BROWNING'S LITERARY REPUTATION: 1833-1870

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"The reputation of any person at any given moment is the sum total, measured in quality and quantity, of all the opinions held about him by all living persons who have any opinion about him at all. It follows that any estimate of any reputation can be little more than a guess."[1]

Only one book dealing exclusively with Browning's literary reputation has been written: T. R. Lounsbury's The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning, which appeared in 1911. Lounsbury has since been criticized by Maurice Cramer, who in the early 1940's published three articles whose purpose was to show that in effect Lounsbury had been guilty of grossly misleading guesswork. DeVane, in turn, has taken issue with Cramer; and McElderry has printed his special quarrels with DeVane. In short, as there was during Browning's lifetime great difference of opinion concerning the worth of his poetic endeavors, since his death there has been much disagreement in studies of what was thought about him during his lifetime.

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[1]D. C. Somervell, "The Reputation of Robert Browning," Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association, XV (1929), 122.

The purpose of this thesis is to present English opinion of Browning, contemporary with him, from the anonymous publication in 1833 of his first poem, Pauline, through the appearance in 1868-69 of what is agreed to be his masterpiece, The Ring and the Book. Somervell most correctly observes that "a study of a reputation, to be of much value, would have to be exceedingly exhaustive."[2] This study makes no pretense to such exhaustiveness. In the first place, had it been confined to the opinions expressed by reviewers, the understandable deficiency of available material in that area would have precluded any thoroughly conclusive statement. Even so, such a statement would be misleading; as Somervell further points out, "It would be a mistake to suppose that a man's real reputation is to be found only in what is said about him in print."[3]

Again, DeVane and others have gathered from widely scattered printed sources various comments on Browning's work by contemporaries other than critics; but it is scarcely conceivable that more than a fraction of what was thus said about Browning could have been recorded. Moreover, a definitive study of Browning's reputation would seem to require a correlated investigation of the turbulent Victorian era in order to ascertain how the general

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[2] Ibid., p. 124.

[3] Ibid., p. 123.

attitude of the time, which seemingly changed with each decade, would reflect the predisposition of Browning's public toward him. Such an investigation, invaluable as it would be, is obviously outside the scope of this study. Even the differing canons by which various reviewers formed their opinions are relevant, inasmuch as these very laws of criticism--classical or otherwise--determined the critics' notions, necessarily preconceived, of how a writer should write and of what he should write about.

In spite of these hindrances, however, in this thesis an attempt has been made to derive from the available Victorian judgment of Browning a reasonably clear picture of the chronological progress of his acceptance. The bibliography of Browning compiled by Broughton and others has proved to be indispensable, furnishing as it does by chronological arrangement and frequent quotation from locally unavailable Victorian periodicals "a rough but suggestive temperature chart of Browning's reputation." The various arguments of those scholars who have concerned themselves with Browning's reputation have been introduced where helpful in trying to synthesize as accurate an overall estimate as possible.

This study will consider the acceptance of each of Browning's publications, in chronological order of their appearance. The chapter divisions have been made at what

seem to be crucial points in Browning's career. Beginning with the appearance of Pauline (1833), the second chapter concludes with a discussion of Sordello (1840), the poem which may be said to have effectively dampened initial enthusiasm for Browning. The third chapter ends with Browning's departure for Italy in 1846 after he had attempted to regain the confidence of critics and public by giving them numerous immortal poems. Dealing with the years in Italy, the fourth chapter goes through the publication of Men and Women (1855), in which Browning offered such ransom for his popularity as "Andrea del Sarto," thought by one critic to be as "perfect as anything of that painter's, who was called the 'Faultless.'"[4] The fifth chapter discusses the progress of Browning's reputation through the appearance of Dramatis Personae in 1864; the sixth, the response to The Ring and the Book in 1869.

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[4]North British Review, XXXIV (May, 1861), 370.

CHAPTER II

1833-1840

Exalted with youth and ambition as he returned home from a performance of Richard III in October, 1832, twenty-year-old Robert Browning conceived a grandiose plan which, as he reported a year later, "occupied me mightily for a time, and which had for its object the ennabling me to assume and realize I know not how many different characters." His intention was to write and publish pseudonymously works such as poems, operas, and novels whose "respective authors" were not to be guessed by the world to be "no other than one and the same individual." Accordingly, he set to work on Pauline, "the first work of the poet of the batch," and by January, 1833, had completed its 1031 lines of blank verse.[1]

Some years later, Joseph Arnould, one of Browning's friends, spoke of Pauline as "a strange, wild (in parts singularly magnificent) poet-biography: his own early life as it presented itself to his own soul viewed poetically: in fact, psychologically speaking, his 'Sartor Resartus' . . . written and published . . . when Shelley was his

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[1]William Clyde DeVane, A Browning Handbook, 2nd ed. (New York, 1955), p. 41.

God."[2] The significance of Arnould's words is apparent upon recalling that at the age of fourteen the precocious and self-centered Browning had managed to obtain the almost unheard-of works of Shelley, under whose influence he rapidly developed atheistic tendencies and began to wage against parents, church, and society a personal rebellion in which he was unable to admit defeat before reaching his late teens. Pauline purported to be merely an account from an unidentified young man of twenty to his love, Pauline, of his victorious struggle with the forces of doubt, social restlessness, and self-centeredness; however, since Browning had also taken from Shelley the belief that the proper subject of poetry is the soul of the poet himself, the poem may be said to be autobiographical in the sense that in Pauline it was actually Browning himself who confessed his gradual release from skepticism and his repentant return to faith and love.[3]

After Browning had completed Pauline, his father's customary indulgence was for once restrained: he refused to stand the expense of the publication of the poem, feeling possibly that the time was not favorable to poetry, an overproduction of verse in recent years apparently having tired the public, who now seemed to be refusing to read or

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[2]Frederic G. Kenyon, editor, Robert Browning and Alfred Domett (London, 1906), p. 141.

[3]DeVane, pp. 42-44.

to buy.[4] Nevertheless, in March, 1833, Pauline was published anonymously by a London firm at the expense of Browning's aunt; and Browning waited anxiously for the world to declare its appreciation.[5]

It was undoubtedly with a great sense of disappointment that he read the first of the reviews of the poem, which appeared in the Literary Gazette for March 23, 1833, and noted disdainfully: "Somewhat mystical, somewhat poetical, somewhat sensual, and not a little unintelligible,--this is a dreamy volume, without an object, and unfit for publication."[6]

But there was yet hope: Browning had paved the way for at least one favorable review by sending a copy to William J. Fox, the editor of the Monthly Repository, a Unitarian periodical. When Browning was twelve he had been introduced to Fox by his young ward Eliza Flower, with whom the Browning family was associated in Nonconformist society. Miss Flower had shown to Fox some of Browning's earliest poetical efforts, from the juvenile volume Incondita, "which verses he praised not a little,

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[4]T. R. Lounsbury, The Early Literary Career of Robert Browning (New York, 1911), p. 6.

[5]W. Hall Griffin and Harry Christopher Minchin, The Life of Robert Browning, 3rd ed. (London, 1910), p. 57.

[6]Literary Gazette, March 23, 1833, p. 183.

which praise comforted me not a little," as Browning remembered years later; and now the anonymous letter accompanying the copy of Pauline sent to Fox alluded to their earlier meeting and expressed hope that the poem should not "be found too insignificant for cutting up."[7]

The letter produced the desired effect: in his review of Pauline in the Monthly Repository for April, 1833, Fox declared: "Whoever the anonymous author may be, he is a poet. . . . We felt certain of Tennyson . . . ; we are not less certain of the author of Pauline." After reading what he called "the annals of a poet's mind" in a description of the "fiercest conflicts, the brightest triumphs," Fox concluded that Pauline "has truth and life in it, which gave us a thrill, and laid hold of us with the power, the sensation of which has never yet failed us as a test of genius." And though admitting that the work was "evidently a hasty and imperfect sketch," he assured his readers:

> In recognizing a poet we cannot stand upon trifles, nor fret ourselves about such matters. Time enough for that afterwards, when larger works come before us. Archimedes in the bath had many particulars to settle about specific gravities and Hiero's crown, but he first gave a glorious leap and shouted Eureka![8]

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[7]Lounsbury, p. 10.

[8]Monthly Repository, New Series, VII (April, 1833), 252-262.

Filled with "inexpressible delight," Browning promised Fox that "he should never write a line without thinking of the source of his first praise." And more than fifty years later he termed Fox's review "the most timely piece of kindness in the way of literary help that ever befell me."[9]

Fox was not alone, however, in giving hearty welcome to Browning; in the Athenaeum for April 6, 1833, Allen Cunningham observed:

> There is not a little true poetry in this very little book: here and there we have a touch of the mysterious, which we cannot admire; and now and then a want of true melody, which we can forgive; with perhaps more abruptness than is necessary; all that, however, is as a grain of sand in a cup of pure water, compared to the nature, and passion, and fancy of the poem.[10]

And on April 14, the Atlas, though recognizing "mechanical difficulties" which hindered the "adaptation of style to thought," saw "many passages in the piece of considerable beauty, and a few of such positive excellence that we augur very favorably of the genius that produced them." The reviewer went on to say that "the poem has created in us just so much interest as will induce us to look with some curiosity at the author's next essay."[11]

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[9]Griffin and Minchin, p. 58.

[10]Leslie Nathan Broughton and others, compilers and editors, Robert Browning: A Bibliography, 1830-1950 (Ithaca, 1953), p. 83, C 2.

[11]Ibid., p. 83, C 1.

In spite of this favorable reception, however, not one copy of Pauline was sold;[12] apparently the skepticism of Browning's father had not been unfounded. Browning's enthusiasm was further dampened when in August Tait's Edinburgh Magazine referred to Pauline as "a piece of pure bewilderment";[13] and in October Browning himself spoke of the poem as an "abortion" and realized that the grandiose plan of the preceding October had been "foolish."[14]

His disheartened frame of mind was caused not so much by the bales of unbound sheets that had been sent home from the publisher as by a circumstance of primary importance insofar as it totally redirected his approach to the writing of poetry. John Stuart Mill, to whom Fox had given a copy of the poem in order that he might review it, was convinced that the speaker in Pauline, whom he shrewdly guessed to be the anonymous author himself, had not recovered from the state of dissatisfaction described; and this conviction Mill indicated in the margin of his copy, where he began with these words: "With considerable poetic powers, the writer seems to me possessed with a more intense and morbid self-consciousness than I ever

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[12]Griffin and Minchin, p. 60.

[13]Broughton and others, p. 84, C 6.

[14]Griffin and Minchin, p. 56.

knew in any sane human being."[15] This review was not published; but when Fox returned Mill's copy to Browning in October, 1833, Browning realized, after reading Mill's marginal notes, that he had exposed his callow soul to public gaze; and he resolved that henceforward his poetry would be objective and dramatic: the utterances of created characters, not of himself; and the chronicles of the souls of others, preferably historical persons.[16]

It is curious that Browning should have remarked years later that Mill's review would have "rendered him most powerful help, exactly at the time when it was most needed." It had not been published because it had been forestalled by the "flippant" notice of another reviewer in the August issue of Tait's, for which Mill also wrote; but Browning must have realized that Mill's severe strictures could have been of no help whatsoever,[17] for he himself had concluded his own note in the copy Mill had used by observing, "Only this crab remains of the shapely Tree of Life in this Fool's paradise of mine."[18]

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[15]DeVane, p. 46.

[16]Ibid., p. 11.

[17]L. F. Haines, "Mill and Pauline: The Review that 'Retarded' Browning's Fame," Modern Language Notes, LIX (June, 1944), 410-412.

[18]Griffin and Minchin, p. 57.

In the fall of 1834 Browning began his second poem, in which the soul he had chosen to expose was that of a German chemist and physician of the Renaissance--Paracelsus, whose aspiration was to become the master of all knowledge.[19] That the form of the poem was somewhat dramatic was owing largely to Mill's criticism of Pauline; but although persons, acts, places, and times were given, Browning carefully pointed out in the preface that the work was intended to be a poem and not a play.[20]

After Paracelsus had been completed in March, 1835, Browning obtained through Fox an introduction to Moxon, who had recently published Tennyson's latest volume as well as Henry Taylor's Philip van Artevelde, considered by critics to be the literary event of the day. Moxon, however, refused to publish Paracelsus, even though the expenses of publication were to be borne by Browning's father, because he had lately become convinced that there was no money to be made from poetry. In spite of favorable reviews and a second edition within six months, Taylor's Artevelde had not paid expenses; and after two and a half years only three hundred copies of Tennyson's volume had been sold. As Taylor later recalled in his autobiography, "It was a flat time; publishers would have nothing to say to poets, regarding them as unprofitable

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[19]DeVane, p. 12.

[20]Ibid., p. 50.

people." Saunders and Otley, the publishers of Pauline, regarded that poem so dismal a failure on the market that Paracelsus would not be considered at all. Eventually, however, Fox was successful in persuading Effingham Wilson to bring out Paracelsus, and on August 15, 1835, the poem, the first to bear Browning's name as author, made its appearance.[21]

First of the critics to speak was the one writing for the Spectator. As his review also appeared on August 15 and there is no report that he had seen an advance copy of Paracelsus, his opinion could have been formed only by means of a glance at the poem:

> Evidences of mental power, perhaps of poetical talent, are visible throughout, but there is no nice conception and development of character, nothing peculiar or striking in the thoughts, whilst the language in which they are clothed gives them an air of mystical or dreamy vagueness.[22]

Although the Athenaeum had devoted one hundred lines to Pauline in 1833, Paracelsus was dismissed with less than a hundred words:

> There is talent in this dramatic poem, (in which is attempted a picture of the mind of this celebrated character,) but it is dreamy and obscure. Writers would do well to remember, (by way of example,) that though it is not difficult to imitate the mysticism and vagueness of Shelley, we love him and have taken

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[21]Griffin and Minchin, p. 72.

[22]Broughton and others, p. 84, C 12.

> him to our hearts as a poet, not because of these characteristics--but in spite of them.[23]

This brief warning so incensed Browning that he reminded Elizabeth Barrett of it ten years later, calling it "a most flattering sample of what the 'craft' had in store for me."[24] At that time Miss Barrett expressed her indignation that Paracelsus had been termed "an imitation of Shelley, when if Paracelsus was anything, it was the expression of a new mind, as all might see, as I saw."[25]

That others were beginning to see in 1835 is evident from the three-column notice which appeared in the Examiner on September 6. John Forster, the critic, began: "Since the publication of Philip van Artevelde, we have met with no such evidences of poetical genius, and of general intellectual power, as are contained in this volume." He admitted that there were "tedious passages" in this "philosophic view of the mind of Paracelsus, its workings and misworkings, its tendencies and efforts and results, worked out through the pure medium of poetry"; but he assured the reader that he would find "enough of beauty to compensate him for the tedious passages," as "a rich vein of internal sentiment, a deep knowledge of

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[23] Athenaeum, August 2, 1835, p. 640.

[24] Griffin and Minchin, p. 73.

[25] Ibid., p. 66.

humanity, an intellect subtle and inquisitive, will soon fix his interest, and call forth his warmest admiration." After giving an analysis of the poem and pointing out scenes of "power" and "tenderness," Forster concluded that "we may safely predict for its author a brilliant career, if he continues to the present promise of his genius. He possesses all the elements of a fine poet."[26]

In November, Fox, ever faithful, gave the "fullest expression of his admiration" in the Monthly Repository:

> This poem is what few modern publications either are, or affect to be; it is a work. It is the result of thought, skill, and toil. Defects and irregularities there may be, but they are those of a building which the architect has erected for posterity . . . .

Apparently resenting the somewhat contemptuous notices which had appeared in the Spectator and the Athenaeum, he added a reminder: "Paracelsus was not written, nor is it to be read, ex tempore. This circumstance has sorely puzzled the critics, especially the Weeklies."[27]

Writing a "favorable review throughout" in the London Journal for November 21, 1835, Leigh Hunt declared that no questions could be raised "as to the high poetic power displayed" in Paracelsus, and classed the poem with Wordsworth's Prelude. Sounding the first defense of Browning's style, he went on record as stating:

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[26]Examiner, September 6, 1835, pp. 563-565.

[27]Broughton and others, p. 84, C 10.

> We do not . . . object to his long and often somewhat intricately involved sentences, or to forms of phraseology and construction, of occasional occurrence, which are apt for a moment to perplex or startle on the first reading, or to any other deviations of a similar kind from ordinary usage or the beaten highway prescribed by our books of authority in grammar, rhetoric, and prosody, in so far as such unusual forms are the natural and unaffected product of the writer's genius, working its purposes in its own way.[28]

At Fox's home on November 27, Browning was introduced to the famous actor Macready; ten days later, Macready, then reading Paracelsus "with ecstasy," recorded in his diary that Browning "can scarcely fail to be a leading spirit of his time." The friendship between Browning and Macready ripened quickly; and Browning spent New Year's Eve at the actor's home, where he met John Forster, whose greeting was, "Did you see a little notice of you I wrote in the Examiner?"[29]

But Forster had not yet finished praising Paracelsus: following hard on the heels of the reviewer for Fraser's Magazine, who in March, 1836, hailed Browning as "a man after our own heart,"[30] Forster penned in the same month an article for Colburn's New Monthly Magazine entitled "Evidences of a New Genius for Dramatic Poetry." Leaving Henry Taylor and his Artevelde out of the question, he was

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[28]Ibid., p. 84, C 11.

[29]Griffin and Minchin, p. 75.

[30]Broughton and others, p. 85, C 15.

now convinced that Browning had opened "a deeper vein of thought, of feeling, and of passion, than any poet has attempted for years"; and though aware that his opinion would "possibly startle many persons," he let down all critical reserve: "Without the slightest hesitation we name Mr. Browning at once with Shelley, Coleridge, and Wordsworth. He has entitled himself to a place among the acknowledged poets of the age."[31]

From the same review it is learned that even after six months Paracelsus had been only "scantily-noticed" by the reading public. According to Gosse, "the public refused to have anything to say to so strange a poem [in which one of the characters, more than once, expresses himself in upward of three hundred lines of unbroken soliloquy]; very few copies were sold."[32] However, the financial failure of the poem was nothing exceptional for the time; and as Lounsbury reports, "In every other respect, save that of sale, Paracelsus was the most unqualified of successes."[33]

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[31]Colburn's New Monthly Magazine and Literary Journal, XLVI (March, 1836), 289.

[32]Edmund Gosse, Robert Browning Personalia (Boston and New York, 1890), p. 37.

[33]Lounsbury, p. 29.

Moreover, its publication opened to Browning a completely new social world. Macready and Forster had enthusiastically provided him with an entree into literary society; accordingly, Browning was present at the famous "Ion" supper given on May 26, 1836, by Sergeant Talfourd, who was then enjoying enormous but transitory fame due to the success of his play, Ion, in which Macready was appearing at Covent Garden.[34] Talfourd's home was thronged with lawyers, artists, actors, and authors; at one table, Browning sat opposite Macready, who was flanked by Wordsworth and Landor. The "crowning event of Browning's early literary fame" came when Talfourd, who had proposed a toast to the "Poets of England," nominated, among others, the author of Paracelsus. Browning found himself seated while the other guests rose; and William Wordsworth leaned across the table and said, "I am proud to drink to your health, Mr. Browning!"

In DeVane's words, "To make [Browning's] cup run over on that memorable evening, as the party was breaking up Macready spoke to the young poet and said, 'Will you not write me a tragedy, and save me from going to America?'"[35]

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[34]Maurice B. Cramer, "Browning's Friendships and Fame before Marriage (1833-1846)," PMLA, LV (1940), 218.

[35]DeVane, p. 13.

Apparently Macready was not confident that Ion would continue to be well received; at any rate, he was deeply concerned with the present condition of the drama in England, and more than a little as it related to his personal welfare. In April he had left Drury Lane following a quarrel with the manager, who had forbidden him to present Richard II; and in January he had recorded in his journal:

> Browning said that I had bit him by my performance of Othello, and I told him I hoped I should make the blood come. It would, indeed, be some recompense for the miseries, the humiliations, the heart-sickening disgusts which I have endured in my profession, if, by its exercise, I had awakened a spirit of poetry whose influence would elevate, ennoble, and adorn our degraded drama. May it be![36]

In 1836 the English stage was, according to one contemporary critic, "a byword of contempt." Drury Lane, Covent Garden, and the Haymarket monopolized exclusively the representation of the "regular" drama; yet the managers, attempting to avoid bankruptcy, were pandering to public taste for melodrama, spectacular displays, and even circus performances and wild beast shows. One of the chief attractions at Covent Garden in 1836 was a spectacular in which a game of dominoes was played by the characters, dressed as dominoes, "in a most remarkable way." It is reported to have made "a remarkable hit:

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[36]Gosse, p. 40.

nearly all the aristocracy came to see it." Its creator was Fitzball, a salaried dramatist retained by Covent Garden, who believed that "everything dramatic that is moral, interesting, and amusing to the public, is the legitimate drama, whether it be illuminated with blue fire, or in one act or in twenty."[37]

But to John Forster, Paracelsus seemed to point toward the redemption of the drama: in March his article, "Evidences of a New Genius for Dramatic Poetry," had expressed this conviction in reference to Browning:

> Dramatic genius--perfectly new, born of our own age, the offspring of original thinking and original expression . . . is now actually amongst us, and waits only the proper opportunity . . . to redeem the drama, and to elevate the literary repute, of England.[38]

On the night of the "Ion" supper the "proper opportunity" had been presented by Macready, who hopefully shared Forster's enthusiasm for Browning; and in November the actor was reading Strafford, Browning's first play, which deals with that period of English history when Parliament was at war with the first Stuarts. Macready's first impression, however, was not favorable; on November 23 he recorded in his diary that he had found more grounds for exception than he had anticipated, and

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[37]Griffin and Minchin, pp. 104-106.

[38]Colburn's New Monthly Magazine, XLVI (March, 1836), 308.

referred to "the meanness of plot, and occasional obscurity." Having laid Strafford aside for a few months, he took it up again in March, 1837, when he began to fear that the play was "too historical." Nevertheless, the manager of Covent Garden, anticipating "instant and continuous popularity," "caught at it with avidity, agreed to produce it without delay on his part, and to give Browning twelve pounds per night for twenty-five nights, and ten pounds per night for ten nights beyond."[39] But Macready's fears were growing. He and Forster attempted a revision of the play, to which Browning angrily objected, and the alterations made by Browning were, in Macready's estimation, "quite bad" and "very unworthy of Browning." Three days before the opening performance he poured his desperation into his diary:

> . . . in Browning's play, we have a long scene of passion--upon what? A plan destroyed, by whom or for what we know not, and a parliament dissolved, which merely seems to inconvenience Strafford in his arrangements. . . . Would it were over! It must fail . . . .[40]

Lounsbury states that practically all contemporary accounts report the failure of Strafford;[41] yet on the evening of its first performance on May 1, 1837,

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[39]DeVane, p. 60.

[40]Ibid., p. 61.

[41]Lounsbury, p. 54.

Covent Garden, the largest theatre in London, was "thronged at a very early hour," and on the following morning the Constitutional reported that "at every concluding act the house rang with plaudits." The reviewer observed: "Such a reception as was given to this play last night gives the lie to any twaddling assertion that there is no taste or no patronage left in England for the real drama." Confessing that it would be "a vain task at so short a notice to attempt an analysis of the play or its beauties," the reviewer contented himself with testifying to "its signal and deserved success" and concluded:

> Some very keen critics have predicted for Mr. Browning that he is to rise to such an eminence as a dramatic poet as has not been attained by any in our time. We have not had the opportunity to study the book before us to pronounce so confidently upon his merits, but certainly, if success be a criterion of desert, there are few poets who can rank more highly.[42]

This critic, probably Douglas Jerrold, whose support of Browning remained virtually consistent, could indeed have had "little opportunity to study the book," since it had been published only the day before; yet the reviewer for the Sun of May 2 reported that Strafford "acts even better than it reads." He felt that action had been "substituted for description, and mere poetry [that encumbers dialogue, and bids action halt] made subservient to the sterner business of the drama." However, he found

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[42]Griffin and Minchin, pp. 109-110.

Strafford to be obscure, in fact "almost unintelligible to those who are not well acquainted with the stirring period of which it treats"; and though in general favorably disposed to the play, he thought it "by no means the highest effort of which Mr. Browning is capable." But remembering the crowded and enthusiastic house, he ordered Browning to "set to work again, for if any one can revive the half-extinct taste for the drama, he can."[43]

According to the playbill, for three more nights Strafford continued "to be received with the same marks of approbation as attended its first representation";[44] and John Forster spoke of the "fervid applause" with which its fourth performance, on May 9, was "received by an admirably filled house."[45] The performance scheduled for May 11 had to be cancelled, however, because the actor who played Pym had deserted. Although a substitute was found, "the financial condition of the theatre, in spite of the undiminished popularity of the play, put an end to its representation,"[46] and the Times reported that a "tissue of absurdities" by Fitzball took the place of Strafford

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[43]Broughton and others, p. 86, C 30.

[44]Griffin and Minchin, p. 110.

[45]Examiner, May 14, 1837, p. 310.

[46]Gosse, p. 46.

and was "rapturously applauded."[47] It would seem that the theatre-goers were not particularly discriminating; and if the worth of Browning's play is to be measured with the yardstick of subsequent contemporary literary opinion, there is reason to call it less than a success, since many of the reviewers began to discover faults with which to temper their praise.

The Literary Gazette for May 6, recalling the high expectation aroused by Paracelsus, declared that Browning had "so successfully" performed as a tragic dramatist that he had not "disappointed the hopes his first work [thought to be Paracelsus] led us to entertain." But the reviewer objected to the dialogue, which he thought to be "very abrupt and interrupted . . . to a degree that often affects the sense," and reported that his interest in the play had waned after the third act, when Strafford was overthrown.[48]

Writing in the Examiner for May 7, John Forster recanted to a certain degree the opinions expressed in his March article: "This is the work of a writer who is capable of achieving the highest objects and triumphs of

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[47]Griffin and Minchin, p. 110.

[48]Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, May 6, 1837, p. 292.

dramatic literature. They are not achieved here, but here they lie, 'in the rough,' before every reader."

Forster admitted that the first performance had "all the evidences of a decided success," but he believed that a "more massive handling of the subject . . . would have taken deeper and more lasting hold upon the audience of a theatre than it is possible to hope for in the present instance." He discovered "the error" of the play to be in Browning's having yielded too much to the "impulses of pure poetical treatment in delineating the character of Strafford," and went on to explain the "sudden transitions and elliptical expressions" of speech as having been caused by the presentation of Strafford as a "victim of an extreme and somewhat effeminate sensibility." Forster found that "a king without a single claim to rescue him from contempt, and a minister whose overruling passion is that of devotion to such a king . . . gives us no strong sympathy or interest." He felt, however, that Browning's "marking of character" was "beyond praise" and "reminiscent of Shakespeare." Pointing to the "masterly" sketches of the leaders of the independent party, he said, "The very faces of the men are before us as we read." Forster expressed general opinion when he regretted that the play had been "most infamously got up" and reported that, with

the exception of Macready and Helen Faucitt, the "rest of the performers . . . were a barn's wonder to look at."[49]

Although the Morning Herald had called Strafford, after its second performance, "by far the best tragedy that has been produced . . . for many years,"[50] the Athenaeum reported on May 6 its conviction that the play did not have "interest enough about it, either of plot or dialogue, to give it more than a temporary existence."[51] In July the oracular Edinburgh Review gave what Lounsbury calls a favorable criticism, of which the deep significance is understood by realizing that the Edinburgh would notice nothing it thought unworthy, such as the poems of Tennyson.[52] The review spoke of the "considerable share of success" Browning had achieved with the play, and called his enterprise "one of no ordinary boldness." After scolding Browning for his "fashion of breaking up his language into fragments; conveying a meaning, as it were, by starts and jerks; rarely finishing a sentence at all; and when he does, cutting it short, with disagreeable abruptness," the Edinburgh advised him to sacrifice less

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[49] Examiner, May 7, 1837, pp. 294-295.

[50] DeVane, p. 69.

[51] Broughton and others, p. 85, C 17.

[52] Lounsbury, p. 57.

to the "seductions of theatrical clap-trap" in order that he might secure "more solid triumphs."[53]

Such, then, was the mixed reception accorded to Strafford. DeVane refers to its "ill-success";[54] Griffin and Minchin note, "Strafford, as even Browning's friends allowed, was not a popular play: its success had really been the success of Macready the actor, and not of Browning the inexperienced dramatist."[55] And Lounsbury goes so far as to say that Strafford amounted to a retrogression, rather than an advance, in Browning's popularity.[56] In the light of the anticipation aroused by Paracelsus, however, the general contemporary critical estimate seems to indicate that the impression left by Browning's play was one of sustained promise, at least.

Nevertheless, it was as great a financial failure as Paracelsus had been, for as Gosse reports, "At that time the public absolutely refused to buy Mr. Browning's books . . . ." Browning, however, was "in no wise disheartened or detracted from his purpose by this indifference of the public."[57] Until 1840 he was to

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[53]Edinburgh Review, LXV (July, 1837), 150.

[54]DeVane, p. 15.

[55]Griffin and Minchin, p. 114.

[56]Lounsbury, p. 74.

[57]Gosse, p. 46.

remain silent while preparing Sordello, with which Macready hoped he would "efface" the memory of Strafford, that "grand escape."[58]

Published by Moxon in March, 1840, at the expense of Browning's father, Sordello represented the result of seven years of fitful and interrupted labor. Writing to Fox even before the publication of Paracelsus in 1835, Browning had made ironic reference to Sordello, then in the finishing stages, as "another affair on hand, rather of a more popular nature";[59] before 1840, however, he was to make several drastic changes in his conception of the development of the soul of Sordello, a troubadour who became a lover and a warrior. Of these alterations, one was necessitated, just as he was ready to have his poem printed, by the appearance in July, 1837, of a lengthy poem by a Mrs. Busk, who had used little historical background in presenting the "popular" treatment of Sordello.[60] Forced to delay publication in order to differentiate his version from Mrs. Busk's, Browning accented the historical element by introducing a profusion of historical details. This, he said in 1863, when insisting that his stress had lain entirely upon the incidents in

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[58]DeVane, p. 61.

[59]Ibid., p. 73.

[60]Griffin and Minchin, p. 93.

the development of Sordello's soul, was "of no more importance than a background requires";[61] in the final version of the poem, however, Sordello the man was so thoroughly obscured by the tangle of events in the background--the feuds between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines in early thirteenth-century Italy--that only a special student could have been expected to find meaning in the poem.[62]

The anticipation with which Sordello was taken up soon turned to bewilderment. Most of the reviewers must have been perplexed, for they remained silent. The Spectator was the only important weekly to give the poem immediate attention (on March 14), and the attitude of the critic may be assumed to have been the one generally prevalent. Insisting that "we cannot read it," he declared:

> Whatever may be the poetical spirit of Mr. Browning, it is so overlaid in Sordello by digression, affectation, obscurity, and all the faults that spring, it would seem, from crudity of plan and a self-opinion which will neither cull thoughts nor revise composition, that the reader--at least a reader of our stamp--turns away.[63]

On March 28, the reviewer for the Atlas, who had been an ardent admirer of Paracelsus but had been disappointed in Strafford, found Sordello "worse than Strafford" and

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[61] DeVane, p. 84.

[62] Lounsbury, p. 85.

[63] Broughton and others, p. 87, C 37.

regretted that it exhibited all of Browning's faults in intensified form and gave evidence of none of his virtues.[64]

In May, the Monthly Chronicle put into circulation its lament:

> We opened Sordello . . . with the most pleasurable anticipations, and closed it with the most painful disappointment. . . . Mr. Browning seems to have forgotten that the medium of art must ever be the beautiful.[65]

On May 30, the critic for the Athenaeum offered his opinion, possibly the only contemporary estimate, among those of all the reviewers, formed after a serious and honest effort to penetrate to the meaning of Sordello.[66] He began:

> If it were Mr. Browning's desire to withdraw himself from the inquest of criticism, he could scarcely have effected that purpose better than by the impenetrable veil, both of manner and language, in which he has contrived to wrap up whatever truths or beauties this volume may contain.

Objecting to "peculiarities of language," "quarrels with prepositions," "puerilities," and "affectations," the reviewer recommended "accepted grammatical forms," since the reader's attention had to be directed toward mastering "novelties of mere construction" and acquiring "familiarity

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[64]Lounsbury, p. 82.

[65]Broughton and others, p. 87, C 35.

[66]Athenaeum, May 30, 1840, pp. 431-432.

with the author's manner." "Like any system of shorthand," he admitted, "the author's scheme of syntax may, with some trouble, be acquired. . . . Occasional outbreaks of light . . . win the reader onward,--tempted, as he is, again and again, to throw down the book in despair."

"Conscientiously" unwilling to send his readers to Sordello itself, yet feeling "bound to afford them some evidence of the art with which the author has concealed his treasures," the reviewer quoted a passage which he challenged the readers to work out, and added, "If the above specimen be within the compass of the reader's faculties, then he may refer to the volume, which abounds in such."

The critic insisted that, even after learning the "shorthand," an attempt to get at the meaning, hidden in "fold upon misty fold," carried the reader too far into the regions of transcendentalism. In fact, a mysterious "air of philosophic pretension about the work . . . leads to the inference that it must contain something," but the "pearls" found in the "muddy waters" proved too often to be merely "commonplace truths" expressed in "provokingly oracular language." Feeling that Browning's purpose apparently had been to show that "dreams of perfectibility" lead to "disappointment," the critic added: "But if this

is the meaning, it is wrapped up in a very needless and absurd profusion of words."

Although the reviewer advised Browning that it might be worth his while "to use the language of ordinary men, and to condescend to being intelligible," he granted, nevertheless, some "pregnant thought" and "significant illustration" here and there; and after the description of Caryatides by sunset had been quoted and praised as "poetry not overlaid by quaint style and extravagant originality," he concluded rather cordially:

> Having placed the author in this favorable and intelligible point of view before the public, we will leave him there, with a final word of advice. . . . If his muse would be appreciated by understandings of this earth, she must keep somewhere or other on this side of the clouds.

Although many of the reports smack suspiciously of facetious exaggeration, various comments of literary contemporaries other than reviewers reveal that even they found Sordello to be so unusually difficult that they considered it practically incomprehensible. In December, 1837, finding himself forced to choose between the role of historian and that of poet, Browning had told Miss Harriett Martineau that he had almost decided to omit both preface and notes to Sordello. Unaware of the nature of Browning's project, her dangerous advice had been to do so, thereby letting the poem "tell its own tale." But Miss Martineau, whom Paracelsus had favorably impressed to

the point of insomnia, was so unable to understand Sordello that she thought herself ill.[67] Douglas Jerrold, who possibly had penned an unsigned though favorable review of Strafford, was convinced after reading Sordello that he had lost his mind; his wife reassured him, however, by confessing that she herself had been at quite a loss with it.[68] Mrs. Carlyle is said to have read the poem through without being able to determine whether Sordello was a man, a city, or a book.[69] And Tennyson is reported to have observed that there were only two lines in Sordello that he could understand: the first and the last, neither of which was true. They were: "Who will, may hear Sordello's story told" and "Who would, has heard Sordello's story told."[70]

A more indulgent opinion was expressed by Elizabeth Barrett, who, though convinced that Sordello required deep study, felt that there were "many fine things" in the poem worthy of studious effort.[71] And W. S. Landor, while expressing irritation, held steadfast nonetheless to his conviction of Browning's great potential: "I only wish he would atticize a little. Few of the Athenians had such a

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[67]Lounsbury, p. 78.

[68]DeVane, p. 85.

[69]Ibid.

[70]Somervell, p. 124.

[71]Lounsbury, p. 80.

quarry on their property, but they constructed better roads for the conveyance of the material."[72]

Apparently having found nothing favorable to say of Sordello immediately after its publication, John Forster had consequently not spoken at the time in the Examiner. But in 1841 he offered this somewhat apologetic defense of the poem:

> When a greater curiosity about the writer shall hereafter disentomb Sordello, it will not be admired for its faults, but, in spite of them, its power and beauty will be perceived. It had a magnificent aim, and a great many passages in which justice was done to that, and to the genius of the designer.[73]

For many years, however, there was to be no need to "disentomb" Sordello: it remained very much alive in the memory of those to whom Browning's name was of even the vaguest significance. By some few indulgent souls it was to be forgiven; but for many others it was to continue for years to serve as a rigid standard of utter unintelligibility by which Browning's subsequent endeavors would be judged, often without even the dubious benefit of a reading. Gosse reported in 1881 that for forty years Sordello had been "an eminent stumbling block, not merely in the path of fools, but in that of very sensible and cultivated

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[72]W. H. Griffin, "Browning and Domett," Contemporary Review, LXXXVII (January, 1905), 110.

[73]Examiner, October 2, 1841, p. 628.

people."[74] Many of those who tried to read the poem permitted the failure of their attempt to prejudice them thereafter against Browning; and most of those who had not come into direct contact with it were so impressed by unfavorable reports that they were not willing to grant a hearing to his later work. DeVane states flatly that the publication of Sordello ruined a promising reputation.[75] Lounsbury calls the poem an "almost insurmountable obstacle" in the way of the works that were to follow in the immediately ensuing years. "With the appearance of Sordello," he declares, "began the eclipse of Browning's reputation which even after the lapse of more than a third of a century had not passed away."[76]

Moreover, Lounsbury feels that the poem was particularly resented because it seemed to "give evidence of a determined disposition not to pay heed to the legitimate requirements of the reader."[77] The Athenaeum (May 30, 1840) referring to it as a "book which the author seems to have taken pains to mystify," warned Browning that "the author who chooses deliberately to put 'his light under a bushel' of affectations, must not be surprised if men refuse the labour of searching it out, and leave him to the peaceable enjoyment of that obscurity which he has

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[74]Gosse, p. 48.

[75]DeVane, p. 86.

[76]Lounsbury, p. 93.

[77]Ibid.

courted."[78] The Atlas (March 28, 1840) felt that the sins of Browning's verse were "premeditated" and "wilful"; in Lounsbury's opinion, these words assuredly expressed the sentiment of all those who read, or tried to read, Sordello.[79]

On the other hand, Browning himself was convinced that more than half the difficulty lay with the reading public; on occasion he is known to have referred sarcastically to the poem as "the entirely unintelligible Sordello!"[80]

Although Gosse was perhaps prejudiced in Browning's favor, he offered in retrospect a defense of the attitude of the readers in relation to the state of poetry at the time of the appearance of Sordello:

> In 1838 the condition of English poetry was singularly tame and namby-pamby. Tennyson's voice was heard only by a few. The many delighted in poor "L.E.L.," whose sentimental "golden violets" and gushing improvvisatores had found a tragic close at Cape Coast Castle. Among living poets, the most popular were good old James Montgomery, droning on at his hopeless insipidities and graceful "goodnesses," the Hon. Mrs. Norton, a sort of soda-water Byron, and poor, rambling T. K. Hervey. The plague of annuals and books of beauty was on the land, with its accompanying flood of verses by Alaric A. Watts and "Delta" Moir. These virtuous and now almost forgotten poetasters had brought the art of poetry into such disesteem, with their puerilities and their thin, diluted sentiment, that verse was beginning to

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[78] Athenaeum, May 30, 1840, p. 431.

[79] Lounsbury, p. 94.

[80] DeVane, p. 86.

> be considered unworthy of exercise by a serious or original thinker. Into this ocean of thin soup Mr. Browning threw his small square of solid pemmican,--a little mass which could have supplied ideas and images to a dozen "L.E.L.'s" without losing much of its consistence. Of course, to a generation long fed on such a thin diet, the new contribution seemed much more like a stone than anything edible. . . .[81]

A slightly different viewpoint is presented by Amy Cruse,[82] from whom it is learned that in the early days of Victoria's reign, poetry was by no means in a state of neglect so far as that segment of the English public who cared to read it was concerned. Although the Byron fever had abated, it had not definitely died out; a new generation of worshippers had succeeded to the old. In spite of the existence of an anti-Wordsworth group, Wordsworth's admirers were as numerous and as enthusiastic as those of Byron; and there were many "real poetry lovers," not distinctive of their age, however, "who read eagerly the works of all the great poets, old and new."

Cruse proposes that in spite of the great heritage from the past, the early Victorians wanted a poet of their own. "They felt that their age had many things to say that had not been said before, and they wanted these things said clearly and beautifully, as only a poet could say them." She feels that this desire was quite strong,

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[81]Gosse, p. 50.

[82]Amy Cruse, The Victorians and Their Books (London, 1935), pp. 177-179.

though partly unconscious, and that in eagerness to satisfy it, some people "mistook the tinsel for the gold, and acclaimed as the poet of the age some minor versifier." This fact explains the great acclaim which met Felicia Hemans, who, through the early years of Victoria's reign, was "read, praised, almost reverenced," and learned by heart "in every schoolroom." In 1838 the "amazing popularity" of the "unpoetical and platitudinous" Proverbial Philosophy of Martin Farquhar Tupper indicated the "measure of the eagerness with which the general public awaited an authentic voice from its own times." Tupper's words were thought to contain "the essence of moral and spiritual wisdom," and his works sold in the tens of thousands. In 1839 Philip James Bailey's Festus, which had "thought and learning but no real poetry," sold twelve large editions.

But of Sordello only 157 copies were sold. Fifteen years after its publication Moxon reported that of the balance of the original edition of 500 copies, eighty-six had been given away and the rest were on hand.[83] In the late 1830's Browning was described as being "full of ambition, eager for success, eager for fame, and, what's more, determined to conquer fame and to achieve success."[84]

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[83] DeVane, p. 86.

[84] Ibid., p. 15.

He was not defeated by Sordello; but in August, 1840, he was undoubtedly disappointed and embittered when he set out to "break new ground" and sarcastically expressed the hope that his next attempt would do him but "half the good Sordello has done--be praised by the units, cursed by the tens, and unmeddled with by the hundreds!"[85]

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[85] Ibid., p. 85.

CHAPTER III

1841-1846

From 1841 until Browning's marriage and departure for Italy in 1846, all of his work was published periodically in a series of eight numbers collectively called Bells and Pomegranates. To reduce expenses, still borne by Browning's father, the Bells were brought out at the suggestion of Moxon in "cheap little yellow, paper-covered, double-columned volumes" which were "printed in painfully small type, on inferior paper."[1] There was one advantage, however: the inexpensive mode of publication permitted a retail price of only one shilling, on the average, for each of the Bells. This price was much lower than that of any of Browning's previous works; Sordello, for instance, had been marked at six shillings sixpence.[2]

Apparently Browning was now attempting to rebuild his literary reputation after the storm of Sordello; as DeVane notes, "It is significant that all the pamphlets of the series of Bells and Pomegranates bore the legend 'By Robert Browning, Author of Paracelsus.'"[3] And in the

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[1]Griffin and Minchin, pp. 124, 135.

[2]DeVane, p. 88.

[3]Ibid., p. 90.

preface to Pippa Passes, with which in April, 1841, the series began, Browning made a modest, though unequivocal, bid for renewed popularity:

> Two or three years ago I wrote a Play, about which the chief matter I much care to recollect at present is, that a Pitfull of goodnatured people applauded it:--ever since, I have been desirous of doing something in the same way that should better reward their attention. What follows I mean for the first of a series of Dramatical Pieces, to come out at intervals, and I amuse myself by fancying that the cheap mode in which they appear will for once help me to a sort of Pit-audience again.[4]

Pippa Passes is a series of four unrelated dramatic scenes, tenuously connected by Pippa's passing within hearing range of each scene so that her song might have its effect on the various characters. This technique immediately confused the critics. "So far as we have yet the means of judgment," reported the reviewer for the Spectator, who assumed that Browning had written a play, "Pippa Passes is not a drama, but scenes in dialogue, without coherence or action."[5] The Atlas reached the conclusion that the poem was not an independent whole, but was the first part of a larger work, and that Pippa's sinister passing would be explained in a sequel.[6] Clarifying matters for those who were confused, the Athenaeum

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[4]Ibid., p. 92.

[5]Broughton and others, p. 87, C 43.

[6]DeVane, p. 95.

explained that the poem had no unity of action, but was "held together by the single unity of its moral" and was dramatic only because it was "written in dialogue form."[7]

Though blind to the beauty of Browning's daring experiment in form, the reviewer for the Spectator was quick to see the danger of the "moral tone," which he felt was of a kind not "likely to be tolerated on the stage, or approved of anywhere." "In one scene," he grumbled, "a young wife and her paramour discuss the murder of the 'old husband' needlessly, openly, wantonly, tediously, and without a touch of compunction, sentiment, or true passion."[8] But John Forster praised this scene between Ottima and Sebald as one of "intensity" and "sensual extravagance," which, he felt, "issue rightly from such a drunken deed of passion and of blood."[9] The Athenaeum stated that the scene "is written with such power of passion and of painting (with a voluptuousness of colour and incident, however, which Mr. Browning may find it convenient to subdue, for an English public) as marks a master hand."[10]

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[7]Athenaeum, December 11, 1841, p. 952.

[8]Broughton and others, p. 87, C 43.

[9]Examiner, October 2, 1841, p. 629.

[10]Leslie A. Marchand, The Athenaeum: A Mirror of Victorian Culture (Chapel Hill, 1941), p. 290.

In fact, though various complaints were registered, the reviewers found much to praise in Pippa Passes. Even the quarrelsome critic for the Spectator granted that the work was "not devoid of good thoughts poetically expressed"; he simply found these thoughts "perfectly ineffective from being in a wrong place."[11] The Morning Herald called Pippa a publication "which promises to be one of the most remarkable of the day" and thought that the scenes were "highly dramatic, glowing with strong and original conception, and combining the darker and more gentle passions in vigorous contrast." Although the reviewer felt that the poem was "marked throughout with a certain waywardness of tone, which occasionally tends to obscurity," he found "abundant compensating contributions of genuine poetry."[12]

John Forster prefaced his criticism of Pippa with a reminder that he had given to Paracelsus "its first and heartiest acknowledgement"; and though he admitted that Browning had published "not so well" since Paracelsus, his work had not been such "as to falsify any anticipation formed of the character of his genius." Forster happily hailed Pippa as "worthy of the writer of Paracelsus," as "without doubt, a piece of right inspiration." He continued:

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[11] Broughton and others, p. 87, C 43.

[12] Ibid., p. 87, C 42.

> The defect in the execution of the work--the whole conception seems to us to have extraordinary beauty--lies in the scene with the young sculptor and his bride. Here, with some few exquisite exceptions, the language is so fitful and obscure, the thoughts themselves so wild and whirling, the whole air of the scene so shadowy and remote, that, with its great blots of gorgeous colour too, we are reminded of nothing so much as one of Turner's canvasses--pictures of nothing, as someone has called them. . . . But the very reverse of this is the general style of the poem: suited to what it had to express; now crisply cutting out the thought, now softly refining or enlarging it; swelling or subsiding at the poet's will, and never at any time failing of originality.[13]

The Athenaeum also commended Browning for his originality, which had caused the reviewer "to take more than common pains to understand him." "Our faith in him . . . is not yet extinct,--but our patience is," complained the critic, who was still angry with Browning for neglecting his warning (issued after Sordello) not to hide his "genius light under a bushel of affectations." Obviously Pippa had been issued in cheap form "to meet and help the large demand" Browning seemingly anticipated; but, insisting that Browning continued to be wilfully obscure, that the poem contained "meanings which it might have been well worth his while to put into English," the reviewer demanded: "How many men does Mr. Browning think there are in the world who have time to read this little poem of his? and of these, what proportion does he suppose will waste it, in searching after treasures that he thus

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[13] Examiner, October 2, 1841, pp. 628-629.

unnecessarily and deliberately conceals?" Calling attention to the twofold moral of the poem (that "happiness is more evenly distributed than it seems" and that "the meanest of them all has his appointed value in God's scheme"), the reviewer said:

> Mr. Browning is unjust both to himself and others, when he subjects it to the almost certainty of being lost. Why should an author, who can think such living thoughts as these, persist in making mummies of them?--and why should we, ere we could disengage this high and beautiful truth, have had to go through the tedious and disagreeable process of unwrapping?[14]

Although Gosse asserts that the public was first won to Browning with Pippa Passes,[15] it seems that few persons were willing to "unwrap the mummies": the sale of Pippa was poor. Lounsbury states that even "that most powerful provocative to sale, a denunciation of the morality of the work," failed to produce any perceptible effect in increasing its circulation.[16] Readers shuddered at the memory of Sordello; and then there was that strange title--"Bells and Pomegranates"! Possibly the Athenaeum had expressed the general opinion when it observed, "On the present occasion, Mr. Browhing's conundrums begin with the very title page."[17]

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[14] Athenaeum, December 11, 1841, p. 952.

[15] Gosse, p. 56.

[16] Lounsbury, p. 111.

[17] Athenaeum, December 11, 1841, p. 952.

Amy Cruse suggests:

> Even those few [who read it] do not seem to have found in it the help and inspiration for which they were seeking. Perhaps Browning's optimism . . . in Pippa's song, ". . . God's in His heaven, All's right with the world," offered too severe a trial of faith in those dark times when, to most thinking people, it seemed that all was very far from right in their own particular corner of God's world. The good times which were to encourage the growth of a sturdy Victorian optimism were as yet not in sight.[18]

Moreover, in 1841 Macaulay's Lays of Ancient Rome offered more attractive reading than Pippa. The Lays were highly praised by the critic for the Athenaeum, who was convinced that if the excerpts he had printed failed to attract the readers' curiosity, then "our age is deeper sunk in apathy than the most melancholy of our bewailers have asserted." Cruse continues:

> Soon a copy [of the Lays] lay on every drawing-room table, and boys and girls all over the country were declaiming with vigour "How Horatius kept the bridge In the brave days of old." So for the first five years or so of Queen Victoria's reign the public treasured its older poets, rushed to buy copies of Proverbial Philosophy and Festus, recited Mr. Macaulay's Lays, and, when they were not laughing at . . . Browning, ignored [him].[19]

Browning had completed King Victor and King Charles (Bell No. 2) more than four years before it was published on March 12, 1842. In September, 1839, Macready had read the play and called it a "great mistake";[20] and it

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[18]Cruse, p. 183.

[19]Ibid., pp. 183-184.

[20]DeVane, p. 98.

convinced the Spectator immediately after its publication that Browning was "a man who rather cultivates his weeds than his flowers."[21]

Forster reported that Browning had painted scenes of "great beauty" with "masterly skill," but found that the "general fault of the tragedy" lay in its defects of versification and in its characterization, not sufficiently "broad and practical." To Forster these mistakes indicated the "wayward perverseness of a man of true genius," but he added that "the reader who is wise enough to take our word and act on it, will find his reward in many delightful, powerful, and pathetic passages."[22]

"We have before predicted that Mr. Browning's audience would be limited, and, inasmuch as he has doubled the price of admission,[23] we are led to conclude that our prediction has been fulfilled," reported the reviewer for the Athenaeum. He expressed sincere regret, however: "We have faith in Mr. Browning, and trust to see him realize a higher destiny than that of the thousand and one claimants to the laurel crown." Though commending Browning for drawing the characters "with breadth and great

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[21]Broughton and others, p. 88, C 50.

[22]Examiner, April 2, 1842, p. 212.

[23]Pippa was marked sixpence; King Victor, one shilling.

distinctness of colouring," the reviewer pointed out that numerous portions of the play gave evidence of an "inability to do justice to his own meanings." Quoting other passages which might "do their creator credit," the reviewer feared, nevertheless, that the play "may give our author little popularity among the many." He added, however, that "it must confirm the few in their anxiety to see him take 'the one step more' out of the labyrinth in which he lingers too fondly."[24]

The sale of King Victor and King Charles must have been no greater than that of Pippa, for in May, 1842, Browning wrote his friend Alfred Domett of his intention to print a few "small poems" which Moxon had advised him to include, "for popularity's sake," in the series of Bells and Pomegranates, intended originally to be restricted to dramas.[25] The sixteen poems of Dramatic Lyrics (Bell No. 3) were not released until November, however, an earlier publication having been thought unwise by Moxon, who complained that in the first part of the year the book season had been "no season at all."[26]

Included in the group of Dramatic Lyrics were "My Last Duchess," "Count Gismond," "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," "Porphyria's Lover," "Johannes Agricola in

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[24] Athenaeum, April 30, 1842, pp. 376-378.

[25] Kenyon, p. 36.

[26] Ibid., p. 42.

Meditation," and "The Pied Piper of Hamelin." Remembering Mill's criticism, Browning carefully pointed out at the beginning of the volume that though the pieces were "for the most part Lyric in expression," they were "always Dramatic in principle, and so many utterances of so many imaginary persons, not mine."[27] Two of the poems, "Porphyria's Lover" and "Johannes Agricola," had appeared together as "Madhouse Cells" in the Monthly Repository in 1836; Gosse marvels at the fact that "two poems so unique in their construction and conception, so modern, so interesting, so new," could have been printed without attracting attention, "so far as it would appear, from any living creature."[28]

John Forster was the first to review the new pamphlet.[29] To him, it was "an indication of the poet's continued advance in the right direction." He found "plenty" in the new poems "to object to"; for instance, he complained that the meanings of some of them were obscure. However, he found "much more to praise," such as "thought of the profoundest kind" and "the most exquisite tenderness." "In a word," he continued, "Mr. Browning is a genuine poet, and only needs to have less misgiving on the subject himself, to win his readers to as perfect a

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[27]DeVane, p. 104. [28]Gosse, p. 34.

[29]Examiner, November 26, 1842, pp. 756-757.

trust . . . as any of his living brethren of the laurel are able to lay claim to." In the "Cavalier Tunes" Forster found "drunken, reeling, reckless, noisy gallantry in every word"; and though remarking that the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" was more to his taste than was the "Incident of the French Camp," he quoted the latter poem in entirety to demonstrate "the simplicity and force with which its touching anecdote is told."

Making no mention of "My Last Duchess" or of certain other poems, Forster turned his attention to "The Pied Piper"; and after giving a complete summary interspersed with many excerpts from the poem, he concluded rather wistfully:

> One sickly little child comes back, being left alone against his will--just as the one rat came back--to tell the tale. But what the tale is, and what the moral of the tale is, besides teaching us to keep our promises, the children whom it has interested here, big or little, must get the Dramatic Lyrics to ascertain: for here we mean to end. A shilling will purchase them.

Other reviewers were not far behind Forster in praising Browning's latest effort. The Atlas gave a long and favorable account of the series to date, declaring, "In short, Bells and Pomegranates, with one or two exceptions, is a casket of poetical gems, pure and sparkling."[30] The Spectator termed Dramatic Lyrics "the best, or at

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[30]Broughton and others, p. 88, C 45.

least the most readable and intelligible of his works."[31] But the critic for the Athenaeum expressed disgust: "That it is Mr. Browning's pleasure to be enigmatical, may now, we suppose, be considered as an accepted condition of his literary dealings with the public."[32] Elizabeth Barrett, who later confessed to having been made quite misanthropical by this review, is reported to have said at the time that "it is easier to find a more faultless writer than a poet of equal genius."[33]

In spite of Forster's plea, the British public were apparently not interested in learning the moral of "The Pied Piper." But Browning was not admitting defeat; The Return of the Druses (Bell No. 4) appeared in January, 1843, only two months after Dramatic Lyrics. The play had been completed by August, 1840, when it was submitted for consideration to Macready. The actor realized at that time that it was not suitable for the stage and recorded in his diary his fear that Browning would "never write again--to any purpose." Browning vigorously defended the play, much to the irritation of Macready, who wrote that Browning "really wearied me with his obstinate faith in . . . Sordello, and of his eventual celebrity, and also with his self-opiniated persuasions upon his Return of the

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[31] Ibid., p. 88, C 51. [32] Marchand, p. 290.

[33] Griffin and Minchin, p. 146.

Druses."[34] Suffice it to say that in 1843 the work was greeted with indifference. The Spectator found in it "the usual faults" and "little of the power of the writer."[35] The reviewer for the Gentleman's Magazine reported that he was not at all interested in the play. However, in the same review, in which he turned his attention to the three Bells which had preceded The Return of the Druses, he stated that Pippa was "very poetically drawn," and added that of the Dramatic Lyrics, which he thought were "very clever in parts," his favorites were "Cavalier Tunes" and "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister."[36]

Macready's rejection of The Return of the Druses in 1840 and of King Victor and King Charles in 1839 had not discouraged Browning's determination to write for the stage. He began work on A Blot in the 'Scutcheon, in reference to which he wrote Macready late in 1840: "'The luck of the third adventure' is proverbial. I have written a spick and span new Tragedy . . . . There is action in it . . . ,--who knows but the Gods may make me good even yet?"[37] Soon thereafter Browning sent the manuscript

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[34]DeVane, p. 133.

[35]Broughton and others, p. 89, C 60.

[36]Gentleman's Magazine, XX (August, 1843), 169.

[37]DeVane, p. 137.

to Macready to be read at his leisure, but the play was not produced until more than two years had elapsed. In a letter to Browning's friend Alfred Domett, Joseph Arnould, another friend, revealed:

> Well, on the eleventh of February [1843] his play Blot . . . was brought out at Drury Lane. That was all the public knew about the facts; but those who knew Browning were also aware of a little history of bad feeling, intrigue, and petty resentment.[38]

This "history of bad feeling" involved Browning's impatience to have his play produced as well as Macready's business troubles, a source of constant irritation. But, more important, before receiving the manuscript of the play, Macready had completely lost faith in Browning's ability as a dramatist. He considered Strafford to have been a miserable failure and thought that both King Victor and King Charles and The Return of the Druses were "rather suited--to borrow the Athenaeum's phraseology--for the closet than for the stage."[39] He did not bother to read the new play until persuaded by Forster to do so on an evening in September, 1841. Forster later reported that "Macready had taken enough wine, and was rather exaggerating in his . . . praise."[40] Doubts soon arose,

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[38]Kenyon, p. 62.

[39]Griffin and Minchin, p. 113.

[40]Maurice B. Cramer, "Browning's Friendships and Fame before Marriage (1833-1846)," PMLA, LV (1940), 214.

however, as to how the public might regard the "situation upon which the play turns"; consequently, the manuscript was sent to Dickens for an opinion, which, when finally given in November, 1842, was unqualified:

> Browning's play has thrown me into a perfect passion of sorrow. To say that there is anything in its subject save what is lovely, true, deeply affecting, full of the best emotion, the most earnest feeling, and the most true and tender source of interest, is to say that there is no light in the sun and no heat in the blood. It is full of genius, natural and great thoughts, profound and yet simple and beautiful in its vigour. . . . And I swear it is a tragedy that must be played: and must be played, moreover, by Macready. . . . And if you tell Browning that I have seen it, tell him that I believe from my soul there is no man living (and not many dead) who could produce such a work.[41]

Apparently Macready continued to entertain doubt in spite of Dickens's fulsome praise. At any rate, having reluctantly set February 11, 1843, as opening night, he is said to have declined his part altogether unless the play were postponed until after Easter. Browning and his friends interpreted this move as one designed to discourage him, Macready apparently considering his services indispensable; but Browning immediately suggested that another actor take the part. Macready was possibly too surprised to offer resistance, and when on the last day of rehearsal he proposed to take the part, after all,

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[41]Griffin and Minchin, p. 115.

Browning refused.[42] The tangle of circumstances precludes the assignment of definite blame to either party; it is enough to say that Browning's refusal to permit Macready to take the leading part, in his own theater, was fatal to the play, which after three performances was removed from the boards because of a lack of patronage.[43]

Arnould continues in his letter to Domett:

> The first night was magnificent . . . and there could be no mistake at all about the honest enthusiasm of the audience. The gallery--and of course this was very gratifying, because not to be expected at a play of Browning's--took all the points as quickly as the pit, and entered into the general feeling and interest of the action far more than the boxes, some of whom took it upon themselves to be shocked at being betrayed into so much interest in a young woman who had behaved so improperly as Mildred. . . . The second night was evidently presided over by the spirit of the manager. I was one of about sixty in the pit . . . and yet we seemed crowded compared to the desolate emptiness of the boxes. The gallery was again full, and again, among all who were there, were the same decided impressions of pity and horror produced. The third night I took my wife again to the boxes; it was evident at a glance that it was to be the last. . . . Now there can be no doubt whatever that the absence of Macready's name from the list of performers . . . was the means of keeping away numbers from the house. Whether, if he had played and they had come, the play would have been permanently popular is another question. I don't myself think it would. With some of the grandest situations and the finest passages you can conceive, it does undoubtedly want a sustained interest to the end of the third act; in fact, the whole of that act on the stage is a falling off from the second act, which I need not tell you is for all purposes of performance the unpardonable fault. Still it . . . must have done this--viz. produced a higher opinion than ever of

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[42] Ibid., p. 116. [43] DeVane, p. 143.

> Browning's genius and the great things he is yet to do in the minds not only of a clique, but of the general world of readers. No one now would shake his head if you said of our Robert Browning, "This man will go far yet."[44]

Macready's "Athenaeum upholder" (as Browning later called the reviewer) spoke on February 18, 1843:

> If to pain and perplex were the end and aim of tragedy, Mr. Browning's poetic melodrama called A Blot in the 'Scutcheon would be worthy of admiration, for it is a very puzzling and unpleasant piece of business. The plot is plain enough, but the acts and feelings of the characters are inscrutable and abhorrent, and the language is as strange as their proceedings. . . . A few of the audience laughed, others were shocked, and many applauded; but it is impossible that such a drama should live even if it were artfully constructed, which this is not.[45]

The Times declared that the play was "one of the most faulty dramas we ever beheld" but admitted that a "moderate success" had been achieved.[46] The reviewer for the Literary Gazette pointed out "fine marks of genius" and "beautiful touches of genuine pathos and poetry" but objected to the "disagreeable subject," which he felt would cause the Blot soon to be "wiped off the stage" in spite of the applause it had received.[47]

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[44]Kenyon, pp. 65-67.

[45]Griffin and Minchin, p. 117.

[46]Ibid.

[47]Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, February 18, 1843, pp. 107-108.

Forster found defects, but none "that calls for instant exposure." Referring to Browning as "a writer whose career we watch with great interest, because we believe him to be a man of genius and a true poet," he reported of the Blot:

> In performance it was successful: a result which it had been hardly safe to predict of a work of so much rare beauty, and of such decisive originality.
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> These are qualities that seldom, at first starting, make their way in the world, more especially the world theatrical. And we are not sanguine of the chances of continued patronage to the Blot. People are already finding out . . . that there is a great deal that is equivocal in its sentiment, a vast quantity of mere artifice in its situations, and in its general composition not much to "touch humanity." We do not pretend to know what should touch humanity, but we would give little for the feelings of the man who could read this tragedy without a deep emotion.[48]

The sales of the Blot (Bell No. 5) were such as to exhaust the first edition; in the final collected edition of the series it was the only number that was designated as being a second edition. It has been suggested that it was sold at the theatre when it was played, having been printed hurriedly on the day of its first presentation, possibly in order to prevent Macready from mutilating the text.[49]

Not long after Browning's break with Macready, which had been the inevitable consequence of the performance of

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[48] Examiner, February 18, 1843, p. 101.

[49] Broughton and others, p. 7.

the Blot, Charles Kean, who was managing and acting at Covent Garden, offered Browning several hundred pounds for a suitable play. By March, 1844, Browning had written Colombe's Birthday; Kean, however, wanted "to keep it till 'Easter next year,' and unpublished all the time." Browning refused to agree to such an arrangement; having published nothing within the past year, he was anxious to get something into print as soon as possible. Apparently finding nothing in his "desk full of scrawls" to substitute for Colombe's Birthday, he assigned future acting rights to Kean and the play was published on April 20, 1844, as Bell No. 6.[50]

After its publication the reviews were neither numerous nor immediate. John Forster's strange notice precipitated a quarrel with Browning:

> There can be no question as to the nerve and vigour of this writing, or of its grasp of thought. Whether the present generation of readers will take note of it or leave it to the uncertain mercies of the future, still rests with Mr. Browning himself. As far as he has gone, we abominate his tastes as much as we respect his genius.[51]

The Athenaeum found in the play further proof of Browning's "fertility of invention," which had given "essential differences" to all his works in spite of their

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[50]Griffin and Minchin, p. 120.

[51]Ibid., p. 121.

relative "merits and demerits." The present "beautiful" work was thought to exhibit "rich . . . eloquence of language" and to indicate that Browning had advanced "many steps nearer to simplicity, without his fancy, or feeling, or stores of imagery showing a trace of impoverishment."[52]

The sale of the play must have been disappointing, however, for another bid for popularity was about to be made. The group of twenty-one poems called Dramatic Romances and Lyrics was published on November 6, 1845. With this volume (Bell No. 7) the series of Bells and Pomegranates was about to be concluded; the eighth and last Bell, consisting of two plays, Luria and A Soul's Tragedy, did not appear until April, 1846, but it caused so little comment at the time that its negligible effect on Browning's reputation will not be considered.

Forster, who was back in Browning's good graces, was the first critic to review Dramatic Romances and Lyrics. In all of them he found "a busy life, a stir of human interest . . . . They move to genuine music, and it is not a sleepy tune."

> We are disposed to admire this little book of Mr. Browning's very much. Our readers know how high we have ranked his muse; and how we have grieved when she lost her way in transcendental and other fogs . . . . Here she has found the path again.[53]

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[52] Athenaeum, October 19, 1844, p. 945.

[53] Examiner, November 15, 1845, p. 723.

The reviewer for the Athenaeum called the book still "another proof of Mr. Browning's fertility"; and though sounding his customary complaint against Browning's obscurity, he found much to praise:

> Though his manner changes less than might be wished--since the mist, if it rises and reveals a clear prospect for half a page, as certainly falls again,--there are few of his contemporaries who embrace so wide a field of subjects; be they of thought, or description, or passion, or character.

The critic declared that Browning's art was "sometimes consummate" and that his descriptive powers were "of high order." "As containing paintings of character," he maintained, "these poems make up a gallery full of human creatures--not abstractions."[54]

Forster heard the "breathless gallop" in "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix"; the Athenaeum found in this poem "a picture in every verse." Both reviewers had much praise for "The Italian in England" and "The Englishman in Italy." Forster thought that the latter poem was "extraordinary" as a "minute picture of Italian life and scenery, done in the sunniest spirit." The critic for the Athenaeum found in it "nothing less than all Sorrento, with its sights and sounds packed together in the necromancer's show-box--too tight, indeed: one picture jostling the other, till the senses ache with

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[54] Athenaeum, January 17, 1846, pp. 58-59.

steady gazing and sudden transition and the effort to retain distinct images." Forster called "The Bishop Orders His Tomb at St. Praxed's Church" a "fine piece"; the Athenaeum saw in it "a study of a human being, full of the wretched ambition and the long-drawn hate of monastic existence." "The Laboratory" was for Forster the essence of the "wicked revels of the ancien regime"; according to the Athenaeum the poem was "a story, a country, and an epoch, in twelve short stanzas." Forster felt that in "The Boy and the Angel" Browning had produced a "masterpiece," and because the poem was "so beautiful," he quoted it "as it stands." Both reviewers had nothing but praise for "The Flight of the Duchess"; Forster suggested, "If the reader would discover how the Duchess tires of the Duke, and how she runs off from his formal restraints, he must read this charming poem." In fact, Forster was so pleased with all of the poems in the collection that he said, "They look as though already packed up and on their way to posterity; nor are we without a confident expectation that some of them will arrive at that journey's end." The critic for the Athenaeum added, "Enough has been given to prove that these Romances will add to the poet's reputation."[55]

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[55] Athenaeum, January 17, 1846, pp. 58-59; Examiner, November 15, 1845, pp. 723-724.

After the publication of Dramatic Romances and Lyrics and continuing through and after the appearance of Luria and A Soul's Tragedy, there were a number of reviews for the ostensible purpose of reviewing one or the other of the last two numbers of the Bells and Pomegranates series; but in these reviews critics usually took the opportunity to look back over the past five years in order to give a general appraisal of the worth of Browning's endeavors during that time. Some of the critics made harsh statements; others, who were quite cordial, seemed eager to recognize Browning's ability and regretful that he had not attained widespread popularity. Most of them were ready to point to the cause of his unpopularity; and though there was general agreement that Browning offered reading that was frequently not easy, some of the reviewers were not slow to suggest that in the matter of understanding Browning the fault might lie at least in part with the readers themselves.

To begin with, there was the frequent assertion that Browning was a poet, and not a bad one at that. The English Review for December, 1845, declared that "Mr. Browning unites within himself more of the elements of a true poet than perhaps any other of those whom we call 'modern' amongst us."[56] In the same month, Douglas

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[56]Broughton and others, p. 89, C 67.

Jerrold's Shilling Magazine spoke of the Dramatic Romances and Lyrics as "the utterances of one of the few real poets of the age."[57] In June, 1846, this magazine expressed even higher praise:

> Mr. Browning is, in our opinion, a great poet . . . . He understands character and human emotion profoundly, and delineates it powerfully. . . . The great secret of his strength . . . is the utter want of sentimentality. He pourtrays the characters of men in all the nakedness and hideousness of true passion.[58]

And Forster's review of Dramatic Romances and Lyrics had echoed his repeated insistence through the years that Browning was a "true poet." He thought that on the whole the Bells were "a remarkable collection, and proof of a very affluent as well as original genius."[59] In April, 1846, Forster wrote:

> When [Browning] divests himself of what clogs him, he wields an extraordinary power over his subject and his readers. . . . But genius is to be thanked, not quarreled with; and we may well doubt, in the case of such a writer as Mr. Browning, whether, if it had fewer faults, it would be so strong and original of its kind.[60]

Browning's originality had long been proclaimed by the Athenaeum (though usually referred to by that organ as "fertility of invention"); and Forster himself had, for

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[57] Ibid., p. 89, C 66. [58] Ibid., p. 90, C 74.

[59] Examiner, November 15, 1845, p. 724.

[60] Examiner, April 25, 1846, p. 259.

years, made frequent mention of it. In his review of Dramatic Romances and Lyrics he called attention to it once more:

> [Browning's] writing has always the stamp and freshness of originality. It is in no respect imitative or commonplace. . . . Each [of the poems] is marked out from its fellow by an idea of its own, to which it moves with corresponding music . . . .[61]

According to Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine,

> Verbiage . . . [and] hacknied phraseology are abhorred by Mr. Browning, and he will go far out of his way to avoid them. . . . This it is which makes his verses and whole poems as fresh and cheering as if he was the first poet that had learnt to write.[62]

Fraser's Magazine placed a premium on originality.[63] Finding in the more-than-adequate quantity of verse being produced (about a new volume every day) little but a deplorable "clock-work tintinabulum of rhyme," a "cuckoo kind of verse which palls upon the mind and really disgusts you," the reviewer insisted that "we look, and justly too, for something more . . . than schoolboy commonplaces and thoughts at second hand, and novelties and nothing more, without a single grain of salt to savour the tun of unmeaningness which they carry with them." Referring to the bulk of the "so called poetry" of the present day as "nonsense, well-tuned and sweet stupidity,"

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[61] Examiner, November 15, 1845, p. 723.

[62] Broughton and others, p. 89, C 66.

[63] Fraser's Magazine, XXXIII (June, 1846), 708-718.

he added that the poet who is "ambitious of a high reputation . . . must make it upon something completely novel." After this prelude, it is indeed surprising to find that the critic had little use for Browning: basing his opinion upon "The Englishman in Italy," which he termed "poetry in the raw material," and "Home Thoughts from Abroad," which was "the mere twaddle of a Cockney at Calais or Cologne," he predicted that "a page out of every ten in Herrick's 'Hesperides' is more certain of a hereafter than any one dramatic romance or lyric in all the 'Bells and Pomegranates' of Mr. Browning." At this review Forster must have chuckled, remembering that in 1841 he had called Browning "a new and original poet--one of the rarest things met with in these days: much cried out for, much sought after, and, when found, much objected to."[64]

Insofar as most present indications were concerned, however, it appeared that Fraser's prediction might not be wrong. "There are few writers so little read, so partially understood," mourned the English Review.[65] And though Douglas Jerrold's was emphatic in its assertion that Browning was a "true poet," the admission was forced

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[64] Examiner, October 2, 1841, p. 628.

[65] Broughton and others, p. 90, C 67.

that "Mr. Browning, however, is not popular, not even with the multitude of literary men."[66]

Attempts to explain Browning's unpopularity were fairly numerous. The Christian Remembrancer confessed, "As his poems stand at present, there is not one of their small twenty-paged sections which can be read freely without reserve."[67] Fraser's complained that Browning's poems were "overlaid with affectation, the common conceit of men who affect to tell common things in an uncommon manner. He clogs his verses, moreover, with too many consonants and too many monosyllables, and carries the sense too frequently in a very ungraceful manner from one line to the other."[68] According to the Eclectic Review,

> They [the poems] possess all the beauties and blemishes of the writer, and these are many and great. Mr. Browning would be a poet of high order if he could free himself from his affectations, and set before himself a great aim in poetry. . . . As it is, with powers capable of all this, he makes himself merely a puzzle to those that see here and there really brilliant passages in him, and to the general reader--caviare.[69]

H. F. Chorley, writing in the People's Journal, expressed a different viewpoint:

> Mr. Browning is not clear. His obscurities, however, do not arise from affectation, but from the

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[66] Ibid., p. 89, C 66.

[67] Ibid., p. 90, C 73.

[68] Fraser's, p. 715.

[69] Broughton and others, p. 91, C 75.

> over-richness of a mind embossed and encrusted, so to say, with the learning and imagery of all schools, of all countries, of all periods--reflective rather than impulsive; and working rather by the accumulation than by the digestion of his materials.[70]

Douglas Jerrold's saw in Browning's "disdain of the popular arts" the chief cause of his unpopularity:

> . . . he has a soul of fire, and casts away every detail, every thought, that does not ministrate to the pourtrayal of the passion with which every line of his productions is fraught. This it is that makes his poetry appear so abrupt, so fragmentary, and, to those whose suggestive powers are sluggish, obscure. These qualities, which are objected to by some persons as blemishes, we take to be proofs of the Poet's genuine inspiration.[71]

In the words of the English Review,

> He came into the literary forum in such a mysterious guise, (that Paracelsus of his), and carried his great gifts about him with such a careless air, that men took but little notice of the unostentatious stranger. . . . [His lesser poems] are strangely associated with, and expressed in strange words; ingenuity of rhymes is carried to an extreme; and the author will often persist in supposing that we know what he means so well, that there is no necessity for him to inform us on the matter.[72]

Douglas Jerrold's, in a later review, replied almost contemptuously:

> He never aids the reader by narrative or obtrusion of himself. There are character, passion, and poetry flung down on paper, and it is certainly the reader's fault or misfortune, if he does not perceive them.[73]

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[70] Ibid., p. 90, C 72.

[71] Ibid., p. 89, C 66.

[72] Ibid., p. 90, C 67.

[73] Ibid., p. 91, C 74.

John Forster's claim was unique:

> Mr. Browning's metaphysics have been too abundant for his poetry. . . . The analytic and the imaginative powers never yet worked well together.

Forster added, however, that from this "fault of youth" Browning was fast freeing himself and that "nothing but this has retarded his advance."[74]

Not only did most reviewers find Browning difficult; some were convinced that he deliberately intended to mystify his readers. Sordello was undoubtedly the springboard for charges of "willful obscurity" that had been made repeatedly ever since the appearance of Sordello. One reviewer had spoken of the "waywardness of tone" in Pippa; the Athenaeum's charge at the time was that Browning "unnecessarily and deliberately conceals his treasures." Even Forster, in his review of King Victor and King Charles, had spoken of "wayward perverseness"; and after the publication of Dramatic Lyrics the Athenaeum remarked that apparently it was Browning's "pleasure to be enigmatical." In 1843, the Gentleman's Magazine had stated,

> We take it that Mr. Browning . . . writes for his own gratification and to his own will, without much regard to the approbation or applause of his readers. . . . Conscious of his powers, he mounts his steed, turns the magic peg in its ear, and instantly shoots

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[74] Examiner, November 15, 1845, p. 723.

> aloft, and goes careening along in the high regions of the empyrean, hardly visible to ordinary mortals.[75]

In April, 1846, the Eclectic Review reached a definite conclusion:

> For a long time we were inclined to believe him really insane. We could not bring ourselves to believe that any man who possessed the power evidenced in his writings would voluntarily assume a form of confused and crazy eccentricity, merely for the poor pleasure of making people wonder. But we came at length to his drama of "The Blot in the 'Scutcheon," . . . and then the conviction was forced on us. Here all is as clear and rational in language as any plain understanding can desire. Mr. Browning, then, can be intelligible if he will.[76]

The truth of the matter is that Browning wanted to be read and certainly would not deliberately have placed any obstacle in the way of his acceptance. Ample proof of this fact can be found in his letters from 1840 to 1846 to Alfred Domett, who served as personal confidant and critic, and who was so enraged over one reviewer's adverse opinion of Pippa that he had written a poem in which he compared the critic to a "black squat beetle" that had stumbled into a mountain "he can never hope to scale" and had thereupon sworn, "There's no such thing as any mountain there!"[77]

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[75] Gentleman's Magazine, XX (August, 1843), 168.

[76] Broughton and others, p. 91, C 75.

[77] Kenyon, p. 20.

In March, 1840, Browning told Domett that he was "busy on some plays . . . that shall be plain enough if my pains are not thrown away . . . ."[78] In May, 1842, Browning confessed, "At present, I don't know if I stand on head or heels: what men require I don't know--and of what they are in possession know nearly as little."[79] In March, 1843, Domett was told to "expect more and better things,"[80] and in November he was thanked for his criticism, "sound as old wine." (Domett himself, realizing that Browning's work tended toward obscurity, frequently advised him to try to clear his style.) Browning confessed in the same letter,

> The fact is, in my youth (i. e. childhood) I wrote only musically--and after [that] stopped all that so effectually that I even now catch myself grudging my men and women their half-lines, like a parish overseer the bread-dole of his charge. But you will find a difference, I think, in what has reached you already, even, and more in what shall reach you . . . .[81]

"All you say about my poems greatly pleases me, and should profit," wrote Browning to Domett in February, 1845. "I do my best at all times . . . ."[82] And in July, 1846, after receiving from Domett a letter "full of cautions and warnings," Browning answered:

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[78] Ibid., p. 29.

[79] Ibid., p. 35.

[80] Ibid., p. 51.

[81] Ibid., p. 96.

[82] Ibid., p. 111.

> As to the obscurity and imperfect expression, the last number of my "Bells," which you get with this, must stand for the best I could do, four or five months ago, to rid myself of those defects--and if you judge I have succeeded in any degree, you will not fancy I am likely to relax in my endeavour now. As for the necessity of such endeavour, I agree with you altogether . . . . The one object of labour is naturally what you recommend to me, and I to myself--nobody knows better, with what indifferent success.[83]

Thus it is seen that for at least six years Browning had attempted to write poetry that could be understood. Nevertheless, he evidently felt that his public was "in possession of" more than it actually was, for he explained the meaning of the title of the Bells and Pomegranates series only at its conclusion, when urged to do so by Miss Barrett, who was as much in the dark as anyone. Moreover, his explanation, that the title was meant to indicate an alternation "of music with discoursing, sound with sense, poetry with thought," was certainly of the nature of a condescension, since he added, "I confess that . . . I supposed the bare words, in such juxtaposition, would sufficiently convey the desired meaning."[84]

It must be assumed, therefore, that Browning felt that his work should be generally understood. And perhaps, in spite of its difficulty, it could have been. However, Lounsbury's report that the over-all circulation

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[83] Ibid., p. 126.

[84] DeVane, p. 89.

of Bells and Pomegranates was very small[85] seems to indicate that only a few persons actually bought the pamphlets and made an effort to understand them. Cruse, too, states that the general public took little notice of the series;[86] and Lounsbury blames Sordello for causing an attitude of sustained indifference to Browning to set in among the English people, including the great majority of the most highly educated class.[87] Both Lounsbury and Cruse inform us that the only appreciation of the entire series of Bells came from a small group of discerning and devoted admirers whose recognition and appreciation of Browning's powers at the time of Paracelsus had continued unabated through the enormous difficulties of Sordello and into and through the Bells, and whose number had been only slightly augmented through the years.[88] Dramatic Lyrics (1842) and Dramatic Romances and Lyrics (1845) were definite bids for greater popularity; and after seeing the proofs of the latter collection Miss Barrett had said, "Now if people do not cry out about these poems, what are we to think of the world?" But even then there was no general outcry; most people simply refused to read them; moreover, what

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[85]Lounsbury, p. 96.

[86]Cruse, p. 187.

[87]Lounsbury, p. 111.

[88]Lounsbury, p. 112; Cruse, p. 187.

favorable critical notice they received apparently had no effect whatsoever on the general public, for it continued to remain indifferent.[89] The prediction of the Athenaeum at the time of the publication of Pippa Passes was that the Bells would not be maintained by the public--that Pippa was "stillborn" and "the last of its race";[90] and from all appearances the Athenaeum had been more right than wrong.

It is possible that more people would have begun to turn from Proverbial Philosophy and Macaulay's Lays to Browning had not Tennyson's collected edition in 1842 caused his popularity to begin to rise so rapidly that he soon overshadowed all other poets. There was a deep sympathy between Tennyson and his readers:

> He could voice their doubts and difficulties; he could put into words the thoughts on man's duty and man's destiny that perplexed so many earnest troubled souls. The forties . . . were years of both material and spiritual distress. There was poverty and want and bitter feeling between man and man; and science was, as it seemed, undermining the old religion and taking away the consolations that faith in God might give. Men looked for a prophet; and Carlyle and Ruskin gave them high and noble teaching. But they wanted something more. They wanted that swifter, more poignant penetration of the spirit which comes only through poetry; and this Tennyson gave them.[91]

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[89] Lounsbury, p. 160.

[90] Athenaeum, December 11, 1841, p. 952.

[91] Cruse, pp. 186-187.

Browning, too, had vital things to say to his generation, but he had been unable to gain a hearing. There is, however, some evidence that he had been making a headway of sorts. In October, 1843, he wrote Domett, "People read my works a little more, they say . . . ."[92] Writing to Christopher Dowson in March, 1844, Browning told of his refusal to agree to keep Colombe's Birthday unpublished until Kean would be ready for it: "For something I must print, or risk the hold, such as it is, I have at present on my public," he explained, adding that the sum promised him by Kean "will pay me but indifferently for hazarding the good fortune which appears slowly but unmistakeably setting in upon me just now."[93] And in July, 1844, Joseph Arnould wrote Domett that Browning "is, more often than he should be, amongst the clouds that hide the majesty of his swoop from the gaze of the world at the mountain base," but added that the world was "beginning to take more note of his movements."[94] DeVane admits that such evidence as this points to the "slow but sure growth of Browning's reputation in a small circle of readers."[95]

Although Douglas Jerrold's declared in 1845 that Browning was "not popular, not even with the multitude of

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[92]Kenyon, p. 92.

[93]Griffin and Minchin, p. 120.

[94]Kenyon, p. 101.

[95]DeVane, p. 147.

literary men," there is evidence indicating that Browning had actually been very well thought of in literary quarters ever since the publication of Paracelsus. As far as the six years following the appearance of Sordello are concerned, it may be said that during that time numerous persons of considerable eminence in the world of letters spoke enthusiastically of Browning's achievements. In 1842 Elizabeth Barrett referred to her future husband as a "high and gifted spirit" who would "work and wait," and in her Poems of 1844 she classed Browning's work with that of Tennyson and Wordsworth and called it a ". . . pomegranate which, if cut deep down the middle,/Shews a heart within blood-tinctured of a veined humanity."[96] Her private letters reveal her sympathy with Browning when critics were assailing A Blot in the 'Scutcheon; and reference has been made to Dickens's unrestricted praise of that play.

Realizing as early as 1836 that Browning was "a great poet" and would "be among the greatest," Walter Savage Landor survived the shock of Sordello, which he felt was "extraordinarily rich in substance but not well expressed," and was able to find "profusion of imagery and depth of thought" in Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, concerning which he wrote Browning, "You may stand quite alone if you

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[96]Griffin and Minchin, p. 147.

will."[97] The mention of Paracelsus in A Satire on Satirists had been "an early and gratuitous puff" for Browning;[98] and in the Morning Chronicle for November 22, 1845, Landor's poem "To Robert Browning," prompted by his delight in Dramatic Romances and Lyrics, expressed his conviction that, with the exception of Shakespeare, Browning was the greatest poet since Chaucer.[99] It has been said that "this tribute from the established veteran of letters seemed to set the seal of recognition on the young poet's reputation."[100]

Thomas Carlyle, "the most vehemently affectionate of all Browning's older friends," was in the 1840's "well on his way to becoming one of the three or four most influential literary men in England." In many circles he "worked for Browning's good, . . . praising him in conversation, interesting distinguished people in his future."[101] Although he did not publish his admiration, he is known to have said that Browning "was one of the few from whom it was possible to expect something" and to have

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[97]Maurice B. Cramer, "Browning's Friendships and Fame before Marriage (1833-1846)," PMLA, LV (1940), 219.

[98]Malcolm Elwin, Savage Landor (New York, 1941), p. 369.

[99]William Lyon Phelps, "Landor and Browning," ELH, I (December, 1934), 231.

[100]Elwin, p. 369.

[101]Cramer, p. 217.

"hoped more from Robert Browning, for the people of England, than from any living English writer."[102]

In the preface to his Tragedies, Talfourd regretted in 1844 that Browning's genius was "only yet dimly perceived";[103] and in the same year Richard Hengist Horne, author of the popular epic Orion (1843), praised Browning highly in his A New Spirit of the Age, described by Joseph Arnould as "a menagerie of modern lions and lionesses whereof Horne acts, not inefficiently, as showman. Friend Robert he stirs up to good effect, and makes him roar out very nobly some of the grandest passages in Paracelsus . . . ."[104]

Many other persons of importance in the literary world and of considerable aid in furthering Browning's reputation are named by Maurice Cramer, the only scholar besides DeVane who has in recent years given close attention to a study of Browning's early fame. Cramer feels that Lounsbury's report of the general neglect of Browning after Sordello is much exaggerated, and objects also to DeVane's statement that Sordello caused Browning to be "plunged into that semi-obscurity which was to last for nearly twenty-four years." He goes on to say,

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[102] Ibid., p. 218.

[103] Broughton and others, p. 89, C 64.

[104] Kenyon, p. 102.

> Simply to jot down a list of Browning admirers up to The Ring and the Book is to show that the dark picture after Sordello is overdrawn. Browning's prestige in London during this time was not as great as that of Carlyle, Tennyson, and others, but he was a literary lion of sorts and his influence was continually growing, though slowly.[105]

DeVane admits that there is "some justification" for Cramer's position but feels that he "confuses literary with social success."[106] It is perhaps best to resolve the matter by turning to Browning himself for an answer. Douglas Jerrold's had proposed that "his delight is in his own might . . . . If the comparative neglect of the many is displeasing to him, at all events, Coriolanus-like, he will not show his scars."[107] When writing to Domett of his gratification at Landor's poetical tribute, Browning said:

> I never was much disturbed in my natural post of "most unintelligible of writers," nor, consequently, got a tithe of the notice book-makers get as a matter of course--yet my gettings, what all the unintelligibility and unpopularity in the world could not preserve me from getting--quite enough it has been, indeed![108]

And as he prepared to leave England for Italy, to begin another period of his literary career, he must have remembered the words of one reviewer, who had said,

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[105]Cramer, p. 208.

[106]DeVane, p. 16.

[107]Broughton and others, p. 90, C 74.

[108]Kenyon, p. 106.

"We know, and we rejoice to know, that neglect of such a man as our author can be but temporary."[109]

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[109]Broughton and others, p. 89, C 67.

CHAPTER IV

1847-1856

For nearly fifteen years Browning lived in Italy; and in contrast to the rather steady flow of works from his pen during the early productive years in England, 1833-1846, his only creations while living in Italy were Christmas Eve and Easter Day (1850) and Men and Women (1855). However, in 1849 the appearance of the first collected edition of his works to date supplied reviewers with material for approximately two years. Since pronouncements upon the 1849 edition were frequently given along with opinions of Christmas Eve and Easter Day, it is convenient for purposes of discussion to consider at once an over-all consensus of critical opinion from about a year after Browning's departure for Italy up to the lull following the subsidence of reviews of Christmas Eve and Easter Day.

It is apparent that during these years most critics were favorably disposed toward Browning, particularly in regard to one aspect of his writing that was already a settled point: his originality. In 1847 the British Quarterly Review was anxious to point out that Browning had "a place apart from and above the herd of implacable

verse-writers, ambitious of demonstrating that poetry is a drug," and that although he might be said to be "deficient in some of the great requisites of art," he had "that one primary requisite: the power of seeing for himself and writing in his own language."

> He is assuredly not a great poet; he is not even a distinguished poet, whose works will be gathered into future collections; but he is nevertheless a man who stands out in relief from his contemporaries--he is a writer of whom one must speak with the respect due to originality.[1]

The British Quarterly had not foreseen the edition of 1849; but its opinion of Browning's originality was echoed frequently. According to the Eclectic Review for August, 1849,

> To our minds, this is a great and original poet. One among the greatest who have arisen among us, he seems, since the beginning of the present century; a poet worthy to claim brotherhood with his contemporary, Alfred Tennyson. . . . With no modern poet are we conversant, in whom less of resemblance to others can be traced. None stands more absolutely self-entire and independent.[2]

The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany agreed in May, 1850:

> There is hardly another English poet now living in the full exercise of all his faculties, who is so suggestive of new ideas, who shows so keen an insight into the mysteries of character, or whose works are so strongly impressed with the marks of genius.[3]

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[1]Broughton and others, p. 91, C 80.

[2]Ibid., p. 92, C 87.

[3]Ibid., p. 94, C 103.

And even Fraser's, ever difficult to please, was forced to admit,

> Even those who possess, or fancy they possess, canons of scientific criticism, are very much at a loss how to apply them to his case. [His eccentricities], whether or not they prove genius . . . , prove at least originality; and all will allow this merit to Mr. Browning . . . a poet distinguished from the herd of scribblers . . . .[4]

In addition to finding Browning's originality completely worthy of their praise, certain critics were not less disposed to admire his genius for the dramatic. "He is, indeed, pre-eminently, if not exclusively, a dramatist," wrote Sharpe's London Magazine, quite taken with Pippa Passes.[5] And the English Review extended the definition: "Whatever he writes, takes consciously or unconsciously a dramatic form. His lyrics are almost all monodramas."[6]

"Rich as are Mr. Browning's powers of imagination and description," stated the Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany, "his chief excellence lies in his delineation of individual character; and we know of no other living poet who so thoroughly conceives or so finely portrays the differing shades of it found in actual life."[7] Although

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[4]Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (February, 1851), 170.

[5]Broughton and others, p. 92, C 85.

[6]Eclectic Magazine, XVIII (December, 1849), 454.

[7]Broughton and others, p. 94, C 103.

Fraser's complained that "his men and women are not flesh and blood, but stage properties,"[8] the English Review declared, "The very souls of his dramatis personae are constantly palpitating before us . . . ."[9]

Turning to the question of Browning's popularity, the British Quarterly observed in November, 1847:

> Robert Browning has conquered for himself a high rank amongst contemporary poets, and there are few persons, we presume, who pretend to an acquaintance with the literature of the day, to whom his name is an unfamiliar sound.[10]

But in November, 1848, Sharpe's London Magazine stated, "Browning is not generally popular. We think he should be so."[11] In June, 1849, the English Review suggested that Browning "bide his time, secure of his own greatness, and of the world's awaking sooner or later to a just appreciation of it." "Even now," said the reviewer, "a change is manifest; a new and complete edition of his works is called for, and proof is thereby afforded that the public is beginning to open its eyes."[12] During the next two years, however, the reports were not encouraging. The Eclectic Review stated in August, 1849, "Pre-eminently

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[8]Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (February, 1851), 173.

[9]Eclectic Magazine, XVIII (December, 1849), 455.

[10]Broughton and others, p. 91, C 80.

[11]Ibid., p. 92, C 85.

[12]Eclectic Magazine, XVIII (December, 1849), 454.

and distinctively, is he to be classed as a poet for the few. Without study, actual bona-fide study, his poetry must remain caviare to the most intelligent reader."[13] In May, 1850, the Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany echoed, "His works are poems for the thoughtful few rather than for the thoughtless many . . . ."[14] And according to Fraser's in February, 1851, "Mr. Browning's niche in the Temple of the Muses should be by now a settled point. On the contrary his poems are still caviare to the multitude."[15]

Why, according to the Eclectic Review, was Browning "not one whom we can recommend to the readers of poetry at their ease: gentlemen who would have their hour's amusement out of our poet"? And why, though recognizing Browning and Tennyson as "great poets," as the "undoubted chiefs of our poetic era," was the English Review yet forced to admit that Browning (and Tennyson as well, Cruse and others notwithstanding) was really not a "household name," as Byron, and Scott, and others had been?

The reviewers themselves explained the reasons. As the Eclectic put it, "Our poet always presupposes an intelligent and thoughtful reader; and herein lies the

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[13]Broughton and others, p. 92, C 87.

[14]Ibid., p. 94, C 103.

[15]Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (February, 1851), 170.

primary source of difficulty."[16] The English Review claimed that Browning did not descend, as Byron and Scott did, "to the common level."[17] Of course, these explanations were simply euphemistic expressions of the fact that Browning was hard to read. The Eclectic got down to earth, however, and blamed him for "neglect of incidental and external material," which "however necessary for the comprehension of the drift of the individual poem, is always hinted at, rather than stated; and that, too, in the loosest way."[18] Fraser's, complaining at length of "crabbed and confused sentences" and of "the absence of graceful grammatic flow," reached the conclusion that these faults were not the product of "mere haste and carelessness," but were due to ". . . a certain 'arrhythmia,' a defectiveness of that highest poetical faculty to which all things are musical."[19]

The English Review, remarking that some people regarded "general obscurity" as "necessarily fatal to Mr. Browning's popularity to the end of time, however great may be his merits," explained that the obscurity arose "mainly, from an excess of reality."

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[16]Broughton and others, p. 92, C 87.

[17]Ibid., p. 93, C 98.

[18]Ibid., p. 92, C 87.

[19]Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (February, 1851), 174.

> Mr. Browning does not write about people,--does not tell you why they think or feel so and so, as other poets do, but shows you the people themselves, thinking, feeling, acting: he brings the scene actually and immediately before you, not presenting it through the usual artificial medium: he rushes abruptly into the very heart of his subject without any exordium, and presupposes a certain knowledge of his theme on the reader's part, which he can not reasonably expect to find. Everywhere an introductory argument seems to be wanted, placing the reader at the right point of view; in the absence of which, this author's highest beauties may at first be unintelligible, or apparently even absurd.[20]

This reviewer went on to suggest that arguments or prologues be prefixed to Browning's works. These aids, not dramatic, but "simply preparatory, explanatory, demonstrative," would "go far toward rendering his works accessible to the general reader, and himself consequently popular."

It was not universally thought of Browning, however, that "no author more requires interpreters to stand betwixt him and the public"; the Eclectic Review insisted, "Patient study is needed; but no more,"[21] and Sharpe's London Magazine reported that though at first "all seems obscurity around us . . . , by degrees, as our eyes grow accustomed to the forest twilight, they discern a thousand beauties that at first passed unnoticed . . . ."[22]

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[20]Eclectic Magazine, XVIII (December, 1849), 455.

[21]Broughton and others, p. 92, C 87.

[22]Ibid., p. 92, C 85.

As far as some reviewers were concerned, obscurity and harsh grammatical constructions were not Browning's only faults. The English Review, objecting to certain themes "which had better been left untouched," mentioned his apparent "exaltation of suicide, as a high and noble act" (in Luria and A Blot in the 'Scutcheon)[23] and "careless audacity in treating licentiousness" (in Pippa and A Blot).[24] Skeptical as well of "The Flight of the Duchess," on the whole an "admirable composition," the reviewer said, "We cannot speak favorably of the moral of this composition, for we do not like a wife's being spirited away from her husband, however unworthy of her . . . ."[25] Yet he admitted that "the moral and even religious beauties which counterbalance these errors are so great, as to call for the general appreciation of all true lovers of poetry or of truth."[26]

A similar complaint was registered by Fraser's, whose reviewer called "Porphyria's Lover" a poem "of uncommon pathos and beauty, though of that lurid and unhealthy tone, in which, we are sorry to say, Mr. Browning's muse seems to work most freely." He felt that the same defect was carried out "into sheer disgustingness" in "The Bishop

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[23] Eclectic Magazine, XVIII (December, 1849), 453.

[24] Ibid., p. 459.

[25] Ibid., p. 468.

[26] Ibid., p. 454.

Orders His Tomb." This reviewer split hairs in objecting that the entire effect of "Porphyria's Lover" was spoiled "by the irreverent attempt at naïveté in the last line," and that "How They Brought the Good News from Ghent to Aix" (which contained "rattle . . . , but no melody") was defaced by a line "which, considering that horses are in the habit of breathing entirely through their nostrils, is as physically impossible as it is disgustingly circumstantial."[27] The English Review, incidentally, said of the latter poem, "Mr. Browning does not write about 'the ride,' as another man would do; . . . he gives us the very thing itself." The reviewer noted that the Duke's jealousy is "finely indicated" in "My Last Duchess" ("a perfect puzzle to most readers, without some clue to its meaning"), and praised "Porphyria's Lover" ("truthful, passionate, beautiful") and "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" ("charming throughout"; "for Browning, marvelously easy of comprehension"; "all the world will be delighted with it").[28]

In spite of complaints of various natures, obscurity continued to be the one fault most objected to by reviewers and, by inference from the reviews, by the public itself. Fraser's said in 1851:

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[27]Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (February, 1851), 174-175.

[28]Eclectic Magazine, XVIII (December, 1849), 467-468.

> If Browning's works do not take a permanent place in literature, it will be from defects of manner rather than of matter, from the mere outward ruggedness of the utterance, and not from any intrinsic want of richness, nobleness, or health in the nature of them.[29]

But the Eclectic Review reminded its readers that "popular or not, he must be a poet after his own fashion; if at all."[30]

Christmas Eve and Easter Day, the first of Browning's works, except for Strafford, to be handled at the expense of the publisher, was brought out on April 1, 1850, by Chapman and Hall, the firm which had published the collected edition in 1849. In this poem Browning turned from his favored objective method and attempted to review in a personal and direct fashion the three aspects of Christian thinking--Dissenting, Catholic, and rational--as he saw them at the middle of the century.[31]

The Athenaeum, feeling that Browning had "recklessly impaired the dignity of his purpose by the vehicle chosen for its development," complained, "The form of doggerel--carried to excess by strange and offensive oddities of versification--is not that in which the mysteries of

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[29]Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (February, 1851), 177.

[30]Broughton and others, p. 92, C 87.

[31]DeVane, p. 195.

faith, doubt, and eternity can be consistently treated."[32] John Forster began his review in the Examiner with the warning that the reader should not form a hasty judgment of the poem from what may appear to be "its occasional levity of tone" and thereby fail to perceive that it expressed "the writer's spiritual experiences in their utmost force and intensity."[33] Fraser's Magazine proposed that the irreverent tone of the work might be "a sign of the fearlessness of real belief."[34]

In most of the reviews there was lengthy discussion of the religious import of the poem and general agreement that Browning's description of the lunar rainbow was, as the Athenaeum expressed it, an "example of the beautiful."[35]

Two hundred copies of the work were sold during the first two weeks after its appearance; but with the passing of Easter the sale flagged and the book could not be called a commercial success.[36]

During the early fifties the Brownings spent much time travelling and socializing "over hot chestnuts and

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[32] Athenaeum, April 6, 1850, p. 370.

[33] Examiner, April 6, 1850, p. 211.

[34] Fraser's Magazine, XLIII (February, 1851), 177.

[35] Athenaeum, April 6, 1850, p. 370.

[36] DeVane, p. 204.

mulled wine."[37] In 1851 and again in 1852 they were in England, where they were given a hearty welcome by the London world of letters. Prolonged visits to Paris and to Rome further precluded any sustained literary activity; but in June, 1854, Browning reported to a correspondent that at last he was "setting his poetical house in order." He had, however, been intermittently absorbed in the creation of new poems, as is learned from a letter of February, 1853, in which he said hopefully to Milsand, his enthusiastic French critic, "I am writing--a first step towards popularity for me--lyrics with more music and painting than before, so as to get people to hear and see." And in a letter of June, 1854, he told Forster that he had written "a number of poems of all sorts and sizes and styles and subjects . . . the fruits of the years since I last turned the winch of the wine press. The manner will be newer than the matter. I hope to be listened to, this time . . . ." In the spring of 1855 Mrs. Browning reported that Robert was "swallowed up in work" and that the new poems were "magnificent."[38] The manuscript was brought to England in the summer of 1855, and on November 17 Chapman and Hall released to the British public the two volumes of Men and Women, in which

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[37]Griffin and Minchin, p. 162.

[38]DeVane, pp. 207-208.

> . . . some fifty men and women of the most various character, and placed in positions that present often the strangest contrasts with each other, are supposed to express portions of their individuality . . . . Now the person who speaks is a Greek poet, speculating upon high things from his especial point of view, in a letter to a munificent Tyrannos whose rich gifts lie piled together on the pavement of the poet's court. Now it is a wild chant of the orthodox about a burning heretic, and now a modern strain of pure domestic love. Old painters live again--seeming to speak to us out of their inmost hearts; and old musicians play to us their fugues and toccatas . . . . Then there is the Arab physician Karshish . . . .[39]

There can be little doubt that Browning had brought all his talent and power to bear upon the preparation of Men and Women; and it has been seen that he had written these poems with the hope that they would be widely appreciated. His disappointment, therefore, must have been intense when he read the first of the reviews, which appeared in the Athenaeum and gave almost unmitigated censure:

> Who will not grieve over energy wasted and power misspent,--over fancies chaste and noble, so overhung by the "seven veils" of obscurity that we can oftentimes be only sure that fancies exist? . . . We had hoped that Men and Women would enable us to register progress in the poet's mind (always rich to overflowing) and in the artist's hand (always able to draw whatever its owner pleased). The riches and the ability are there, but the employment and the expression of them seem to us, on the whole, more perverse, personal, and incomplete than they were formerly.[40]

On November 24, the Saturday Review, then only three weeks old and still anxious to "astonish by its

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[39] Examiner, December 1, 1855, p. 756.

[40] Marchand, p. 292.

audacity,"[41] attacked Men and Women violently.[42] The first three sentences indicate the tone of the whole, which expressed an attitude similar to that of the Athenaeum, but in a far more vitriolic manner:

> It is really high time that this sort of thing should, if possible, be stopped. Here is another book of madness and mysticism--another melancholy specimen of power wantonly wasted, and talent deliberately perverted--another act of self prostration before that demon of bad taste who now seems to hold in absolute possession the fashionable masters of our ideal literature. It is a strong case for the correctional justice of criticism, which has too long abdicated its higher functions.

The reviewer immediately turned his attention to Browning's apparent inability to write clearly:

> Can any of his devotees be found to uphold his present elaborate experiment on the patience of the public? Take any one of his worshippers you please . . . and we will engage to find him at least ten passages in the first ten pages of Men and Women, some of which, even after profound study, he will not be able to construe at all, and not one of which he will be able to read off at sight.

Quoting four stanzas from "By the Fireside," the meaning of which he defied anyone to find, the reviewer added, "We really should think highly of the powers of any interpreter who could 'pierce' the obscurity of such 'stuff' as this." Next he offered "a gold medal in the department of Hermeneutical Science" to anyone who could make sense of

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[41] Merle Mowbray Bevington, The Saturday Review, 1855-1868 (New York, 1941), p. 208.

[42] Saturday Review, I (November 24, 1855), 69-70.

"Master Hughes of Saxe-Gotha," from which he quoted nine stanzas, ending

> So your fugue broadens and thickens,
> Greatens and deepens and lengthens,
> Till one exclaims--"But where's music, the dickens?
> Blot ye the gold, while your spider-web strengthens,
> Black to the stoutest of tickens?"

Continuing in the same tone of derision, the reviewer wondered:

> Do our readers exclaim, "But where's poetry--the dickens!--in all this rigmarole?" We confess we can find none--we can find nothing but a set purpose to be obscure, and an idiot captivity to the jingle of Hudibrastic rhyme. This idle weakness really appears to be at the bottom of half the daring nonsense in this most daringly non-sensical book.

But the reviewer was not to be tricked into believing that Browning "purposely and scornfully" trampled on the precepts of art; either having forgotten his earlier charge of "talent deliberately perverted" or having changed his mind, he insisted that Browning was "half-intelligible" only because he was "half-gifted," that his mysticism was but weakness--"weakness writhing itself into contortions that it may ape the muscles of strength."

> Frequently the conclusion is almost irresistible, that Mr. Browning's mysticism must be <u>malice prepense</u>: on the whole, however, we are inclined to clear his honesty at the expense of his powers, and to conclude that he is obscure not so much because he has the vanity to be thought original, as because he lacks sufficient genius to make himself clear.

After this vituperative tirade, the critic admitted that "Bishop Blougram's Apology" and "Cleon" were worth

reading, and that he could actually understand and even like "The Statue and the Bust," the poem that "pleased us most--really, perhaps, because we could read it off-hand." As Bevington points out, "Readers of Browning today find something lacking in either the fairness or the critical acumen of a reviewer who had [Men and Women] before him and could ignore 'Saul,' 'Fra Lippo Lippi,' and 'Andrea del Sarto,' to mention only a few of the poems."[43]

John Forster came to Browning's rescue on December 1.[44] After praising and quoting from as many of the poems as space would permit, he answered implicitly the Saturday Review critic, whose opinion had been not entirely unjustified:

> Only indeed to establish beyond dispute that these volumes are not exclusively "obscure and mystical" have we been induced to quote so much. No doubt there are too many pieces in the volumes to which the objection of obscurity in the meaning, and of a perverse harshness in the metres, may be justly urged. It is Mr. Browning's old fault. Since his first poem was published twenty years ago, . . . this journal has been incessantly objecting to it. But there is some danger at present, we see, of the objection being carried too far. An occasional obscurity of expression which may be the drawback on a full mind . . . proceeds in the present case from what we fear is inseparable from a cast of thought imparting nevertheless to the whole its pervading excellence and flavour. The robust intellect works actively; and the perceptions of a poet, when applied to thoughts of more than common subtlety, will often outrun his reader's. Such

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[43] Bevington, p. 210.

[44] Examiner, December 1, 1855, pp. 756-757.

> obscurity proceeds from fullness, not emptiness; and it is not always that a thought which is hard to follow will be found not worth the exercise of mind required for overtaking it. A distinctive quaintness, a complete absence of diffuseness, and the inborn dramatic feeling which is often apt to suggest breaks of phrase, and striking interruptions to a train of thought, are among the chief causes of what is most complained of in Mr. Browning. They are part of the writer's individuality, and it is by right of his individuality that he will live, if he is to be read by future generations. We do not say this by way of defending unquestionable faults, but to explain why they disfigure the work of a man of true genius. We heartily wish them away; but they shall not prevent our pronouncing the poems we have quoted or named [here], and many others . . . to be as genuine poetry as any that has been written in our time.

Poems specifically mentioned by Forster included "An Epistle . . . of Karshish," which he praised, saying, "Subtle, and full of noble and high suggestion is the Arab Doctor's picture of . . . Lazarus." A "masterly expression of the fee-fa-fum in poetry," "Childe Roland" "proceeds through a succession of objects perfectly natural in themselves, but to which the condition of the mind in the traveler is made to impart a quasi-supernatural terror. As a mere study in the poet's art this piece is very striking." "Wide surely," insisted Forster, "is the range of the dramatic genius that can give expression to character like this [in "Up in a Villa and Down in the City"] and has also power to fill our hearts with such a strain caught from the very spirit of the Hebrew poets as afterwards represents to us David harping songs . . .

to spirit-troubled Saul." Forster found that two of the poems, "In a Balcony" and "Bishop Blougram's Apology," stood out from the rest in importance and striking dramatic power. Of "In a Balcony" he wrote, "The whole of this little piece indeed is so full of life and pathos, that, in the hands of actors reasonably competent, it would surely form a most effective sketch upon the stage." He thought "Bishop Blougram's Apology" to be "perhaps the best, certainly the most subtle poem in the series," "powerful" in its "admixture of true wisdom and genuine religious instinct joined and reconciled to a thoroughly comfortable worldliness." Favorable mention was made of "The Grammarian's Funeral" as well as of the "very charming poem of 'The Statue and the Bust,' written in terza rima with incomparable facility and grace."

In January, the attack on Men and Women was continued with renewed vigour. "Robert Browning is a name which will serve the future historian of the English literature of the nineteenth century to point to the moral of genius unfaithful to its trust," predicted Fraser's. "Endowed by nature with those gifts which, duly cultivated, enable a man to become a fine poet, he has chosen to let them run wild; and what might have been a beautiful garden is but a wilderness overgrown with a rank and riotous vegetation."[45]

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[45]Broughton and others, p. 97, C 137.

"Mr. Robert Browning has shown us that poetry may be written a great deal worse, in some respects, than anything which has yet passed under our review," reported the Christian Examiner.[46] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine complained that "there is no getting through the confused crowd of Mr. Browning's Men and Women."[47] "Anything so crabbed, harsh, and grotesque, as many of these so-called poems, we never encountered before," agreed the Christian Remembrancer.[48] "Perhaps," suggested Bentley's Miscellany, "closer study, such as the poet requires as a sine qûa non to appreciation, will discover beauties that lurk unseen during a too cursory perusal; but the most cursory perusal can hardly escape a conviction that the poet's penchant for elliptical diction . . . is unhealthily on the increase."[49] In July, the London Quarterly thought it "very doubtful now, if the genius of Mr. Browning will issue from its nebulous retreat, and orb itself distinctly in our literary heaven."[50]

Frequently echoed was the charge of the Saturday Review that Browning's "set purpose" was to be obscure. "'Men and Women' is by many degrees more eccentric,

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[46]Ibid., p. 98, C 139.

[47]Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXXIX (February, 1856), 135-136.

[48]Broughton and others, p. 98, C 140.

[49]Ibid., p. 97, C 135.

[50]Ibid., p. 98, C 146.

affected, resolutely strange, and in parts deliberately unintelligible than its predecessors," observed the Christian Remembrancer.[51] "Instead of looking on his gifts of imagination and of intellect as entrusted to him for the benefit of others," grumbled the critic for Fraser's Magazine, "he has just got out of them the utmost personal pleasure that they would yield with the least possible trouble."[52] Blackwood's Magazine agreed, "There is an unmistakable enjoyment in this wild sport of his--he likes it, though we are puzzled."[53] The London Quarterly Review reprimanded Browning for disdaining "to take a little pains to put the reader at a similar advantage with himself,--to give a preparatory statement which may help to make his subsequent effusion plain and logical." The critic complained, "He . . . leaves out (or out of sight) a link here and another there of that which forms the inevitable chain of truth, making a hint or word supply its place."[54]

John Forster, however, was not the only critic who could appreciate Browning. Others, willing to look through the faults they felt compelled to enumerate,

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[51]Ibid., p. 98, C 140. [52]Ibid., p. 97, C 137.

[53]Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXXIX (February, 1856), 137.

[54]Broughton and others, p. 98, C 146.

reported that they had made a rare find. The reviewer for the Spectator wrote:

> That the standard of poetic excellence may not through condonation of his lapse be lowered, we must enter a passing protest against his fashion of presenting incidents so allusively as to baffle ordinary penetration to discover what he means--of printing poems having reference to some facts or conversation not given and needed to explain them--of continually running into absurd phrases and ridiculous rhymes in the midst of serious and impassioned poems . . . . This protest entered, we can honestly say that the two new volumes contain more genuine poetry than ninety-nine out of a hundred volumes pretending to that venerable title.[55]

Bentley's Miscellany protested the great wrong done to Browning by those who confounded "the excrescent 'accidents' with the 'essence' of his poetical genius" and thereby concluded that he was "no poet at all."

> How much greater a poet he might be, would he but anticipate the easy every-day work of faultfinders, by striking out what they so readily find, and by taking upon himself before publication the duty they promptly assume after it, of rooting out the tares from his wheat,--it is pardonably provoking to think. Nobly endowed is Robert Browning with gifts superior not only in degree but in kind to more than two or three, among contemporary poets, who are read and applauded to the echo by thousands, where he is read and musingly loved by tens.[56]

Speaking for those who did admire Browning's "learning in tracks not commonly explored," his "keen powers of observation," and his "shrewd acquaintance with the world and its ways," the British Quarterly stated:

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[55] Ibid., p. 96, C 134.

[56] Ibid., p. 97, C 135.

> That, among the English authors of the day, very few, indeed, could be compared with Mr. Browning for power and originality of mind has long been the settled opinion of all acquainted with his writings, and capable of judging them. . . . All one's previous opinions as to the force, and subtlety, and variety of Mr. Browning's intellectual powers . . . are confirmed by this book.[57]

Though feeling that "Andrea del Sarto" and "Bishop Blougram's Apology" were "about the only intelligible sketches" in the volumes, even Blackwood's admitted:

> After all, he really seems to mean something, which is a comfort in its way . . . . Sometimes he works like the old primitive painters, with little command of his tools, but something genuine in his mind, which comes out in spite of the stubborn brushes and pigments, marvellous ugly, yet somehow true. . . . Unlike those brothers of his who use the dramatic form with an entire contravention of its principles, this writer of rugged verses has a dramatic gift, the power of contrasting character, and expressing its distinctions.[58]

And Cardinal Wiseman, whom "Bishop Blougram" more than likely suggested, wrote in the Rambler, the Roman Catholic publication:

> For ourselves, we thank Mr. Browning, . . . reckless as he is, for a rare treat in these thoughtful and able volumes. We do not suppose that they will command any extensive popularity, for except the rather select audience to which they are addressed, the rest of the world will probably only use them as a magazine of polemical weapons.[59]

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[57] Ibid., p. 97, C 138.

[58] Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, LXXIX (February, 1856), 137.

[59] Broughton and others, p. 99, C 154.

But Browning had not intentionally addressed Men and Women to a select audience. Here was his definite appeal for widespread popularity. He had striven to mend his obscure ways, going even so far as to call in the aid of Fox, his first critic and old friend, to help him read the proofs. Because of the interest and quality of his new poems he had every right to expect the applause of the intelligent world, at least. At first, all went well: by Tuesday, after publication on Saturday, the volumes had sold enough to cover expenses; but soon the gush of sales stopped "without so much as a subsequent trickle."[60] There were still unsold copies of Men and Women on Chapman's hands as late as 1863.[61]

Possibly militating against the proper appreciation of his work was the Crimean War, then at its height; moreover, his long absence in Italy had not kept his name before the British public.[62] And after In Memoriam had been read in 1850 with a feeling that was almost reverence, Tennyson's popularity was greater than ever. He had been made Poet Laureate in 1850 and soon most reading men were almost incredibly enthusiastic Tennysonians.[63] That there was yet an audience for other poets, nevertheless,

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[60]K. L. Knickerbocker, "Browning and His Critics," Sewanee Review, XLIII (January, March, 1935), 287-288.

[61]DeVane, p. 27.

[62]Ibid., p. 210.

[63]Cruse, pp. 189-190.

is proved by the fact that four editions of the poems of Alexander Smith, "that light of the 'spasmodic' school," were absorbed in as many years by a generation that asked for no re-issue of Men and Women.[64]

Browning himself felt that his publishers had not been sufficiently active in his interests. He was particularly enraged at the reviews, which he looked over in the reading room at Galignani's, the depository in Paris for current periodicals of all nations. Writing to Chapman from Paris on January 17, 1856, he referred to the "zoological utterances I have stopped my ears against at Galignani's of late. 'Whoo-oo---oo-oo' mouths the big monkey--'whee-ee-ee-ee' squeaks the little monkey, and such a dig with the end of my unbrella as I should give the brutes if I couldn't keep my temper and consider how they miss their nuts and gingerbread!" In the same letter he became more serious:

> I have read heaps of critiques at Galignani's, mostly stupid and spiteful; self-contradictory and contradictory of each other. What effect such "rot" would have on me in the case of the book being somebody else's, I know exactly; but how it works with the reading public you must tell me, if I am ever to know. I suppose we are not at the end of them and the best comes last, it is to be hoped.[65]

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[64]Griffin and Minchin, p. 201.

[65]Knickerbocker, p. 288.

The "rot" had some effect; inexorable conclusions were to be drawn from Chapman's sad report. Browning concluded that his poetry was too new and original to appeal to the public. "As to my own poems," he said five months after the publication of Men and Women, "they must be left to Providence and that fine sense of discrimination which I never cease to meditate upon and admire in the public--they cry out for new things and when you furnish them with what they cried for, it's so new they grunt."[66]

Of course, the novelty of Browning's poetry appealed to some; but these admirers were undoubtedly those who constituted the small, select audience so frequently mentioned by reviewers and whose number was increasing so slowly as to be practically imperceptible. The Westminster Review gave what is probably an accurate report concerning the effect of Browning on most of those who tried to read him for the first time:

> Heinsius is said to have characterized Aristotle's works by a "majestic obscurity which repels the ignorant." We borrow these words to indicate what is likely to be the first impression of a reader who, without any previous familiarity with Browning, glances through his two new volumes of poems. . . . Here he will find no conventionality, no melodious commonplace, . . . no didactic laying out of a subject, but dramatic indication, which requires the reader to trace by his own mental activity the underground stream of thought . . . .

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[66] Ibid., p. 289.

> To read Browning he must exert himself, but he will exert himself to some purpose.[67]

Most people, however, were apparently not willing to exert themselves. The difficulty of Browning's works was doubtless the chief cause of his continued unpopularity.

Duckworth, however, proposes other reasons. With specific reference to the decade of the 1850's, he has considered the preconceptions and prejudices which he feels had to be overcome by the more intelligent of the English public before they could place themselves in sympathetic contact with Browning.[68] Although Matthew Arnold spoke in 1853 of "the bewildering confusion of the age of spiritual discomfort," most Englishmen were rejoicing in the material prosperity of the time and felt that any man of letters should realize that his mission was to proclaim this prosperity, to "preach the doctrine according to Bentham." The Spectator had said that "the poet who would really fix public attention must leave the exhausted past and draw his subject from matters of present import."

Although the Edinburgh Review had said that "the English public was never more eager to hail the productions of a literary genius," Duckworth constructs a hypothetical Ars Poetica of the 1850's to show that

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[67]Broughton and others, p. 99, C 153.

[68]F. G. R. Duckworth, Browning (New York, 1932), pp. 18-28.

writers desirous of acceptance and approval were expected, nevertheless, to conform to certain rigid principles laid down by most of the reading public. In content, a writer was expected to manifest moral soundness to turn the ignorant and skeptical toward the light; originality, but not what might seem to be mere novelty; and, of course, no vulgarity or ribaldry. Above all, he should write about England. In form, lucidity was the primary requirement--obscurity would simply not be tolerated; and a polished presentation, giving no indication of slovenliness, was an absolute necessity.

Duckworth feels that he has said enough to show what kind of reception Browning might have expected, not only in 1855, but for many years preceding that time. In defiance of the stricture concerning sound morals, for instance, he would have been thought to maintain, in "The Statue and the Bust," that adultery was laudable. And he would have seemed to sympathize with that licentious monk, Fra Lippo Lippi. His odd and out-of-the-way subjects would be considered thoroughly distasteful: those obscure musicians, lascivious monks, worldly bishops (at least the one ordering his tomb), and medieval philosophers. Furthermore, the paucity of treatment of English history and scenery would be especially regretted: why couldn't he make England the background of his poems? Why "Pippa

Passes," and not "Polly Passes"? As to his obscurity, there would be only one possible answer: he hoped by being obscure to gain a reputation for profundity, just as by being eccentric he hoped to persuade his readers that he was being original. And the faultiness of his verse could only be the result of his being too sinfully proud to use "the crucible and the file"--to willingly subject his art, as it were, to the severest discipline.

Stopford Brooke anticipated one point of Duckworth's observation.[69] "Browning is more Italian than English," says Brooke, and calls attention to the poem "De Gustibus" in which Browning, contrasting himself with a friend who loves England, ended the poem by saying:

> Open my heart and you will see
> Graved inside of it, "Italy."
> Such lovers old are I and she:
> So it always was, so shall ever be!

Brooke points out that Browning wrote not as Tennyson did--of the daily life of the English farmer, squire, miller, and sailor; of English sweet-hearting; of English parks, brooks, and village-greens--but of Pippa, the work-girl at Asolo; the Spanish monk in his garden; the Arab riding through the desert; the poor painters at Florence; the dead grammarian in Germany; and of a hundred others,

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[69]Stopford A. Brooke, The Poetry of Robert Browning (New York, 1902), pp. 26-31.

none of whom is English. All his representations of common life are outside of England with few exceptions; and this, Brooke feels, is probably one of the greatest reasons why English people for a long time would have so little to do with Browning.

Perhaps, as Cramer has suggested,[70] the public at large and most of the reviewers were waiting to be kindled by a more intense and boisterous enthusiasm than had yet been spent for Browning. Such enthusiasm was soon to be supplied by the Pre-Raphaelites. About 1847 Browning's greatness began to dawn on Dante Gabriel Rossetti and his brother, William Michael, who dared to find Tennyson in the ascendancy of his fame less exciting than the difficult and unpopular Browning. They particularly worshipped Sordello; and Cramer feels that it may have given the young aesthetes a feeling of superiority to advocate passionately something shocking to the conservatives: "If we miss the excitement and rebelliousness of it all, we miss half the point of their partisanship of Browning. Sordello was indeed the quintessential modern poem to these young men."

The original members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their associates were later convinced that

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[70]Maurice B. Cramer, "What Browning's Literary Reputation Owed to the Pre-Raphaelites, 1847-1856," ELH, VIII (1941), 305-321.

numerous readings, recitations, and "preachments," by which D. G. Rossetti imposed Browning as a sort of dogmatic standard upon them, had counted in the long run for a great deal; many of them, including William Allingham, have left testimony behind them to prove how deeply affected they were by this eagerness for Browning. Almost every one of these rebels was destined to become the center of no small influence.

One specific example of D. G. Rossetti's proselytizing concerns the November, 1848, revival of A Blot in the 'Scutcheon at Sadlers Wells: in a letter to a friend urging him to attend the first night, Rossetti wrote that A Blot was a "most remarkable production" and that he himself was certain to go, as "the great author" might be there. For several years Rossetti preached Browning without having met him. At last, William Allingham, who had met Browning through Leigh Hunt, brought Rossetti into the presence of his idol on one of Browning's visits to London in the early 1850's.

Another service rendered to Browning by the Brotherhood was the printing in May, 1850, of a defense of Browning, ostensibly a review of Christmas Eve and Easter Day by W. M. Rossetti, in The Germ, the P.R.B. publication. After five pages of praise, the article concluded thus:

> And let us at last say: read Sordello again. Why hold firm that you ought to be able at once to know Browning's stops, and to pluck out the heart of his mystery? Surely, if you do not understand him, the fact tells two ways. But, if you will understand him, you shall.

To the same issue of The Germ, F. G. Stephens, another Pre-Raphaelite, contributed an essay called "Modern Giants," in which he praised Browning for his reaction against traditional forms by taking refuge from the worship of the past and looking into the heart of man without using "pretty flowers of metaphor in the lispings of a parson." Stephens explained that the public thought Browning's work obscure because they were "enervated" and wanted only "green grass, tall pines, and vineyards."

The influence of the P.R.B. was becoming strong by 1855, when Men and Women confirmed their confidence in Browning's greatness and brought their idolatry to its height. D. G. Rossetti found the reviews either inadequate or contemptible; William Allingham called the review in the Athenaeum "wholly idiotic."

Possibly the most important example of D. G. Rossetti's direct activity in behalf of Browning was his influence on John Ruskin, who had declared loudly after reading Men and Women that the poems were a "mass of conundrums." Rossetti wrote Allingham that he had laid siege for one whole night and that the next morning Ruskin sent to Browning a bulky letter "in which I trust he told

him that he was the greatest man since Shakespeare." Whatever was in the letter, in the fourth volume of Modern Painters, published early in 1856, Ruskin publicly voiced his opinion of Browning's greatness: ". . . Robert Browning is unerring in every sentence he writes of the Middle Ages; always vital, right, profound. . . ." He went on to say that his concentrated writing, such as that in "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "needs so much solution" before the reader can understand it that his patience fails him and he gives the thing up as insoluble, but truly Browning's work "ought to be the current of common thought." Of these words, Cramer says, "I have no doubt they sank deep into the consciousness of critics and the reading public. They were one of the most outstanding services ever rendered to Browning's reputation."

By 1856 Browning had won, in the Pre-Raphaelites, the "magnificent adoration" of men who were or soon would be among the most fundamentally influential men in England. Their enthusiasm was slowly, but actually, being extended to the general public. Since Men and Women won a most enthusiastic response from them, Cramer concludes that "the reception of that publication in England was more cordial and significant than has generally been said."

DeVane states that "the early brisk sale of Men and Women was probably caused by the little circle of the

poet's faithful admirers, such . . . as the Pre-Raphaelite group . . . ," and adds, ". . . Mr. Cramer's enthusiasm for finding admirers and friends for Browning in these years needs to be tempered by a consideration of the sale of his books. There is no doubt, however, that these groups helped Browning's fame immensely."[71]

In the years immediately following the appearance of Men and Women, Browning's poetry began to appeal to the undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge. D. G. Rossetti was directly instrumental in kindling devotion to Browning at the universities.[72] As late as 1856 almost incredible enthusiasm for Tennyson prevailed there; most of the students had not even heard of Browning.[73] Pre-Raphaelite influence had been creeping in for several years before 1856, however, and Rossetti was the idol of one small group of students from both Oxford and Cambridge who had gone so far as to call themselves "The Brotherhood." Sometime before 1856 Edward Burne-Jones, one of the founders of this group, met Rossetti on an evening when he was giving forth a "burning and memorable defense of

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[71]DeVane, p. 210.

[72]Maurice B. Cramer, "Browning's Literary Reputation at Oxford, 1855-1859," PMLA, LVII (1942), 232-240.

[73]Cruse, p. 197.

Browning."[74] Much impressed, Burne-Jones transmitted the Browning fever to his group, in whose publication, the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, William Morris reviewed Men and Women, saying:

> I suppose, reader, that you see whereabouts among the poets I place Robert Browning; high among the poets of all time, and I scarce know whether first or second in our own; and it is a bitter thing to me to see the way he has been received by almost everybody.[75]

Burne-Jones wrote to a friend in Birmingham, Charlotte Salt, to urge her to read Browning:

> You won't at first like him much, perhaps, he is too different from anyone else to be liked at first sight by most, but he is the deepest and intensest of all poets--writes lower down in the deep heart of things--rises up to the seemingly clear surface less often. Oh, how ten lines of him help one![76]

Soon Swinburne and Walter Pater had been converted to Browning, whom they called the greatest poet since Shakespeare. In 1858 Swinburne read several of Browning's poems to a group of friends in his rooms; the discussion that followed revealed that only one of those present had read any of Browning's works. During the next six years, however, Browning's influence grew steadily in the

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[74]Cramer, "Browning's Literary Reputation at Oxford, 1855-1859," p. 233.

[75]Broughton and others, p. 98, C 149.

[76]Cruse, p. 197.

universities, and convincing evidence of it was to be seen in 1864.[77]

But in 1856 Browning was hopelessly discouraged by the poor response to Men and Women. Although in that year the Brownings were permanently relieved of financial strain by John Kenyon's munificent bequest of 11,000 pounds, Browning was nevertheless disturbed by the continued attitude of indifference to his work. He even began to feel that his friends might have been more aggressive in his behalf. He told Chapman in a letter of April, 1856:

> The half-dozen people who know and could impose their opinions on the whole style of grunters, say nothing to them . . . and speak so low in my own ears that it's lost to all intents and purposes. Now is not Ruskin a layer down of the law in matters of art? Then see what he said of a poem of mine, printed twelve years ago and now, in this fourth volume [of Modern Painters]--but nobody will snip that round into a neat little paragraph and head it "Ruskin and Browning" and stick it among the "News of the Week," "Topics of the Day" as the friendly method is! It's a shame, ye public![78]

Browning felt little inclination to write during the next few years. He wrote a poem now and then, and attempted, half-heartedly and unsuccessfully, to revise Sordello. And after the death of Mrs. Browning in 1861, literary matters were completely forgotten for a while.[79]

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[77]Cramer, "Browning's Literary Reputation at Oxford, 1855-1859," pp. 239-240.

[78]Knickerbocker, p. 289. [79]DeVane, pp. 280-281.

CHAPTER V

1857-1865

After the barrage of reviews of Men and Women in 1856, the critics remained virtually silent for six years. The quiet was broken once in 1861 by the North British Review, from which it is learned that Browning's works, "with a most penetrating power of genius, . . . have failed to reach any considerable number of people."[1] "We wish," said the reviewer, "that Mr. Browning could be induced to look beyond the 'fit audience, though few;' we are confident that he can write such poems as shall bring his books home to many."[2]

Nothing more was said until February, 1863, when, in an article entitled "A Poet without a Public," Chamber's Journal regretted, "It is probable that no man of our times has written as much and so well without general acknowledgement as Robert Browning."[3] In the same month the Saturday Review was curious:

> . . . we cannot [but] wonder if the partial friends whom genius such as his is sure to make and to keep are surprised and mortified at his comparative

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[1] North British Review, XXXIV (May, 1861), 352.

[2] Ibid., p. 374.

[3] Broughton and others, p. 100, C 173.

> unpopularity. We say comparative unpopularity, because we have always understood that among those who are fond enough of poetry not to be repelled by a manner which his friends describe as "marked and peculiar" . . . he has never wanted an attentive, and seldom an admiring audience. Comparatively unpopular, however, he certainly is.[4]

The Critic called Browning "by common consent the least popular" of the poets of the day, adding that he was not so much "unpopular" as "ignored."[5] The London Review termed the lack of an audience for his poetry "a popular judgment of more than twenty years' standing,"[6] and the Eclectic and Congregational Review proposed that "it may perhaps be questioned whether with all his . . . munificent endowment of thought, scholarship, and genius, he is not better known as the husband of Mrs. Browning than by the productions of his own pen."[7]

In May, the Reader confirmed the opinions of the other journals: "There are, indeed, a great many . . . to whom Browning is still 'caviare.' . . . He is not, and probably never will be, so popular a poet as Tennyson." But the reviewer made an interesting observation: "With the exception of Tennyson," he said, "Browning is our most

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[4]Saturday Review, XV (February 7, 1863), 179.

[5]Charlotte Crawford Watkins, "Browning's 'Fame within These Four Years,'" Modern Language Review, LIII (1958), 494.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Broughton and others, p. 101, C 176.

remarkable living poet. This, which has long been the opinion of our most thoughtful critics, is now generally admitted, or on a fair way to be so."[8] And the London Review reported that "a great singer, if not the greatest of those among us, is gaining acceptance, which we may hope is all the surer since it has been somewhat slow."[9]

It is possible that the assertions of these two reviewers were slightly exaggerated; nevertheless, they indicate that some measure of success must have attended a certain commendable effort to widen the circle of readers of Browning. Shortly after Browning's return to England in 1861, John Forster and Barry Cornwall had begun the preparation of a volume of selections from Browning's works, by means of which they hoped, as Browning himself put it, "to popularize my old things."[10] Writing to Forster in October, 1861, Cornwall stated the ultimate purpose of the anthology: "The object of course is to induce readers of the Selections to read all his works."[11] The preface of the book, which appeared early in 1863, revealed that it "originated with two friends, who from the first appearance of Paracelsus, have regarded its

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[8] Ibid., p. 101, C 179.

[9] Watkins, p. 495.

[10] Ibid., p. 493.

[11] Richard Willard Armour, Barry Cornwall (Boston, 1935), p. 274.

writer as among the few great poets of the century; who have seen this opinion, since, gain ground with the best readers and critics; and who believe that such a selection as the present may go far to render it universal."[12]

In November, 1861, Cornwall had told Forster, "Whenever I have heard people speak of Browning, they have generally referred to 'My Last Duchess' and others of the Lyrics."[13] Containing for the most part, therefore, carefully selected poems from Bells and Pomegranates and Men and Women, the book had exhibited Browning at what Forster and Cornwall considered his best.[14] If credence can be given to the statements of the critics for the Reader and the London Review, the anthology had, to some extent, made the desired impression, and the efforts of the collaborators had not been totally in vain.

Following hard on the heels of the Selections came the three volumes of a new edition--the second--of Browning's collected works, appearing in May, June, and September, 1863. The first volume contained all the hitherto published short poems; and after this book and the Selections had been before the public for nearly a year, the Victoria Magazine was able to speak in February,

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[12] Ibid., p. 191.

[13] Ibid., p. 278.

[14] Watkins, p. 493.

1864, of "the degree in which [Browning] has at last succeeded in enlisting public attention."[15] This encouraging statement agrees happily with Browning's explanation to a correspondent in the summer of 1863 of the reason for the deferment of the publication of Dramatis Personae, which he had intended to publish in 1863. "There is some success attending the complete edition," he reported, "and we let it work."[16]

The acceptance of the Selections and the Collected Works was not universal, however. The Victoria Magazine reminded its readers that "Mr. Browning is not, in this country, a popular poet."[17] The National Review called him "the favorite of an intellectual sect," and the Saturday Review called his audience "fit but few."[18]

When Dramatis Personae was released in May, 1864, the early reviewers were not optimistic over its chances for widespread popularity. They implied that it was awaited by an audience already formed and defined, and measured it by the standard of Browning's previous work.
"Mr. Browning's present volume is as thoroughly Browningish, and will be as much 'caviare to the general,'

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[15]Broughton and others, p. 103, C 192.

[16]Watkins, p. 494.

[17]Broughton and others, p. 103, C 192.

[18]Watkins, p. 495.

as any of its predecessors," predicted the Reader for June 4.[19] "Already, though [it] has been but a few days out," the reviewer surmised, "most of Mr. Browning's admirers will have had it in their hands, and will have been estimating . . . its probable effect upon the reputation of their favorite poet."[20] In July, the Eclectic and Congregational Review reminded everyone that "Browning has no popularity in the general sense of that word; he is a poet for scholars and students . . . ."[21] The Victoria Magazine observed, "These, as much as any of Mr. Browning's previous works . . . demand faith and patience. The nut is undeniably hard to crack."[22] The London Review summed up general critical opinion:

> Mr. Browning's new poems are not likely to produce any immediate effect upon the reputation he has already acquired. They will be received with rapturous admiration by the circle of thoughtful and cultivated readers who have made him "the god of their idolatry," but they will scarcely succeed in overcoming the distaste of those who have hitherto found themselves unable to appreciate his particular genius.[23]

Yet in October, the Edinburgh Review, objecting forcefully to "the great defects of expression which enshroud [Browning's] thoughts and distort his composition,"

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[19]Broughton and others, p. 105, C 205.

[20]Watkins, p. 495.

[21]Broughton and others, p. 104, C 200.

[22]Ibid., p. 105, C 207. [23]Watkins, p. 495.

found it "a subject of amazement that poems of so obscure and uninviting a character should find numerous readers" and was convinced that "it were vain to deny that his steady perseverance in the course which he has chosen has won at length for himself an influence among readers of poetry second only to that of the laureate."[24] And in November the Christian Examiner testified, much more happily than had the Edinburgh, to Browning's "great and ever increasing audience."[25] There could be no doubt that the success of the collected edition of 1863 had extended to Dramatis Personae: a second edition--Browning's first genuine second edition--had already been called for in September![26]

Not only was Browning's increasing audience something he could appreciate: the reviewers, on the whole, were more cordial than ever before. On June 4, 1864, the Athenaeum declared that "all faults" notwithstanding "Mr. Browning is one of our very few living poets, and this book is a richer gift than we shall often receive at the hands of poetry in our time."[27] The Saturday Review had mellowed considerably since the appearance of Men and Women: although the reviewer found obscurity in Dramatis

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[24]Edinburgh Review, CXX (October, 1864), 538, 565.

[25]Broughton and others, p. 102, C 189.

[26]Watkins, p. 494.

[27]Marchand, p. 292.

Personae, he considered the obscurity to be inherent in the difficulty of the subject matter; moreover, it was "often diminished as far as possible by felicity of expression" and more than compensated for by Browning's subtlety of insight into character.[28] The Christian Examiner stated in July, "There are few poems . . . that so much tempt and repay study as those of Robert Browning."[29] In the same month the Victoria Magazine expressed its conviction that Dramatis Personae "confirms the verdict which has already placed Mr. Browning in the foremost rank of modern poets."[30] And the reviewer for the Eclectic and Congregational Review did not suppose that he was "alone in making the confession that, of the living masters of English poetry, Robert Browning gives us the greatest measure of delight. We are not careful to contest for him the chief place among his brethren, but we do not know how to admit the right of any other to a higher."[31]

In January, 1865, the Christian Spectator declared that "Mr. Browning is a poet as well as a deep thinker,"[32] and in the next month Colburn's New Monthly Magazine printed a genuinely appreciative review. The critic

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[28]Bevington, p. 211.

[29]Broughton and others, p. 104, C 197.

[30]Ibid., p. 105, C 207. [31]Ibid., p. 104, C 200.

[32]Ibid., p. 105, C 211.

called the attention of his readers to a certain "air" with variations, the "oftenest and plainest heard," that he had found running throughout Dramatis Personae: "When pain ends, gain ends too."

> Mr. Browning contends that by enduring sorrow--sometimes by suffering wrong--a man may learn more than he can ever learn by pleasure and prosperity. "Is there nought better than to enjoy?" he is for ever asking. And the answer he gives in varying forms, whose essence is always the same.

As demonstration of this discovery, the reviewer cited lines from "James Lee" ("Calm years, exacting their accompaniment of pain, mature the mind."), "Rabbi Ben Ezra" ("Be our joys three parts pain!"), and "Abt Vogler" ("Why rushed the discords in, but that harmony should be prized?").[33]

Even the Edinburgh was forced to admit that "every reader who glances at Mr. Browning's poems, however cursorily, must perceive that he is a man of rare accomplishments, with a singularly original mind capable of sympathising with a multiplicity of tastes and characters very far removed from everyday experience."[34]

Several reasons may be suggested for Browning's unprecedented success in the mid-Sixties. DeVane's opinion, that Men and Women had slowly been making an

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[33]Colburn's New Monthly Magazine, CXXXIII (February, 1865), 187.

[34]Edinburgh Review, CXX (October, 1864), 538.

impression during Browning's nine years of silence since its publication,[35] must be considered even though Elizabeth Barrett Browning had complained angrily in a letter to her sister-in-law in 1860, "Robert is; all England can't prevent his existence, I suppose."[36] His popularity with the students at Oxford and Cambridge is an incontestable factor; Chapman and Hall reported that most of the orders for copies of the second edition of Dramatis Personae were coming from the universities.[37] Of more than possible significance is the fact that many of the poems in Dramatis Personae dealt with topics of vital contemporary interest. Upon his return to England, Browning, though totally grief-stricken for many months, began eventually to plunge into the vigorous life of the times. He read Darwin's Origin of Species, Strauss's Das Leben Jesu, and Renan's La Vie de Jésus. In Dramatis Personae, therefore, his dramatic disguise wore somewhat thin as he voiced his opinion upon such absorbing controversial topics of the day as science, spiritualism, and, above all, higher criticism of the Scriptures.[38] "Caliban upon Setebos" was promptly related to Darwinism. "Mr. Sludge the Medium," appearing when book after book on

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[35]DeVane, p. 283. [36]Lounsbury, p. 165.

[37]Griffin and Minchin, p. 236.

[38]DeVane, p. 280.

spiritualism--"Sludgehood," as one reviewer now termed it--was being published and reviewed, possibly appealed to intellectuals, not specifically as a portrait of D. D. Home, the well-known medium who was immediately recognized as Sludge's prototype, but as an attack on a popular folly.[39] Calling "A Death in the Desert" "one of Mr. Browning's finest poems; a very lofty and solemn strain of religious thought," the Quarterly Review said:

> It is evident that [Browning] takes great interest in the stir of our time, the obstinate questionings of doubt . . . . He says his say emphatically on the side of belief. . . . We should greatly regret if the poem failed to be made known far and wide. After M. Renan's "Life of Jesus" and the prelections of the Strasbourg school of theological thought, it should be welcome as it is worthy.[40]

But a more important reason for the upswing of Browning's reputation was the appearance of what has been called a phenomenon:[41] the emergence of a new and special audience, which must be distinguished from the "fit but few" who had long admired him, and which must be related largely to the growing tolerance, in some instances a predilection, for non-conformity.[42] In The Gay Science (1866) Eneas Sweetland Dallas noted that "there is gradually being wrought a change in the relation of the

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[39] Watkins, p. 498.

[40] Quarterly Review, CXVIII (July, 1865), 101-102.

[41] Watkins, p. 495.

[42] Ibid., p. 493.

individual to the mass."[43] Dallas's observation is thought to be proof that John Stuart Mill's essay "On Liberty," which was "an eloquent defense of the principle of individuality," had found, in the years since its appearance in 1859, an audience of considerable significance among those who were inclined to rebel against "the social tyranny of the majority." Although Mill had not related his defense of non-conformity to either the writing or the criticism of literature, he had included in his definition of social liberty both liberty of expression and liberty of taste, to which some of his readers undoubtedly extended his general defense.[44]

Finding new use for such clichés as "the fit but few," "caviare to the general," and "the multitude who read while they run," reviewers began to point out the antithesis between individual judgment and mass opinion.[45] Gradually, however, those who were "fit" became more numerous, and fewer of the multitude were reading while they ran; and to this steady development of a new and different taste, itself a product of the advance of non-conformity, may be related that reversal, from 1861 to 1865, in the attitude of a significant portion of the reading public toward Browning's poetry. The turning

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[43] Ibid., p. 492.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., p. 493.

point of this reversal is thought to have occurred as a response to the republication of the entire body of Browning's work in 1863, when it took the form of a revaluation of his poetry as a whole in the light of a changing climate of intellectual opinion.[46] In 1865, in a letter to Isa Blagden, Browning's explanation to her of what she had called his "fame within these four years" was that "at last a new set of men arrive who don't mind the conventionalities of ignoring one and seeing everything in another . . . ."[47]

In the mid-Sixties, therefore, Browning's position was that of a writer of considerable interest to a significantly large segment of the reading public. Of course, it can not be said that he was popular in a general sense. Many of the reviewers pointed out that he was not; and conclusive proof is afforded by contrasting the size of the second edition of Dramatis Personae, which was 2,000 copies, to the number of sales of Tennyson's Enoch Arden, of which 16,000 copies were reported sold within a few days of its publication on August 15, 1864, and 60,000 in a short time thereafter.[48]

That Sordello, which had combined the worst of matter and manner, had taken its toll was reported by the Victoria Magazine in February, 1864:

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[46] Ibid., p. 493. [47] Ibid., p. 495. [48] Ibid., p. 494.

> There can be no doubt that to Sordello is chiefly attributable the prevalent idea of Mr. Browning's obscurity as a writer, and his slow advance toward popular appreciation; and doubtless at this time the memory of it withholds many minds from attempting to enter the rich and beautiful gardens which since then our author has with unremitting labour and supreme art been dressing for them.[49]

The Quarterly Review for July, 1865, was convinced that the poem had been "flung down to make readers stumble on the threshold of their acquaintance with a new poet."

> The current opinion of his poetry, outside the circle of the few who have thoroughly studied the subject and met with their reward, would be somewhat nearer the mark, supposing the poet had only written . . . Sordello. . . . The obstacle has remained in memory, and in the minds of many has influenced, if not determined, their estimate of all that he has since written. Sordello has to answer for much of its author's lengthened unpopularity.[50]

Moreover, Browning was still Browning. The reviewers unanimously recognized this fact and on numerous occasions pointed out the direct relation between Browning's peculiarities of subject-matter and style and the continued dislike for him on the part of the majority of the public. As for subject-matter, the widespread objection was voiced in May, 1863, by the Eclectic and Congregational Review: "He writes for men--for men and women--but not for Englishmen."[51] In 1861, calling Browning "hardly an

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[49]Broughton and others, p. 103, C 192.

[50]Quarterly Review, CXVIII (July, 1865), 77.

[51]Broughton and others, p. 101, C 176.

Englishman," the North British Review had given the definitive statement on this aspect of Browning's writing: "It would seem that in this English body of his the soul of some thirteenth-century Italian painter had got by mistake, and many of these poems are the signs it makes in trying to be recognized." Calling attention to Browning's lines in "De Gustibus"--"Open my heart and you will see/ Graved inside of it 'Italy'"--the same review stated:

> Now it is a wholesome prejudice with us, that if a man is to write for Englishmen, the first condition of national fame is that he be an Englishman; and if he opens his heart to us, we expect to read "England" written there . . . or "Great Britain" at least.[52]

As for style, the London Quarterly for July, 1863, summed up the feelings of all readers and reviewers who were discontented, when it stated that Browning's manner was so obscure "that it is often exceedingly difficult to determine his meaning."

> There are whole passages--nay, more, there are whole works, from which the reader turns with only a very indistinct and cloudy notion of what the poet was trying to say. . . . He either cannot or will not put his ideas into their simplest and most intelligible forms . . . .[53]

However, the phenomenon of the emergence of a considerable audience for Browning's poetry seems to have impelled certain reviewers to a revaluation of it.

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[52]North British Review, XXXIV (May, 1861), 352-353.

[53]Broughton and others, p. 101, C 178.

Browning himself was aware of this development and reported it to Isa Blagden: "When there gets to be a general feeling of this kind, that there must be something in the works of an author, the reviews are apt to notice him, such notice as it is."[54] These words indicate Browning's understandable and long-harbored resentment of critics; nevertheless it appears that certain conscientious ones, some of whom were manifestly influenced by Mill, were beginning to recognize in those aspects of Browning's works most generally objected to--matter and manner--not only the grounds of his appeal to a limited, though growing, audience, but also evidence that he was actually a poet of great power.[55]

In May, 1861, the critic for the North British Review felt totally justified in directing complaint toward "the peculiarities in Mr. Browning's poetry" even though he realized that the average reading mind was not "deep" and had explained this condition by saying that "the haste in which so many people live tends to foster a shallow and snatchy habit of mind, and to utterly destroy that attention which is so absolutely necessary for the appreciation of deep thought and subtle poetry."[56]

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[54]Watkins, p. 495.

[55]Ibid., p. 496.

[56]North British Review, XXXIV (May, 1861), 351.

But by May, 1863, the critical attitude had begun to change toward both Browning and the public; Browning was less to blame for his peculiarities, and the public was often implied to be too stupid or at least too lazy to deal with them. So it was that in reviewing the Selections for the Saturday Review in 1863, Donne, the critic, was able to speak of Browning's unpopularity as being the result of an "incapacity, or disinclination at least . . . to adapt himself to the taste of the day." Donne found in Browning "certain defects of manner and taste . . . which the indolent and luxurious readers of the nineteenth century will not tolerate"; but he was disposed to declare these "faults," such as lingering too long over "subtle reproductions of characters not generally interesting," to be those "of a powerful and deeply original mind." "Recollecting Mr. Mill's dictum," he continued, "we gladly pass over what may appear to be Mr. Browning's aberrations, in order that we may call attention to his splendid powers."[57]

A similar trend of thinking is evident in the reports of other reviewers. Browning's use of historical subjects and continental settings, which made so much of him "caviare to the general," was appreciated by the critic for the Reader (May 30, 1863) who understood it to be the

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[57]Saturday Review, XV (February 7, 1863), 179-180.

expression of the quality most highly prized by his admirers: his intellectual inquisitiveness.[58] The eclectic critic for the Eclectic and Congregational Review insisted in July, 1864,

> It is in . . . the making the ages and their histories, events, and persons, vehicles for living instruction--it is in the exploring of the profoundest recesses of human spirits . . .--it is in a pathos infinitely too deep for any but eclectic hearts, sufferers, doubters, and seers to have much sympathy--it is in a reticence and reserve of verse which leaves you wondering . . .--it is by allusions and eruditions which mark the scholar but instruct the learner, set in words which make a carcenet of precious jewels over the pages that this author's superabundant power is made known.

The same reviewer added,

> We do not meet the wonderfully happy artfulness of expression which seems not like a making but a happening; but . . . we are quite aware that many would prefer . . . the more unwrought, the sometimes weird and frequently awakening flash of mystical expression which wins more from the heart than the highest combination of mere music . . . .[59]

Certain critics attempted to describe and defend the unorthodox characteristics of Browning's method. "His genius being dramatic," explained the reviewer for the Quarterly, "he has to make his way to the heart of a character, conceal himself there, and then, looking abroad through the eyes of the man or woman, reveal their nature in his own speech." After quoting "My Last Duchess," the

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[58] Watkins, p. 496.

[59] Broughton and others, p. 104, C 200.

reviewer continued: "A slight examination will serve to show with what consummate art a world of character is portrayed in that small poem. The person of the speaker stands firmly full-drawn, as one of the portraits by Titian . . . ." Insisting that the reader must not assume that Browning's lyrics are subjective, but must realize that they are dramatic, the reviewer observed how "little would be made" of "A Grammarian's Funeral" if it were thought to be a "lyric of emotion." But correctly regarded, "it conveys a great sense of going up-hill, and the weight of the burden . . . ; it toils upward step by step--long line and short--best foot forward,--and altogether carries out the idea of a spirit that climbed in life."[60]

The critics' discovery of the importance of Browning's method caused them to regard the unorthodox language of the poems no longer as a defect in intelligibility but as a necessary concomitant to his peculiar method.[61] The London Quarterly Review pointed out that what appeared to be unintelligibility was sometimes no more than the novelty of Browning's style.[62] In the National Review Bagehot reported that the "difficult" and "unpleasant"

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[60] Quarterly Review, CXVIII (July, 1865), 79-85.

[61] Watkins, p. 498.

[62] Ibid.

lines of "Caliban" illustrated the nature of "grotesque art," which he distinguished from pure art as being that which catches the subject "in difficulties" and "gives representation of its minimum development." Bagehot termed Browning a "prolific master" of grotesque art because he "puts together things which no one else would have put together, and produces an effect on our minds which no one else would have . . . tried to produce." But because poetry was "but one of the many amusements . . . for the lighter hours of all classes," Bagehot felt that "Caliban" would not be appreciated by readers who did not have "enough of staying power" to conquer the difficulty presented by the poem.[63]

The reviewer for the Quarterly recognized in the "coarse, blunt, guttural sounds, and dogged, stiffnecked movement" in the "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister" an "essential and effective part in embodying the imaginary speaker."[64] Dealing with the complaint that frequently "Browning is unmusical," he explained that an inadequate understanding of the character of various poems caused them to seem to be unmusical, but suggested that it was quite probable that Browning had a particularly keen sense

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[63] Living Age, LXXXIV (January 7, 1865), 18-20.

[64] Watkins, p. 498.

of music, which "served to put into his verse a greater use of accent than flow of melody." Hence much of the meaning in some poems was "intended to be got at through this stress of the accent." To four lines from "The Laboratory" he supplied the proper accent, which "serves to make the music bite into the subject in a bitter way":

> 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![65]

Such criticism made explicit the grounds for a general preference among reviewers for those poems which most clearly illustrated the dramatic principle. Among the reviewers of the Selections and the Poetical Works (1863), nine poems, most of them dramatic monologues, received consistent notice and high praise as representing the best of Browning. They were: "My Last Duchess," "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "Fra Lippo Lippi," "Andrea del Sarto," "Karshish," "Bishop Blougram's Apology," "Saul," and "Cleon." The reviewers of Dramatis Personae showed a consistent preference for four monologues: "A Death in the Desert," which was considered by most reviewers as the best poem in the volume, or as one of the best; "Caliban,"

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[65] Quarterly Review, CXVIII (July, 1865), 82-83.

which was praised to an almost equal degree; "Mr. Sludge"; and "Abt Vogler."[66]

In spite of their frequent allusions to the lazy minds of the general public, the reviewers were anxious for their readers to share in the discovery of Browning's richness. The reviewer for the Quarterly urged his readers to try to understand the dramatic principles of Browning's art so that they could interpret his poems correctly and see for themselves that he had "created characters intensely human, real enough to stir the profoundest feelings."[67] The Victoria Magazine reminded its readers that they must not "run" while they tried to read Browning:

> His poetry is not to be taken up to occupy an idle moment or to charm away an incipient headache. People who want poetry to serve such ends as these must go elsewhere. Mr. Browning requires our best faculties and our undivided attention, at least during a first perusal.[68]

Colburn's New Monthly Magazine attempted to persuade the public not to judge Browning "by a careless reading of two or three poems."

> To read them once is as if we were to go by night to see a cathedral. There would come to us immediately some sense of its grandeur and of its mystery. We should see the outline of its towers and spire. But

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[66]Watkins, p. 497.

[67]Quarterly Review, CXVIII (July, 1865), 87.

[68]Broughton and others, p. 105, C 207.

> the tracery of its front, the colouring of its windows, the play of shadow and sunshine among its sculptured stones, we should wholly lose. . . . To learn the strength and beauty of Mr. Browning's poems, they must be read many times, and in many moods.[69]

In the event that the reader was still displeased after more than one reading, Colburn's had the answer:

> . . . it requires differing intellects justly to discern his abounding beauties. The minds of men, in ever-varying forms, are mirrored in his works. The reflection that pleases one may not please another. . . . Lovers of gentle Pippa may not admire the impulsive Mildred; those who feel such lusty life as beats through the frame of Fra Lippo Lippi may know little of the resignation of Andrea del Sarto; while followers in the steps of Blougram, the modern materialist Bishop, will hardly understand the hopes and fears that filled the heart of the Greek poet, Cleon.[70]

And after quoting the whole of "My Last Duchess," Donne of the Saturday Review instructed the prospective initiate into the realm of Browning:

> This dramatic scene requires to be read carefully. Every word . . . in it carries its own well-considered meaning and carefully anticipated weight. If, therefore, a man rattles through it expecting to sound its depths by one glancing inspection, . . . he might just as well be reading Tupper; but if, on the other hand, he will only give it time enough and thought enough, we cannot doubt that he will feel himself in the presence of something which emphatically belongs to what De Quincey has somewhere denominated the "literature of power."[71]

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[69] Colburn's New Monthly Magazine, CXXXIII (February, 1865), 186.

[70] Ibid.

[71] Saturday Review, XV (February 7, 1863), 180.

A striking example of the new attitude toward Browning's poetry[72] was the reaction of numerous critics to the pronouncement of the Edinburgh Review upon the 1863 collected edition and Dramatis Personae. Having tried all of Browning's work "by the standards which have hitherto been supposed to uphold the force and beauty of the English tongue and of English literature," the Edinburgh found them "deficient" and likely to survive only "as a curiosity and a puzzle."[73] The Reader (November 26, 1864) angrily called the "tawdry twaddle" of the Edinburgh reviewer "an insult to the earnest students of a subject so surprisingly novel," and offered to "point to various proofs of his total ignorance of what he professes to write about."[74] In January, 1865, the Saturday Review attacked the ultra-conservative position of the Edinburgh by calling its article "the most complete literary fiasco which any of our Quarterlies have perpetrated for very many years."[75]

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[72]The attitude cannot be said to be exclusively new; a few discerning critics had for years been its harbingers. See Forster's review of Men and Women, p. 95.

[73]Edinburgh Review, CXX (October, 1864), 565.

[74]Broughton and others, p. 105, C 202.

[75]Bevington, p. 211.

In July, 1865, when all other critics had rested the case for the present, the Quarterly Review gave what may be called the essence of the general critical opinion of Browning in the third year before the appearance of The Ring and the Book:

> At a time like the present, when the tendency is for minds to grow more and more alike, all thinking the same thoughts . . . ; when for a single original poet like Mr. Tennyson, we have a hundred tuneful echoes, and one popular novelist has his scores of imitators, we think that a writer of Mr. Browning's powers ought to be better understood than he is, and the discrepancy lessened betwixt what is known of him by the few, and what is thought of him by the many. He has qualities such as should be cherished by the age we live in, for it needs them.[76]

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[76] Quarterly Review, CXVIII (July, 1865), 77.

CHAPTER VI

1866-1870

The years immediately following the publication of Dramatis Personae saw Browning honored in 1867 by Oxford, which conferred upon him by diploma the degree of Master of Arts, a distinction awarded only for eminence in the field of learning.[1] The third collected edition of his works appeared in 1868, by which time it may be said that the "vital center" of his work had been discerned.[2] In his notice of the edition, the critic for the North British Review classified Browning's works: near the summit he placed a group of poems including "Karshish," "Andrea del Sarto," "Fra Lippo Lippi," and "Caliban"; but to the "final and supreme" group, "the most generally known, and the most heartily relished," he admitted only four: "The Bishop Orders His Tomb," "My Last Duchess," "Soliloquy of the Spanish Cloister," and "The Flight of the Duchess."[3]

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[1] Griffin and Minchin, p. 238.

[2] B. R. McElderry, Jr., "Browning and the Victorian Public in 1868-69," Research Studies of the State College of Washington, V (December, 1937), 193-203.

[3] North British Review, XLIX (December, 1868), 396-400.

The most important of Browning's activities in the late 1860's was his work on The Ring and the Book, whose "protracted period of incubation" had begun in June, 1860, when he found the "square old yellow book" in Florence.[4] The Roman murder case was continuously in his mind from 1860 on; and by the autumn of 1868, after numerous distractions, he had finally completed an enormous total of over 21,000 lines, which were distributed unevenly throughout twelve books. The Ring and the Book was published in four separate volumes, each containing three books: the first volume appeared on November 21, 1868; and by February 27, 1869, the entirety of Browning's longest poem was before the English public.[5]

In the late 1930's B. R. McElderry, Jr., published two articles dealing with his investigation of the critical reception of The Ring and the Book. He concluded in part that the critics were "strongly predisposed in Browning's favor" when the poem appeared:[6] they recognized his importance; they respected his perseverance during years of relative neglect; and they sympathized with him--the widower of England's best-loved poetess. McElderry feels that their sympathy, more than ever

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[4]Griffin and Minchin, p. 233.

[5]DeVane, p. 318.

[6]McElderry, p. 193.

aroused by the "O lyric Love" passage in The Ring and the Book, was nowhere better manifested than in the words of the Edinburgh Review, typical of the general, though somewhat belated, expression:

> To those only who have passed, like Mr. Browning, through the darkest of the valleys of the shadow of death, identity of sorrow will reveal the full pathos and significance of his noble words. But they will be precious to those who, without having experienced supreme calamity, may claim as lovers of English literature a community of sorrow with the poet, since the loss which he deplores has deprived them of one of the noblest and brightest of intellectual benefactors:--
>
> "O lyric Love, etc."

McElderry proposes that it was in such a frame of mind that most reviewers approached The Ring and the Book, obviously intended as Browning's masterpiece. He continues:

> The poem's huge bulk, its unique plan, and the device of installment publication--virtually unprecedented--all served to indicate that here was something more than just "a new book by Mr. Browning." Plainly, the time had come for a larger public to take Mr. Browning seriously, to try harder than ever before to understand him. The reviewers, therefore, set out to minimize his defects, and to convince the public of his virtues.[7]

It is evident that many critics seem to have been so overawed by The Ring and the Book that they had little or no doubt that it was Browning's masterpiece. In his first notice of the poem, on December 26, 1868, Buchanan, the reviewer for the Athenaeum, began somewhat cautiously:

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[7] Ibid., p. 196.

"The Ring and the Book, if completed as successfully as it is begun, will certainly be a remarkable achievement."[8] But on March 20, 1869, after the last volume had appeared, Buchanan led the literary world in its praise and gave the most fulsome and unreserved tribute to Browning written before or since in the Athenaeum:

> At last, the opus magnum of our generation lies before the world . . . and we are left in doubt which to admire most, the supremely precious gold of the material or the wondrous beauty of the workmanship. . . . We feel it difficult to write calmly and without exaggeration; yet we must record at once our conviction, not merely that "The Ring and the Book" is beyond all parallel the supremest poetical achievement of our time, but that it is the most precious and profound spiritual treasure that England has produced since the days of Shakespeare.[9]

In comparison to that of the Athenaeum, the praise of St. James' Magazine (January, 1869), sincere as it apparently was, seems mild: "Mr. Browning has evidently put forth all his strength, and for this reason, as well as on account of its length, [The Ring and the Book] will always take rank as one of the most important of his books."[10] Macmillan's Magazine (January, 1869) felt that The Ring and the Book would "remain to all time, the monument of a genius unique in its peculiar qualities of intellectual

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[8]Broughton and others, p. 107, C 235.

[9]Marchand, pp. 292-293.

[10]Broughton and others, p. 113, C 292.

subtlety and imaginative force."[11] The Fortnightly Review (March, 1869) found in Browning's extraordinary grasp of the dramatic form "one reason why we should reckon [The Ring and the Book] as his masterpiece."[12] To the London Morning Star for April 17, 1869, the poem appeared to be "incomparably the greatest work of our greatest poet."[13] On July 24 Chamber's Journal reported: ". . . it is in the work now before us that Mr. Browning's genius reaches the culminating point. Henceforth, his place in the very first rank of English poets must be conceded without a murmur or doubt."[14] And in October, 1869, the North British Review declared, "There can be little doubt that this poem is the masterpiece of the writer."[15]

Since adultery is central to its theme and the statement is realistic, The Ring and the Book would be thought to have presented an insurmountable obstacle to the enthusiasm and approval of the Victorian critics. Pointing out numerous "un-Victorian elements," McElderry includes Pompilia's birth as an illegitimate child, the "nameless bastard of a common whore"; Guido's brutal

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[11] Macmillan's Magazine, XIX (January, 1869), 258.

[12] Broughton and others, p. 112, C 285.

[13] Ibid., p. 111, C 281.

[14] Ibid., p. 109, C 263.

[15] North British Review, LI (October, 1869), 97.

compulsion of Pompilia; the leering suggestions of Margherita, Guido's servant; Guido's encouragement and permission of his brother's advances to Pompilia; and the birth of Pompilia's child, who, according to Guido, was "the priest's bastard and none of mine." In short, the restrictions of polite society as understood in Victorian England were steadily disregarded; moreover, because of the poem's structure, it was difficult if not impossible to skip the parts in which there was no attempt to restrain emphasis on the seamy side.[16]

Most of the reviewers, however, did not even raise the question of the morality of the poem.[17] In its first notice the Saturday Review pointed out the "intrinsic disagreeableness of the subject" and called The Ring and the Book "a history of . . . low and mean vice";[18] but the matter was not mentioned again in the enthusiastic review of the complete poem. The Westminster Review noted the "Elizabethan quality of the language." The Christian Examiner objected that Browning was "sometimes coarse." Chamber's Journal condemned the poem as "revolting," but proceeded to praise it on various grounds. The Edinburgh Review objected vigorously to the "mental and verbal

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[16]McElderry, pp. 197-198.

[17]Ibid., p. 198.

[18]Saturday Review, XXVI (December 26, 1868), 833.

garbage" assigned to some of the male characters, but had no doubt of the "essential purity of Mr. Browning's mind." And the London Quarterly Review observed that "when the poet has pared off the rags and tatters of human frailty, . . . Beauty comes with edification in her train."[19]

Terming this censure "very incidental and mild," McElderry calls attention to a review of The Ring and the Book in the Fortnightly (March 1, 1869) by John Morley, who had attacked the morality of Swinburne's Poems and Ballads less than three years previously. But in his praise of The Ring and the Book Morley lambasted the "debilitation of public taste" caused by the "graceful presentation of the Arthurian legend for drawing rooms," and went on to thank Browning for "Shakespearian fullness, vividness, and directness." Finding Browning a much greater and more useful poet than those who "strum us dolefully forth the tracts in polished verse of blameless Arthurs and prodigious Enochs," Morley added, "It is a commonplace to the wise, and an everlasting puzzle to the foolish, that direct inculcation of morals should invariably prove so powerless . . . a method."[20]

McElderry finds Morley's defense of The Ring and the Book as amazing as the praise in the Athenaeum by

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[19]McElderry, p. 198.

[20]Ibid., pp. 198-199.

Buchanan, who, only one year later, was to condemn the immorality of Rossetti's House of Life. In order to explain the reason for Browning's escaping such treatment, not only by Morley and Buchanan but by many other reviewers as well, McElderry supplements his proposal that in 1868-69 the critics were strongly predisposed in Browning's favor: he feels that Pompilia, Caponsacchi, and Guido were "idealized," that they "flattered the sentiments of the time," since in them "good and evil remained unmistakable, as the Victorians wished."[21] McElderry then concludes that as a result the reviewers manifested for these three a "sentimental appreciation" which consequently helped them to overlook or excuse Browning's unusually frank treatment of adultery, and consider it, though "realistic and vigorous," at the same time "serious" and not "inflammatory." To younger men like Morley, thinks McElderry, The Ring and the Book represented a welcome advance, a widening and deepening of literary content which invited the sober reflection of mature men; and the more conservative reviewers could agree with the Edinburgh that "Beauty comes with edification in her train." McElderry continues:

> It was this which convinced most reviewers that the poem was really "moral." For if the story hinged on the unmentionable sin, if the speech of Guido was

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[21] Ibid., pp. 202-203.

> "Elizabethan," there at the very center were the blessed and spiritually victorious trinity: Caponsacchi, more vigorous than Tennyson's Arthur, but morally as impeccable; the Pope, a prelate curiously satisfying to Protestant readers . . . ; and Pompilia . . . . In the presence of these, who could denounce The Ring and the Book as immoral?[22]

Pompilia went straight to the hearts of most of the reviewers. The Spectator thought her a "masterpiece of delicate power"; the Athenaeum spoke of her "changeful and moon-like beauty." The Westminster Review declared, "Seldom has a woman been portrayed with such delicacy, such insight, and such dramatic power." The Christian Examiner called her a "marvelous creation," "a lasting joy in literature"; the London Quarterly was confident that she would "rank among the great women of art." And Chamber's Journal searched in vain the whole of English literature for "a creation worthy of being compared with her."[23]

Feeling that Pompilia was "too indifferent," the Saturday Review saw in Caponsacchi and Guido "Mr. Browning's signal triumphs." The reviewer said, "We question if, since the great dramatists of the Elizabethan age, English poetry has ever produced characters so solid, so complex, so carefully thought out."[24] To most reviewers, Caponsacchi was only slightly less admirable than Pompilia; and Guido was generally accepted as a worthy foil to the hero

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[22] Ibid., p. 200. [23] Ibid.

[24] Saturday Review, XXVII (April 3, 1869), 461.

and heroine.[25] The Pope was not discussed in detail, but his philosophic reflections were much admired and liberally quoted.[26]

The reason why certain critics reported little or no obscurity in The Ring and the Book may perhaps be explained by McElderry's insistence that they were anxious to minimize Browning's defects. Thus, the Christian Examiner could say, "Of general obscurity there is none."[27] Macmillan's found "but little of the obscurity which made a riddle of Sordello," and only then "when he [Browning] comes before us a narrator in his own person." "As soon as he begins to speak through the mouth of his dramatis personae," said the critic, "he is plain enough to those who have once caught the trick of his style."[28] After reading the entire poem, the critic for the Saturday Review reported, "Here and there is a passage full of Mr. Browning's old contortions and obscurities, which have rendered . . . so many of his poems sealed books to the multitudes." On the whole, however, the reviewer felt that Browning "warms with his subject; the abrupt and fragmentary style is changed for a continuous flow . . . .

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[25]McElderry, p. 202.

[26]Ibid., p. 203.

[27]Broughton and others, p. 109, C 262.

[28]Macmillan's Magazine, XIX (January, 1869), 262.

The poem gains in intelligibility by being studied as a whole."[29] In his first review of The Ring and the Book, Buchanan of the Athenaeum stated, "We know nothing in the writer's former poems which so completely represents his peculiarities as this installment of The Ring and the Book. . . . Everything Browningish is found here."[30] But the following March, overcome with enthusiasm, Buchanan declared, "Once and for ever must critics dismiss the old stale charge that Browning is a mere intellectual giant, difficult of comprehension, hard of assimilation."[31]

Some of the reviewers, however, were not willing to dismiss the charge. Although in January, 1869, the critic for the Westminster Review testified to having met "fewer of those wild extravagances, crabbedness verging to obscurity, and carelessness of expression which looks like contempt for the reader," he reported in April:

> We must confess that our hopes, which we expressed in our last number about Mr. Browning's "Ring and the Book," have been disappointed. . . . Mr. Browning has returned to his old faults, or, as his extreme admirers would say, beauties. He evidently has done so from pure willfulness.[32]

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[29] Saturday Review, XXVII (April 3, 1869), 460-461.

[30] Broughton and others, p. 107, C 235.

[31] Marchand, p. 293.

[32] Broughton and others, p. 113, C 298-299.

The British Quarterly Review lamented "power defiant of art, and original thought hidden in difficult language"; the Spectator detailed the "familiar old faults" of style;[33] and the Edinburgh, admitting and deploring "patent and obtrusive" faults, added, "He that runs may read--and revile."[34]

McElderry points out that although the critics were able to overlook the questionable morality of The Ring and the Book and sincerely wanted to minimize Browning's defects because they felt that the time had come for him to be widely appreciated, they became, nevertheless, gradually "more objective--and more sceptical" when they passed on to the more strictly artistic claims of the poem.[35] For this reason, certain reviewers entered against The Ring and the Book the "old stale charge" of obscurity and other complaints as well.

As might be expected, the length of the poem was thought generally to be inordinate. Macmillan's considered it "needlessly prolix";[36] the Saturday Review

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[33]B. R. McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation of The Ring and the Book," Research Studies of the State College of Washington, VII (June, 1939), 85.

[34]Edinburgh Review, CXXX (July, 1869), 164.

[35]McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 76.

[36]Macmillan's Magazine, XIX (January, 1869), 262.

included the length in its enumeration of other faults;[37] the Westminster Review reported "too much verbiage."[38] The Quarterly Review declared: "[The Ring and the Book] is decidedly too long. It is weariness to the flesh to read so many arguments pro and con . . . . The poem might have been a fifth part of the length, and have improved by the omissions."[39] Fraser's Magazine found the poem "far too big for the nineteenth century" and closed its review with these words: "So the play ends, a dramatic poem in twelve acts, which might be effectively reduced to the five of legitimate drama."[40]

Several reviewers mentioned books that they felt could profitably have been excluded. The speeches of the lawyers, "Half-Rome," "The Other Half-Rome," and "Tertium Quid" were those most frequently found dispensable; but there was less general conviction regarding any individual book than a troubled feeling that by selection and compression Browning might have used his material to better advantage.[41] Only one reviewer raised no objection to the length: J. W. Chadwick, writing for the Christian

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[37] Saturday Review, XXVII (April 3, 1869), 461.

[38] McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 81.

[39] Quarterly Review, CXXVI (April, 1869), 347.

[40] McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 80.

[41] Ibid., pp. 83-84.

Examiner, declared: "It would be easy to enumerate various faults, but the length of the poem would not be among them. For ourselves, we wish it were longer. . . . The Ring and the Book is as fascinating as any novel and reads as rapidly."[42]

The unusual form of The Ring and the Book--a succession of monologues each telling the complete story from a different viewpoint--elicited a variety of opinion. Fraser's suggested that it might well have been a play, and other publications intimated as much. The Athenaeum felt that "the monologue, even when perfectly done, can never rival the scene," but the British Quarterly insisted that Browning was "not a dramatist, but . . . a consummate actor."[43] The Athenaeum called the repetitious manner of the poem "that of a magpie";[44] the British Quarterly pronounced the entire arrangement "inartistic."[45] But the critic for the Saturday Review said, "When we come to close the volume [including the first four books] we are anxious to know how the real fact will develop itself out of the maze of conjecture and inconsistency."[46] Calling the form a "novelty . . . of simplicity and obvious

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[42]Broughton and others, p. 109, C 262.

[43]McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 80.

[44]Ibid., p. 85. [45]Ibid., p. 77.

[46]Saturday Review, XXVI (December 26, 1868), 833.

naturalness," the North British Review felt that Browning had chosen to present the story as he did because he thereby availed himself of a most useful framework for the display of the characters. Discerning Browning's obvious intention, the reviewer said:

> His horrid murder is not led up to, hidden, and discovered, as in a novel, but bursts upon us like an announcement in a journal. The interest lies not in the sensational atrocity or pathos, but in its ambiguous character,--the various interpretations which may be given to the acts and motives [of the characters].[47]

Moreover, in the succession of monologues the reviewers discovered Browning's omnipresence.[48] According to the Spectator, "He overflows, as he always overflows, in intellectual point, in acute comment, in quaint illustration . . . ." The Athenaeum reported, "We get Mr. Browning masquing under so many disguises." The British Quarterly observed that Browning "throws himself with marvelous skill into many characters, but he never forgets himself."[49] And the North British Review found the Pope's monologue permeated with Browning's ideas.[50]

There was some disappointment among reviewers that the subject of Browning's masterpiece was Italian.

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[47]North British Review, LI (October, 1869), 117.

[48]McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 78.

[49]Ibid., p. 78.

[50]North British Review, LI (October, 1869), 123-124.

"Poetry, like charity, should begin at home," grumbled the British Quarterly.[51] Tinsley's Magazine complained, "If Mr. Browning had studied England and English character as faithfully and successfully as he has studied Italy and Italian character, his position as an English poet would have been other than it is now."[52] The North British Review reminded those who were displeased: "But if he goes to Italy and studies there, he paints Italian subjects in the Dutch manner, and is most attracted by the deposits of Teuton admixture in the strata of the Italian mind."[53]

Whatever the faults of The Ring and the Book, at least two reviewers sensed that it was "real." Buchanan reported in the Athenaeum his observation:

> Everywhere there is life, sense, motion--the flash of real faces, the warmth of real breath. We have glimpses of all the strange elements which went to make up Roman society of those times.[54]

And John Morley wrote in the Fortnightly Review:

> After we have listened to all the whimsical dogmatising about beauty, to all the odious cant about morbid anatomy, to all the well-deserved reproach for unforgivable perversities of phrase and outrages on rhythm, there is left to us the consciousness that

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[51] McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 76.

[52] Ibid., pp. 76-77.

[53] North British Review, LI (October, 1869), 120.

[54] McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 76.

> a striking human transaction has been seized by a vigorous and profound imagination, that its many diverse threads have been wrought into a single rich and many-coloured web of art, in which we may see traced for us the labyrinths of passion and indifference, stupidity and craft, prejudice and chance, along which truth and justice have to find a devious and doubtful way.[55]

Before discussing the public reaction to The Ring and the Book, it will be instructive to review the progress of Browning's reputation after the auspicious publication of Dramatis Personae. According to the critic for the Contemporary Review (January and February, 1867),

> No reputation has during [the past thirty years] advanced so steadily. If [Browning's] popularity does not as yet approach that of Mr. Tennyson, if the readers of "Paracelsus" or the "Dramatis Personae" are to be counted by the thousands and those of the "Idylls of the King" and "Enoch Arden" by tens of thousands, there are yet not wanting judges who, recognizing the characteristic excellences of each, see in Mr. Browning, with all the drawbacks of obscurity, abruptness, and an indifference to beauty of form or subject amounting almost to scorn, some elements of a higher poetic greatness than they find even in the high thoughts and perfect melody of his great rival.

Summarizing the growth of Browning's reputation, and remarking that his fame, "such as it is," had been attained "under conditions singularly unfavorable," notably Sordello, the reviewer concluded:

> . . . and though Longfellow and Tupper are still, perhaps, the favourite poets of middle-class readers, there is hardly a sixth-form boy or undergraduate of any culture who would not bracket together the names

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[55]Broughton and others, p. 112, C 285.

> of Tennyson and Browning as the great poets of our time, and discuss with his fellows, in study talks or at debating clubs, which of the two stands on the highest level of excellence.[56]

There are two statements available next in chronological order. One of these was given by the reviewer for Tinsley's Magazine (January, 1869) along with his review of The Ring and the Book:

> The position of Robert Browning in the limited roll of contemporary poets is a very peculiar one. By his disciples and admirers--and they are a select, if not a numerous, body--Browning is considered to be beyond all comparison, the master of modern English poetry; by the majority of intelligent book-readers--those who actually form their opinions from books, and not at second hand, from the column of weekly reviews--he is regarded as a man of vast intellectual power, who allows a certain capricious tendency towards mysticism or indirectness of phrase to run away with him; while by nearly all those who catch up the floating echoes of social literary judgment, he is held to be the leader of the Festus school, a man intentionally obscure, a writer whom people who value easy literary digestion ought piously to avoid.[57]

But the Westminster Review, in the same month, approached The Ring and the Book with the following comment:

> Ten years ago he was quite unknown except to the select few. We distinctly remember hearing in the winter of 1860 a well-known author, and editor of one of the most influential reviews of the day, declare that he had never read a word of Mr. Browning's poetry. And the declaration struck nobody present as surprising. Such a declaration, however, in the year 1869 would be a confession of ignorance.[58]

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[56] Eclectic Magazine, New Series, V (March, April, 1867), 314-317.

[57] Broughton and others, p. 109, C 258.

[58] McElderry, "Browning and the Victorian Public," p. 194.

The British Quarterly Review (March, 1869) gave only somewhat feeble assurance that "the knowledge of his poetry is widening" and that as yet he "merely amazes and astounds" the British public.[59] Chamber's Journal (July 24, 1869), observing that Browning had been "before the world for some five-and-thirty years," added that "it is not too much to say that the world as yet does not know him."[60] And in October, the North British Review reported: "There are still many wise men, and men of taste, who would have their teeth drawn or their toes amputated rather than read him."[61]

One article, which appeared in the Cornhill Magazine for February, 1869, marked, "as another sign of new life in poetry, the rapid, the sudden advance of Robert Browning in public honour." The author of the article insisted that "a love of Browning, a taste for the olives of his verse, began to be more general before he came forward with that most perfect product of his genius, 'Caliban on Setebos.'"[62] The reviewer continued:

> This previous beginning of a taste amongst all people who read sufficed to open their minds to an immediate perception of what that one poem signified: neither

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[59]Broughton and others, p. 109, C 260.

[60]Ibid., p. 109, C 263.

[61]North British Review, LI (October, 1869), 126.

[62]Cornhill Magazine, XIX (February, 1869), 251.

more nor less than the possession of a mind which, once at least, could soar as high and see as deeply and as far as any mind that ever was, almost. The publication of the volume which contained this poem, among other beautiful things [Dramatis Personae], was thus very fortunate in point of time. "Pippa Passes," in which all Browning's genius is visible and much of it startlingly clear, did not suffice to bring for him the full daylight of general appreciation, nor did other poems equally fine as well as brief and easy to read . . . . Unfortunately, there was an excuse for not knowing Browning's poems at all. You could say, with a creditable air of being critical and candid, that he was too obscure for you; that the labour of reading him was too much. Indeed, . . . it was not long ago the fashion to say that--whether you had read much or little of the poems you disposed of à la mode. You admitted, languidly, that there were fine things in them, and supposed that some people really could understand and enjoy them as a whole; but you, unhappily, were a plain mortal; you only got confused by riddles, however ingenious, and bothered with barbarisms, however splendid. This was for a long time the proper tone to take about Browning in "society"--that conscious but still potent sham which is so very scornful of what it happens to think eccentric at any particular time. . . . But . . . there presently appeared a little weariness of the old views, or a new generation came into possession of the popular voice and showed signs of choosing a "note" of its own. The praises of Browning were now proclaimed aloud where they were never heard before; and there arose a general timid whisper of his name as after all a man to swear by, the man possibly. Then it was--most opportunely--that he published the volume which contains "Caliban"; a poem of such manifest worth that the world must have been as dull and deaf as it had been on several previous occasions if it had not instantly known it for an immortal thing. As it happened, however, the world had become more curious and alert; and it took the new volume with pleased surprise. More reading of Browning and more praise of him after that. Recurrence to his previous works;--doubt, on reading "Sordello" again, whether it had not been the victim of gross joking, and whether it might not really be understood after all;--wonder that anybody could ever have overlooked the force and beauty in the "Bells and Pomegranates" for instance; more confident and outspoken opinion in college coteries, in

> "society" and elsewhere, as to the author's merits; in short, a general upspringing of breezes blowing into the haven of popular favour. . . . And though Browning has had to wait a long time for the universal recognition which he has always deserved, it is now pretty complete.[63]

This lengthy, but, it is hoped, worthwhile, digression has proved at least one thing: the lack of a unanimous attitude on the part of the reviewers toward the extent of Browning's general acceptance at the time of the appearance of The Ring and the Book. Consequently, it is impossible to draw a definite conclusion regarding the matter. Further inference, however, may be gained by noting that several reviewers were confident that The Ring and the Book would encourage more people to read Browning. The critic for the Saturday Review declared that it "cannot fail to arouse interest in the readers of poetry";[64] the one for the Westminster Review stated, "Hitherto Mr. Browning's admirers have been few though fit. His present poem will do much to make him popular."[65] The North British Review was convinced that Browning was undoubtedly courting popularity: "With a timely consciousness that he has hitherto failed to be generally understood, he has set himself in the early afternoon of

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[63] Ibid., pp. 251-253.

[64] Saturday Review, XXVI (December 26, 1868), 832.

[65] Broughton and others, p. 113, C 298.

his power to repeat what he had to say in a tongue more comprehensible." The reviewer quoted from the poem itself to support his conviction that in writing it Browning had been

> Perchance more careful whoso runs may read
> Than erst, when all, it seemed, could read who ran,
> Perchance more careless whoso reads may praise,
> Than late, when he who praised, and read, and wrote
> Was apt to find himself the self-same me.[66]

DeVane reports that "in spite of its length, the poem sold very well, and a second edition was called for in 1872."[67] This information is not particularly encouraging, however, because probably only 2,500 copies were printed in the first edition.[68] DeVane insists, nevertheless, that "in Browning's day the poem made him a national figure; it raised him in the popular imagination to a greatness, though not a popularity, equal to Tennyson's."[69]

Cruse concurs with DeVane that with The Ring and the Book came Browning's full triumph. "Enthusiasm for him rose as high, though it was not as universal, as enthusiasm for Tennyson. He, in his turn, had become the fashion. To admire his works was regarded as the test of a fine literary taste. His obscurities were regarded by

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[66] North British Review, LI (October, 1869), 98.

[67] DeVane, p. 347.

[68] Broughton and others, p. 15.

[69] DeVane, pp. 347-348.

his followers with pride as distinctions which put his poetry out of reach of the vulgar."[70]

McElderry, taking issue with DeVane, feels that the reviewers, who, he insists, wanted to like The Ring and the Book and wanted the general public to follow suit, "worked hard at the task of enjoying it, but they themselves were conscious that they had not entirely succeeded."[71] Believing first, that the reviewers most whole-heartedly admired "the characters of the poem, and the broad moral lessons inherent in their experience," and second, that the critics admired Browning for "his pluck in outlasting neglect" and saw "steadfastness in his achievement of a huge masterpiece in the years immediately following his bereavement," McElderry concludes that The Ring and the Book was in 1869 a "personal triumph rather than an artistic one," and that among the reviewers "there was not so much confidence that the intelligent reading public would enjoy [it], as a conviction that . . . they ought to enjoy it, regardless of the inconvenience."[72]

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[70]Cruse, p. 200.

[71]McElderry, "Browning and the Victorian Public," p. 203.

[72]McElderry, "The Victorian Evaluation," p. 89.

Browning himself considered it an artistic success;[73] evidently, he thought it a popular one as well, because he told his friend Pollock that "he had at last secured the ear of the public, but that he had done so by vigorously assaulting it, and by telling his story four times over."[74] Carlyle is said to have thought The Ring and the Book "one of the most wonderful poems ever written . . . all made out of an Old Bailey story that might have been told in ten lines, and only wants forgetting." Tennyson remarked that parts of the poem were "full of strange vigour and remarkable in many ways," but he was "doubtful whether it can ever be popular."[75] His brother Frederick could not find the courage to attempt it. He was a great friend of Browning; "but it does not follow," he is reported to have said, "that I should put up with obsolete horrors and unrhythmical composition." One James Smetham read three volumes of The Ring and the Book "with a curious mixture of impatience and admiration. To find every character thinking and talking Browning," he said, "is like drinking strong coffee that swells the nerves and causes a dull ache over the eyes." Henry Arthur Jones

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[73]H. Allingham and D. Radford, editors, William Allingham, A Diary (London, 1907), p. 195.

[74]McElderry, "Browning and the Victorian Public," p. 193.

[75]DeVane, p. 346.

tried two or three of Browning's poems and reported that "he is a dreadful heavy dumpling, the toughest and hardest baked I ever stuck my jaws into."[76]

It may safely be assumed that in 1870 this was the common reaction toward Browning. The rather limited size of the first edition of The Ring and the Book, which was not exhausted for many months, seems to indicate that Browning's audience was still select. As one late reviewer of the poem observed, "When the child or intelligent rustic, who has laughed aloud over the delicious 'Piper of Hamelin,' and cried for joy as the good horse Roland's hoofs smite the Aix pavement, tries to read more of the book which delighted him so much, he finds little there that he can understand . . . ."[77] And in December, 1869, William Hand Browne, though expressing his conviction that Browning was "not a poet merely, but a great poet," found much of his work to be so demanding on the reader as "to partially justify the criticism that 'Browning is a poet for poets.'"[78]

But Browne closed his article by calling attention to that characteristic of Browning's writing which before

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[76]Cruse, p. 201.

[77]Eclectic Magazine, New Series, XIII (March, 1871), 269.

[78]New Eclectic Magazine, V (December, 1869), 721.

many more years was to assure his place in the popular heart: indomitable optimism.

> To an age of faith, and an age of derisive mockery, has succeeded an age of mere despair. Science admits that she knows and can know nothing but phenomena, of which man himself is but one; Philosophy is letting go her hold upon her grand postulate. So with the poets: Tennyson feebly "trusts that somehow Good may be the final goal of Ill" because he feels that without such trust life were intolerable; but he confesses himself to be, at best, but--"An infant crying in the night;/An infant crying for the light,/And with no language but a cry." Arnold melodiously laments that whereas in some centuries faith would have been possible to him, it is now possible no longer; the sweet, clear, Greek-souled Morris has a sad minor undertone of hopelessness running through all his poetry; [and] Swinburne rushes in desperation to passion, as sinking sailors burst open the spirit-room . . . . Has [Browning] any better tidings for us than these?
>
> We have already called attention to the number of his poems that tell a story of a failure, purposes accomplished, love wasted, lives thrown away; and this question:--What is success and what failure, and what is the ultimate result of Man's brief and painful existence?--comes up more than once for solution, receiving several answers, which are in truth but parts of one answer. David replies to the question,--what success may spring from these failures, what victory from these defeats?--that man is exalted not by the achievement but the will; and a defeat may be counted to him for a victory. Rabbi Ben Ezra answers that it is not for us to say what is success and what failure . . . and Abt Vogler answers: . . . "And what is our failure here but a triumph's evidence/For the fullness of the days?" But Pope Innocent gives the fullest and firmest answer:
>
> Sc never I miss footing in the maze;
>
> No,--I have light nor fear the dark at all.
>
> Doubtless there are many who declare that they have light; but we doubt their declaration, perceiving that they are palpably with us in the thick of the shadow, nor gifted, that we can discover, with faculties superior to our own. But here is this our brother with keener vision than ours, and placed upon a height from which he sees much that we cannot see;

do his eyes detect any gray lines in the east, any cheerful prophecy of the dawning? And his answer comes back to us clear and unfaltering from his mountain-top:

> So never I miss footing in the maze;
> No,--I have light nor fear the dark at all.[79]

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[79] Ibid., pp. 723-725.

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