

My Last Duchess ①

My Last Duchess, probably written in 1842, is ^{one of the} most remarkable of Browning's dramatic monologues. Generations of critics have marvelled at how, in a bare 56 lines, a character so rich and vital steps before us. Browning is thought to have based the poem's speaker on Alfonso II (1533-97), fifth Duke of Ferrara and last of the Este line, an aristocrat infamous for his imprisonment of the Renaissance poet, Torquato Tasso. Browning's Duke, however, though inspired by history, transcends any specific identification.

As we attend closely to this monologue, we come to understand the full dramatic situation in which it takes place. The Duke, eccentric, vengeful and possessive, has had his first duchess quietly murdered because she failed to focus her whole existence on him. Now he is negotiating for a second marriage with a Count's daughter. At the exact point at which we hear him speak, he has taken the Count's envoy or messenger up to the first-floor of his place in order to look at some of his art

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treasures. Ostensibly this is a moment of relaxation, a break from the negotiations concerning the dowry that must accompany his next wife. Actually it is an opportunity for the Duke — suave and urbane as he appears — to vent a powerful set of obsessions on his unsuspecting hearer: the circumstances of his first marriage, and what he thinks went wrong with it.

At the start of the monologue the Duke draws back the curtains on a private, especially-prized portrait of his first wife, 'my last Duchess', and invites the envoy to sit down to look at it and contemplate the beauty of the painting: Fra Pandolf, the artist, seems to have captured an intense likeness, a particular expression, a passionate 'earnest glance, a spot of joy'. At first the Duke only appears concerned with the aesthetic realm — the main emphasis appears to be on the painter's skill in capturing an exquisite facial expression. Then, disturbing undercurrents emerge. The Duke maintains his smooth tone, but gradually we sense his underlying, deadly annoyance.