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Reforming Christ's Body in Victorian Poetry

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A Gift Rediscovered: Browning's Revised *Ring and the Book*

One of the many treasures housed in the Armstrong Browning Library, on the campus of Baylor University in Waco, TX, is Robert Browning's personal copy of his great poem, *The Ring and the Book*. On the presentation page of this four-volume second edition, one learns of the occasion on which Browning received this special copy of his own work: "To Robert Browning on his Seventieth Birthday, May 7, 1882, from some members of the Browning Societies of London, Oxford, Cambridge, Bradford, Cornell, Cheltenham and Philadelphia, with heartfelt wishes for his long life and happiness."¹ Browning societies formed to celebrate the poet's work with almost a religious fervor. The orchestrator behind this gift was Frederick James Furnivall, renowned literary scholar, head of London's Browning Society, and Browning's close personal friend. One month prior to Browning's birthday, Furnivall distributed to members of many Browning societies a printed request for contributions toward the gift, which he then presented to Browning personally. The gift consisted not only of *The Ring and the Book*, but of Browning's collected works, along with a special oak bookcase carved with motifs that illustrate his poetry. The presentation page of volume 1 of *The Ring and the Book* adds an extra paragraph to the dedication, suggesting Browning's evident need for a copy of his own works: "These members, having ascertain'd [sic] that the Works of a great modern Poet are never in Robert Browning's House when need is to refer to them, beg him to accept a set of these Works, which they assure him will be found worthy of his most serious attention." Browning's particular need to refer to

¹ Item A0475 in the Browning Collections of the Armstrong Browning Library.

his own poetry is evident in the use he made of this gift. The four volumes of the poem contain Browning's numerous handwritten revisions, which he would apply to the 1888-89 edition of his *Poetical Works*. Browning's birthday gift is thus a rewarding study for two main reasons: It displays the warm and thoughtful affection that Browning's friends and admirers held for him, and it lends insight into Browning's ongoing revision process.

The gift on the whole is both personal and appreciative. The bookcase is a beautiful work of art that reflects Browning's art; bells and pomegranates form the most prominent of the carved motifs. In addition to Browning's own books, the set includes a volume of autographs and personal notes from Browning Society members who contributed to the gift. Furnivall received Browning's thank-you letter the day after he delivered the gift to him; it was a personal confirmation that the gift achieved its intended effect:

I never was so honored, so gratified by any action of any approach to a similar nature, that ever happened to me in the course of my life. But how could it be otherwise, and why should I be concerned to assure you of what you must intimately know? / Will you communicate this, or the substance of it to my 'Hundred and two' friends—not one of whom shall slip from the grateful memory of, My dear Furnivall, / Yours affectionately and gratefully ever / Robert Browning²

In a circular to the Browning societies printed on the same day as the thank-you letter, Furnivall summarized his own reply, indicating that the intent behind the gift had been to show Browning their gratitude for “the help and pleasure that he for so many years has given us.”³ In the gift and in this exchange of letters, one sees a display of the warm affection between these friends and of the intelligent way that Furnivall showed Browning how greatly he admired his poetry.

² Robert Browning to Frederick J. Furnivall. Personal Letter. 8 May 1882. Huntington Library. Accessed through the Browning Database on October 28, 2015.

³ Quoted in Editorial Note A to Browning's aforementioned letter. *Browning Database*. Wedgestone Press, 2015.

This particular copy of *The Ring and the Book* is also immensely valuable to the textual history of Browning's poetry because of the poet's handwritten corrections. Roma King and Susan Crowl offer the following commentary on Browning's revision process:

Throughout his life Browning continually revised his poetry. He did more than correct printer's errors and clarify previously intended meanings; his texts themselves remained fluid, subject to continuous alteration. As the manuscript which he submitted to his publisher was no doubt already a product of revision, so each subsequent edition under his control reflects the results of an ongoing process of creating, revising, and correcting.⁴

Here, King and Crowl explain their rationale for choosing Browning's latest verifiable revisions, rather than the earliest manuscripts, as the copy-texts for the 1989 printing of Browning's *Complete Works*. The approach to Browning is different than that taken with an author who performed little to no revision. In such a case, the author's original manuscript would be considered authoritative, and would be sought as a copy-text over later manuscripts, which would stand a greater chance of corruption in the copying process. By contrast, since Browning constantly revised his poetry, his latest revision, not his original, constitutes his authoritative version.

Browning's practice of revising his personal copy seems to have combined with his hectic work-schedule to result in forgetfulness. In a letter to his publisher, George Smith, Browning explains a moment of absentmindedness while revising his great poem for the 1888-89 *Collected Works*:

By what seems like an hallucination, I have corrected my own copy of the Ring and the Book,—and put it back on the shelf! When the sheets of the four volumes were sent with

⁴ Roma A. King, Jr. and Susan Crowl. Preface. *The Complete Works of Robert Browning*. Athens and Waco: Ohio UP and Baylor UP, 1989. Vol. 9. Pg. ix.

the others, I forgot what I had done,—supposed that I had sent the books with those preceding,—and the Printers had made a mistake in giving me work to do I had already done. As it is—I need only copy the corrections already made,—so that you will receive the sheets in very few days.⁵

If such confusion were typical of Browning's revision process at home, one can easily imagine him not being able to find his own books when he needed them, as the presentation page on his birthday gift suggests.

Confusion as to the whereabouts of these books occurred again in the twentieth century. In 1988, Michael Meredith commented on the above letter, "Presumably this is what happened, but as Browning's copy of *The Ring and the Book*, purchased by Sotheran in the 1913 sale, has been lost, we can never be sure."⁶ This mystery appears to be solved. The Armstrong Browning Library's acquisition notes indicate that the bookcase and books were indeed part of lot 458, purchased by Sotheran in 1913, when the Brownings' personal effects were sold following Pen's death. The gift was donated to the library by Michael Barker in 2006, who indicated that his father bought it while in Rome in the 1930's from "an Italian count who had fallen on hard times."⁷ If true, this detail would be a very strange coincidence, considering the villain in *The Ring and the Book* was also an Italian count.

Analysis of Specific Revisions

Though Browning's revisions are often small, one can see by comparison that a changed word or punctuation mark can result in a substantial improvement in clarity or effect. Let us consider what difference six specific revisions make in context:

⁵ Robert Browning to George Smith. Personal Letter. 8 May 1888. Quoted in Michael Meredith, "A Botched Job: Publication of *The Ring and the Book*." *Studies of Browning and His Circle* 15 (1988): 50.

⁶ Meredith, "Botched Job," 50.

⁷ My thanks go to Cynthia Burgess at the Armstrong Browning Library for help in researching the acquisition notes.

(a) VII.673

<i>2nd Edition</i>	<i>Handwritten Revision</i>
Your open for the irregular	Your straight for the irregular

In lines 659-65, Pompilia summarizes the objection that she could have done more to make peace between Guido and her parents, to curb her husband's violent anger. She responds that she was unable to do anything of the sort:

[...] I was blind.

That is the fruit of all such wormy ways,

The indirect, the unapproved of God:

You cannot find their author's end and aim,

Not even to substitute your good for bad,

Your straight for the irregular; you stand

Stupefied, profitless, as cow or sheep

That miss a man's mind, anger him just twice

By trial at repairing the first fault. (668-76)⁸

She is confounded, like a cow that sees a man's rage but does not understand it, too afraid to move lest the man direct his anger at her. In such a manner, she saw Guido's "wormy way" but was unable to do anything to "straight[en]" it. The revision on line 673 is significant in light of what follows. Guido charges Pompilia with adultery (677-80), and she insists that the charge is false (680-82). The word "straight" emphasizes that she is blameless in the matter, whereas the word "open" is more ambiguous. Although her claim of innocence is clear from other lines, the

⁸ Unless otherwise indicated, quotations from *The Ring and the Book* reflect the 3rd edition as printed in the Broadview publication. Eds., Richard D. Altick and Thomas J. Collins. Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Literary Texts, 2001.

revised word adds greater clarity and completes the metaphor. A “straight” line contrasts with an “irregular” one—as well as with a “wormy way”—while an “open” line does not.

(b) VII.755

<i>2nd Edition</i>	<i>Handwritten Revision</i>
What did he answer? “Folly of ignorance?”	What did he answer? “Folly of ignorance!”

Pompilia describes a night, six months into their still unconsummated marriage, when Guido demands that she sleep with him (741-46). Fleeing his bitter tempter, she runs in terror to the Archbishop, requesting to be accepted into a convent (747-54). The Archbishop’s response begins on line 755. Here we can see the difference that a mere punctuation mark can make: here, it alters the character of the Archbishop and the tone of the scene, at least for several lines. With his opening phrase in the form of a question, one can picture him as consoling and sympathetic to Pompilia’s fear and vulnerability. One might hear a tone of compassion in his voice, particularly since he calls her “daughter” in the next line. But as an exclamation, it is clear from his first line that the Archbishop will be no friend to Pompilia, but another enemy. Had this correction not been made, the Archbishop’s actual tone could have been detected by line 768 at latest, but until then there could easily have been confusion. The exclamation point eliminates that possibility.

(c) VII.860

<i>2nd edition</i>	<i>Handwritten Revision</i>
So, when I made the effort, saved myself,	So, when I made the effort, freed myself,

The Archbishop has sent Pompilia home to ‘do her duty’ to Guido, and she recognizes that he will give her no protection either from her husband’s violent temper or her brother-in-law’s advances. She then turns to God for guidance, and decides to flee with Caponsacchi, regardless of how she may be slandered (847-62). By substituting “freed” for “saved,” Browning avoids

the possible confusion of an unintentional theological meaning. He also clarifies that Pompilia is speaking about her actual flight from Guido.

(d) VII.1099

<i>1st edition</i>	<i>2nd edition</i>	<i>Handwritten Revision</i>
There is no other course , or we should craze,	This is no other cause , or we should craze,	This is no other help , or we should craze,

The maid Margherita has advised Pompilia to warn Caponsacchi that Guido may seek to kill him (1088-92). The substance of Pompilia’s response is on lines 1097-1102:

Even if you speak truth and a crime is planned,
 Leave help to God as I am forced to do!
 There is no other help, or we should craze,
 Seeing such evil with no human cure.
 Reflect that God, who makes the storm desist,
 Can make an angry violent heart subside.

The revision to line 1099 is not so much a change in meaning as in emphasis. Pompilia has prescribed her course of action on line 1098. She also explains her rationale on lines 1101-02, that they will trust in God to curb Guido’s anger. In the first edition, “There is no other *course*” could subtly imply a tone of despair, as though to “[l]eave help to God” is their only option, but not necessarily the most desirable. The second edition line could possibly be a move toward doubling the intent of lines 1101-02, that God is the only “cause” by which Guido’s murderous rage could be pacified. The emphasis would then shift to confidence in God as protector. Browning’s revision, “There is no other *help*,” adds clarity to this emphasis, reiterating the word “help” from the previous line.

(e) XII.536-38

<i>2nd Edition</i>	<i>Handwritten Revision</i>	<i>3rd Edition</i>

In the outstretched right hand of Apollo, there, Is screened a scorpion: housed amid the folds Of Juno's mantle, lo, a cockatrice!	In the outstretched right hand of Apollo, there, Lies screened a scorpion: housed amid the folds Of Juno's mantle lurks a cockatrice!	In the outstretched right hand of Apollo, there, Lies screened a scorpion: housed amid the folds Of Juno's mantle lurks a centipede!
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Fra Celestino, the Augustinian monk, delivers his sermon, warning contemporary Romans to guard against a pagan hostility toward Christianity, characterized by 1st century Roman society. He rhetorically asks his audience if they will revert to the worship of ancient Roman deities in lines 535-40. In the descriptions of the statues of Apollo and Juno, the sense of shock and revulsion is increased by the verbs “lies” and “lurks.” One revision not found in Browning’s personal copy, but which is present in the 3rd edition, is the substitution of the word “centipede” for “cockatrice.” The change makes for a clearer parallel, the scorpion and the centipede both being poisonous insects, suggesting the poisonous effects of worshipping these false gods. On the other hand, the far more fearsome cockatrice—the rooster-headed dragon whose gaze can kill—might have been so imposing a creature that it would have proved distracting.

(f) XII.559-61

<i>2nd Edition</i>	<i>Handwritten Revision</i>
Would thenceforth make the sinning soul secure From all foes save itself, that's truest foe,— For egg turned to snake needs fear no serpentry,—	Which thenceforth makes the sinning soul secure From all foes save itself, soul's truest foe,— Since egg turned to snake needs fear no serpentry,—

Fra Celestino has just described the scene of the murder. In lines 557-61, he gives a parenthetical contemplation on the nature of sin. The most recognizable revision, “that’s truest foe” to “soul’s truest foe,” simply clarifies the meaning. Such clarity is an obvious improvement. The remaining revisions are structural, changing the five-line aside from a statement to a clause. Perhaps Browning realized the need to make it a clause in light of the idiosyncratic 56-line, single-sentence structure of the stanza, which runs from 554 to 609.

All of these revisions can be counted as improvements, the need for which Browning evidently noticed only upon re-reading his work and contemplating over time how to clarify and hone his artistic touch. Though many of these seem to be small details, they contribute in their small ways to a more precise rendering of his vision. Knowing Browning's tendency to continually refine his work, and given that he had the opportunity to rework it for the 1888-89 *Poetical Works*, the Browning Societies' birthday gift proved to be both thoughtful and useful. As it did in Browning's personal library, this gift holds a celebrated status in the Armstrong Browning Library, as a critical piece of Browning textual history and as a token of the great affection that friends and admirers held for the beloved poet.

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