
c My Last Duchess

[Browning, Robert \(1812 - 1889\)](#)

Robert Browning, *Dramatic Lyrics* (1842).

FERRARA

[1That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,](#)

2Looking as if she were alive. I call

[3That piece a wonder, now: Frà Pandolf's hands](#)

4Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

5Will 't please you sit and look at her? I said

[6"Frà Pandolf" by design, for never read](#)

7Strangers like you that pictured countenance,

8The depth and passion of its earnest glance,

9But to myself they turned (since none puts by

10The curtain I have drawn for you, but I)

11And seemed as they would ask me, if they durst,

12How such a glance came there; so, not the first

[13Are you to turn and ask thus. Sir, 'twas not](#)

14Her husband's presence only, called that spot

15Of joy into the Duchess' cheek: perhaps

[16Frà Pandolf chanced to say, "Her mantle laps](#)

17Over my Lady's wrist too much," or "Paint

18Must never hope to reproduce the faint

19Half-flush that dies along her throat"; such stuff

20Was courtesy, she thought, and cause enough

21For calling up that spot of joy. She had

[22A heart . . . how shall I say? . . . too soon made glad,](#)

23Too easily impressed; she liked whate'er

24She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.

[25Sir, 'twas all one! My favour at her breast,](#)

26The dropping of the daylight in the West,

27The bough of cherries some officious fool

28Broke in the orchard for her, the white mule

29She rode with round the terrace--all and each

[30Would draw from her alike the approving speech,](#)

31Or blush, at least. She thanked men,--good; but thanked

32Somehow . . . I know not how . . . as if she ranked

[33My gift of a nine-hundred-years-old name](#)

34With anybody's gift. Who'd stoop to blame

35This sort of trifling? Even had you skill

[36In speech--\(which I have not\)--to make your will](#)

37Quite clear to such an one, and say, "Just this

38Or that in you disgusts me; here you miss,

[39Or there exceed the mark"--and if she let](#)

[40Herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set](#)

41 Her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse,
42 --E'en then would be some stooping; and I chuse
43 Never to stoop. Oh, sir, she smiled, no doubt,
44 Where'er I passed her; but who passed without
45 [Much the same smile? This grew; I gave commands;](#)
46 Then all smiles stopped together. There she stands
47 As if alive. Will 't please you rise? We'll meet
48 The company below, then. I repeat,
49 [The Count your Master's known munificence](#)
50 Is ample warrant that no just pretence
51 Of mine for dowry will be disallowed;
52 Though his fair daughter's self, as I avowed
53 At starting, is my object. Nay, we'll go
54 [Together down, Sir! Notice Neptune, though,](#)
55 Taming a sea-horse, thought a rarity,
56 [Which Claus of Innsbruck cast in bronze for me.](#)

Notes

[1](#) First published in *Dramatic Lyrics*, 1842; given its present title in 1849 (*Dramatic Romances and Lyrics*). The emphasis in the title is on *last*, as the ending of the poem makes clear; the Duke is now negotiating for his next Duchess. Fra Pandolf (line 3) and Claus of Innsbruck (line 54) are artists of Browning's own invention. *Title*: emphasizing the word *Last* as the ending of the poem implies; the Duke, identified as "Ferrara" in the poem's speech prefix, is negotiating for his next Duchess. In 1842 the title was "Italy and France. I. -- Italy" (then the poem was paired with "Count Gismond: Aix in Provence," which followed). *Ferrara*: most likely, Browning intended Alfonso II (1533-1598), fifth duke of Ferrara, in northern Italy, from 1559 to 1597, and the last member of the Este family. He married his first wife, 14-year-old Lucrezia, a daughter of the Cosimo I de' Medici, in 1558 and three days later left her for a two-year period. She died, 17 years old, in what some thought suspicious circumstances. Alfonso contrived to meet his second to-be spouse, Barbara of Austria, in Innsbruck

in July 1565. Nikolaus Mardruz, who took orders from Ferdinand II, count of Tyrol, led Barbara's entourage then. This source was discovered by Louis S. Friedland and published in "Ferrara and *My Last Duchess*," *Studies in Philology* 33 (1936): 656-84.

[31](#)*Frà Pandolf*: a painter not recorded in history, a member of religious orders and so, on the surface of things, unlikely to have seduced the Duchess. No known painting has been linked to Browning's poem.

[6](#)*by design*: when put the query, "By what design?", Browning answered: "To have some occasion for telling the story, and illustrating part of it" (A. Allen Brockington, "Robert Browning's Answers to Questions concerning some of his Poems," *Cornhill Magazine* [March 1914]: 316).

[13](#)*you*: presumably Browning had in mind Nikolaus Mardruz.

[16](#)*mantle*: loose cloak without sleeves.

[22](#)When questioned, "Was she in fact shallow and easily and equally well pleased with any favour or did the Duke so describe her as a supercilious cover to real and well justified jealousy?" Browning answered: "As an excuse -- mainly to himself -- for taking revenge on one who had unwittingly wounded his absurdly pretentious vanity, by failing to recognise his superiority in even the most trifling matters" (Brockington).

[25](#)*My favour*: a love-gift such as a ribbon.

[30](#)*approving*: "forward" in 1842.

[33](#)*a nine-hundred-years-old name*: Lucruzia's family, the Medici, had their recent origin in merchants, but the Este family went back 650 years (*Complete Works*, III [1971]: 372).

[36](#)*to make*: "could make" in 1842.

[39](#)*exceed the mark*: overshoot the target (from archery).

[40](#)*lessoned*: put to school, instructed; possibly punning on "lessened," `diminished.'

[45](#)*I gave commands*: when asked what this meant, Browning said first, "I meant that the commands were that she should be put to death," but then continued, "with a characteristic dash of expression, and as if the thought had just started in his mind, `Or he might have had her shut up in a convent'" (Hiram Corson, *An Introduction to the Study of Robert Browning's Poetry*, 3rd edn. [Boston, 1899]: viii).

[49](#)*The Count*: presumably Ferdinand II, count of Tyrol, who led the negotiations for the marriage of Alfonso II and Barbara of Austria.

[54](#)*Neptune*: the Roman god of the sea, whose chariot is often shown pulled by sea-horses.

We always drop unprepared into a Browning dramatic monologue, into several lives about which we know nothing. Soliloquies or speeches in a play have a context that orients the audience. Browning's readers have only a title and, in "My Last Duchess," a speech prefix, "Ferrara." Yet these are transfixing clues to a drama that we observe, helplessly, unable to speak or to act, as if we turned on a radio and, having selected a frequency, overhear a very private conversation, already in process and, as we may come very gradually to appreciate, about a murder and the maybe-killer's search for the next

victim. Readers familiar with Browning's writing and sensitive to nuance perceive the speaker's pride and cold-bloodedness. Many miss the point and are astonished. "You say what? there's nothing in the poem about him killing her! where do you find that?" A century and more ago, when Browning still lived, readers presented him with questions about this poem. He answered them cautiously, almost as if he had not written the poem but was seeing it himself, attentively, after a very long time and was trying to understand what had happened.

Thanks to Louis S. Friedland, a critic who published an article on "My Last Duchess" in 1936, we know something about how young Browning found the story. Fascinated with the Renaissance period, he visited Italy in 1838 and clearly had done considerable reading about its history. He must have come across a biography of Alfonso II (1533-1598), fifth duke of Ferrara, who married Lucrezia, the 14-year-old daughter of the upstart merchant princes, the Medici, in 1558. Three days after the wedding, Alfonso left her -- for

two years. She died barely 17 years old, and people talked, and four years later in Innsbruck, Alfonso began negotiating for a new wife with a servant of the then count of Tyrol, one Nikolaus Mardruz. The poem's duke of Ferrara, his last duchess, the "Count" with whose servant (Mardruz) Ferrara is here discussing re-marriage and a dowry, and the new "fair daughter" are historical, but the interpretation of what actually took place among them is Browning's own. He first published the poem in 1842, four

years after his visit to Italy. The painter Frà Pandolf and the sculptor Claus of Innsbruck are fictitious, as far as we know, but Browning must have meant his readers to associate the poem with these shadowy historical figures because he changed the title in 1849, from "Italy and France. I. -- Italy." to ... what we see today.

The title evidently refers to a wall painting that Ferrara reveals to someone yet unidentified in the first fourteen words of the poem. "That's my last Duchess painted

on the wall," he says. However a reader utters this line, it sounds odd. Stress "That's" and Ferrara reduces a woman, once his spouse, to something he casually points out, a thing on a wall. Emphasize "my" and Ferrara reveals his sense of owning her. Pause over "last" and we might infer that duchesses, to him, come in sequence, like collectibles that, if necessary, having become obsolescent, are to be replaced. If "Duchess" gets the stress, he implies -- or maybe we infer -- that he acquires, not just works of art, but persons; and that

Duchesses are no different from paintings. The line suggests self-satisfaction. Finding ourselves being given a tour of a grand home for the first time, by the owner himself, and being told, "That's my last wife painted on the wall," how would we react? We might think, "How odd he didn't say her name. I wonder what happened ...", or at least we might wonder until he finished his sentence with "Looking as if she were alive." This clause, also sounding peculiar, tells us two things. The Duchess looks out at us, the viewers, directly from the

painting; and her depiction there is life-like, that is, we might be looking at a living person rather than a work of art. Yet wouldn't Ferrara say "life-like" or "true to life," if that was simply what he meant? His choice of words may suggest that, while she, the Duchess herself (rather than her image in the painting), looks alive, she may be dead; and the phrase "last Duchess" echoes in our working memory. Do we know for sure? Does "she" mean the Duchess or her painting?

Ferrara continues, cheerfully, describing the painting, *not* the Duchess (so possibly we are being silly): "I call / That piece a wonder, now." The phrase "That piece" must mean "that portrait," surely, though there is something intangibly common, almost vulgar, in his expression. That sense of "piece," as "portrait," is archaic now and may have been so when Browning wrote the poem (OED "piece" sb. 17b). This context, a man speaking of pictures of women, connotes something quite different, what the term has meant for centuries,

and still means now, "Applied to a woman or girl. In recent use, mostly depreciatory, of a woman or girl regarded as a sexual object" (OED sb. 9b). Is "That piece" a portrait or a sl-t, a b-tch, a c-nt? Ferrara's next remark keeps us off-balance. "Frà Pandolf's hands / Worked busily a day, and there she stands." Obviously the "piece" is something hand-made, a painting, a wondrous good one, not a person, not someone contemptible -- a relief; and yet Ferrara continues, "there she stands." The painting cannot stand because it is on the wall. Is

he speaking about the woman? Ferrara then invites his listener, standing beside him, to sit down "and look at her." As readers, Ferrara also speaks to us, as if we too were there, because Browning, who as a lyric poet would address us directly, has disappeared behind this character. We may want to sit down. Mid-way through line 5, Ferrara has not yet done with us. We have to look at the Duchess, through his words, being just as silent as the "you" to whom Ferrara refers. We have to "read" (6) her face.

As "Strangers" (7), knowing nothing about this place and its people, we must be told (and Ferrara will explain) why he named, "by design," the painter, giving him the honorific, "Frà" ('brother'), due a member of religious orders and a celibate man. The Duchess's look -- her "pictured countenance,/ The depth and passion of its earnest glance", and that "glance" (again) -- causes *ignorant* observers, if they *dare* (11), to look as if they would ask Ferrara, and only Ferrara, because (as he tells us pointedly) the portrait is

curtained off, and only he can pull back the curtain to reveal it, just what elicited that "passion" in her. His listener does not ask this question, though he may look as if he would like to ask. He just sits where he is told to sit and hears what others, of his type, would sometimes want to ask (but in fact seldom do ask) and, more, hears what Ferrara would say in answer to that rare question. Was she looking at a lover, at sometime who desired her? That is one question her look suggests, but of course that is impossible, for Frà Pandolf, a celibate

religious, could never bring forth that "passion." No, her look did not rise, Ferrara implies, from sexual passion, but from a more general emotion. "Sir, 't was not / Her husband's presence only, called that spot / Of joy into the Duchess' cheek." If "presence" meant just "the state of being in the same place", it would be redundant here. Ferrara uses the term to allude to the importance of his decision to be with her, the stateliness and majesty that a duke confers, as a gift, on anyone by just turning up; and add to that, possibly, the way he, as her

sexual partner, ought to arouse her, nature being what it is, to colour in this way.

Yet any "courtesy," Ferrara asserts, any court compliment owing to the Duchess merely by virtue of her position, aroused that look, that "spot of joy," that "blush" (31). Frà Pandolf, for example, might have observed that the Duchess should shift her mantle up her arm somewhat to show more of her wrist, its skin being attractive; or he might have complained that his art was not up to capturing the "faint / Half-flush that dies along" her throat. If

it died in the throat, where did it live? Frà Pandolf alludes here to the "spot of joy," spreading downwards from her cheeks (15) as he was painting her. Her embarrassed, but not at all displeased, awareness that someone likes her reveals itself in a blush, a colouring in a small patch ("a spot") as blood flows to the face. That, Ferrara says, reveals a "joy" felt by the Duchess in herself, at being herself, at being looked at approvingly, no matter who -- whether a celibate painter, or her husband the duke -- did the looking.

Now, standing before her portrait, where she stands, by the side of a listener made to sit, Ferrara obsessively reviews the reasons why that joy was "a spot," a contaminant that should not have been on his last Duchess' cheek. The more he talks, the more his contempt and self-justifying anger show, and the more he endears the Duchess to us. Unable to recognize "courtesy" as insincere, she was made happy by it, in fact, took joy in "whate'er /She looked on, and her looks went everywhere." A sprig of flowers from the duke for

her bosom (25) and his ancestral name itself (33) meant joy to her, no less than a sunset, a courtier's gift of some cherries from the tree, and the white mule whom she rode "round the terrace" (29). She smiled on him, whenever he "passed" her (44), though sharing the same smile with anyone else. Her humility and general good nature, however, disgusted (38) Ferrara for the way they seemed to trifle (35) with, or understate the value of his own gift, a place in a noble family 900 years old. Lacking the cunning to discriminate publicly, to flatter

Ferrara, she also could not detect his outrage; and he said nothing to her about what he felt. She wore her feelings openly, in her face, but to the standing Duke any outward expression of his concern would have meant "stooping" (34, 43), that is, lowering himself to her level. He attributes this silence to his lack of "skill / In speech", an excuse that the poem itself disproves. When he describes her as missing or exceeding the "mark" (38-39), Ferrara develops his metaphor from archery, as if she was one of his soldiers, competing in a

competition for prizes (his name), rather than a Duchess who was herself the prize.

"This grew; I gave commands; /
Then all smiles stopped together.
There she stands / As if alive."
This elliptical chain of four curt, bleak sentences brings Ferrara back to where he started. If the Duchess smiled everywhere, could her smiles be stopped by anything short of death by execution? What Ferrara's commands were, he does not say, but "As if alive", the second time he uses the phrase, has a much

more ominous sound. At the beginning, Ferrara could indeed be speaking mainly about the "life-like" portrait, but as his anger grew, he shifted to the Duchess herself. She cannot be "life-like." Even had he just divorced her and put her in a convent, as Browning thought possible late in his life -- as if the poem somehow lived independent from him -- Ferrara killed the joy that defined the "depth and passion" of her being. He finally controlled before whom she could "blush." He

alone draws back the curtain on the portrait.

Then Ferrara invites his listener and us to rise from being seated and "meet / The company below" (47-48). When negotiating with the listener's master the Count for a dowry, Ferrara "stoops." He not only lowers himself to the level of a mere count but generously offers to "go / Together down" with the listener, a servant, side by side, instead of following him and so maintaining symbolically a duke's superior level and rank. For all his obsession with his

noble lineage, Ferrara bargains with it openly.

Will Ferrara "repeat" (48) in marriage as he does in his speech? He claims the Count's "fair daughter's self" is his "object." Will she too, an objective achieved, become a thing, found on a wall like his last Duchess? Ferrara hints at his intentions by pointing out a second work of art, this time a sculpture, as he reaches the staircase. Neptune, the sea-god, is "Taming a sea-horse" (55), as Ferrara tamed his last Duchess.

In this poem Browning develops an idiolect for Ferrara. Unlike poets like Gray and Keats, Browning does not write as himself, for example, by echoing the work of other poets, because to do so would be untrue to the Duke's character. Ferrara betrays his obsessions by nervous mannerisms. He repeats words associated with the Duchess: the phrases 'as if ... alive' (2, 47), 'there she stands' (4, 46), 'Will 't please you' (5, 47), and 'called/calling ... that spot of joy' (14-15, 21), 'look,' variously inflected (2, 5, 24), 'glance' (8, 12),

`thanked' (31), `gift' (33-34), `stoop' (34, 42-43), `smile' (43, 45-46), and `pass' (44). These tics define his idiolect but also his mind, circling back to the same topic again and again. He takes pride in saying, "I repeat" (48). He also obsesses about his height, relative to others. He stands because the Duchess stands on the wall, and he requires his listener to sit, to rise, and to walk downstairs with him side-by-side. He abhors stooping because he would lose face. Last, Ferrara needs to control the eyes of others. He curtains off the

Duchess' portrait to prevent her from looking "everywhere." He tells his listener to look at her and to "Notice Neptune."

Publication: