extremely nice to her – but they are all hypocrites according to the woman. It is her Queen’s day and the public is cheering for her. This poem has the typical medieval woman-worshipping ideal. Everybody is nice to her and treats her like a queen; she will get all the attention on this day.

\begin{quote}
E’en when I was dressed, \\
Had either of them spoke, instead \\
Of glancing sideways with still head! \\
But no: they let me laugh, and sing \\
My birthday song quite through, adjust \\
The last rose in my garland, fling \\
A last look on the mirror, trust \\
My arms to each an arm of theirs, \\
And so descend the castle-stairs – \\
And come out on the morning-troop \\
Of merry friends who kissed my cheek, \\
And called me Queen, and made me stoop \\
Under the canopy – (a streak \\
That pierced it, of the outside sun, \\
Powdered with gold its gloom’s soft dun) – \\
And they could let me take my state \\
And foolish throne amid applause
\end{quote}

Of all come there to celebrate
My Queen’s day – Oh I think the cause
Of much was, they forgot no crowd
Makes up for parents in their shroud! (lines 22-42)

The last line reveals that the girl’s parents have died, and everybody tries to make her forget and give her a good time. She says that no crowd or no party can make up for the death of her parents. She has not been able to come to terms with what happened, and then another terrible thing happens: her honour is blemished because of Gauthier’s accusations. As I have said before, the reputation of the girl and especially her chastity is of great importance.

Count Gauthier, when he chose his post,
Chose time and place and company
To suit it; when he struck at length
My honour, ’twas with all his strength.
And doubtlessly ere he could draw
All points to one, he must have schemed! (lines 3-6)

A knight called Gauthier humiliates her in front of the entire company. He accuses her of not being chaste and sleeping with him the night before. He does not want her to be the queen of the tournament after she has supposedly given him her virginity:

But Gauthier, and he thundered “Stay!”
And all stayed. “Bring no crowns, I say!
“Bring torches! Wind the penance-sheet
“About her! Let her shun the chaste,
“Or lay herself before their feet!
“Shall she whose body I embraced
“A night long, queen it in the day?
“For Honour’s sake no crowns, I say!” (lines 53-60)

The girl is still sad after her parents’ death and this comes as an even bigger shock to her. She is so devastated she cannot utter a word:

I? What I answered? As I live,
I never fancied such a thing
As answer possible to give.
What says the body when they spring
Some monstrous torture-engine’s whole
Strength on it? No more says the soul. (lines 61-66)

Fortunately another knight, Gismond, comes to save her. He strikes Gauthier and makes him confess it was a lie. The only way Gismond can get the truth out of Gauthier is by beating him up, by literally hacking it out of him, “Cleaving till out the truth he clove” (line 96).

He strode to Gauthier, in his throat
Gave him the lie, then struck his mouth
With one back-handed blow that wrote
In blood men’s verdict there. North, South,
East, West, I looked. The lie was dead,
And damned, and truth stood up instead. (lines 73-78)

After Gauthier dies, the girl lets herself fall into Gismond’s arms and he takes her away. At the end of the monologue we find out that the two are happily married and have children. She seems to be sitting in some room with the silent listener, Adela, who is probably a maid or a female companion. At the end of the poem she also addresses Gismond, then her husband. When Gismond comes up to her, she explains to him that she was telling Adela about her tercel (a male peregrine falcon):

Gismond here?
And have you brought my tercel back?
I just was telling Adela
How many birds it struck since May. (lines 123-126)

It is a typical sequence of events: there is a damsel in distress and the knight in shining armour – Count Gismond in this case – who saves her from the evil knight and takes her away to his home in the south. They marry (although this is not explicitly mentioned), have a family and live happily ever after.

Even though the intentions of Count Gismond seem very noble and rather innocent, there is a sexual connotation in certain words and images that Browning uses, especially in the following lines:

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Pass the rest
Until I sank upon his breast.
Over my head his arm he flung
Against the world; and scarce I felt
His sword (that dripped by me and swung)
A little shifted in its belt, -
For he began to say the while
How South our home lay many a mile. (lines 107-114)

The sword is obviously a phallic symbol, and the image of “feeling his sword” symbolises her having sexual intercourse with Gismond.

“Count Gismond” is not a poem which fits in this sequence of dramatic monologues: the female figure is not killed, but especially the point of view is different, because it is a woman who is speaking.

G. “The Laboratory”

A minute's success pays the failure of years.
– Robert Browning

This poem resembles “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” in the sense that the husband has a wish to kill his wife, and again there is the motif of adultery, only more explicit than in the other poems. He is sure that she is cheating on him, because she makes no secret of it. The man is in the process of making a poisonous drink that will kill his wife, or rather: he is watching the man in the laboratory, who is making the poison for him. At that very moment, his wife is with her lover:

He is with her; and they know that I know
Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow

133 Robert Browning, “The laboratory” (1844)
While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
Empty church, to pray God in, for them! I am here. (lines 5-8)

In short, the husband is thinking of revenge while his wife is committing adultery – only she knows nothing about that, because she thinks he is powerless and too weak to do anything about it.

The silent listener is the brewer of the potion, and he is told about the whole situation in confidence: the husband tells the brewer the purpose of the poison. He is encouraged to work:

Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,
Pound at thy powder, I am not in haste! (lines 9-10).

At the same time the listener also has to answer questions, like:

Which is the poison to poison her, prithee? (line 4)

And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,
Sure to taste sweetly, is that poison too? (lines 15-16)

Quick – is it finished? (line 25)

We do not learn much about the listener, except that he is an old man and that he gets a reward for his work:

Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,
You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will! (lines 45-46)

There is a hint that the husband will take the poison himself, although that is not clear. He wants the lover to see her die, but he asks if it can hurt him too: “If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?” (line 44). When the husband takes the potion, he gives all his gold to the brewer, and says he will “dance at the King’s!” (line 48). This last line is possibly a referral to God, Paradise or death.

The reader learns from this poem that there is a clear difference in personality between the married couple. She does not feel guilty about her adultery in any way, it is quite the opposite: she laughs at him for not doing anything, for letting her do what she wants, even if it hurts
him. He says one drop of poison is not enough to kill her, because she is not weak like himself:

What a drop! She’s not little, no minion like me
That’s why she ensnared him: this never will free
The soul from those masculine eyes, (lines 29-31)

Because of that strength she was able to make her lover fall in love with her. Only more of the poison can free her soul from the “masculine eyes” (line 31), which is probably a pars pro toto for the whole body of the lover. The poison needs to be strong enough, because he wants to stop her heart from beating by telling the brewer:

say, “no”!
To that pulse’s magnificent come-and-go.” (lines 31-32)

He thinks he is weak, because he cannot kill her. He tried to let her “fall” in his imagination, but it did not work. He watched his wife with her lover “whispering”, but was unable to do anything about it:

For only last night, as they whisper’d, I brought
My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought
Could I keep them one half minute fix’d, she would fall,
Shrivell’d; she fell not; yet this does it all! (lines 33-36)

One could also interpret these lines as trying to make his wife come to her senses, by just looking at her, by not doing anything about it. But he still wants her dead, maybe to comfort his own conscience and not because he would actually want her dead. To me, it seems more like an action of revenge on her lover than on her:

Not that I bid you spare her the pain!
Let death be felt and the proof remain;
Brand, burn up, bite into its grace
He is sure to remember her dying face! (lines 37-40)

The female character from “The Laboratory” stands in contrast with the other two poems, “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess”, because there the woman is kind, friendly,
loving and especially weaker than the man, whereas in this poem she is the one not showing empathy: she is the “evil” one. She does not even hide the fact that she is cheating on him; on the contrary, she wants him to know to make him feel bad. She thinks he is spineless, unable to do anything about it; this is not true, but he is not “brave” enough to witness his actions:

   Take my mask off! Nay, be not morose,
   It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close (lines 41-42)

It is not really clear who the names Pauline and Elise in lines 22 and 23 refer to. One might think Pauline is the name of his wife (and coincidence or not, but “Pauline” is also the title of Browning’s first big work that was published), because she “should have just thirty minutes to live!” (line 22), but then the name Elise is also mentioned:

   and Elise, with her head
   And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead! (lines 23-24)

Perhaps Elise is his lover, although the context makes that doubtful. It is the first time and last time that she is mentioned, so this remains unclear.

The man also has some hidden ambitions apart from killing his wife, but he does not take this up any further than in the following lines:

   Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,
   What a wild crowd of invincible pleasures!
   To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,
   A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree-basket! (lines 17-20)

The speaker in “The Laboratory” needs sympathy because he wants to justify his plans and his actions towards the reader and towards the brewer. He explains explicitly why he wants to poison her. The husband makes it sound as if it is all her fault, and like the Duke, he will kill her. Only here, it is made clear that he has a fairly “good” reason to kill her, unlike the Duke, who merely had suspicions. The husband knows that his wife has a lover because she does not even hide it, and he has even watched the two lovers together.
I chose the quotation because it can be applied to this dramatic monologue: “the failure of years” could refer to the failure of the marriage; “a minute’s success” would then be the poisoning, the punishment of the adulterous wife: she will pay for making the marriage fail.

**H. “Evelyn Hope”**

There's a woman like a dew-drop, she's so purer than the purest.

I chose the poem about “Evelyn Hope” particularly because it has a unique audience. The auditor in this poem is supposed to be Evelyn Hope, who is mentioned in the title already, but the first line immediately signals to the reader that she is dead. Addressing a dead person does not come about often in literature but describing a dead woman did already appear in Browning’s writings, viz. in “Porphyria’s Lover”.

Like in “Porphyria’s Lover”, the speaker describes a woman. But more than in Browning’s earlier dramatic monologue, the description of “Evelyn Hope” resembles that one of “The Lady of Shalott”, also mentioned in my analysis of “Porphyria’s Lover”. The ways in which both women are depicted are remarkably similar. The speaker in “Evelyn Hope” calls her beautiful, and Lancelot, who is the main male character in “The Lady of Shalott”, says that “She has a lovely face” (line 169).

Whiteness and paleness are also present in the descriptions:

**“Evelyn Hope”**: And the sweet white brow is all of her. (line 16)

**“The Lady of Shalott”**: Lying, robed in snowy white That loosely flew to left and right – (lines 136-137) Dead-pale between the houses high, (line 157)

The importance of light is equally striking. When the male characters come into the picture, there is the proximity of sunlight, but not clear or bright: in “Evelyn Hope”, the shutters keep

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most of the light outside, and in “The Lady of Shalott”, the sunrays are filtered through the leaves:

The shutters are shut, no light may pass
Save two long rays thro’ the hinge’s chink. (lines 7-8)

He rode between the barley sheaves,
The sun came dazzling through the leaves (lines 74-75)

In “Evelyn Hope” this image of light represents gloominess and melancholy, while in “The Lady of Shalott” it is more a signal of hope: the sunlight comes through and brightens up the day. Both of the female characters are still young women, and it is a pity that their time has come. Of course, we do not know what happened to Evelyn Hope: she could have been struck by disease; she could have been murdered; or she could have committed suicide, like the Lady of Shalott. In Tennyson’s poem night and darkness are repeated motifs, so the reader can connect the two Victorian poems and perhaps even suspect a suicide.

The description of flowers in both poems catches the eye. Here, Evelyn Hope’s life seems to be connected with the geranium she plucked while she was still alive; but now that Evelyn is no more, the flower is dying as well. It is also a sign that she has not been dead for a very long time.

She plucked that piece of geranium-flower,
She saw the water lily bloom, (line 111)
Beginning to die too, in the glass; (lines 4-5)
And your mouth of your own geranium’s red – (line 38)

The leaf is an important detail in “Evelyn Hope”. It is almost a gift from the speaker to the girl, and the leaf symbolises a young life that has been taken away. The leaf is broken off of the flower and will wither too soon, just like the girl has been torn out of the world. Her death was too abrupt and untimely. Leaves are also an image that Tennyson uses when the Lady floats in the river to Camelot:

So, hush, - I will give you this leaf to keep: The leaves upon her falling light – (line 138)
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand! (lines 53-54)
Also God is mentioned in both poems, as the one who called the woman, or as the one who will forgive her for committing suicide. Here, it seems less likely that Evelyn Hope killed herself, because the following line explains that it was God’s will and not her own:

Till God’s hand beckoned unawares, - (line 15)  
God in his mercy lend her grace, (line 170)

In this comparison with “The Lady of Shalott”, I hope to have shown that some of the imagery is comparable to the images that Browning used in his “Evelyn Hope”, and that both poems idealise a dead woman. I came across these lines in “The Philosophy of Composition” by Edgar Allan Poe when I had just read “Evelyn Hope”:

[...] I asked myself – “of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?” Death – was the obvious reply. “And when,” I said, “is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?” From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious – “When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.”137

Evelyn’s beauty is suggested by a number of adjectives: “beautiful” (line 1), “pure and true” (line 18), “pure and gay” (line 36), “divine” (line 37); the word “young” is used three times in two lines:

There was place and to spare for the frank young smile,  
And the red young mouth, and the hair’s young gold. (lines 51-52)

I will now elaborate further on the last part of Poe’s statement quoted above, in connection to the protagonist in “Evelyn Hope”: “the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover”. The speaker in this poem is again a man, who seems older than the other speakers in the poems I have discussed, although those characters never mentioned their age. Age is of importance in “Evelyn Hope”, because by determining this age gap the difference between the two characters becomes too big, and perhaps even insuperable. Evelyn Hope was “sixteen years old, when she died” (line 9), while the speaker is “thrice as old” (line 21).

Beside the difference in age, there is also a difference in their attitude and life style: “our paths in the world diverged so wide” (line 22). Evelyn Hope was consequently unattainable for the protagonist. Still, he feels the need to possess her, like Porphyria’s lover does:

I claim you still, for my own love’s sake!
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few:
Much is to learn, much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you. (lines 28–32)

We do not learn much about the protagonist: we do not know what kind of person he is, what he does or which class he belongs to. We do not even know what the relationship is between him and Evelyn Hope: he says that “perhaps she had scarcely heard my name” (line 10), so it is not certain that Evelyn even knew him. It is clear that the narrator had been watching her, because he knows so much about her. Still he remains mysterious, especially at the end: the sixth stanza is rather obscure. In these lines it seems as if he has lived for an eternity since Evelyn died and that he has travelled and sought deliverance, but he was never set free. The one thing that can set him free is Evelyn, but she is dead. The reader could also place the travelling in the period of time when Evelyn was still alive; he could have left after he had seen her, and returned when he learnt about her death.

He wants to save Evelyn for himself: he will “claim” her when the time is right. The line “through worlds I shall traverse” is probably a reference to the worlds of life and death, whose borders he will have to cross to reach Evelyn. The last stanza displays a similar development to that of “Porphyria’s Lover”. There are several indications that point to a crime: Evelyn Hope did not die a natural death, but was murdered. The speaker is a possible suspect because of certain things he says in the poem, for instance: “It was not her time to love” (line 11), which is a decision that the speaker makes: he must kill her so that he can wait for the right time to claim her (perhaps this would mean killing himself and then traverse the worlds). Also, the mention of a secret in line 55 may turn out to be the secret of a murder. The next line closes the poem: “You will wake, and remember, and understand”. This is probably his ideal scenario: he will go to Heaven and be there when she wakes from her sleep. She will remember why he killed her, and she will understand why he committed the murder: because he loved her and he wanted to be the only one to possess her.
I. Comparing the Poems

In this chapter I will especially try to compare the first two poems I discussed, viz. “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess”. In both poems the female character – Porphyria and the duchess – is murdered by the protagonist. There is a difference between the male characters when one looks at them from a social perspective: the position of Porphyria’s lover is never mentioned explicitly, but it is assumed that he belongs to the working class while his mistress is part of the upper class, whereas the protagonist in “My Last Duchess” is a duke, who has authority and an ancient name. The men have certain expectations about their women: the lover requires that Porphyria will reject her class and will live with him; the duke demands that his wife shows more respect for his position, and that she is more thankful for everything that he has given her. Both attach great value to their status in society.

Browning repeatedly represented male authority in his dramatic monologues, while the voice of the female presence is not heard. The male narrator tries to objectify the woman, and this results in an extreme climax: the death of the woman. The fact that the man needs to possess the woman is an illusion. Browning showed how the speaker’s aspiration is always destroyed in the end: the speaker has a certain goal that he wishes to reach, but he can never achieve it. Porphyria’s lover for instance needs Porphyria and her love, but he kills her and thus loses her. The duke in “My Last Duchess”, who needs a good wife, kills the duchess. Andrea del Sarto needs the attention of Lucrezia, but sends her away to her lover himself. Maybe “Evelyn Hope” belongs in this sequence too, since there is a hint of a possible murder at the end of the poem.

“My Last Duchess” shows the self-importance of the speaker and the necessity of the subjection of women and wives to their husbands, and this is of importance to “Porphyria’s Lover” as well. Porphyria’s lover feels important enough to decide on life or death; he lets his lover think what he wants her to think. She does not seem very important to him; she needs

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139 “My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name”, quoted from Robert Browning, “My Last Duchess”, line 33.
140 Breanna Byecroft, Representations of the Female Voice in Victorian Poetry.
141 Marysa Demoor, An introduction to Victorian poetry, p. 68.
him more than he needs her. Browning questions the way in which the two sexes treat each other, the way their relationships work and how (some) men deal with their lover or wife. His poems serve to explore the connection between men and women and how love can result in (sexual) violence.\textsuperscript{142}

“The Laboratory” also belongs to the group of poems which deal with domestic violence, but the role of the villainous character has changed: instead of a madman, the poem’s villain is now a mischievous woman who is fully conscious of what she is doing. Her husband is a weakling, who eventually decides to put an end to her life by poisoning her. Here, there is no indication of class at all: it is the least of the speaker’s concerns. This poem is again about a murder, but unlike “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” it has yet to happen. The preparations are elaborately described and also the reasons the husband has for the murder are explained. When one compares the feminine character of “The Laboratory” to “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess”, there is a clear contrast. In the latter poems there are only slight hints and subtle indications to unfaithfulness, whereas in “The Laboratory” it stands firm that the woman is cheating on her husband. He has caught them red-handed and the affair is not a secret.

In “The Laboratory” the woman has no voice either. She is not part of the audience, so again the reader cannot be completely sure that the speaker is trustworthy. It is possible that he is lying, but to me the reliability of the speaker is less important than in “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess”.

Furthermore, “Andrea del Sarto” deals with a woman who is unfaithful. Only here there are no plans for a murder or revenge in any way. The woman is not depicted as a malicious being, like in “The Laboratory”, nor is she portrayed as an angelic feminine character like Porphyria and the Duchess. Lucrezia is an indifferent and superficial woman who only cares about luxury. Instead of using violence against her or planning a murder, he tries to talk to her. But after 267 lines of arguments he still has not succeeded and he gives up in the end.

“Count Gismond” is the exception in my selection of poems. The violence that is mentioned in the poem is between two rivalling men: the bad guy who threatens the woman and the knight in shining armour who comes to save her. There is again a certain tension between a

\textsuperscript{142} Catherine Maxwell, \textit{Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover”}, Explicator, 1993 fall, 52 (1), 27 – 30.
man and a woman, but there is no violence between them: the conflict arises when count Gauthier accuses the queen of something she has not done and when count Gismond wants to defend her. Gismond fights Gauthier, forces him to tell the truth and kills him.

It also differs from the other poems because the speaker is not a man, but a woman. Moreover, the audience, Adela, is a woman. The poem has a happy end, which is unusual for Browning, too. “Porphyria’s Lover” ends with Porphyria’s death; “My Last Duchess” is about the death of the duke’s wife and the search for a new “victim”; “Evelyn Hope” is a pessimistic poem about the death of a young woman; “The Laboratory” implies that the death of the woman will follow, and the speaker might even kill himself, too.

Furthermore, setting and history are important, at least to some of Browning’s poems. “Count Gismond” is set in France: “Aix in Provence” is in the subtitle. The period in which the story takes place is the Middle Ages: the reader can derive this from the terms that are used in the poem. The words “knight”, “tourney” and “sword” are associated with the culture of the Middle Ages. The setting of “Andrea del Sarto” is clear too, since the protagonist is an actual historical figure in Italy. In the rest of the poems, this does not matter so much. “My Last Duchess” is also based on a historical character, the duke of Ferrara: he was Alfonso II of the house of Este, who married the fourteen-year-old Lucrezia de Medici in 1558. In 1565, he married Barbara, the sixth daughter of Ferdinand I, the count of Tyrol. Lucrezia could be seen as the last duchess, and Barbara was the duchess he had in mind next. When she died in 1572, the duke married once more, with Barbara’s niece.143

There is no such historical background in “Porphyria’s Lover”, “The Laboratory” and “Evelyn Hope”.

**J. Gender-related Theories and Final Thoughts**

In this chapter I will discuss some theories related to gender and the relationship between men and women, and link these to the poems I have discussed earlier.

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Toril Moi’s book about sexual and textual politics gives an overview of theories of which some can be applied to Browning’s poems. Thus “sexual politics” is defined by Kate Millett, who strongly disapproved of literature that presents male sexual violence against women, as “the process whereby the ruling sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the subordinate sex.” This is especially true for the poems where the male protagonist needs to control his female subject (“Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess”). In “Evelyn Hope” the protagonist also wishes to “claim” and “take” Evelyn as his own. The exceptions here are “Andrea del Sarto” and “Count Gismond”, which stand out in comparison with the other poems I have discussed: these poems clearly have a different tone, and it is not so much about control and power as about the specific relation between the man and his wife. Andrea del Sarto is not after power and control; he craves Lucrezia’s attention. “Count Gismond” is not focused on power and possession, but a person’s reputation is of paramount importance to the characters.

The Madwoman in the Attic

Moi dedicates some ten pages to *The Madwoman in the Attic*, a book written by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. The madwoman in the attic refers to the novel of Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*. In this novel the protagonist is Jane Eyre; Bertha, the wife of Mr. Rochester, Jane Eyre’s employer, is the madwoman in the attic. She is locked away from the world, and she is the complete opposite and even the rival of Jane Eyre. Rochester compares the two: “this young girl, who stands so grave and quiet at the mouth of hell, looking collectedly at the gambols of a demon.” But there is definitely a link between these two female characters: also Jane Eyre has been locked up in the red room, when she was ten years old. The words of Mrs. Reed remind the reader of Bertha: she is “all fire and violence.” Even though Jane is the protagonist and the narrator of the story, the other female character does not get a voice. Bertha is silenced until Jean Rhys wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 which “tells the story which is never told in *Jane Eyre*.”

Moi draws from Gilbert and Gubar, who make some thought-provoking remarks:

147 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 211.
Sally Minogue, *Introduction to Jane Eyre*, p.XVIII.
148 Sally Minogue, *Introduction to Jane Eyre*, p.XVIII.
Since creativity is defined as male, it follows that the dominant literary images of femininity are male fantasies too. Women are denied the right to create their own images of femaleness, and instead must seek to conform to the patriarchal standards imposed on them. Gilbert and Gubar clearly demonstrate how in the nineteenth century the ‘eternal feminine’ was assumed to be a vision of angelic beauty and sweetness: from Dante’s Beatrice and Goethe’s Gretchen and Makarie to Coventry Patmore’s ‘Angel in the House’, the ideal woman is seen as a passive, docile and above all selfless creature. The authors stingingly comment that: ‘To be selfless is not only to be noble, it is to be dead. A life that has no story, like the life of Goethe’s Makarie, is really a life of death, a death-in-life. The ideal of ‘contemplative purity’ evokes, finally, both heaven and the grave.’

While reading this, “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” immediately crossed my mind: both male speakers have an ideal image of a woman that they can control completely. They both kill the woman, so that she becomes an everlasting image of beauty and purity in their minds. One can relate this quotation from Gilbert and Gubar to the other poems too, because they all have a male speaker who does not give the woman a voice of her own.

The female characters in “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” are described like Jane Eyre: they are ladylike and kind women. “Evelyn Hope” is another example of this: she is a beautiful, young, care-free girl. What makes these women so ideal in these three poems is that they are all dead. The duchess and Evelyn are both dead at the beginning of the poem, and Porphyria dies during the lover’s speech. Only their images remain: Evelyn’s and Porphyria’s dead bodies are described, and the Duchess lives on in the painting that was made of her.

The queen in “Count Gismond” is again a very innocent and pure character, whose reputation is blemished by an evil man, but she is saved in the end by a good knight.

The female character in “The Laboratory” has likenesses to the madwoman in the attic: this time the woman is without angel-like qualities. She is malicious, and she finds pleasure in tormenting her husband. This woman needs to be killed in order to become a controllable object.

Cixous’ theories on Patriarchal binary thought and power

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Equally applicable to Browning’s poems is the “Patriarchal binary thought”, which Moi discusses in the context of Hélène Cixous. She gives a list of some of these “binary oppositions”:

(Man/Woman)  
Activity/Passivity  
Sun/Moon  
Culture/Nature  
Day/Night  
Father/Mother  
Head/Emotions  
Intelligible/Sensitive  
Logos/Pathos  

According to Moi,

these binary oppositions are heavily imbricated in the patriarchal value system: each opposition can be analysed as a hierarchy where the ‘feminine’ side is always seen as the negative, powerless instance. [...] The hidden male/female opposition with its inevitable positive/negative evaluation can always be traced as the underlying paradigm.  

Then, Cixous imports struggle and death into her discussion. The only consequence of these oppositions is some kind of fight in which the victor will always be the man, who stands for activity. Loss is associated with passivity, which symbolises the female presence. Cixous states boldly that “either woman is passive or she doesn’t exist.” This, again, can be linked to Browning’s poetry. The female characters are always passive: the queen in “Count Gismond” cannot do anything active: she needs to be saved by a man. Lucrezia does not do anything, she just sits there and does not listen to her husband. Porphyria subjects herself to her lover, and the duchess is now nothing more but a passive object. The only woman who is active is the female character in “The Laboratory”, but she will be killed in order to be controlled.

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The terms of ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity’ are an obvious opposition. The difference between the male and female figure, especially concerning their power and abilities, is striking. Porphyria and the Duchess represent something beautiful, gentle and kind, while the man symbolises strength, power, and aggression. The man in the poems always wins, and this often results in the death of the woman. The only exceptions to this are of course “Count Gismond” and “Andrea del Sarto”.

Moi states that

masculinity and femininity are posited as stable, unchanging essences, as meaningful presences between which the elusive difference is supposed to be located. [...] Once ‘women’ are constituted as always and unchangingly subordinate and ‘men’ as unqualifiedly powerful, the language structures of these groups are perceived as rigid and unchanging.¹⁵²

This is also true for Browning’s poetry: once a situation has been sketched, the characters and the relations between the characters never change. If it is the man who controls the woman, then it will stay that way throughout the poem. The woman will never even make an attempt to break the patriarchal order; she just undergoes the control and the whims of her husband. Porphyria is an example of how it should be: she subdues herself to her lover. To make sure it will not change, he kills her. If the woman does not do what the man desires, he kills her: problem solved. The duchess and the woman in “The Laboratory” are examples of “disobedient” women, and who are punished for that.

Cixous discusses the motif of power in literature:

I would indeed make a clear distinction when it comes to the kind of power that is the will to supremacy, the thirst for individual and narcissistic satisfaction. That power is always a power over others. It is something that relates back to government, control, and beyond that, to despotism.¹⁵³

This immediately reminded me of “My Last Duchess”. Holding power over people, displaying their power everywhere (e.g. the statue of Neptune and the seahorse) and narcissism are clearly characteristics of the duke’s behaviour. A duke is a very powerful man to begin with, who controls his subjects: he needs to control his wife even more.

After these statements about power Cixous refers to a different kind of power, which is as personal and individualistic as the first kind: “woman’s powers”. Moi says about this that the woman is constantly in a struggle against oppression (of the man) and

the struggle seems to consist in a lame effort to affirm a certain heterogeneity of woman’s powers (a heterogeneity belied by the singular of ‘woman’), which in any case seems to come down to claiming that a strong woman can do what she likes.  

Just like the kind of power that I have previously discussed, this kind of “woman’s powers” can be linked to one of Browning’s poems, viz. “Andrea del Sarto”. The protagonist here is again a man, who makes it seem as if he is in control, but he is clearly subjected to the female presence. Here the man has about everything to have power over the woman: she has to depend on him for financial security, but still she does as she likes. In this sense Lucrezia can be described as a strong woman: she has her husband on a string. In Browning’s poems I discussed, the only female character who comes out of it well is Lucrezia. Andrea worships her and does not even mind the fact that she has a lover. The queen’s situation improves through the poem and eventually leads a safe life, but she is still controlled by a man. The only poem which has this same theme is “The Laboratory”. The woman does as she likes and knows her husband will let her be, but this will be her downfall: he is planning a murder after all. In the other poems the man has all the power and the woman has to undergo everything.

The theories discussed by Moi offer little or no elucidation for “Count Gismond”. The notion of honour is the most important thing in the entire poem. There is not so much to say about passivity or death, except that the woman does not have the power to defend herself or even speak for herself: another man has to defend her honour. In this way she is passive and at the mercy of men. The fact that the protagonist is female and that she is not killed is another exception in relation to the other poems I have listed. It is a “typical” medieval romance story: the lady is in distress, she is saved by the knight in shining armour, who takes her away to be his wife. This character was just lucky that she encountered a man who was willing to rescue her. Lucrezia is also lucky: if she had been married to another man, such as the duke, she would have been killed long ago.

154 Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics, p. 125.
4. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and *Aurora Leigh*

A comparison of Browning’s poems with his wife’s poetry is bound to be interesting, especially because of her views on gender. I will look at *Aurora Leigh*, Barrett Browning’s masterpiece, which was written during a period of four years (1853-1857). It investigates primarily the position of women, and also of the poor in a lesser sense, in Victorian society. Gender differences and ideology are of great importance here and additionally *Aurora Leigh* takes up the question of education for women, their independence and equality of the sexes.\(^{155}\)

*Aurora Leigh* is what one could call a novel-poem. Barrett Browning called *Aurora Leigh* a novel-poem in a letter to Robert Browning, when she wanted to describe the next piece she was going to write:

> But my chief intention just now is the writing of the sort of novel-poem […]\(^{156}\)

*Aurora Leigh* is constructed as some kind of poem, written in blank verse\(^{157}\); but it is also a novel, because it is a long fictional story. Because it is not considered as a “true” work of poetry, this novel-poem was a more acceptable genre for a woman writer. According to the feminist critic Marjorie Stone the novel was considered to be the best literary form for women because the Victorians thought epic, philosophic and satiric poetry was a male connotated genre. Stone refers to Gilbert and Gubar to support her statement: women
did not require or display the knowledge of classical models barred to most women, novelists did not aspire to be priestly or prophetic figures interpreting God and the world to their fellows, and the novel was less subjective than the prevalent lyric and confessional poetic forms and therefore more congruent with the self-effacing role prescribed for Victorian women.\(^{158}\)

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\(^{155}\) Marysa Demoor, *An Introduction to Victorian Poetry*, pp. 77-79.

\(^{156}\) *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845-1846* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1898) p. 32


\(^{157}\) Tonya Browning, *Aurora Leigh: “A Woman’s Voice”*.

\(^{158}\) Marjorie Stone, p. 115.

Aurora Leigh is the heroine in the story; it is written from her point of view and it deals especially with her wishes to write poetry and defend her view on the rights of women. She works to support herself, and she is very independent. The relationships that are described in the story are rather complicated: Aurora’s cousin Romney Leigh wants to marry her, but he cannot accept her career aspirations and her political ideas. Then Romney wants to wed Marian, a young, lower-class girl that he has supported through his charity. Lady Waldemar, who wants to marry Romney herself, makes sure Marian does not get Romney. In the end Aurora and her cousin get together despite everything that has happened.

Many critics, Tonya Browning asserts,

immediately drew the correlation between the character of Aurora Leigh and the person of Barrett Browning such as Swinburne in his preface to the 1898 printing of *Aurora Leigh*: ‘Aurora is, of course, in all essentials a conscious and intentional portrait of the author by herself – a study from the life after her own spiritual and intellectual likeness, set in the frame of an utterly and obviously imaginary experience…’

Elizabeth Barrett Browning herself wrote in one of her letters that: “I have put much of myself in it – I mean to say, of my soul, my thoughts, emotions, opinions; in other respects, there is not a personal line, of course.” Tonya Browning illustrates the fact that Elizabeth has put some details from her personal life in her work, for example the yellow rose that Romney gave to Aurora:

> To change the water for my heliotropes  
> And yellow roses. Paris has such flowers,  
> But England, also. ‘Twas a yellow rose,  
> By that south window of the little house,  
> My cousin Romney gathered with his hand (Book VI, lines 302-306)

Robert Browning once included a yellow rose in one of his letters to Elizabeth. Tonya Browning quotes Wilsey to explain further: “In February of the following year, Elizabeth Barrett reminded Browning playfully of his first floral gift and asked if he knew that yellow roses stood for infidelity.” Also Virginia Woolf is mentioned in Tonya Browning’s article:

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159 Algernon Charles Swinburne, p. xi.  
Quoted in: Tonya Browning, *Aurora Leigh: “A Woman’s Voice”*.  
Quoted in: Tonya Browning, *Aurora Leigh: “A Woman’s Voice”*.  
161 Tonya Browning, *Aurora Leigh: “A Woman’s Voice”*.  
62
she asserts that “Aurora the fictitious seems to be throwing light upon Elizabeth the actual.”

After reading these observations one may hesitantly conclude that Aurora’s character is comparable to Elizabeth Barrett Browning, or at least that a similarity between the two is not too far-fetched.

There is a clear difference between both poets when it comes to the use of personal elements in their poetry. Unlike his wife, Browning clearly stated that the protagonists and characters in his poetry bear no relation to himself: they are the products of his imagination and have no connection to him as a person whatsoever. Robert Browning pledged never to write about his personal feelings after the comments on “Pauline”. Elizabeth wrote down her personal feelings many times: she became famous for the collection of poems called “Sonnets from the Portuguese”, a series of love poems that she began writing during the period of correspondence with her husband-to-be. “The title was actually a reference to a term of endearment Robert had for Elizabeth, my little Portuguese, a reference to her dark complexion.” So this again is an allusion to her personal life.

I found rather interesting analyses of Aurora Leigh which can be related to Robert Browning’s poetry and the themes that are raised there. As in Gilbert and Gubar’s theory there is a comparison of the protagonist to an angel-like figure; and of course the relation between masculinity and femininity, and the objectification of the female character in Aurora Leigh can be explored.

In his book Dickens and Women Michael Slater claimed that writing only came second for women writers in the Victorian era. First of all, women needed to fulfil their domestic responsibilities and be a virtuous “angel”. Barrett Browning gives her protagonist a place “outside the confines of the domestic sphere, but she still describes Aurora as a keeper of virtue.”

Aurora Leigh is referred to as an angel in several passages, for instance by Romney at the end of the novel:

“Ah,” he said


163 See p. 5.


165 Timothy Farrell, Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh.
Farrell says in his article that “with Aurora Leigh, Barrett Browning revises the Victorian gender construction which roots the virtuous woman firmly in the domestic sphere.” Barrett Browning suggests that a woman is able to have a life outside of the domestic sphere and still keep her function of what Farrell calls “moral repository”. But as the story develops Barrett Browning encounters a problem: how will her protagonist keep her virtue if she has to live in the amoral public sphere? A woman who is not supported by a family or a husband has to sell herself – or her writing skills in Aurora’s case – to earn money and to make something out of her life. The image of the prostitute became rather popular in the nineteenth century, and in this novel the prostitute is a metaphor for the writer. Gail Turley Houston noticed that in the 1830s and 1840s the mass audience increased, and that “the establishment of cheap serial publication allied to the practice of paying authors by the line” lead to the use of this metaphor. The writer or artist was seen as a prostitute, because they had to sell themselves “in the marketplace, like prostitutes, in order to survive.” Aurora Leigh has no choice and has to sell her skills as a writer to support herself; she admits that she has to write for

[...cyclopaedias, magazines,]
And weekly papers, holding up my name
To keep it from the mud (Book III, lines 310-312)

Aurora writes for these “lower” forms to enable herself to write a “higher” kind of literature, viz. poetry. Hence the protagonist in this novel can be portrayed as a metaphorical prostitute, although it is striking that Aurora does not lose her virtue because of this. It is quite the opposite; she is still portrayed as a pure and virtuous woman. Prostitution is not only present in Barrett Browning’s poetry; think of Dante Gabriel Rossetti for instance. One of Rossetti’s most famous poems, “Jenny”, is about a man describing a prostitute, Jenny. The woman is considered as “the other” over which the speaker has power. He decides whether the woman sleeps with him or not, whether he can touch her or not. The woman is the object of his desire.

166 Timothy Farrell, Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh.
167 Gail Turley Houston, p. 214.
Quoted in: Timothy Farrell, Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh.
168 Timothy Farrell, Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh.
Prostitution is not only used as a metaphor in the book; Barrett Browning wrote the following to Mrs. Jameson about *Aurora Leigh*:

What has given most offence in the book, more than the story of Marian--far more! has been the reference to the condition of women in our cities [prostitution], which a woman oughtn't to refer to, by any manner of means, says the conventional tradition. Now I have thought deeply otherwise. If a woman ignores these wrongs, then may women as a sex continue to suffer them; there is no help for any of us--let us be dumb and die. I have spoken therefore, and in speaking have used plain words--words which look like blots, and which you yourself would put away--words which, if blurred or softened, would imperil perhaps the force and righteousness of the moral influence.  

With this, Barrett Browning states strongly that prostitution cannot be ignored and that prostitutes cannot be silenced to the outside world. A woman writer should give a voice to the ones who are ignored and wronged the most in society.

In Browning’s poetry, women are denied a voice. They are perceived from a male perspective and the reader never gets the chance to discover their side of the story.

Aurora wants to be free and independent, and the imagery that she uses to describe her aunt shows this clearly. Her aunt is referred to as a bird in a cage, who does not know freedom and independence, while Aurora is depicted as a free bird that is brought to her aunt’s cage in order to live a secluded life.

She had lived we’ll say,
A harmless life, she called a virtuous life,
A quiet life, which was not life at all,
[… She had lived
A sort of cage-bird life, born in a cage,
Accounting that to leap from perch to perch
Was act and joy enough for any bird.
Dear heaven, how silly are the things that live in thickets and eat berries!
I, alas,
A wild bird scarcely fledged, was brought to her cage (Book I, lines 289-313)

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At the end of *Aurora Leigh*, the female protagonist realises that “a real love […] is the ideal subject for the poet and that only in exercising such a poetry and vision of love can Aurora experience and communicate this mystic secret of spiritual transcendence.”¹⁷⁰ It is striking that Aurora’s desire to be autonomous has altered and is even denied at the end of the novel: then, her image of the ideal woman is a woman who has “the power to remoralize man and to bring him closer to God.”¹⁷¹ Aurora revises the opinion she had at the beginning of the novel: “she does not have to reject male love to succeed as a female poet.”¹⁷² Romney has come to a different conclusion as well and apologises: he admits he was wrong about women not being able to be good poets.¹⁷³

Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi showed that Aurora is rather ambivalent towards womanhood in the first pages of the novel. The reader can find a clear example of this in the description of the painting of Aurora’s mother:

[...] still that face [...] was by turn  
Ghost, fiend, and angel, fairy, witch, and sprite,  
A dauntless Muse who eyes a dreadful Fate,  
A loving Psyche who loses sight of Love,  
A still Medusa, [...] Or, anon,  
Our Lady of the Passion, stabbed with swords  
Where the Babe sucked; or, Lamia in her first  
Moonlighted pallor, [...]  
Or, my own mother, leaving her last smile  
In her last kiss, upon the baby-mouth  
My father pushed down on the bed for that,  
Or, my dead mother, without smile or kiss,  
Buried at Florence. (Book I, lines 151-168)

Aurora describes her mother in contradictory terms: fiend and angel, fairy and witch, Psyche and Medusa. She does not know how to find the right label that she can apply to women, or how to find a fitting description for women in general.

Note: I edited “excercizing”.
¹⁷¹ Timothy Farrell, *Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh*.
¹⁷² Sarah Eron, *Aurora and The Angel*.
¹⁷³ Timothy Farrell, *Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh*.  
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Gelpi states that Aurora does not accept her womanhood in the beginning: she uses masculine nouns and adjectives when she is referring to herself. She never calls herself a “girl” or “daughter”, but “child” and “infant”. She also shares her last name, Leigh, with her cousin Romney, and even resembles him physically. Lady Waldemar writes: “Your droop of eyelid is the same as his” (Book IX, line 163). Aurora wishes “to escape when possible from her conventional life as an English lady and see herself as a deer – but a stag, not a doe.”

I threw my hunters off and plunged myself
Among the deep hills, as a hunted stag
Will take the waters (Book I, lines 1071-1073)

When Aurora is learning classical languages, she compares her situation and herself to Achilles, “whose mother dressed him in women’s clothes to prevent his going to the Trojan War.” Gelpi sees this as the most striking example of seeing herself as more masculine than feminine; she even imagines herself to be wearing men’s clothes.

And thus, as did the women formerly
By young Achilles, when they pinned a veil
Across the boy’s audacious front, and swept
With tuneful laughs the silver-fretted rocks,
He wrapt his little daughter in his large
Man’s doublet, careless did it fit or no. (Book I, lines 723-728)

Gelpi explains this image of masculinity:

So the sense of herself as masculine, which she feels she needs in order to think seriously of herself as a poet, becomes the sense which eats into the flesh of her self-esteem. She is manlike (according to the culture’s associations with masculinity) in some respects but not, after all, a man, just as Achilles was not a woman.

When it comes to her own sexual identity, Aurora “both denies and accepts these different aspects of womanhood in herself. In book 5, she discovers her hair beginning”

174 Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, pp. 41-42.
Quoted in: Timothy Farrell, *Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh*.
175 Timothy Farrell, *Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh*.
176 Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, p. 42.
Quoted in: Timothy Farrell, *Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh*.
177 Breanna Byecroft, *Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”*. 
to burn and creep,
Alive to the very ends (Book V, lines 1126-1127)

When Romney tells her laughing that her hair gleams, as if there were fireflies in there, Aurora feels ridiculous:

Ah, Romney laughed
One day … (how full the memories came up!)
"–Your Florence fire-flies live on in your hair,"
He said, “it gleams so.” Well, I wrung them out,
My fire-flies; made a knot as hard as life,
Of those loose, soft, impracticable curls (Book V, lines 1129-1134)

She tells how her hair is “alive”, but as soon as Romney compliments her, she makes a knot, and hides her curls. The “impracticable curls” suggest sensuousness and frivolity; “a knot as hard as life” is more something that would fit a serious and devoted person.

Aurora uses these images of masculinity “in order to justify her place in the public sphere and to preserve her femininity from the amoralness of that sphere.”178 She hides her femininity from society in order to come across as a true member who fits in; she thinks she can do this better by using these masculine images. As the novel goes on however, she becomes more feminine and in the end Aurora Leigh is able to embrace her womanhood. She loses all traces of masculinity and eventually accepts Romney and his ideas: she cannot be a wife and a poet at the same time. “Now Aurora claims that it is precisely because she is not a wife (and therefore she is an “imperfect woman”) that she is not a perfect artist.”179 She and Romney have to be united before she can be connected to the spiritual. Farrell ends his article with the following statement: “Aurora, by the novel-poem’s end, has given into the dominant gender construction in which women define themselves through their relationships with men.”180

178 Timothy Farrell, Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh.
179 Timothy Farrell, Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh.
180 Timothy Farrell, Victorian Constructions of Gender in Aurora Leigh.
In the text Aurora “makes sharp distinctions between “man” and “woman”, between the feminine and the masculine”. One image that struck me in particular was when Aurora describes her “friend” Romney in the first book:

We came so close, we saw our differences
Too intimately. Always Romney Leigh
Was looking for the worms, I for the gods.
A godlike nature his; the gods look down,
Incurious of themselves; and certainly
’Tis well I should remember, how, those days
I was a worm too, and he looked on me. (Book I, lines 553-558)

The men are being compared to gods, looking for the worms. Romney Leigh looks down, like the gods do, and looks for something that is not as valuable or as high as they are, something that can only look up: a worm. Aurora Leigh is thinking of herself as a worm, something “base” that looks up to the higher things. What I make of this is that she may not be “worth” as much as men, but she has higher goals that she wants to attain than they have. Men always have a more prestigious position that allows them to look down on things, but which makes them focus on the earthly things. They are not curious about the “gods”, the “higher” things, because they get more chances and opportunities than women to reach those. Women are not used to get these chances and therefore their aims are “higher”.

At the end of Aurora Leigh, the protagonist has lost the need to make these distinctions between the two sexes: “here she sheds this obsessive genderization when she ultimately substitutes the term ‘man’ for ‘soul.’” The soul has nothing to do with gender or sex. A true man is a man who finds himself in his soul: the soul is more important than masculine characteristics:

The man, most man,
Works best for men, and, if most men indeed,
He gets his manhood plainest from his soul (Book IX, lines 874-876)

Love is defined as “both the innermost essence or region of the soul and the greater union of two individual souls.” If true love is seen as the union of two souls, then it is genderless.

181 Sarah Eron, Aurora and The Angel.
182 Sarah Eron, Aurora and The Angel.
183 Sarah Eron, Aurora and The Angel.
Here, Barrett Browning transcends “the limitations of the gender question.” Through her love Aurora claims that love “allows the spirit to metamorphose into a higher state or form.” Through her love Aurora can “attain a divine, or extraordinary poetic perspective.”

Breanna Byecroft takes up a very interesting subject in her article about *Aurora Leigh*, which can be related to Browning’s poetry. She looks at the objectification of the female character: “men project all their desires onto a female object.” I have discussed this already when I was analysing some of Browning’s dramatic monologues, and Byecroft shows how objectifying women also is a theme in Barrett Browning’s novel. Aurora Leigh is supposed to reject the objectification of women, but she looks at her own sex as objects. The novel has some very dominant female figures, for instance Aurora’s aunt and Lady Waldemar. Her aunt teaches Aurora how to be part of patriarchal society, and how to be “a subordinate and subservient woman.” The girl is raised to be a wife for her cousin, Romney. The aunt is being compared and degraded to a bird in a cage.

Byecroft states that “although the meaning of Aurora’s life is to escape objectification by men, she constantly categorizes women and projects her ideas onto them.” Her description of and her feelings towards the painting of her mother show this. It seems as if she needs some kind of label for women, but she is not sure if the label would be a positive or a negative one: she sums up nouns like “fiend” and “angel”. “The portrait conjures up in her mind images of women who are spiritual and demonic, empowered and sorrowful, tender and monstrous.” Byecroft believes that these conflicting descriptions of her mother figure represent her ambiguous attitude towards women. Another important character, who is described as a “woman-serpent” (Book VI, line 1154), is Lady Waldemar. Marian describes Lady Waldemar in a very negative way:

I never liked the woman’s face or voice,

Or ways: it made me blush to look at her;

It made me tremble if she touched my hand;

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184 Sarah Eron, *Aurora and The Angel*.
185 Sarah Eron, *Aurora and The Angel*.
186 Sarah Eron, *Aurora and The Angel*.
187 Breanna Byecroft, *Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”*.
188 Breanna Byecroft, *Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”*.
189 Breanna Byecroft, *Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”*.
190 Breanna Byecroft, *Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”*.
191 Breanna Byecroft, *Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”*.
192 Breanna Byecroft, *Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”*.
And when she spoke a fondling word I shrank,
As if one hated me, who had the power to hurt;
And, every time she came, my veins ran cold,
As somebody were walking on my grave. (Book VI, lines 1204-1210)

Marian herself becomes an interesting female character. She is objectified by all characters, even by Aurora herself. Byecroft states that “Aurora objectifies and distances Marion by envisioning her as a Madonna”.¹⁹³

And in my Tuscan home I'll find a niche
And set thee there, my saint, the child and thee,
And burn the lights of love before thy face,
And ever at thy sweet look cross myself
From mixing with the world's prosperities. (Book VII, lines 126-130)

Marian’s mother objectifies her daughter as well, by trying to sell Marian to a man, as if she was some kind of product to be sold; Lady Waldemar’s servant tries to do this, too. Marian becomes an object of male desire. Because of this, Aurora thinks of Marian as both an angel and a corrupted victim. When Aurora sees Marian’s baby for the first time, she even considers her to be a seductress, but when she finds out that Marian was not to blame because she was raped, the girl is portrayed as a Madonna-figure:

“Sweet holy Marian! […]
I'll swear his mother shall be innocent
Before my conscience, as in the open Book
Of Him who reads for judgment. (Book VI, lines 825-830)

Marian calls Aurora an angel, good and pure, when she decides to help her out many times:

“Alas,” she said, “you are so very good; (Book VI, line 733)

[…] Ah, Miss Leigh,
You’re great and pure (Book VI, lines 748-749)

At the end of Aurora Leigh, when Aurora confesses her love for Romney, she identifies with the women that she tried to objectify and that she distanced, and she explains:

¹⁹³ Breanna Byecroft, Objectifying the Female in “Aurora Leigh”.
Now I know
I loved you always, Romney. She who died
Knew that, and said so; Lady Waldemar
Knows that; . . . and Marian. I had known the same,
Except that I was prouder than I knew,
And not so honest (Book IX, lines 684-89)

I wish to conclude this chapter with a comparison between Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* and Robert Browning’s poetry. First of all I will discuss the protagonists that both poets used, then I will look at how the sexes treat each other and conceive the other sex, and finally I will note some interesting parallels between the works of the Brownings.

The difference in the use of protagonists is obvious. Robert Browning makes use of male narrators (with “Count Gismond” being the only exception), whereas Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s protagonist is a woman. Aurora Leigh is not like the male protagonists in Robert’s work: she is a very self-conscious and autonomous lady, who knows what she is doing. She has only one goal: being a poet and being independent. The queen in “Count Gismond” is the opposite of Elizabeth’s female character: she has to rely on a man to save her and she is at his disposal. The male character in *Aurora Leigh*, Romney Leigh, is at first somebody who has a very conservative view on women and their activities, but like Aurora Leigh he goes through an evolution in the course of the poem. Both characters change their views on the role of women. The protagonists in Robert’s poems do not go through any progress or change whatsoever. Also, Aurora Leigh does not show any sign of madness, whereas Robert’s characters often do.

Death is a recurring motif in Robert’s work, but it is not a major theme in Elizabeth’s novel-poem. The only death that really matters in *Aurora Leigh* is the death of the two people who had the biggest influence on Aurora’s personality: her parents. Aurora’s mother, who died at a young age, is comparable to the duchess from “My Last Duchess”. Both women are depicted in paintings which are of great value to the protagonist: Aurora looks at her mother and identifies herself with her; the duke sets his last duchess as an example for his next wife.

Robert Browning especially explores the possessiveness and obsession in his male characters. The women are nothing more than objects that have to obey their masters. The female characters in *Aurora Leigh* are objectified, too. All women are given a fixed label: Lady Waldemar is a serpent; Marian a tragic Madonna-figure; Aurora’s aunt is a woman trapped in
the cage of English society. Aurora Leigh herself can be seen as a character that has to discover her own identity as a woman: she first wants to identify with men, but at the end of the novel-poem she realises that she is a woman and that her place is by a man’s side. The character in Aurora Leigh that can be compared to Robert’s female characters is Marian. She is a very submissive person and is tyrannised by other characters in the story. By subjecting herself to the men she encounters, she becomes a “dead” person:

I was not ever as you say, seduced,
But simply murdered.” (Book VI, lines 812-813)
[...]
And so, that little stone, called Marian Erle,
Picked up and dropped by you and another friend,
Was ground and tortured by the incessant sea
And bruised from what she was, changed! Death’s a change,
And she, I said, was murdered; Marian’s dead. (Book VI, lines 853-857)

“Murder” is something which recurs in Browning’s poems: “Porphyria’s Lover”, “My Last Duchess” and “The Laboratory”. Porphyria is more like Marian than the duchess or the adulterous woman: she is also submissive and even more so than Marian; Porphyria offers herself to her lover. The end result is the same: both women get killed: Porphyria literally and Marian metaphorically. Marian is not murdered in the literal meaning of the word: she is spiritually dead. Her only purpose in life is her child.

Elizabeth mainly deals with the “woman-question” about autonomy, jobs and education. Her protagonist is an unusual woman: she is well-educated and refuses to marry. She makes her own living as a poet, and is a very good-natured person. Most of Browning’s characters are wealthy or upper-class: they do not need to work or worry about making ends meet. Women do not have a job and just profit from their husband’s financial power. A good example of this is Lucrezia in “Andrea del Sarto”, who is given everything her heart desires. Robert’s main subject was definitely not the woman-question. His goal was to write about “evil” or mad characters and not about fighting some kind of battle of justice.

Before I move on to the conclusion of this dissertation, I would like to summarise the most important findings in this chapter about Aurora Leigh. First of all, there is a clear difference in the aims of the Brownings. Robert Browning does not take up the woman-question, whereas
Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s novel-poem is all about women and their need of some kind of independence and education. There is also a difference in treatment of the female characters: Aurora Leigh is a very independent woman with a wish for autonomy, Robert’s characters on the other hand are all dependent on their husbands or lovers. Aurora Leigh deals with people who have to struggle to survive, like Aurora Leigh herself, who cannot choose which paper or journal she writes for: she has to take anything that comes her way. Robert’s characters are often wealthy upper-class people, who do not need to worry about making money – except maybe Andrea del Sarto, who needs to paint to provide his wife with luxury.

Of course Robert Browning’s goal was not to degrade women in his poetry: he wanted to explore the evil mind of his protagonists. Gender relations were simply not of interest to him and never evolved to that either, although they were important in Elizabeth’s work. Robert did admire his wife’s writings, and encouraged her to write. When she wrote to him about her plan to write a novel-poem, she was stunned by his positive reaction:

Still, I am surprised, I own, at the amount of success; and that golden-hearted Robert is in ecstasies about it - far more than if it all related to a book of his own.194

Leigh Hunt described his opinion of Aurora Leigh in a letter to Robert Browning:

a unique, wonderful and immortal poem; astonishing for its combination of masculine power with feminine tenderness; for its novelty, its facility, its incessant abundance of thought, and expression; its being an exponent of its age. . . its lovely willingness to be no loftier, or less earthly, than something on an equality with love. I cannot express myself as thoroughly as I would; I must leave that to the poet, worthy of the poetess, who sits at her side.195

Betsy Boyd refers again to Leigh Hunt in her article on Aurora Leigh and explains that

this critic extols the virtues of Browning’s blend of masculine and feminine forces. Of course, he acknowledges that the poem reflects the Victorian age. Judging from his statement about the poem's equality with love and earthliness of the poem, however, Hunt believes the work to make a statement

Quoted in: Tonya Browning, Aurora Leigh: “A Woman’s Voice”.
<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ebb/alrev2.html> 30/03/2007.
about mortal life and emotional nature. Not so much concerned with the woman poet’s dynamic personal strength, he praises the poem’s excessive abundance of emotion. 196

5. Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to summarise the most important observations and findings. Browning’s poetry is unique in the history of English literature. The dramatic monologue as a literary form was something new in literature and has proven to be so important that it influenced some of the major writers and poets of the past century, for instance Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot.

In the biggest part of this dissertation I have discussed six of Browning’s poems: “Porphyria’s Lover”, “My Last Duchess”, “Andrea del Sarto”, “Count Gismond”, “The Laboratory” and “Evelyn Hope”. I compared these poems with respect to themes, characters and motifs.

Browning used the technique of the dramatic monologue to create imaginary characters that were enabled to ask relentless questions. The poems are constructed by the use of contrasts and conflicts “between the transience and permanence, love and selfishness, perfection and flaw, inertia and effort, renunciation and commitment, and the physical and spiritual.”\(^\text{197}\) The protagonists float between these contrasts and try to reach some kind of solution or goal, but never really succeed. Usually the actions of the narrators result in the death of the desired object (which happens in “Porphyria’s Lover”, “My Last Duchess”, “The Laboratory”, “Evelyn Hope”).

Browning’s speakers invite the sympathy of the reader. Moral judgement is not entirely possible in the form of the dramatic monologue because of the point of view that is used in the poems; the first person singular, on the other hand, makes it easier for the reader to identify with the narrator.\(^\text{198}\)

The speakers of some poems are portrayed as mad and the reader is warned about their unreliability. “Porphyria’s Lover” appeared in a collection of two poems with the title “Madhouse Cells”, which refers to the madness of the protagonists. Browning emphasised that the poems were not autobiographical by stating he did not write about characters that were inspired by his own thoughts and experiences; his characters did not have anything to do with him.

\(^{197}\) Guozhi Chen, *Male Identity in Browning’s Poetry*.

\(^{198}\) Guozhi Chen, *Male Identity in Browning’s Poetry*.
The social status of the characters is usually very good. Most of Browning’s speakers are strong, upper class, male protagonists, like the duke and count Gismond. Some of them are middle class: Porphyria’s lover for instance, who is not allowed at the party Porphyria goes to, and Andrea del Sarto, who has to paint to make a living. Most of them have a certain prestige, money and a reputation. These are of great importance in the poems “My Last Duchess”, “Andrea del Sarto” and “Count Gismond”. 

There is only one female speaker in Browning’s poems that I have chosen to discuss in my dissertation, viz. in “Count Gismond”. This poem is an exception compared to the other poems. This nameless female protagonist is very passive and has no voice of her own: she has to rely on the male character to save her. The other speakers are dominant male figures who tyrannise the other characters. Their goal is to possess a woman. If they do not succeed in that or if the situation is not to their liking, the only honourable solution they have left is to put an end to the life of the woman in question. That way they will always possess her: she remains untouched and the protagonist can manipulate the situation. Murder occurs in three of the six poems: “Porphyria’s Lover”, “My Last Duchess” and “The Laboratory”. Perhaps “Evelyn Hope” also belongs in this sequence, but whether or not Evelyn is murdered remains unclear.

The audience in Browning’s dramatic monologues is passive most of the time and they stand in a specific relationship to the speaker. Porphyria is the audience of the lover; the envoy of the duke; Lucrezia of Andrea del Sarto; Adela of the queen in “Count Gismond”; the brewer in “The Laboratory” and Evelyn Hope in “Evelyn Hope.” Usually the audience is inferior to the speaker: some of the characters have to obey their husband, lover or master, who is in a socially higher position. Thus the speaker usually holds power over the audience. There is always something that happens to the audience or that is peculiar about the way they behave towards the speaker. Most of the characters that are part of the audience are passive and dominated by the strong male protagonist. The need to objectify, possess and dominate is definitely a characteristic of Browning’s protagonists. Women get no voice and are very passive characters that are controlled by their husbands or lovers. The only woman who is a rebel and a mischievous character is going to be poisoned by her husband.

There are two special cases: Lucrezia, who is hardly paying attention to anything her husband is saying, and Evelyn Hope, because she is already dead at the start of the poem.

In addition to projecting all their desires onto a female object, the male speaker uses his narrative voice to suppress the woman’s point of view. This clearly indicates the domination of the male character over the female one. There is a pattern that shows how women are being
reduced to an object instead of being treated as a human being with feelings and thoughts of their own.
The male speakers objectify women in three ways: firstly they can put words in their mouths without giving them the possibility to defend themselves; secondly they can give the women a specific quality or value, which is a more subtle way of objectifying them; and thirdly they can impose their opinions and views on the female characters.  

Adultery is a recurring theme in Browning’s poetry: unfaithfulness is the main theme in “The Laboratory”, and it is also important in the context of “Andrea del Sarto”. In other poems, like “Porphyria’s Lover” and “My Last Duchess” adultery is merely hinted at, but it is still there. In “Count Gismond” the virginity of the girl is questioned: she is being accused of having slept with a man before marrying, which is unacceptable and will blemish her reputation.

In my final chapter I dealt with “Aurora Leigh”, one of the most important works of Browning’s wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning. To me, it seemed interesting to investigate the work of both spouses and compare their treatment of female characters in their poetry. Even though one might expect contrasting perceptions and attitudes, there are some striking similarities. A significant aspect that appears in both Robert and Elizabeth’s poetry is the objectification of women.

But the fact is that Robert Browning’s aim was a literary one, while Elizabeth’s goal was more ideological, so any comparison on this level is faulty. Robert’s poems are not autobiographical: he emphasised that his protagonists had nothing to do with his own person, while Elizabeth did include some elements of her own life and her ideas about womanhood and women’s lives. Robert Browning was deeply interested in sensationalism, grotesqueness, madness and abuse; he did not feel the need to degrade women. Furthermore, the male speakers are not portrayed as sane, strong and responsible men. On the contrary: they treat the women that way because they are mad, and not because they have a feeling of superiority towards women. The dramatic monologues are male-oriented: women do not get a voice. Elizabeth Barrett Browning on the other hand, gave her female character some kind of voice and lets the reader discover the aspirations of women, and the situations that they are in.

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The poetry of both Brownings and their lives fascinated me already before I started this dissertation, and it still manages to do so. I enjoyed reading Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s love poetry more than her novel-poem; *Aurora Leigh* was not the easiest text for me to read, but it proved worthwhile to compare it to Browning’s work. The parallels between the poems of the Brownings on all kinds of levels are striking and were engaging to discover and explore. “Porphyria’s Lover” remains my favourite poem of Robert Browning, but I appreciate the other dramatic monologues as well. Especially the mystery of “Evelyn Hope” appealed to me. “Andrea del Sarto” is perhaps the poem I liked the least, because it is so much longer than the other dramatic monologues and it came across as long-drawn-out.

To conclude I would like to draw attention to the difference of value of the work of the Brownings. Robert Browning’s poetry affected his contemporaries and later poets:

   Much of Robert Browning's legacy to poets writing after him in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries comes from his vitalization of the dramatic monologue. Victorian and modern poets have found it liberating to assume other personae (often quite alien to their own values and beliefs) and by looking through those characters’ eyes, allow them to speak for themselves.\(^{200}\)

The dramatic monologue has proven to be of considerable importance for Ezra Pound for instance, who was one of the major modernist poets. Pound’s work and ideas were significant for many other twentieth century writers and poets, like T.S. Eliot. Elizabeth Barrett Browning on the other hand, was very popular in her own days, but her poetry did not have any value for the modernists or other poets. She remained well-known, but unlike her husband her work had no influence on later trends in literature.

APPENDIX:

“Porphyria’s Lover”

The rain set early in to-night,
The sullen wind was soon awake,
It tore the elm-tops down for spite,
And did its worst to vex the lake:

5    I listened with heart fit to break.

When glided in Porphyria; straight
She shut the cold out and the storm,
And kneeled and made the cheerless grate
Blaze up, and all the cottage warm;

10   Which done, she rose, and from her form
Withdrew the dripping cloak and shawl,
And laid her soiled gloves by, untied
Her hat and let the damp hair fall,
And, last, she sat down by my side

15   And called me. When no voice replied,
She put my arm about her waist,
And made her smooth white shoulder bare,
And all her yellow hair displaced,
And, stooping, made my cheek lie there,

20   And spread, o’er all, her yellow hair,
Murmuring how she loved me --- she
Too weak, for all her heart’s endeavour,
To set its struggling passion free
From pride, and vainer ties dissever,

25   And give herself to me for ever.
But passion sometimes would prevail,
Nor could to-night’s gay feast restrain
A sudden thought of one so pale
For love of her, and all in vain:

30   So, she was come through wind and rain.
Be sure I looked up at her eyes
Happy and proud; at last I knew
Porphyria worshiped me; surprise
Made my heart swell, and still it grew

35   While I debated what to do.

That moment she was mine, mine, fair,
Perfectly pure and good: I found
A thing to do, and all her hair
In one long yellow string I wound

40   Three times her little throat around,
And strangled her. No pain felt she;
I am quite sure she felt no pain.
As a shut bud that holds a bee,
I warily oped her lids: again

45   Laughed the blue eyes without a stain.
And I untightened next the tress
About her neck; her cheek once more
Blushed bright beneath my burning kiss:
I propped her head up as before,

Only, this time my shoulder bore
Her head, which droops upon it still:
The smiling rosy little head,
So glad it has its utmost will,
That all it scorned at once is fled,

And I, its love, am gained instead!
Porphyria’s love: she guessed not how
Her darling one wish would be heard.
And thus we sit together now,
And all night long we have not stirred,

And yet God has not said a word!

“My Last Duchess”

That’s my last Duchess painted on the wall,
Looking as if she were alive. I call
That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf’s hands
Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will ‘t please you sit and look at her? I said
“Frà Pandolf” by design, for never read
Strangers like you that pictured countenance,
The depth and passion of its earnest glance,
But to myself they turned (since none puts by

The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)
And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,
How such a glance came there; so, not the first
Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, ‘twas not
Her husband’s presence only, called that spot

Of joy into the Duchess’ cheek: perhaps
Frà Pandolf chanced to say, “Her mantle laps
Over my Lady’s wrist too much,” or “Paint
Must never hope to reproduce the faint

Half-flush that dies along her throat”; such stuff

Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough
For calling up that spot of joy. She had
A heart . . . how shall I say? . . . too soon made glad,
Too easily impressed; she liked whate’er
She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

Sir, ‘twas all one! My favour at her breast,
The dropping of the daylight in the West,
The bough of cherries some officious fool
Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule
She rode with round the terrace—all and each

Would draw from her alike the approving speech,
Or blush, at least. She thanked men,—good; but thanked
Somehow . . . I know not how . . . as if she ranked
My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name
With anybody’s gift. Who’d stoop to blame

35 This sort of trifling? Even had you skill
In speech—(which I have not)—to make your will
Quite clear to such an one, and say, “Just this
Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,
Or there exceed the mark”—and if she let

Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set
Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
—E’en then would be some stooping; and I choose
Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
Whene’er I passed her; but who passed without

40 Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;
Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
As if alive. Will ‘t please you rise? We’ll meet
The company below, then. I repeat,
The Count your Master’s known munificence

50 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
Though his fair daughter’s self, as I avowed
At starting, is my object. Nay, we’ll go
Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,

55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.

“A Andrea del Sarto”

But do not let us quarrel any more,
No, my Lucrezia; bear with me for once:
Sit down and all shall happen as you wish.
You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?

5 I’ll work then for your friend’s friend, never fear,
Treat his own subject after his own way,
Fix his own time, accept too his own price,
And shut the money into this small hand
When next it takes mine. Will it? tenderly?

10 Oh, I’ll content him,—but to-morrow, Love!
I often am much wearier than you think,
This evening more than usual, and it seems
As if—forgive now—should you let me sit
Here by the window with your hand in mine

15 And look a half-hour forth on Fiesole,
Both of one mind, as married people use,
Quietly, quietly the evening through,
I might get up to-morrow to my work
Cheerful and fresh as ever. Let us try.
To-morrow, how you shall be glad for this!
Your soft hand is a woman of itself,
And mine the man’s bared breast she curls inside.
Don’t count the time lost, neither; you must serve
For each of the five pictures we require:

It saves a model. So! keep looking so--
My serpentining beauty, rounds on rounds!
--How could you ever prick those perfect ears,
Even to put the pearl there! oh, so sweet--
My face, my moon, my everybody’s moon,

Which everybody looks on and calls his,
And, I suppose, is looked on by in turn,
While she looks--no one’s: very dear, no less.
You smile? why, there’s my picture ready made,
There’s what we painters call our harmony!

A common greyness silvers everything,--
All in a twilight, you and I alike
--You, at the point of your first pride in me
(That’s gone you know),--but I, at every point;
My youth, my hope, my art, being all toned down
To yonder sober pleasant Fiesole.
There’s the bell clinking from the chapel-top;
That length of convent-wall across the way
Holds the trees safer, huddled more inside;
The last monk leaves the garden; days decrease,

Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape
As if I saw alike my work and self
And all that I was born to be and do,
A twilight-piece. Love, we are in God’s hand.

How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead;
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!
I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!
This chamber for example--turn your head--
All that’s behind us! You don’t understand

Nor care to understand about my art,
But you can hear at least when people speak:
And that cartoon, the second from the door
--It is the thing, Love! so such things should be--
Behold Madonna!--I am bold to say.

I can do with my pencil what I know,
What I see, what at bottom of my heart
I wish for, if I ever wish so deep--
Do easily, too--when I say, perfectly,
I do not boast, perhaps: yourself are judge,

Who listened to the Legate’s talk last week,
And just as much they used to say in France.
At any rate ‘tis easy, all of it!
No sketches first, no studies, that’s long past:
I do what many dream of, all their lives,
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--Dream? strive to do, and agonize to do,
And fail in doing. I could count twenty such
On twice your fingers, and not leave this town,
Who strive—you don’t know how the others strive
To paint a little thing like that you smeared

Carelessly passing with your robes afloat,--
Yet do much less, so much less, Someone says,
(I know his name, no matter)--so much less!
Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged.
There burns a truer light of God in them,

In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,
Heart, or whate’er else, than goes on to prompt
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman’s hand of mine.
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,
Reach many a time a heaven that’s shut to me,

Enter and take their place there sure enough,
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here.
The sudden blood of these men! at a word--
Praise them, it boils, or blame them, it boils too.

I, painting from myself and to myself,
Know what I do, am unmoved by men’s blame
Or their praise either. Somebody remarks
Morello’s outline there is wrongly traced,
His hue mistaken; what of that? or else,

Rightly traced and well ordered; what of that?
Speak as they please, what does the mountain care?
Ah, but a man’s reach should exceed his grasp,
Or what’s a heaven for? All is silver-grey,
Placid and perfect with my art: the worse!

I know both what I want and what might gain,
And yet how profitless to know, to sigh
“Had I been two, another and myself,
“Our head would have o’erlooked the world!” No doubt.
Yonder’s a work now, of that famous youth

(The Urbinate who died five years ago.
(‘Tis copied, George Vasari sent it me.)
Well, I can fancy how he did it all,
Pouring his soul, with kings and popes to see,

Above and through his art—for it gives way;
That arm is wrongly put—and there again--
A fault to pardon in the drawing’s lines,
Its body, so to speak: its soul is right,
He means right—that, a child may understand.

Still, what an arm! and I could alter it:
But all the play, the insight and the stretch--
(Out of me, out of me! And wherefore out?
Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think--
More than I merit, yes, by many times.
But had you--oh, with the same perfect brow,
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird
The fowler’s pipe, and follows to the snare --
Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!
Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged
“God and the glory! never care for gain.
“The present by the future, what is that?
“Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!
“Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!”
I might have done it for you. So it seems:
Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.
Beside, incentives come from the soul’s self;
The rest avail not. Why do I need you?
What wife had Rafael, or has Agnolo?
In this world, who can do a thing, will not;
And who would do it, cannot, I perceive:
Yet the will’s somewhat--somewhat, too, the power--
And thus we half-men struggle. At the end,
God, I conclude, compensates, punishes.
‘Tis safer for me, if the award be strict,
That I am something underrated here,
Poor this long while, despised, to speak the truth.
I dared not, do you know, leave home all day,
For fear of chancing on the Paris lords.
The best is when they pass and look aside;
But they speak sometimes; I must bear it all.
Well may they speak! That Francis, that first time,
And that long festal year at Fontainebleau!
I surely then could sometimes leave the ground,
Put on the glory, Rafael’s daily wear,
In that humane great monarch’s golden look,--
One finger in his beard or twisted curl
Over his mouth’s good mark that made the smile,
One arm about my shoulder, round my neck,
The jingle of his gold chain in my ear,
I painting proudly with his breath on me,
All his court round him, seeing with his eyes,
Such frank French eyes, and such a fire of souls
Profuse, my hand kept plying by those hearts,--
And, best of all, this, this, this face beyond,
This in the background, waiting on my work,
To crown the issue with a last reward!
A good time, was it not, my kingly days?
And had you not grown restless... but I know--
‘Tis done and past: ‘twas right, my instinct said:
Too live the life grew, golden and not grey,
And I’m the weak-eyed bat no sun should tempt
Out of the grange whose four walls make his world.
How could it end in any other way?
You called me, and I came home to your heart.
The triumph was--to reach and stay there; since
I reached it ere the triumph, what is lost?

Let my hands frame your face in your hair’s gold,
You beautiful Lucrezia that are mine!
“Rafael did this, Andrea painted that;
“The Roman’s is the better when you pray,
“But still the other's Virgin was his wife--""

Men will excuse me. I am glad to judge
Both pictures in your presence; clearer grows
My better fortune, I resolve to think.
For, do you know, Lucrezia, as God lives,
Said one day Agnolo, his very self,
To Rafael . . . I have known it all these years . . .
(When the young man was flaming out his thoughts
Upon a palace-wall for Rome to see,
Too lifted up in heart because of it)
“Friend, there’s a certain sorry little scrub
“Goes up and down our Florence, none cares how,
“Who, were he set to plan and execute
“As you are, pricked on by your popes and kings,
“Would bring the sweat into that brow of yours!”
To Rafael’s!--And indeed the arm is wrong.

I hardly dare . . . yet, only you to see,
Give the chalk here--quick, thus, the line should go!
Ay, but the soul! He’s Rafael! rub it out!
Still, all I care for, if he spoke the truth,
(What he? why, who but Michel Agnolo?
Do you forget already words like those?)
If really there was such a chance, so lost,--
Is, whether you’re--not grateful--but more pleased.
Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed!
This hour has been an hour! Another smile?

If you would sit thus by me every night
I should work better, do you comprehend?
I mean that I should earn more, give you more.
See, it is settled dusk now; there’s a star;
Morello’s gone, the watch-lights show the wall,
The cue-owls speak the name we call them by.
Come from the window, love,--come in, at last,
Inside the melancholy little house
We built to be so gay with. God is just.
King Francis may forgive me: oft at nights

When I look up from painting, eyes tired out,
The walls become illumined, brick from brick
Distinct, instead of mortar, fierce bright gold,
That gold of his I did cement them with!
Let us but love each other. Must you go?
That Cousin here again? he waits outside?
Must see you--you, and not with me? Those loans?
More gaming debts to pay? you smiled for that?
Well, let smiles buy me! have you more to spend?
While hand and eye and something of a heart
Are left me, work’s my ware, and what’s it worth?
I'll pay my fancy. Only let me sit
The grey remainder of the evening out,
Idle, you call it, and muse perfectly
How I could paint, were I but back in France,
One picture, just one more--the Virgin’s face,
Not yours this time! I want you at my side
To hear them--that is, Michel Agnolo--
Judge all I do and tell you of its worth.
Will you? To-morrow, satisfy your friend.
I take the subjects for his corridor,
Finish the portrait out of hand--there, there,
And throw him in another thing or two
If he demurs; the whole should prove enough
To pay for this same Cousin’s freak. Beside,
What’s better and what’s all I care about,
Get you the thirteen scudi for the ruff!
Love, does that please you? Ah, but what does he,
The Cousin! what does he to please you more?
I am grown peaceful as old age to-night.
I regret little, I would change still less.
Since there my past life lies, why alter it?
The very wrong to Francis!--it is true
I took his coin, was tempted and complied,
And built this house and sinned, and all is said.
My father and my mother died of want.
Well, had I riches of my own? you see
How one gets rich! Let each one bear his lot.
They were born poor, lived poor, and poor they died:
And I have laboured somewhat in my time
And not been paid profusely. Some good son
Paint my two hundred pictures--let him try!
No doubt, there’s something strikes a balance. Yes,
You loved me quite enough. it seems to-night.
This must suffice me here. What would one have?
In heaven, perhaps, new chances, one more chance--
Four great walls in the New Jerusalem,
Meted on each side by the angel’s reed,
For Leonard, Rafael, Agnolo and me
To cover--the three first without a wife,
While I have mine! So--still they overcome
Because there’s still Lucrezia,--as I choose.
Again the Cousin’s whistle! Go, my Love.
“Count Gismond”

Christ God who savest man, save most
Of men Count Gismond who saved me!
Count Gauthier, when he chose his post,
Chose time and place and company
To suit it; when he struck at length
My honour, ‘t was with all his strength.

And doubtlessly, ere he could draw
All points to one, he must have schemed!
That miserable morning saw
Few half so happy as I seemed,
While being dressed in queen’s array
To give our tourney prize away.

I thought they loved me, did me grace
To please themselves; ‘t was all their deed;
God makes, or fair or foul, our face;
If showing mine so caused to bleed
My cousins’ hearts, they should have dropped
A word, and straight the play had stopped.

They, too, so beauteous! Each a queen
By virtue of her brow and breast;
Not needing to be crowned, I mean,
As I do. E’en when I was dressed,
Had either of them spoke, instead
Of glancing sideways with still head!

But no: they let me laugh, and sing
My birthday song quite through, adjust
The last rose in my garland, fling
A last look on the mirror, trust
My arms to each an arm of theirs,
And so descend the castle-stairs-

And come out on the morning troop
Of merry friends who kissed my cheek,
And called me queen, and made me stoop
Under the canopy-(a streak
That pierced it, of the outside sun,
Powdered with gold its gloom’s soft dun)-

And they could let me take my state
And foolish throne amid applause
Of all come there to celebrate
My queen’s-day—Oh I think the cause
Of much was, they forgot no crowd
Makes up for parents in their shroud!

However that be, all eyes were bent
Upon me, when my cousins cast
Theirs down; ’t was time I should present
The victor’s crown, but ... there, ’t will last
No long time ... the old mist again
Blinds me as then it did. How vain!

See! Gismond’s at the gate, in talk
With his two boys: I can proceed.
Well, at that moment, who should stalk
Forth boldly—to my face, indeed—
But Gauthier? and he thundered “Stay!”
And all stayed. “Bring no crowns, I say!

“Bring torches! Wind the penance-sheet
“About her! Let her shun the chaste,
“Or lay herself before their feet!
“Shall she, whose body I embraced
“A night long, queen it in the day?
“For honour’s sake no crowns, I say!”

I? What I answered? As I live,
I never fancied such a thing
As answer possible to give.
What says the body when they spring
Some monstrous torture-engine’s whole
Strength on it? No more says the soul.

Till out strode Gismond; then I knew
That I was saved. I never met
His face before, but, at first view,
I felt quite sure that God had set
Himself to Satan; would who spend
A minute’s mistrust on the end?

He strode to Gauthier, in his throat
Gave him the lie, then struck his mouth
With one back-handed blow that wrote
In blood men’s verdict there. North, South,
East, West, I looked. The lie was dead,
And damned, and truth stood up instead.

This glads me most, that I enjoyed
The heart o’ the joy, with my content
In watching Gismond unalloyed
By any doubt of the event:
God took that on him—I was bid
Watch Gismond for my part: I did.

Did I not watch him while he let
His armourer just brace his greaves,
Rivet his hauberk, on the fret
The while! His foot ... my memory leaves
No least stamp out nor how anon
He pulled his ringing gauntlets on.

And e’en before the trumpet’s sound
Was finished, prone lay the false knight,
Prone as his lie, upon the ground:
Gismond flew at him, used no sleight
O’ the sword, but open-breasted drove,
Cleaving till out the truth he clove.

Which done, he dragged him to my feet
And said, “Here die, but end thy breath
“In full confession, lest thou fleet
“From my first, to God’s second death!
“Say, hast thou lied?” And, “I have lied
“To God and her,” he said, and died.

Then Gismond, kneeling to me, asked
-What safe my heart holds, though no word
Could I repeat now, if I tasked
My powers for ever, to a third
Dear even as you are. Pass the rest
Until I sank upon his breast.

Over my head his arm he flung
Against the world; and scarce I felt
His sword (that dripped by me and swung)
A little shifted in its belt:
For he began to say the while
How South our home lay many a mile.

So, ’mid the shouting multitude
We two walked forth to never more
Return. My cousins have pursued
Their life, untroubled as before
I vexed them. Gauthier’s dwelling-place
God lighten! May his soul find grace!

Our elder boy has got the clear
Great brow, tho’ when his brother’s black
Full eye shows scorn, it ... Gismond here?
And have you brought my tercel back?
I was just telling Adela
How many birds it struck since May.

“The Laboratory”

Now that I, tying thy glass mask tightly,
May gaze thro’ these faint smokes curling whitely,
As thou pliest thy trade in this devil’s smithy--
Which is the poison to poison her, prithee?

5  He is with her, and they know that I know
Where they are, what they do: they believe my tears flow
While they laugh, laugh at me, at me fled to the drear
Empty church, to pray God in, for them!--I am here.

Grind away, moisten and mash up thy paste,
Pound at thy powder,--I am not in haste!
Better sit thus and observe thy strange things,
Than go where men wait me and dance at the King’s.

That in the mortar--you call it a gum?
Ah, the brave tree whence such gold oozings come!

15  And yonder soft phial, the exquisite blue,
Sure to taste sweetly,--is that poison too?

Had I but all of them, thee and thy treasures,
What a wild crowd of invisible pleasures!
To carry pure death in an earring, a casket,
A signet, a fan-mount, a filigree basket!

Soon, at the King’s, a mere lozenge to give
And Pauline should have just thirty minutes to live!
But to light a pastile, and Elise, with her head
And her breast and her arms and her hands, should drop dead!

Quick--is it finished? The colour’s too grim!
Why not soft like the phial’s, enticing and dim?
Let it brighten her drink, let her turn it and stir,
And try it and taste, ere she fix and prefer!

What a drop! She’s not little, no minion like me--

30  That’s why she ensnared him: this never will free
The soul from those masculine eyes,--say, “no!”
To that pulse’s magnificent come-and-go.

For only last night, as they whispered, I brought
My own eyes to bear on her so, that I thought

35  Could I keep them one half minute fixed, she would fall,
Shrivelled; she fell not; yet this does it all!
Not that I bid you spare her the pain!
Let death be felt and the proof remain;
Brand, burn up, bite into its grace--
40 He is sure to remember her dying face!

Is it done? Take my mask off! Nay, be not morose;
It kills her, and this prevents seeing it close:
The delicate droplet, my whole fortune’s fee--
If it hurts her, beside, can it ever hurt me?

45 Now, take all my jewels, gorge gold to your fill,
You may kiss me, old man, on my mouth if you will!
But brush this dust off me, lest horror it brings
Ere I know it--next moment I dance at the King’s!

“Evelyn Hope”

Beautiful Evelyn Hope is dead!
Sit and watch by her side an hour.
That is her book-shelf, this her bed;
She plucked that piece of geranium-flower,
5 Beginning to die too, in the glass;
Little has yet been changed, I think:
The shutters are shut, no light may pass
Save two long rays through the hinge’s chink.
Sixteen years old when she died!

Perhaps she had scarcely heard my name;
It was not her time to love; beside,
Her life had many a hope and aim,
Duties enough and little cares,
And now was quiet, now astir,
15 Till God’s hand beckoned unawares,—
And the sweet white brow is all of her.
Is it too late then, Evelyn Hope?
What, your soul was pure and true,
The good stars met in your horoscope,

Made you of spirit, fire and dew—
And, just because I was thrice as old
And our paths in the world diverged so wide,
Each was naught to each, must I be told?
We were fellow mortals, naught beside?

20 No, indeed! for God above
Is great to grant, as mighty to make,
And creates the love to reward the love:
I claim you still, for my own love’s sake!
Delayed it may be for more lives yet,

Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few:
Much is to learn, much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you.
But the time will come—at last it will,
When, Evelyn Hope, what meant (I shall say)

In the lower earth, in the years long still,
That body and soul so pure and gay?
Why your hair was amber, I shall divine,
And your mouth of your own geranium’s red—
And what you would do with me, in fine,

In the new life come in the old life’s stead.
I have lived (I shall say) so much since then,
Given up myself so many times,
Gained me the gains of various men,
Ransacked the ages, spoiled the climes;

Yet one thing, one, in my soul’s full scope,
Either I missed or itself missed me:
And I want and find you, Evelyn Hope!
What is the issue? Let us see!
I loved you, Evelyn, all the while!

My heart seemed full as it could hold;
There was place and to spare for the frank young smile,
And the red young mouth, and the hair’s young gold.
So, hush.—I will give you this leaf to keep:
See, I shut it inside the sweet cold hand!

There, that is our secret: go to sleep!
You will wake, and remember, and understand.
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