Robert Browning's Last Word

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WERE THE BROWNINGS really married? This may seem an odd question in light of popular legends about their bliss, but it is a question scholars have been asking with increasing frequency. William Irvine and Park Honan, and more recently Clyde de L. Ryals, find a Browning increasingly estranged from his wife's moralism, political radicalism, and occultism. In their view, Robert Browning's marriage entailed the sacrifice of his deepest convictions and of the irony native to his poetic voice.[1]

Meanwhile, such feminist scholars as Helen Cooper, Dorothy Mermin, Dolores Rosenblum, and Sandra M. Gilbert are reconstructing Elizabeth's spiritual and artistic biography; all find Robert an accidental and ancillary presence as they recover an Elizabeth in quest of an authorizing poetic mother, one who will restore a woman abandoned in patriarchy to her proper legacy of a female culture and a woman's tradition.[2] Along with the jailer/father who once loomed so large in Freudian reconstructions of Elizabeth Barrett's life, the redemptive husband is diminishing to a mere distraction in the woman poet's quest for her lost female inheritance.

Female and male scholars alike are coming to doubt the authenticity of this marriage of poets. Only Flavia Alaya keeps faith, arguing eloquently that politically and poetically, the Brownings were as fully married as they

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[1]Irvine and Honan, *The Book, the Ring, & the Poet: A Biography of Robert Browning* (New York, 1974), and Ryals, *Becoming Browning: The Poems and the Plays of Robert Browning, 1833-1846* (Ohio State Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 254-255.

[2]Cooper, "Working into Light: Elizabeth Barrett Browning," *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Indiana Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 65-81; Mermin, "The Female Poet and the Embarrassed Reader: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*," *ELH*, 48 (1981), 351-367; Rosenblum, "Face to Face: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* and Nineteenth-Century Poetry," *VS*, 26 (1983), 321-338; Gilbert, "From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento," *PMLA*, 99 (1984), 194-211.

appeared to be.[3] Otherwise, contemporary scholars dismiss the romance that once seemed so enthralling.

Nobody, though, has yet looked closely at the poetry that resulted from this marriage of poets. If, as Phyllis Rose believes, the essence of marriage is storytelling, what stories do the Brownings tell? In examining five Victorian marriages, Rose is struck by

> the way in which every marriage was a narrative construct—or two narrative constructs. In unhappy marriages, for example, I see two versions of reality rather than two people in conflict. I see a struggle for imaginative dominance going on. Happy marriages seem to me those in which the two partners agree on the scenario they are enacting, even if . . . their own idea of their relationship is totally at variance with the facts.[4]

Rose avoids the political and literary complications of the Brownings' marriage, but this union of narrative poets exemplifies her theory of married storytelling. As Browning proclaims in his initial letter of invading adoration, their love story was read before it was experienced: "I do, as I say, love these books with all my heart—and I love you too" (quoted in Honan and Irvine, p. 147). Both Elizabeth and Robert Browning were ardent storytellers who felt that the books they produced were bodies. For Elizabeth's Aurora Leigh, "Poems are / Men, if true poems."[5] For Robert, the "pure crude fact" of the Old Yellow Book is "Secreted from a man's life when hearts beat hard."[6] The breathing, beating humanness of these books allows us to catechize these narratives as if they were people to discover whether they are congruent or conflicting.

Despite the passionate ambition of *Casa Guidi Windows,* Elizabeth's major work during their life in Florence was her immensely popular epic, *Aurora Leigh* (1853–56); Browning's volume *Men and Women* appeared in 1855, during the composition of *Aurora Leigh.* When he returned to England a widower, he transmuted Italy and Elizabeth into his own, fractured epic, *The Ring and the Book* (1868–69). This essay will examine the degree to which Robert Browning's dramatic monologues collaborate with Elizabeth's epic in the creation of a single story, the primary interest being biographical only insofar as poems are alive.[7] The tensions these poems reveal when explored together transcend the perishable, and perhaps happier, lives of the people who composed them. To use Phyllis Rose's

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[3]"The Ring, the Rescue, & the Risorgimento: Reunifying the Brownings' Italy," *BIS,* 6 (1978), 1–41.

[4]*Parallel Lives: Five Victorian Marriages* (New York, 1983), p. 7.

[5]Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh and Other Poems* (1853–56; rpt. London, 1978), Book III, ll. 90–91. Future references to this edition will appear in the text.

[6]Robert Browning, *The Ring and the Book,* ed. Richard D. Altick (Yale Univ. Press, 1971), "The Ring and the Book," ll. 35–36. Future references to this edition will appear in the text.

[7]As is true in Lawrence Lipking, *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers* (The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981).

terms, we shall look at the poems to see whether they agree on a unified story, or whether they embody two versions of reality in tacit but radical conflict.

Before their marriage, Robert Browning described their contrasting poetic voices with characteristic deference to Elizabeth's: "you *do* what I always wanted, hoped to do, and only seem now likely to do for the first time. You speak out, *you,*—I only make men & women speak—give you truth broken into prismatic hues, and fear the pure white light, even if it is in me."[8] In fact, in the "married" poems this essay considers, the two voices were more closely allied than this often-quoted letter suggests. Elizabeth, if anything, seems to move toward Robert. In *Casa Guidi Windows,* the poet's "I" announces itself boldly and often— "I love all who love truth," she proclaims unabashedly—but in *Aurora Leigh* she forfeits her own voice, for the epic authority is herself a dramatic character. The glorious free-spirited Aurora has little in common with the frail, family-beleaguered Elizabeth Barrett, who lived as the broken daughter her creature escaped becoming.

Aurora Leigh seizes possession of the truth via its author's abdication of the right to speak out directly: Elizabeth Barrett Browning grants her heroine an authority she herself never claims. In *Men and Women* and *The Ring and the Book,* Robert Browning abandons whatever attempt he once had made to "speak out": both volumes are a cacophony of obscure voices from an exotic past, "tell[ing] a truth / Obliquely" ("The Book and the Ring," ll. 855–856) as they contradict each other. Both Robert and Elizabeth claim "the truth," but neither dares utter it directly. Their methods in this period are more similar than different. The truths they tell are very different indeed.

Aurora's boast, at the center of her poem, has thrilled women readers from her day to our own:

> Never flinch,
> But still, unscrupulously epic, catch
> Upon the burning lava of a song
> The full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age:
> That, when the next shall come, the men of that
> May touch the impress with reverent hand, and say
> "Behold,—behold the paps we all have sucked!
> This bosom seems to beat still, or at least
> It sets ours beating: this is living art,
> Which thus presents and thus records true life." (V. 213–222)

Through its heroine, *Aurora Leigh* celebrates its epic self audaciously as a grand female body who takes contemporaneity into herself. Nineteenth-century epics abounded in giant female personifications, though few of them had such moist and palpable breasts: Coleridge's Life-in-Death, Byron's

[8] *The Letters of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett Barrett 1845–1846,* ed. Elvan Kinter (Harvard Univ. Press, 1969), I, 7.

Catherine the Great and her controlling female avatars in *Don Juan,* Keats's Moneta, Shelley's Asia, Tennyson's Vivien, Emily Brontë's A. G. A., Swinburne's Atalanta, and on a slighter scale Robert Browning's Pippa are all grand women who in some sense, like Britannia herself, personify their age. But its vaunted contemporaneity sets *Aurora Leigh* apart from other nineteenth-century attempts at epic. The younger Romantics and their Victorian followers set their long poems in a remote and mythic past; *Aurora Leigh* turns scornfully away from work that "trundles back . . . five hundred years, / Past moat and drawbridge, onto a castle-court" (V. 191–192). It decrees that the "sole work [of poets] is to represent the age, / Their age, not Charlemagne's" (V. 202–203).

In scorning the past and claiming its time, *Aurora Leigh* scorns virtually all present poetry. Taking as its inspiration novels like *Jane Eyre,* which also glorifies the imperious "I" of a heroine with an irrefutably topical career, it seizes the age male bards have shunned. The epic present is personified as a full-breasted woman because, among poets, only insurgent women dare to claim it, just as in *Casa Guidi Windows* and *Poems Before Congress,* only a woman dare embody the revitalized Italy male politicians fear and betray (see Alaya, pp. 14–17). Aurora's denunciation of poets who "flinch from modern varnish," withdrawing into "Roland with his knights at Roncesvalles" (V. 208, 207) may even be a furtive swipe at Robert's great dark "'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came'," though Elizabeth does allow her husband his lizards and toads:

> I do distrust the poet who discerns
> No character or glory in his times,
> And trundles back his soul five hundred years,
> Past moat and drawbridge, into a castle-court,
> To sing—oh, not of lizard or of toad
> Alive i' the ditch there,—'twere excusable,
> . . . . . .
> [But] dead must be, for the greater part,
> The poems made on their chivalric bones. (V. 189–198)

Nothing in *Aurora Leigh* qualifies this opposition between triumphant female present and desiccated male past. The brazen "I" who proclaims herself "the Age" reduces to corpses the rich history reanimated in *Men and Women,* which was published the year before Elizabeth wrote scathingly about "poems made on . . . bones."

In "Old Pictures in Florence," one of the few nondramatic monologues in *Men and Women,* the "I"—is Robert Browning speaking out at last?—embraces and restores the dead things Aurora Leigh kicks away. Musing "that Old and New are fellows," the speaker champions a past that is constantly obliterated:

Their ghosts now stand, as I said before,
Watching each fresco flaked and rasped,
Blocked up, knocked out, or whitewashed o'er
—No getting again what the church has grasped
The works on the wall must take their chance.[9]

Aurora's "full-veined, heaving, double-breasted Age" is supplanted by a past of crumbling plaster, each square of which once blazoned a vision as ephemeral as the long-dead men and women themselves. The truth in *Men and Women* expresses itself through the poet's trick of animating ghosts. The past is its terrain, specifically the male past, despite a few interpolated utterances by nameless women ("A Woman's Last Word," "Any Wife to Any Husband"). Even the rapturous tribute to Elizabeth in "One Word More"—"yourself my moon of poets!" (st. 19, l. 2)—is shadowed ominously by Andrea del Sarto's sardonic apotheosis of his promiscuous Lucrezia: "My face, my moon, my everybody's moon" (l. 29). Women may gaze celestially, but the past Browning animates throngs with male artists, seers, and spiritual questers of all sorts, engaged not in Aurora's triumphant appropriation but in the thwarting process of missing their moment.

The failure of the past to survive bestows on it Robert Browning's seal of authenticity. His "contemporary"—who is of course no longer contemporary with Victorian readers—is singularly myopic. In "How it Strikes a Contemporary," a worldly man frets about a poet who cloaks himself in silent anonymity:

He took such cognisance of men and things,
If any beat a horse, you felt he saw;
If any cursed a woman, he took note;
Yet stared at nobody,—they stared at him,
And found, less to their pleasure than surprise,
He seemed to know them and expect as much. (ll. 30-36)

Elizabeth Barrett Browning imagines the contemporary poet as public and female. Aurora Leigh snatches at her vocation by crowning herself; in her later aesthetic, her grand self-image crowns herself not with a wreath but with her Age. Like a fountain spouting in the middle of a park, she cannot but be noticed. Robert's contemporary exudes spying, staring, and secrecy. His poet is the most cloaked and private of men, whose contemporaries exist to be known, not to know him. Aurora is the seen, while Robert's obliquely perceived poet is the seer. She takes life from contemporaneity; his

[9] "Old Pictures in Florence," from *Men and Women 1855*, ed. Paul Turner (Oxford Univ. Press, 1972), st. 24. Future references to *Men and Women* are from this edition and will be cited in the text.

provisional life comes only after he has crumbled into the past. These different visions are not so much at war as they are mutually exclusive. For each poet, the world of the other is unreal, inhabited by the half-alive.

Moreover, in Keats's terms, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's epic celebrates the egotistical sublime, even if the ego is not directly the poet's own, while Robert's volume displays the virtuosity of the chameleon poet. From the first page, *Aurora Leigh* assaults us with a torrent of "I"s and "my"s. At the end, the power of the "I" is, if possible, intensified, for Aurora's godly lover, blinded and abased, permits her to "Shine out for two" (IX. 910). Robert's speakers never claim such paramount authority. The vociforousness and copiousness of the volume allows them to elbow each other aside; the robust "Zooks!" of Fra Lippo Lippi means more to us with the "dust and ashes" of Galuppi's toccata echoing in our ears. The delicate orchestration of the volume prevents any single speaker from achieving full authority, while it gives each the authority to undermine the claims of the rest.

Moreover, the form of the dramatic monologue undermines by its very nature the claims of the epic. Robert Langbaum's influential study emphasizes what we would now call reader response to the dramatic monologue as it suspends us tantalizingly between sympathy and judgment.[10] On the face of it, though, the dramatic monologue makes fewer demands on the reader than the epic does. The epic concerns itself with our acquiescence. If, after reading *Paradise Lost,* we do not feel that the ways of God have been justified, the Bard has failed, though the poem may have succeeded wonderfully. If, after reading *Aurora Leigh,* we fail to accept Aurora as the capacious spirit of her turbulent Age, the poem has insufficiently captivated us. In dramatic monologues, the speakers turn their designs away from us, directing their insistence to a generally skeptical listener. We hear and observe the speaker not in full face, but at an angle, through a glass darkly, relieved of the full force of his or her obsessed attention. Unlike the epic bard, the speaker is at no great pains to persuade us.

The unbelieving auditor, not the pressure of truth, dictates the dramatic monologue. The unseen authoritarian husband in "A Woman's Last Word" orchestrates his wife's utter, and utterly disingenuous, collapse; the ham-handed torch-waving guard dictates for that moment who Fra Lippo Lippi is, just as Lucrezia's scorn generates Andrea's self-scorn, or Saul's soul-sickness, David's prophetic self-glorification. Not only are

[10] *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (1957; rpt. New York, 1963). For a view of Browning's shaping auditor that is closer to my own, see Dorothy Mermin, *The Audience in the Poem: Five Victorian Poets* (Rutgers Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 47–82.

the selves of these speakers denied absolute authority, but they are in the process of continual and convoluted formation according to the auditors' unspoken demands. "So free we seem, so fettered fast we are," sighs Andrea for all these luxuriantly loquacious speakers. He is, in Browning's world, right, but God does not lay down the fetters: they arise from the constraints imposed by those unsympathetic others who dictate to the malleable self what it should be. The dramatic monologue celebrates self-creation, but it is a self-creation enforced by the power of skepticism over the insecurity of being. Other listeners would probably dictate other poems. In its essence, the dramatic monologue asks of us neither sympathy nor judgment. Rather, it strikes home to us the impurity of our own tale telling, the ways in which our own truth has been adjusted, not to a remote and acquiescent audience, but to our intimates who do not believe us.

Browning's dramatic monologues, then, are an oblique defense of the "prismatic hues" of his poetic truth, exposing the fatuousness of accusations like F. J. Furnivall's, in 1881:

> The interest of [Browning's "Essay on Shelley"] lay in the fact that Browning's "utterances" here are *his,* and not those of any one of the "so many imaginary persons" behind whom he insists on so often hiding himself, and whose necks I for one should continually like to wring, whose bodies I would fain kick out of the way, in order to get face to face with the poet himself, and hear his own voice speaking his own thoughts, man to man, soul to soul. Straight speaking, straight hitting, suit me best.[11]

For Browning, there is no single "face to face" revelation, but only faces, each one of which imprints a different soul, and thus a different truth, on its interlocutor.

For Elizabeth, on the other hand, face to face revelations were an absolute experience of epiphany and salvation. As Dolores Rosenblum puts it, "Looking into the mirror face of a mother-sister marks Aurora's discovery of an integrated self and a poetics" (p. 335). The spiritual authorities Elizabeth holds dearest dissolve mockingly in Robert's *Men and Women* to a pageant of distorted refractions. We are not seen by others with the grandiosity we see in ourselves, Robert's volume reminds us. The self is embarrassingly adjustable, contemporaneity embarrassingly obtuse. The corrosive power of Robert's poems over Elizabeth's iconography may have determined the sudden violence that ends *Aurora Leigh*: Aurora's mocking lover/cousin Romney is struck blind, and so can be married without danger. Aurora's eyes alone will see, thus retaining the power to make of all faces what Rosenblum calls "mirror faces." The integrity of her vision will never be undermined by skeptical reflections in another's eyes.

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[11]Quoted in William Benzie, *Dr. F. J. Furnivall: Victorian Scholar-Adventurer* (Norman, OK 1983), p. 139.

So far, in looking at *Men and Women* in conjunction with *Aurora Leigh,* we find, as in our own arms race, explosive material each poet is afraid to use. The vision in each book could be lethal to the other one, so they sit side by side, never quite in contact. Perhaps Robert speaks for both poets when he defines the nervous truce of "A Woman's Last Word":

> What so false as truth is,
> False to thee?
> Where the serpent's tooth is,
> Shun the tree—
>
> Where the apple reddens
> Never pry—
> Lest we lose our Edens,
> Eve and I! (ll. 13-20)

Once the worst had happened—Elizabeth's death and the loss of his Italian exile—Robert freed himself to transplant her material and her legend into his own poetic territory. During her life, she had regarded his fascination for the Old Yellow Book with some horror (see, for instance, Irvine and Honan, p. 409); when he melded its violence and intrigue into *The Ring and the Book,* he must at last have known she was dead. To be safe, though, he killed her again. His absorption of Elizabeth's iconography—particularly the glorification of Marian Erle in *Aurora Leigh* as a holy twin of the supreme woman poet who personifies her age—resurrects his sainted wife in order to butcher her in the person of Pompilia. His most radical butchery is spiritual. *The Ring and the Book* erodes Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cherished systems of salvation, a devastation over which he makes her preside in the attenuated person of "Lyric Love."

Lyric Love has little in common with the vibrantly physical poet evoked in Book V of *Aurora Leigh.* Since she is "half angel and half bird," she has no breasts and little blood to speak of; since "heaven [is her] home," she has evaporated helplessly out of her age, passing from cynosure to spectator, forced to gaze on a bloody past she cannot affect. *Aurora Leigh* dismissed the "ghosts" *Men and Women* restored. Now, Elizabeth herself is relegated to ghostliness, while Robert reanimates the seventeenth century in all its confused vitality. The woman who claimed to embody her age has been pushed into a past more remote than Italy's, forced to become the Muse of a tale she never would have told.

Moreover, Elizabeth Barrett Browning's most cherished material is part of the base metal out of which Robert forges his ring. *Aurora Leigh* celebrates the choric power of female community: its triumphant achievement is not Aurora's marriage to the diminished Romney, but her union with the victimized seamstress, Marian Erle. In the best tradition of fairy tale princes, the wealthy Romney had reached down to "save" Marian from her abased class and gender, only to be rejected twice; Aurora does save

her, not by elevating her, but by recognizing and ratifying her absolute truth. Together, Aurora and Marian exemplify the mystic interdependence of the female victim and queen, an interdependence which (as I have argued elsewhere) is a resonant presence in Victorian iconography.[12] *The Ring and the Book* mutes this vibrant union to the solitary whisper of the moribund Pompilia, whose truth is heard only by the pure of heart and the dying. This pale, isolated heroine drains from female truth its clarion authority.

In *Aurora Leigh,* both Aurora and Marian tell stories that have an instantaneous impact. Aurora's stories—her poems, and the poem we are reading—are validated by their immediate success; her age crowns her truth. Marian's two stories have a similar authoritative impact on their sole hearer, Aurora herself. When they first meet, she tells the initially skeptical Aurora the sad story of her life. Most of Robert Browning's auditors would remain skeptical, thus squeezing Marian's tale into that embarrassed compound of lies and semi-truths that constitutes the dramatic monologue. Aurora, on the other hand, is instantly converted, authenticating Marian's history by blending it into her own:

> She told me all her story out,
> Which I'll retell with fuller utterance,
> As coloured and confirmed in after times
> By others and herself too. (III. 827–830)

Our Bard Aurora confirms Marian's truth without question by translating it into her own, utterly reliable language.

Later, a chastened Aurora and a Marian purified by humiliation meet again in Paris. This time, Marian's wildly implausible tale of abduction, rape, and miraculous motherhood needs no validation: Aurora allows her to tell it at length, in her own voice. Its truth is instantaneously apparent. Without hesitation or attempts at confirmation, Aurora writes to a powerful friend:

> "Dear Lord Howe,
> You'll find a story on another leaf
> Of Marian Erle,—what noble friend of yours
> She trusted once, through what flagitious means,
> To what disastrous ends;—the story's true." (VII. 235–239)

The truth of Marian's stories echoes and reinforces the truth Aurora claims for herself as the self-crowning Bard of her own life history. The embodiments of truth know each other instantly in *Aurora Leigh*, as the good people do in Dickens' novels, because their very beings are illuminated. Thus, when Marian finds her mission in motherhood, we must not doubt that God has taken her shape:

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[12]Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 7–62.

> For, Romney, angels are less tender-wise
> Than God and mothers: even *you* would think
> What *we* think never. He is ours, the child;
> And we would sooner vex a soul in heaven
> By coupling with it the dead body's thought,
> Than, in my child, see other than . . . my child.
> We only never call him fatherless
> Who has God and his mother. (IX. 407–415; EBB's elision)

Even the best of men are excluded from this God-endowed authority of true womanhood: God obligingly abdicates his conventional fatherhood to legitimize a mother's self-completeness. As Marian is to her child, so is Aurora to her poem. Both women are the only begetters, the sole, self-consecrating authorities in a world with no other legitimate storytellers. Their affinity with God irradiates their spiritual power. In *The Ring and the Book*, Pompilia's intimacy with God assures that she will be silenced for a hundred and seventy years.

In recasting his wife's epic into his own, Robert Browning compressed these two powerful women into a single, dying young girl; he also modulated the elation of inspiration into the agony of sanctification. Pompilia's large eyes, her fineness of perception, her aesthetic and pictorial instinct, all look back to Aurora Leigh, as well as to Elizabeth Barrett Browning; the ordeal of her victimization is Marian Erle's. But Pompilia's truth rests in her martyrdom, not in the story she barely articulates. The inspired utterances of Aurora and Marian become the Christ-like wounds displayed involuntarily by a saint whose seal of purity is her illiteracy.

Aurora's quasi-allegorical name announces her; even when she marries Romney, she need never change it. By contrast, Pompilia's ornate names martyr her with lies:

> 'T is writ so in the church's register,
> Lorenzo in Lucina, all my names
> At length, so many names for one poor child,
> —Francesca Camilla Vittoria Angela
> Pompilia Comparini,—laughable! ("Pompilia," ll. 3–7)

In fact, of course, Pompilia's final name is legally "Franceschini." Her wishful omission of her husband's patronym does her no good: the marriage for which she is murdered and martyred is the salient fact of her life. Names do not express Pompilia, but oppress her. Her inexorable weight of names indicates her marginal position in her age: in her militance as well as her martyrdom, she is a hallowed spirit of anticultural life. It is impossible to imagine seventeenth-century Rome personified as a giant, heaving-breasted Pompilia; the spirit of the age is embodied in the men who shout and dissemble and display themselves as she lies dying. The authenticity of Pompilia's truth lies in her very removal from the turbulent contemporary life Aurora Leigh embodied. The spiritual authority of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's women is thrust to the margins of the social and political life Barrett Browning's poetry of the 1850s celebrated.

It may be Robert Browning's ultimate victory over his celebrated wife that he robs Pompilia of a public voice. Aurora Leigh's glory was more Bardic than moral, a glory she shared with the oral poet Marian. Robert Browning is at pains to bless Pompilia, his own victim/queen, with illiteracy, though the Old Yellow Book proves that the historical Pompilia could both read and write.[13] Pompilia herself uses illiteracy as a badge of distinction opposed to her falsifying weight of names. Aurora Leigh's writing exalted her as the spirit of her age, while Pompilia's inability to write exalts her by isolating her from that age:

> How happy those are who know how to write!
> Such could write what their son should read in time,
> Had they a whole day to live out like me.
> Also my name is not a common name,
> "Pompilia," and may help to keep apart
> A little the thing I am from what girls are. (ll. 82–87)

"The thing I am" removes her utterly from the life of her culture, almost from humanity itself; like Lyric Love, "half angel and half bird," Pompilia forfeits human privileges. The Pope's soliloquy authorizes her by blessing her most un-Aurora Leigh-like silence: after apotheosizing her as "perfect in whiteness," the Pope muses:

> It was not given Pompilia to know much,
> Speak much, to write a book, to move mankind,
> Be memorized by who records my time. ("The Pope," ll. 1019–21)

Because she is neither the author nor the spirit of her age, Pompilia shines as the "one prize" in the secret ruminations of the lone, dying Pope.

Her silence is rewarded with a fittingly secret benediction: like Pompilia, the Pope speaks in soliloquy.[14] The purity of both is immunized from the ambiguous entanglements of the dramatic monologue. Pompilia is spoken about incessantly in street and court, but she speaks only to an indeterminate audience in the privacy of her deathbed, and her death is more speaking than her words. Pompilia's glory is her secret, fitted only for the intimacies of soliloquy and of death. Had she dared to glorify herself in public, as Aurora Leigh did, Browning's poem assures us that no one would have noticed.

Since the trial does in fact vindicate Pompilia's innocence, *The Ring and the Book* might well have ended with general recognition of the dead saint. Instead, it ends in a tangle of dark and unregenerate activities with the bitter refrain, "Let God be true, and every man a liar." The lawyer who had "sainted" her plans to indict her as a "person of dishonest life," allowing the

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[13]See J. E. Shaw, "The 'Donna Angelicata' in *The Ring and the Book*," *PMLA*, 41 (1926), 58–63.

[14]For a discussion of the essential soliloquy within Pompilia's apparent dramatic monologue, see Roy E. Gridley, "Browning's Pompilia," *JEGP*, 67 (1968), 64–83.

Convertite nuns to claim her property; and these presumably are the very nuns who heard her deathbed soliloquy. Far from being instantaneously converted, as Aurora Leigh was by Marian Erle's tales, the Convertites repudiate her truth and proceed on their hale if unglorified way.

Pompilia may be "perfect in whiteness," at least in the Pope's somber account, but her words have no more authority than the other words that fly around in this poem, whose "tongue" proves indeed "a two-edged sword" ("The Book and the Ring," l. 708). Like Marian Erle before her, Pompilia exalts the absolute and divine power of her motherhood, claiming kinship with a mothering God who expunges male violence:

> Let us leave God alone!
> Why should I doubt He will explain in time
> What I feel now, but fail to find the words?
> My babe nor was, nor is, nor yet shall be
> Count Guido Franceschini's child at all—
> Only his mother's, born of love not hate!
> ("Pompilia," ll. 1759–64)

Pompilia asserts her divinely sanctioned self-sufficiency only to have the poem destroy it. Even the fitfully omniscient narrator corrects her and puts her in her place:

> Well, proving of such perfect parentage,
> Our Gaetano, *born of love and hate,*
> Did the babe live or die?—one fain would find!
> What were his fancies if he grew a man?
> Was he proud,—a true scion of the stock,—
> Of bearing blason, shall make bright my Book—
> Shield, Azure, on a Triple Mountain, Or,
> A Palm-tree, Proper, whereunto is tied
> A Greyhound, Rampant, striving in the slips?
> Or did he love his mother, the base-born,
> And fight i' the ranks, unnoticed by the world?
> ("The Book and The Ring," ll. 812–822; my italics)

Browning's narrator is unyielding: Pompilia is allowed no mitigation of her invisibility and silence. Gaetano's inheritance from her is not glory, but the distinction of being consistently unnoticed. Elsewhere in this volume, Professor U. C. Knoepflmacher explores ways in which, under Elizabeth's influence, Robert Browning gives a voice to the martyred women his earlier poems had silenced. This is so, but *The Ring and the Book* is ruthless in insisting that if the saving poet had not descended to give Pompilia his own versatile voice, she would have been forever unheard. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's "unscrupulously epic" claims for absolute authority in her age are in *The Ring and the Book* suppressed with loving brutality. The story of Pompilia, who is perfect in whiteness and exemplifies truth, suggests that a woman speaks with purity only by dying unheard.

Having survived a poet who made epic claims for herself, Robert Browning perpetuated her voice by turning it into his own; he "married" Elizabeth Barrett one more time when he appropriated her after her death, weaving her declarations into the corrosive fabric of his dramatic monologues. According to Irvine and Honan, she had found from the first something sinister in his ability to read her: "She had been frightened of him at first. She felt he had a power over her, that he could read her thoughts as he might read a newspaper" (p. 192). This initial ability to read Elizabeth ripened into an ability to write her and finally, with love and reverence, to silence her.

Having lived beyond his marriage, Robert Browning had a man's last word. Characteristically, his final tribute to Elizabeth twisted the promise that was, in "A Woman's Last Word," a wife's:

> Teach me, only teach, Love!
> As I ought
> I will speak thy speech, Love,
> Think thy thought. (ll. 25–28)

Robert Browning ended up by speaking his wife's speech and thinking her thought, but in muting them to a dying whisper among dramatic monologues, he drained them of authority. Initially, he had praised Elizabeth enviously for her capacity to "speak out"; finally, he spoke out for her, making her voice one of many testimonies to the superior survival power of a poet who could "make men & women speak." In his crowning work, he added his wife to the chorus of his creations.